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Cultural Theories, Cultural Practices

Sexuality education has been slow to address cultural diversity. The combination of essentialist theory and medicalization has led educators to attach overwhelming importance to individual drives and behaviors in sexuality. Culture, when mentioned at all, has been discussed simply to add exotic flavor. Sexuality education texts may, for example, describe the sexual practices of South Pacific tribes or other native peoples—but then provide no cultural framework that would allow students to understand the deeper implications relative to human diversity. This sends a message about the “strange” customs of “foreigners” as compared to the “normal” practices of “Americans” (usually cast as a homogeneous group).

The AIDS epidemic has helped change this emphasis on individual sexual drives and behaviors by underscoring the need for culturally specific education. The groundbreaking HIV prevention work taking place in particular communities—for example among gay men, intravenous drug users, urban women, and the African-American community—contains powerful lessons about culture and sexuality. These programs show us in a tangible way that sexual definitions, meanings, and symbols are culturally constructed and that safe-sex campaigns are most effective when they are designed and targeted for different groups. However, while many educators now agree that programs must address cultural differences, there has been little discussion about what “culture” actually is, how it works, and how to develop effective multicultural sexuality education.
In the absence of such discussion it is easy for educators to rely on strategies that, while familiar, may be limited. This is the case with one common method of addressing cultural diversity at conferences or workshops: the multicultural panel. These panels usually consist of speakers from a range of communities—for example, African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American—who address such issues as AIDS and safer sex from the standpoint of their culture. These efforts are valuable in their emphasis on the importance of difference, and I’ve organized several of them myself. However, it is worth examining their drawbacks, since such limitations plague other multicultural projects as well.

Multicultural panels set culture apart or make it different. This happens in two ways. First, the multicultural panel is often the only context in which diversity is mentioned, and other topics continue to be addressed from the perspective of dominant groups. Although this is happening less often now, it can still be the case that some events, except for the panel on diversity, are dominated by middle-class, educated European Americans. Second, the composition of these multicultural panels implies that only “minorities” constitute a culture. Panelists might be women, lesbian or gay, or from communities of color. This reinforces the myth that culture is “out there” away from the mainstream; that such dominant groups as European Americans, heterosexuals, and men don’t have a culture; or, more importantly, that they are the universal standard, and everyone else is “different.” These panels also implicitly suggest that cultures are homogeneous and so any one member can speak for the whole group. The point here is not to condemn an effort that can be useful, but to use it as an example of a strategy that raises important questions about the definition of culture and how it works.

Defining Culture

The precise definition of culture is a problem that has occupied anthropologists and sociologists for over a century. For the purposes of sexuality education, it is probably most useful if I give a broad, working definition of culture and then more carefully look at how these theories have changed and become more complex. Culture is the set of historically created worldviews, rules, and practices by which a group organizes itself. It serves as a blueprint or map to help us negotiate our daily lives. Cultural logics—things we take for granted as common sense—are woven throughout our existences. Culture shapes and constructs sexuality on the levels of what we believe to be sexual, what we know as the rules for being sexual (when, with whom, how), and, some would argue, even what we feel as sexual.

Before we turn to theories of culture, however, it is important to acknowledge that in the past decade the term culture has become part of our popular language. We use it loosely as shorthand for any group that seems to have some commonalities—for example, “youth culture,” “rock culture,” and “sports culture.”

The casual use of this term is usually not challenged, unless it is attached to a group that, for whatever reason, is controversial. One relevant incident for sexuality educators was the bitter debate over including lesbian and gay families in the Children of the Rainbow multicultural curriculum in New York City in 1992. Although many people supported the curriculum and the notion of lesbian and gay culture; some opponents claimed that gay people were sick and deviant individuals, not members of a culture. I mention the Children of the Rainbow controversy here because the questions it raises about culture—what it is, which groups count as cultures, who gets included in multicultural education, and who makes these decisions—are at the heart of our challenge as educators.

One significant aspect of the Children of the Rainbow debates was the argument that some groups have an authentic claim to being a culture while others do not. For example, one parent protested, “They’re teaching my child that being gay is on the same level as being Puerto Rican.” His objection is based on a traditional idea that culture is transmitted generationally, and that it is a set of
shared patterns based on such seemingly biological characteristics as race and ethnicity.

This argument rests on ideas about culture that were once common among social scientists but have since evolved. Until the late 1950s, behaviorism dominated the social sciences, and culture was defined as patterns of behavior, actions, and customs. This definition included preferences in, for example, music, food, and clothing. In the Children of the Rainbow debates, supporters and opponents argued about whether or not lesbians and gay men have a history of shared behaviors. The notion of race and ethnicity as the basis of the most viable cultures rests on the early-twentieth-century concept that these categories are biologically based rather than socially constructed. In this view, racial and ethnic cultures are stable and permanently marked by physical characteristics passed on through generations. We will see how these ideas are limited as we examine more contemporary ideas about the nature of culture.

