

Trends in Sexuality: Are We Practicing What We Are Preaching?

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As counselors, in order to adequately prepare for the variety of issues that may surface when working with clients, we need to be aware of the trends in sexual attitudes, experiences, and beliefs. Being cognizant of sexuality issues and achieving adequate education to competently address sexuality issues in counseling sessions is crucial. In the past, research has found a lack of sexuality education in counseling programs. The significance of incorporating sexuality education into counseling programs as well as the counseling environment is explored in this article. The importance of addressing possible incongruencies of sexual attitudes and behaviors in counseling sessions is discussed. Suggestions and ideas on integrating and addressing sensitive and controversial sexuality topics with clients and counselors-in-training are provided.

Sexuality is pivotal to being human. Individuals express their sexuality through beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. A person's sexuality is an integral dimension of personality, as is a person's selection of sexual behaviors and acts (Myerson, 1987). "In the same way that all individuals are rational beings, even when acting inconsistently with their beliefs, all humans are sexual beings, regardless of whether or not one expresses it" (p. 72). Contrary to popular cultural notions, one's sexuality is neither dependent on nor defined by the sexual orientation of those around them. Rather, as Myerson stated, sexuality includes, but is not restricted to, sexual orientation, fantasy, self-knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, activities, and experiences. From this perspective, all humans are sexual beings from conception to death regardless of the behaviors and feelings experienced.

How one perceives the environment and behaves as a reaction is influential in what one will experience in life (McChristie, 1999). Positive attitudes and beliefs tend to produce positive behaviors and experiences, while negative outlooks and attitudes produce negative behaviors and experiences. Every individual seems to perceive life selectively and with discrimination, meaning that individuals constantly filter out many sounds and scenes, allowing a significant yet manageable amount of information into one's

consciousness. As McChristie stated, "the perceptions one allows into one's consciousness are consistent with attitudes and beliefs" (p. 1). What one believes about an issue will influence one's perception and experience with situations related to that issue. Where individuals learn about sex, what one learns, what one's attitudes toward sex and sexuality are, and the reflection of sexuality on one's behaviors all have personal and professional significance. These attitudes and experiences are fundamental in counselor growth and awareness as well as client development.

Sexuality is a topic of constant discussion, observation, and exploration within the American culture. The prevalence of this issue is pressing to new heights within society, making it an essential and integral part of the repertoire of knowledge within the counseling field. It is evident by the trend in societally driven media, focused primarily on the younger population, that sexuality is learned primarily through experimentation and peer education as compared to formal and parental education. This burden of educational injustice is reflective in the topics that are surfacing repetitively within today's counseling environment, thus making it imperative to address the formal education and preparation needs of the counselor with regard to this seemingly nonprioritized topic. Recognition of this particular pattern in sexuality is essential in guiding counselors to obtain and use the knowledge and resources available, in allowing counselors to provide necessary support to the client and a greater understanding of society as a whole. By adequately educating counselors in training and in practice, the pervasiveness of this topic can be approached with the same skill and familiarity as any other issue that is approached within a session. Being educated as a professional with regard to this material shares equal importance in a productive counseling relationship with the ability to express empathy, honesty, and authenticity.

The primary objective of formal training for the counselor is to understand and accept his or her own sexuality and identity, and become proficient in identifying any learned behaviors or personal barriers

that exist when addressing topics such as sexual preference, experience, dysfunction, and perception. It is through this process that individuals become aware of any inconsistency between one's behaviors and values as well as increase one's awareness of personal limitations and prejudice. Working to consciously identify one's own sexual beliefs and behaviors will better prepare the counselor to recognize trends in sexual attitudes and experiences pertaining to the client.

Sexuality edification can further communication and trust within the counseling relationship, can convey a sense of openness and support, and can contribute to a safe environment which promotes growth and awareness. By addressing the broader implications of both the counselor's and the client's individual sexuality within therapy, the discrepancy between attitudes and experiences may become more congruent. It is imperative to recognize one's own attitudes and behaviors that encompass the sexuality component of human beings, so one can best establish an environment conducive to acknowledging the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences that encompass the sexuality dimension of male and female clients.

Through literature reviews, it has been found that women and men have different attitudes toward sexual experiences. There is a trend in conservative behaviors in regards to sex (Henshaw, 1998; Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002). However, there has also been a trend in liberal sexual attitudes (Calvin, Carroll, & Shmidt, 1993; Laksmanna, 2003). Through this literature review, there appears to be a negative relationship between sexual attitudes and experiences, indicating a contradiction of attitudes and experiences (Tucker-Ladd, 2000). Although there appear to be more conservative sexual experiences, the sexual attitudes of individuals are becoming more liberal.

Research in the area of individuals' sexual attitudes and sexual experiences is limited to its descriptive methodology, its population of traditional college students, and its purpose of "what" versus "why." Existing research does not provide an understanding of the multiplistic society and the possible relationship (or lack thereof) between sexual attitudes and sexual experiences, and if sexual attitudes and experiences differ among genders. Through the reviews of literature, it is evident research is lacking in the exploration of the relationship among sexual attitudes, experiences, and gender. A descriptive representation of the sexual attitudes, experiences and gender of individuals could provide insight into the relationship among experiences and attitudes of sex. This insight could promote an awareness of one's self, which is vital in personal growth.

