

UJ Sociology, Anthropology & Development Studies

**W E D N E S D A Y
S E M I N A R**

Hosted by the Department of Sociology and the
Department of Anthropology & Development Studies



Meeting no 26/2009

**To be held at 15h30 on Wednesday, 23 September 2009,
in the Anthropology & Development Studies Seminar Room, DRing 506, Kingsway campus**

**‘Let’s Talk About Sex’:
Discourse and Power at the Intersection of
Religion and Adolescent sexuality**

- Please do not copy or cite without authors’ permission -

Tessa Doods

North West University / Wits University

- Programme and other information online at www.uj.ac.za/sociology -

'Let's Talk About Sex':

Discourse and Power at the Intersection of Religion and Adolescent sexuality

Tessa Dooms (University of the Witwatersrand)

Introduction – Lets Talk About Sex?

Let's talk about sex, baby
Let's talk about you and me
Let's talk about all the good things
And the bad things that may be
Let's talk about sex
Let's talk about sex
Let's talk about sex
Let's talk about sex

Let's talk about sex for now to the people at home or in the crowd
It keeps coming up anyhow
Don't decoy, avoid, or make void the topic
Cuz that ain't gonna stop it
Now we talk about sex on the radio and video shows
Many will know anything goes
Let's tell it how it is, and how it could be
How it was, and of course, how it should be
Those who think it's dirty have a choice
Pick up the needle, press pause, or turn the radio off
Will that stop us, Pep? I doubt it
All right then, come on, Spin
Salt-N-Pepa (1990)

So, let's talk about sex and religion. I have often been asked how I am able to get people to think of, much less talk about sex and religion in the same conversation or in relation to each other, I however think sex and religion share a socio-historical background of interrelatedness, and furthermore I submit for your consideration that I am not alone in thinking this assertion to be true, as sociologist as far back as Weber and more recently Foucault have in various ways argued and demonstrated the longstanding relationship between religion and sexuality.

While Weber was more concerned about understanding meanings of sex within religious frameworks, Foucault, like Salt-N-Pepa, was concerned with the function of talking about sex, or better put, the ways in which sex and sexuality are spoken about or silenced, how through the ebbs and flows of discourse, sexuality is constructed by many forces, religion being a key factor and finally he was interested in explaining the power relations that underlie sexuality as a discursive project¹. Particularly in the modern era, religions have often been accused of sexual silence; however, religious groups are often very vocal about sexuality in their official doctrines and rituals, communicating their iteration of what I will refer to as a dominant or official institutional sexual messaging. Often contributions to sexuality from religious fronts are perceived as having negative implications, however, it is my view that these contributions should not simply be overlooked, but ways of harnessing these contributions should be sought.

In this paper I briefly articulate the official sexual messaging that has emerged within the context of Teens Ignited, a Pentecostal Charismatic youth group in Potchefstroom South Africa, and reflect the complex nature of this discourse as jointly created and experienced at different levels by the youth group leadership and the youth members. Through participant observation, participant inquiry and questionnaires, I was able to observe and identify the language, social relations, structural elements and specialized knowledge that contribute to the discourse of sexuality that exists at Teens Ignited.

However, before we delve too far into the details of the case study, I would like to make a detour, before we talk about sex let's talk about sexuality, moreover let's talk about 'talking about sexuality'. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* argues for an understanding of sexuality not only as a series of sexual choices made by individuals, rather as a product of and response to socially discursive projects of power.²

¹ Gane, N. 2002. *Max Weber and Post modern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment*. New York: Palgrave.

² Foucault M. 1978. *History of Sexuality (vol.1)*. Vintage Books: New York.

Discourse in the way Foucault uses the term refers to the systematic management of knowledge and ideas that have as a product particular ideologies that are presented as 'Truth'.³ Foucault draws attention to the how the ebbs and flows of sexual messages and silences are discourses employed by society and its structures, in an attempt to direct, channel and determine sexual actions. He makes this more explicit by stating about sexuality that:

It appears rather an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priest and laity, an administration and a population.⁴

Discourses of sex and sexuality are embedded in power relations, thus, these relationships can either serve as aids or obstacles to the negotiation of the sexual practice of adolescents. Keeping foremost in our minds that sex is social and sexuality is a social construct, understanding the social structures that give meaning to these relationships of power is important. As something religious adherents may consider a source of divine power, it is understandable why Foucault highlighted the role of religion is the shaping of repressive sexualities. Allow me to explain.