As reliance on behaviorism eroded in the social sciences, ideas about culture shifted. Anthropologists argued that culture is made up not just of shared behavior patterns but also of shared information, knowledge, or symbols. This broader notion suggested that people of a specific cultural background would have more in common than their preferences in music or food; they would share a more diffuse way of approaching and understanding the world. They would share a particular logic.

But this more comprehensive definition also had limitations. The idea of a shared cultural logic implied that cultures are more homogeneous and stable than we now know them to be. Currently, cultural theorists emphasize internal contradiction and multiplicity in cultures. Rather than being systems in which values, language or slang, subjective beliefs, or symbolic systems are universally shared, cultures are fragmented and multiple. For example, although some research suggests that there is a high level of intolerance toward homosexuality among African Americans, there are certainly many who are open and accepting of gay people. The view that cultures operate unevenly is more accurate; it is also more complicated for us as educators, since we must hold open the possibility of different and competing worldviews even within one cultural group.

Cultures in Practice

Using the basic notion of culture as a blueprint or map, there are several elaborations that are important for designing effective, culturally specific sexuality education.

Cultures construct but do not determine our behavior. Individuals learn the rules of their cultures and are shaped but not inevitably determined by them. In other words, we are not simply robots acting out cultural rules. While we can never be outside of the influence of our culture, our feelings, attitudes, and practices also reflect idiosyncratic aspects of our individual experiences and backgrounds. This is as true for sexuality as for other cultural areas. In a process that is not fully understood, we internalize sexual beliefs, values, systems, and rules for practice. But we are not bound by these cultural maps. For example, premarital sexual intercourse was against the rules of the dominant culture for much of this century, but many people both participated in and enjoyed this activity.

Cultures are not static but dynamic. Although we can think of culture as a blueprint or set of somewhat stable rules, these rules evolve and change. Cultures are flexible entities; they respond to historical and social changes. For example, ideas about masturbation have changed radically in the last one hundred years. In the late nineteenth century, physicians believed that masturbation caused a range of ills, both physical and emotional. Masturbatory insanity was a diagnostic category. Not surprisingly, then, cultural rules forbade masturbation. Currently, however, doctors and sex researchers regard masturbation as a neutral, even healthy, practice. Virtually no one, even those who disapprove of masturbation, believes that it causes insanity or other dire effects. While it may not be entirely accepted (consider Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders's firing for suggesting the
teaching of masturbation in schools), masturbation is a common topic in popular magazines, television, and the movies. The cultural rules have changed:

This potential for cultures to change and evolve is important for sexuality educators. Increasingly we realize that campaigns for behavior change—safer sex, for example, or contraception use—can only be effective if they help to bring about a shift in cultural norms, for it is difficult for individuals to change their sexual behavior if it puts them at odds with their culture. The problem for educators is that cultures don’t change rapidly or easily, and we do not understand the precise mechanisms by which to bring about shifts in sexual mores. Nevertheless, it is useful not only to think about the sexual content of cultures but to see cultures as engaged in an ongoing and active process of constructing and reinventing sexual logics.

Cultures are not monolithic and homogeneous but internally contradictory. Blanket statements about cultural norms (for example, “the expression of sexual pleasure is acceptable among European-American women” and “it is unacceptable for Latinas to show an interest in sex”) are often inaccurate. Tensions and contradictions exist within cultures. Saunders has expressed this as the difference between an ideal, dominant culture that may often be male defined (where, for example, women should be pure and chaste) and a counterculture, in which there are different options at the level of real experience (where under some circumstances women can be highly sexual).  

Cultures are internally complex, and there may be gaps between the dominant cultural message and an individual’s socialization into it. So although a tendency among middle-class European Americans in the late twentieth century has been the growing acceptability of sexual pleasure, we still find pockets of sexual shame, fear, and danger among many of the women. Individuals may also actively resist cultural messages. For example, there are specific arenas in which Latina women have some latitude to express sexual pleasure despite negative cultural rules, and there are ways in which women demonstrate resistance to restrictive sexual norms.

This contradictory aspect of culture puts us in a complicated position in the classroom. Although we know that cultural logics can be pervasive and powerful, we must also look for areas of internal tension or resistance. This paradox requires us to make generalizations about cultures while simultaneously being aware of the fragile nature of our assertion. Cultural generalizations are always vulnerable to challenge.

