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Fostering Critical Awareness of the Role Media Play in Sexual Socialization

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ABSTRACT

Background: One’s socialization into a larger communal fabric promotes development of specific ideas, beliefs, and values, in addition to shared cultural norms, symbols, and the language necessary to communicate with others. This includes our sexual socialization. Some of the most prominent influences informing our sexual-selves include various forms of media: social media, theater, film, news, the arts, and music. Understanding connections between cultural exposures and individual cognition / behavior is an important first step toward individual development and assimilation.

Purpose: To help students better understand how media inform sexual development, a group pedagogical method was developed titled “Sexual Socialization and the Media”. The exercise was designed specifically for an undergraduate human sexuality course.

Methods: Groups were asked to select and analyze three forms of media: music videos, literary pieces, and film. Student reflections were provided on sexual scripting, sexual skills, symbolism and innuendo, and conflicts between media messages and reality. A 14-item Likert survey was administered to students to assess the efficacy of the assignment. Thirty-five students provided feedback over the course of two semesters.

Results: More than half of students “Strongly Agreed” that the assignment helped them understand how media inform their sexuality. Over 80% “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that the assignment helped them clarify their own values, attitudes, and behaviors. Additionally, students indicated that the assignment supported development of critical reflection skills specific to media and sexuality. In all, the assignment received a score of 93.3% in terms of its “…usefulness in understanding the connection between sexuality and the media.”

Conclusions: Pedagogical approaches are an ideal conduit toward continued sexual development, promoting recognition of implicit sexual messaging through review and critique of media.

INTRODUCTION

Maccoby (2015) defines socialization as the “...processes whereby naive individuals are taught the skills, behavior patterns, values and motivations needed for competent functioning in the culture in which the child is growing up.” Socialization processes support positive behaviors, regulatory boundaries, parental tendencies, and systems functioning. Although scripting in the form of cultural norms – such as the democratic process – are supported by one’s emersion into one’s cultural narrative. Emerging from the discipline of sociology and informed by the seminal work of numerous theorists such as Charles Cooley (1864–1929), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987), and Carol Gilligan (1936– ), one’s self-development and how society influences these progressions serves to inform our views of the world around us making socialization important on many levels. Agents of socialization include family, school, workplace, religion, peer groups, and government. Of particular interest are agents related to various forms of media widely assessable in the 21st century. These include entertainment and news outlets, social networks such as Snapchat and Facebook, and messages provided by advertisers. Within this context, sexual socialization has emerged as a major conduit toward which youth learn to regulate their sexual behaviors based upon media messages. Spanier (1977) defines sexual socialization as “a process involving several interrelated social-psychological components which collectively...determine our sexual self-concept....”. This form of socialization typically occurs outside formal institutions of learning (parents and schools, for example) and for adolescents, tend to stem from messages received through movies, television, advertisement, written material, and music (Prot, Anderson, Gentile, Warburton, Saleem, Groves, & Brown, 2015). Sexual messages often misrepresent how ours sexual-self should develop by providing inaccurate sexual norms, overestimation of peer sexual contacts, or the scripts necessary to perpetuate gender-specific stereotypes. Understanding these exposures and how they influence our behaviors is important in selecting those that best meet our individual and societal needs through critical reflection. The purpose of this study was to provide undergraduate students an opportunity to explore various agents of socialization to identify sexual messages that convey social expectations and to compare them to their own expectations and values.

THEORY

This study was informed by Sexual Script Theory proposed by Gagnon and Simon (2005). Utilizing a constructionist approach toward human behavior, Gagnon and Simon posit that sexual scripts are best categorized by three salient constructs: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts. Given the importance of messaging as a focus of the study, student reflections focused solely upon cultural scripts represented within each of the three media types explored.

METHODS

Students enrolled in an introductory, undergraduate course on human sexuality were asked to complete a group assignment titled “Sexual Socialization in the Media”. The pedagogical exercise was developed by the author to allow students an opportunity to reflect upon sexual scripts presented in various forms of media. The assignment was completed three times during the semester where student groups were asked to select and analyze sexual scripting in music videos, literary pieces, and film. Groups reflections on media-specific scripts were garnered to include insights on media messages, acceptable practice, gender roles, sexual symbolism and innuendo, sexual stereotypes, and conflicts between media messages and reality. Groups provided a written narrative for each of ten questions required for the assignment. A 14-item Likert survey was administered to assess the efficacy of the assignment. Thirty-five students provided feedback over the course of two semesters.

RESULTS

Student commentary on the efficacy of the assignment was quite high. When asked if the assignment helped them understand how media inform literature, and film informed their sexuality, 54.3% and 37.1% responded “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”, respectively. 45.7% of students “Strongly Agreed” that the assignment helped them understand how sexual messages provided direction while developing as a person, while 88.6% either “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that the project helped them clarify their sexual self-concept, values, attitudes, and behaviors. Finally, 97.1% either “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that the assignment helped them develop skills of critical reflection. The assignment was highly recommended for future human sexuality courses as was the group approach.

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

Students indicated a high level of utility in this approach as a means of understanding sexual scripting provided via various forms of media. Future iterations should include both cultural and interpersonal reflections as channels toward understanding linkages between our sexual-selves and social messages that inform our sexuality. Pedagogical approaches are an ideal conduit toward continued sexual development, promoting recognition of implicit sexual messaging through review, and critique of media.

References upon request