

**SEX, ETHICS AND COMMUNICATION: A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO CONVERSATIONS ON INTIMACY, 2ND ED., VALERIE V. PETERSON (2013)**

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For the vast majority of us, sex is what brought us into existence. Once born, we enter a world infused with sexuality. We hear slogans like ‘sex sells’, and from an early age, we are taught how to make ourselves attractive to the opposite sex. In short, sex permeates our entire lives. As such, it is no surprise that many have written extensively on how to be better sexual beings. Ancient works like the *Kama Sutra*, *Koka Shastra*, *Ananga Ranga* and *The Perfumed Garden*, down to a host of modern works like *The Joy of Sex*, attest to this cultural obsession with sex. Valerie Peterson is no stranger to these works and has written extensively about sexuality, so she is well informed to step into this fray with her book *Sex, Ethics, and Communication: A Humanistic Approach to Conversations on Intimacy*. What sets Peterson’s work apart from many others that examine sexuality is right in the title: her focus on communication and ethics. As Peterson explains,

What I am interested in are ways people might be ‘good’ about sex – ways they might have ‘better’, rather than ‘worse’, sex. By this I mean sex that is ethically informed, and is, at the same time, part of the wider range of sexuality and sexual practices common to everyday life. (6)

This book is divided into three separate but interconnected parts: ethics, communication and society. In the section on ethics, Peterson is careful to cast the widest possible ethical net. She begins with a discussion of the generally accepted reasons for having sex, including reproduction, pleasure and love. She then lays out a diagram that brings together the elements of consent, liking, loving, marriage and whether it feels good, with consent forming the basic foundation of ethical sexual conduct. Her diagram makes clear that one can consent, but not necessarily like the other person, nor does being married mean that the encounter will feel good for both parties. Peterson bases her ethics on the idea of vulnerability, explaining that as humans we are all vulnerable, albeit in slightly different ways.

Peterson then moves into the communication section of the book, examining both sex as communication and communication about sex; the latter she breaks down into interpersonal communication about sex and public communication about sex. In the segment on public communication, she discusses the various narratives and metaphors surrounding the sexual act. For example, many of us are familiar with such metaphors as ‘scoring’. Peterson provides several alternative metaphors and narratives to redefine the sexual act. For example, rather than ‘scoring’, which places the partners in an adversarial stance, one could consider sex as a ‘duck pond game’, in which everyone wins a prize simply by playing the game. Although she recognizes that this may not work in all instances, the point of the exercise is to think differently about sexual encounters, because the way we think about things influences how we behave:

What if people thought of sex less as a violent or deadly sport or competition, and more as a game of the sort that does not involve competition or loss [...] What if people thought of sex as something that was mainly about shared time and space, and mutual gain? (81)

By dissecting the language of sexuality, she encourages the reader to carefully reflect on her or his own thoughts, values and practices.

Finally, we reach the section on sexuality and society. One issue here is that Peterson attempts to cover a wide range of issues, including the male/female wage gap, sex and politics, marriage (both same sex and heterosexual) and family relationships. Although this information provides valuable context concerning how we view sexuality and gender roles as a society, she is only able to just scratch the surface. That said, the insights here are useful and interesting, for example, where she explains that women have good reasons to function as gatekeepers of sexuality while men have good reasons to function as gatekeepers of marriage. Overall, Peterson does a good job of demonstrating how some of these sexual norms have come into being and are shaped and influenced by the larger culture in which they exist.

Peterson is at her best when she examines the communicative element of sexuality. Too often scholars tend to view sex as something divorced from communication, and when it is acknowledged, it is mainly to discuss how consent is granted rather than something that happens throughout the entire interaction. I found Peterson's arguments concerning the relationship between our sexual language and sexual actions to be quite convincing as well. However, as with any book, there are some weaknesses. Although Peterson is careful to note that her advice applies equally to those in non-heterosexual and non-monogamous relationships, she often glosses over less mainstream sexual practices, such as BDSM, leaving the discussion focused largely on the more 'vanilla' sexual practices. I also would have liked to see a much more robust discussion of sexual ethics as well, but with a focus on practical strategies for an undergraduate reading audience, this is understandable.

This book would be accessible to first-year college students, and Peterson writes clearly and frankly about topics that many find uncomfortable to discuss. Indeed, one could easily use her ethical diagram in a middle-school sex-ed class. As such, this book could be used in many classes beyond the expected courses in communication, gender studies and human sexuality. For example, this could be used quite effectively in a first-year seminar course because when a report by the Office of the Vice President (2014) explains that 'one in five women is a survivor of attempted or completed sexual violence while in college' (27), there is clearly a need to begin talking early about not just safe sex, but ethical sex. Peterson's book is an excellent place to begin.

## REFERENCE

Office of the Vice President (2014), *1 is 2 Many: Twenty Years Fighting Violence Against Women and Girls*, Washington, DC: Office of the Vice President, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/2014\\_vawa\\_report.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/2014_vawa_report.pdf). Accessed 4 August 2017.