



Guest Editorial

Cross-cultural variation in sexuality: An essential element for clinicians' awareness

Nilamadhab Kar

Consultant Psychiatrist and College Tutor, Department of Psychiatry, Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, Wolverhampton, UK

Date of Submission : 13 October 2021

Date of Acceptance : 03 November 2021

Introduction

There is a vast cultural difference in the expression and practice of sexuality. This extends to variations in the degree of acceptability of behavior that may have sexual connotations in the communities. It is needless to emphasize that clinicians should be mindful of these variations and be culturally sensitive while dealing with issues related to sexuality. Understanding cultural nuances, expressions, expectations, boundaries of acceptable and non-acceptable sexual behavior is key to successful clinical practice. It is preferable to draw attention to these issues in order to raise awareness and stimulate debate.

Biologically-based sex drive and societal methods to manage it manifest in a myriad of cultural beliefs, expectations, and behavior. In a sense, procreation is relegated to a minor role of human sexuality (Stevens Jr., 2014).

Interestingly societies are differentiated as sex-negative, which view sex as fundamentally procreative and reject a wider hedonistic or recreational role for sexual activity, and sex-positive, which view sex as more than a purely procreative act (Bhavsar and Bhugra, 2013).

Influencing factors

Many factors influence cultural variations of sexuality. These could be general education, value teaching, societal learning, social permissiveness, adherence to religious or cult rules, prohibitions and censorship, taboos, repression, economic level, even power in society and politics (Kar, 2014). People from different cultures are observably so different in their sexual communications, body language, attire to impress or suggest, and behavior in public places that it can be readily discernible that there are massive differences in the art and craft of expression of human sexuality.

Sexual attractiveness: Considering an example of biological factors influencing sexual attractiveness, throughout the world, femininity in women's faces affects men's attractiveness judgments (Kleisner et al., 2021). However, the magnitude of males' preference for female facial femininity differs among countries and correlates with the

Corresponding author: Nilamadhab Kar

Email: nmadhab@yahoo.com

How to cite the article: Kar, N., (2021). Cross-cultural variation in sexuality: An essential element for clinicians' awareness. *Indian Journal of Health Sexuality and Culture* 7 (2), 3–8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6057804>

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nation's health, i.e., higher preference in countries with better healthcare (Marcinkowska et al., 2014).

Morality: Sexual attraction is also influenced by morality, less in men than in women (González-Álvarez and Cervera-Crespo, 2019). Similarly, morality often dictates sexual boundaries in cultures. Thus, while some generalizations can be made, societies have different standards and practices, secondary to the degree of adherence to set moral standards.

Gender inequality: Gender roles and equality in a society influence sexual behavior as well. Sexual norms and practices are more restrictive in countries marked by gender inequality. A study reported that relatively high gender equality was associated with more casual sex, more sex partners per capita, younger ages for first sex, and greater tolerance or approval of premarital sex (Baumeister and Mendoza, 2011).

Religion: Religion has a massive influence on sexual behavior amongst followers. Religious diktats suggest gender roles, dressing pattern/code, selection of spouses, conditions for maintaining celibacy or sexual abstinence, set boundaries for sexual experience, e.g., disallowing premarital or extramarital sex, etc., even in some cases, sexual frequency (Mc Farland et al., 2011). People who do not follow the religious rules are ostracized, isolated, and in some instances receive punishments that can go to the extremes, including honor killing and non-judicial deaths in many societies and religions.

The relationship between sexuality and religion is somewhat intertwined and complex. Traditional thinking may suggest inherent opposition or incompatibility between the two; however, compromises are

becoming more common. For example, while celibacy was the norm for religious leaders, marriages and even homosexual relationships are accepted in certain religions, whereas many others remain strongly opposed. However, some sects believe worldly pleasures, including areas of sexuality, are a prerequisite for salvation. Nonetheless, it is suggested that it may not be easy to combine sexuality, a worldly pleasure, with religiosity or spirituality (Rigo et al., 2016).

