

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, in my course Women in Society, I was presenting some of the recent research on rape, when I noticed tears in the eyes of one of the young women in the class. I asked if she was okay and she replied, "It happened to me." She then told the class of having been raped two years earlier. This in-class disclosure was the first time the young woman had ever told anyone about her experience, and it galvanized the approximately twenty students in this all female class into "gathering around" her emotionally for the last few minutes of the class session. Class members expressed their concern about what had happened to her, and as they left, I took the young woman aside to ask how she was feeling. Although she said she was fine, I told her that there were counseling services available, adding that I would be glad to refer her to one of them. As she nodded and left the room, I was very conscious of the inadequacy of my response.

In the years that have followed, other less dramatic, but similar experiences have reinforced my awareness that many classroom discussions have the potential for eliciting intense personal reactions. In some of these situations the students shared their feelings with the whole class. On other occasions, the students discussed their reactions with either a few of us or only with me. As a result of my experiences, I have developed some strategies for dealing with this kind of situation. I was, however, interested in the extent to which other sociologists have

had similar experiences, the kind of courses that elicited them and the ways the situations were handled. Over the past few months I have interviewed seventeen colleagues¹, mostly sociologists, concerning these topics. In the following sections I will draw upon my own experiences and those of my colleagues.

As we end a decade of teaching courses on sex and gender, it is clear that there has been an increase of courses and materials that focus on these issues. This trend is likely to continue. It is therefore important for faculty to understand and adequately respond to student reactions which the teaching of material on sex and gender has the potential for generating.

COURSES AND TOPICS

The seventeen colleagues with whom I discussed this topic reported a variety of experiences. Most recalled at least several situations, in a variety of courses, in which a class discussion had generated student reactions that needed extra attention. On the other hand, a few faculty members noted that while students in their classes would share attitudes and/or describe personal situations, these classroom experiences had never generated a reaction that the faculty member felt required further response.

The kinds of situations that colleagues described were as varied as their courses and materials they covered. In the small sample of faculty members interviewed, there was a wide range of