Abstinence-Only Sex Education: Are There Effects Beyond the Realm of Knowledge, STIs, and Pregnancy?

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Objectives

This research takes a Feminist Theoretical perspective and investigates if the often patriarchal, essentialist, and objectifying curriculum in Abstinence-Only Sex Education (AE) cases can be traced to a proxy measure of state level cultural forces on gender inequality, specifically, on gendered violence and employment discrimination.

Literature Review and Theory

The development of ‘abstinence programs’ for sex education swept the United States in the 1980s (Thomson). Hegemonic masculinity plays a role in the abstinence-only curriculum. Specifically, the systematic favoring of ‘male’ traits and a devaluing of ‘female’ traits. Homophobia is inherent in hegemonic masculinity, and AE ignores homosexual experiences at best, and often demonizes them. Also, in the AE classroom, female sexuality and desire is rarely addressed. Women are often shamed into silence about sexual experiences or even thoughts, because they are taught that women do not experience sexual desire. In the AE model of education, girls and women are held responsible for the regulation of male sexuality. This approach reifies men of the need to control their own behavior. The shift of responsibility makes it difficult for both young women and young men to become self-governing in “their intimate and reproductive lives as adults” (McClain).

Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE), on the other hand, allows open discussion amongst students and educators and works to address various elements of sexuality.

One central claim in Feminist theory is that the essentialist argument that women are “naturally” as they are is a major way of oppression (Ritzer). AE curricula do this, often leaving girls who have multiple sexual partners to chew gum (and thus addicted), and constructing females as baby making machines devoid of any hint of sexual pleasure. Women are either not AE or not AE programs are a signal that larger social cultural forces are shaping many parts of society based on an essentialist gender association. If true, we should see how variations in sex education in states correlates with changes in macro level state outcomes, using one economic outcome and one crime outcome.

In terms of causality, we do not assume either a direct or indirect effect of AE on gendered inequality. However, we would expect a more direct causal link to sexual violence than to economic inequality, as the curricula in sex education directly focuses on sexuality on the nature of women and men.

Methods

State requirements for sex education curricula were collected, and variables indicating whether the curriculum included requirements for Abstinence Emphasis, birth control methods, ways to avoid coercion, condoms (for STI prevention), as opposed to abstinence. Sexual orientation in a positive/neural/neutral/marginal, medical accuracy of information, cultural appropriateness of information, presence or exclusion of religious materials, discussing sexual activity within the context of marriage only, discussing sex in negative terms as related to consequences, healthy decision making, family communication skills.

Rape rates were gathered from the Uniform Crime Report of the Justice Department, 1990-2010, for all 50 states. Change scores were calculated using the data from years 1990 and 1995.

State level pay gaps for full time workers were gathered from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and change scores calculated to determine how much that gap had grown or narrowed over the time period 2000-2010.

Data analysis was performed in SPSS using multiple linear regression, including dummy variables where appropriate.

Results

Variables for birth control methods, ways to avoid coercion, condoms (for STI prevention), as opposed to abstinence, sexual orientation in a positive/neural/neutral/marginal, medical accuracy of information, cultural appropriateness of information, presence or exclusion of religious materials, discussing sexual activity within the context of marriage only, discussing sex in negative terms as related to consequences, healthy decision making, family communication skills had no significant relationship to other changes in rape rates. Inclusion of these variables in multiple regression analysis (as control variables) did not appreciably impact the results on the separate model. Therefore, we do not report these more complex models.

We found no relationship between AE/non-AE in a state and the change in the gender pay gap in that state over time, but we do find that abstinence education is significantly associated with a decrease in rapes reported to police over 110,000 beyond the general declining trend of such reports nationally. We therefore do not report these more complex models.

Discussion

Interpretations of this research need to take into account the issues with our data and methods, issues that require caution. First, as we use state as the unit of analysis, regression coefficients cannot be used to make statements about the USA as a whole. For example, it would appear from Model 1 that the gender wage gap increased 2008-2010, but more properly we would say that more states (not more people) saw an increasing gender wage gap over that time.

Second, we use reported forcible rapes in Model 1, and we need to keep in mind that reported violence is different from committed violence, and reports to the police underestimate victimization rates.

Finally, we do not specify any direct, detailed causal model, nor do we test one. We do use time series data, so we can infer that there might be a causal effect, but the broad brush nature of our measures makes such an interpretation highly tenuous. Given that we find no effect of the sex education curricular details to have significant effects, we believe this makes our assumption that AE is a proxy measure of other forces to have some support. If the details of curricula mattered, we would see that as indication a more direct causal process was involved.

Conclusions

Overall, the data suggest that there is no relationship between the gender pay gap and abstinence only education, but there is a relationship between AE and the reported rape rate in a state. We suggest this might show a decrease in reporting in Abstinence-Only states rather than an actual decrease in sexual assaults. The patriarchal nature of AE could be causing women to feel more shame and responsibility for sexual assaults against them, and therefore might be less likely to report them to police. This would be consistent with Feminist theory, at least in the case of the two states that showed the greatest increase in rape over time: North and South Dakota. Over the 20 year time period analyzed, these states have seen a huge economic boom in resource extraction, leading to an influx of men relocating and working in such occupations. Given the small and ethnically homogenous population of these states, and the influx of “outsiders” we speculate that rapes are more likely reported in these states as they fit the idea of being “natural” and other figures of “legitimate rape”. “They are attacking our women, it is not the woman’s fault. Women who report such attacks might be treated better, or expect to be treated better, by law enforcement and other powers of the patriarchy, as they have not violated gendered behavioral expectations.

Future research is needed to expand on this tentative finding. We suggest that measures of victimization as opposed to reports be used. While we could not use the National Crime Victimization Survey for our analysis as it does not report state level data, it does report data at the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) level of aggregation. This, combined with a census of localities, new crisis centers, women’s shelters, and other organizations that serve women who have been victimized in those MSAs seems like it would allow more strict tests of any causal influence of AE on the treatment of women. This would allow observational measurement of curricular structure and content at the school district level. While labor intensive, such a project seems warranted given our findings.

Sources


Table 1: Statistical Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1: Change in Rape Rates, 1990-2010</th>
<th>Model 2: Change in Gender Pay Gap, 2000-2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.676** (2.416) 4.568 (1.761)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence Emphasis Curriculum</td>
<td>-11.288** (3.416) 1.304 (1.076)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported in the table, standard errors are in parentheses. ** p < .01; for model 1, Abstinence Emphasis Curriculum p = .002)*

Acknowledgments

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