

Sex and Mental Health Education on the UNC Campus: a report of my fieldwork activities to date and future plans

Vic Schoenbach  
graduate student in the  
Department of Health  
Education  
August 8, 1973

This report covers my activities to date and future plans for my fieldwork project concerning sex and mental health education in the UNC community. My goals have been two-fold: first, I have tried to make a real contribution to sex and mental health education on the campus; second, I have sought to develop my own understanding in this area. Accordingly, I have devoted a great deal of time to reading and conversations with students and other individuals, as well as to activities that have low impact but provide educational opportunity for me.

Spring and summer, 1971:

In a very real sense, my fieldwork activities began some time before my actual enrollment in the Department of Health Education in September, 1972. For at least two years prior to that time, I had spent considerable time reading and thinking about sexuality and mental health. When I first arrived in Chapel Hill, during the course of a trip from New York to Texas, I was struck by the range of ongoing activities regarding sex education: the course for undergraduates (HEED 33), the "Elephants and Butterflies" column in the Daily Tar Heel and the pamphlet of the same name, the projected student-run sex counseling service (now, the Human Sexuality Information and Counseling Service), the

existence of a private firm involved in the marketing of contraceptives (Population Services, Inc.), and of course, the Carolina Population Center.

After making inquiries during that visit and again on my return in November, 1971, I decided that there would be considerable opportunities for me to become involved in the field of sex education and to make some practical contributions to the work here. Financing myself with a part-time computer programming job for the Carolina Population Center, I applied to be a discussion leader in Health Education 33 and a counselor in the newly-established Human Sexuality Information and Counseling Service (HSICS).

It was shortly after I had begun both of these activities that I heard about the M.S.P.H. program in HEED, and made inquiries about applying to the department. I explained to Lou Nidorf, then in charge of MSPH admissions, that I was interested primarily in a program that would enable me to do what I had already determined to do, that is, learn about and work in sex and mental health education in the college community. He indicated that there were certain formal obligations in terms of course requirements, major paper, and so forth, but that beyond those departmental and school requirements, my program was open.

The principal restriction in his mind concerned my not carrying out activities that would through inadvertence or negligence result in harm to individuals in the community. An example he gave suggested that I might set up some sort of program or organization, abandon it when I received my degree,

leaving others to be disillusioned about their having committed themselves to it.

In addition to working with HEED 33 and the Sex Counseling Service, I was invited to lead a class discussion on sexuality in a Physical Education class. The class invited me to return the following week to lead a discussion on homosexuality. I also met and talked with various individuals working in mental health related fields, among them Dr. Myron Liptzin (psychiatrist in charge of the Mental Health Section of the Student Health Service), Prof. Robert Wilson (at that time the Chairman of the Department of Mental Health), and Dr. Donald Harris (currently Health Educator for the Student Health Service).

During the summer preceding my enrollment, I attended a two-week summer program at the Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington, Indiana. The workshop consisted of lectures and discussion covering various topics in sexuality and sex education, supplemented by small group discussions in the evening. The organizers of the workshop asked me to lead one of these discussion groups. I objected that I was not adequately equipped for the task, but they affirmed that I was so I accepted. As it turned out, my group included Dr. Mary Calderone (then director of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States, abbreviated SIECUS) and the director of the Department of Psychiatry at a Detroit hospital. I cannot say that I facilitated the group, but I did learn a lot from the experience.

Another enterprise for which I was not adequately prepared, or at least did not develop as I had hoped, was a "course" I

volunteered to give through Chapel Hill's "Free University". The Free University was conceived and organized early that summer by SIFT (Summer Involvement for Teenagers). I responded to a request for volunteers and offered to give a course on "Sex and the Enjoyment of Life". As it turned out, eight students enrolled -but no teenagers. Because of the age and interests of the participants, we attempted to transform the course into a rap group. In the end, though, it was discontinued after four meetings.

