Probing the Boundaries
Innovative Dialogue

Intimate Explorations
Reading Across Disciplines

Edited by

Alejandro Cervantes-Carson & Beatriz Oria

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Intimate Explorations: 
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An Ethnographic Deconstruction of Sex & Relationships
Education in Scotland

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Abstract
This chapter begins by presenting ethnographic data on the behaviours of
Scottish working class teenagers and proceeds to an analysis of discursive
behaviour observed surrounding the area of sexual relationships. The paper
not only argues that sexual and/or intimate relationships are tied to wider
social, cultural and economic realities, but are to be privileged as uniquely
disclosive of the nature and power of social and cultural realities in the lives
of teenagers. On this basis, the chapter considers some of the challenges
faced by Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in Scotland today when
adolescent/teenage behaviours are understood as social, cultural and class
practices. This chapter also argues for the increasing salience and presence of
'sexual relationship' work in the lives of a younger generation due to a
powerful mix of new cultural and economic conditions that have arisen since
the 1980s. The article notes the increasing challenges faced by any SRE
curriculum today and concludes SRE as currently configured by the State is
unlikely to recognize the dominant forces shaping young peoples' sexual
relationships as this would require a 'deconstructing' reflexivity towards SRE
once recognised itself as a social and class practice by its professional
practitioners.

Key Words: Ethnography, policy, relationships, Scotland, sex education,
working class.

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1. Introduction
   A commonplace observation made in both the popular press and
academic commentary in Scotland in recent years is that Scotland not only
has one of the worst health records in Europe but one of the worst sexual
health records. About these two facts there is very much a consensus.
Unfortunately, when it comes to proposing solutions to these problems, in
particular the poor sexual health record of young Scots, the consensus comes
to an abrupt halt.
In this presentation I will approach the issue of sex education from an ethnographic or anthropological standpoint. My assumption as an ethnographer is that before there are facts, figures and health statistics concerning young people, before there is a cottage industry of research and policy recommendations devoted to this issue, there is a series of social and economic conditions that young Scots are immersed within which need to be known and conceptually mapped. Not having time for any detailed mapping, I will offer instead two brief ethnographic anecdotes recorded while doing fieldwork in the small Fifeshire village of Cardenden on the east coast of Scotland; a small post-industrial village with an approximate population of 4,830 and, using this as a baseline, explore the lived experience of some young people so as to evaluate the dominant State sponsored paradigm of sex education in use in Scotland today as well as the other sex education paradigm in Scotland today — that of Relationships and Moral Education (RME) developed by the Catholic Church.

2. Ethnography

For a number of months during fieldwork I lived in the main street of the village and was routinely able to witness and record the behaviours of young locals in the street. A particular characteristic was a remarkable comportment in public space and a particular relationship to language that seemed linked to their being-in-public-space; a form of behaviour I propose to privilege as revelatory of the ‘lifeworld’ of working class adolescents. Let me begin then by citing two examples from my fieldwork diary:

21.8.2000 I was going on a walk with my wife’s sister-in-law to the local supermarket with my two-year-old daughter Candela. We passed two young boys. One boy shouted ‘Ya fuckin slag’ to one of two girls walking to the fast-food place as the two boys walked in the other direction. The boy had a pizza in a box he had just bought from the take away. He threw a large piece of it at an oncoming bus. He next proceeded to throw a can of coca cola into the river and then followed with the pizza box. After our shopping we went to the park. The same young boy walked towards a young teenage couple. He shouted ‘Are ye shaggin [having sex] her yet...’ I go over to him and say...

Another fieldwork journal excerpt:

10.9.2000 It’s 9.30 p.m. and I’m preparing Candela’s bed. A group of teenagers at the bus stop outside. Only two or
three are talking. Half the street can hear. One boy says he is ‘wantin a gobble’ from one of the girls. I only can see two. A bus for Kirkcaldy arrives but nobody gets on. Five walk away from view. Four are left. ‘Ah'm no wantin fixed wi ye. Ah'm no wantin oot wi ye. Ah want tae shag ye’ one boy says to a girl. Two boys move off leaving one boy and a girl at the bus stop. Next I hear one boy calling back ten yards away but clearly audible to all within fifty yards of the main street: ‘Ah'll be back tae get ma baws emptied.’ Presently, I hear the girl speak. She is trying to elicit agreement from a boy. ‘Ah'm no a slag, eh?’ she asks him. I hear another voice. A young boy, white jersey, baseball cap, is outside the takeaway talking on a mobile phone. He says: ‘Ken what Ah'm goonnae dace? Ah'm goonnae bend ye o'er and fuck ye like yer no there.... What?... A dug?... Kick it in the teeth. Ken what Ah dae right, if any dug gits on ma nerves, Ah jist gie it a kickin. Dae that....’ At this a male friend of his comes out from the takeaway and asks ‘Why are ye getting fuckin drunk? On a Wednesday!’ And then adds ‘Who are ye talkin tae?’ His friend replies ‘She says ye've got a nice voice.’ He responds to this saying ‘Tell her she's got a braw pair e tits.’

