

CDFV Reader



Working to end
domestic violence.
Learning from London

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Research summary:
Heterosexist violence and same-sex partner abuse

Database highlights:
Same-sex domestic violence

Evidence based practice:
Sex & Ethics: the sexual ethics education program for young people



Evidence based practice

Sex & Ethics: the sexual ethics education program for young people (2009)

Moira Carmody (PhD)¹

Summarised by Deborah Balmer, Education Officer, CDFVR

Sex & Ethics: the sexual ethics education program



for young people is a result of a three year empirical research project into sexuality and sexual assault prevention. The research, led by Associate Professor Moira Carmody, was conducted in two stages. The first stage was to provide an evidenced-based foundation for the development of a violence prevention education

program, using a sexual ethics approach. It began in 2006 and involved in-depth interviews with 56 culturally and sexually diverse men and women aged 16-25 years from three regional and three metropolitan areas in New South Wales. The results of this foundational research are published as *Sex & Ethics: young people and ethical sex* which accompanies the education program.

The second stage of the research involved running a pilot of the education program that was developed from the results of the foundational research and evaluating its potential for the prevention of unwanted, coerced or pressured sex. The pilot education program was run over a six week period involving three hours per week. Participants in the pilot program had not participated in the foundational research. Carmody's (2009b, p.17) evaluation found that "young people made significant improvements over the life of the group in their ability to negotiate sex and their increased knowledge of sexual assault and they demonstrated a strong uptake of using ethical bystander skills." These changes, which were statistically significant over the time the group met, were still in evidence six months later. The published program, *Sex & Ethics: the sexual ethics education program for young people* is an iteration of the pilot program.

The education program is theoretically informed by the work of feminist post-structuralist theorists such as Jana Sawicki and the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, especially his "notion of mutuality, the constant state of reflection and renegotiation that we need to assess and rework where we are in relation to living an ethical life" (Carmody 2009b, p.5).

¹Moira Carmody (PhD) is Associate Professor at the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. She has worked for over 25 years in the field of sexual violence prevention as a sexual assault counsellor and coordinator, community educator, policy advisor at the state and federal level, and researcher and educator.

The Ethical Framework

The essential tenet of the program is the use of an ethical framework which is about the 'process of decision-making and is not about prescribing what any person should think or do in any given situation' (Carmody 2009b, p.7). In week two, the education program presents the ethical framework, and in ensuing weeks uses numerous activities to apply the framework to real-life situations taken from the foundational research. As confidence builds, the framework is subsequently applied to the participant's own life.

The sexual ethics framework (Carmody 2009b, p5) has four interconnected steps.

1. **Caring for myself** - is this what I want, am I safe?
2. **Being aware of the other person's needs** – how do I know what they want?
3. **Negotiating and asking** – exploring what both people want, and
4. **Reflecting** during and after the sexual encounter – what happened, who did what, or how could it be different?

The program is designed to be run by two educators. Carmody is adamant that educators running the program must adhere to its 14 key values and must have the relevant knowledge and skills. A check list is provided which recommends that educators work along-side a complementary educator, to overcome any such deficit.

Organization & Group Structure

Making allowances for different cultural groups and faith-based communities, Carmody recommends concurrently running two single-gender groups of twelve, and bringing them together for the final session for joint reflection. She also provides guidance on issues of location, participant recruitment, consent to participate, and evaluation. Educators/coordinators are encouraged to contact Carmody for more detail on evaluation tools.

Course Progression

The course uses a variety of activities and approaches to achieve the learning goals including:

role-play, pair-work, whole-group, case studies, brainstorming, identifying, and questioning, with the notion of reflection being a central theme. Reflection is deliberately practised in every session as well as assigned for homework. Questions used in the program range from lower to higher-order. A synopsis of each week's learning goals follows.

Week 1 *Getting to know each other: how we learn about sexuality and gender*

Learning Goals: Beliefs, values and ideas about sexuality and relationships are diverse and there are many different views held by young people (2009b, p. 19).

Participants are encouraged to develop skills of ethical reflection and be able to demonstrate understanding of the influences that shape their sense of self, and views on sexuality and relationships as well as clarify attitudes and values as related to sexuality.

Week 2 *What are sexual ethics?*

Learning Goals: How do we work out what feels like the right decision in any situation involving sexual intimacy (2009b, p. 41)?

The sexual ethics framework is introduced with participants having to demonstrate an understanding of the framework and the influences on their decision-making, including friendships, age, gender, culture and experience. Interaction with the framework includes guided discussion, role-play, and case study (using real evidence from research) to practise application of the sexual ethics framework.

Week 3 *Understanding other people's desires and needs*

Learning Goals: Deciding to be sexual with someone for the first time or with someone you know well involves more than physical attraction (2009b, p. 59).

Verbal and non-verbal communication, gender differences, expectations of sexual intimacy, different attitudes to sex, romance, love, alcohol, drugs and sexual negotiation are some of the areas addressed.

In reflecting on non-verbal communication for example, the focus is informed by research: "We know from research that most people, especially young men, rarely speak during the process of getting to sex and often over-interpret non-verbal messages given by women. They often don't 'read' non-verbal cues accurately or ethically, and therefore assume consent from non-verbal communication" (Carmody, 2009a, p. 62).

Week 4 *Ethical Consent*

Learning Goal: Every sexual encounter

invites ethical exploration to maximise pleasure and minimise danger (2009b, p. 73).

Participants are guided to consider what sexual consent and sexual assault are. The sexual ethics framework persists through all of these activities with guidance given on questions to ask in giving and obtaining consent and an examination of ethical negotiation and consent.

Week 5 *Is this relationship working for me?*

Learning Goal: Sex in relationships can change over time and we need skills to navigate these changes (2009b, p. 95).

This session guides participants to reflect on the differing desires and needs within sex in relationships. One case study focuses on giving participants the experience of communicating with their partner when that sex is unsatisfying. Carmody found in the pilot program that this activity drew attention to the difficulties of talking about what actually occurs during sex. The case study used in this activity involves two characters with intentionally unclear genders. The other case studies involve skill development for an abusive relationship and ending a relationship ethically.

Week 6 *Standing up against sexual violence*

Learning Goal: Preventing sexual assault is everyone's responsibility. We can do our bit for friends and others (2009b, p. 111).

In this session, the death of Dianne Brimble is used as a case study to develop participants' skills and knowledge of being an ethical bystander. Diane was found naked and dead on a cruise ship in September 2002. She died from a mix of alcohol and the drug GHB or fantasy. The man charged over her death is yet to come to trial. The case study is a chilling introduction to matters involved in being an ethical bystander.

While young people are the primary audience for this evidenced-based violence prevention program, its ethical framework and learning outcomes have relevance for sexually active people of all ages. Additionally, its attention to violence prevention, particularly in regard to the ethical bystander, is relevant to everyone.

Sex & Ethics is available from Palgrave Macmillan publishers. The book and the program can be purchased separately or together. The pack of both (ISBN: 9781420256116) is priced at \$79.95 (RRP).

References

Carmody, M 2009a, Sex & ethics: young people and ethical sex, Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra.
Carmody, M 2009b Sex & ethics: the sexual ethics education program for young people, Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra.

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