

# Mutuality in Multiple Roles: The Relational-Cultural Approach to Mentoring

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# Philosophy of Academia

I fundamentally believe in the importance of relationships. In all areas of my life I have experienced that through relationships people are changed, enhanced, and improved. This life philosophy is consistent in my approach to both teaching and research. I approach my classroom experiences, students, colleagues, and research as ongoing opportunities for new and ever evolving relationships. This is demonstrated in my teaching and research – as relationships with students, with participants, with colleagues are the priority. It is my theoretical belief (Gilligan, 1982; Vygotsky, 1978, Baker Miller, 1976) that through relationships we cognitively, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally develop. Thus all of my teaching, each of my research projects, and all of my service is driven towards that end. I believe that students, participants, colleagues, and myself grow and learn through our relationships with one another and while each experience has a point or outcome, the process and interaction is as important and collaboration is key. Toward that end I often engage with students, colleagues, and participants in a variety of ways as the relationships evolve. For me the personal is professional and research is teaching, and teaching, research, as well as, all of it is learning. From my view students, colleagues, participants, and community partners are all researchers, teachers, students, collaborators, mentees and mentors. All of my life experiences, interactions, and professional endeavors are both teaching and learning.



# Relationships Matter



# Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)

- Developed by Jean Baker Miller and the Stone Center at Wellesley, now the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute

<http://www.jbmti.org/index.php>

- Believes in the primary need for connection and emotional joining – relationship is central to any human experience
- Critique of Western psychological focus on autonomy, independence and individuation - instead values interaction, empathy, mutuality, connection
- One's autonomous self is not enhanced by care for and exhibiting just action toward others, but



## RCT in Mentoring Students

- Moves beyond the psychosocial and instrumental approach of mentoring to an interactional process
- Reciprocal, fluid, and synergistic
- Quality and nature of relationship is more meaningful than quantity or structure
- Authenticity, commitment, self-disclosing, engaged
- Found to mediate stress & depression, increase self-esteem, self-actualization, cooperation, and relationship satisfaction
- Increases motivation and innovativeness
- Students are personally strengthened & inspired

to take action

# Mutuality

- Influencing another person through one's thoughts, feelings and actions while also remaining open to his or her influence
- According to Jordan (1991) it involves an acknowledgement of sameness in the other, appreciation of the differentness, accommodation and willingness to be changed by an interaction
- Flattening of the power hierarchy in traditional mentoring
- Mentoring mutuality has been found particularly successful with female and minority students
- Inspires confidence, fosters a professional identity, responsibility, creativity, competence and

# Multiple Roles

- Mutuality and increasing connection calls for complexity in the relationship and thus in roles, which is considered relational competence
- Growth fostering relationships are fluid, interactive and developing
- Teacher/student, mentor/mentee, advisor/advisee, collaborators, colleagues, expert
- As relationships develop, so do roles and opportunities for learning and growing

(Jordan, J., Walker, M. & Hartling, L.,

2004)



## Case Example – Lindsey

- MSW student
- Internship Supervisor
- Research Assistant – local conference
  - Lindsay Price, *School social workers attitudes towards gay and lesbian families*. CHE Research and Creative Activities Forum, Poster Presentation
- Independent Study – regional conference
  - Price, L., Averett, P. & Jenkins, C. (2010). Mental Health Needs of Older Lesbians: National Survey Results. *Annual Eastern Region Adult Mental Health Conference*. Poster Presentation, April 27-28<sup>th</sup> Greenville, NC.
- As alumni initiated and mentored RA, Amy, in two local conference presentations & a peer reviewed publication
  - Averett, P., Moore, K. & Price, L. *LGBT virginity definitions and meanings*. CHE Research & Creative Activities Forum poster presentation and 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Winner.
  - Averett, P., Moore, A., & Price, L. (2012). Virginity definitions and meanings among the LGBT community. *East Carolina University Women's Studies Lecture Series*. Paper Presentation, Greenville, NC. September 27, 2012.



# Lindsey presenting





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## Virginity Definitions and Meaning Among the LGBT Community



### ABSTRACT

The literature on LGBT virginity is almost nonexistent, thus this pilot study was completed to understand the meaning of the term virginity and the role it plays in the LGBT community. The research questions asked members of the LGBT community to define virginity, discuss its meaning and to share experiences. Data were collected from two focus groups and six individual interviews and were analyzed. Results indicate that there are a range of virginity definitions, there is little discussion of the topic, and that "coming out" is a more important rite of passage in the LGBT community. Implications for social work practitioners and sexuality researchers are discussed.