One reason for cultural contradiction is that cultures are fractured along many dimensions. Even within a culture there are divisions and differences according to such factors as race and ethnicity, gender, social class, level of assimilation, sexual identity, and age. When we make cultural generalizations, it helps if we can be specific about the group to whom we are referring. For example, because of the pervasiveness of double standards (although the particulars may vary), gender is an especially important dimension of sexual difference within cultures. Therefore, if we are examining premarital sexual practices of African Americans, Asian Americans, or European Americans, it makes a big difference whether we are discussing males or females. In this example, the effects of socioeconomic class also allow for great variability within groups.

Cultural assimilation is a variable in sexual norms of ethnic, immigrant groups. Assimilation refers to the extent to which one cultural group has taken on the beliefs and practices of another; usually the minority group integrates the logics and characteristics of the dominant culture. Acculturation is the process by which immigrant and host cultures affect and bring about change in each other. In the late twentieth century, assimilation is a more complicated issue; given the international distribution of U.S. cultural products, from television and popular music to clothing, most immigrants enter this country already familiar with dominant American cultural practices. In this country, degree of assimilation may affect the sexual beliefs, attitudes, and practices of an individual member of an ethnic group. For example, teachers who work with adolescents may notice that Haitian-American and Chinese-American teenagers are
sometimes at odds with their parents over such issues as dating and sexuality, because the youth have adopted some of the dominant cultural logics while the parents still adhere to more traditional rules of their culture.

**Individuals have multiple cultural identities.** If cultures are internally divided, it follows that individuals within cultures will identify with a range of groups. For example, a person who is an African American will also have an identity based on gender, sexual identity, and socioeconomic class. Therefore, if we compare a middle-class, heterosexual, African-American man with a poor, African-American lesbian, not only might they have very different cultural logics and practices but they will be in different structural positions in terms of discrimination. While they both might experience oppression based on race, the woman would also be vulnerable based on gender, social class, and sexual identity.

Within cultures, then, individuals may occupy both dominant and nondominant groups, depending on the various groups with which they identify. Many people have some combination of identities that are dominant (European American, heterosexual, middle and upper class, male) and some that are nondominant (female, lesbian or gay, poor or working class, racial and ethnic minority). However, there are some—like the African-American lesbian mentioned above, or the white, middle-class, heterosexual male—whose identities are completely dominant or primarily vulnerable to oppression.

Multiple and intersecting cultural identities may put individuals in complicated positions: Sometimes the identities may leave one feeling divided, as might a gay male who is a practicing Catholic, because the norms of each group are at odds. Individuals are sometimes forced to choose whether to favor one identification or another. For example, psychologist John Peterson describes how racism in the gay community and homophobia in the black community contribute to conflicting dual identities for black men who are gay. Each culture has different norms concerning sexual identity. Peterson suggests that this conflict is managed differently by men who choose to primarily identify with the gay community ("gay black men") or the black community ("black gay men").

Although individuals might find it a relief to emphasize one identification, it is difficult to be forced to ignore other important aspects of one's identity. In this country, unfortunately, movements for social change tend to be organized around a single identity. Analyses of racism, sexism, and homophobia have become increasingly visible. Analyses of people with intersectionalities—two nondominant identities—have been less frequent. So, for example, in the discussion of sexuality and sexual harassment during the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings, we heard a familiar narrative based on racial discrimination ("high-tech-lynching") and another based on gender oppression (sexual harassment and abuse). But law professor Kimberle Crenshaw has argued that there was not a well-known political analysis that could encompass both gender and race for Anita Hill, given her intersectional identities as black and female.

Everyone has a culture, even those in dominant groups. This is an obvious but ignored aspect of culture. Culture, as it is used in such terms as multicultural or cultural diversity, often refers only to nondominant groups, to those who are somehow different from the majority. So women, people of color, non-Christians, lesbians and gay men, and poor and working-class people are thought to have culture. On the other hand, men, heterosexuals, European Americans, Christians, and the middle and upper classes are not presumed to have culture. They are the norm. They occupy unmarked, supposedly empty categories that nonetheless define the standard against which everyone else is compared and inevitably judged different.

In our programs, if we treat only "minority" groups as a culture, we reinforce the sense that dominant groups are neutral and universal, that they are "above culture." One key aspect of privilege for people in these groups is that they are in a social category that is supposedly invisible but nevertheless defines what is "normal." It is important, therefore, to identify certain beliefs and practices as specific to dominant groups such as European Americans and
heterosexuals just as we identify other norms with people of color and lesbians and gay men.

