Conflicted Identification in the Sex Education Classroom: Balancing Professional Values With Organizational Mandates

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Abstract

Despite enormous resources spent on sex education, the United States faces an epidemic of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among young people. Little research has examined the role sex educators play in alleviating or exacerbating this problem. In this study, we interviewed 50 sex educators employed by public schools throughout a Midwestern, U.S. state about their experiences in the sex education classroom. Twenty-two interviewees communicated feelings of conflicted identification and provided examples of the ways in which they experienced this subjectivity in the context of their employment. We find these interviews shed light on the as-yet-understudied communicative experience of conflicted identification by delineating key sources of such conflict and discursive strategies used in its negotiation. Our results suggest that those who experience conflicted identification *and* who have a sense of multiple or nested identifications within their overarching professional identity may be safeguarded to some extent from eventual organizational disidentification.

Keywords

sexual health, education, interviews, communication, identification, qualitative, Midwestern U.S.

All U.S. states require public schools to teach sex education in some form (National Conference on State Legislatures, 2012), and well over 200 million federal dollars are earmarked for sex education each year (Boonstra, 2010). Yet the nation is still plagued by high levels of sexual risk-taking among its youth. Indeed, a report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2015) based on the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey—a survey that asks U.S. middle and high school students to report a variety of risky behaviors including sexual activity—indicated 46% of U.S. high school students had engaged in sexual intercourse and, of the 34% who had been sexually active in the prior 3 months, 41% had not used a condom or other contraceptive method. Although these behavioral statistics are alarming, perhaps even more troubling is that high school students (age 15–19) accounted for 28% of new chlamydia cases and 22% of new gonorrhea cases in 2013 (CDC, 2014a). And while the 273,105 live births for women aged 15 to 19 in 2013 was a record low (CDC, 2014b), the U.S. teen pregnancy rate remains substantially higher than other Western industrialized nations (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers, & Singh, 2015).

Correspondingly, the United States is the site of seemingly endless debates concerning the role of secular public schools in teaching sex education. These debates tend to focus on whether programs should feature abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula (i.e., curricula that discusses condoms and contraception only in terms of failure rates) or whether they should feature so-called abstinence-plus or comprehensive sex education (i.e., curricula that highlights the health benefits of abstinence among young people but also might include information about the benefits and uses of condoms, contraceptives, and a range of other sexual-health-related topics; Kirby, 2006; Santelli et al., 2006). Decisions about what is included in sex education curricula in public schools occur at the state level and at the discretion of the local school boards, who may expand upon, but not violate, state mandates (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2015). The enactment of these regulations on sex education curricula falls to sex educators. As sex education

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curricula are legislated, these educators are bound, by law, to teach according to approved mandates or risk losing their jobs. In this study, sex educators are defined as individuals who teach human sexuality curricula. However, as participants in this study made clear, this is often just a small part of their teaching load, and the level of training they receive varies, with some receiving little-to-no formal training in sex education instruction.

Although numerous studies have evaluated the effectiveness of various types of programs (e.g., Byers et al., 2003; Caron & Free, 2008; Spriggs & Halpern, 2008), few have taken into account the experiences of the individuals who are responsible for implementing sex education programs within the confines of organizational structures. Existing research that does account for health educator experiences has explored educators' enactive mastery experiences, as well as their curricular decision-making processes (Carrion & Jensen, 2014; Jensen, 2012). These studies demonstrate how sex educators' experiences and choices play a role in the quality of sex education programs and, by extension, in students' sexual-health outcomes. What remains unexplored, however, is how educators negotiate conflicting ideological viewpoints concerning that which they are required to teach by their employing organization and that which they believe is professionally appropriate and/or effective.

In the present study, we address this gap in the literature by drawing from semi-structured interviews with 50 sex educators employed at public secondary schools throughout a Midwestern, U.S. state, 22 of whom expressed a degree of conflicted identification within the context of their employment. Conflicted identification refers to a state in which an individual alternates between (and/or otherwise negotiates) feelings of connection with and disconnection from a social collective (e.g., their profession or organization; Pratt, 2000, Williams & Connaughton, 2012). Our data not only shed light on the as-yet-understudied communicative experience of conflicted identification but also suggest that those who experience conflicted identification *and* who have a sense of multiple or nested identifications may be safeguarded to some extent from eventual disidentification. In this respect, they are better situated to offer clear, effective health education messages to their students. We begin our study by reviewing extant literature on identification in general and conflicted identification in particular, highlighting what little is currently known about the communicative experience of conflicted identification. Next, we provide an overview of our data collection methods before analyzing how interview participants described their experiences with conflicted identification in the sex education classroom. Finally, we delineate the implications of our findings both theoretically and in terms of efforts to support individual identity negotiation within health education contexts.

