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Research Article

## Subjectivity About Sexual Ethics Among Korean Undergraduate Students Using Q Methodology



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### SUMMARY

**Purpose:** Most undergraduate students are in the phase of gaining mental and physical autonomy from their parents as they expand their worlds. The ways that sexual ethics are established during this time may have an important influence on healthy lifestyles and the maintenance of social order. This study aims to determine a typology of undergraduate students' sexual ethics and the characteristics that compose the types.

**Methods:** Q methodology, which analyzes the subjectivity of each type of attitude, was used. The 44 selected Q statements from 43 participants were classified into the shape of a normal distribution using a 9-point scale. The collected data were analyzed using the PC-QUANL program.

**Results:** The results revealed three discrete groups of students with respect to sexual ethics: traditional absolute purity type, open-minded compromise type, and rational responsibility type.

**Conclusions:** The results of this study indicate that different approaches to educational programs on sexual ethics are recommended for undergraduate students based on the three types studied.

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### Introduction

Sexuality transcends sexual activity; it is a comprehensive concept that includes attitudes, values, activities, and sense of sexual identity [1]. At present, Korea has an ambivalent standard of sexuality attributed to the mix between traditional Korean culture, which emphasized virginity and sexual expression within marriage, and Western romantic love ideology and sexual freedom. The Korean-type sexual morality that has emerged has brought major changes to the ethics and lifestyle of Korean society and active academic discussions on sexuality. However, the inflow of Western ways of thinking, commodification of sex, and absence of systematic sex education have brought increasing confusion to ethical values regarding sex, consequently bringing rise to many problems, such as sexual harassment and violence, and abortion.

Korea has many issues that relate to sexuality. The number of victims of sexual violence in Korea is increasing [2]. In 2011, the

number of sexual violence consultations reported was 129,938, which increased to 145,446 in 2013 [2]. Further, the number of unmarried mothers is increasing to a serious level of concern. Korea is a nation with a low fertility rate and an aging population, and consequently, a high level of artificial abortion and high numbers of international adoptions are truly national losses [3]. According to "Status and needs of single mothers report 2005" by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family [4], unmarried mothers aged 20–29 years accounted for over 50.0% of all unmarried mothers. Moreover, the primary explanation for the high percentage of unmarried mothers was unplanned pregnancy owing to lack of or poor quality contraception.

Biological sexuality is based on the primary sex characteristics present at birth, but sexual identity is constructed through socialization that usually culminates at the end of puberty. Sexual identity is established through the combined influences of the maturity of biological sexuality and the individual's psychological integration with his or her biological development. It is completed primarily when identity and role by sex has occurred and then demonstrated through sexual role behavior, as well as the establishment of sexual ethics [5]. This process is commonly believed to occur during the end of adolescence and early years of adulthood.

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Undergraduate students are generally at this developmental point. They are in the process of gaining mental and physical autonomy from their parents and expanding their worlds [6]. Therefore, it is during this period that they establish their attitudes toward sexuality and start their sexual activities through exposure to diverse information on sexuality and sexual activities [7]. The ways that sexual ethics are established during this time may have an important influence on healthy lifestyles and the maintenance of social order.

Sexuality affects not only an individual's personality and emotions; it is the foundation of healthy social interaction. Thus, philosophical reflection on sexual values is important, based on which a firm foundation of sexual ethics that recognizes ideal sexual conditions and morally allowable sexual conditions could be established. Ethical values include the meanings and values given to sexuality by individuals, and these ethics vary according to individuals' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and academic circumstances. In addition, an individual's social context influences her or his ethical thinking and attitudes through continuous negotiations with herself or himself [8,9]. The establishment of ethical values is necessary to an individual's ability to make ethical decisions. Therefore, sexual values and ethics that will properly guide an individual's sexual consciousness and activities need to be established.