Fall, 1971:

Following my official entry into the Department of Health Education, I attempted to proceed more systematically, at least in trying to define a fieldwork project that could have a start and a conclusion, and be subject to more precise evaluation. Many different activities suggested themselves (a survey of sexual problems among students, a survey of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with current social life, a mental health outreach project involving the training of people who regard themselves as "people who others turn to with their problems" so that they could function more effectively as informal counselors).

In trying to determine my best course of action, I had conversations with Donald Boulton (the new Dean of Students), Dr. Donald Harris (the newly appointed Health Educator for the Student Health Service -- and in the process of defining his "fieldwork"), Sharon McGinnis (a counselor in the Mental Health Section), and others. I attended meetings of the Residence College Counseling Team (a group of graduate

students in clinical psychology and other counseling related fields who provided counseling services to students in residence halls; they received salaries from the Department of Residence Life), the Human Sexuality Committee Board of Directors (since disbanded, the Board of Directors helped to initiate and oversee HEED 33, the Elephants and Butterflies column, the HSICS, and other activities), the Counseling Coordinating group (a regular meeting of representatives of all counseling organizations on campus; the group developed from an initial meeting convened by David Eckerman, Professor of Psychology, as part of the University self-study). I also continued to attend the meetings of the HSICS, though I did not continue to counsel after November, 1972.

From these conversations and meetings, and after discussing the matter with my advisor Lou Nidorf, I judged that it would not be feasible for me to attempt to promote or carry out the more ambitious of the projects I had been contemplating. And, while a survey might indeed be valuable, no organization or group seemed ready to make a significant use of its results. Accordingly, I decided to continue a multi-faceted fieldwork that would permit me to keep in touch with many different activities, would provide me with opportunities for further educational and skill development, and would have some concrete impact. The Sex Counseling Service (HSICS) offered the best network in all these respects, so I decided to continue my connection with the service, with a primary interest in outreach and special projects.

Winter and Spring, 1972-73:

One facet of my outreach activities has involved making presentations and facilitating discussions on sexuality with groups of students in residence halls. I made ten such presentations altogether, including one at Duke University, one to an adult Sunday school class at the Edenton Street Methodist Church in Raleigh, and one to an Upward Bound group. The principal benefit from these discussions was my own educational and skill development, though participants and others in contact with participants in these discussions have told me that the evenings were indeed valuable. Group size varied from ten to about forty. Often an evening that began at 8:00 would find half the group still there at 11:00.

At one dorm discussion I attempted a questionnaire evaluation. Of the forty or so students who attended, fifteen replied. A majority of the replies said that their overall reaction was "very favorable". Only one gave an overall reaction of "so so", the most negative choice. I made cassette tapes of this and other discussions.

During the spring semester I participated in two other outreach activities. The first was the preparation of a series of recommendations to be presented to the Dean and Associate Dean of the Department of Student Affairs. Our recommendations, "The Sexual Education and Health Care Responsibilities of the University," were drafted by six members of HSICS and a graduate student in the School of Education. The report reflected the results of the survey of sex knowledge, attitudes and behavior carried out the previous year by the Sex Counseling Service. That survey, designed and executed by our

director, Robert Wilson, found that nearly three-fourths of the undergraduate population had had sexual intercourse at least once, and that a majority of these students had not employed contraception on their first experience. Our report included recommendations regarding the Student Health Service, Office of Student Life, Department of Residence Life, academic curriculum, and the distribution of sex education materials. A sizeable article appeared in the Chapel Hill Newspaper concerning the survey, our report, and the response of the University administration.

At the same time, I participated in meetings of a self-selected group that considered sex education needs of UNC students with a specific focus of the question of the need for a campus booklet dealing with aspects of sexuality.