Theories of Organizational Identification

Identification has been conceptualized as the psychological attachment that an individual feels to a social collective (i.e., an organization, a team, a professional community). Many identification studies trace their theoretical roots to Burke (1969) and his theory of consubstantiality, or what Sass and Canary (1991) have interpreted as "the extent to which one shares one's substance with another idea, value, person, organization, et cetera" (p. 280). Likewise, Larson and Pepper (2003) have defined identification as "the communicative process through which individuals either align themselves with or distance themselves from . . . targets/sources of identity" (p. 530). In this respect, identification is the process by which individuals form their identity through their relationship with various social collectives, including organizations, teams, and professions (Lammers, Atouba, & Carlson, 2013).

As suggested above, individuals can identify with multiple sources. These various identifications can be conceptualized as "nested" in nature. For example, an individual has a job in a specific work group in a department that is part of a particular division of an organization. Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) referred to these as low-order identities (i.e., job, work group) and high-order identities (i.e., division, organization). They argued that nested identities of these various orders vary according to three dimensions. First, they are inclusive/exclusive. Higher order identities subsume the other identities, while lower order identities are more exclusive because not everyone in the organization claims that identity. For example, not everyone who works for a school is a teacher, but all teachers work for the school. Next, these identities have an abstract/concrete dimension. Higher order identities are thought to be more abstract as they rely on sometimes ambiguous values and missions to guide them, whereas lower order identities are more concrete, often having standard operating rules and procedures. The final dimension on which identities vary is distal/proximal. Higher order identities are more distal inasmuch as they have less immediate impact on the individual in comparison with lower order sources of identification. These dimensions suggest—and research has generally supported—the assumption that individuals tend to identify more with lower order targets (Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Scott, 1999; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). This is not always the case, however, nor can the assumption be made that because identities are nested, they are consistent. In fact, when there is a conflict among identities, individuals may experience a shift in their most salient identity. Conversely, identifications on one level tend to generalize to other levels.

Arguably, one of the primary reasons for the host of relatively recent studies on identification within organizational literature (e.g., Kramer, Meisenbach, & Hansen, 2013; Lynch, 2009; Scott, 2013) is the shift within many organizations from a reliance on traditional forms of control (i.e., simple, technical, and bureaucratic; see Edwards, 1981) to a reliance on concertive control. Concertive control occurs when individuals are compelled to personally subscribe to and come to identify with an organization's values. When faced with contradictions between the organization's needs and those of another group or individual (even themselves), individuals operating under concertive control often work to uphold the good of the organization (Bullis, 1993). In some cases, though, what one deems "best" for the organization according to traditional or overarching organizational values may not adequately account for the needs of individuals served by the organization or, in the long run, the organization itself. For example, Larson and Tompkins (2005) found that managers' strong identification with organizational values impeded attempts at organizational change, change that would benefit employees and clients. In this case and others, concertive control proved to be at least as restrictive as more traditional forms of oversight (Barker, 1993), and it seemed to play a major role in how individuals decided what was best for themselves and other organizational stakeholders.

Indeed, research suggests individuals' sense of identity creates a series of premises upon which they are likely to rely as they make choices and develop an understanding of the world around them (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). For instance, individuals who become ingrained within a social collective's value structure rely on those values as they interact with others and make decisions both within and outside the confines of the social collective. Using this framework, one would assume educators' decisions about what, how, and why to teach their students are influenced by the school or school district through which they are employed. Evidence for this assumption is offered up by deWet and Gubbins (2011), who found significant differences in educators' beliefs about whether culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students should be included in gifted programs, even if the students did not qualify according to traditional inclusion criteria. The authors found educator beliefs varied depending on whether or not they were employed by school districts mandating gifted education. Those teachers who taught in districts without mandates were more favorable to CLED student inclusion. DeWet and Gubbins reasoned that one possible explanation for this relationship is educators in school districts mandating gifted education identified with the organization's goals and values and, thus, made their decisions based on their alignment with the organization. What cannot be ascertained from deWet and Gubbins's quantitative survey

analysis, however, is how outlier educators (e.g., those in states mandating gifted education but who nonetheless believed CLED students should be included) might deal with this conflicted organizational identification, a question that we explore in the present study.

To date, a growing body of research is dedicated to examining diverse categories of alternative identifications (i.e., neutral, deidentification, disidentification), including conflicted identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000). Pratt (2000) explained conflicted identification emerges when individuals "alternatively move toward, away, or against the organization" (p. 480).[1] For instance, individuals may develop a sense of conflicted identification when they identify strongly with some aspects of the organization's (or other social collective's) ideological positioning at the same time they actively (although not necessarily openly) disagree with other key elements of the organization's values or endorsements. Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) offered several more specific examples of this including "critical theorists in business schools (who embrace the general ideologies of scholarship and learning, but are at odds with the predominant positivist paradigm)," or "gays in conservative institutions (who could feel strong identification with most of the values of the organization, but perceive that their lifestyle is not accepted)" (p. 4). These authors have argued that conflicted identification and other similar states "may predict a host of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, ranging from satisfaction to intentions to quit, and from organizational citizenship behaviors to whistle-blowing" (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 22). Correspondingly, Scott (2007) noted the continued need to study the experience and expression of various forms of attachment as little is known about their communicative indicators and the potential implications of their discursive manifestations. The present study joins diverse attempts to answer this call within the context of U.S. public sex education and poses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What identification-oriented conflicts do sex educators describe encountering in the context of their employment?

