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Self-Disclosure in Teaching Sexuality Courses

This paper presents our own reflections, and those of our students, on the issue of self-disclosure in teaching. In particular we focus on two final year undergraduate courses that we teach on the psychology of gender (Meg) and sexualities (Paula), which are taken each year by around thirty students.

Most of the literature on self-disclosure and managing heteronormativity in the classroom has centered on the disclosure of sexuality as identity/orientation and the silencing of lesbian and gay, and to some extent bisexual, identities within the academy (Epstein et al., 2003; Barker, 2007). However, we are reflecting here on a broader understanding of sexuality and gender, which encompasses a whole range of practices, identities and communities. For example psychology also tends to exclude any form of non-monogamy, and transgender, intersex and sadomasochism are generally only presented in the context of 'abnormal psychology'. Furthermore, childhood and adolescent sexualities, where questions relating to sex and identity are potentially important sites of understanding, are often only discussed with reference to risk, vulnerability and abuses of power.

For these reasons we deliberately engage with a diversity of sexual and gendered experiences in our courses, especially those excluded from mainstream psychology, and with intersections between these and culture, race, religion and class. This is experientially vital given that the majority of our students are non-white (around 82%) and from a diverse range of cultural and class backgrounds (we ourselves are white from middle and working class backgrounds respectively).

Inevitably the teaching of such courses has caused us to reflect on the ways in which the sexual and gendered identities and experiences of the students and ourselves are, or are not, made visible in the classroom. Frequently students will relate material to their own experiences in discussions, and questions of how this is dealt with by the teacher, and to what extent the teacher may reflect on their own experiences as well, are complex. Whilst many textbook authors and teachers use anecdotal stories about their husbands/wives to illustrate their material, it could be regarded as more loaded to use a story of a same-sex partner or of partners plural.

Such stories are regarded as potentially coercive in a way that heterosexual and monogamous narratives are not (as one of us, Meg, found when it was publicly suggested that her non-monogamous practices would be copied by ‘vulnerable’ students).

Like Bertram and Massey (2007), we are keen to reflect on outness in our teaching. We are aware of the potential of outness to encourage students to question their assumptions (Silin, 1999) and to correct faulty assumptions (Reavey, 1997), yet we also have concerns about the losses that go along with such gains. Of course, similar issues are raised in relation to being out in an academic paper like this. Whilst we are open about some aspects of our own sexualities here, we have chosen not to explicitly declare our identities or practices in this paper for three reasons: (1) our identities are not fixed or representative of these sexualities more broadly; (2) we are cautious to avoid confessional narratives which imply that our identities require explanation (Barker, 2006); and (3) we are sadly aware of many times when such openness has been used against academics. Similarly on the courses we did not say anything about our own sexual identities up front, but there were moments when they were brought into question by either the class material or student comments.

To gain some understanding of the way our students felt about outness (on the part of themselves and the teachers), we gave out a brief set of open-ended questions about how they had experienced the sexualities course personally and whether they felt that the teacher ‘coming out’ was important in any negative and/or positive ways. The students who responded represented a wide range of perspectives on these questions. Two provided accurate views of Meg’s sexual identity (due to previous media coverage of her research and identity), one of these mentioning ‘Meg’s bisexuality and Paula having a son’ although it was unclear whether they had assumed anything about Paula’s sexuality on the basis of this. It was assumed that being in a partnership with a child equated with being heterosexual and monogamous. For some heterosexual students this had the effect of seeing someone who they ‘identified with’ positively exploring sexuality and embracing ‘queer’ discourses.

Views on whether teachers’ own identities and experiences were important to the course varied from those who felt they were very important and who would have liked more openness, to those who felt they were irrelevant. However, most agreed that some degree of openness was important for the following reasons:

- Creating a 'safe' or 'comfortable' space for students to be open about how these issues relate to their own lives. One student commented that 'it creates a power barrier between the teacher and the students if they don't' since students were being 'open'.
- Reflexivity being important in teaching as well as research and the sense that teachers will always be coming from some standpoint and they would rather be aware of it. This did not necessarily involve personal disclosure but a 'standpoint' on sexuality more generally.
- The importance of experiential as well as theoretical knowledge in increasing the 'impact and power' of the sessions: 'by knowing that the lecturers have identities under discussion I feel it brings it more alive and encourages you to challenge your own views and become more open-minded and understanding of people's choices in life'.