By any standards, this behaviour is in need of explanation and presents something of an interpretive challenge. I argue this linguistic violence is grounded in poverty; that these speakers, when confronted with a space or opportunity for linguistic freedom and invention, flee from language as if it were a dead tool in their hands because a particular class condition is revealed in their particular relationship towards and use of language; in this case the ‘refusal’ to use language. I argue these opportunities to speak reveal a class-based political economy of speaking; that the vicious language emerges from being subject to the public realm as themselves for the first time; being in public without the protection of parents with the result that, among the disadvantaged, public space is experienced as a keenly felt interrogation. In place of an original occupation of space as a child, of childhood days of play and freedom from self-consciousness in public space, there is the advent of self-consciousness and along with this comes awareness of objectivity. Their very show of insensitivity is in fact a show of being dominated by a deep sensitivity to negative public evaluations of themselves. If they cannot resist despoiling a virginal space by endlessly writing their name or disturbing the peace by shouting obscenities, it is because they are in no position to resist this interrogation by furnishing trajectories full of promise and imagined futures. Ordinarily, then, it is adolescents from the
poorer families most unable to contest this interrogation who resort to extremes of behaviour. Because it is in the public realm most of all that our desire to be somebody is triggered, so it is in public they reveal their positionality; get into trouble for the most trivial of reasons, turning the private drama they instantiate into a public spectacle for the ethnographer to witness.

3. State Paradigm

Far from an occasion of mutuality then, the particular discourse and comportment surrounding sexuality glimpsed in the above anecdotes indicates a form of sexuality that is an occasion for witnessing the opposite of love. Far from the exercise of care, this situated sexuality is a site for enacting de-personalisation of self and others; where sexual relationships are to be privileged as sites where a will to dominate, a desire for power and acts of violence are exercised most intimately and where sexual relations are characterised by predatory behaviours and a will to victimise others. Such sexual relationships are to be privileged as evidence of the internalisation of an inauthentic and oppressive way of being sexual and being human.

One might well wonder what kind of Sex and Relationships Education could combat such casual linguistic-come-sexual violence that we presume characterises the relations of these young people glimpsed above. The reason I wish to ground a discussion of sex education policy among a working class location arises from the fact that the research literature is clear that it is the poorer classes, those from postcode areas characterised by multiple deprivation, that have higher rates of teenage pregnancies, single parent families, children living in poverty and cohorts of unsupervised young people often practicing high-risk sexual behaviours that justifies the call for sex education in schools.  

In August 2002 Malcolm Chisholm, then Minister for Health and Community Care in the Scottish government, set up a twenty-one member expert group to produce a sexual health strategy for Scotland and in September 2003 the draft sexual health strategy for Scotland was published. In this document there is the clear prioritization of imparting information to young people. The educational strategies deployed to change adolescent behaviours are consistent with the assumption that changing consciousnesses changes behaviours. Hence, just as with poverty reduction strategies used elsewhere, there is a focus upon ‘consciousness raising’ strategies and pedagogical techniques aimed at ‘demystifying’ sexuality, breaking down taboos that prevent the free and frank discussion of sexuality and the free and frank ‘demystified’ accessing of information and services.

However, a criticism of such strategies, whether it is poverty or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) to be reduced, is that such sexual health
programmes nowhere address the substantive issues of philosophical anthropology nor the material-come-cultural environment in which the young people these policies are aimed at are immersed in. All of this despite the clear evidence-based link between poverty and poor sexual health. Given the research already available to policymakers an obvious policy conclusion would be to develop sexual health strategies that would recognize the centrality of the issue of poverty. If there is no such policy embedded within sexual health strategies then the net result will be the need for SRE is never-ending as a change in consciousness does not change poverty or multiple deprivation.

