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Elizabeth Marazas '01*

Elizabeth Downes '01†

*Illinois Wesleyan University

†Illinois Wesleyan University

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A Psychological Perspective on Sex

By Elizabeth Marazas and Elizabeth Downes

The only sexual advice I ever got from [my dad was]... "You can let a girl give you a hand job, you can let her give you a blow job, but never ever have sex with random women"... That was good advice. It really was. I can't say I've heeded it all the time, but I've definitely kept it in my head.

—Joe, 22 year old male

I believe that we are all sexual beings but that God has designed sex for the context of marriage, so I strive to have sexual purity in [my] thoughts and actions.

—Mary, 22 year old female

[My first time], I felt that I loved the person I was with. I was in a committed relationship. I felt that they respected me and my decisions and that it was not forced upon me.

—Sarah, 20 year old female

By the time I knew what masturbation was, I never did it [any more], because I was raised [with the belief that] your body parts are your private body parts. They are no-no spots and you don't touch them unless you're gonna clean them.

—Rita, 20 year old female

All of these excerpts (which were taken from interviews with students whose names have been changed) imply that many ideas about sex originate from specific experiences. On the other hand, we cannot always pinpoint the exact source of our sexual beliefs. For example, why has Joe not always heeded his father's advice regarding sexual intercourse? Perhaps it is because other nondescript experiences in his life, and the interaction of these experiences, work together to create a fluid and sometimes contradictory perspective on sexuality. Blumstein and
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Schwartz propose,

Sexuality is situational and changeable, modified by day-to-day circumstances throughout the life course. In our perspective there are few absolute differences between male and female sexuality. What differences we observed are primarily the result of the different social organization of women's and men's lives in various cultural contexts. (345)

This quote prompted us to find out exactly what factors are most influential on the development of a person's sexual ideology.

Purpose:

The purpose of our study was to determine what factors influence one's sexual ideology and practices. Extensions of this question include: Do different experiences lead to different ideologies and practices? Do similar experiences lead to similar ideologies and practices? To clarify our study, we will provide the following definitions that we used to conduct our study. Sexual practices and behaviors are those sexual activities which a person has practiced, is practicing, or will practice depending on their sexual ideology. A person's sexual ideology includes those beliefs that a person holds about sex (including the following: what sexual behaviors he/she considers to be normal, natural, and moral for self and others and why; what the purpose of sexual intimacy is; how sex interacts with emotional and psychological processes; and what boundaries or limitations are placed upon certain sexual behaviors—e.g., sex only within marriage).

Method:

Participants in our study were 14 students at Illinois Wesleyan University (7 males and 7 females). To gather data on our topic, we developed a list of questions to ascertain the sexual practices and beliefs of the subjects. We then conducted individual interviews with the 14 subjects, in which they answered the questionnaire in writing as well as participated in a conversation/interview. In these interviews, which lasted anywhere from a half an hour to an hour and a half, the participants

discussed their background as it relates to their sexuality, as well as other pertinent information. In the questionnaire portion of the interview, we asked the participants to respond to questions that were aimed at deciphering their sexual beliefs and practices. The questions included some of the following: "In what sexual activities do you engage, past and/or present (i.e. sexual intercourse, anal intercourse, oral sex, kissing)?" "In what sexual practices (defined as deviant by our culture—such as transvestitism, frotterism, voyeurism, sado-masochism, etc.) do you engage, past and/or present?" "What sexual behaviors do you consider deviant, if any?" "What sexual behaviors do you not practice, but still accept as normal, moral, and/or natural?" The goal of the interview was to determine which parts of the subjects' backgrounds contributed to their current sexual ideology (e.g., family structure, socioeconomic status, sexual education, and influence of parents and peers).

Results:

We came to the conclusion that culture has the greatest overall influence on the development of one's sexuality. From this conclusion, it follows that people from similar cultures will have similar sexual views and practices. We found this to be true among students at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Overall, we found that the majority of the participants had similar sexual ideologies, even if their current practices differed. To clarify, the general reasoning behind the subjects' sexual ideologies turned out to be similar. Specifically, everyone seemed to voice the opinion that they were okay with the sexual practices of others, even if they did not practice these activities themselves. As one male subject put it, "My feelings are: if it works for you, then go with it...Whatever floats your boat...As long as it's not making me uncomfortable and not affecting me, then that's fine." Most of the subjects did not project a moral judgment upon other people's sexual practices, nor did they project a judgment upon other people's activities in general. Even if the subjects recognized an act as "unnatural" for themselves, they did not necessarily view this behavior as unnatural for others. One male participant said, "I'm not really down with the whole homosexual thing...If you are, cool...more power to you, but I'm just not." Although the participants

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were mostly accepting of the behaviors of others, some of the participants placed a somewhat non-moral judgment on some behaviors. For example, the majority expressed distaste for any sexual practices that focused on the use of bodily secretions such as feces, urine, etc. for sexual pleasure. As one female student put it, "I would never have feces sex. Some people like that. Poop is gross. Take a sh** in my mouth, no thank you!" In addition, a male student commented, "I would never do anal sex. It's gross. Poop comes out of there." (As a side note, those people who had participated in anal intercourse did not voice any such disgust or concern.)

