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Editorial

Sexualities in the Margins: Creating a Space for Conversations

Arpita Das, Annelies Kleinherenbrink and Ebtihal Mahadeen

Although intrinsic to one's being, sexuality remains a controversial and taboo subject around the world. While certain cultures may appear to be more forthcoming in discussing certain aspects of sexuality, holistic discussions are still in short supply everywhere. In addition, whereas open conversations on sexuality are almost invisible in certain regions, in others they are mostly limited to the heterosexual, white, non-disabled, monogamous and marital realms. In some regions, the mainstream discourses on sexuality are limited to ambits of reproduction and reproductive health alone, thereby rendering invisible conversations on, for example, non-marital and non-heterosexual sexualities. In others still, it may be easier to talk about sexuality in the contexts of public health and/or sexual abuse and assault. However these discussions may again be limited to specific populations. For example, it could be claimed that it is more acceptable to talk about sexual violence against women and girls, but these conversations become strained in the context of sexual assault of men and boys as the social construction of masculinity imagines men as only the perpetrators, but never the victims and survivors, of sexual violence. Thus, although conversations around sexuality have undoubtedly shifted and expanded in the past few years, they still remain confined to the stereotypical stranglehold. Discussions and debates around affirmative sexuality and sexual rights remain scarce or limited to certain spaces, and we often find that even when sexuality is discussed, certain sexualities are deemed legitimate while others are pronounced perverse, immoral, unhealthy or illegitimate.

This special edition of the Graduate Journal of Social Science (GJSS) is inspired by a unique event, which sought to create a space to talk about marginalized aspects of sexuality. The 2011 NOISE (Network of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies in Europe) summer school ran in Breukelen, the Netherlands, under the title *The Miraculous (Dis)-Appearing Act of Sexuality: Mapping the Study of Sexuality in Europe, 1960-2010.* It was there that we, the editors of this special issue, met as participants. The academic institute created a space for conversations on an eclectic selection of subjects – including the history of sexualities in Europe, lesbian and gay sexualities, the emergence of heterosexuality as a concept, intersexualization, homonationalism, as well as nuanced discussions on homosexuality, bisexuality, queer and transgender politics, amongst other topics. Conversations during this academic institute opened up avenues to reflect on many of the unconventional, the invisible and the marginalized aspects of sexuality. *Sexuality in Focus* emerged from the discussions and debates in Breukelen, and we hope that this diverse collection of papers will speak to a diverse range of readers and academics who are engaged and invested in the broader realm of sexuality studies.

In this volume, Agata Pacho's paper *Establishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the Imaginary and the Collective* shares conceptual interlinkages with Ayisigi Hale Gonel's paper, *Pansexual Identification in Online Communities: Employing a Collaborative Queer Method to Study Pansexuality.* Pacho discusses the need for acknowledging and accepting asexual identities and creating spaces for their expression. She contends that the existence of asexuality challenges the notion of the 'universal innate sexual drive' particular to human experience. She further emphasizes the need for revising perceptions of sexual orientation, gender relations and family formation. In her paper, Gonel discusses the concept of pansexuality as 'sexual attraction regardless of gender, sex or lack thereof'. Her paper puts forth the argument that the very idea of pansexuality is destabilizing, particularly since we live in societies that uphold normality and where the gender identity of a person is seen as intimately linked to their sexual orientation. Pansexuality thus leaves not only the person to whom one is attracted to in gendered terms abstract, but also the sex/gender of the desiring subjects themselves. Both concepts of asexuality and pansexuality challenge the heteronormative norm and open up a diverse set of possibilities, which destabilize the notion of binaries in the context of sexuality. Furthermore, both Pacho and Gonel push forward the idea of online groups as a different form of community-building. That both scholars relied on online spaces to research people's experiences of asexuality and pansexuality speaks about potential marginalization and invisibility of such groups, which brings forth the significance of representation: who and what gets represented in the mainstream and, consequently, who and what is rendered invisible in this process?

