

Suzanne Benack “Psychology of Sexuality”

Since sexuality is one of the major arenas of life which humans regulate through social norms and values, a course on the Psychology of Sexuality pretty much cannot avoid treating ethical issues. Questions of sexual values are highly emotionally charged for our students, and are also fairly taboo as a topic of conversation. Thus, I’ve found that students are eager to know what their peers believe about the acceptability of various sexual behaviors (homosexuality? fetishes? promiscuity?). Moreover, they are quick to leap from facts in the scientific literature (e.g., children of gay parents are not more likely to be gay themselves, teenage girls with many sexual partners tend to have lower self-esteem) to values (gay adoption is OK; promiscuity is not a good idea for teenage girls).

The purpose of the ethics module in this course (a week of readings and class sessions, in the eighth week of the term) was to have students examine the relationship of the scientific literature on sexuality and the ethics of sexuality. We looked at two specific questions as case examples of this interrelation:

- Do the scientific findings on the origins of sexual orientation have implications for the ethics and politics of gay rights?
- What are the ethical issues in psychological treatment of people with socially taboo sexual desires? To what extent do treatment guidelines derive from psychological knowledge, to what extent from ethical principles which are independent of psychological knowledge?

Each of these two questions had a class session devoted to it (for a total of one week of the course, in the eighth week of the term). Each class began with a five-minute quiz on the assigned readings (from the psychological and philosophical literature). Students were then given a set of value questions and/or hypothetical case situations. The class consisted of a discussion of these questions and cases, moving between individual free writing, small group discussions, and whole-class discussions.

Students were clearly very engaged in this discussion. Coming near the end of the term and, for most of them, near the end of their career as psychology majors, the conversation served as a springboard for reflecting critically on much of the work they had done in the field. They raised good questions: whether values do/should guide scientific research; whether one’s psychological beliefs ought to depend only on “facts” or on values as well; whether psychotherapy can be value-neutral.

I thought this was largely successful and useful. I did have a sense, though, that it was “too little, too late,” both in terms of the course and in terms of the major. The conversation was successfully disequilibrating – students examined and questioned their implicit beliefs about these issues. But there was not time to begin to move toward any deeper understanding and resolution.

I think in the future, I will look for ways to “prepare the ground” for this discussion of science and ethics by setting up the issues throughout the course, so that the focused conversation can be more productive. I will also look for a way for individual students to spend more time articulating their own thoughts (e.g., in a journal entry).

