

BOOK REVIEW**When sex goes to school: Warring views on sex--and sex education--since the sixties**

Kristin Luker, 2006

W. W. Norton & Company

\$25.95, 416 pp

ISBN 0-393-06089-6

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Federal policy in the United States officially promotes abstinence-only until marriage, while restricting information about effective contraception and sexually transmitted disease prevention for sexually active students. At the same time, public opinion surveys have consistently demonstrated widespread support for comprehensive sex education. In *When sex goes to school*, sociology professor Kristin Luker examines the sex education debates in America. Based on an ethnographic analysis of the perspectives held by a sample of 105 local activists across four American communities, Luker probes the values and motivations of some of the most vocal participants in these debates.

The book begins with a social and political history of sex education in America. Starting with the invention of an early form of sex education by the social hygienists during the first sexual revolution a hundred years ago, we travel through the second and very different sexual revolution of the sixties, and then on to the contemporary sex-education approaches that are behind the highly politicized debates of today. Throughout this journey Luker skillfully integrates historical fact and well-supported speculation with relevant social and political theory.

Luker then dives into the current debates, beginning by classifying her research participants into two opposing ideologies -- sexual conservatives and sexual liberals. These labels, we are told, came largely from participants' own words during the interviews, and it seems, especially from the sexual conservatives in the sample, who are fond of characterizing everyone who disagrees with them as liberals, and unabashed about their own self-labeling as conservatives. Recognizing that these two concepts are somewhat fuzzy, several chapters are devoted to exemplifying each type and exploring their correlates and etiologies.

Beyond Luker's basic delineation that sexual conservatives support abstinence-only until marriage sex education whereas sexual liberals support comprehensive sex education, we learn that "For the conservatives, sex outside of marriage is wrong because the Bible says it is." (p 136). "The liberals, however, think that the question of sex before and outside of marriage comes down to facts" (p.137). Luker explains facts as being based in relevant information and reasoning rather than faith, and subject to testing and, when necessary, correction. (As I understand her, relevant facts might include, for example, contraception success rates, or knowledge about the emotional maturity of one's partner.) In the terminology of ethics, Luker's distinction might be viewed as representing a conflict between deontological values (protected, non-negotiable values based on rules concerning behaviors) and consequentialist values (negotiable values focused on outcomes and subject to value tradeoffs to achieve the best results).

In an extended discussion on these two proposed sexual ideologies, the many exemplars and quotations of sexual conservatives that Luker provides tend to coalesce quite coherently. This category might provide a useful conceptualization appropriate to many or most of the small group of Americans who vocally support abstinence-only until marriage approaches to sex education. I think the opposite is true, however, about Luker's presentation of her sexual-liberal category. This group was portrayed with a broad brush -- not only as supporting comprehensive sex education and accepting sex outside of marriage, but as hedonistic ("if it feels good do it" p. 100), pluralistic, near universal in their "support for homosexuality" (p. 112), apt to describe their opponents as Christians, and beholden to dubious folk theories about children's perception and attention (p. 198). This unrestrained and stereotypical

description, together with the sexual-liberal label, does not do justice to the ideological and educational heterogeneity found across the substantial majority of Americans who pragmatically support comprehensive sex education.

Luker's fundamental oversight, I believe, is her neglect of the sexual middle – just one sentence in the book was devoted to this group, noting in passing that they were precluded from the study due to the study's designed sampling of activists. Perhaps the sexual conservatives that Luker interviewed do view everyone else as liberals, and some of the community activists for comprehensive sex education might indeed be hedonistic, pluralistic sexual liberals. But the large majority of Americans who, on state and national public opinion surveys, consistently choose comprehensive sex education (about 80%) over abstinence-only approaches (about 12%) and contraception-only approaches (about 5%), do not as a group fit Luker's expansive descriptions of the sexual liberals. Substantial majorities of all racial-ethnic groups, both genders, all socioeconomic groups and educational levels, and all religious denominations including evangelical Christians, support comprehensive sexuality education. These supporters report a diversity of values on related issues, such as traditional marriage, sex outside of marriage, abortion, homosexuality, gender roles, and so on. What binds them together, conceptually at least, are their pragmatic, public-health-oriented views on sexuality education. And in addition to its many quieter members, this sexual middle does include advocates and activists for comprehensive sex education – at the community, state, and national levels. Thus I can't help but wonder if an alternative framing of the debates might be more useful – one that explicitly recognizes this majority middle as an ethically unique force in support of comprehensive sex education, pragmatic rather than deontological across a wide range of sexual values spanning the spectrums from traditional to progressive, and from religious to secular.

In a later part of the book, Luker argues that “American sex educators are sadly confused“ in venerating European approaches to sex education, especially in France. This argument is supported by noting that Sweden and France both have similar low rates of adolescent pregnancy, abortion, STD's, etc., and claiming, however, that Sweden provides exemplary sex education while “official sex education in France is much closer to what American conservatives would favor, almost 180 degrees away from the comprehensive, frank, and open Swedish sex education.” (p.211). Having made a pilgrimage similar to Luker's to study sex education in northern Europe, I came back with a fundamentally different view of sex education in France. I suppose Luker would consider me sadly confused, but I saw much to emulate in the French approach. For example, forty hours of sex education in grades 8 and 9 are mandated by the French government (in California, America's most sexually pragmatic state, two hours are mandated), the *Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial* provides and supports comprehensive sex education to young people in and out of schools through a network of 60 regional centers around the country, a national youth-focused mass-media educational campaign on contraception and protection from STDs and AIDS reinforces school-based sex education, and free, non-prescription emergency contraception is provided by school nurses to any adolescent who requests it. Is this really “much closer to what American conservatives would favor”?

The book closes with several suggestions for change that range from sensible (school boards should determine if parent speakers actually have children enrolled in the district), to unrealistic (offer separate tracks for both abstinence-only and comprehensive at the same school, and let the students and their parents decide which track to follow). In fairness, there are no simple solutions to this sometimes rancorous clash of protected versus pragmatic values. Yet for starters, it would be helpful for America's vast and value-diverse sexual middle to assert its own pragmatic identity, rather than allowing sexual conservatives and sociologists to define them as sexual liberals. The importance of framing the issue in a political debate is well-known, and the danger in allowing a small vocal minority of deontologically-valued sexual conservatives to define their opposition should be clear.

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Acknowledgement: I thank the W.T. Grant Foundation for its essential support of my work.