Fieldnotes: Facilitating Conversations about Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Field Education

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Summary

This essay proposes that field supervision and peer reflection groups need to be spaces in which differences regarding sexuality, sex, and gender can be openly discussed in spite of and because of theological differences.

As ministerial students transition from academic study to ministerial practice, they regularly encounter questions related to sex, gender, and sexuality. Field supervision and peer reflection groups can provide holding spaces where such experiences can be openly discussed. However, students and field educators acknowledge that these topics are often avoided or resisted. Based on conversations with field educators and former students, this article identifies some of the obstacles to open discussion, such as theological differences, and summarizes field education best practices that can contribute to more constructive dialogue on sex, gender, and sexuality. Such intentionality of practice may minimize avoidance and exclusion often experienced around these topics.

This topic took shape when the authors talked with each other about the most challenging situations they encountered in facilitating discussion

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in field education groups and in classes with ministry students. As the conversation continued and the examples accumulated, a sort of epiphany occurred when we realized how many of the examples involved questions of sex, gender, and sexuality. We wondered whether this was the experience of other field educators, and if so, what practices others had employed to work through and grow from these experiences. This paper identifies best practices in framing language, reflection, and group process to facilitate constructive and insightful dialogue about sex, gender, and sexuality in theological education. First, we offer a review of pertinent texts and describe the questions that guided our conversations with colleagues. Next, we share our reflections about the challenges in facilitating conversations about sex, gender, and sexuality in theological education. Lastly, we offer practical suggestions for discussion facilitation.

Perspectives on Sexuality, Theology, and Working with Difference

There is substantial and growing literature on working with questions of diversity and difference in field education. Volume 29 of *Reflective Practice*, "Forming Religious Leaders in and for a Diverse World," was devoted to working with questions of difference in formation and supervision.[1] The recent book, *Welcome to Theological Field Education!*[2] includes a chapter on "Considerations for Cross-cultural Placement,"[3] as well as references to working with difference in many of the other chapters. Emmanuel Lartey's *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* is a now a standard in field education.[4] We were interested in exploring how the paradigms emerging in the field for addressing questions of diversity and difference generally might be applied specifically to questions of diversity and difference in sex, gender, and sexuality.

Queer theorist Judith Butler's work on sex/gender/desire offers a challenge to contemporary discourse by examining the ways in which categories and consideration of sex, gender, and sexuality reify constructed differences.[5] In her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), she argues that 'woman' is not made by biology or heterosexuality, but by an iterative gender performance of 'woman.' Against a compulsory system of heteronormativity that marks woman as female because of her anatomy (presence of primary and secondary sex organs) and sexuality (heterosexual), Butler urges the collapse of sex/gender distinctions. Following from her deconstructive work, gender does not rely on anatomical sex as the guarantee of gender ex-

pression or heterosexuality. This understanding of gender as a spectrum is increasingly part of the context of discussion in field education co-existing along with more dualistic notions of gender.

In the essay "Differences, Dialogues, and Discourses: From Sexuality to Queer Theory in Learning and Teaching Care," Joretta Marshall proposes that queer theory, in its application to teaching and learning, is not restricted to use as a term of sexual identity. Queer theory "is a perspective and positionality that challenges hegemonic power in multiple forms."[6] Queer theory, arising out of questions of sex, gender, and sexuality, offers a perspective and path toward "redemptive discourse" that can feed back and inform a broad range of approaches to difference and diversity in field education. Marshall's understanding of redemptive discourse is any conversation that leads to "the development of alternative ways of thinking and structuring our lives that support a more positive and justice-oriented image of self-God-other-creation-in-relation."[7]

Lastly, Marcella Althaus-Reid's concept of theological evictions has also shaped our thinking and questions. Her work heightens an awareness of the embedded, unrecognized suppositions that can occur in theologies. Considering liberation theology, a theology that by its very title carries the assumption of liberation, she notes that the liberative perspective presented is based on assumptions of normativity that may, in addressing the concerns of one group, either ignore or even negatively impact other marginalized groups. As Althaus-Reid writes, "Liberation theology has evicted more than just women in its circles of interpretation: it has evicted non-dualistic patterns of thought, non-hierarchical structures of thought, and alternatives to non-reproductive and male epistemology."[8] Challenged by her writing, we asked ourselves, "What normativity is represented in the structure of field education? What thoughts and alternatives do we evict in the process of field education? Is it possible to hold a diversity of perspectives on sexuality and religion in the context of field education without evictions of either?"