Culture is not biological or essential but socially constructed. The same theoretical insights about essentialism and social construction theory that we discussed in regard to sexuality have shaped contemporary debates about culture. Scholars argue that cultures and identities organized around such social categories as race, ethnicity, and gender are not essential or biologically based but invented and given meaning in ongoing social and political processes. In other words, it is not biology that gives rise to certain patterns, practices, and logics based on gender or skin color. Rather, these categories of gender and race are given particular meanings that change over time.

The United States has a long history of defining race as a biological category, with groups other than European Americans considered inherently inferior. The belief that race and racial culture are based on essential and immutable characteristics is widespread. But critics are challenging this notion (see Chapter Three). They point out that humans have such mixed and overlapping origins that the separation of groups by discrete physical traits is arbitrary and imprecise. For example, at different historical times Italian Americans and Latinos have been categorized as both white and nonwhite. Racial categories are only “real” because of the social meanings they have been given, not because of seemingly biological features such as skin color. Skin color, sociologist Stuart Hall argues, has nothing to do with blackness. “People are all sorts of colors. The question is whether you are culturally, historically, politically Black.” Race is an identity that people are not born with but must assume in an ongoing process of identification.

These new ideas about the construction of culture have important implications for sexuality educators. First, they remind us that an individual’s level of identification with a culture is an ongoing process, not a biological given. We can’t assume, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, that a particular student who is sitting in our class identifies with black culture(s) simply because she has black skin.

Second, social construction theory underscores that any sexual differences one might identify based on categories like race, ethnicity, or gender are social in origin, not biological. For example, working-class men do not “naturally” avoid masturbation. There is nothing biological to explain early ages of sexual intercourse among black men and women. Any patterns in a culture have historical, social, and political origins. They were invented by social actors and therefore can, and likely will, be reinvented and changed. Third, cultures have more or less recognition and privilege because of social factors, not biological ones. No culture is inherently more authentic or superior.

In our hierarchical society, some cultures are valued more than others. Our society maintains a powerful system of structural inequality. Groups that are non-dominant based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and class have less social, political, and economic power. This system affords power and privilege to some groups at the expense of many others.

Power differences show up in sexuality education in several areas. First, most sex research includes only dominant groups, from which generalizations are made about everyone’s sexual belief systems, attitudes, and practices. For example, sexuality educators still use the data from the Kinsey reports to generalize about sexual behavior, even though those studies were based only on a European-American sample. In addition, sex research among communities of color tends to focus on problem areas—for example, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Finally, sexuality education materials frequently reinforce cultural bias. For example, in an analysis of photographs in sexuality texts, Whately concludes that adolescents of color are most often depicted in photos that illustrate topics of sexual danger or immorality.

Culture and Operation

- Culture is a set of rules or guidelines that influence individual behavior.
This discussion of culture's internal contradictions, fragmentation, and social constructedness leaves us with the question of how best to develop a multicultural approach to sexuality education. If, for example, cultural categories are fluid and unstable, how do we even begin to address the possibility of group differences? And if individuals have multiple cultural identities, how can we determine the extent to which particular group norms have shaped their sex/gender systems? These are difficult questions that cultural theorists have answered, and they may never be fully resolved.

Meanwhile, as sexuality educators, our approach to culture must be complex. We must be able to manage the potential ambiguities of culture. We cannot sidestep them by acknowledging cultural categories but then emptying them of all content or significance. This approach—"we're all the same under the skin" or "I don't care what color someone is"—is what Frankenberg calls color evasiveness and power evasiveness. In sexuality education it could take the form of a move back to essentialism—for example, telling an audience, "there are certain biological truths to sexuality that we all share."

This strategy fails to address the social importance of culture in our society as it affects access to power and resources, and it ignores real differences in the construction of sexuality among various groups no matter how fluid they might be.

What is left for us if we avoid the approach that treats culture as stable and determining ("Asian Americans can't comfortably talk about sex") and the strategy that dismisses culture ("sex hormones are color-blind")? The middle ground is to be tentative and cautious. We explicitly recognize cultural diversity because we want people to be able to see themselves in our discussions. Just by pointing out that there are differences, we can help more people feel included, even if we haven't mentioned their particular cultural group. But our generalizations in a classroom will be partial, not universal ("some Asian Americans" or "certain black middle-class men"). We can always qualify or elaborate on our comments about culture and sexuality.

Our approach to cultural identities is similarly precarious. It can be useful to think of identities as "necessary fictions." We acknowledge that, given how our society is organized, individuals need to locate themselves in particular cultural categories. These categories are important in the United States, and although there are some who insist they hate to be labeled, we can't simply deny a perspective (for example, saying "race doesn't exist; we're all one human race") without falling into the power-evasion trap.