Moving along the same lines of problematizing gender and sexuality, Lena Eckert's paper *From the 'Polymorphous Perverse' to Intersexualization: Intersections in Cross-Cultural Ethnographies* examines the quest for the male, the female and the intersex. Eckert uses the concept of the 'polymorphous perverse', a psychoanalytic term coined in the nineteenth century in sexological discourses, and traces its subsequent usage in ethnological and anthropological work in the twentieth century. She examines the work of Gilbert Herdt in his anthropological research in the 1990s on Sambian people in Papua New Guinea and his usage of the concept of 'polymorphous perverse' to depict hermaphrodites in the Sambian culture. Eckert claims that the concept has been used not only to depict the fissures within the gender and sex binaries, but also to talk about 'arrested development' in non-Western or supposedly primitive cultures. This argument lends immediate relevance to our contemporary lives when Eckert draws analogies between the nineteenth century usage of the term to depict the homosexual and/or the hermaphrodite as abnormal and the racialized discourses in the twentieth century to talk about the non-Western or the less developed.

The first three papers in this issue thus pose many questions about the 'normal' and the 'natural'. They all underscore the fact that within a 'normalized' society, only certain sexual identities, genders, sexualities and sexual orientations are recognized. Within this worldview, it is heterosexuality that is married and aimed at reproduction that gets recognition and primacy. Intersex people who challenge the binary nature of sexes thus fall through the cracks. Other forms of sexual expression and desire (or the lack of it), such as pansexuality and asexuality, pose challenges to the structures of hetero/ homosexuality. Taking this conversation forward, the next set of papers in this issue discusses the ways in which certain discourses within sexuality get marginalized. They ask: in what ways do these discourses get submerged, who decides what enters discussions on sexuality and on what basis?

In his paper *R v Peacock: Landmark Trial Redefines Obscenity Law*, Alex Antoniou unpacks what is considered obscene, who gets to decide what is considered obscene, and how the state enters discussions on obscenity. In discussing a particular landmark case from 2011-12 in which Michael Peacock, charged under an obscenity law, gets acquitted, Antoniou illuminates the machinations of the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 (applicable to England and Wales) and the changing discourses on obscenity. Antoniou makes an interesting observation that the very strength of the obscenity test, which allows for the discretion and the interpretation of the jury, can become its weakness. He furthermore observes that the test of obscenity is not so much dependent on the effectiveness of the material in question, but on the effect on its potential audience. Therefore, although Peacock's material largely dealt with issues of male fisting, sado-masochism and urination conventionally considered obscene under the law, the potential audience he was catering to was well aware of the materials and their potential effects. As such, the acquittal of Peacock, while serving as a triumph for the freedom of sexual expression, also points towards problematic complexities underlying contemporary obscenity law.

Continuing with the theme of unpacking the dynamics that marginalize certain discourses on sexuality, Freya Johnson Ross examines the school-based Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) for young people in her paper *Are We Nearly There Yet? Struggling to Understand Young People as Sexual Subjects*. Johnson Ross challenges the commonly held notion that young people are asexual and illegitimate sexual subjects, critically assessing the nature of SRE in schools within England. Indeed, she finds that although sexuality-related information is transacted in schools, a large part of SRE focuses on the biological and reproductive elements of sexuality, overemphasizing the risks and dangers of sex, safety and protection as well as teenage pregnancies and infection. By contrast, Johnson Ross argues, what this kind of education misses out on are important discussions around sexual pleasures, desires and expressions, affirmative sexuality and diversity of sexualities. Johnson Ross furthermore points out that this kind of approach upholds the Cartesian hierarchy of knowledge in which the mind is privileged over the body and therefore all physical elements of sexuality are regarded as the least valuable.