Learning from Dialogue

We had informal and more formal conversations with a number of professional colleagues and former ministry students as we considered these questions. The professional colleagues represented a spectrum of leading field educators from around the country and a mix of denominational, gender, and sexual identities. The former students represented diversity in gender, sexual orientation, age, race and ethnicity, and faith traditions. As we gath-

ered these reflections, we shared the fruit of our conversations for further development and insight at the Association of Practical Theology session at the American Academy of Religion in November 2012. Questions that guided our conversations included:

- Do questions of sex, gender, and sexuality come up in field education discussions?
- How have we navigated issues that have arisen?
- Do we see any linkages between religious diversity and questions of sex, gender, and sexuality?
- What practices move students toward discernment and integration in regard to these issues?
- What can we do to change or improve the process of dialogue and growth?
- Does working in an institution with a particular religious tradition impact discussion? If so, how so?
- Have we been able to create a holding space for a diversity of perspectives on sexuality and religion in the context of field education without eviction of either? If so, how did we do that? If not, what made creating a holding space difficult?

Our conversations with field educators and students revealed that talking about differing theologies of sex, gender, and sexuality as presented by students, authoritative sources, and field site placements is challenging work, particularly if it is to be redemptive work.

One particular challenge in discussions is identifying what the term 'sexuality' references and who it references. Marshall comments that the term "sexuality" is often used as code or a synonym for discussing sexual orientation. However, sexuality in a broader sense includes questions of sexual orientation, as well as sexual activity, gender identity, gender roles, and other ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality arise in the work of ministry.[9] For example, one colleague commented that he did not think he had ever had sexuality come up in his discussion groups. However, after some reflection, he enumerated instances in which sex, gender identity, and gender roles had been featured either as central themes or subthemes within group discussion. Sexuality is also a critical place of embodied intersections, where some bodies are marked as sexual, hypersexual, or not sexual at all. For example, how is a person with a disability perceived in relation to classroom conversation about sexual theologies, particularly as persons with disabilities are often stigmatized and seen as non-sexual? What we heard about the frequency of discussions related to sex, gender, and sexuality affirmed our

experiences and expanded our horizons. We share excerpts from our conversations to date so that they might provide a way forward toward crafting research agendas attentive to critical sexual realities.

We heard that even the most common issues of sexuality that arise in ministerial encounters, such as discussions about low levels of sexual desire or intimacy in a couple relationship, situations of possible gender discrimination or sexual harassment, or pornography use, were often resisted, avoided, or evicted from case discussions with field supervisors and field groups. Certain topics, like masturbation, were particularly uncomfortable. Certain intersections of identities, such as a quadriplegic man mourning his loss of sexual activity, heightened avoidance. Ministry is a field where, to borrow from James Joyce, "Here comes everybody." As we talked to students and field educators it became clear that ministry students engage a vastly wide spectrum of humanity and human sexual practice in their ministerial encounters. A particular challenge named by both students and field educators was addressing less common, unfamiliar situations or topics that arose in ministry settings or from those seeking counsel. Examples include bondage and discipline, sadism and masochism (BDSM), fetishes, cross-dressing, being on the down low, polyamory, and swinging. Students placed in ministries dealing with issues of rape or sexual abuse reflected that it was sometimes difficult to discuss these situations with their less familiar peers. In all of these cases, norms of social propriety, limited knowledge about the topics, and differences in theological approaches imposed constraints on open, deliberative discussion and reflection.

We also heard that ecclesial views on the role of women and sexual minorities in ministry were frequent bases for theological reflection. As one female interviewee said, "I was always told, 'Follow wherever the Spirit leads,' until the Spirit led me into ministry." Another said, "I didn't realize that the church that raised me would also reject me." One interviewee observed that "Students grapple with being in a denomination or congregation where homophobia is rampant, but this is understood as part of the biblical mandate, not as homophobia." On the other hand, in a couple of our conversations, former students who believed their denomination's teachings on the immorality of same-gender sexual relationships felt it was difficult to hold that view and escape being labeled homophobic. In allowing expressions of difference in one area, harm toward others in another area of identity can occur. As one student said, "While it might seem valid and respectful to allow those with 'different' religious perspectives to have time

and a right to air their views, their comments can feel hurtful or alienating to others in the group."

