

Sex and zombie cannibals

Mark Sergeant with some potential lessons from recent media reports

In the May 2011 issue I reported on the fallout of a 'practical demonstration' during a human sexuality course led by Professor Mike Bailey at Northwestern University (tinyurl.com/0511media). It appears that another human sexuality class has recently been receiving press attention.

Tom Kubistant runs a human sexuality course at Western Nevada College in the US. In a federal complaint filed on 25 June, Kubistant is alleged to have created a 'sexually hostile class environment' for a student (tinyurl.com/bv99lb2).

One of Kubistant's students alleges that he asked class members to divulge information on topics such as any sexual abuse they had been the victim of, sexual behaviour with members of the same sex and also their current sexual preferences. Specific items that students were, allegedly, asked to report on included what stimuli sexually aroused them, the different types of orgasm they could experience and details of how they

stimulated themselves sexually. According to the complainant, Kubistant stated on the handout used to collect this data that he would not be reading this information because it was extremely personal. Instead, submissions by students on these topics would simply be skimmed to make sure that students had provided a response.

The student bringing the federal complaint reports that they were the victim of abuse as a child and were distressed about having to reveal information about this as part of their studies. Allegedly the student's concerns were dismissed by Kubistant, who stated that detailing her history of abuse as part of the class would be cathartic. Ken McKenna, the lawyer representing this student, indicated that Kubistant was violating professional standards by requiring students to reveal this information, stating: 'You can't just demand somebody reveal their sexual abuse when it could be psychologically harming, and it needs to be dealt with in a clinical setting instead of a classroom setting'.

At the start of this human sexuality course, Kubistant allegedly told students about the sensitive nature of the material to be discussed and asked students to sign an acknowledgement before taking the class. According to the complainant, Kubistant at no point indicated that students would be required to disclose information about their own sexual history and preferences.

A statement from Western Nevada College indicated they had initiated an

investigation and reviewed the course information, assessments and the acknowledgement signed by the students. Evaluations taken from students during the past six years were also being reviewed.

In the few days since the story broke it has generated media attention both in the US (tinyurl.com/dytaao7 and tinyurl.com/6lj8k6e) and the UK (tinyurl.com/bwgtktr and tinyurl.com/cbncze4).

This case, regardless of its outcome, does raise some interesting issues concerning the teaching of sexuality-related topics in academia. Lecturers need to be sensitive to the individual needs and experiences of their students, be ethically aware when asking for sensitive information and always provide students with the option of declining to respond. Developing alternative assignments is also a wise strategy.

Teaching sexuality-related topics in academia can be a difficult task. It's an area that I personally have been lecturing on for almost 10 years and it has taken a long time for me to develop the format of these lectures. I also have to give at least six separate disclaimers in my first lecture so students know exactly what to expect.



MEDIA PRIME CUTS

Toxoplasma's dark side: The link between parasite and suicide <http://t.co/yy1mk4sx>
 The rise of the Cyberhero League <http://t.co/w1Egxeis>
 Need to get to safety in a riot? There's an app for that <http://t.co/J9UfxPR0>
 Charisma class: how to win fans and influence people <http://t.co/5lfw8nm0>
 Choke therapy: the sports stars who blew their big chance <http://t.co/Wiy2RE4c>
 Banking, testosterone and emotional intelligence <http://t.co/uEBpkk9Q>
 The psychology of procrastination, maybe read it later etc <http://t.co/Sy9U3eHn>

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linked to several other aggressive attacks in the Miami area. Moves to ban 'bath salts' were announced soon after the attack (tinyurl.com/7o88auv).

However, more recent toxicology reports showed that the only drug present in Eugene's blood was actually marijuana (tinyurl.com/bqbcgvj). The precise motivation and cause of the attack is still being investigated but may never be clearly documented.

In the aftermath of the attack, some are questioning the rush to ban bath salts. David Nutt, the former chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, wrote an article questioning this form of 'knee-jerk' reaction by legislators (tinyurl.com/bvkbrcce). Nutt argues that 'Bans are often a neat trick for placating voters, but have nothing to do with making society safer and happier', suggesting that policies should instead be based on the production of hard evidence about the effects of drugs rather than just media reports on their effects. Nutt also drew parallels with the rush to ban mephedrone in the UK following its link to the death of two teenagers. Toxicological reports, which showed that the drug was not involved in the death of the two teenagers, only emerged after the ban.

This story does give us insight into public attitudes towards extreme and troubling behaviours. Stories reported in the media with buzz words like 'cannibalism' or 'zombies' will always grab public attention. It is not uncommon for politicians to react quickly to these issues, sometimes resulting in premature legislation.