However, the government strategy is about much more than simply effecting changes in behaviour. Nothing less than a revolution in consciousness is aspired to. Hence an integral aim of sex education is to challenge gender stereotypes and traditional assumptions as to what constitutes male and female roles and behaviours. The aim is to deconstruct machismo ways of ‘doing masculinity’ as well as subordinate behaviours traditionally associated and internalised by girls. The overall aim is to create relationships between the genders characterised by equality. Significantly, however, there is no advertence to the fact that it was wider social and cultural and historical forces that were central in how Western societies transformed gender relations; that it had nothing to do with curricular provision but a Judeo-Christian culture allied to affluence, legal reforms, medico-technological innovation (the contraceptive pill) and a post-manual and post-industrial occupational structure that was able to absorb women into the workplace which has modified gender relations. This recognition of the importance of wider structural forces should lead us not only to be realistic about what changes can be expected of pedagogical techniques, but whether such policies are desirable at all. If we take the example of programmes cited as successfully challenging ‘essentially’ gender behaviours as examples of successful educational intervention, we have to treat such claims and objectives with some scepticism. As an example then, while the standard progressive aim of liberating boys from gender stereotyping and liberating girls from domesticity to be more ambitious may seem unobjectionable as a general principle, we have to ask whether such ‘social engineering’ initiatives that challenge gender roles are to teach girls, for example, how to value their husbands without their economic functioning; whether it is proposed we should develop curricula that liberate girls from expecting their husbands to provide physical and financial security; whether we should really teach working class boys *not* to integrate their manhood/manliness with the traditional role of earning and providing for their family i.e. dissociate their ‘sense of self’ from reproducing the material existence of dependent others?

Another obvious question is whether the teachers of Sex and Relationships Education who are to affect such ‘gender engineering’ politics
know how to do this themselves. Have they, in the course of their own lives, moved beyond stereotyping of the male and female? Does the teacher of SRE need to liberate herself of all 'essentialist' linking of masculinity and money?

This particular instance is cited because among working class localities there are objective reasons why roles and tasks are gendered; why there is a sexual division of labour. In working class Scotland for example, the sexes are routinely 'segregated' and there still is a sexual division of labour because the economic question remains the dominating organising problematic in their lives and even more so within a family context. For the working class mother, what gender equality or 'female liberation' often means in practice, is that she considers herself less-than-equal in her marriage if not in full-time employment; which means the woman, more often than not, doing a routine manual semi-skilled job often on an insecure contractual basis and with no occupational pension - in addition to running a family and a household.

Such a class-based perspective helps us to evaluate educational policies. When in school a boy participating in role-playing may appear to the liberal policymaker to be learning to explore his masculinity in a 'non-traditional' manner, the fact is that if masculinity is de-essentialised and understood as a series of class practices, for example, such boys have yet to begin to 'do masculinity.' When working class masculinity is understood as a 'cultural form' and a cultural practice borne from many years of exposure to and assimilation to being employed in the bottom half of the occupational hierarchy, as well as forming and reproducing a family under these disciplining conditions, it is realized that 'masculinity' does not emerge from consciousness nor an eternal masculine nature but a set of lived material conditions and experiences. It stands to reason then that only a very different set of real and lived material conditions and experiences (and not an educational intervention involving role playing) could hope to change this form of 'doing masculinity.' A consequence of this perspective is that to describe 'traditional masculinity' as 'stereotypical gender behaviour' amounts to what Pierre Bourdieu terms symbolic violence insofar as it aims to delegitimise another class's construction of gender; as well as reifying 'gender' by imagining one can extract it, its constitution and structuration, from the real world and make of it, via policies of social engineering, what one will. Insofar as this paradigm of understanding gender and its alleged malleability constructs sex education policy, SRE is constructed by the hopes and fears of a secular and liberal middle class elite.

Setting the policy goal then of 'relationships equality' between the genders is problematic. It is done within the context of the government's failure, after fifty years of policymaking, to establish educational or health equality between the classes. Indeed, the evidence is that these indices of inequality have increased.
I argue that what policymakers have to recognize and make curricular provision for is the fact that outside of school, sexuality and behaviours between the sexes are heavily socialized; are subject to being structured by socio-cultural and economic/market forces; that sexual and gender behaviours must be approached as class practices, for example. Often, then, the only prospect of seeing the ‘core skills’ and ‘learning outcomes’ that SRE programmes set for their pupils meeting with any success depends upon the extent to which fundamental social realities are faced up to and incorporated into SRE. Successful SRE will indeed mean transcending class practices, transcending social gender inequalities, tackling the violence perpetrated by boys on girls, but to imagine one can do this with sex education policies that fail to recognize and combat class structures is to surround a series of (for the most part) enlightened objectives by a wall of inadequate policies preventing any chance of success.

4. Church Paradigm

In 2002 The Catholic Education Commission rejected the State-sponsored Sex and Relationships paradigm. Predictably enough, the Church viewed the State-sponsored programme as unacceptable; as a species of ‘secular fundamentalism’ insofar as it discriminated against Christian beliefs. The Church issued its own Guidelines and Guidance Notes for the teaching of Relationships and Moral Education (RME) for Catholic schools and in 2005 began the Called To Love project. The fundamental inspiration of the Catholic approach to sex education is its theological understanding of human sexuality and its appeal to the empirical evidence, such as the ever-increasing rise in the number of abortions in Scotland, which the Church claims proves that liberal secular sexual health strategies, such as the prioritisation of making information about condom use freely available in schools, far from helping young people come to a mature understanding of their sexuality, actually worsens their situation. The Church’s opposition to condom use as a means of ensuring safe(r) sex is not only theological but empirical. While the Church does not deny the use of a condom during intercourse greatly reduces the risk of unwanted pregnancies, advocating the use of condoms is hardly a responsible policy any particular father or mother should recommend to their adolescent children as a means of keeping them safe. As a recent report authored by Anne Williams and published by the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics has it:

