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# **Racy Sexy - Sorting through the Traffic Jam at the Intersection of Race, Culture, Ethnicity and Sexuality: A Model for Intergenerational Multicultural Sexuality Education for Parents**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at developing a multicultural model for sexuality education that focuses on parents as the advocates for increased understanding and support for healthy sexual behaviors among youth.

## **Introduction**

In North America, current models for sex and sexuality education take certain cultural and social norms for granted. There is little consideration given to the role of cultural, familial and contextual foundations in enhancing knowledge and supporting behavioral changes (Irving, 1997, Sears, 1995). The HIV/AIDS global pandemic has raised concerns and urgency to increase knowledge about sexual risks and sexual health. Sexuality education models often utilize scientific and biological information to “convince” our populations to change our sexual behaviors. These models utilize strategies that are aimed at main stream North American youth populations, which create sexual stereotypes and gaps in knowledge particularly for immigrant youth and youth from ethnocultural communities. Despite the increasingly diverse demographics of target populations, sexuality education reflects a white middle-class, heterosexual male bias (Ward & Taylor, 1994). These perspectives are simplistic and do not recognize the complexity in which the nature of sexuality and identity are interdependent, bound to social, historical, cultural, economical and institutional factors which are inextricably linked to individual interactions. There have been few theories published that integrate multicultural approaches to sexuality education, and even fewer that approach sexuality education from an intergenerational perspective.

## **Background**

In 2000 I was hired to develop an Educational Program for an AIDS organization, which provides services to East and Southeast Asian communities. As a sexuality educator from an ethnocultural community I have always had difficulty negotiating Western concepts around sex and sexuality that did not resonate within my own field of experience as a Malaysian lesbian. The first thing I did was to investigate existing sexuality education programs and conduct focus groups with youth peer sexuality educators, sex/sexuality/reproductive/HIV/STD educators and community health providers to identify the gaps and challenges in providing education to individuals from ethnocultural communities. I also conducted a focus group with a group of Asian youth to determine issues that were relevant to them related to HIV/AIDS/STD and sexual health. One of the most important findings that was consistent for all the groups was the need to have an intergenerational approach to sexuality education that included culturally and linguistically relevant elements. From these basic inquiries it was clear that adults, particularly parents played important roles in shaping attitudes, behaviors and beliefs of youth around sex and sexuality issues. Parents should be included centrally within the pedagogical framework that

supports a communally and culturally based model which has the potential to diffuse sexual and racial stereotypes, to help create a positive social environment for changes in sexual behaviors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper will look at theoretical frameworks in Multicultural Education, Ethnic and Race Identity Theory and Human Sexuality that contribute to the development of this model. Discourse in Multicultural Education is centered on the recognition of cultural diversity and the importance of respecting and understanding the differences and fluidity of culture. This includes concepts of sex, sexuality, gender, desire and pleasure. While there are no conclusive agreements on the definitions of ethnicity or the means of constructing identity, it is clear that individual and collective norms, values, attitudes and behaviors are associated with membership into social and cultural groups (Keefe, 1992; Phinney, 1990; Tajfel, 1978). By extension the 'rules' for individual sexuality may be said to be influenced by the way in which our identities are mapped and shaped. Human sexuality researchers in North America such as Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, have played an important part in essentializing human sexual behaviour and coding sexual norms. Biological facts do not take into consideration the ways in which human sexuality is formed and expressed. To understand and accept diverse concepts related to sexuality it is important to deconstruct how human sexuality has been focused on biological determinism and not social constructivism (Irvine, 1995). Social Construction Theories on human sexuality challenges dominant norms and universally held assumptions about sex, gender and culture, this provides a more heterogeneous source of wisdom and knowledge from which to draw from when we try to understand the relationship between sexuality, identity and culture. From these theoretical locations we can begin to appreciate the complexity and fluidity of individual sexual expression.

### **Multicultural Education**

Multicultural educational practices reflect a range of traditions and include assimilationist models, which support the absorption of culturally marginalized learners into mainstream cultures. Within the context of this paper, multicultural education refers to learning environments, which acknowledge different traditions of thoughts, practice and feeling. This is pedagogy which supports the acquisition of different forms of understanding and nurtures qualities that encourage critical inquiry. This process of building bridges between diverse cultures may help reduce identity and cultural conflicts inherent in interpersonal and intergroup relationships, which impact on an individual's capacity to operate well in diverse settings. Failure to recognize cultural dimensions in sexuality education reinforces conflicts between parent/home values and school, peer and youth values and may create feelings of anxiety, tension, frustration, anger and low self-esteem.