Foucault argues that religious power relations provide a backdrop of meaning for the knowledge that determines the sexual behaviour of individuals in a process of cultural rationalisation.⁵ It is important to note that Foucault in many ways is critical of the ways in which discursive projects narrowly define the scope of human thought and experience. He argues that on the one hand increased knowledge is presented as a means to create a sense of choice and autonomy for the individual, however, inherently relationships of power in fact causes knowledge to constrain and dominate individuals.

³ Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon, trns. Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon.

⁴ Foucault M. 1978. *History of Sexuality (vol.1)*. Vintage Books: New York. p. 103.

⁵ Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault refers to discursive projects as ‘technologies of dominance’, as they are systematic approaches to knowledge and are largely one directional in the transfer of power.⁶ However, Foucault posits that while sexuality is subject to institutional power, it is also a force that resists such power as illustrated in the following quote:

Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely.⁷

Sexuality is not easily, nor entirely controlled by structural forces seeking to subdue it, but this is not because an actor’s willful disobedience to institutional powers seeking to regulate sexuality, but because sexuality as a lived experience is in itself quite a powerful structural force that involves a complex of interpersonal and social factors. Thus, sexual behaviour is not solely influenced by the meanings ascribed to sex within institutional sexual messaging or the power exercised in conveying such messages but how meanings and power are interpreted and understood by persons.⁸

The inability of institutional forces to entirely subdue sexuality is illustrated in the case of adolescents at Teens Ignited. The dominant message about adolescent sexuality within Teens Ignited is that sex prior to marriage is a sin and so is to be avoided. In short, it is a message of abstinence from sex for adolescents. The prohibition of sex before and outside of marriage is the main pillar on which this discourse of sexuality rests.⁹ Yet, 34% of TI members surveyed about their sexual practice report having had penetrative vaginal sex and a further 48% report other types of sexual experiences such as sexual kissing and touching.

⁶ Gane, N. 2002. Max Weber and Post modern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment. New York: Palgrave

⁷ Foucault M. 1978. p 103

⁸ Foucault. M. 1978.

⁹ This is not surprising as abstinence is a message that is common across three of major world religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, as well as many other religious and cultural schools of thought throughout Africa.

The disjuncture between the official message about sexuality at TI and the sexual behaviour of its membership begs the question ‘why is this message about sexuality not translating into practice?’ Answers to this question lie in understanding content of the message as understood by adolescents themselves and reflecting on the contexts wherein this dominant religious message about sex meets the lived experience of sexuality for adolescents. This is best understood by looking at two examples of content interpretation and context analysis as articulated by members of TI; so sex before marriage is a sin, but what is sex and is marriage still relevant? These are the issues raise adolescents at TI.

What is sex?

At first glance and particularly to religious leaders who undoubtedly have heard and internalized this message many times over, the idea that ‘sex before marriage is a sin’ is a message that is clear and simple to comprehend, however, one of the first things that became clear was that upon closer inspection from the young people the very subject of the message was not well understood.

In the 2007 movie ‘Juno’, Juno, the protagonist and a pregnant sixteen year old girl, asks an interesting question: “What does sexually active mean anyway?” It is this question that made me consider how adolescents conceptualise sex and sexually. Looking at data from the participatory inquiry workshops and the survey questionnaires a lack of clarity among members of Teens Ignited about what constitutes sex and sexual activity became evident. While the message of Teens Ignited that no sex outside of marriage explicitly referred to penetrative vaginal sex, what is far more ambiguous in the minds of the participants is the degree to which other sexual activities fall under this proscription, something particularly true of the female respondents.

An example of this among young female participants who had not reported vaginal intercourse but reported engaging in some degree of kissing and petting, 37% reported that they did not think they were adhering to the teaching of Teens Ignited and 47% felt that God did not approve of this sexual lives.

Furthermore 67% of all participants – male and female – reported being uncertain about whether being a virgin always meant that a person is sexually pure, thus behaviours other than intercourse could be considered sexually deviant by the religious standard. Yet, when asked to respond to the following proposition: “Kissing is sex”, 98% of all respondents reported disagreement with is statement. Masturbation was another sexual act where similar incongruence was expressed by the group. This illustrates how a lack of clarity and depth in the institutional sexual message leaves adolescents with a measure of uncertainty about how to enact this directive, moreover it highlights how religious leaders and doctrines take for granted that what is they may mean by ‘no sex’ may have multiple meanings in the contexts adolescents inhabit.