Research Question 2: What strategies do sex educators identify as mechanisms they use for alleviating identification-oriented conflict in the context of their employment?

Method

Participants

Fifty sex educators employed at public schools throughout a Midwestern, U.S. state participated in this study.

Participants were employed at junior high schools ($n = 27$), high schools ($n = 22$), or at a joint junior/senior high school ($n = 1$). Their self-reported ages ranged from 23 to 65 years ($M = 40.68$, $SD = 12.38$), with 13 identifying as male and 37 as female, and all participants reporting their race/ethnicity to be either White or Caucasian. Correspondingly, 95% of public school teachers identified as White in the state in which the study took place and during the school year in which this study took place (K. Lane, personal communication, April 28, 2009). Sixty percent ($n = 30$) of the participants had gone beyond the required bachelor's degree and obtained a master's degree. Participants' tenure in their position ranged from 1 to 40 years ($M = 17$, $SD = 13.18$).

Of these 50 sex educators, 22 (44% of the sample as a whole) expressed in their interviews a sense of conflicted identification (see the subsequent Analysis section for discussion of construct operationalization). Their demographics largely aligned with the demographics of the sample as a whole. They were employed at junior high schools ($n = 11$), high schools ($n = 10$), or at a joint junior/senior high school ($n = 1$). Their self-reported ages ranged from 23 to 65 years ($M = 41.5$, $SD = 12.25$), with 5 identifying as male and 17 as female. Sixty-three percent ($n = 14$) of the participants had gone beyond the required bachelor's degree and obtained a master's degree. Participants' tenure in their position ranged from 2 to 40 years ($M = 20.86$, $SD = 12.33$).

Procedures

Following the attainment of institutional review board approval, sex educators were recruited to participate in this study. The sampling frame came from the list of public school teachers designated to teach health on the state's Department of Education website. Depending on available contact information, individuals were recruited by either email or formal letter. Four hundred teachers were contacted with a final sample size of 50 sex educators. Recruitment ended when the authors felt they had achieved a maximum variation sample representing a wide range of participant demographics and experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to conduct telephone interviews with participants. The semi-structured format not only allowed for consistency across interviews but also provided flexibility to inquire about participants' unique experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Telephone interviews allowed individuals to participate when it was convenient for them and alleviated some of the limitations inherent to a statewide study.

Dr. Jensen conducted all of the interviews. During the interviews, she first explained informed consent to each of the participants and, upon receiving verbal consent to audio-record the interview, a short battery of demographic questions was given. This was followed by a series of open-ended questions about participants' experiences derived, in part, from existing research on the communication of sex information targeting young people (Allen, 2009; Buston, Wight, Hart, & Scott, 2002). These questions focused on (a) their training and job history, (b) how they obtained information about what to include in their curriculum, (c) their description of the curriculum, (d) their perceived self-efficacy in the classroom, and (e) specific strategies they used to teach sex education. Taped interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes in length with an average length of 40.94 minutes ($SD = 10.14$). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. All participants were given a U.S. $20 gift certificate following the interview.

Analysis

The authors did not go into the analysis expecting to find conflicted identification, but, rather, conflicted identification emerged through the analysis, which was guided by constant-comparative techniques (Charmez, 2006). Each transcript was read in its entirety before coding commenced. As the authors began to see themes emerge, memos were generated exploring those themes. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) then occurred during which the authors began a list of theoretical categories and continuously compared the readings of the interview transcripts with the theoretical categories and revised as necessary. Themes were collapsed and refined throughout the process of coding and after discussion between the authors (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this process, it became clear that a number of participants were experiencing identification conflicts related to the curricular mandates of their employing organization. Thus, the authors decided to focus their analysis on the conflicted identification participants were describing and the ways in which educators reported managing these conflicts.

After this initial stage of analysis, the authors randomly selected and read 10 transcripts with an eye toward conflicted identification and examples of how participants responded. After discussing the content of the transcripts and reviewing relevant literature on conflicted identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000), the authors operationalized evidence of conflicted identification in terms of two elements: (a) individuals expressed alignment with some aspect of their job (e.g., their employing organization, their profession) and (b) individuals suggested they felt compelled by their school or school district to teach in one way but implied they would—given the personal freedom—like to teach another way. For an interviewee to be coded as exhibiting conflicted identification, they had to both exhibit identification within the context of employment *and* indicate they felt conflicted in their employment role because

of that identification. After creating coding criteria for conflicted identification, the authors divided the remaining 40 transcripts and coded them individually to ascertain how many participants expressed conflicted identification, as well as to collect examples of its expression and explore communicative responses to these conflicts. The examples provided throughout this article are drawn from the 22 cases in which conflicted identification was recognized. Pseudonyms are used in place of interviewees' names.

