

# Teaching about Female Sexuality: Putting Women on Top

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Women's studies programs commonly offer courses on human sexuality, illustrating the need for a feminist approach to this subject. Both of us had prior experience teaching human sexuality through women's studies when we decided to teach such a course at our current university. In fact, it initially took us by surprise when one member of our Women's Studies Program suggested that we teach a course on female rather than human sexuality. We quickly agreed that this course would be more appropriate as a women's studies offering and that it would enable us to accomplish goals not possible through a course on human sexuality. An additional reason for developing the course was to provide women's studies curriculum in the natural sciences. Therefore, the content includes more biological information than is often taught in a broadly defined human sexuality course. The Female Sexuality course we developed is interdisciplinary, cross-listed by the Biology and Psychology Departments and the Women's Studies Program.

## Why Teach Female Sexuality?

There are both ideological and practical reasons to teach a course on female sexuality. First, separating female from male sexuality promotes the process of women defining, understanding, and practicing their own sexuality. Historically, men have defined women's sexuality. The most obvious example is the way in which male culture has attempted to define reproduction for women—when they should reproduce, how they should give birth, and whether they should have access to birth control. Women need to define for themselves the role of reproduction in their sexual identity. Another benefit of teaching female sexuality is that it encourages women to develop a self-affirmed sexuality rather than partner-affirmed sexuality. Women need to discover their own sexual needs, fantasies, and erotic orientation aside from whether they have a partner or who that partner is. By teaching a separate course we have validated the idea of female-defined sexuality.

The focus on women has allowed us to cover several topics that could not be dealt with adequately in a course that covers both sexes. Frequently in human sexuality courses, topics such as menstruation, menopause, effects of pregnancy on sexuality, lesbianism, and sexual victimization of women are discussed minimally. In addition, male sexuality is likely to be emphasized. For example, coverage of sexual dysfunction often includes more information on erectile dysfunction and how women can help men with this problem than on female anorgasmia and men's role in sex therapy for women. The neglect of female sexuality among sex researchers is pervasive. Female ejaculation has been "discovered" only recently,<sup>1</sup> and the anatomy of the clitoris still is undetermined.<sup>2</sup> In a female sexuality course, topics of concern to women can be addressed regardless of their relationship to male sexuality.

## The Continuum Model

At the most fundamental level, our goal is to teach a "sex-positive" course. We want women to feel good about themselves sexually and positive toward others. However, in order to accomplish that we must redefine acquired notions of acceptable sexuality. We believe that to understand sexuality it is necessary to conceptualize sexual behavior in terms of variation rather than in terms of "normal" behavior. It is possible to convince a group of students that the range in height within a group of people describes more about the group than its average height. Yet we are so socialized to accept only average sexual behaviors that it is quite a challenge to think about the variation in sexual behavior that also exists.

The framework upon which we base our analysis of sexuality is that all sexual behaviors exist along a continuum. For instance, there is a continuum of the degree of exhibitionism people express ranging from none at all to the notorious "flasher." Most people, of course, are not at one end or the other but somewhere in the middle for that trait. For any sexual trait, a group of individuals will show some variation in the extent to which that trait is expressed. However, what people consider "normal" is often the statistically common behavior, which is then culturally defined as acceptable and healthy. However, for almost any sexual trait, a large percentage of the population will not conform to the average. For example, there is a great deal of variation in the extent to which people eroticize undergarments. Who is to say at what point along the continuum the behavior is no longer healthy? How can an individual feel good about herself, her partner, or others in society if she is so concerned about where along the continuum the behavior is no longer acceptable? Because everyone's sexuality does not completely overlap with the norm, the only liberating approach to sexuality is to envision it from the perspective of variation.

To teach sexuality using a continuum model of sexual behavior does not mean that there are no standards or criteria for acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices. It merely suggests that the criteria should not be based on its position along a spectrum. For example, lesbianism is and probably always will be a minority sexual preference (although with less repression it may be more prevalent than seen currently) and that minority status contributes to its unacceptability. What we propose is that the standards of acceptability not be based on some vague notion of normality but on consent.

It is necessary when teaching the continuum model to emphasize that many forms of sexual variation are acceptable regardless of how extreme they may appear as long as they involve consenting individuals. Fetishism is classified as a deviant or unhealthy sexual expression, yet if it is not harmful, is it wrong? Often people will suggest that once we start accepting certain behaviors, how would we know where to stop? With this question, they condemn all sorts of sexual



practices that are perfectly harmless. Our framework states that the place to stop is when there is no longer consent. For example, voyeurism is common and acceptable in our culture and many people have their voyeuristic tendencies satisfied by watching sexual acts in popular films. However, the peeping Tom at our window is not acceptable. Similarly, rape of village women after a battle may be "normal" behavior, but it is unacceptable using the consent criterion.

By employing the continuum model rather than simply treating sexual practices as a long list of categories, people can recognize that sexual behaviors at the ends of the continuum are related to their own practices and begin to understand sexual orientations other than their own. Even sadomasochism can be discussed as a continuum ranging from mild, socially acceptable forms of inflicting or enjoying pain (e.g., as love bites or hickeys), to more extreme, socially stigmatized forms (e.g., whipping).

