

TEACHING TIPS



Culture and Gender in Teaching Close Relationships

Elaine Hatfield
University of Hawaii

Fall in love, fall in disgrace -- Chinese Proverb

Hawaii is a multi-cultural state and not surprisingly, the students in my Close Relationships and Human Sexuality classes generally come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds: African, Chinese, European, Filipino, Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, Hispanic, Vietnamese, Mixed, and Other-American. In addition, the intermarriage rate in Hawaii is unusually high – 68%. (For purposes of comparison, the intermarriage rate on the mainland still hovers around 3%.) Needless to say, students in Hawaii are extremely sensitive to, and interested in, issues of culture and gender when we discuss love, sex, and intimacy.

In spite of this interest, when I first started teaching at the University of Hawaii, I found it extremely difficult to persuade some students to speak in class. A few had difficulty with English, some were shy or thought it was inappropriate to speak in class despite my urging, others simply never had any practice speaking up in class.

Eventually, I found two questions that were guaranteed to provoke discussion in even the most silent of groups: Are men and women different in _____? [Fill in the blank.] In Hawaii, are Asians and _____'s or _____'s different in _____? [Fill in the blank.]

These days, I generally use the following procedure to get discussion going. I ask students to split up into small groups, select a "court reporter," and then go to a nearby coffee bar, classroom corner, or lawn and discuss the question I've assigned for 20 or 30 minutes. Discussion is always spirited. At the end of discussion period, group leaders come to the front of the class and summarize their group's conclusions.

I'm not sure why, but when students are representing others, they tend to have no trouble expressing themselves – they are generally funny, intelligent, com-

elling, and sometimes startlingly frank. We get the kind of discussion that teachers yearn for, but rarely get.

Of course, this doesn't mean that I always agree with students' views of the world. Right now, culture and gender are "hot" topics. Students inevitably agree with the slew of popular books that insist that *Men are From Mars; Women From Venus* and that "East is East ... and never the twain shall meet." I (and I think most social psychologists) generally find that traditional cultural and gender differences seem to be rapidly disappearing in the realm of love and sex (see Oliver & Hyde, 1993, and Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). Today culture and gender seem to be less important than men and women's shared humanity.

Students don't believe the research, of course. The cultural folk-lore is too strong to be overcome by existing data. (Of course, maybe students know something that I don't.) Now we have a starting point, however. That makes it easy to get students interested in research.

I generally point out that there is some evidence to support students' assumption that culture has a critically important impact on romantic and sexual attitudes and behavior. I might, for example, tell them about the work of Phillip Shaver, Shelley Wu, and Judith Schwartz (1991), who interviewed students in North America, Italy, and the People's Republic of China. These researchers found that although North American and Italian subjects tended to assume

that passionate and companionate love were intensely positive experiences, Chinese students had a far darker view of love. The final step, of course, it to persuade students to embark on their own research to prove the experts wrong.

References

- Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (1996). *Love and sex: Cross-cultural perspectives*. New York, NY: Alyn & Bacon.
- Oliver, M. B., & Hyde, J. S. (1993). Gender differences in sexuality: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 114, 29-51.
- Shaver, P. R., Wu, S., & Schwarz, J. C. (1991). Cross cultural similarities and differences in emotion and its representation: A prototype approach. In M. S. Clark (Ed.), *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, (Vol. 13, pp. 175-212). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Editor's note: Dr. Elaine Hatfield is Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii. She has received numerous awards for her research on the psychology of close relationships, and has written numerous books including her most recent ones: Emotional Contagion (1994), Love and Sex: Cross-cultural Perspectives (1996), and, with Richard Rapson, Love, Sex, and Intimacy: Their Psychology, Biology, and History (1992).

Have you developed or discovered a great classroom activity? Do you have an interesting lecture idea or lecturing method? Is there a great book you'd like to recommend? How about a testing tip? Please share your experiences and ideas with others by submitting them to **TEACHING TIPS**. No suggestion or idea is too small! -- NC