Results

Our analysis suggests that a number of participants (*n* = 22) reported an ideological perspective on sex education (i.e., beliefs about how and what to teach) at odds with the perspective mandated by the school/district of their employment. For the majority of these educators, this discrepancy was experienced as a significant ideological difference. But, for a number of reasons (e.g., job security, normative pressure from parents), they nonetheless tended to follow the dominant ideology and adhere to the goals/objectives of their organization (i.e., their school/school district). We argue that the identification experiences described by these individuals mirror what scholars have termed conflicted identification. The remainder of this section delineates the ideological struggles facing participants, why many participants reported following the dominant ideology despite personal concerns, and how these dominant ideologies are discursively negotiated and even subverted.

Sources of Conflicted Identification

Our participants described a range of diverse identification-oriented conflicts they encountered while teaching sex education. Although participants were not explicitly asked to speak about their identification(s), interviewees used language suggesting they felt connections with the various social collectives of which they were a part. Specifically, participants expressed degrees of both implicit and explicit identification with their profession. This identification was evidenced in statements from participants that noted (a) a calling to the profession (e.g., "I had a gift so I was gonna pursue that . . . I've been told, I've always been told I was a born teacher"—Nathan, a 30-year-old junior high school teacher), (b) significant work to maintain professional standards (e.g., conference participation, continuing education), (c) their position as one they personally selected and perceived as valuable (e.g., "I started teaching because I wanted to teach."—Julie, a 55-year-old junior/senior high school teacher), and/or (d) their role as significant as it involved educating youth for the betterment of the community (i.e., several educators noted they taught in schools/communities in which they

had grown up and, thus, had vested interests in teaching students how to contribute to those communities). Although participants seemed strongly entrenched within their professions, they also explained how these identification-oriented connections become stressed at times, particularly in the context of teaching sex education in mandated ways. Their interviews revealed conflicts of identification, which manifested in terms of feelings of inauthenticity, fear for job security, and concerns about angering community stakeholders. Many participants expressed having more than one of these feelings concurrently.

Feelings of inauthenticity. For some interviewees, the conflict they experienced seemed to originate from a sense of potential inauthenticity in carrying out their job. Nathan, a 30-year-old junior high school teacher, explained the moments he struggled with these feelings:

> When I have to say what abstinence is, I don't feel, I don't feel successful because I hate it. I hate saying that. I hate, only because I feel like I'm Bible-pushing. I feel like religion is getting into the schools and it's supposed to be that church and state are separated and I don't feel like that's what it is. Again, I don't have a religious affiliation and that may be a component of that. But people should have a choice. I guess it's my American-ism talking but I hate it because, kids, we're trying to teach them to be decision makers and now we are telling them, "No, you can't do that." And I was the type of kid that if you were to tell me "No," I'm going to find a way to do it. So that's personal. I don't, I just have a hard time saying abstinence.

Earlier in the interview, Nathan had expressed a strong degree of identification with his profession and the mission of his school. But, in this case, he also noted he closely identified with an ideology of "American-ism" involving the separation of church and state. Nathan suggested the organizational mandate to teach abstinence-only curricula was so closely aligned with religious messages that he "hated it" when he had to follow this dictate in the context of public schools.

Other participants expressed a similar sense of inauthenticity emerging when their beliefs about the goals of their profession (i.e., teaching children to be decision makers, providing accurate information) were at odds with what they had to teach as educators in organizations endorsing abstinence-only programs. These feelings stemmed from a belief that the curriculum was ineffective because some students were already engaging in sexual practices. For instance, John, a 26-year-old high school teacher, shared,

> I am not a proponent of abstinent-only sexual education. It doesn't work . . . I feel that I'm doing the students kind of an

injustice because it's kind of like teaching with textbooks from the 1800s. You know, the information they need is not there.

Similarly, Paige, a 56-year-old junior high school teacher, explained that she had been able to teach what she wished until the HIV/AIDS epidemic forced the district to revise their sex education curricula, which resulted in what she saw as an inappropriate and ineffective mandate:

> Paige: And when this committee began I was told that these are the things I could not address in my classroom: masturbation, homosexuality, birth control.
>
> Interviewer: Wow, birth control entirely.
>
> Paige: Yeah. And I'm thinking that's it. So I said, "I've taught too long to know that that wasn't gonna work! How do you do any AIDS instruction without any of those kinds of issues or even sexuality education?"

Julie, a 55-year-old junior/senior high school teacher, expressed a similar degree of frustration about a curriculum she deemed unrealistic and a student body she felt was due information about contraception and abortion. She explained, "The only [guideline] was, supposedly, I wasn't supposed to talk about birth-control options, abortion. I think those were the main two. And I just argued and said, 'That's unrealistic.' . . . And I just, truthfully, ignored it." For both Paige and Julie, rather than take on a role they found at odds with their sense of professional ethics, they decided to teach a curriculum that was not endorsed by their employers. This choice did not necessarily alleviate feelings of conflicted identification, but it nonetheless seemed to alleviate feelings of inauthenticity.

Concern for job security. For other participants, the biggest source of their sense of conflicted identification was their concern for job security. These participants disagreed with their employing organization's sex education policy but emphasized the fact that, if they were not to adhere to the policy, it would put them in danger of losing their jobs. As Eloise, a 60-year-old junior high school teacher, shared, "No matter how much you enjoy the students or you know the students, it's just not safe, as a teacher, to explain those kinds of things." Safety was not something Eloise could be assured if she overstepped the bounds of her school mandate.

