

Acquiring Information about Sexuality

Throughout our lives, numerous sources socialize us about sexuality. Adolescents receive most information about sex from informal sources, mainly their peers (especially same-sex friends). They also learn from dating partners, different-sex friends, the media, and reading on their own. According to a large-scale study, teens acquire the least amount of sex information from their mothers and teachers, and even less from their fathers.⁵³ The mass media that adolescents favor rarely include accurate information about sexual health. An analysis of the rare sexual health content in four media (television, magazines, music, and movies) popular among adolescents revealed ambiguous and/or inaccurate content. These media reinforced traditional gender stereotypes of males as obsessed with sex and sexual performance, and females being responsible for protection against pregnancy.⁵⁴ Basically, the media are not providing much sexual health content for their adolescent audiences. In terms of formal sex education, in 1996 the federal government provided funding to states whose schools taught abstinence-only in their sex education programs. In 1996, 49 out of 50 states adopted the program and took the funds; today, only 33 states receive this funding. Many schools have found the abstinence-only approach to be ineffective and have chosen instead to teach students about protection from pregnancy and disease, should they decide to engage in sexual relations.⁵⁵

While heterosexual teens tend to turn to their peers, young people who realize that their sexuality may not fit societal norms often consult the Internet. The Internet provides a level of security and anonymity that allows them to explore their sexuality. They can construct and interact with a virtual community of similar adolescents, and they can come out safely online before they disclose their sexuality to anyone in person.⁵⁶

Communicating Sexuality in Organizations

Sexuality infuses organizations, as members engage in a variety of sexual relationships, ranging from flirtations to short-term affairs, to committed partnerships.⁵⁷ The organization is a logical and relatively safe place to meet a prospective romantic and/or sexual partner. Employees meet prospective mates or spouses, have affairs with one another, and sometimes break up at work. In most organizational settings, employees routinely engage in such behaviors as sexual banter, jokes, teasing, gossip, and flirting. Basically, the workplace is a fertile site for performing sexuality.

How people express or repress sexuality depends on the type of organization. For instance, sociologists Jeff Hearn and Wendy Parkin differentiate exploitation organizations from those that do not foreground sexuality.⁵⁸ The former include any type of organization that trades on sexuality, including the pornography industry, "escort" services, strip clubs, and sexual aids manufacturers and retailers. The latter encompass most other workplaces.

Hearn and Parkin also discuss distinct sexuality matters that confront members of total (or closed) organizations—institutions such as prisons, asylums, the military, or boarding schools—where members spend all of their time.⁵⁹ In those places, authorities often engage in obtrusive control and surveillance mechanisms for staff as well as residents.

The sexual makeup of the institution can complicate sexuality policies. For example, members of single-sex organizations may be concerned about homosexual activity. The extent to which such organizations develop and enforce policies hinges on their primary attitude toward sexuality. Prisons for adults probably have different attitudes and rules than the military, and both are likely to differ from boarding schools for girls or boys.

When I went to college in 1968, I lived in a girls' dormitory. If a male visited me, he had to sign in at the front desk, and I had to keep my door open. He also had to leave by 10:30 PM. The housemother monitored these visits, and any girl who broke the rules could be evicted. Not only does my dormitory experience illustrate how total institutions might implement policies about sexuality, it also shows, once again, the importance of context. When I went to graduate school in the mid-1970s, I resided in a coeducational dormitory where everyone came and went freely, with no monitoring by the resident assistant.

Even when people in organizations do not refer directly to sexuality, sexuality always is an absent presence. An awareness of sexual harassment policies may dictate and discipline our behaviors. Or, norms or policies about appearance may control how we dress, and whether we should act or dress in a more or less sexual manner, depending on our role. We may not act on sexual attraction to a superior, subordinate, coworker, client, or student because of formal or informal policies.

Aware of potential consequences, many people carefully choose words and monitor their actions. Some professionals fear that cross-sex mentoring may evolve into sexual relationships, or that other people may infer such relationships. Gay and lesbian workers also may limit mentoring interactions with others of the same sex for fear that people may think they're coming on to them.