Isabelle Dussauge extends this discussion of Cartesian logic in the process of obtaining orgasm data of the brain in neuroscientific research studies of the 2000s. In these studies, the 'non-fleshy, non-bodily aspect of orgasm' is achieved through the subtraction of the 'imitation of orgasm data' from the overall 'orgasm data', thus erasing the muscular body data from the brain data. In her paper *The Experimental Neuro-Framing of Sexuality,* Dussauge discusses at large the biases, assumptions and pitfalls within this kind of research and makes interesting revelations about what is considered sexual (or not), who is considered a legitimate sexual subject, and what makes for a legitimate study of sexuality. For example, neuroscientific studies of sexuality tend to include only certain sexual subjects (for example, young people in their twenties, males and heterosexual males). Interestingly, Dussauge observes that within the study on participants' sexual orientation in neuroscientific research, it is participants who occupy the extreme ends of the Kinsey scale and who are considered the bearers of idealized and ideally oriented homo- and heterosexuality that gain primacy. Dussauge claims that this is not because other forms of sexuality or sexual expressions do not exist, but possibly because they are considered expendable within the neuroscientific project. In separating the body from the brain, this kind of a research project also upholds the brain as the most important sexual organ.

Lastly, two interesting book reviews add to the scholarship on the miraculous (dis-)appearing of sexuality, the theme of this particular issue. Michelle Hutchinson Grondin reviews Lenore Manderson's book *Technologies of Sexuality, Identity and Sexual Health* (2012) and highlights the diversified ways of using sexual technologies in various parts of the world in unique ways signifying a process of empowerment for marginalized sexualities. Ellen Zitani reviews Laura Schettini's book, *Il Gioco Delle Parti: Travestimenti e Paure Sociali Tra Otto e Novecento* (2011) studying forms of gender non-conformity and transvestism in Italian history. In reviewing Schettini's work, Zitani emphasizes that studying gender transgression can be a useful method for historians to understand the making of the Italian citizen and their relationship with the state.

In this special issue we have attempted to touch upon a variety of subjects within the ambit of sexualities; subjects which remain at the margins or, in some cases, entirely invisible. Although we have attempted to present a wide spectrum of subjects, we acknowledge that there are many others that remain invisible, for example, sexualities of people with disabilities, or the aging and their sexualities. However, as editors of *Sexuality in Focus*, we hope that this issue will further some conversations around marginalized sexualities. We hope it will contribute to the blurring of boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities and that it will highlight the shifting definitions and dynamics within the study of sexualities. In sum, we hope to stir up some thoughts and initiate some conversations. In this effort, we are indebted to the Chief Editors of this issue, Alexa Athelstan and Rosemary Deller, for their continued support in bringing this issue to life. We thank Boka En, the In-design Editor, Roberto Kulpa, the Web Design Editor, and Adam Pearson, the Liaison Officer for volunteering their valuable skills and services. We thank Megan O'Branski and Mercedes Pöll for their helpful and timely feedback during the copyediting process. We also thank all academic and peer reviewers who have rig-

orously and painstakingly reviewed the papers we received for this issue and helped *Sexuality in Focus* take shape. We welcome your thoughts and feedback on this issue. Please write to us at: editors@gjss.org.

Establishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the Imaginary, and the Collective

Agata Pacho

Sexuality is seen as a crucial aspect of one's identification and sexual desire is perceived as the core of one's identity. Therefore, the emergence of an asexual identity constitutes a radical disruption of approaches to identity and epistemology in social science. This study explores a virtual community of asexual individuals who engage in discussions about contradictory processes of identification, the instability of sexual identities, gender relations and possible representations of asexuality. This work locates the process of sustaining an asexual identity and its representation within a broader critique of essentialist positions. Furthermore, it investigates the distinctive features of on-line communities and the implications of the Internet in their establishment. These findings may lead to a better understanding of asexuality as well as an enhanced insight into the social and cultural negotiations over the sexual.

