

Sex Education and The New Morality

JEROME A. BECWAR

A RATIONALE for an educational program in human sexuality relevant to young adults in the 1970s must be based on several premises that conflict with verities of American life, such as Puritanism, the so-called Protestant ethic, obligatory female chastity, the double standard, and the threat of divine retribution for engaging in nonmarital sexual activity. There is ample evidence to suggest that today's youth—and some of their parents—are in the process of evolving moral positions (often called "life styles") that are contemptuous of social restraints on affective communication, one aspect of which is human sexuality.

This paper has two parts. The first is an attempt to spell out the conditions and attitudes that are revolutionizing sexual conduct in America and to suggest the kind of sex education that is most relevant to the new circumstances. The second part is intended to encourage thought about the ethics of the situation.

I. ON BEING "WHERE IT'S AT"

The Attack on Old Values

The lyrics of much contemporary folk and rock music direct the listener to emote, to feel, to respond—to "let it all hang out." Authors who are popular with young adults (Kurt Vonnegut and Rod McKuen, for example) urge a reaffirmation of the primacy of human values over organizational allegiance and condemn the survival techniques inherent in dehumanized social and economic hierarchies: manipulation, hypocrisy, and self-aggrandizement. The political, social, and cultural revolutionary spirit that pervades many college campuses (and, increasingly, high-school campuses) monotonously and predictably denigrates mass man and proffers an invitation to the emancipated to enter into the Age of Aquarius. Underground newspapers not only provide useful information for those wishing to engage

in a variety of frankly hedonistic activities; they also contain suggestions for the prudent or the perplexed who may be in need of counseling in the use of contraceptives (the service usually known as contraceptive counseling), abortion referral, pregnancy tests, or simply someone to rap with. Encounter groups (also called T-groups or affective-education sessions, which offer "sensitivity training") enable the emotionally uptight to regain the ability to communicate without words and, through progressive stages of shell-shedding, to interact emotionally, sensually, and sexually with other reprocessed human beings.

The educational establishment is denounced for its rigidity, incoherence, irrelevancy, and—most especially—for its inability to communicate with youth on issues that lie unattended in the no-man's-land of the generational warfare that is splintering and polarizing virtually all of our social institutions. Among these issues is the role of sex and human sexuality in interpersonal relations, a topic that traditionally has either been ignored, approached with a cultural and moralistic bias, or relegated to the physical-education department, where it is hastily included in a conglomerate unit on the dangers of drugs, sex, and venereal disease.

Predictions for the Immediate Future

Formal school programs in the rudiments of sex education are likely to expand, if only in an attempt to stem the rising tide of venereal disease and out-of-wedlock pregnancies. This "social hygiene" view is well established and is generally acceptable to conservative (usually rural) state legislators and their tax-conscious constituents. The providing of contraceptive counseling to adolescents by the Teen Scene program in Chicago and by similar projects in Battle Creek (Mich.), Memphis, San Francisco, and elsewhere suggests that conventional sexual morality is secondary to fiscal considerations in the arena of pragmatic politics. In effect, an establishment organization, the Planned Parenthood Association, is being sanctioned to function as might the Sexual

The author teaches biology at Francis W. Parker School, 330 Webster Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60614. A 1951 graduate, in biology, of Roosevelt University, he obtained his master's degree, also in biology, from the University of Chicago. He has taught science in Chicago-region schools since 1955. Becwar is chairperson of the advisory committee of the Planned Parenthood Assn.'s "Teen Scene" program in Chicago and is "most interested in the impact such programs may have on the schools." His wife, Bunny, a fourth-grade teacher in Winnetka, Ill., shares his interest in sex education. Becwar is a consultant to Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corp., for which the first part of this article was originally written. Part II of this article was included in a sex-education packet prepared by the National Association of Independent Schools. Both the organizations named have kindly given permission to reprint, as edited.



Freedom League, a group that tends to produce disgust and anger in the typical sexually upright adult. Schemes of this kind are likely to produce a demand for parallel programs in high schools, in my opinion, for the following reasons:

1. Girls and boys receiving contraceptive counseling are likely to introduce others to this service. In time the case-load will become overwhelming and will demand a more efficient vehicle of communication: the schools.

