

THE COUNSELLOR AND CHANGING CANADIAN SEXUAL MORES*

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Abstract

To date, the counsellor in North America has been inadequately trained, and consequently ineffective in dealing with client problems involving human sexuality. The purpose of this paper is to help the counsellor increase his awareness and understanding of the sexual attitudes and behaviour of the clients with whom he interacts in the therapeutic setting. This task is undertaken by examining the empirical findings from some current Canadian sex research to determine some of the dominant changes in attitudes that have occurred within the past decade. The findings from this research have indicated that there has been a major change in the personal outlook of Canadian youth, as well as the viewpoint of the public at large, leading to a more general acceptance of a permissive sexual ethic. There are also signs that public attitudes toward prevalent social codes of sexual behaviour are being reappraised and redefined. The implications of these changes in Canadian sexual mores as a significant factor in the counselling process are discussed.

Résumé

Le conseiller nord-américain a reçu jusqu'à ce jour un entraînement inadéquat et conséquemment inefficace lorsqu'il aborde les problèmes touchant la sexualité humaine. Cet exposé a pour but d'aider le conseiller à accroître sa vigilance et sa compréhension face aux attitudes et au comportement sexual des clients avec qui il communique en thérapie. A l'examen des constatations empiriques relevées dans une recherche sur le sexe faite au Canada, cette tâche fut entreprise pour déterminer les changements dominants survenus dans les attitudes durant la dernière décennie. Ces constatations nous font voir une transformation importante dans les vues personnelles de la jeunesse canadienne et dans le point de vue du public menant à l'acceptation plus générale d'une éthique sexuelle permissive. Nous remarquons aussi des signes indiquant que les attitudes du public, vis à vis des codes sociaux actuels sur le comportement sexuel, sont réévaluées et redéfinies. Les implications de l'évolution dans les coutumes sexuelles au Canada en tant que facteur important dans le processus de consultation sont discutées.

Introduction

Several authors (Kelly, 1976; McConnell, 1974; and Schiller, 1973) have observed that counsellors have been relatively unsuccessful in regard to their effectiveness in dealing with client problems involving human sexuality. Very few counsellor training programs in Canada and the United States include any specific courses pertaining to the significance of sexuality in human behaviour. However, counsellors working with children, adolescents, and young people in school and university centres are being increasingly asked to become involved with the personal concerns of their clients related to sexual matters (McConnell, 1974; Pietrofesa and Splete, 1973). Schiller (1973) outlined a variety of "typical problems"

that may be encountered by counsellor that included: sexual identity, obtaining sexual information, family planning, abortion, frigidity, impotence, masturbation, sexual techniques, and premarital and extramarital sex.

There is a growing concern that attention must be given to preparing counsellors to deal more effectively with the sexual problems of their clients (Kelly, 1976; McConnell, 1974). However, there is no simple and easy way to fulfill this task. To function well in this area, the counsellor needs all of those skills and attributes that are essential for effective interpersonal counselling, in addition to special training to comprehend sexual concerns. In the opinion of the present author, this special training should include three major components. The first is related to an awareness and understanding of one's own sexual attitudes and behaviour. The second component involves an

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awareness and an understanding on the part of the counsellor of the sexual attitudes and behaviour, as well as the sexual values, of the clients with whom he interacts in a therapeutic setting. The third component pertains to the acquisition of up-to-date knowledge of the current information about human sexuality from available literature. The discussion that follows is concerned with helping counsellors become more adequately informed in relation to the last two components. It will be focussed on the results of some current Canadian sex research. The findings to be reported will concentrate particularly on changing attitudes toward premarital sex, as well as examining subsequent accepted social codes of sexual behaviour.

The Changing Patterns of Canadian Sexual Attitudes

Few persons would deny that public attitudes toward sexuality in North America have been in flux for the past decade. These attitudes have shifted and changed in varying directions. As there has been a rather limited amount of research done in Canada to document these changes, it is difficult to determine where Canadians actually stand, as a result of the so-called sexual revolution that has influenced social thought and changed individual behaviour. Sex researchers in Canada have not, to date, acquired the status and the recognition of such American research notables as Kinsey (1948, 1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970). The majority of the research studies that have empirically examined the changing patterns of sexual attitudes in Canada have used university students as subjects (Shymko, 1977; Perlman, 1978; Wakil, 1976). Several of these studies have provided interesting comparisons with intranational and international student samples. Although an extensive amount of further research is needed before a definitive picture of the sexual mores of Canadian youth emerges, the results of the studies that have been completed do provide some valuable information, that hopefully will be of interest to the counsellor.

The rapidly expanding introduction of family life education in Canadian schools within the past ten years is providing sexual information for more students than in the past (Déiseach, 1977). However, very little Canadian research has examined sexual attitudes using children or adolescents as subjects. Thus, very limited empirical information is available that would explain what Canadian children and adolescents are actually doing or thinking about sexual matters. In fact, current Canadian studies that analyze the sexual attitudes of either the older or the younger generation are few and far between. One notable exception is the contribution of the

Canadian Institute of Public Opinion (or the Gallup Poll) in providing some valuable information about the general public's view about sexual matters (Perlman, 1978).