Misconceptions

Myths, misconceptions, and taboos about sex are commonly present in all cultures, regardless of geography, education, and economic level, although the degrees may differ. Sexual misconceptions could depend on the degree of sexual knowledge, which also varies in societies. This could be due to lack of or inadequate sex education, easy access to misinformation, and unavailability or difficulty in getting accurate information. The usual ways of spreading sexual information through peers, print, and electronic media have been added by the internet, which has become a major source of misinformation. There should be a concerted effort to make accurate, comprehensive information readily available on the internet to target and deal with myths and misconceptions.

Marriage and sex

In many cultures, sex is considered within the confines of marriage; however, there exist wide variations in real life, even in the most conservative societies. Human beings can be sexually attracted to multiple partners simultaneously; there are cultures with polyandry and polygyny; however, in a general rule, sex outside marriage is considered unacceptable all over the world.

Nevertheless, extramarital sexual relationships are common, irrespective of moral, ethical, cultural, religious stance. While divorce rates, multiple marriages, and live-in relationships are growing worldwide, sexual experiences are becoming more common outside traditional marriages. Similarly, people are trying to dissect the common understanding of biological sex as the expression of two adults' psychological love. In some cultures, it is becoming as if less distressing to have occasional digressions than the others. In many societies, it is not uncommon to see people having children from multiple partners; and parents or even grandparents who are never married.

Internet

The variations in different societies might be merging or fading away with the role of the internet, providing easy access to sexual content, where the sex education materials are far less than the socially objectionable material and misinformation. Unfortunately, a massive number of people, even children, and adolescents are getting exposed to deviant sexual behaviours, varied sexual preferences, porn, sexual abuse, which might contribute to distress and many related disorders. Besides, the age of exposure to sexual content has become lower with more and more internet use. Therefore, it has a massive influence on permissiveness, preferences, and sexual behaviors in societies. Some countries are becoming aware of the deleterious effect of exposure to sexual content on the internet and implementing restrictions. However, their effectiveness is somewhat inadequate. There is a need for greater awareness of these, parental education, and government measures to protect vulnerable people, especially children and adolescents.

Human sexuality in trade

It is well known that prostitution, prevalent

in most cultures, at all levels of socioeconomic strata, is continuing within societies in many different forms. Male prostitution is becoming more common as well. Linked to prostitution, there are sexual slavery, sex trafficking, grooming, sexually transmitted infections, economic misery, and many such social ailments, which are continuing despite laws against them.

Besides prostitution, human sexuality is heavily used in other trade and commerce, with an assumption of 'sex sells', although some research suggests otherwise (Gramazio et al., 2021). These are principally observed in advertisements where advertisers and media utilise the innate essence of sexual attraction as a key to draw the viewers' attention to their product. The commercials often objectify human beings, use sexual connotations in the communications. Acceptability of such advertisements varies across the world, depending upon the degree of conservatism or restrictiveness of the society. There are many negative consequences of promoting these sexualized advertisements, e.g, body image dissatisfaction, psychological stress (Krawczyk and Thompson, 2015), including the inefficacy of such advertisements (Gramazio et al., 2021).

Sexual abuse

Some stereotypical assumptions that females are more frequent victims of sexual abuse are now changing. More research in different cultures suggests that males have been victims of sexual abuse in a considerable proportion. In fact, more males than female children reported being victims of sexual abuse in a study from India (Kumar et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2019). While societies are changing, making it probably more accessible for women to report their sexual abuse as observed in 'me too' movements, however, there is still a massive issue for men to report theirs, be it for hesitancy or

inadequate social acceptance of these. Sexual abuse of male is a relatively hidden area in many cultures. Clinicians need to be aware of its repercussions, considering the magnitude of the stress involved.

Sexual dysfunctions

Sexual dysfunctions are relatively common. However, their prevalence vary across cultures, which could be due to differential cultural expectations of gender roles, sexual behaviour, and existing explanatory models of sexual dysfunction, as a culture often sets the thresholds for abnormality (Bhavsar and Bhugra, 2013). Similarly, seeking help for these problems varies across cultures; some of the reasons include hesitancy considering its sensitivity and ignorance due to lack of information and education. There is a need for public education in the local language using a communication style that can be understood easily by the general population.