2. As today's parents are replaced by "post-pill" parents—those who experienced their adolescent sexual activity in the early 1960s—the latter's relatively high degree of sexual activity will predispose them to accept, if not insist on, some form of contraceptive counseling for their children.

3. Contraceptive counseling is an established policy at many of our universities. Activist ("emancipated") high-school students may well insist on receiving comparable services as a civil right. See in this regard *Up Against the Law: the Legal Rights of People Under Twenty-One*, by Jean Strouse (1970: New American Library, New York), chapter 5.

4. The present concern for the environment, of which overpopulation is one aspect, is lessening resistance to public discussion of birth control.

5. Some authorities, including the Sex Information and Educational Council of the United States (SIECUS), suggest that the United States is moving toward the acceptance of the Scandinavian attitude toward premarital sexual relationships: permissiveness with affection. If so, contraceptive education would be justified as providing a basis for socially responsible sexual behavior.

6. The sexual explicitness of the mass media, especially films, is helping to eliminate both legal and extralegal restrictions on public discussions of such topics as nonmarital sexual relationships, abortion, homosexuality, masturbation, variant forms of sexual behavior, and contraception.

7. There are philosophic grounds for anticipating increased acceptance of greater sexual freedom. The leaders of the "youth cult" adhere to ideals that conflict with many of the tenets of the Judeo-Christian heritage. They tend to be existentialist, and the ethical determinants of their behavior are rooted in rationalism and what has been called "liberal humanism." They are attempting to escape the irrational fear, guilt, and shame that they feel are inherent in the traditional religious establishment and, indeed, in our political, social, and economic institutions as well. In my opinion, any attempt to influence the sexual behavior of today's young adults that is based on threats of divine retribution or social ostracism will be widely rejected.

Guidelines for an Educational Program

The fact that human sexuality may be expressed in a variety of behavioral modes must be the underlying theme of future sex education. The topics that

have received major emphasis in past and existing sex-education programs—reproductive biology, preparation for marriage, venereal disease, and the like—have been presented within the context of a monodimensional and culturally biased sexual morality and therefore have not dealt with some of the more compelling questions being asked by today's youth. Indeed, even "situation ethics" turns off some of the older adolescents, because it is essentially based on the selection of a course of action that might be considered the lesser of several evils, not the affirmation of a positive good. I am reminded of discussions I have had with students about the U.S. Supreme Court's criteria of obscenity or pornography: books, films, etc., are obscene if they do not accord with contemporary community standards, have no redeeming social value, and appeal to prurient interests. The students have pointed out that appealing to prurient interests might well be considered a redeeming social value.

In *The Greening of America: How the Youth Revolution Is Trying to Make America Livable* (1970: Random House, New York), Charles A. Reich described an impending state of awareness, "Consciousness III." If such a state truly does exist, many of today's young adults show signs of having achieved it: their interpersonal relationships are characterized by frankness, openness, and a willingness to risk the hazards of interaction among relatively unprotected psyches. Traditional sex-education programs, although better than none at all (if competently conducted), tend to turn off these people, who find the programs are not "where it's at." I consider the following factors essential to a program that will enhance rapport among students and between the students and the instructor:

1. The classroom setting should be as informal as the group permits. Roundtable discussions should occur as frequently as possible; lectures should be given only when absolutely essential.

2. The class should be coeducational; and, if possible, adults of the sex opposite that of the classroom teacher should take part. These adults might be doctors, psychologists, sociologists, or perhaps other teachers of sex education.

3. In view of the fact that procreational sex constitutes a virtually insignificant portion of one's total sexual outlet, reproductive biology should occupy a relatively minor part of the curriculum. Indeed, the primary value of a detailed knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system lies in establishing a background for a functional knowledge of contraceptive techniques, of the symptoms of venereal disease, and of the rudiments of erotic stimulation.

4. Clinical data on human sexual behavior and correlative studies in ethology (by Alfred C. Kinsey, W. H. Masters and V. E. Johnson, Desmond Morris, and others) should be analyzed and interpreted. The student should become aware of the different forms

of sexual interaction—heterosexual, homosexual, and autosexual; and of the wide variation in methods of genital stimulation—genital-genital, oral-genital, manual-genital, and anal-genital.