Embedded within Multicultural educational framework is the need to understand individual and communal contextual experiences and circumstances, the objective is to provide 'translators' to different subcultures, without privileging any one subculture.

### **Social Construction of Sexuality**

Essentialist's perspectives on sexuality, which rely on biological interpretations of sex, gender, and sexuality is slowly being replaced by Social Construction Theories of Sexuality. This new position looks at sexuality and gender as a construction of cultural, social and political influences. To understand sexuality is to look at how particular cultures organize sexual behavior, identity and social norms. There can be no universal norm but multiple cultural norms. These norms are neither fixed nor constant but shift and transform over time.

- Sexuality is not universal either throughout history or across cultures
- It is doubtful that there is an internal, essential sex drive or force.
- Biology plays a small role, if any, in determining our sexuality.
- Sexuality is deeply influenced by social, political, economic and cultural factors.
- We must examine the specific meaning attached to sexuality at particular historical moments in particular cultures.

(Irvine, 1995, pp. 12 – 14)

### **Cultural Coding Embedded in Current Models of Sexuality Education**

‘Sexual and other social identities, as possible ways of living, are produced in relation to the cultural repertoires and institutional conditions of schooling’  
(Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 2)

In the Vancouver, British Columbia, by the time students graduate high school they would have received up to 10 hours of formal ‘Sex Ed.’ and countless hours of informal sex ed through peer interaction, main stream media and other sources. In North America, sex education models have emerged from social hygiene and human reproduction movements to provide information focused on biology and physiology rather than behavior and culture. (Irvine, 1995 pp. 125 – 127) This reinforces narrow essentialist interpretations of sex and sexuality which serves to normalize, or more important ‘abnormalize’ divergent expressions of sexuality.

#### *Essentialism*

- There is an internal, probably biological sex drive or instinct.
- Sexuality is universally expressed throughout different historical times.
- Sexuality is universally expressed across different cultures

(Irvine, 1995, p. 3)

In our current milieu adolescents are socialized to think about sex within a certain context, the discourse of healthy sexuality is predominantly from the perspective of the dominant culture. Certain values and beliefs are privileged for example;

- Emphasis on individual agency in relationships and choices.
- Open and frank communication as the method to negotiate relationships.
- Sexual identity as an integral and defining element of individual identity.
- Individuals are central in the discourse around sexuality.

### **Implications of this Model on ‘Outsider’ Communities**

Sex education strategies intended to support healthy decision making in young adults may in fact be detrimental to individuals who may already be experiencing tensions between their ethnic identity and personal identity. Values and beliefs that appear to contradict home values contribute to further conflicts within familial and community relationships. These relationships are important in the construction of self identity and the development of cultural and social schema, that define how individual negotiate their place in their communities and in the world. Self-labeling, a sense of belonging, positive evaluation, group preferences, community interest, knowledge and involvement within communities are affected by the educational initiatives which assume culturally neutral positions.

Members from communities that may not rely on verbal communication, share communal values and/or rely on religious norms to articulate sexual expression may feel further alienated from their home identities because dominant discourse is reinforced. Teaching for sexual diversity means that learners should have the capacity to decode social roles and self-image without interfering with ethnic identity.

### **Cultural Context for Asian-Canadians**

Asian is a problematic term used to categorize individuals and communities from diverse locations and experiences, which share a context embedded within colonialism in a region called Asia. This paper reflects practice in the field, in this circumstance ‘Asian’ is used to refer to East and Southeast Asians, which include; Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Philippines and Brunei. Within these countries and between these countries lie a fluid and contested terrain of sexuality and gender which exist despite attempts of scienceification.