We have also reflected on our own experiences of outness (or not) in these sessions. One of us (Meg) questioned whether to use gender-neutral pronouns when mentioning a partner or to use whichever pronoun applied. When a student spoke of the experiences of her own non-monogamous parents, Meg was left wondering whether to add a voice of experience as well as of research expertise, or whether to leave this student as the one voice of difference in the room. In this case it was decided to use a tone of familiarity, mentioning several examples of personally known and famous people, hopefully normalising non-monogamy without becoming confessional.

Another thorny area is childhood sexuality. Some students were very open about their experiences of positive childhood sexuality, including sexual games and memories of sexual desire with friends. One of us (Paula) considered using positive same-sex stories from her own childhood, before several religious students (mainly Christian) expressed the view that permitting free expression in childhood and adolescent sexuality was sinful and potentially abusive. The discussion then became more academic, as Paula felt the use of personal experience might be inappropriate, as it could potentially discredit students who felt uncomfortable (including students who may have had very negative experiences). Academic exploration, for Paula, was felt to be a safer option for exploring this difficult terrain, although she encouraged

students with positive experiences to discuss them openly with the other students. With such an emotive and morally loaded topic as childhood and sexuality, seeming to be 'siding' with one group would have been potentially disruptive to the group dynamics, as the teacher can be seen to hold the 'correct' or more 'dominant' view, even if that position dissolves outside the classroom.

It is important to acknowledge the complexity of group dynamics around personal disclosure as well as how the increasing comfort of some students with self-disclosure may decrease comfort amongst others. For example, one black student, from a Rastafarian family, spoke, very movingly, about the discrepancy she felt between herself and students from a white, non-religious background. She said that she felt that other students found it easier to engage with critical material about sexuality, especially when another student had stated that her parents would be 'okay' if she 'brought home' a woman. The first student reflected on the difficulties she would experience of 'bringing home' a white man, let alone a woman. This led to what seemed a very useful discussion of issues of intersectionality and family norms. Importantly, this student embraced the discomfort she was experiencing and reflected that it was helping her to engage more critically with the material, something which may have been more difficult for those students who were positioning themselves within a narrative of liberal tolerance.

Bertram and Massey (2007) argue for increasing levels of discomfort, rather than comfort, in such settings and speak of their use of 'world turned upside down' exercises, such as Rochlin's (1977) heterosexuality questionnaire and Sedgwick's (1993) paper *How to Bring your Kids up Gay*. These destabilise both heteronormative and homonormative narratives of assimilation and sameness, encouraging students to reflect on their positions of privilege and the ways in which oppressive hierarchies are perpetuated (Garber, 1994). Such exercises can also be useful in revealing normative sexualities themselves as culturally and historically constructed. Meg has similarly used Rothblum's (1999) friendship planet, Kimmel's (2006) Nacirema paper (which describes American fraternity behaviour as if it was a social anthropological study of an 'other' culture) and her own exercises on sadomasochism (Barker, 2007).

We have also been forced to confront our own normative assumptions about students, when using these exercises. One year, when introducing the Kinsey and Klein models of bisexuality, Meg was surprised when small group discussions of

these models provoked several stories of same-sex experiences from students who had previously only spoken of opposite-sex attraction.

As well as class exercises, Paula has used filmic case studies (e.g. 'The Woodsman', 'Twin Peaks', 'Kids') to examine the complexity of, and to explore students' moral, emotional and political responses to, topics ranging from child sexual abuse, adolescent sexuality and sex offending. Students have reported that visual presentations of material are powerful, emotionally charged and compelling because they rupture their 'rational' narrative on a subject, which invites them to engage in an alternative dialogue with the subject matter (Reavey, forthcoming).

Inevitably such exercises provoke some discussion about the practices of students themselves and people they know, and often call into question the teacher's particular views and experiences of the subject matter. In this paper we have shown how we often had to deal with this 'on the hoof'. This is not necessarily a negative thing, in comparison to being completely out about all our identities and relationships from the start. Generally we would argue that adopting openness in pedagogical approaches, using a wide range of exercises and visual material, can invite students to examine not only their own or our personal experiences but also a *diversity* of culturally salient characterisations and images. Presenting a plurality of experiences thus enables a more sophisticated reading of the complexity of personal experience and its relevance in developing and rethinking perspectives on gender and sexualities.

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