It is interesting, given toxicology reports of Eugene having tested positive only for marijuana, that this drug was also associated with highly politicised reports on its effects in the 1930s such as the, now discredited, 'Reefer Madness' (tinyurl.com/brs49pm).

MEDIA PRIME CUTS

End the macho culture that turns women off science, says @AtheneDonald
<http://t.co/Ei1iN01z>

Why you probably won't experience your own traumatic death
<http://t.co/VXe8TKz4>

Who puts the science in MPs' in-trays?
<http://t.co/aLEwcBis>

Should minimally conscious patients be asked if they wish to die?
<http://t.co/81AFy0LH>

'IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S US'

At 31, Jonah Lehrer appeared to be having the time of his life. Since graduating from Colombia University in 2003 with a major in neuroscience and work in Eric Kandel's lab under his belt, Lehrer had carved out a successful niche as one of the early bloggers in the field of mind and behaviour. He then wrote three successful books and landed a plum role as staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Admirers spoke of him as an 'ideas man' in the mould of Malcolm Gladwell. Then, in June, media commentator Jim Romanesko accused Lehrer of self-plagiarism, and suddenly it was open season.

Others unearthed articles where Lehrer had apparently recycled chunks of his earlier writing (links at tinyurl.com/lehrerslate), and Twitter was awash with comment about the rights and wrongs of this practice. Many fellow authors didn't think it was a big issue: journalist Jon Ronson tweeted that 'Victor Lewis-Smith once defended his own [self-plagiarism] by saying nobody attacks Sinatra for constantly doing My Way'. Most comments I read from psychologists were similarly forgiving. But the kerfuffle continued for another few weeks, even taking in accusations of plagiarism proper (see tinyurl.com/lehrermore).

Ultimately though, this seemed to be an issue for Lehrer and his editor to discuss. Indeed Lehrer's *New Yorker* work quickly had explanatory footnotes added and the author himself apologised: 'It was a stupid thing to do and incredibly lazy and absolutely wrong.' Perhaps more interesting, for our audience at least, was a blog post a week before the storm broke, from neuroscientist Bradley Votek (see tinyurl.com/lehrerdefend).

Votek opened his post, 'Defending Jonah Lehrer', by saying: 'This is a strange post for me to write because I admit I've ridden the anti-Jonah bandwagon before, advocating throwing Jonah overboard to quell the pop neuroscience storms.' Perhaps showing more honesty and self-analytical skill than many commentators, Votek admitted 'that some of my anti-Lehrerism probably stems from righteous brain-nerd ego-driven indignation. Why does this dude get all the attention when he's not even a neuroscientist?! He's just a neuroscience roadie!' That's not fair, said Votek, and 'neither is all the shit he's getting'. In fact: 'It's not you, it's us.'

So why is the neuroscientific community at fault for Lehrer's 'occasionally inaccurate scientific reporting'? 'Because our own

house is in such disarray', Votek wrote, citing 'voodoo correlations', 'double dipping' statistics in neuroimaging, and the strange case of the dead salmon in the fMRI scanner. But there are also more subtle issues, according to Votek. 'One of the main offenders living in our attic seems to be conflating the idea that because a brain region is active in one state – such as addiction – and in another task – such as mothers looking at pictures of their own babies – that babies are 'addicting'... This makes about as much sense as saying that because I kiss with the same mouth-hole that I burp from, kissing and burping are essentially the same.' In fact, Votek argues that dopaminergic neurons don't get any sensory inputs early enough to make a 'decision' about the reward value of visual stimuli, and they are probably encoding salience (relevance).

Votek writes that 'It turns out some of our strongest neuroscientific results could very well be wrong. Or, at the very least, they're not nearly as cut and dry as they're often made out to be. So how can we blame people like Mr Lehrer for linking dopamine with reward when that idea has been one of the major results...of the last 30 years?'

These errors are, according to Votek, running amok in our own scientific house. Cognitive neuroscience grew out of experimental psychology, he says, 'but with this legacy comes a lot of baggage... With the advent of neuroimaging techniques, psychologists put people in brain scanners to see where in the brain behaviours "were". But this is the wrong way of thinking about these concepts. As cognitive neuroscientists, instead of asking, "where in the brain does this fuzzy concept occur?" we should be asking, "how can neurons give rise to behavioral phenomena that look like what we call creativity?"...we need to build upon what we've learned from decades of psychological research within a neuronal framework. Not just stick people into an fMRI, press some buttons on a computer that say "analyze", and copy-and-paste the figures into a paper.'

Votek concludes that Lehrer needs to keep up the interesting writing. 'Just... please be more skeptical of us. We don't know nearly as much as you give us credit for.' Perhaps, there, Votek has hit upon why we shouldn't be so quick to judge and criticise authors like Lehrer, and how authors like him can play an important role in questioning and sharpening our own scientific thinking. JS