5. Explicit information about contraceptive techniques is absolutely essential to a meaningful program. Educational materials on this subject are sparse, especially for high school use, but I believe they will soon become commoner. The essentials—a variety of contraceptives—are obtainable from Planned Parenthood clinics or any pharmacy. It is imperative that the relative effectiveness of each method of contraception be emphasized. Students must be told the risk of pregnancy with each method; that the pill is the only contraceptive method that gives nearly absolute protection in nullipara; and that the other methods are better than none at all. This is also an appropriate time to consider noncoital alternatives (for example, heavy petting) in achieving orgasm on the part of persons who do not wish to experience any pregnancy risk but who are or plan to be sexually active.

6. Abortion tends to be a fascinating topic because of its controversial nature. Students should be aware that psychologic and economic preparation for an abortion is essential for both married and unmarried persons who have made a prior decision not to consummate an unwanted pregnancy.

7. Venereal-disease education should be approached as would be the study of any other infectious disease. The traditional suggestion that venereal disease is an inevitable and perhaps justifiable consequence of engaging in nonmarital sexual relations—indeed, that venereal disease is *caused* by nonmarital sexual activity—should be strictly avoided. Students should understand that the deferring of medical treatment as a result of fear, shame, or guilt is totally irrational and socially irresponsible.

8. Sexual morality and sexual psychology are inherently complementary if both are considered within the context of human sexuality as an intense form of interpersonal relationship. (On the other hand, the primary motive in sexual interaction may be unilateral genital gratification, as is frequently the case of our society; in that case the psychologic component scarcely warrants serious consideration.) If genital activity is indeed a part of the totality of a bilateral intellectual, emotional, and sexual encounter, it is impossible not to consider the motivating factors that initiated and led to the fulfillment of the relationship: mutual trust, affection, and desire. (These matters are considered in some detail in the second part of this paper.)

Achieving Community Acceptance

If Reich's thesis in *The Greening of America* is correct—that most of our mature adults and most of our social institutions are presently at either a Consciousness I or a Consciousness II level of aware-

ness—a conflict between the kind of educational program in human sexuality suggested above and the dominant adult society is apparent. However, I believe the trends I have enumerated are likely to cause a radical and rapid change of view on the part of mature adults and our social institutions, inasmuch as acceptance and adaptation will be in their own self-interest.

Contemporary examples of this accommodation abound. Parents accept the fact that their daughters are availing themselves of contraceptive services at university health centers; indeed, some parents encourage them to do so. Universities, in turn, are increasingly absolving themselves of their status *in loco parentis* and are granting virtually 'round-the-clock parietal visiting privileges, either as official policy or through nonenforcement of restrictive official regulations. Long-term nonmarital cohabitation, communal living, and other kinds of behavior at variance with the sanctioned norm of licensed monogamous marriage rarely if ever are terminated by police action for violation of the fornication or adultery statutes. The contraceptive counseling of adolescents is, as we have noted, becoming commonplace in some of our larger cities. Adult males, married or unmarried, are going to vasectomy clinics—a clear indication that procreational sex is irrelevant to them. In some occupational and social subgroups the homosexual has been able to vacate the closet without fear of becoming a pariah. Prominent citizens agitate for abortion-law reform or repeal, lobbying alongside representatives of Women's Liberation and political radicals.

If adult society can be convinced that social change is inevitable and, especially, if it can be shown that the economic and social costs of the failure to adapt to change are likely to outweigh the cultural security gained by obligatory adherence to conventional sexual morality, then the new alternative codes of sexual conduct will be accepted, in my opinion. In this regard, mass education in human sexuality and sexual behavior for adults—in effect, a “Sesame Street” for the sexually uninformed and uptight—could well be considered to have at least equal priority with programs for their sons and daughters. The extensive market for manuals of sexual techniques—books such as David Reuben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* and the anonymous *Sensuous Woman*, *Sensuous Man*, and *Sensuous Couple*—together with the astronomic appeal of soft- and hard-core pornography, suggests that adults are in great need of assistance in becoming reconciled to this particular manifestation of “future shock.” This point is underscored in the *Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (1970: Bantam Books, New York): it is included in the commission's list of nonlegislative recommendations.

In summary: sex education for the future must be humane, relevant, and realistic. Ideally it would

insist that human sexuality is primarily a form of interpersonal communication, only incidentally related to the reproduction of the species. Adult programs are essential to the successful education of children and adolescents. And, although not dealt with in this paper, the training of teachers and others who are professionally engaged in this field needs to be drastically expanded.