Keywords: Asexuality, lack of desire, sexual identities, identity representation, virtual community

Introduction

Asexuality stands for the lack of sexual desire. Even though it belongs to the broad spectrum of sexual identities, asexuality is underestimated by scholars, and receives little media attention. Still, it poses significant challenges to Western discourses on sexuality. The temporality and unreliability of the popular understanding of sexual desires and practices have been emphasized since Michel Foucault introduced the idea of the sexual as a social and cultural construct (Foucault 1990). Yet, sex drive is still usually seen as a 'natural' physiological need. Assumptions about innate sexual desires and impulses of human beings are deeply rooted in shared cultural and religious beliefs, and so are the sciences of sexology and psychology (Seidman 2003, XI).

This article is concerned with the phenomenon of asexuality, which fundamentally disrupts and questions the notion of a universal innate sexual drive. Here, I will explore the construction of an asexual identity, situating it within a broader critique of essentialist standpoints.

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It is argued that rethinking formations of gender and sexuality through a central focus on asexuality can provide a better insight into the social and cultural negotiations over the sexual (Scherrer 2008). This research analyses how the emergence of the asexual identity suggests the need for revising existing perceptions of sexual orientations, gender relations and family formation.

Furthermore, I will discuss the complex issues of representation and propose reasons for the lack of visibility and awareness of asexuality. Finally, this study will consider the role of the Internet in the creation of asexual communities.

The first part of this study provides a theoretical background for the research. There have been only a few published studies on the topic of asexuality. Research rooted in psychology sought to determine demographical and health-related variables predictive of being asexual (see Bogaert 2004) and generate measures of sexual arousability in order to support the idea that low sexual desire is the primary feature predicting asexual identity (see Prause and Graham 2007). This research shares a number of similarities with studies of Lori A. Brotto et al (2010) and Kristine S. Scherrer (2008), which endeavor to theorize the identities and experiences of asexual people. In addition, this work engages with queer and gender studies. The analysis is situated within the larger discourses of three main concepts: identity, representation and community, which will be used to critically examine essentialist standpoints.

After locating the project in relation to relevant academic scholarship, the second part will give a detailed account of how the research for this study was carried out, with particular attention to the analysis of qualitative data. The empirical research was based on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest association of asexual people in the world.[1] Due to the virtual resources used in this work, the unique character of Internet research must also be taken into account. Finally, questions related to methodology will be used to explore the ethical dimensions of the research.

The third part will present the data analysis. It will attempt to investigate the findings of the study using the theoretical frameworks and concepts discussed in the first part.

Part I: Exploring Theories of Identity

The aim of the research is to identify and examine how asexuality constitutes a radical disruption of the approaches of social science to identity and epistemology. In what follows, the discussion will focus on the postmodern critique of identity, the theory of sexual identities and desire and the process of identification. The latter relates to the establishment of representation, which makes an identity visible and politically valid. Finally, the last section will investigate the significance of establishing a sexual community and the implication of the Internet for that process.

As an introduction to asexuality, it is useful to explore its possible definitions as well as the ways in which asexuality is considered by scientific discourses.

Asexuality in Context

AVEN's homepage states that asexuality is a sexual orientation, in which there is no sexual attraction. Asexual people distinguish themselves from celibates who choose not to have sex, and, therefore, must control their sexual drive. They also emphasize their ability to form intimate relationships, as their orientation does not affect their emotional needs.

However, asexual identity is not a new phenomenon; A. C. Kinsey's studies are helpful in tracking the scientific interest in the absence of sexual drive. Kinsey, a leading sexologist, assumed that an average human male is able to reach orgasm as often as every day. Less frequent intercourse may be due to absence of a partner or a work routine (Kinsey 1948, 205). Kinsey pathologised low sexual outlet, and attributed it to poor health or hormonal problems requiring medical attention (1948, 209).