On the other hand, there were a few practices that the participants almost unanimously agreed were unacceptable for anyone. These included rape, molestation, pedophilia, and bestiality---four major sexual taboos in the culture we surveyed. One of our male subjects stated, "The three things that I absolutely do not accept are: bestiality, rape, and pedophilia, because these are not consensual acts." Another male said, "I think [bestiality] is just disgusting...and perverted." (As a side note, voyeurism, frotterism, and exhibitionism involve people who have not consented to the sexual act, but none of our participants expressed an objection to these practices.)

In regards to specific sexual practices, our heterosexual subjects tended to see the same things as acceptable and normal for themselves, even if they believed that these practices should remain inside the institution of marriage, and they were therefore not currently practicing these behaviors. Our bisexual and homosexual participants also tended to practice acts that were similar to heterosexuals' practices, but there was a greater tendency for bisexual/homosexual participants to view anal sex as natural, even though some heterosexual participants also practiced anal sex. While some of our participants had never had sexual intercourse, every participant interviewed expressed desires to eventually have intercourse in the future. With regards to kissing and masturbation, every student that we interviewed had experimented with these sexual practices at least once. The participants tended to view oral sex, masturbation, kissing, fondling, and necking as natural sexual practices, even though they may not be currently engaging in them (due to the lack of a committed relationship or marriage). Specifically, the subjects that were not currently practicing these acts had either done them in the past or

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could see themselves engaging in them in the future. In addition, they tended to speak about these acts with more levity than they did while speaking about any type of intercourse. One male subject said, "Kissing, I think, is really fun, and appropriate between two people who are dating and [who are] in a romantic relationship." In responding to the question, "Why do you engage in oral sex?" a female student said, "Oral sex, well, that's just fun."

Besides kissing, masturbation was the most widely accepted sexual practice among those surveyed, with the exception of one female participant. Although she has masturbated in the past, she currently views masturbation as "tak[ing] up space in [my] life that God could better use and I don't think that it is a holy or pleasing thing to God." The remainder of the students who masturbate fell into two different categories of reasoning. The first category included those people who felt that masturbation was somewhat of a substitution for sex (i.e. sexual release). "Masturbation, sometimes it's just a necessity. Women think that the whole 'blue balls' thing is just b.s....it's not. It backs up and it hurts...A lot," was one male student's view. The second category included people who felt that masturbation was a supplement to sex. One male student said, "I [masturbate] more often when I have a girlfriend, because I have sex on my mind more often then." According to a female student, "The reason I don't like masturbating when I'm single...is because it's a sore subject. I don't want to think about sex [when I'm single] because then I'll have to think about my lack of a relationship." Another female said, "I don't masturbate by myself, because I feel it does nothing for me."

Additional observations:

During our study, we observed that the influence of religion tended to create the greatest disparity of views. Mary and John, two born-again Christians, had sexual ideologies that were similar to the ideologies of the other participants in the sense that they did not wish to project their own ideas about what was natural for them onto others. In the case of Mary and John, religion is one aspect of culture, yet it clearly overshadowed all other aspects of culture and became the primary influence in their sexual ideology. In contrast, many of the other partici-

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pants were raised in a certain religion, but religious ideas did not dominate their sexual ideology. With the sexual ideologies of Mary and John, there seemed to be less of an interplay of experiences and influences than we observed in the other participants. We attributed this disparity of opinions to the introduction of Christian views and of the Christian way of life into their lives at a later point (as opposed to at baptism).

Concluding Thoughts:

Initially, we believed that gender would significantly influence the development of a person's sexuality, because of the widely held belief that males and females have different experiences due to their gender. According to Anselmi and Law, "Sexuality is often learned through experiences that differentiate male and female gender identity" (308). In spite of the different experiences that males and females encounter due to their gender, we learned that gender and other factors were less influential than culture on the development of sexual ideology. Ultimately, gender does have some impact on one's sexual development, but is not the deterministic influence on one's sex ideology.

From our research, we found out many interesting opinions on sexuality in general, but the main conclusion we made is that culture has the most impact on the development of our subjects' sexuality. This conclusion corresponds with the following view of Tiefer and Kring: "The plain fact is that there are no universal sexual behaviors besides just the procreative act because sexuality is a social and cultural construction" (321). Commenting on this point, Anselmi and Law say, "This fact may seem surprising, because penile-vaginal intercourse would seem essential to human survival. Certainly, sex for procreation is universal across cultures, if not individuals... Cultures exert significant influence over sexual expression" (309).

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