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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem of faculty members being confronted, in or out of the classroom, with students' personal reactions to some of the subject matter, especially sex and gender material, found in today's college sociology courses. The paper suggests some ways in which sociologists view student sharing of personal reactions and discusses how faculty can respond. Also discussed are the sociological courses and topics that are especially likely to spark student reactions and sharing behavior; some faculty reactions when such occurrences have taken place; ideas for coping with this behavior in the classroom; and observations from faculty on handling students' personal problems that come to them out of the classrcom setting. It is suggested that faculty should think about the content of the materials that they will be presenting, the structural and organizational approaches they should use, and the goals of the course prior to content presentation in order to anticipate students' reactions and better meet their academic and personal needs. Contains 11 references. (GLR)

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, in my course Women in Society, I was presenting some of the recent research on rape, when I noticed tears in the eyes of one of the young women in the class. I asked if she was okay and she replied, "It happened to me." She then told the class of having been raped two years earlier. This in-class disclosure was the first time the young woman had ever told anyone about her experience, and it galvanized the approximately twenty students in this all female class into "gathering around" her emotionally for the last few minutes of the class session. Class members expressed their concern about what had happened to her, and as they left, I took the young woman aside to ask how she was feeling. Although she said she was fine, I told her that there were counseling services available, adding that I would be glad to refer her to one of them. As she nodded and left the room, I was very conscious of the inadequacy of my response.

In the years that have followed, other less dramatic, but similar experiences have reinforced my awareness that many classroom discussions have the potential for eliciting intense personal reactions. In some of these situations the students shared their feelings with the whole class. On other occasions, the students discussed their reactions with either a few of us or only with me. As a result of my experiences, I have developed some strategies for dealing with this kind of situation. I was, however, interested in the extent to which other sociologists have

had similar experiences, the kind of courses that elicited them and the ways the situations were handled. Over the past few months I have interviewed seventeen colleagues[1], mostly sociologists, concerning these topics. In the following sections I will draw upon my own experiences and those of my colleagues.

As we end a decade of teaching courses on sex and gender, it is clear that there has been an increase of courses and materials that focus on these issues. This trend is likely to continue. It is therefore important for faculty to understand and adequately respond to student reactions which the teaching of material on sex and gender has the potential for generating.

COURSES AND TOPICS

The seventeen colleagues with whom I discussed this topic reported a variety of experiences. Most recalled at least several situations, in a variety of courses, in which a class discussion had generated student reactions that needed extra attention. On the other hand, a few faculty members noted that while students in their classes would share attitudes and/or describe personal situations, these classroom experiences had never generated a reaction that the faculty member felt required further response.

The kinds of situations that colleagues described were as varied as their courses and materials they covered. In the small sample of faculty members interviewed, there was a wide range of

courses and topics that elicited intense student reactions. The courses in which reactions had occurred did include a number of courses that have traditionally been part of the curriculum as well as ones that have been added within the past decade or two. For example, the sharing of intensely personal and sometimes emotionally painful information was reported to have occurred in introductory sociology, social problems, social psychology and research methods classes. However, courses in which the issues of sex and gender were an explicit part of the course content were the most frequently mentioned as generating intense student reaction. These included courses on sex roles, women in society, women in cross cultural perspective, women and work, marriage and family, and human sexuality.

The specific topics that elicited strong student responses were also quite diverse. Some of the topics were ones that have been grist for the sociologist's mill for quite awhile, while others have only recently become appropriate for academic discourse. The topics that at least two colleagues said had generated intense responses were: suicide, alcoholism, personal identity, sexual identity, gender equality in relationships, parent-child relationships, racism, homophobia, pregnancy, abortion, deciding whether or not to have children, marital conflict, family violence, rape, sexual harassment, divorce, single parenthood, childbirth, career decisions and marital choices.

Some of the topics that trigger reactions can be more easily predicted than others. Based on data for topics like rape (Burgess, Groth, Holmstrom and Sgroi, 1978), sexual harassment (Project on the Status and Education of Women, 1978) and marital violence (Adler, 1981), faculty who cover these and similar subjects are probably aware of the likelihood of their students having had personal experiences in these areas. Similarly, faculty who teach courses in human sexuality discussed with me their awareness that the students in their classes are often confronting issues of their own sexuality, making choices about their behavior or re-thinking their previously held attitudes in the light of the course materials. There have also been discussions in the women's studies literature concerning the emotional tenor of the classroom because of the course content. (For example, Marcia Westkott (1983) writes about the "paralyzing fury" or "hopeless resignation" that may be generated by feminist social analyses, and Cheri Register (1979) describes the mid-semester period of depression and frustation that can overcome a class.)