Kinsey also dismissed another phenomenon that challenged the notion of an active sexual drive, sexual frigidity. Kinsey argued that the failure of a female to be aroused or to reach orgasm during sex resulted not from a lack of capacity to function sexually, but from a limited understanding of the nature of women's sensuality (Kinsey 1953, 373). Within the tradition of sexology, a lack of sexual drive is necessarily read as a medical or psychological problem. Quite the opposite, I will argue through the further analysis of data that asexuality may be seen in its own right as a part of a complex field of sexualities rather than a pathologised condition.

Identity and the Critique of Essentialism

Before moving on to look in more depth at the construction of the asexual identity, it is necessary to discuss the theorization of identities in more detail.

Stuart Hall (1996) gives an account of the postmodern critique of an 'integral, originary and unified identity' (Hall 1996, 6). He encourages understanding of identification as a process that is never fully completed, but is always 'in progress' (1996, 6). The concept of identity used by Hall is one that is increasingly fragmented, fractured and often constructed across intersecting or antagonistic practices and cultural discourses (1996, 1–3). Similarly, Scherrer's exploration of asexual identities suggests the need for a larger project of re-writing simplified narratives of sex, sexuality and physical intimacy (Scherrer 2008, 629).

Despite the strength of such narratives, a unitary identity is still present in social theory due to the lack of a possibility of replacing it with another, entirely different concept (Hall 1996). An analysis of the asexual identity may bring a better understanding of the contradictory and dynamic character of the process of identification. It will be pointed out later that AVEN proposes several categories of asexuality, some acknowledging sexual behaviours allowing members to move freely between them. AVEN's principles resemble the process of forming an identity which Hall describes as fragmented and involving antagonistic elements. Sexuality also, following Foucault's argument, may be considered a 'practice of being' within certain historical and cultural contexts rather than a fixed or static concept (Fraser 1999, 21–25).

While sexuality is seen as a crucial aspect of one's identity, sexual desire is perceived as its core, and it needs to be subjected to further analysis. Theorists such as William Simon (1996) propose that contemporary discourses provide us with a specification of an appropriate desire as well as places, times, gestures and utterances to articulate that desire. Our longings are dependent on cultural scenarios, thus desire follows rather than precedes behaviour. Whenever individuals fake their sexual responses or invoke authentic sexual excitement, they draw upon acts that mirror cultural expectations (1996, 46–47).[2] Within the constructionist discourse, the absence of sexual desire could be seen as a form of resistance to social and cultural expectations.

Sustaining Identity

While identity is dynamic, it also assumes some degree of coherence and continuity. As such, it gives a sense of personal unity and social location (Weeks, 1987, 31). One of the aims of AVEN's enterprise is to support the process of identification of asexual people.

According to Hall, identity is constructed through the recognition of shared origins or characteristics with another person or group. Moreover, formations of discourses and social practices give ideological meaning to the constitution of subjects (Hall 1996). Consistency of identity is also assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender and sexuality, and through the conflation of the experience of gender with sex and desire. Yet, Judith Butler (2004) suggests that gender is necessarily performative. Butler argues that gender is produced through fantasy but also practice (e.g. iteration), and its false stabilization ensures the interest of the heterosexual regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain (2004, 172). Moreover, regardless of this fact, it will be perceived to be necessary and natural (2004, 178). Most significantly, for Butler, performativity is never simply the reproduction of certain ideas of gender and the sexual. The practice of performance gives them new meanings and puts them into new contexts, which always carry the possibility of subversion (2004, 218).

In turn, the common assumption of the normativity of heterosexual identity and relationships depending on an erotic longing between a man and a woman enforces gender difference and inequality (Hollway 1996). The emergence of asexual attraction sheds new light on the formation of intimate relationships, and thus may enable a new way of gender enactment as well as new possibilities of gender relations.