The committee included Fred Schroeder (Associate Dean of Men), Marianne Hitchcock (Office of Student Life), Bruce Baldwin (psychologist with the Student Health Service), Emily Kenan (counselor and staff-coordinator for HSICS), and two either students. The meetings began in February and continued more or less weekly throughout the semester. It became clear from early on that most of the participants were concerned about problems of communication and relationships rather than lack of knowledge concerning contraception, venereal disease, and other "practical" aspects of sex. In fact, the various existing booklets that came before us for consideration received the disparaging characterization of plumbing manuals".

The principal stated concerns of all participants (except myself) seemed to be with helping students to communicate and relate, with a particular concern for the coitally

inactive. I agreed with the importance assigned to communication and relationships, but asserted the equal importance of concrete information about sex, including such topics as masturbation, homosexuality, and sexual dysfunction. Also, I felt that it was important to work toward an acceptance of sex as a healthy and valuable activity. Of course each individual should make his or her own personal decision about what activities to engage in. But we ought to recognize that society as a whole has restricted and condemned sexual pleasure. This negativism causes problems for individual development, relationships, and sexual satisfaction. Our role, then, should be to provide overall encouragement and permission, though of course not pressuring anyone

Several factors in addition to this division hampered the work of the committee. Having received no mandate whatever, we had no assurance that anything we might prepare would be published. The situation was presented to us as one in which we could recommend and submit a document, which would then be forwarded to the Chancellor who might make funds available. In addition to this uncertainty, none of the committee members received any compensation for their involvement (except for me, in that the activity formed part of my fieldwork). One member objected to this omission, and others may have received an implied message regarding the importance of the project.

The absence of a mandate was matched by the absence of a leader or man. The need for one was suggested from time to time, but none emerged or was chosen. In any case, the procedures reflected our organization. No survey or other organized enquiry was conducted. The assessment that there was

indeed need for a pamphlet reflected attitudes held before the first meeting. So did the assessment of what ought to be included in such a booklet

Notwithstanding the initial enthusiasm and frequency of meeting, the group began to lose steam as the term progressed. During the exam period, it disintegrated. Apart from several pages I had submitted, receiving the response that it "wasn't what we are looking for", nothing was written. At the last attempt to hold a meeting, during the first summer session, Fred Schroeder, Marianne Hitchcock and I were the only ones in attendance (the meetings were held in the Office of Student Life).

At this final meeting, I explained that I was attempting to write material for a campus booklet that might be published by the administration, the Student Health Service, the HSICS, or some other organization. My primary concern was to find out if what I was working on fell within the scope of what might be acceptable to the official organizations. Toward that end, I subsequently turned over thirty pages of my draft version to be circulated among members the Mental Health Section of the Student Health Service. Fred Schroeder has recently returned from out-of-town, and I hope to receive some preliminary assessment shortly.

Summer, 1972:

In order to increase the availability of information on the more concrete aspects of sex, to gain some indication of interest in this information, and to contribute to the feeling that sex is an acceptable subject for discussion and

experience (a continuing concern, perhaps even the central concern of my field-work), I helped to arrange for HSICS to order 1,000 copies of the Birth Control Handbook during the latter part of the spring semester.

The Birth Control Handbook, published by a radical group in Montreal, represents the most complete information on contraception available in pamphlet form. Designed for free distribution by non-established organizations, the booklet costs five cents when ordered in quantity. This cost is far below any comparable publication, and falls within reach of Student Government resources.

During the spring semester, we distributed about 700 copies at discussion evenings, to visitors to our office, and to students in general. The latter group was reached as an experiment by leaving copies of the handbook on a rack next to the Information desk in the Carolina Union. The rack is used for give-away material about campus events and other matters of general interest. This method of distribution enables students to obtain information with complete anonymity and without having to identify themselves as "having an interest in sex" (by, for example, coming to our office or to a discussion evening). Although information on birth control and other sexual subjects is available in the Chapel Hill community, there has been no location where detailed facts could be obtained without having to declare one's interest - except, of course, for the various libraries.