In this model of Sexuality Education for diversity it is not as important to name sexuality but to recognize the lack of universality in expressions of sexuality. Focus is placed on the interrogation of that which influence sexual behavior. For example within Chinese scholarship Western concepts of sexuality and sex do not exist, familial-kinships and focus on contextual relationships cultivates a general disinterest or resistance in discussions around sexuality. Medical and scientific terms are relatively new concepts that are not used in the language, but rather domains of family, marriage, kinship, sentiment, concern, affection, desire, virility, procreation, yin-yang, qing, happiness and pleasure are utilized to characterize self-identity within the context of social relationships. (Wah-shan, 2000, pp. 19 - 20)

In sexuality education it would be impossible to ensure that the whole spectrum of sexual expression is respected and honored. Pedagogy for responsible sexual behavior may lie not in the articulation of explicit concepts of sex and sexuality but in the focus on the pervasive influence of culture, history and experience in defining our sexual selves.

### **Proposed Education Model**

This model was developed as a tool to support the bridging of generational gaps between parents and youth. These gaps are complicated by migration and immigration, language and socialization. The objective of this model is to enhance understanding as to the role of ethnicity in the development of individual sexuality and to cultivate an appreciation of the role of culture and ethnicity in maintaining social and community norms while at the same time creating tension within other relationships. This is a three-dimensional mapping strategy to locate diverse expressions of identity, cultural competence and gender.

*Genitalia as gender – Spirit as gender (axis X)*

Within biological definitions, gender is based on genitalia or chromosomes. Spirit as gender is the counter ideal to the essentialist interpretation of gender.

*Language as Cultural capital (axis Y)*

Language is an overly simplified but convenient way to measure cultural capital within an individual's ethnic identity. On one end of this continuum is 'home' language ability is equated with ethnic cultural capital and on the other hand is 'home' language challenge is equivalent to reduced ethnic cultural capital.

*Familial/peer relationships as identity (axis Z)*

Relationship identity and affiliation provides a perspective on the significance of group identity. In this case peer affiliation is juxtaposed with familial ties.

This is an exercise where parents and youth are asked to locate themselves within the sphere using the X,Y and Z axis. They are then asked to locate their parents and/or children within the same sphere. The degree of conflicts youth may have with their parents may lie in the distance between these locations. Opportunity for transformative learning occurs in the articulation of the differences and critical analysis on why the distance occurs and how to bridge the distance.

Reflection on these multiple positioning creates opportunities to discuss diverse concepts and experiences of identity, values and beliefs as they relate to gender, sex and sexuality. These three bisecting vectors allows for the visualization of the interplay between the three different fields and the distance between parent and youth

When we can see the range of expressions between parent groups and youth groups, we can begin to understand the potential for different constructed meanings and to appreciate differences and diversity. Parents may develop a deeper understanding of conflicts between generations and they may begin to cultivate an awareness issues facing immigrant youth and youth from ethnocultural communities. The objective is not to place value on the differences and/or distance of location but to articulate the meaning and implication of the different ways of being and our positions in the world.

The premise of this model lies in the belief that talking about sexual health may have little to do with talking about sex but more about concepts of self, ethnicity, belonging and others. Here, parents and youth are able to appreciate alternative embodiments of sexuality and interrogate the differences without privileging one or another. Discussions are focused on bridging cultural differences rather than depending on specific coded values and behaviors to promote sexual health. The model is merely a tool to facilitate discussions on issues related to sex and sexuality rather than speaking specifically about sex.

## Implications

Sexuality educators are continually in search for more effective ways of communicating about sexuality. We are preoccupied with developing effective and appropriate ways to talk about sex; we are also focused on expanding our audience base. Despite our attention to these programming objectives, there continues to be assumptions made about who should be receiving sexuality education. This usually means populations at risk and youth populations. Youth because there is a consistent belief that youth have a better capacity to integrate healthy sexuality practices as part of their development to adulthood. Education to adults at risk is based on a theory of rational choices, which assumes that adults will act purposefully and in their own best interest. These models do not consider the role community values and beliefs have on individual behavior. The goals of most sexuality educators is to affect behavioral changes that support the practice of safer sex, this cannot be achieved if we focus solely on individual agency.

## Conclusion

Changes in sexual behaviors require support from external social-political environments, which includes acceptance of diverse expressions of sexuality, ethnicity, race and culture. Youth and populations at risk require the guidance of their peers, parents and other adults to integrate new ways of being and to limit dissonance between peer culture, dominant culture and home culture.

In our culturally diverse society, prevailing models of sexuality education should be critically viewed for relevance and effectiveness. By appropriating adult education theories and strategies we can develop alternative models for sexuality education grounded in a socio-political and cultural context that supports change.

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