While the sociologist is often prepared to cope with student reactions that the course elicits, student reactions can not always be anticipated. One colleague, for example, described having a class in social welfare do a values clarification exercise in which the students were asked to choose three patients out of a possible ten who would get to use the scarce resource of a kidney dialysis machine. Only after one student ran from the room

in tears did the faculty member discover that the student's father had recently died from end stage kidney disease. Another colleague reported that, in a research methods class, a discussion of research on voluntary sexual encounters among men in public places led several female students to describe their feelings about having been victimized by sexual exhibitionists. A third described a demographic lecture on fertility rates that triggered a student's after-class discussion of coping with infertility.

It appears possible for almost any course in the social sciences to generate a strong personal reaction from students. There do seem to be some course characteristics that more readily permit their occurrence. Faculty that described student reactions felt that they were most likely to occur in classes that were small (less than 30 students), composed of only one gender and in which there were organizational or structural qualities that encouraged students to make a personal connection to the material (e.g., using small group discussions, seating the class in a circle, including course assignments like keeping a journal, having the instructor set an example by relating experiences from his/her own life to the course material). In addition, faculty members who built into the course structure one or more required faculty conferences (usually to discuss student projects) found that these often became opportunities for students to discuss personal matters.

Examining courses that focus on issues of sex and gender in

more detail suggests several possible reasons for why they are more likely than other courses to elicit strong personal responses. These courses are quite likely to have at least some of the characteristics discussed above. In addition to those traits, some of these courses, especially those in women's studies programs and/or taught by feminists are likely to have, not only the traditional academic goal of intellectual mastery of subject matter, but also the less traditional goal of personal change (including challenging basic self-concepts and sex-role beliefs) (Brush, Gold and White 1978). Instructors teaching courses on sex or gender related topics are also more likely than those teaching other courses to use an adaptation of the consciousness-raising group as an integral part of the course. Whether because of an interest in non-hierarchal learning experiences (Baker and Snodgrass, 1979), and/or desire for a body of experiential information that may be compared with more elaborate sociological studies (Howe 1977:40), these groups make personal sharing central to the classroom experience.

The topics included in courses that focus on issues of sex and gender also encourage students to react personally to the material. One colleague I interviewed felt that women's studies by its very name appeared to students to focus on the personal and interpersonal which means that faculty members had to work hard to make the courses theoretical. Marcia Westkott (1983, p.211) has observed that "... in Women's Studies courses women are no longer studying material that is totally outside themselves, but are learning

about the ways in which their social contexts have shaped them as women. Not only can students illuminate knowledge of themselves through understanding their social contexts, but also they can test interpretations of their social contexts from the perspectives of their own experience. For them the personal becomes intellectual, and the intellectual, personal."

Peggy McIntosh (1983) in writing about transforming the curriculum argues that there is more about our lives in some phases of curriculum development than in others. In a phase one curriculum she believes we have "womanless sociology" and in phase two we have "women in sociology," (covering a select few) but in both cases the emphasis is on the public world and its "pinnacles of power" (McIntosh 1983:9). It is only when we move into phase three (women as an absense, anomaly or problem for sociology), -- where many of our women's studies courses are today -- and begin to focus on what has traditionally been defined as the "bottom," do we pay attention to many of the topics that affect students personally. (The kind of sociology that may be taught at this level will include discussions of women's <u>victimization</u> in both the public and private spheres of life, and, in fact, can become very depressing for female students and faculty.[2])

Taly Rutenberg (1983:72), a women's studies graduate, has noted that because the material addresses the students' experiences, women students have to strain <u>not</u> to identify. I would add that the content of courses on sex or gender roles,

the family, human sexuality and others are likely to generate similar reactions in male students as well.

Finally, the way in which the faculty member is perceived by the students can influence student responses. One colleague, for example noted that it was in her women's studies classes that her female students seemed most interested in using her as a role model. Since many of the topics covered in courses on sex and gender issues are ones that may facilitate students' use of faculty (both female and male) as role models, this may increase the potential for personalizing the student-teacher relationship.