Sexual practices and preferences

Sexual practices and preferences differ in diverse communities and different socioeconomic strata within the same community (Kar and Koola, 2007). Sexual experimentation, toys, methods may vary depending upon the resources available. Similarly, the prevalence of sexual preference disorders also differs, although studies are particularly inadequate in many cultures.

The practice of male circumcision and female genital mutilation continues in certain societies. While some health benefits of male circumcision have been reported, it is not a universally accepted procedure and is conducted chiefly as a socio-cultural influence. Its impact on sexuality is difficult to assess as many confounding factors influence sex. Whether circumcised individuals consider this helpful or not is

dependent mainly on their socio-cultural beliefs (Bañuelos Marco and García Heil, 2021). Female genital mutilations, which have no health benefits or medical indications (Klein et al., 2018), is a concern, considering adverse physical and psychological outcomes. Despite its harmful consequences and violation of women's human rights, the practice continues and is under-reported. Its eradication has met with hurdles as the practice has multiple socio-cultural, traditional, and religious underpinnings (Mc Cauley and van den Broek, 2019); and requires a change in thinking and attitude of its advocates.

Culture-bound sexual syndromes

Interestingly, there are many culture-bound sexual syndromes, like Koro in many Asian countries, Dhat syndrome in the Indian sub-continent, Shen Kui in China, and Sukra Prameh in Sri Lanka (Kar, 2005; Kar, 2014). Sometimes epidemics of Koro have been reported, affecting a large number of people. Cultural belief of semen as 'elixir of life' emphasizing its preservation and worries related to its loss leads to mental health issues. Societies have adored and worshiped sexual power and sex organs in many different forms, and these belief systems often contribute to the distorted content of thoughts. Some cultures even think of sex as a cure for a few mental health conditions.

Sex-related crimes

This is a significant issue in many cultures. Many such crimes are continuing at an alarming rate, starting from sexual harassment, abuse, grooming, sexual blackmailing, human trafficking for sexual trade, forced prostitution, rape, etc. In addition, unacceptable sexual behaviour within the confines of marriage, intimate partner violence, and marital rape are

increasingly being reported in some societies. In contrast, their prevalence in other societies is not clear. Interestingly, laws related to these crimes, their actual implementation, and provisions of punishments for these crimes differ massively in different countries, besides the variations in reporting and conviction rates.

Sex education

Research over the years strongly supports comprehensive sex education across a range of topics and students' age, which helps develop healthy relationships and a greater positive, inclusive understanding of human sexuality (Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021). However, sex education is often debated and controversial, with massive variation in different societies. First of all, it is not accepted in many, and secondly, there are wide variations of its contents and methods of provision. Many conservative communities do not wish their children or adolescents are given sex education. There are many taboos and misinformation associated with it. Content of sex education can range from biological information to relational and psychological issues. It is just not in schools; sex education should be available to the general public in an easily accessible method.

Conclusion

Human sexuality goes much beyond procreative function, and it differs across cultures in the associated belief systems and expression. Sexual issues, behaviors, dysfunctions lead to various issues, e.g., relational problems, unacceptable behaviours, distress, mental health problems, and legal problems with significant consequences. Despite the massive influence of sexuality in human life, in-depth studies on various topics are lacking in most societies and cultures. Change in sexuality,

preferences, sexual behavior in societies and their impact on various aspects of public life are interesting areas for future research.

There is a need for sex education for the public in most societies, including diverse topics covering emotional aspects of relationships. This should start systematically in schools providing age-appropriate information from a young age. Becoming aware and sensitive about the cultural differences regarding human sexuality is vital for the general public to respect and not offend in social communications and interactions. It cannot be overemphasized that it is vitally important for professionals practicing sexual medicine to understand the beliefs, expressions, behaviors, and practices of sexuality across cultures.

Acknowledgments

The Institute of Insight, UK and Quality of Life Research and Development Foundation, India.

Conflict of interest : None

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