Collectively, students noted several obstacles in field education groups and supervision that impede more reflective discussion on sex, gender, and sexuality. Often there is a sense that there is a great deal to cover in field education sessions (whether in reflective groups or supervision), and so there is no time for deeper reflection or time is used as an excuse to avoid that reflection and discussion. Students report that assumptions were made about their level of knowledge or comfort with topics of sex, gender, and sexuality. They also noted that facilitators and supervisors did not always seem comfortable acknowledging their own level of knowledge, or were not aware of their own issues concerning sex, gender, and sexuality. Another factor that students felt limited discussion was a fear of conflict—fear of difference getting out of control—on the part of both facilitators and students.

Students noted that if questions of sex, gender, and sexuality were not avoided, they might alternatively be over-emphasized. Sexual identity can become overemphasized or essentialized rather than considering other aspects of the identity of individuals. Overemphasizing the trauma of sexual abuse and rape—emphasizing the devastating nature of such experiences and long term impact—can have the unintended effect of disempowering and negating the resilience demonstrated by survivors, particularly for those less experienced in working with rape and abuse survivors.

Best Practices for Dialogue

How, then, do we move these instances toward more redemptive discourse? Both experienced field educators and students offered numerous suggestions for improving dialogue. While supervision issues related to sex, gender, and sexuality were the focus of our conversations, the responses of our dialogue partners often encompassed best practices for addressing differences more broadly understood. Experienced field educators will recognize many of these best practices, but perhaps note a few innovations. Field educators newer to the field may find this list useful in constructing their own approaches to supervision. These practices involve establishing frameworks, language use, reflective practice, and group process.

Establishing Frameworks

Establishing a ministerial framework is a key practice shared by our colleagues. Field educators ask students to identify their images of ministry,

their understanding of what ministry is, why one does it, and how they will bring their understanding into the world. Field educators also commonly ask students to articulate their sources of authority and influence, to make concrete where they ground their perspectives, values, and actions and to name their sources of wisdom, including but not limited to experiences, education, relationships, and faith traditions. While there are many reasons to ask students to consciously articulate these positions and to share these positions with their peers, with respect to future dialogue this clarity and ownership allows students to hear early on the diversity in the group and understand that not all come from the same place. It sets the stage to show respect for the place of others. Some field educators specifically asked their students to consider how their image of a minister is informed by gender or sexuality, thus setting the stage for later discussions of these topics.

A related framing technique of field supervisors and group facilitators is to make transparent the differences in the group from the beginning. While education about multiplicity and difference should be infused throughout the curriculum, experienced field educators often take time to raise awareness of the intrapersonal and interpersonal multiplicity of identities in a group, of the possible varying levels of identity development pertaining to those identities, to the various social locations in which any individual operates at different moments, and the differences in power in different contexts, identities, and locations. While students found it helpful to note areas of intersection in the multiplicity of identities in a group, students noted that it is also helpful to acknowledge that some differences do exist. "We can agree to disagree." Students also suggested that ministerial students could benefit from a course or training on human sexuality.

Lastly, field education discussions are framed as pivotal locations for transformative pedagogy. Field educators reported that the goal of the seminar was "not to find an answer but to open a question." Another educator reported, "My job is to help you see what you can't see."

Language Use

Language use can set the stage for more challenging discussions. Students can be encouraged to start statements with soft stems such as "This is my perspective…," "I am confused…," "I wonder…," or "I hear you saying…" Students can also be encouraged to name their own multiple feelings and the possible multiple feelings of others in any given situation, both positive and more difficult or challenging feelings. A list of feeling words can help

facilitate this process, particularly for students who are uncomfortable with feelings of anger, anxiety, or sadness.

One field educator noted the importance of allowing "linguistic space and grace to stumble into articulation as students move from visceral experiences to articulations of embedded theology." Intentionally naming this "space for grace" can encourage a more accepting atmosphere as students struggle with new language, particularly language related to sex, gender, and sexuality.

Field supervisors' and group facilitators' awareness of language also helps to model comfort with language and concepts. Using non-gendered language and inclusive pronouns can help minimize the "evictions" to which Althaus-Reid refers. Field supervisors and group facilitators can continue to educate themselves about language around human sexuality and the ongoing changes and usages of language in this area. Field supervisors and group facilitators, as well as students, can become more aware of micro-aggressions, including statements that reinforce stereotypes such as, "She was attractive for a lesbian" or "He is very accepting for an evangelical." Field supervisors can make greater use of body language and ask students to be more aware of physical sensations to break down mind/body/spirit boundaries.