FACULTY REACTIONS

As discussed in the previous section, most of the faculty interviewed recalled one or more incidents in which a class had generated on strong personal response on the part of one or more students. Some of the faculty welcomed such reactions, advocating a pedagogy that emphasizes the personal grounding of intellectual discourse. Other faculty members felt uncomfortable with this kind of student response, and several reported being conscious of trying to keep personal sharing time to a minumum. One colleague felt that she had not had many students talking about personal situations because she has made it clear that once something is defined as an individual's, problem dealing with it is not what a sociologist does. Another colleague reported that, as a result

of being emotionally drained by the number of students who shared things in class, as well as those who came to see her after class, she changed her teaching style. She feels her current use of a lecture format and her attempts to deal with topics only on the cognitive level have decreased student reactions to the material.

Recognition of the difficulties of going beyond personal sharing was also reported. One sociologist reported feeling that while she was always attempting to move class discussions from the personal to the institutional, the students were trying to keep it at the level of the personal. Porter and Eileenchild (1980), in writing about teaching in women's studies classrooms, discuss articles that express concerns about discussions that are heated and personal, do not stick to the subject and make concentrating on the subject matter problematic.

One specific student response to courses covering issues of sex and gender, which several colleagues described, involved a course contributing to a major decision or change which the student was making. Some of the situations involved marriage, divorce or pregnancy; otners involved career choices. Some faculty members reported discomfort at being at least partially responsible for decisions that students made; others felt that when students carefully apply data and theory to their own situations this makes "good sociology;" other colleagues argued that faculty often overestimate the amount of influence they have on students.

All of the faculty members I interviewed were unanimous in expressing the view that their role was not to be a counselor or therapist. Even the few who had had some training in counseling argued that to be a counselor for one's students was inappropriate. Furthermore, several noted that some students have difficulty distinguishing between the roles of sociologist and counselor or therapist (especially if the sociologist teaches courses in the family, human sexuality, and social psychology), and that the faculty member must take the responsibility for keeping the roles separate.

Several colleagues commented that a faculty member who plays both roles simultaneously can have a conflict of interest because being a counselor can interfere with the ability to objectively judge that student's performance. In addition, the student who sees the faculty member as a counselor may have unrealistic expectations. One colleague reported that a student was indignant when another faculty member, who had listened sympathetically to the student's litany of family problems all semester, gave him a D for the course.

COPING IN THE CLASSROOM

Faculty members should be prepared to respond to intense student reactions, especially if the class has been explicitly structured to facilitate sharing. Several of the faculty

members I interviewed mentioned using the small group as a source of experiential data and/or an outlet for personal responses to class material. Florence Howe's (1977:40) description of women's studies classrooms includes the observation that the instructor is "often a willing participant, responsible for setting the appropriate limits for intimacy and an atmosphere of trust." One colleague I interviewed noted the additional responsibility of making students aware of the paramount need to keep the group discussions confidential. Another sociologist, who often used small group discussions, advocated using non-threatening exercises early in the semester in order to get to know the students and predict who will need special support.

A common way that sociologists reported dealing with both solicited and unexpected student sharing was to move the discussion from the personal to a more general level by discussing the sociological issues involved. They felt that by emphasizing the general issues involved, the faculty member could stress the sociological content and allow other class members to respond to the more general discussion. Several sociologists reported that they seated the class in a circle, not only to facilitate discussion, but also enable them to watch faces and body language for signs of stress.

If a student begins to share an important personal revelation, the faculty member will have to decide whether or not to encourage or discourage the student from continuing. One

colleague cautioned that it may be unwise to allow a student to reveal something in the heat of the moment that he/she may later regret having shared with thirty acquaintances. She argued that the student must be given the opportunity to stop at any point and to discuss it privately instead. Another colleague suggested that if the instructor felt there was not closure at the end of the class after such a situation, or if there was the possibility of a delayed reaction on the part of other students to one student's response, then the faculty member should reintroduce the topic in another class session.

When a faculty member anticipates a potential need for services, one strategy that several sociologists, including myself, have found useful is to bring the local resources into the classroom. In response to particularly sensitive topics, students are more likely to use a service if they are familiar with the personnel. Bringing in classroom speakers from rape crisis centers, battered women's shelters, the affirmative action office, and so on, can be useful for that reason. In addition to those specific speakers, making the students aware of the college's counseling services can also be helpful. In a course which covers several potentially sensititive topics, I often try to have a counselor come early in the semester to talk about a neutral topic (i.e., women and assertiveness). Later in the semester I then refer to the counseling center, and the counselor the class has met, as possible resources for other

issues.