Heidi, a 27-year-old high school teacher, admitted she had discussed things in the classroom that could have led to her dismissal:

> Yeah there's kind of like a black hole there . . . And when I look back on it if somebody really wanted to cite me on it, I guess I technically could have lost my job if someone, and

I guess I'm still in that same situation, I mean I hope to god that somebody doesn't want to take it that far.

Heidi described the tension of having to choose whether or not to jump in the black hole and risk one's own job security. This was a struggle echoed by Samantha, a 35-year-old high school teacher, who indicated she felt an ongoing sense of conflict that sometimes led her to thwart the rules, thus putting her job on the line, because key decision makers in her organization were unwilling to address the problems at hand:

> Well the problem, I think, is that [the school board] is not comfortable with [discussing birth control]. You know they knew that there is a problem with teen pregnancy, however it's not something they're willing to budge on, so in lieu of job security you kinda have to [discuss birth control in class despite the abstinence-only mandate] sometimes, unfortunately.

Samantha's use of the word "unfortunately" at the end of her comment highlights the dissonance and even disappointment she felt at the prospect of having to risk her job for the sake of the children she was appointed to educate. For many participants, their experiences teaching sex education repeatedly put them in a precarious position where they were forced to balance or choose between their organization's policies, perceived student needs, and their own job security.

Fear of angering organizational stakeholders. For still other participants, the key source of identification-oriented conflict they encountered in teaching sex education came from their perception/fear of angering organizational stakeholders such as parents or community members. Belinda, a 27-year-old junior high school teacher, highlighted the seemingly unresolvable tension she experienced in the face of this concern:

> Some parents want me to teach their child how to put on a condom, other parents would prefer that their child stay naïve and innocent. Parents who don't care about their child, they're not involved in their child's life, they don't care one way or the other, but parents who are involved with their child, they're usually either, "No I don't want you to talk about it," or "Yes, please talk about it, BUT don't talk about this." There are a lot of "buts" . . . So you know it's just a trial by fire.

From this perspective, sex educators feeling conflicted about diverse parental goals will likely always face dissent. However, without an employer sharing ideological perspectives about curricula, educators may feel especially ungrounded in their professional choices.

In a number of these cases, participants' sense of conflicted identification was revealed in light of their concerns about potentially negative parental responses. Nathan, the

30-year-old junior high teacher who expressed anger at being forced to teach an abstinence-only curriculum, indicated that he *only* teaches out of the textbook "because I don't want parents calling me" and because "I'm scared of getting sued. I'm so scared of getting sued. You get sued left and right and it's all based on that." Nathan, an individual adamant about what should be taught, still followed the organization's mandate because of the potential for stakeholder objections. Similarly, Joy, a 65-year-old junior high school teacher, explained, "Parents—they can be pretty scary." Concerns about "scary" organizational stakeholders and getting sued were compounded by concerns about job security, as well as acceptance within the larger community. Jake, a 52-year-old junior high teacher, explained,

> And it's like anything else, it only takes one person to write a letter to the editor, to call a school board member, and if those people don't want to deal with it, it comes from the top down. Watch what you do, watch what you say, don't be controversial. And like I said, you have to pick your battles and most of the time it's not worth the hassle.

Jake argued that a single disgruntled stakeholder had the power to set off a chain reaction in which an employee would be framed as, at best, problematic and, at worst, unfit for their job. Given that parents may become upset regardless of course content or teaching methods, sex educators in this sample seemed to feel an almost constant tension related to the choices they made in their job and their sense of identification with employing organizations they felt would not support them in the face of stakeholder objections.

Discursive Strategies for Managing Conflicted Identification

In spite of the sense of futility individuals such as Jake seemed to associate with their experiences of conflicted identification in the sex education classroom, a number of participants nonetheless delineated distinct communicative strategies allowing them to subvert the dominant ideology and lessen their feelings of conflict and futility. These strategies included finding ways to be student-focused, relying on sources external to the organization, and choosing silence or evasion.

Student-centered communication strategies. Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly indicated that they sought out ways to be student-centered in the classroom and thereby limit their sense that they were doing either their students or their employing organizations a disservice. In other organizational contexts, this strategy may be best translated as a client-focused orientation. In this

sample, participants reasoned, given that the schools' objective is to educate and thereby meet the needs of students, the choices teachers made to respond to students' experiences and inquiries would always align with schools' objectives in some respect, even if they technically defied schools' abstinence-only mandates. As Keri, a 52-year-old high school teacher explained, being student-centered and thereby serving the needs of the employing organization in an overarching sense involved accounting for the specific subjectivities and experiences of the populations served:

> Well, in the inner city I answer [questions that fall outside of the scope of the abstinence-only curriculum]. If I know it. Otherwise, if I tell them I don't know it, I'll go find out. Because you can't, with inner city kids, I mean you have to answer the questions or they'll get, I'm telling you, they just won't believe in the curriculum. They won't think you're authentic. It takes a long time to get their trust anyway. Once you've got their trust then you can help educate them. But these kids are not trusting people. But their lives are not trusting, these kids have hard lives. They come to school, we have a 99% attendance rate. So they come to school because they live in unsafe neighborhoods, they don't have stable home lives. A lot of time, they're switching places to live every 2 months. I mean, it's just not, and they need someone they can trust that can give them the right information. My kids have really hard lives.