Reflective Practice

The process of theological reflection itself—grounding the case in personal experience, considering descriptive information, integrating theological and normative perspectives, engaging in critical analysis, and developing alternative action steps—was recognized by many respondents as critical to building a space for deliberative discourse. For example, a practice of students naming how a peer's case relates to their lives may get to the affective dimension of the case even when the factual elements contain matters of difference or conflict.

Providing time and space for clarifying questions slows down the process and allows for multiple angles and perspectives on a case to emerge. One educator explained, "It is not silence *qua* silence, but more time between incident and action that marks the pause. Sometimes we can spend an hour in clarifying questions on a two page case. This may seem excessive, but in a world of hurry, refusing to foreclose the process allows for a range of possibilities to emerge that may not be otherwise possible to discern. There is no analysis until everything is on the table for that moment." Having students wrestle with theological complexity, using stems such as, "On the one hand

from a theological perspective one could argue… On the other hand…" also opens up more space for dialogue.

One idea we heard was that of stepping back from one's first strong reaction. One interviewee described this as helping group members develop non-anxious ways of attending. From there students can have the "freedom to receive what comes…without being defensive or rushing to judgment." Carrie Doehring has referred to this initial strong reaction as a "jarring" encounter, and suggests having students track such moments as "potential epiphanies of alterity, their own or another's."[10]

Group Process

The group facilitator plays a key, but subtle role, in creating a space for dialogue. One interviewee likened the role of the facilitator to that of the orchestra conductor who "honors and monitors" the process, bringing out the quieter voices or instruments, balancing the sound, and ensuring that movements reach their crescendo and then decrescendo.

In addition to facilitating the group process, students noted many ways in which field supervisors and group facilitators could make discussions of sex, gender, and sexuality more effective and open. They suggested, first, that supervisors and facilitators work on becoming more self-aware of their own biases and blind spots in discussing issues of sex, gender, and sexuality. Students suggested ongoing education on group process for supervisors as well as supervisors engaging in their own supervisor/facilitator case reflection groups. One student suggested facilitators tape group sessions and listen back to the session. Students also suggested facilitator training in conflict management.

Students were also concerned about processes to make sure that quieter or absent voices were heard. In their discussion of this, they suggested practices similar to those described by Lassiter, Napolitano, Culbreth, and Ng, including assigning different students during various case discussions to intentionally represent missing voices in the group.[11] Other students noted that attention to group composition is important. Several noted how important having an ally in the group is for them to be comfortable in speaking about difficult subjects.

Conclusion

As ministry students transition from academic study to ministerial practice, they face issues related to sex, gender, and sexuality on a regular basis. Field

supervision and peer reflection groups need to be spaces where such experiences can be openly discussed in spite of, and because of, theological differences. Many of the practices already inherent in the field education process can facilitate reflective dialogue around these issues. It is helpful to consider these techniques consciously in light of questions of sex, gender, and sexuality; to recognize the salience of these issues in ministry; and to acknowledge the challenge their discussion can involve. Such practices can contribute to greater intentionality in these discussions. In so doing, theological evictions may be minimized and contribution to redemptive discourse enhanced, not only around issues of sex, gender, and sexuality; but more broadly across multiple identities and differences in general.

NOTES

1. Herbert Anderson, ed., "Theme: Forming Religious Leaders in and for a Diverse World," *Reflective Practice* 29 (2009).
2. Matthew Floding, ed., *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010).
3. Ibid., Joanne Lindstrom, "Considerations for Cross-Cultural Placement," 155–167.
4. Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003).
5. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
6. Joretta Marshall, "Difference, Dialogues, and Discourses: From Sexuality to Queer Theory in Learning and Teaching Care," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 104, no. 2 (2009): 37.
7. Ibid., 38.
8. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM, 2004), 75.
9. Marshall, 31.
10. Carrie Doehring, "Teaching an Intercultural Approach to Spiritual Care," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 22, no. 2 (2012): 7.
11. Pamela S. Lassiter, Louise Napolitano, John R. Culbreth, and Kok-Mun Ng, "Developing Multicultural Competence Using the Structured Peer Group Supervision Model," *Counselor Education and Supervision* 47, no. 3 (2008): 164–178.