Changing Attitudes to Premarital Sex

Probably the most obvious change in Canadian sexual attitudes, that has been documented in current research, is the relatively wide acceptance of premarital sex (Hobart, 1970; Perlman, 1978; Shymko, 1974). This change involves the acceptance of sexual intercourse within the context of an affectional relationship, that does not necessitate marriage as a prerequisite. The specific results of several recent studies will be outlined in an attempt to explore the extent of this change. The research that will be considered will include Canadian studies reporting on the attitudes towards premarital sex from three different sample sources: university students, the public at large (as indicated by the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion), and a relatively small group of adolescents. Although this discussion will concentrate on research indications of attitude change, some observations about behavioural change will also be presented.

Hobart (1970) examined the orientations to courtship and attitudes to premarital sex of Canadian youth by comparing the responses of English and French Canadian students from universities and trade schools in Edmonton, Montreal, and Waterloo. A follow-up (Hobart, 1977) reported more recent changes in sexual attitudes among similar student groups (with the addition of samples from British Columbia and the Maritimes).

Hobart (1970) acknowledged the acceptance of premarital sexuality when the couples involved are engaged or in love, by the majority of both the Anglophone (N=681) and Francophone groups (N=377). In response to questions about premarital sex, an overwhelming majority, of both English and French students approved of premarital petting for males. When asked similar questions in relation to females, 89% of the English group and 79% of the French group accepted petting for females; while 56% and 51% respectively approved of premarital intercourse for females. Increasing permissiveness in their personal dating practices were reported by about 67% of the English Canadian sample, as compared to 39% of the French Canadian. In both samples, the males were more liberal than the females in regard to all the measures of their sexual attitudes and behaviour. It is also interesting to note that a sizeable minority of both English and French Canadian students expressed some personal confusion about deciding ethical questions associated with premarital sex.

The results of the 1977 follow-up study completed by Hobart provide further indications of the acceptance of premarital sex among Canadian youth. He identified a conversion of both males and females toward what he termed a "love standard", an acceptance of permissiveness with affection, in the sexual behaviour of Canadian youth. This trend was particularly noteworthy in the Francophone female group. Although Francophone females were still the most conservative group, a distinctly larger proportion, than in the 1970 sample (42% as compared to 76%), were increasingly more favourable toward sexual intercourse within the context of a committed relationship. A noticeable decline in the guilt reaction of females after sexual experiences (again particularly in the Francophone female group) was also noted. An additional finding of this 1977 follow-up survey was the more favourable acceptance by the Francophone students, as compared to the Anglophones, of living arrangements involving male-female cohabitation outside of marriage.

Perlman (1973) conducted a series of studies at the University of Manitoba, in which he asked psychology students about various aspects of their sexual behaviour and their personal lives. He compared his results with some of the recent studies done using similar student samples from both Canada and the United States. He found that the degree of sexual permissiveness observed in his samples, as indicated by the subjects' acceptance of sexual intimacies involving kissing, premarital petting and premarital sexual intercourse, was very similar to the levels reported in the Canadian study by Hobart (1970), and the international study by Luckey and Nass (1969) that had compared student attitudes and behaviours from five Western countries. In a comparison of the permissiveness factor from the results of studies using Canadian, American, and European student samples; (although the differences in the dates of the research may influence this comparison) (Luckey and Nass, 1969; Reiss, 1967; Perlman, 1973), Perlman found that the Canadians consistently proved to be the most conservative group.

The results of a recently conducted poll by the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion indicated how the attitudes of the general public have changed regarding premarital sex within the past five year period. One of the specific questions asked was: "There has been a lot of discussion about the way morals and sex are changing in this country. What is your opinion on this . . . do you think it is wrong for a man and woman to have sex relations before marriage or not?"

Of the 1,043 persons who were interviewed, in the 1975 survey, 47.1% thought that premarital

sex was acceptable, 16.6% were undecided, and 36.4% viewed it as unacceptable. A comparison of responses to the same question, between 1970 and 1975, indicated 16% increase in the number of Gallup Poll respondents who agreed that sexual relations were acceptable before marriage. A favourable view regarding premarital sex was linked with these characteristics: being under 30 years old, having a university education, having a family income over \$15,000, being a male, being Jewish, favouring the N.D.P. politically, living in a community of over 100,000 persons, and also living in either Quebec or Western Canada. Those persons having more restrictive attitudes about premarital sex were described as: being older, being less well-educated, having a family income under \$6,000, living on the Prairies, living in a smaller community, being female, and favoring the Progressive Conservatives politically. The age difference in attitudes towards premarital sex noted in this poll were in concordance with previous research reports. Several other similar surveys had also indicated that older Canadians tended to be more restrictive in their outlook (Perlman, 1978).