In accounting for the lived experiences of her students, Keri came to the conclusion that student questions must guide her curriculum because anything other than a student-led discussion would result in students' lack of faith in her and her ability to teach.

Other participants explained how they created the space in which to answer the difficult questions students might ask and thereby extend the mandated curriculum. Several participants indicated they utilized question boxes for students to submit inquiries, or they opened the floor for discussion. These participants operated under the philosophy that if the student asked the question, they, as educators, were at liberty to answer said question. Heidi, a 27-year old high school teacher, explained her approach, stating

> I kind of have an environment where the kids can feel open to ask questions and I like that because kind of where our school stands on how you go about teaching it is abstinence-only. That's all that they really want us to tell our students but I feel that if they ask the question, I feel that I have the obligation to tell them, at least give them the knowledge or where they can go to find the correct answer.

Emily, a 47-year-old high school teacher, echoed that she had also found success with this approach:

In the [state] that's all we're supposed to teach [abstinence], but the little leeway is that if somebody asks then I can teach it. So I usually do a lead in and get them to ask a question about, well, "If you don't want to have a kid but you want to have sex, then what do we do?" And that's all I have to do, and then I can teach it.

This strategy offers the added benefit of giving teachers additional control over when, where, how, and whether specific questions were answered, as Jennie, a 47-year-old high school teacher, made clear:

Yeah, and I've had, you know, just very few times over the course of 25 years where a kid has taken me some place where, uncharted waters or what not, and if I know that there's no malice on their part, I can respectfully say just within the normal classroom management, I can say, "Let's you and I chat about that at a different time," not trying to be demeaning to them, but yeah, I'll deal with it at some point, maybe not in front of 32 of them, but I'll deal with it.

Beyond speaking with specific students one-on-one, other teachers drew from student-submitted questions and rephrased them in ways they deemed more appropriate for class discussion. That these discussions ultimately seemed to be generated from students, rather than from the teacher, offered teachers a degree of justification for extending the curriculum and alleviated their sense of conflicted identification.

Employing sources external to the organization. Another strategy participants used for providing students with information outside of the mandated curriculum, without explicitly defying the mandate itself, involved directing students to external resources. Evan, a 49-year-old junior high school teacher, explained he would provide students with abbreviated answers to their questions and then refer them to a nurse for further information. Other participants, such as Carolyn, a 43-year-old junior high school teacher, relied on resources outside of the school for student referrals:

I said there were [questions about things like abortion or pregnancy], I will give them that lady's number [an external organization], because she's been ok'd by the school and then she can get into it further and she can keep it quiet if she wants or whatever she wants to do.

Similarly, Eloise, a 60-year-old junior high teacher, relied extensively on external resources. One of the external presenters who visited her classes ultimately became a long-term resource for students as he

gives a telephone number, where they [the students] can call if they need help with anything or if they have any more questions. He has a website that he really encourages them

to use, to keep in touch with him, let him know [what] they're doing, if they're having any questions or feelings that they're having some trouble with.

Furthermore, Eloise explained that she actively fostered a persona that encourages students to go to others with their questions: "Students don't generally talk to me. I'm not one that they come talk to. I'm pretty strict."

This practice of encouraging students to ask other individuals about their questions seemed to help teachers feel they were staying within the bounds of their employing organization's directives without denying students the information they felt was needed. In some cases, this strategy involved directly answering some beyond-the-pale questions first and then referring students elsewhere. For instance, Keri, the 52-year-old inner-city high school teacher quoted above, explained her students "come and talk to me about STDs and I refer them to the County health department and get the social worker involved." But in other cases, such as that of Carolyn and Eloise, this strategy involved no more than a referral and thereby offered a relatively conservative approach to stretching the limits of organizational mandates and alleviating the tensions of conflicted identification.

Evasion. A final strategy several participants delineated for alleviating their sense of conflicted identification was silence or evasion. That is, they indicated that they simply did not share their curriculum or teaching strategies with others. The following interview exchange with Justine, a 29-year-old high school teacher, highlights this strategy:

Justine: I guess I go by the "don't ask, don't tell" philosophy but I've never had anybody question as far as . . .

Interviewer: And so if they do start asking, it sounds like people start getting concerned about what's going on.

Justine: Right, right.

By keeping to herself, Justine suggested she evaded the extra attention and corresponding concern that might be generated from discussions about her teaching. Later in the same interview, Justine explained she makes information from Planned Parenthood available to students, but she has to be strategic in how she does so:

Interviewer: Do you think that your school board would find [giving students information about Planned Parenthood] problematic, or do you think that would be okay . . . ?

Justine: It's hard to say. I'm thinking that, again, they would be, if they found out it was going on, I think they would have a problem with it. So I would be hesitant just to . . .