Traditionally, a lack of erotic bonds is thought to allow women more independence. Gherardi (1995) argues that the common understanding of femaleness is deeply rooted in our history and culture, and that we use archetypes to interpret our social worlds. Gherardi gives two examples for models of femaleness which operate within our culture. The first archetype, the 'virgin goddess' represents a woman who does not engage in sexual relationships and stays independent from men's judgments. The second model, the 'vulnerable goddess' represents a woman who seeks her identity and well-being in relation with often dominating men (Gherardi, 1995, 71–73). Based on the above, the archetypical understanding of the connections between sexuality and gender may enforce the representation of asexual women as less dependent on their partners.

What is more, identity always exists in relation to the other, and it marks difference as well as rejection and abjection. That is, exclusion has a political meaning, as it is located within hierarchy-producing objects and marginalized subjects (Hall 1996, 4–5), and while there are boundaries between the self and the other, these boundaries are not fixed, nor clear. Hence, heterosexuality cannot ignore the proximity of homosexual desire, and homosexuality cannot escape the social pressures of heteronormativity (Butler 1999, 31). Although asexuality is defined as the opposite of orientations that imply sexual attraction, it also challenges the basis on which distinctions between different sexualities are made. For instance, an asexual homosexual disrupts the fundamental assumptions of a homosexual relationship, to which active sexuality is ascribed.

Representation of Identity

For Hall, identities are constructed within representation, which is as much imaginary and invented as based on the resources of history, language and culture. Emerging identities use cultural resources in the process of becoming by asking the questions of what they might become, how they have been represented and how these facts affect their own representation of themselves (Hall 1996, 4). It has been already mentioned that within the discourse of sexology, a lack of sexual drive is read as a medical or psychological problem. Despite this, asexuality is often ascribed to particular social groups. For instance, disabled people are believed to be unable to engage in sexual activities. Such discourses institutionalized in mass culture use the concept of asexuality to normalize heterosexuality and to marginalize other sexualities as abnormal or dangerous (Shildrick, 2004, 135). Many disability scholars complain that even though physical and mental impairments alter functioning, they do not eliminate the desire for love, affection, and intimacy. However, people with disabilities may find it difficult to avoid internalising social values and attitudes denying their sexual nature and, therefore, adapt a nonsexual lifestyle (Milligan and Neufeldt 2001). The phenomenon of asexuality becomes increasingly complex as the lack of sexual desire is accepted or even imposed on certain social groups while healthy adults are required to engage in sexual behaviours. AVEN's endeavours to establish asexuality as a sexual minority have the potential for challenging both assumptions.

As representation is based on cultural discourses, it may be suggested that asexual people relate to the politics of other marginalized sexual identities. In accordance with this observation, I will suggest that a comparison between the former group and the gay pride movement may offer a better understanding of the possibilities and difficulties related to the representation of asexuality.

The Essentialist Politics of Identity

In spite of the general interest of social scientists in the deconstruction of identity categories previously taken for granted, essentialism persists. The notion of identity as fixed and immutable actually enables the articulation of minority politics. For instance, biological essentialism can be used to challenge homophobia, which treats homosexuality as a matter of (wrong) choice rather than of biology (Fraser 1999, 5–6). Similarly, asexuality can also mobilize essentialist themes. Even though it challenges the naturalness of sexuality, asexuality can embrace the essentialness of the lack of sexual desire (Scherrer 2008, 636).

Furthermore, establishing a sexual identity prevents the denial of the phenomenon by defining it. For example, homosexuality became acknowledged within society after sexology had introduced a scientific terminology for it (Foucault 1990; Weeks 1995). In a similar manner, Scherrer argues that essentialist notions of asexuality enable the recognition of this new sexual identity (Scherrer 2008, 629).