On the other hand, these identities are "fictions" not because they have no social reality but precisely because they are a product of culture; they are categories we have invented and given meaning. Cultures are not biological imperatives that carry with them unchangeable characteristics. So we must be wary of treating culturally invented categories like race or sexual identity as though they are groupings that are universally and biologically stable.

Our approach to culture, finally, takes the form of an ongoing question. We assume that sexual meanings, and consequently practices, will be different among the many individuals in our classrooms.
And it is possible that some of those different meanings form patterns based on cultural group. But our assumptions end there. We hold in mind the possibility of difference, and it is useful if we have some knowledge of particular sex/gender systems so that we can imagine what some of those differences are. But we don’t know how fully any particular student identifies with her cultural group. Or how other identities, such as gender, might interact. Or how her family’s beliefs might conflict with their cultural norms. All of these intangibles give rise to questions we can integrate into our lessons. It is this very questioning—allowing students their own voice—that opens up the space in classrooms for cultural diversity to be recognized.

Learning the Culture’s Sexual Rules: Script Theory

Culture interacts with sexuality in complicated ways. A number of questions arise when we recognize both sexuality and culture as social constructions. How do cultural differences shape the sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals? How do we learn to be sexual? How do we integrate the cultural messages around us into a set of sexual rules? Why are some messages more powerful than others, and why do some people make different sexual decisions than others? The honest answer to these questions is that we don’t fully understand these processes.

Constructionists insist, however, that we learn to be sexual in the ways we learn anything else. Although sexuality might seem to be a special aspect of human life with a different set of rules, this is not inherently so. Sexuality is only unique because, as a culture, we have decided to set it aside and treat it differently than any other part of our lives. The process of becoming a sexual person is not an unfathomable mystery. It is something we continually learn from the world around us. Let’s look at a few days in the life of one popular television adolescent as a way of examining some social constructionist theories on how we become sexual.

Angela is the fifteen-year-old protagonist of a current popular television show, “My So-Called Life.” This show follows the lives of several adolescents—most of them European American—and the parents of Angela as they all confront problems at home, school, and work. In one episode, Angela faces an important sexual milestone: whether to have intercourse with her boyfriend, Jordan. This would be her first experience of sexual intercourse, while Jordan, we learn from one of Angela’s friends, has been with many other girls. In the first scene, Jordan pressures Angela to “pick a place” where they can go and have sex (in keeping with the language of the show, I will use the term sex as a euphemism for intercourse).

How does Angela make her decision? The episode depicts her as totally engrossed in the process, looking for information wherever she can find it. Suddenly, for Angela, sex is the only worthwhile topic of conversation. Watching her, we see how her sexual decision making is a complex activity that is shaped by influences like the media, family, experts, and friends. She is learning the cultural rules about sexuality and fashioning them into rules for herself. One way of thinking about this social process is through the theory of sexual scripts.

Sociologists William Simon and John Gagnon have developed scripting theory from a combination of sociological and psychoanalytic theories. Script theory suggests that becoming sexual is a lifelong process in which individuals learn cultural expectations about sexuality that they shape into their own particular patterns. Cultural meanings infuse our sexual desires and feelings; social expectations permeate the cues we use during sexual interactions. Even the term script suggests how sexuality is both profoundly social and performative. Sexuality takes shape in interaction between oneself and the social world.

Simon and Gagnon identify three levels of sexual scripting: cultural scenarios, intrapsychic scripts, and interpersonal scripts. Cultural scenarios are collective patterns that specify appropriate sexual goals, objects, and relationships. They are rules for how, when,
where, and why to be sexual and whom to be sexual with. We learn these scripts from the dominant culture, but there are also sexual rules and belief systems that are specific to nondominant cultural groups. For example, African Americans and Asian Americans will learn the dominant cultural scenarios, those of European Americans, but also the rules and logics of their own cultures. Sometimes these cultural scripts will compete or contradict.

But we do not simply act out cultural scenarios, because we carry with us the influence of our own particular personalities, life histories, and experiences. This internal world of desires, fantasies, and wishes makes up our intrapsychic scripts. It is this personal narrative of sexuality and desire as shaped by the family and by cultures that has been the subject of psychoanalytic theorists, starting with Freud. It is important to point out that intrapsychic scripts are not biological drives. They are not the opposite of cultural scripts but are, in fact, shaped by culture.

**Interpersonal scripts** are patterns of interaction that allow us to function in sexual situations. They are usually fashioned from some combination of cultural and intrapsychic scripts as well as from the imagined expectations of the partner. There may be circumstances where interpersonal scripts quite directly reflect both cultural scenarios and intrapsychic scripts. But usually things are much more complicated, as individuals attempt to negotiate sexual situations while balancing both external and internal worlds. Nevertheless, interpersonal scripts help us to be sexual with others, even though most people are not consciously aware of them.