Marriage is sacred

What is very clear about the abstinence message is the centrality of marriage. According to Anton Myburg (the TI youth leader) sex should only form a part as a full expression of love within the context of marriage, and that it is only then that sex is most enjoyable. According to Basset this is not an uncommon message within the Christian community and its leaders, but based on a discussion I was privy to after a TI youth sermon about dating, its relevance is certainly debatable message for adolescents in 21st centaury.¹⁰ On the 14 September 2007 Myburg gave an address about dating and sexuality. In this teaching he reinforced a sentiment I had gathered from conversations with youth goers prior to this evening, but had not understood as a direct instruction until this particular evening. The main idea communicated in this sermon was that dating was unbiblical and undesirable for the purposes of reaching two goals (1) abstinence from sex prior to marriage and (2) having a fulfilling and healthy marriage in future.

¹⁰ Radcliffe, T., Basset, L., Fassin, E. (2007). *Christians and Sexuality in the time of AIDS*. Cref: London.; Cole, E. L. 1997. *Sexual Purity: A sexual revolution called purity*. Albury Publishing: Tulsa, Oklahoma.

It was clear that marriage is assumed as a norm by Myburg as the religious leader and that it is also to be protected even prior to a person being or considering marriage. Dating, is thus considered a harmful practice, which endangers the sacred nature of marriage (which is the only context in which sex is permitted); in Myburg's words "Dating is practicing divorce". However, although marriage may be taken for granted within a Christian framework, Aronson argues that the relevance of marriage in the lives of young people is debatable and marriage may not be an obvious goal for contemporary young people¹¹.

After Myburg's talk about dating, marriage and sexuality ended, as members gathered afterwards to enjoy coffee and socialise, a conversation was sparked by a startling question raised by Nthabiseng (19), a member of TI. When asked what Nthabiseng (19) thought about abstinence before marriage, she responded by asking a startling question in return: "What is marriage anyway?" This question took the entire group by surprise, some of the young people in the group had some reservations about the ability to abstain until marriage, but they had not thought to bring marriage itself into question. Nthabiseng brought into question what constitutes marriage, the implications of not getting married and of divorce. The crisis of marriage illustrated by Nthabiseng serves as a context for adolescent sexuality as related to the 'no sex before marriage' message.

By raising ambivalence about the nature of sex and the relevance of marriage, members of the Teens Ignited youth group bring lived experiences and knowledge that seem to be ignored or totally missed by both the religious messages and leaders seeking to provide directives and regulation of sexuality. I argue that these lived experiences and knowledge sets are exactly why the institutional messages of religion are not entirely able to subdue the sexuality of these adolescents – thus accounting to some extent for disjuncture between message and practice.

¹¹ Aronson, P. (2008). The Markers and Meanings of Growing Up: Contemporary Young Women's Transition From Adolescence to Adulthood *Gender & Society*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 56-82 (2008). ; Denis, P. 2006. "The crisis of marriage in contemporary South Africa" in *Grace and Truth. A Journal of Catholic Reflection for Southern Africa*. Vol. 23, No.1 (April 2006) pp 3-8.

Moreover, I argue that if the messages about sexuality being provided in this context's contribution to the adolescent sexuality and sexual wellbeing is to be strengthened, the experiential wisdoms that can be uniquely provided from the perspectives of adolescents themselves should be considered in an attempt to re-imagine the religious messages communicated about sex and possibly deconstruct adverse power relations Foucault suggested underlie sexuality as a discursive project.

These arguments reflect a broader argument Foucault makes with regard to knowledge and power. Foucault observed that an important aspect of what may be considered the turn away from the era of the meta-narrative in late modernity is the notion of the 'return to knowledge'. He here argues that the generation of knowledge previously controlled by the structurally powerful will face what he terms 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges'.¹² This refers to the ways in which historical and practical experiences of people in everyday life that have been ignored in the creation of dominant discourses of the powerful before, are brought to the surface, expressed and accounted for as useful and relevant knowledge.¹³ With regard to sexuality Foucault in his writings about sexuality gives insight into the social, political, economic and religious histories that have been kept buried, little understood and unchallenged with regard to dominant sexual discourses in Western societies. It is here that we see that while discourse is about what is externalized about sex, it is also a means to silence many ideologies and voices.