The continuum framework encourages individuals to examine their own sexual identity as a composite of the variation that exists in society rather than as conforming or not conforming to social norms. It is only this type of framework that can enable people to explore and accept their own sexuality, whatever it might be.

### Teaching Female Sexuality

We believe that the pathway to the development of a self-



"Cal and her daughters at Cape Cod." © 1982 Patricia by Evans.

affirmed sexuality lies in being able to understand how sexuality is controlled by culture. Students must be made aware of how culture shapes and reinforces sexual desire and behavior by mystifying, through stigmatization, all alternative (noncoital) forms of sexual expression, including masturbation, oral and anal sex, sexual fantasy, celibacy, lesbianism, and fetishisms. Our greatest challenge in trying to promote this understanding is to make students aware of how profoundly the concept of "sexuality" is equated with the behavior "heterosexual intercourse." A realization of the fallaciousness of this equation is essential to redefining sexuality from a feminist perspective.

Our objective in the course was to *demystify* sexual variations not involving intercourse by teaching students to realize the physiological and psychological commonalities between "normal" and "unusual" forms of sexuality. For example, learning that the physiological response involved in orgasm is identical regardless of the means used to induce it (e.g., intercourse, masturbation, oral sex) opens the way to begin challenging the idea that coitus is "best."

Demystifying sexual variation involves a three-step process: (1) setting a positive tone for the course, (2) confronting students' implicit prejudices about what constitutes "correct" sexuality, and (3) providing alternative criteria for sexual standards from which the student can choose. Because the process must occur sequentially to be effective, course topics and experiential exercise are chosen to progress from least to most controversial.

*Setting a positive tone.* Maintaining an atmosphere of tolerance is crucial when teaching sexuality. We had several strategies for developing such a climate. First, based on our previous experiences of teaching sexuality, we recognized that our attitude toward the material and students would in large part set the tone for the class. Consequently, we had continually to confront our own hopes for and anxieties about what could be accomplished in one semester. This means we had to appraise students' attitudes and begin teaching at their level, keeping in mind that we would not be effective with every student. A survey of student attitudes and sexual knowledge given at the beginning of the semester was invaluable in challenging our preconceived ideas about students' beliefs. We were surprised to learn how sexually conservative many of our students were: for example, many approved very strongly of premarital virginity for women. Having the survey results provided a "reality check" for us when we felt disappointed, angry, or frustrated with the class.

A second way in which we tried to develop an open atmosphere was by being very careful to use "honest labeling"<sup>3</sup> during our lectures and in our syllabus. For instance, when announcing a film on sexual techniques, we were careful to label it a film on "heterosexual techniques." Lectures on heterosexual relationships were labeled as such, to make students cognizant of the existence of lesbian and gay relationships. Because the phrases "making love" and "having sex" are so often equated with coitus, we rarely used them, preferring instead to be more specific in our labeling. By making such precision the norm, students eventually became quite relaxed using honest labeling themselves.

A third strategy we used to set a positive tone for the course was to engage students in a series of desensitization exercises. Student anxiety is very high in sexuality courses,





particularly a *female* sexuality course. Anxiety about sexuality will be manifested in nervous laughter, hostility, a heavy reliance on instructors for "expert" advice, and panic about grades (who wants to fail a sex course? what do you tell your friends?).

We reserved about one class period per week during which small, leaderless groups of eight to ten students completed a set of prearranged desensitization exercises. Most instructor's manuals accompanying sexuality texts have a variety of experiential exercises from which to choose. Exercises such as "vocabulary brainstorming," in which students think of all possible synonyms for sexual terms like "breast," "clitoris," "penis," and "vagina," are exceptionally useful for reducing the shock value associated with sexual language. The exercise has the added advantage of lending itself to a discussion of the sexist connotations of the terms for women.

*Confronting sexual prejudice.* Once the tone for the course has been established, the next challenge is to begin confronting students' sexual prejudices by calling into question standard definitions of normalcy. This is accomplished in two ways: (1) by explicitly teaching the continuum model of sexual variation, and (2) by integrating material on noncoital sexualities (e.g., lesbianism, masturbation, fantasy) throughout the course.

This is without a doubt the most trying and exhilarating period of the course to teach. Unfortunately, as students become more relaxed talking about sex, an intolerance for noncoital, nonheterosexual forms of sexuality will emerge. Without intervention, discussion groups after a while will become oppressive to celibates, lesbians, or even women who prefer masturbation to intercourse. In lectures, resistance to new

ideas will mount. Both times we have taught the course, student resistance reached its peak during the lecture on sexual fantasy.

It is quite tempting at this point to consider backing away from controversial issues. However, it is necessary to be bold and nondefensive during this phase. We had several different strategies for coping with tension. First, we made it a point to explain our philosophy at several points during the semester. For example, at the first class meeting, we explained that the course would have a feminist perspective and that we would expose them to as many new viewpoints as possible, allowing them to make informed decisions about values. At other points, we had to remind them to keep an open mind. The positive effect of making our bias clear was that students ended up evaluating us as being "extremely objective."