With no publicity calling attention to the presence of the handbooks, they were taken up at a rate of about fifty per day. Since there were periods when the rack remained empty

before we could get a chance to re-stock it, this rate is an underestimate. Despite the radical orientation of the Birth Control Handbook (it embraces a pro-Third World position), no complaints were received.

Having thus identified a definite community interest, HSICS asked the summer Campus Governing Council (Student Government) for a special grant to make copies of the Birth Control Handbook available to all students attending summer school. In addition, we requested funds to obtain a smaller number of a companion publication, the VD Handbook, to assess student interest. The Campus Governing Council appropriated funds for our full request of 7,000 Birth Control Handbooks and 2,000 VD Handbooks.

The booklets arrived during the second summer session. We distributed them by placing stacks in the lobbies of residence halls, libraries (undergraduate, Wilson, Health Sciences, and Library Science), the Student Stores, the Carolina Union, and other buildings. Posters calling attention to the booklets and to their sponsorship accompanied each stack. Also, each booklet bore the HSICS stamp. Thus, the handbook distribution served as publicity for HSICS counseling as well.

Judging from the rate at which the copies have been taken from all locations, consumer response has been very favorable. The School of Pharmacy decided to give a copy of both handbooks to all students in their senior class. Adverse comments have dealt only with the political content of the Birth Control Handbook and have been few in number. Of the half-dozen that I have received, all have come from non-students (Fred Schroeder, Marianne Hitchcock, Donald Harris, Sandra Ward (of the

Department of Residence Life), a secretary in the School of Public Health, and the former director of the Western New York State office of Planned Parenthood, now in Chapel Hill. Most informal comment has been very favorable.

In order to obtain more concrete evidence of student response and to gain some idea of interest in pamphlets on other subjects, I prepared a two page questionnaire asking for comments on pamphlets read as well as the student's preferences for pamphlet topics, views on who should finance their purchase, and willingness of students to pay for them. These questionnaires have been inserted in copies of the handbooks and in copies of other pamphlets ordered from the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States. The latter pamphlets, covering masturbation, homosexuality, sexual response, sexual values, premarital intercourse, and sex education, were obtained to improve the response to our questionnaire. Altogether, some 475 questionnaires have been distributed. The preliminary returns give high ratings to both the Birth Control and VD Handbooks, and approve of their distribution through Student Government funds. The questionnaire results will be used as a guide for further pamphlet distribution, to support our future requests for Student Government grants, and to encourage the administration and Student Health Service to become more active in this area.

Other fieldwork activities:

In addition to these outreach activities, regarding HSICS I have also:

- 1) helped design screening and training program for new counselors during the fall of 1972;
- 2) conducted a training session for new counselors on sexual dysfunction, during the summer of 1973;
- 3) consulted with Brian Nielson, librarian at the Undergraduate library, concerning their holdings of sex related materials; the library agreed to acquire all the books on our recommended list that they did not already have.
- 4) prepared a draft memorandum concerning a recently produced videotape course in human sexuality developed at the University of Hawaii and recommending its broadcast over WUNC-TV;
- 5) attended all regular meetings of the HSICS and many special meetings concerning leadership and administration; I have also consulted with the present and former directors, and helped draw up plans for organization, including HSICS's newly evolving active management committee.

The remainder of my fieldwork activities to date include informal consulting with students preparing papers or course presentations, considerable reading of both popularly-oriented and scientific works in the area of sexuality and mental health, operating a small-scale "lending library" for HEED students, and participation in an eight-week course of Reevaluation Counseling, a group self-development experience currently offered for credit (as a sixteen-week course) through the Department of Maternal and Child Health. I have also spent many hours in informal conversations about sex and

mental health concerns. While it is difficult to count such conversations as fieldwork, I have often had the experience of receiving personal confidences punctuated with the remark "this is the first time I've talked with anyone about these things". Such conversations have been an important learning opportunity for me as well as of some small benefit to the emotional health of the community.