We can see examples of the three levels of scripting operating as Angela grapples with her decision. First, let’s examine the level of intrapsychic scripting. It is more difficult in a film to have access to an individual’s inner world, her intrapsychic script. But there is some evidence of Angela’s internal process, her plans and fantasies at this moment in her sexual development. At the beginning of the episode, Angela has clearly reached a moment in her life when she is coming to terms with the meanings of having sex. She walks down the hall at school ruminating to herself: “I couldn’t stop thinking about . . . the, like, fact of it: . . . That People Had Sex. That they just had it; that sex was this thing people . . . had. Like a rash. Or a . . . rotweiler. Everything started to seem like . . . pornographic or something.” We see here how Angela’s internal process is still social; she is thinking about her own sexuality in relation to that of other people. She considers what and how other people might be sexual. She passes two teachers and muses about how they each have sex, and maybe even with each other! This speculation prompts a wave of self-criticism: “I am, like: The sickest person.”

Like many adolescents (and even adults), Angela is preoccupied with sex. When she reveals this to her friend, Brian, we see how intrapsychic scripts (her ongoing thoughts, plans, fantasies, and desires) can be at odds with cultural scenarios (in this example, the rule that tells us that boys are more interested and obsessed with sex than are girls). In this scene, we also see how Angela is responding internally to the cultural expectation (and her own experience with Jordan) that boys only want sex, and we see how Brian challenges this.

**ANGÉLA:** Nothing happened to me personally I’m just . . . I just think it’s kind of sad. That’s all. About boys.
**BRIAN:** What about boys?
**A:** How they only care about . . . you know. Getting you into bed. Or something. I mean, don’t they?
**B:** Not all boys.
**A:** I mean, I think about it. All the time. But . . .
**B:** Wait, you think about it. All the time?
**A:** Brian! Yeah, shut up, boys don’t have the monopoly on thinking about it.
**B:** They don’t?10

Cultural expectations affect our intrapsychic scripts, then, but they don’t overpower them. Angela can talk about her evolving inner sexual life, and we also see some evidence of her wishes and desires for Jordan in scenes where there is clear sexual tension between them.
Second, let's look at the cultural level of scripts. Cultural scenarios are sexual rules, the "common sense" or logic of sexuality. But just because we know the rules doesn't mean we will obey them. We are social creatures, but we are also individual actors. Cultural scenarios are not easily ignored, however. They are powerful in that they serve as standards for what is seemingly right and moral. In part they are enforced because when we adhere to them we feel normal and natural, in tune with our culture. So individuals can resist or disobey cultural scenarios, but there may well be a cost. Cultural scenarios may be contradictory (sexuality educators are fond of pointing out the paradox of the two cultural messages, "sex is dirty" and "save it for someone you love"), and individuals who identify with nondominant cultures can be influenced by different sets of scripts.

Since our sexual lives are influenced by cultural scenarios, Angela searches around her for the rules about intercourse. What do other people do and how have they made their decisions? Experts are an important source of sexual information, and they shape our sexual beliefs and expectations. One way that they do this is by giving out information about what is "normal" behavior. Angela pursues this source of guidance with her doctor when she goes for a flu shot. She tells the doctor she has a question for a school project. "It's a question about percentages of what's normal. You know, in terms of, what people actually do. I mean, people my age. I just need to see some... statistics." Here, Angela hopes that knowing what most other girls her age are doing will help her decide. If she does the same thing, maybe she will feel "normal." Later with her friend, Sharon, she watches a self-help video—another source of sexual messages. They giggle as the couples on the film have intercourse while a sex therapist intones advice in a serious voice: "No human desire is shameful or abnormal."

Peers, who often reflect back to us various cultural norms, are another source of sexual learning. Angela talks to her friends. She mistakenly assumes one of them, Sharon, has decided to stay a virgin, and when she realizes her error, Angela blurts out, "You had, like, intercourse?" "Like, constantly," Sharon replies. The message here is that it's no big deal, Sharon has crossed this line. Later, Angela, hoping for further guidance, asks her, "So how did you, like, decide?" Sharon, however, can only recall that one day she decided she was "ready." Angela's Latino, gay male friend, Rickie, has another perspective on sex. He tells her that sex "should be like... a miracle. Like: Seeing a comet or feeling like you're seeing one."