Some additional information regarding the sexual attitudes of a younger age group was obtained by the present author from an exploratory study using a sample of Canadian adolescents from a suburban high school in Toronto (Shymko, 1974). A group of 121 students aged 16-19 years of age were questioned about a variety of personal and social issues related to sex. Their responses to a sexual attitudes questionnaire were factor analyzed and eleven factors were chosen that were considered to define the attitude structure of this sample of adolescents. These factors were associated with these sexual issues: sexual permissiveness, attitudes to raising children, sex education programs in schools, sexual responsibility, sexual responsibility of males, prevalent (or current) sexual attitudes, marriage-sex roles, sexual freedom, movie censorship, sexual restrictiveness, sex education and personal issues.

An examination of the individual questionnaire items that comprised these factors provided some more specific insights into these adolescents' viewpoints. Like the university students who had been queried previously (and were discussed above), these younger subjects were generally accepting of premarital sex that occurred within a committed relationship. These adolescents attached more importance to the degree of personal involvement in the relationship, than to the preservation of virginity for either males or females. They viewed themselves and their peers as capable of making responsible decisions about their sexual behaviour. There were indications of

an adherence to a double standard of sexual morality that suggested that there were different accepted codes of behaviour for males and for females. The latter were given the responsibility for defining the limits and for providing the guidelines for sexual behaviour. However, these respondents did not consider birth control to be primarily a female responsibility, but one that should be shared by consenting partners in the sexual relationship.

These adolescents were very positive about the inclusion of a wide variety of topics, that involved many controversial and personal matters, in sex education programs at school. The sexual ethics of the adult society were perceived by these adolescents as being predominantly hypocritical and exploitative. Many of the uncertainties and confusions that are characteristic of adult viewpoints; about such controversial issues as pornography, homosexuality, illegitimacy, and changing male-female roles, were also characteristic of the expressed attitudes of these adolescents. However, there appeared to be no clear consensus about what policies and practices would be most effective for the good of the individual and for society in regard to these matters.

Implications for Counselling

The specific implications of the findings of the research reviewed above for counselling will of necessity be based on speculation, as there has been relatively little comparable research based on a direct application to the counselling situation (McConnell, 1976). Also, due to the limited sampling used in these research studies, it cannot be assumed that those persons who seek counselling have similar viewpoints to the subjects described above. In addition, the major portion of the Canadian sexual research that has been published has been primarily surveys, that rely on self-report measures, that can be distorted by personal bias, methodological problems and volunteer selectivity (Perlman, 1978). Thus keeping these limitations in view, an attempt will be made here to reflect on the usefulness of these findings for the counsellor.

The research studies that were examined strongly point to the acceptance of a more permissive sexual ethic at various levels of Canadian society. This observation is in agreement with similar research that was done in the United States in the 1960's that indicated that a permissive sexual tradition now pervades American culture. Commenting on the effect this may have on interpersonal relations, Reiss (1966) suggested that "the movement appears to be toward a Scandinavian type of system of sex standards, with key emphasis on the association of

sex and affection and the quality of the interpersonal relationship." Possibly, the counsellor can be in the vanguard in providing effective leadership that would facilitate this transition towards emphasizing the humanistic qualities in sexual relationships. Hopefully, by applying his/her therapeutic skills in this endeavour, the counsellor will contribute to the enhancement of the communication process that is vital in effective interpersonal relationships that involve sexuality.

There also seem to be strong indications that the counsellor will be increasingly called upon to function as a resource person who will provide accurate and up-to-date information for clients, as well as for interested groups and individuals, on topics relating to sexual matters. As previously noted, this function would require many practicing counsellors to improve their current sexual knowledge. It would also necessitate the inclusion of more courses related to human sexuality in all counselling training programs. The astute counsellor would then be able to incorporate his psychological knowledge of human development at various stages of life cycle with this added understanding of human sexuality. Hopefully, the merging of these two very important subject areas would help dispel some of the misinformation and personal anxiety that is often associated with psychosexual development. As stated by Belzer (1974), frequently sexual problems are closely linked to "sexual uneducatedness" rather than to psychopathology. It must become the counsellor's role to differentiate between these two contributing factors when dealing with sexual problems.

From an improved understanding of the findings of current sex research, the counsellor can acquire insights into the range of what now seems to constitute "normal" sexual behaviour. It could be assumed that the public acceptance of a more permissive sexual ethic provides the individual with more latitude in regard to the personal choice of a sexual code of behaviour. For some individuals making this choice may not be easy, as sexual activity outside of marriage in North American society has been shrouded in guilt and fear for so many years in the past. Hopefully, the counsellor can assume an important role in helping the individual choose the behavioural pattern that is best suited to his or her personal needs, at this particular stage of life.

In his extensive analysis of the relationship between love and will in human behaviour, May (1969) observed that the sexual emancipation of American society has not solved the numerous personal problems related to sex. Although the reduction of many of the external societal restrictions has resulted in increased individual freedom, it has also brought additional

responsibilities. These changes have also led to a concurrent increase in internal anxieties and guilt. It would seem then that one set of social problems has been replaced by another, that appear to be equally difficult for the individual to cope with. Thus, possibly the major challenge to the counsellor that arises from the aftermath of the sexual revolution, both in Canada and the United States, is to enable the individual to deal effectively with the personal responsibilities that have come with this sexual emancipation involving a more permissive sexual ethic.

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