II. RESPONSIBILITY, RATIONALITY, RELATIVISM

Beyond "Feeling Good"

As we have seen, the standards of conduct by which Western society has attempted to determine human sexual behavior in the recent past are being modified as a result of their frequent inapplicability to the present situation. Specifically, sociotechnologic developments, such as improved methods of contraception, antibiotic treatment of venereal diseases, and the extension of democracy into the social as well as the political and economic life of modern man, have led to an increasingly pragmatic and humanistic view of sex. For those who choose to exercise increased sexual freedom a new code of sexual conduct—that is, a formal ethics of sex—is required to replace the absolutism of the past.

To a considerable degree the simple morality of the hippie subculture—which might be expressed as “if it feels good, do it”—satisfies this need; but there is an obvious necessity to append the qualification “as long as it does not hurt anyone.” It would appear that a more formal code of sexual behavior is in fact evolving, simultaneously and rapidly, among a significant number of young adults who are outside of the hippie subculture. The salient characteristics of this ethics are that it helps one to act responsibly, to think rationally, and to react (to the sexual behavior of others) relativistically.

From an empiric viewpoint sexual behavior is socially *responsible* if three conditions are met:

1. The sexual activity does not result in the conception of an unwanted child; that is, an effort is made to prevent conception through a medically approved method of birth control or by a technique of achieving orgasm that eliminates the possibility of fertilization.

2. Neither sexual partner knowingly transmits a venereal disease to the other.

3. Neither sexual partner exploits the other as a sexual object, but rather regards the sexual activity as concomitant to an affectionate relationship with the total person. Or, as Wardell Pomeroy says in his excellent book *Boys and Sex* (1970: Delacorte Press, New York), “Penises and vaginas can’t love each other; only people can do that.”

The argument for the third condition is perhaps not as persuasive as are the arguments for the other two, except in the case of such obviously exploitative acts as forcible rape and child molestation. Further, it must be admitted that the wide acceptance of

the practice of “making out,” as a manipulative and acquisitive technique of sexual “conquest,” may warrant the designation of this condition in part as a judgmental one.

A *rational* approach to human sexuality is one that recognizes that deep feelings of guilt and fear may impair one’s ability to enjoy a responsible sex life. A person may have a gratifying sex life but act irresponsibly; for example, his impulsiveness or lack of foresight may result in an unwanted child. Conversely, one may lead a responsible sex life by limiting one’s sexual activity to nonaffectionate outlets, such as intercourse with prostitutes or solitary masturbation, and hence deprive himself of the enjoyment of meaningful sexual interplay with another human being. As a means of counteracting irresponsible and irrational manifestations of sexual behavior, it is imperative that the sex educator clearly distinguish between the *procreative* function of sex (as the means of continuing the *species*) and the *recreative* function of sex (as the primary, if not exclusive, motivation for the sexual activity of the *individual*). In this context the ubiquitous nature of sexual attraction and the normality of arousal should not evoke feelings of guilt, fear, or other manifestations of anxiety, nor should they lead to impetuous or imprudent sexual activity.

Acceptance of Personal Freedom

A *relativistic* ethics is one that acknowledges that no particular view of sexual conduct is antithetic to the idea of individual freedom in a democratic society. If the sex educator emphasizes the fact that the anticipation of orgasm is the primary motivating factor in any normal sexual experience, whether it be expressed autoerotically, heterosexually, homosexually, or by any other means that is socially responsible, the student should derive an awareness of and a tolerance toward “deviant” sexual behavior. Similarly as to the method of achieving orgasm: the student should be cognizant of society’s partiality toward penile–vaginal intercourse but at the same time should be aware that some people prefer variant forms of arousal, such as manual–genital or oral–genital stimulation. Negative attitudes in this regard may be defended on esthetic grounds, but the designation of such behavior as immoral or unethical cannot be relativistically justified.

How Many Will Die of Cancer?

In 1971 an estimated 339,000 Americans died of cancer; in 1970, 332,000; in 1969, 325,000; and in 1968, 318,547, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. In 1972 about 345,000 will die of the disease; that is, about 960 persons a day—more than one every two minutes. Of every six deaths from all causes in the U.S., one is from cancer.

American Cancer Society