It's important to point out that while this show entertains us by showing Angela's exposure to different cultural scenarios about sex, it also serves to reinforce these messages for all the viewers. Television can be a very powerful tool for teaching cultural norms. Adolescents tuned to this show hear, along with the fictional Angela, a range of different attitudes toward having sex. They hear the two girlfriends express nonchalance (Angela's other friend, Ray Anne, says, "It's so tragic to see her making this whole big deal over this thing that's, like, over in three seconds"), while Rickie and Brian take the decision more seriously. The show upholds the cultural expectation that boys (Jordan) pressure girls (Angela), who are more reluctant, to have sex. But it simultaneously undermines gender stereotypes through the viewpoints of the characters of Sharon, Ray Anne, Rickie, and Brian. Sexual pleasure doesn't figure prominently for any of the characters, including Angela's parents, who, in a parallel plot, worry that their sex life is "mechanical."

Parents, schools, religions, and advertising are also powerful vehicles for teaching cultural rules about sex. While none of these influences figure prominently in this particular show, Angela has likely been exposed to competing messages from all of them. However, as a middle-class, European-American adolescent, she is largely surrounded by the rules and logics of the dominant culture.

Third, we come to the level of interpersonal scripts. In interpersonal scripts, we draw on cultural rules and our internal fantasies and desires (as well as our fantasies about the expectations of the
partner) in order to interact with someone. Interpersonal scripts can be smooth and practiced or, as is more often the case, awkward and undeveloped.

Sexuality educators often target the level of interpersonal scripts for intervention. It is mapped as the key site for behavior change. We do this, for example, when we teach adolescent girls "lines" they can say when pressured for sex by adolescent boys. One popular book contains supposedly witty comebacks for girls; for example, if he says, "I won't hurt you and I'll pull out in time," the text coaches her to say, "I think I'll pull out of this relationship fast!" Safer-sex education is dominated by intervention at the interpersonal script level. One brochure is filled with rejoinders women can use to persuade male partners to use a condom. For example, if he says, "They look ugly," she might say, "Come here, big boy. I love the way you look in that color."

Most of the time this targeting at the interpersonal script level happens without an awareness of script theory—especially Simon and Gagnon's elaboration of the three conceptual levels. But interpersonal scripts appear to be the clearest level on which behavior occurs; something is happening between two people, and it would seem to be the obvious moment to intervene. Most educational strategies address cultural scenarios only minimally, if at all, and virtually ignore intrapsychic scripts.

Given the emphasis educators place on interpersonal scripts, it is absolutely stunning to watch the interaction between Angela and Jordan. Like perhaps most adolescents, their direct communication about sex is virtually nonexistent. They don't ever approach the possibility of intercourse as a joint decision. Neither one can discuss his or her own feelings, desires, fears, and conflicts. They can barely look each other in the eye. Their "conversations" on the topic consist of rolled eyes, shrugged shoulders, and disconnected, seemingly random phrases punctuated by long, yearning kisses.

Throughout the entire show, although Angela is internally obsessed and seeking out as much outside information as possible, she and Jordan share only a few mumbled references to "being together." Then they have a fight a few days after Angela breaks the plan they had to "be together." This is their most explicit interaction about having intercourse:

ANGELA: It's so hard to explain, because it's not gonna sound right, because... part of me really wants to.
JORDAN: This is the whole reason I didn't want to start this in the first place.
A: Why? Because you knew you wouldn't get sex? So. You'd just be wasting your time?
J: Because you don't get it: okay? You're supposed to. It's... accepted; it's what you're supposed to do. Unless you're, like: Abnormal.¹³

Devastated, Angela turns and walks off. (She's just been given another cultural message: girls who don't want to have sex are abnormal.) Then, although this isn't discussed either, they break up.

Script theory, by helping us to examine the three different levels of sexual learning and decision making, allows us to target our strategies differently. We can see that, if Angela had been coached in her sexuality education class with witty little rejoinders, it would have been totally ineffectual. For rejoinders to be even remotely useful, a conversation has to be happening in the first place. Angela and Jordan clearly need to develop effective interpersonal scripts, and the scripts must go beyond simple phrases like "just say no" or "use a condom." Angela and Jordan need to be able to communicate more deeply about sexuality, intimacy, and their relationship. Some classes have begun to integrate lessons and exercises on sexual communication.

Helping students to evaluate various cultural messages is also crucial. How, for example, does Angela sort out and respond to what she hears from her friends, her doctor, the video, Jordan, and her family? Finally, intrapsychic scripts receive little attention in
the classroom. And, as we can see, Angela is obsessed with sex and with her decision about first intercourse. Studies show that adolescents crave discussion about their sexual feelings and decisions. We must create the space for them to have this discussion.