### INTRODUCTION

There is little research that has been done on the topic of virginity loss within the LGBT community (Gross, 2003). The research that is available posits that the definition of 'virginity loss' is highly individualized and does not have a fixed definition. Much of the knowledge surrounding sexuality and virginity is seen through a heteronormative lens and often does not include the experiences of people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered (Richardson, 2006). Virginity is often viewed as an important rite of passage in terms of sexual and personal identity (Carpenter, 2005). What is not understood is how this rite of passage is viewed or critiqued within the LGBT community. This pilot study attempted to understand the meaning of this term and its role in the LGBT community.

### METHOD

Qualitative methodology utilized two focus groups with two LGBT student organizations connected to colleges in Eastern NC and then we conducted six follow up interviews with participants of the focus groups to gather further details and depth. Participants were aged 18 and older, varied in sexual orientation and identity, and were racially diverse. Focus groups were one hour in length while individual interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. The focus groups and interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Qualitative content analysis was completed via independent coding of the three researchers who then met repeatedly in order to discuss and reach agreement in themes.

### RESULTS

#### RANGE OF DEFINITIONS

Results indicated that virginity is a very individualized and contextual experience. In both the focus groups and interviews there was a wide variety of definitions ranging from any sexual behavior to various but specific levels of sexual contact, also included was the role of emotional connection. Several participants even changed and clarified their own definitions during the course of the interview.

"For me there was degrees of virginity." - Aaron

#### TERMINOLOGY

As discussed in the heterosexual literature the language of virginity also varied from loss, the idea of it as a gift, and some rejecting the term virginity and instead stating it was discussed as "first time."

"I would say it's more of a first time. And that kind of goes with the whole degree of kind of thing—where this is my, this is my first time with a partner. This is my first time ever giving a blow job. This is my first time ever receiving. It's referred to, as I would say, mostly referred to as a first time." - Mark

#### SEXUAL ASSAULT

It is important to note that four of the participants reported their first sexual experience as an assault. Two were lesbian identified who were raped by men, one was a gay identified man who was raped by a man, and one a FTM trans identified person who was raped by a man.

"My version varies. I would say that losing your virginity is the first time two people have consensual sex. But when I was talking to the girl last night I caught myself telling her that I lost my virginity when I was raped. So for me it's different than if I was talking to somebody else about them." - Christine

#### VIEWS

Participants stated they had not given the term virginity much thought prior to discussing it with the researchers during the interviews, nor was it an important topic of discussion in the LGBT community. One reason for this was the role of religion. Several participants spoke to virginity being a religious heterosexual experience, thus not all options for LGBT people. However, one consistent idea throughout the interviews was that participants did not want to be any individuals "first time." "I have no desire to have sexual relations with someone who hasn't previously had sexual relations. I guess there is that whole mama bird complex thing where you imprint on someone else. I just don't want to deal with that." - Sasha

#### WHAT IS IMPORTANT?

Participants clearly stated that in the LGBT community "coming out" is a more important rite of passage than virginity. "I have to agree with Katie because when I think back to the memories I have from life, I think that the coming out stories take precedence much more than losing my virginity does. Like, I don't remember the last time I thought about losing my virginity but I thought about how I came out several times. It's much more important." - Tom



### CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study support the idea of virginity as a heterosexual concept. Because LGBT definitions and experiences of virginity are so varied, it points to the limitation of sexuality researchers in attempting to operationalize and adequately define sexual behavior in regards to the LGBT people. In these two LGBT communities "coming out" was viewed as the most important rite of passage. Implications of this research suggests that Social Work practitioners need to value LGBT individuals' "coming out" stories as an important life event rather than focusing on sexual behavior.

#### References

Carpenter, L. (2005). *Virginity lost: An intimate portrait of first sexual experiences*. New York: New York University Press.





## Conclusion

- By focusing on developing increasingly connected, authentic and mutual relationships where students have a voice, a choice, control and respect as colleagues who have something to give, the result can be life long relationships and research productivity.
- Students and faculty can both be changed through the relationship and connection. Both can develop new competencies, new supports, new knowledge, enhanced confidence, produce synergy that results in creativity and increased competencies in the next mentoring relationship.

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