Interviewer: Right. Just to have the [Planned Parenthood] cards [handed out to all students].

Justine: Yeah but I might put a number on a bulletin board so it's there.

In this case, Justine, like Carolyn, Eloise, and Keri, used the strategy of referring students to sources external to the organization.

Another example of evasion strategies at work involved situations wherein educators felt compelled to expand on the information provided by external sources. For example, Katie, a 31-year-old junior high teacher, noted her district contracts with a religious-based organization to teach an abstinence-only curriculum. In their presentations, this contracted organization takes the stance "no birth control is 100% effective except for self-control . . . they say condoms do not work effectively 100% of the time." Katie explained that explanation results in "a lot of kids they walk away with the attitude 'Well if condoms don't work why bother.'" In response, she gives what she calls the "seat belt speech" once the organization has finished their presentation:

> So I address it as, well you can say that seat belts don't always save your life in a crash, but you could say why bother, but if you are going to do something that's risky it's probably a better idea to try to protect yourself in some way, than not protect yourself at all. "Would it be safer to never get into a car?" Yeah, probably. But you have to protect yourself somehow.

Katie, it seems, took liberty to expand on the mandated curriculum, and she did so without making that information known to others in her organization.

What set this strategy apart from some of the examples discussed earlier is that the teachers were fairly certain that their employing organization would not approve of the external source (in Justine's case) or the message provided (for Katie). In this way, this strategy may actually function to heighten, rather than alleviate, the sense of conflicted identification employees experience as they are forced to carry out their job from within a context fraught with evasion and potential exposure.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that many of the sex educators who participated ($n = 22$) experienced an ideological conflict between what they were required to teach by an employing organization and what they personally and professionally believed needed to be taught. This conflict left them in a precarious organizational position as they constructed lesson plans and navigated classroom interaction.

Theoretical Implications

Although conflicted identification is not a new construct, to date, it remains underdeveloped empirically. What little research does exist on this construct, particularly in the context of organizational affiliation, makes it clear that a better understanding of the experience and discursive management of this subjectivity has the potential to serve both individual and organizational interests. For instance, Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) reasoned,

> If identification is the expected state, then experiencing ambivalence may indicate momentum toward possible disidentification, a possible way station on the slippery slope toward antipathy. If so, the impact of ambivalence on the individual and organization may be more pernicious than [is] . . . generally recognize[d]. (p. 19)

Alleviating this extension from conflicted identification to disidentification and antipathy depends upon an explication of the source of the break that occurs when an individual is split between identifying and not identifying. How this break manifests itself discursively and how organizational members negotiate this break without traveling down the "slippery slope toward antipathy" are questions upon which the data analyzed here shed some light.

More specifically, this data suggest one of the predictors of whether an individual is able to comfortably exist in this conflicted state without fully disidentifying is his or her ability to strategically communicate with various stakeholders. Participants pointed to several ways they negotiated within the ideological system in place including drawing from student-derived inquiries, referring students to external resources, and limiting the amount of information they provided to others both inside and outside their organization concerning their job decisions and practices. In some cases, these tactics allowed educators to maintain their organizational affiliation while still preserving a greater sense of meeting students' needs, which they believed to be their professional responsibility. These strategies also helped educators negotiate some of the barriers to having a more comprehensive curriculum (i.e., struggles with feelings of inauthenticity, concern for their job security, and fears about angering organizational stakeholders). These findings echo and extend the research on identity threats from the psychology literature. Specifically, Petriglieri (2011) identified ways individuals may respond to a threat to one of their identities. The following responses from Petriglieri's typology are evident in our participants' responses: (a) derogation which results in social isolation (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007) as several of our participants avoided talking about their teaching strategies with others, (b) concealment (Pachankis, 2007) as several of our participants voiced concerns about feeling inauthentic, and (c) change in importance of identities (Kreiner,

Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009) as our participants privileged one identity over another as they chose to fulfill professional obligations rather than meet organizational mandates. In this respect, the present study gives voice to Petriglieri's proposed model of identity threats and extends the model by expanding the repertoire of identities upon which individuals draw.

More specifically, the present data provide evidence that the liminal state between identification and disidentification may be made more tolerable when individuals are able to shift to other identifications. The key to existing in this liminal state may be the concept of nested identities, in which individuals feel connected to multiple groups—groups often enmeshed within each other (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). As Cooper and Thatcher (2010) proposed, the identifications upon which individuals call depend on their own self-concept and the motive for identification. In the present study, analysis indicated many participants held their profession as the core of their identity, but this professional identification (i.e., "I am a teacher.") was nested within their organizational identification (i.e., "I am a teacher at X high school."), which was also nested within their feelings of connection with their school district (i.e., "I am a member of X school district."). These multiple, nested identifications allowed our participants to rely on a comparatively compatible identification to guide them through their experiences teaching sex education. To illustrate, although many participants reported feeling conflict with the organization and school district's policy on sex education, no participants expressed feeling conflicted with their profession. Indeed, it was their perceived professional obligation to educate students, what Cooper and Thatcher would refer to as their identification motive, which made them feel conflicted about organizational mandates. This finding aligns with Lammers and Garcia's (2009) argument that professional identification often transcends other identifications. Indeed, our participants reported that organizational mandates to teach anything less than a comprehensive sex education curriculum created an ethical dilemma to either teach as mandated or to teach as they believed was necessary for the health and well-being of their students. Their response to this dilemma either led them to put their job in jeopardy (and thereby risk their sense of organizational identification) or teach sex education in a way they believed was less than effective for their students, thus putting their students' health at risk (and thereby risking their sense of professional identification). In this respect, this study not only supports previous research suggesting identifications are multiple (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott, 1999; Scott et al., 1999; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000) and fluid (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998; Elsbach, 1999; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Pratt, 2000),

