

## **“I JUST DON’T FEEL COMFORTABLE”: OPENNESS AS A TOOL TO SWEDIFY INTIMACY**

Anna Baral

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Cultural Studies, Linnaeus University/project leader Vän i Umeå,  
Sweden*

[anna.baral@lnu.se](mailto:anna.baral@lnu.se)/[anna@vaniumea.se](mailto:anna@vaniumea.se)

### **ABSTRACT**

Sexual and reproductive health education for migrants is highly prioritised by the Swedish government and organisations working with reception and resettlement. School professionals lament a lack of specific education and feel unprepared to deal with such sensitive issues and must rely on educational materials that often lack cultural sensibility (Bredström & Bolander 2018). In this context, it often happens that expectations of what is “properly” Swedish in relation to intimacy and sexuality are projected on the students. In a country that is represented as progressive and freed, youth are expected to be willing to talk about certain topics openly and straightforwardly, in a presumed contrast with what happens instead in “their culture”.

The paper addresses the tension between openness and silence that unfolds in the dialogue between teachers and students born abroad and its meaning in the process of “Swedification”. Drawing on the literature on silence in intercultural perspective (Jackson 2004) and on the expectation of having a “voice” as a form of epistemic violence (Orner 1992), it reflects on how the tension between voice and silence contributes to constructing images of Swedishness in relation to sex education. “Openness”, or speaking up, is believed to empower young adults, as part of a liberal, democratic dialogue, even if this is uncomfortable and frightening to many. To have a voice becomes not only a right but also a requirement for inclusion. In response, migrants carefully navigate silence, reticence, or diversion as empowering and “comfortable” (albeit never passive).

Drawing on ethnographic interviews and participant observation with young adults with migratory experience, the paper explores the discomfort engendered by “having to speak” about intimacy, and how it is handled by the actors involved. It argues that while a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler 1999) can be productive of social change, the *injunction* to speak may however deprive young people with migratory experience of a space where they can reflexively and safely assess contradictory demands in the new country – a deprivation that ultimately hinders them from becoming the “good citizens” they are expected to be.

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**Keywords:** openness, intimacy, sex education, discomfort

**Authors biography:**

I have received my PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Uppsala University with a dissertation on masculinity and morality in Uganda. My first postdoc, within the project IMAGENU (Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda; Århus University, Copenhagen University, Gulu University), has focused on interethnic and biracial relationships and the role of transnational imagination in couples' intimacies. My second postdoc, within the project "Let's Talk" at Linnaeus University, directed by Dr. Åsa Trulsson and with Christopher High, has focused on the role of intimacy and relationships in the lives of your people with migratory experience in Sweden. I am now employed as project leader in the organization *Vän i Umeå*, working on inclusion and migration in the city of Umeå, northern Sweden.