In summary, then, sexual scripting theory carries important messages for sexuality educators. First, awareness of the multiple levels of sexual scripts allows us to work with the dynamic between cultures and individuals in a more complex way. In particular, it reveals the limitations of concentrating on the interpersonal level when all three levels are intertwined. Change at the interpersonal level, for example, cannot easily happen without cultural support and intrapsychic shifts.

Second, scripting should be understood as a powerfully constructed dynamic. Despite a popular association with the lines or roles in a play, scripts are not simply learned behavior that can easily be unlearned. Women do not fail to insist on condom use, for example, because they can't think of effectively snappy responses to men's refusals. Role playing and rehearsal are certainly useful behavior-change components of sexuality education. But ultimately cultural scenarios for both men and women must allow for women's power in sexual negotiations. And for lasting change, women need not just new interactive responses but strong inner feelings—intrapsychic scripts—that support sexual empowerment.

The interconnections among all levels of sexual scripting suggest a third concern for sexuality educators: sometimes when we ask people to change their interpersonal scripts we put them in conflict with their cultural scenarios. This could doom the intervention, if individuals refuse or are unable to change interpersonal negotiations in which they are not supported by cultural norms. Conversely, if the intervention succeeds and the individual does change an interpersonal script, he or she might be left in an unpleasant, confictual, or even dangerous situation. For example, one unanticipated consequence of successful HIV and AIDS education for women was that when some began refusing sexual activity without a condom they were beaten by their partners. Their sexual assertiveness was at odds with certain cultural norms of male dominance and female submissiveness.

Fourth, although the three levels of sexual scripts are interrelated, they are not necessarily congruent within the individual. We know, for example, that people's intrapsychic scripts—their desires, fantasies, wishes—are often in conflict with cultural norms. Sometimes this can affect interpersonal scripts. Adolescent pregnancy, for example, is sometimes a problem for young women who are beginning to recognize their lesbianism (intrapsychic script) but are terrified by social discrimination (cultural scenario). They engage in sexual activity with men as a way to try to "prove" their heterosexuality, but they fail to protect themselves during intercourse. Disjuncture among script levels is quite common and helps explain a range of sexual conflicts.

Fifth, since individuals often have multiple and competing cultural identities, they must manage conflicting scripts. This was the case in the earlier example about the dual identities of black men who are gay and sometimes must resolve competing scripts by foregrounding either racial or sexual identities. Crafting effective programmatic modes of intervention for people with competing sexual scripts can be one of the most challenging tasks for sexuality educators.

Finally, although Simon and Gagnon don't specifically use scripting theory to discuss the role of cultural diversity in sexual learning, the theory is very useful for this purpose. It ensures a multicultural perspective. Since there are three levels of scripts, educators cannot simply focus on the interpersonal level. Cultural scenarios—the sex/gender systems of different groups, both dominant and non-dominant—must be a major focus in our programs.

Behavior change is perhaps our most challenging and elusive goal. There is much that we don't yet know about how to help people
change their sexual behavior. We do know that the process is complex and involves a focus not just on individuals but on their entire social universe. Script theory is one tool that allows us to do this.

There are three levels of sexual scripts:

Cultural scenarios are collective patterns that specify appropriate sexual goals, objects, and relationships. They serve as guides for performance by narrating for us how, when, where, why, and with whom to be sexual. Another term for this might be sex/gender system.

Intrapsychic scripts constitute an internal world of desires, fantasies, and wishes. Intrapsychic scripts are not biological drives but are, in fact, shaped by culture. Intrapsychic scripts help us with sexual expression by managing and ordering sexual desires and fantasies.

Interpersonal scripts enable us to function in sexual situations. They are usually fashioned from some combination of cultural and intrapsychic scripts as well as the imagined expectations of the partner. Interpersonal scripts allow for coherent sexual interaction.

Race is one of the central social categories many educators think about when considering cultural diversity. We ask ourselves whether there are racial differences in certain sexual belief systems or practices. And if so, what do they mean for our curricula or our outreach efforts? Yet even as we grapple with the important challenge to develop programs that are culturally specific, a debate over race—whether it exists, what it means—makes our task more complex. The current disagreements among scholars over the concept of race have major implications for our multicultural work.

The Social Construction of Race

Briefly stated, these debates center around the usefulness of the term race. Whereas once scientists defined race as a fixed, biological category into which individuals could be neatly sorted, many now argue that the task of grouping people by physical characteristics is based less on objective biological variation and more on social and political influences. Race, these challengers insist, is a social construction.1

The idea that race is a neutral, tangible category based on biological characteristics is long-standing. One might argue that racial groups as we categorize them today, and the individuals—whites, blacks, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, Asian, or Pacific Islander—who fit into these groups, are obviously distinct. The linking of such