The vast majority of the literature on sexual ethics is composed of quantitative studies that focus on knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, sexual behaviors, and pregnancy [6,7,10–15]. Moreover, sexual ethics education and related programs have mainly been targeted at teenagers or college students as a whole, neglecting their individualities [16]. However, individuals' subjectivities in terms of sexual ethics play a critical role in understanding the relevant issues beyond words. Therefore, researchers should analyze each subjective perspective. Subjectivity is revealed by a systematic categorization of people's thoughts, feelings, values, and experiences related to the current research issue [17,18]. Therefore, the present study sought to identify college students' subjectivities with regard to sexual ethics by the Q methodology, which provides a systematic study of subjectivity [17].

This study aims to determine a typology of undergraduate students' sexual ethics and the characteristics that compose the types. By confirming the structure of undergraduates' subjective types of sexual ethics, the study aims to address the establishment of values for sexual ethics. A typology of sexual ethics is expected to help in providing customized sex education targeted at each type, enhance the content of counseling programs, and contribute to a resolution of the ambiguity of Korea's sexual culture.

## Methods

### Research design

This study was conducted via a Q methodological approach to explore and describe subjectivity regarding sexual ethics among Korean undergraduate students.

### Q methodology

Q methodology, introduced by William Stephenson in 1935, combines the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research as a research method in encouraging participating individuals to express their subjective perspectives on a particular issue [19].

The five stages of the Q methodology in the present study are as follows: First, through literary reviews, journal collections, and in depth interviews, various ideas, beliefs and opinions are assembled to form "concourses". Second, a set of statements that best

represent the concourses is developed (Q sample). Third, the participants (P sample) select and sort these statements into forced-choice structures (Q sorting). All statements must be ranked, where each position can only be used once. Fourth, the collected data are analyzed by creating a correlation matrix for factor analysis. Factor scores are calculated for the Q sorting of each participant, and a total score is computed by examining the validity of the statements. Based on these results, the subjectivity types of the research participants are identified. Finally, each subjectivity type is interpreted [20].

### Procedure and data collection

#### Concourses (Q population) and Q sample

In this study, the Q population is expressed by the concourse that is the sum of all statements or opinions uttered by the undergraduate students with regard to the sexuality issue being investigated. It should be composed of all of the statements that each participant expressed subjectively about the themes, objects, and concepts in the study, including subjective thoughts [21]. This study conducted a literature review, an open-ended questionnaire survey to extract statements on sexual ethics, and in depth interviews with eight students from various classes with specific gender and age characteristics. Before each interview, each interviewee was informed about the purposes and procedures of the study, and each interviewee provided informed consent. The interviews took an average of 1–2 hours, including the time spent obtaining participants' statements regarding open questions such as "What pops into your head when sexuality is mentioned?" and "Please tell me your honest opinion about sexuality ethics."

This procedure generated statements that expressed recognition of sexual ethics. All of these statements were extracted and arranged into 180 Q populations created to avoid overlapped questions. Then, the Q populations were categorized through repeated readings, from which statements believed to represent the best category for each subject emerged and were selected [21]. Prior to this survey, 44 statement samples were determined using two preliminary surveys and discussions with experts on Q methodology.

#### P sample

As the variable in Q methodology is the "person" and not a characteristic of the person, which is the case in individual-level quantitative research, Q methodology can be performed based on the small sample theory: if the P sample increases, a number of people will be concentrated into one factor, which would obscure that characteristic [21]. The present study had a P sample of 43 undergraduate students from three universities in Jeonllabuk-do province.

#### Q sorting

All of the participants were asked to rank the order of the Q samples using a grid termed the Q sort table by means of a paper-and-pencil survey. The Q sorting yielded a systematic forced distribution of 44 Q statements on a scale of 1–9 (Figure 1). After each Q sort, the participants were interviewed on the items they had placed in the extreme columns [*most strongly disagree* (ranked –4) and *most strongly agree* (ranked +4)]. The resultant Q sort was a matrix representing each participant's operant subjectivity on the issue under consideration.

#### Validity and reliability

Validity of a Q study includes content, face, and Q sorting validity. The reliability of Q sorting was verified using a test–retest

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