Foucault posits that an important means of counteracting the undesirable impacts of a dominant discourse it is necessary for obscure knowledge and meanings held by individuals to be taken into account and leveraged as discourse ensue.¹⁴ Thus, I argue that the questions, concerns, perceptions and practices of TI members that may traditionally be seen as delinquent, subversive and counter-productive may be the best resource pool for knowledge that can be used to re-imagine the dominant discourse of sexuality at TI.

¹² Foucault, M. 1980, p. 81.

¹³ Foucault, M. 1980.

¹⁴ Gane, N. 2002.

In so doing the fatalistic nature of discourses as ‘technologies of dominance’ could be effectively neutralized and instead of the dominant discourse of sexuality at TI being perceived as a tool for control it can be a means for young people to enhance the ability of religion to make a constructive impact on adolescent sexuality and sexual well being.

Making the discourse Inclusive and Responsive

While it is clear that Foucault’s argument is against the silencing of sexual knowledge, what is not clear to my mind is the ways in which he envisions practical realities and experiences of everyday life as a form of ‘subjugated knowledge’ could be brought to the surface to challenge or contribute to discursive projects of sexuality as opposed to silenced. The challenge for religion, thus, is in an effort to positively get the abstinence message to be more effective a move needs to be made from the understanding of ‘Sex before marriage is a sin’ as a prohibitive statement about sex toward abstinence as a discourse of sexuality that is both inclusive and responsive. The need exists to create consciously and purposively layered set of directives and supports that are also a multi-directional process wherein the concerns of the adolescents are not only noted but reflexively used to enhance the relevance of the discourse and experience of sexual wellbeing of adolescents.

To become more inclusive, changes aimed at broadening the range and depth of the discourse is required. In the case of TI I argue that a more comprehensive discourse requires changes to the content of the message and the context of adolescent sexuality. Examples of this may include exploring the definition of sex as understood by adolescents and how it relates to understandings of abstinence and evaluating the relevance of marriage in light of the crisis of marriage adolescent’s encounter or experience. Addressing and engaging with the experiences and concerns of TI members with regard to sex and marriage may form part of a more comprehensive and effective discourse that reflects ‘subjugated knowledges’.

These recommendations can serve as a starting point for re-imagining religious discourses of sexuality; however, the implementation of these recommendations for making the discourse more comprehensive can best be achieved if the discourse itself is able to respond to the new knowledge that could impact on it. Foucault argues that the challenging unequal power relations created by discourse and the undesirable impact it has, is a product of channeling the knowledge of individuals as they respond to this discourse, and that these responses present an opportunity to change the nature and impact of the dominant discourse.¹⁵ However, the influence of these responses depends on whether or not such knowledge is heard and considered. It is my assertion that for that institutional discourses of sexuality should be able to adapt to the changing needs of the target audience and the responses (both compatible and contrary), thus making room for the ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’.

Conclusion: Why does this matter?

In light of the increasingly sexualized nature of contemporary youth culture in South Africa, sexuality and sexual-wellbeing have become priorities in social, economic and political spheres of South Africa and particularly due to HIV, the importance of understanding the role various social structures play in the shaping of adolescent sexuality can not be stressed enough.¹⁶

Religious settings provide a great potential for sexuality education within a value framework. A helpful curriculum will include the meaning of sexuality; developing a positive concept of sexuality, and a healthy sexual identity; present the issues of adolescent sexuality, including the various health issues; and an understanding of quality relationships within the family and among peers.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gane, N. 2002.

¹⁶ Varga, C. A. 1997. “Sexual decision-making and negotiation in the midst of AIDS: youth in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, South Africa” in *Health Transition Review*, Supplement 3 to Volume 7, 1997, pp. 45-67. ; Varga, C. & Mkubalo, L. 1996. “Sexual (non) negotiation among black African teenagers in Durban” in *Agenda*, 28, pp. 31-38. ; Varga, C. 2003. Gender Roles Influence Sexual and Reproductive Health among South African Adolescents. *Studies in Family Planning*. Vol, 34, No. 3. (Sept 2003), pp 160-172. ; Varga, C. 2003. Pregnancy Termination among South African Adolescents. *Studies in Family Planning*. Vol, 33, No. 4. (Dec 2002), pp 283-298.