Since *sexuality* is a broad term that encompasses

a wide range of behaviors and emotions, it is easy to see the important part it can play in one's overall well being (Bridges, Lease, & Ellison, 2004). Therefore, most counselors will eventually come in contact with clients dealing with some type of concern related to sexuality. Counselor preparation in this area, however, appears to be lacking. In fact, many counseling graduate programs provide limited coursework on sexuality, leaving counselors in training unprepared to recognize and deal with sexually related matters with their clients (Pearson, 2003). Many counselors dread the possibility of sexual issues being brought up for discussion in session and are hesitant to bring them up themselves (Bridges et al., 2004). Consequently, significant problems may be overlooked, and progress in therapy may come to a standstill. Without adequate preparation in this area, counselors are unknowingly inviting the potential for relationship breakdown and treatment failure, along with feelings of dissatisfaction for both the counselor and the client.

In order to ensure counselor competency in this area, it is imperative that counselor education programs adopt a comprehensive training approach that sufficiently incorporates and addresses sexuality issues (Pearson, 2003). Classes focusing on sexuality in counseling need to be offered, with accurate information on sexuality being incorporated throughout the already established curriculum. Inviting knowledgeable guest speakers, engaging students in informative group discussions, and encouraging participation in role-playing activities have been found to be very useful in higher education. Additionally, texts, videos, exercises, and other teaching resources should include subject matter associated with sexuality issues.

Counselors need to be educated on how to communicate about sexuality effectively in order to model to their clients (Bridges et al., 2004). The hesitancy and general discomfort that typically accompany discussions of sexuality in sessions can eventually be overcome once the counselor and client become more familiar with the material and realize the importance it can play in the counseling relationship. Counselor education should not be limited to the physiological components that tend to be the focus of classes on sexuality. Instead, coursework should include other aspects of life that can be directly affected such as relationships, intimacy, and self-esteem. In addition, counselor education programs need to provide an atmosphere in which students can reflect openly and honestly on their own sexuality and principles and biases, alongside educators who present a nonjudgmental attitude toward students as issues are explored (Pearson, 2003). This type of training is essential for the challenges mental health professionals

currently face in identifying and working through sexuality issues in counseling sessions, which is an important feature of “good therapeutic work” (Bridges et al., 2004, p.158).

Training counselors for sexuality concerns is particularly important. Counselors addressing sexuality issues must have a clear understanding of the purpose of counseling. With this, counselors need to have the basic counseling skills with a background in a variety of counseling theories, methods, and techniques. The counselor should possess the ability to confront and express one’s self honestly. Having an awareness as well as true respect for individual differences is essential for counselors to possess. Personal qualities that support the strengthening of counselor-client interactions are critical when working with sexuality issues. Mindfulness of and receptivity to the wide array of information about human sexuality, and effective communication skills in order to convey this information to clients, is critical for counselors to maintain.

There is no uniform standard for training in sexuality counseling, nor should there be. It is incumbent upon interested counselor trainees to seek programs that include sexuality education and counseling to develop their own theories of sexual counseling. Counselors must use their personal beliefs about people and human interactions as a basis for developing a theoretical foundation. Counselors must explore their own sexuality, including sexual attitudes and behaviors, as it is imperative to understand one’s own assumptions and personal judgments. To be effective, counselors must be familiar with current approaches to counseling individuals with sexuality concerns. Further, counselors must have “basic training in such subjects as processes of reproduction, sexual development, sexual functioning, sexual behavior, sex and gender, marriage, family and interpersonal relationships, sex and health, and the historical study of sex and sexuality” (Schiller, 1977, p. 30).

In order to address such sensitive topics as sexuality, one must possess a strong level of confidence, a significant amount of awareness and education, and the ability to address controversial and sensitive topics. Integrating sexuality issues and possible incongruencies of attitudes and behaviors into existing master’s level curriculum would be challenging and take a passionate level of commitment on the educator’s behalf. Courses that could easily address sexuality issues include Family Therapy, Legal and Ethical Aspects of Counseling, Human Growth and Development, Counseling Children and Adolescents, Career Counseling, Theories of Counseling/Personality, Practicum, and Internship. Although sexuality counseling is a relatively new field,

still in its infancy, it is growing rapidly. Within this field are subspecialties such as family planning and sexual abuse counseling. The specific issues for each subspecialty can be discussed in specialty courses for counselors and can be implemented within the variety of existing counseling courses.

Understanding the meaning, the awareness, and the significance of sexuality in counseling programs is essential and fundamental to the training and education process of counselors in training. When dealing with sexual attitudes and experiences, preparation and training of counselors on how to address sexuality topics is essential. Planned Parenthood (2003) reported sexuality education is an evolving and ever-changing edification of obtaining and developing an appreciation of beliefs and attitudes about sexual individuality, understanding, and relationships. Educating individuals about sexuality is more than teaching anatomy and sexuality orientation. Sexuality education includes sexual awareness, sexual development, sexual intimacy, sexual acknowledgement, and respect as well as an understanding of sexual attitudes and behaviors.

Sexuality attitudes and experiences arise in counseling sessions, and it is questionable whether counselors have been provided adequate education to address such issues. Current and historical trends in sexual beliefs and behaviors were briefly explored in this article, as well as the importance of sexuality in counseling programs and counseling sessions. To be cognizant of sexuality issues, counselors need to be adequately prepared to competently and proficiently address these issues in counseling sessions.

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