Plans for Fall, 1973:

During the period of my involvement in HEED fieldwork, I have been conscious that my work at the UNC campus has not been contained within the time limits of the HEED program. Not only did it begin before my enrollment, but I have expected it to continue afterwards. For this reason I have not made plans to terminate my involvement or lay the basis for projects I have worked on to continue in my absence. The latter is an important consideration, but I think the later this can be attempted the more fruitful will be the results.

With these considerations in mind, my future expectations for fieldwork include several concrete projects, and several more general objectives. Concretely, I hope to work with HSICS to obtain and distribute the Birth Control and VD Handbooks to all interested students. This would be the first time that all students have received any form of explicit sexual information while at UNC (Elephants and Butterflies, a more attractive but also more costly pamphlet giving less detailed information on reproductive physiology, contraception, venereal disease and local resources, has been distributed to dormitory residents in previous years).

Besides being a major step forward in facilitating access to information, large scale distribution rather than mere availability will communicate a more forceful implied message that sex should be talked about and that students are being encouraged to find out. Our society in general, and universities in particular, typically communicate an implied negative message about sex. We encourage learning and the search for truth in all other subjects; sex knowledge is left to those who inquire specifically, often receiving raised eyebrows and visible anxiety with the response. To be sure, this situation has changed considerably during the last several years. But the effects linger. This unspoken taboo constitutes perhaps the most important value of an affirmative sex education program.

Similarly, the previously mentioned TV course in human sexuality can be expected to have an impact much greater than the actual content it conveys I will try to interest WUNC-TV in broadcasting all or part of the series.

Finally, I hope to complete one or more pamphlets of my own on other topics concerning sex and relationships. The pamphlets would communicate specific information, but would aim principally to reduce anxiety, encourage students to respect and accept their feelings, and reduce self-blame for shortcomings. Publication and distribution could probably not be carried out before spring, 1973 at the earliest.

Among the more general objectives, the first concerns the organization and operation of HSICS. Having begun largely as the creation of an extraordinarily talented and energetic

undergraduate student named Robert Wilson with considerable support of all kinds from another undergraduate, Emily Kenan, HSICS has during its second year grappled with the transition from being run by the founder-director to a more self-directed role.

During this fall, as a continuation of my efforts for nearly a half year, I hope to promote the development of an active management committee that would include perhaps half a dozen persons in the ongoing administration and planning of HSICS activities. This involvement would give it greater staying power since it is unlikely that a director could be retained for any length of time without salary or other material compensation. Along these lines I am also encouraging the pursuit of work study funds, academic credit, and other types of compensation/reward for work done for HSICS. These rewards are not necessarily incentives so much as they free participants from having to take as many formal courses or work at part-time jobs, thus increasing the time and energy they can give to HSICS.

My second objective derives from my belief that HSICS can have its greatest impact in an active public education role rather than in a counseling and passive information one. During HSICS's first year of operation, and even during the second, a substantial portion of enquiries concerned services available from the Student Health Service. The lack of publicity about these services and about the welcome a student could expect to receive made many students hesitant to go directly to an organization, even one wholly supported by their student health fees. Increasingly, the Student Health Service has publicized their willingness to make available

contraception, venereal disease diagnosis and treatment, and counseling for sexual problems in a nonjudgmental context. At the same time that more of the HSICS role in sex counseling is being taken up by the Student Health Service, HSICS's experience and established reputation enable it to carry out affirmative projects in sex education.

These projects could include further distribution of pamphlets, screening of sex education films, consultation with academic departments and professional schools about increased sex education content in their curriculum, surveys of students to document interest in such curriculum reform, surveys to determine the prevalence of sexual and social concerns, working with public schools in the community to assist in preparation of sex education programs, etc. Students who participate in these projects might receive academic credit through a course in the School of Public Health (MHCH 140 serves as a model).