¹⁷ Stayton W R. 1985. Religion and adolescent sexuality. *Paper presented at the Seminar for Adolescent Medical Research*. June 1985.

Stayton suggests a holistic formula for effective sexuality messaging to adolescents that includes the circumscribing of meaning, shaping of identity, reinforcement of practical health messages and social health. A good model for creating a discourse of sexuality requires religion to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to messaging, while attempting to provide a moral and spiritual base for sexual decision making, religious messaging, in a quest to impact on motivation of sexual decisions should address biomedical and social factors if they are to make the desired impact. These may include, messages regarding the adolescent body's readiness for sexual debut, the psychosocial impacts of sex, the social labels associated with sexually active individuals and the health risks associated with various kinds of sexual activity.¹⁸

Contemporary sexual health issues undoubtedly prioritized the need to identify and understand the contributing factors to sexuality among young people; I contend that this study shows that whether perceived as positive or negative, religious entities such as youth groups do make a contribution to the sexual lives and experiences of the adolescents that encounter it. By outlining and analyzing the content dominant discourse of sexuality at TI and demonstrating the links and gaps between the discourse and both perceptual and behavioural responses, thus, this paper has highlighted possible strengths and weaknesses of religious contributions to adolescent sexuality, made suggestions toward strengthening the positive aspects thereof and using a very specific example has employed long standing sociological arguments to about sexuality and religion to better understand these contributions.

Bibliography

Aggelton, P. 1991. "When will they learn? Young people, health promotion and HIV/AIDS social research", in *AIDS Care*, 3, pp 259-264.

Adair-Toteff, Christopher. 2005. *Max Weber's Charisma*, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 189-204 (2005).

¹⁸ Stayton W R. 1985.

Aronson, P. (2008). The Markers and Meanings of Growing Up: Contemporary Young Women's Transition From Adolescence to Adulthood *Gender & Society*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 56-82 (2008).

Beier, S. R. et al. 2000. "The Potential Role of an Adult mentor in Influencing High-risk Behaviours in Adolescents" in *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 154, pp. 327- 331.

Denis, P. 2006. "The crisis of marriage in contemporary South Africa" in *Grace and Truth. A Journal of Catholic Reflection for Southern Africa*. Vol. 23, No.1 (April 2006) pp 3-8.

Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault M. 1978. *History of Sexuality (vol.1)*. Vintage Books: New York.

Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon, trns. Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon.

Gane, N. 2002. *Max Weber and Post modern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment*. New York: Palgrave.

Hill, P. C. 2000. "Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure", in *Journal of the theory of Social Behavior*, 30:1, pp. 51-77.

Radcliffe, T., Basset, L., Fassin, E. 2007. *Christians and Sexuality in the time of AIDS*. London: Cref.

Reddy, J. S. et al. 2004. "Young People, HIV/AIDS/STI s and Sexuality in South Africa: The gap between Awareness and Behaviour", in *Acta Pediatric*, Vol. 93, pp. 264-296.

Regnerus, M. D. 2007. "How does religion affect teens' sex?" in *The Dallas Morning News*, 14 April 2007.

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/religion/stories/DN-relq&aregnerus_14met.ART.East.Edition1.4341575.html. Retrieved on 26 December 2008.

Stayton W R. 1985. 'Religion and adolescent sexuality'. *Paper presented at the Seminar for Adolescent Medical Research*. June 1985.

Varga, C. A. 1997. "Sexual decision-making and negotiation in the midst of AIDS: youth in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, South Africa" in *Health Transition Review*, Supplement 3 to Volume 7, 1997, pp. 45-67.

Varga, C. & Mkubalo, L. 1996. "Sexual (non) negotiation among black African teenagers in Durban" in *Agenda*, 28, pp. 31-38.

Varga, C. 2003. Gender Roles Influence Sexual and Reproductive Health among South African Adolescents. *Studies in Family Planning*. Vol, 34, No. 3. (Sept 2003), pp 160-172.

Varga, C. 2003. Pregnancy Termination among South African Adolescents. *Studies in Family Planning*. Vol, 33, No. 4. (Dec 2002), pp 283-298.