

# Spiritual Formation and Sexuality Education in Seminaries: What Can Adult Education Theory Contribute?

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## Recommended Citation

Conklin, Sarah C. (2001). "Spiritual Formation and Sexuality Education in Seminaries: What Can Adult Education Theory Contribute?," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/21>

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## **Spiritual Formation and Sexuality Education in Seminaries: What Can Adult Education Theory Contribute?**

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**Abstract: This "research in progress" roundtable session seeks theoretical suggestions and strategies for encouraging spiritual development, perspective transformation, self knowledge and development of the whole person within the education of adult helping professionals, especially clergy. The goal of such development is the sexual and spiritual health of clergy and their congregants. .**

### **Need for Explanation and Documentation of Formative Sexuality Education in Seminaries**

The status of sexuality education within theological schools in America has not been documented in the social science literature. Empirical data is also lacking on which to base recommendations about how transformation, spiritual growth, or self knowledge is best developed or encouraged (Tisdell, 1999). Additionally, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has expressed concern about how the formative aspects of seminary experience should be assessed as part of the institution accreditation process.

Formation as an aspect of education has roots in the Greek tradition called *paideia*. In contemporary terms, the seminary experience is expected to provide not only knowledge and technical skills needed to become a member of the clergy, but also to play a role in forming the character of the students. Such character formation shapes values, beliefs and perceptions in addition to imparting information (Carroll, Wheeler, Aleshire, & Marler, 1997).

A logical place to begin this investigation of education and formation is within institutions that are already concerned with spiritual growth - accredited seminaries and theological schools (Hough, 1995; King, 1995). According to health education theory, both spiritual growth and sexuality content could contribute to the ability of helping professionals to enhance their own health and address the health needs of their constituencies (Butler 1997). Likewise, adult education theory addresses spiritual development (Tisdell, 1999), perspective transformation (Mezirow 1991), self knowledge (Dirkx 1998), and development of the whole person (King 1998) within the education of adult helping professionals. Droege (2001) collected evidence of sexuality and spirituality content in courses available to helping professionals in nursing, counseling, social work, teaching, and ministry. Compared to ministry, the other professions seemed to receive more consistent instruction preparing them in human sexuality content.

### **Questions Addressed in the Proposed Study of Clergy Student Sexual and Spiritual Health**

The problem this study seeks to answer is "How does seminary training prepare clergy to address the sexuality-related needs of congregants?" This question will be posed to all 173 American institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Originally, the primary concern was a curricular one and therefore questions focused on courses and their content. Recently, the organizations funding this research have broadened their perspective to include a new ATS accreditation standard addressing "formation" of seminarians. In practice this means a concern for how the institution tends to the spiritual growth of its students.

The other question this project intends to answer deals with the perceived need for academic training in human sexuality for clergy students. Asking, "Is sexuality education for clergy really necessary?" and "Is it the role of seminaries to provide sexuality education?" will assess attitudes and beliefs of current students and faculty.

### **Theoretical Framework Needs Expansion to Include Pertinent Adult Education Theory**

Culture, based on the perspectives of Clifford Geertz and Ann Swidler, is a framework for understanding organizations including institutions such as seminaries (Carroll, et al., 1997). They define culture as "shared symbolic forms (worldviews and beliefs, ritual practices, ceremonies, art and architecture, language, and patterns of daily interactions) that give meaning and direction to life" (p. 252). Students are formed by the culture as they interact with it, negotiating, contesting, and using its tools to construct perspectives that vary in "degrees of agreement or disagreement with the normative core of the culture" (p. 268).

Another theoretical construct has roots in two competing ancient conceptions of health; Hygeia as a well way of living versus Asclepius as a healer who treats disease and corrects imperfections. (Buchanan, 2000). The scientific medical approach to health problems is based on a paradigm of power, control, and mastery. Buchanan sees today's health problems as social and behavioral; thus the issues are political and ethical. He advocates a new approach to health problems based on practical reason as opposed to instrumental reason, individual well-being as achieved by virtues of mindfulness (self knowledge about values and human integrity), and community well-being (based on nurturing a sense of belonging, concern for the whole, and respect for social bonds).

The purpose of this round table discussion is to expand the theoretical basis of this study from only that of health education and theological education to include adult education theory - particularly those theories involving education of the whole person, holistic approaches, perspective transformation, and spiritual development. By expanding the theoretical base, those involved in research about varied kinds of adult education and professional preparation could contribute to and also benefit from research that is focused on sexuality and spirituality education and formation of clergy students in seminaries.

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