Second, soliciting anonymous feedback by asking students to write down any questions, comments, or concerns they had was a very effective way of letting them know their voices were important to us. We did this one time during the semester, shortly after we had an open lesbian guest speaker and an explicit film on sexual fantasy. Using the responses, we spent a class period directly addressing some of the issues that students had raised. This gave students a chance to see that their concerns were often shared by others. It also gave us the opportunity to gauge how widespread were any hostilities or anxieties.

Third, as we sensed that the small group discussions were starting to bog down in sexual prejudice, we instituted instructor-controlled discussion groups. The material at the end of the course lent itself especially well to larger group dis-



cussions. It was quite easy to generate an hour's worth of student response to the issue of whether prostitution should be legalized, decriminalized, or remain a crime.

*Providing alternative sexual standards.* As stated earlier, students tend to react with fear to initial attempts to question societal or personal standards of what constitutes "abnormal" behavior. It is essential to communicate to students that *understanding* alternative forms of sexuality does not require them to *adopt* the behaviors as their own. For example, during one lecture, we pointed out that if they took a course on comparative religions, they would expect to be exposed to a variety of religions and not just Judaism or Christianity. However, they would not expect that they needed to change their own religion as they discussed each.

While we hoped to persuade students to judge sexuality using the criterion of consent rather than religious or sexist codes of sexual conduct, some students were not prepared to take such a large step toward sexual tolerance. For those students, our objectives were to help them understand the origins of their sexual biases (e.g., parents, religion, early childhood experiences), and to have them weigh the costs and benefits for themselves and others of adhering to those standards. This process itself reduces sexual bigotry by making students accept responsibility for the sexual standards they have chosen.

### Putting Women on Top

It is perhaps symbolic that the missionary position for coitus (women underneath) is a good position for fertilization of eggs but a poor one for female stimulation. As women regain sexual power, they are literally and symbolically going to end up "on top." The effect of the female sexuality course on students has been astounding. Many women, both heterosexual and lesbian, reported that they have become happier with themselves as a result of understanding their own sexuality better. Several of the older, married students claimed they should have taken the course fifteen years earlier and that it should be required for all twenty-year-olds. Some women (and even some men) revealed that what they learned in the course had improved the quality of their present relationships both sexually and interpersonally. And almost everyone remarked that their attitudes toward individuals with values and lifestyles different from their own had changed dramatically.

Knowledge of female sexuality empowers women to control their own sexuality. It makes women less vulnerable to sexual harassment, to male sexual advances, and in situations where sex is used to make a woman feel incompetent or out of place. It has been interesting to note how males are more fearful of bringing up sexual topics around either of us because they might "expose" their lack of knowledge. Sexual knowledge equalizes power between women and men within heterosexual relationships and in social and work situations.

Through sexual repression, women have been denied access to the sexual sphere. By limiting women's sexuality to reproduction, and preventing the development of female sexuality through the threat of rape, sexual harassment, and incest, male culture has encouraged us to fear sexuality. The power that accompanies knowledge of female sexuality helps us, as women, to claim what is rightfully *our* territory.

## Syllabus: Female Sexuality

### Part I: Becoming Sexual

- Week 1: Introduction. Sex in historical and cross-cultural perspective. Discussion: sex attitudes and survey.
- Week 2: Sexual anatomy. Sexual development. Slide show on female genitalia.
- Week 3: Gender differentiation. Child and adolescent sexuality. Discussion: knowledge of anatomy.
- Week 4: Gender roles. Adult sexual development. Discussion: sexual vocabulary "brainstorming."
- Week 5: Heterosexual relationships. Lesbian relationships. Exam.

### Part II: Physical aspects of sexuality

- Week 6: Sexual response cycle. Sexual techniques. Film on heterosexual techniques.
- Week 7: Hormones, menstruation, menopause. Pregnancy. Discussion: values clarification of sexual techniques.
- Week 8: Problem pregnancy and infertility. Birth control. Discussion: choosing whether to reproduce.
- Week 9: Women's health movement: guest speaker. Sexual diseases. Discussion: origins of sexual standards.
- Week 10: Sexual dysfunction. Sex therapy. Exam.

### Part III: Exploring Sexual Variation

- Week 11: Lifestyles. Fantasies. Film on sexual fantasy.
- Week 12: The "coming out" process: open lesbian guest speaker. Sexual variation. Discussion: clarifying values about sexual variation.
- Week 13: Pornography and erotica. Prostitution. Discussion: legal and moral issues regarding prostitution and pornography.
- Week 14: Rape and sexual harassment. Incest. Discussion of *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, by Louise Armstrong, a book about incest.
- Week 15: The future of sex. □

### NOTES

1. John D. Perry and Beverly Whipple, "Pelvic muscle strength of female ejaculators: evidence in support of a new theory of orgasm," *Journal of Sex Research* 17, no. 1 (1981): 22-39.
2. Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, *A New View of a Woman's Body* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).
3. Laurie Roades, "Integrating material on lesbianism into women's studies' courses," paper presented at the Midwest Regional NWSA, Columbia, Missouri, April 1984.

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**Victoria L. Sork (left) and Suzanna Rose.**