Sperm have a diameter of 50 microns. Naturally occurring holes in the wall of a latex condom have a diameter of 1 micron. The HIV retrovirus, which causes AIDS, has a diameter of 0.1 microns... AIDS viruses swim freely through
the holes in a condom. That is a fact that should be widely publicized.10

In the Church-sponsored programme *Called To Love* what is immediately striking about the Catholic understanding and its classroom materials and curriculum provision for relationships education is its underpinning theology. Specifically, the very intimacy that Catholic theologians ascribe to the inner life of God is believed to hold profound truths for human sexuality. *Deus caritas est* recently declared Pope Benedict in the inaugural encyclical of his pontificate: God is love. For the Church, in the words of Pope John Paul II, human sexuality “is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the person as such.”11 In his encyclical *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II wrote:

God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation and thus the capacity and responsibility of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.12

There is a shocking quality to Catholic theology’s rigorous stapling together that which late-capitalist modernity and its cognoscenti class everywhere sunder: the self and sexuality; there is the clear rejection of the ‘liberation’ of sexuality from morality, personhood, parenthood, children; its relentless integralism that theorises human sexuality to the very limits, and beyond, of its intelligibility.

However, a criticism I would like to make is that much of the Relationships and Moral Education programme traps Catholicism into what Joseph Margolis has termed ‘eighteenth century thinking.’ What Margolis means by this is classical Enlightenment-style unitary thinking that has yet to free itself from universalist assumptions about Reason. What I mean by borrowing this phrase in this context is not to call on the Church to free its understanding of human sexuality and development from ‘universalist’ assumptions, but to suggest the Church needs to put its universalism at stake by plunging into the specificities and contingencies of historicity and culture – such as those of Scottish working class locations, for example. I suggest this work of integrating universalist and particularist realities and truths is a pressing research priority for Catholic sex education in Scotland today. Having a beautiful vision of human sexuality is important; but possessing the means of translating such a vision into the lives of working class youths is infinitely better.
5. Conclusion

There are in Scotland today two models of sex education: the Religious and the Secular, the Church and State programmes, Relationships and Moral Education (RME) and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE). Perhaps the ghost at each of these banquets is culture and class. Can SRE or RME work among the working class? One might as well ask the same question of music education or science education. If we cannot expect long established unequal educational outcomes to be reversed in these subjects, we have no right to expect it in any other aspect of the curriculum. How much easier and familiar to develop a sex education programme, repeat the education, education, education policy mantra, than address the real issue of long durée patterns of social inequality.

Notes

1 This paper emerges from background research in preparation for a three-year international ethnographic research project (beginning January 2008) jointly funded under the United Kingdom Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) / Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Religion and Society research programme led by the Department of Religious Education at Glasgow University.

2 This poor sexual health record is well documented in the literature. I refer the reader in particular to two excellent studies in which can be found more extensive bibliographies: 1) J van Loon, Deconstructing the Dutch Utopia, Family Education Trust, London, 2003; 2) P Boydell and C Mackellar, Informing Choice: A New Approach and Ethics for Sex and Relationships Education in Scotland, Scottish Council on Human Bioethics, 2004.

3 For a lengthier review of the issues involved in representing class locations and lives I refer the reader to my article ‘Fundamental Ontology versus Esse est percipii’, Space and Culture, vol. 12-2, 2009 (forthcoming).


6 I should point out that the researchers who put together the documentation which accompanies the government’s strategy explicitly highlight the connections between poverty and poor sexual health. However, if we are to
believe the researchers’ claim to have developed policies in light of sensitivity to material poverty, we must believe that sex education policies sensitive to working class realities must bear a striking resemblance to those liberal–secular policies made with no reference whatever to working class reality!

7 The presence of the Catholic Church within State education in Scotland is sizable given the historic legislation of 1918 which continues to give the Church an extremely influential role within its schools – some 15% of all State schools. Enthusiastic support of Catholic schools by the First Minister Alex Salmond and his predecessor Jack McConnell, combined with the high profile excellence of Catholic schools in government inspections, would seem to endorse Catholic education and policymakers.


9 The number of abortions in Scotland has risen steadily since the 1967 Abortion Act. In 2006 there were 13,081 abortions performed in Scotland, about 36 per day. National Health Service (Scotland), viewed on 19 March 2007, <http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk/isd>.


12 Ibid. p. 19.

Bibliography