but it also begins to explore how one identification (in this case, professional identification) may cause a conflict in identification with another source while still preventing disidentification.

Specifically, the findings of this study begin to explore the communicative dimensions of the interplay other scholars have found between professional and organizational identification. For example, Frandsen (2012) found high-profile individuals in low-prestige organizations shift their identification to other targets to cope with poor organizational images. In the present study, the identification shift participants experienced was in response to fundamental differences in values between identification targets. Similarly, Hekman, Bigley, Steensma, and Hereford (2009) found when professional identification was reciprocal to organizational identification (i.e., high professional identification and low organizational identification or vice versa), the effects of perceived organizational support and perceived psychological contract violation (i.e., when an organization disappoints an employee) were significant. In the present study, we see qualitative accounts of how employees react when they are disappointed by their organization. The results of this article allow us to more clearly understand how the interplay between nested identifications is communicatively constructed. The current study also presents an opportunity for future scholars to more fully explore, first, how nested identifications interact, second, how these various identifications might allow individuals to maintain a sense of an authentic self when they experience conflicted identification, and, third, how communicative strategies change depending on where on the continuum of identifications an individual locates herself or himself.

Finally, this study raises questions about the relationship between concertive control, or control based on value propositions, and more direct methods of control in organizations. Indeed, it seems as if it is the interplay between these types of control within the various identification targets that created conflict for participants. For instance, participants indicated they had the proclivity to adhere to the values of their profession and, thereby, suggested professional ideologies drove their behavioral choices. However, conflict arose when these values were confronted with tangible control mechanisms (i.e., loss of job, jeopardizing relationships with stakeholders). This finding demonstrates there are often competing modalities of control at work in an organization and points to these opposing power sources, in this case, professional values versus organizational mandates, as a catalyst for conflicted identification. Future research needs to more fully examine the role of control in relation to conflicted identification.

Pragmatic Implications

In the context of teaching sex education specifically, participants who expressed a sense of conflicted identification

cited specific sources of conflict (i.e., feelings of inauthenticity, concerns about job security, concerns about organizational stakeholder disapproval), all of which may actually be grounded in overarching structural issues related to the organization as a whole. For instance, some participants pointed to a lack of formal training or guidance about what should/could be covered in their sex education courses. They were familiar with the overarching ideology of the program but were not given formal training about how their teaching should mirror this ideology. Therefore, these individuals were left in a quandary, deciding what is and what is not appropriate as they balanced their desire to follow organizational rules with their personal beliefs concerning what students needed to be taught. Furthermore, many participants also noted they received no training on teaching techniques specifically useful for teaching sex education. They indicated their particular teaching techniques came from trial and error. This suggests a more formalized training program for sex educators, either as part of college curricula or district/state-wide initiatives, may help ameliorate the organizational conflicts sex educators face and provide them with useful educational tools for communicating pertinent information. This suggestion is in line with Petriglieri's (2011) model proposing social support as a moderator between identity threats and individuals' responses to said threats.

In an applied sense, regardless of whether participants' sense of professional conflict was the result of a lack of guidance/training or of something else, participants in these interviews provided many comments suggesting their own sense of conflicted identification affected their ability to do their job and students' ability to learn. Students, they argued, could tell when they were being inauthentic and feeling conflicted about their degree of honesty and forthrightness in the classroom. Participants implied students probably picked upon this feeling and were less forthcoming with questions and less aggressive about seeking out sexual-health information than if they had encountered a more centered, open, and supportive instructor. These comments not only support research highlighting negative professional and organizational outcomes of conflicted identification among employees (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) but also provide one possible reason why sex education in this country is, and long has been, failing. Future research needs to further explore the relationship between conflicted identification among sex educators and students' learning and health outcomes.

Limitations

The present study is limited in that participants were all employed in the same state and, thus, do not represent the experiences of sex educators employed in other parts of the United States, particularly those states with different educational mandates. In addition, the study was not able to include information about individual teacher rankings and reviews and, therefore, cannot speak objectively about the potential relationship between, for instance, professional success and the experience and negotiation of conflicted identification. What the study does provide insight into, however, is the possibility that conflicted identification is often central to the experience of teaching sex education and this subjectivity, and its implications may be managed via more-or-less subtle discursive mechanisms.

Note

1. Conflicted identification has also been termed ambivalent or schizo-identification (see Elsbach, 1999).

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