
Introduction: Innovations in Sexuality and Counselling / Innovations dans le domaine de la sexualité et le counseling

Kathleen V. Cairns

University of Calgary

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to edit this special issue, since currently very few, if any, Canadian counsellor education programs or teacher education programs offer preparation for dealing with client's and student's sexual questions and concerns. This absence of sex counselling and sex education from our curricula reflects, I think, the continuing prevalence in our society of dysfunctional beliefs, knowledge deficits and mistaken assumptions about sexual problems. These beliefs include myths about sexual behaviour, assumptions about what "normal" sex is, and mistaken notions about how sex education and sexual behaviour interact. They reflect, in my opinion, a culture which is still predominantly sex-negative or erotophobic: one which views sex simultaneously as 'natural' and as problematic or shameful and prefers silence to dialogue on issues related to it.

The largest problems with this approach seem to be that it produces children and adults whose information about sexual functioning is superficial and often inaccurate, whose capacity to seek out sexual information and to discuss sexual behaviour with their partners is significantly impaired, and whose ability to plan for sexual activity is rendered ineffectual by the need for sex to be "spontaneous" and unplanned. These problems, and others like them, are sufficiently widespread in Canada that no sex counsellor or educator need ever want for work, yet it is the rare counsellor who seeks out sex education or training in sex counselling. This fact is probably less surprising when one remembers that values and counselling interact in both blatant and subtle ways to affect the types and content of services we offer. Further, sex counselling and education are difficult activities, requiring more introspection, education, consultation, and supervision than most counselling specializations do. Its effectiveness is dependent on the counsellor's comfort with conversation about sexual behaviour, breadth and depth of knowledge about human sexuality, skill in the identification of specific knowledge or behaviour deficits, and in the application of empirically supported interventions to correct these problems.

One of the first realizations that any sex counsellor or sex educator comes to, hopefully during specialized training, but sometimes less fortuitously in the first months of practice, is that sex counselling and sex

education are interdisciplinary activities that include multiple, inter-related research, practice, and instructional activities. Sexology, sexual psychology, forensic sexology, public health initiatives, epidemiological studies of sex-related problems and conditions, K-12 sex education, counselling for “normal range” sexual dysfunctions—all of those, and many other specialized areas of study and practice, contribute to the complex field that is the study of human sexuality. The disciplines that contribute to the knowledge base that is necessary for practitioners in these fields are similarly many and varied. Biologists, biochemists, neurologist, gynecologists, urologists, psychiatrists, pharmacists, psychologists, nurses, teachers, social workers, historians, sociologists, and counsellors—all can be met with and heard giving presentations on their work at scientific meetings such as those of the Canadian Sex Research Forum (CSRF) or the American Association of Sex Educators Counsellors and Therapists (AASECT).

The study of sex, in comparison to many other disciplines, is a truly inter-disciplinary study, one in which the practitioner cannot afford to be isolated by the requirements of a particular profession. The practice of sex counselling, or of sex education, requires the constant updating of information from many fields of study. It requires that practitioners establish complex networks of professional contacts across disciplines so that their practice may be informed by the most accurate possible information, and so that they have access to consultation with other, specialized practitioners. Both the context and the content of the field change rapidly, and practitioners are subject to often intense pressure from special interest groups for conformity to particular political positions, pressure which is often focused on requiring adherence to particularly restrictive sets of beliefs, such as homophobia or sexist beliefs about the rights of women and children to sexual information and services.

Because sex counselling and education are inter-disciplinary, it is essential that practitioners have the comfort and support of an intellectual and professional community to enable them to consult science first and politics second, if at all, in the face of such controversies and fashions. Willingness and ability to work with other professionals in a collaborative way are essential attributes of counsellors and educators in this field.

Counsellors' and educators' most frequently offered services are counselling for individuals and couples who are experiencing sexually-related “problems of living,” and sex education, usually offered through the public schools or in community counselling or other health-related agencies. However, as is the case with most applied disciplines whose focus is the study of human behaviour, boundaries among specializations within the overall fields of sex counselling and education are never as tidy

as our definitions, or our job descriptions, make them out to be. The sex educator is often asked unpredictable questions that require a diplomat with specialized medical and psychological knowledge to answer. The sex counsellor encounters individuals or couples whose sexual problems are complicated by serious psychological dysfunctions, object-choice problems, or have illegal components. Because this is the case, counsellors and educators who work in these areas require training in sexual physiology, biology, and psychology, in addition to their specific training in the management of specific sexual dysfunctions and sex education curricula.

The broad range of topics covered in this special issue demonstrates, I think, the diversity of practice and research in the area in Canada. It is intended to bring forward the work of some sex educators and counsellors whose work is currently adding to our knowledge base about how sex and sexuality affect human behaviour. I hope that, in reading through some of this work, you may discover anew the multifaceted nature of practice and research in sexuality in Canada, improve your own knowledge of the topics to the benefit of your students and clients, and perhaps develop a new interest and willingness to seek out further education in the practice of sex education and counselling.