If speakers are not possible, the faculty member may bring written material to class. Several colleagues said they brought a listing of services to class or announced periodically that there was one available in the office. These listings included general directories to human service agencies, guides to legal resources and directories of feminist organizations. In addition, brochures about and phone numbers for organizations like Planned Parenthood, gay rights groups, women's centers, child abuse hotlines and so on were distributed or circulated by some faculty members at appropriate times.

One strategy that I have frequently used is to tell students that I know that for some of them the classroom discussion may become more than an academic exercise. For example, as a preface to discussion of issues involving victimization (i.e., rape, family violence, incest) or other similar issues, I tell the class that it is very possible that one or more of them may be currently dealing with the situation or its aftermath. In addition to giving them information about the resources available, I express my willingness to make an appropriate referral for them after class.

Other faculty members use student logs or journals. Several commented that the students were able to use them to relate experiences and that the faculty member was able to respond to the student on a one-to-one basis. Several

instructors said that they occassionally noted agencies and other resources that the student might find helpful.

The last comment on the classroom is a statement of goal as well as a concrete strategy. Given that courses on sex and gender will analyze the effects of restrictive, male dominated institutions on the lives of women and men, it is clear that as Marcia Westkott (1983) suggests, we must direct the feelings of anger, frustration, and victimization that can emerge from critical awareness. "To push beyond criticism, however, is not to relinquish it, but to hold it in tension with vision" (Westkott, 1983:213). We must use our sociological imaginations in our analyses and in our course assignments to help our students to transform and transcend problematic experiences. As Westkott (1983: 213) observes, "by articulating that which we oppose and by envisioning alternative futures, we identify the goals and strategies for action; that is, we clarify what it is we want to move away from as well as what it is we want to move toward." To that I would add the suggestion that every consideration be given to providing opportunities for students, within the context of our courses, to work towards the realization of those alternative futures. Working for the passage of significant legislation, changing discriminatory practices at the college or university or contributing one's time to effective local groups or organizations may be much more useful to students than counseling or therapy.

OFFICE ADVICE

While faculty members did not do counseling, many of them were called upon for information because of their specialities. Some examples of this kind of request included questions about pregnancy, requests for names of gynecologists, and reactions as to how to handle certain job interview situations. Sometimes faculty members reported that the requests for information were preludes to a student sharing personal reactions and seeking advice.

Faculty varied in their responses to students who wished to discuss personal matters outside of the classroom. The majority did give the information requested, and several said they usually talked things over with the student as a way of helping him/her sort out their thoughts. However, after discussing a situation once or twice they then referred the student elsewhere. A few faculty members reported that they had called an agency or a professional on the student's behalf. One or two recalled actually taking the student to an agency. There was consensus that to move beyond those limits would be inappropriate.

CONCLUSIONS

I have no data on how often students experience the kind of reactions I have been discussing or how frequently they share their thoughts about them with us, either inside or outside of

the classroom. The experiences that my colleagues and I have had make it clear that it does happen at least occasionally. It is clear that sociologists experience strong responses to a variety of classroom topics. However, student reactions appear to be more common in courses covering issues of sex and gender.

Student reactions to classroom material are likely to increase because of the rapid increase of materials that consider sex and gender. New courses focusing on these issues have rapidly multiplied and materials on these topics are increasingly integrated into existing courses. As Florence Howe (1983:8) has noted, "the new scholarship on women is a mountain that is here to stay. Scholars who have ignored it up to now must peck away at it."

The content of sociology courses is increasingly likely to include analyses of the private realities of people's lives and and relationships. The courses are likely to be taught by both women and men, by feminists and non-feminists, and by those who advocate personal sharing for political and/or educational purpose and those who do not. This paper suggests some of the ways in which sociologists view the sharing of personal reactions, and discusses ways that sociologists can respond. We need to think about the content of the materials we will present, the structural and organizational approaches we will use and the goals of our courses. In this way we can better anticipate our students' reactions and meet their academic and personal needs.

NOTES

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2. McIntosh (1983:14-15) argues that the way out of this is to move into a "phase four" curriculum where we see women as sociology - that is by refusing to define "woman" only as a problem and beginning instead to think of women as varied human beings.

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