At the same time, the notion of identity needs to be distinguished from biological sexual orientation. While the latter results from a 'natural' desire, and does not carry any political meaning, sexual identity stands for an active sexuality, and relates to certain values and lifestyle. What is more, identification as a choice implies that freedom is a condition of all actions, and thus it is charged with responsibility and inscribed with ethical values (Fraser 1999, 129). According to Weeks, identity is politically significant, especially when personal desires are in contradiction to social norms, and when the process of identification entails the rejection of dominant values (Weeks 1995, 63). The development of selfhood and one's identity cannot be separated from the development of citizenship (Bell and Binnie 2000, 8). The private spheres of citizen's lives are not only open for political interrogation and intervention, but the emergence of new ways of living together indicates the democratization of relationships (2000, 27–31). This project attempts to rethink the potential of asexual identity for challenging social conventions and redefining the role of the family, for instance, by decoupling marriage and sex and strengthening the argument for legitimising single-parenting in adoption policies. Noteworthy, the emergence of a new sexual identity necessarily draws attention to the role of community in the process of sustaining that identity.

Community Formation and Internet Technologies

According to Weeks, every community is based on shared traditions and fundamental agreements. As such, it offers a sense of solidarity and a common understanding of the social, as well as a basis for political activity. At the same time, community is never fixed, but it changes over time (Weeks 1995, 79). Establishing sexual communities is possible only when there are sufficient numbers of individuals sharing similar experiences. It also requires identifiable targets of opposition and specific goals. Even though new sexual minorities challenge conventional moralities, there is always a certain agreement with the mainstream.

While Weeks also suggests that geographical concentration of the members of a community is essential (Weeks, 2003, 81), virtual communities enable social connections irrespective of the actual locations of the individuals involved. Moreover, theorists such as Massey separate social interconnectedness from the local, and argue that multiple connections across space are just as important and authentic as face-to-face relations (Massey 2005, 185).

Even so, relationships in virtual communities are different from social interactions in geographically based associations. The former enhance the development of the latter (Harrison and Stephen, 1999, 221). Irrespective of their origins, they are attributed with a democratic character and a great potential to provide access to information for many, as well as a new kind of public space making a genuine dialogue possible between community members (1999, 226). It also has an ability to develop trust, social connectedness and bind a community together (1999, 229). Online communities can be argued to have positive attributes and promote a whole new community that prior to the Internet was not available. On the other hand, they can lead to numerous problems. For instance, Clay Shirk (2003) argues that the possibility of creating multiple virtual personae may cause confusion and ambivalence about one's identity. Also, as online self-presentation is often restricted to a few sentences, perceptions of such identity can be entirely misguided and incorrect. Above all, Shirky (2003) records that the most common problem with online communities tend to be online harassment, understood as threatening or offensive content aimed at known friends or strangers through ways of online technology.

The community of AVEN is based on computer-mediated communication, and, therefore, it is necessary to push the investigation towards exploring the significance of online communities for asexual people. Some authors believe that Internet networking is a response to the loss of communities in real contexts. It is also a location of solidarity and resistance for traditionally marginalized groups (Benwelll and Stokoe 2006, 249).

The spatiality of identities has been a significant theme in the studies of other sexual minorities. In her analysis of bisexuality, Clare Hemmings (2002) stresses the lack of social space for experiencing sexual attraction to people of both genders. Bisexual social existence is always partial, and it is located in a hetero- or homosexual sphere (2002, 38). This problem is observable in the absence of concrete bisexual spaces (2002, 46), while, as Hemmings argues, the Internet functions as an imaginary home for bisexuals (2002, 175).

In an attempt to gain a broader perspective on the emergence of sexual identities with the aid of the Internet, this study draws upon data collected from the AVEN forum. The research possesses a number of possibilities as well as difficulties regarding methodology.

Part II: Methods

The research is based on the analysis of data collected from the forum of AVEN, which hosts the world's largest online asexual community. The decision to base the research on online data was influenced by the various debates on the relationships between the Internet and new possibilities of identity politics and representation (e.g., McKema and Bargh 1998). Internet communities are a distinctive phenomenon of the last two decades, and as such, they seem to be pertinent to analyzing the emergence of sexual minorities in postmodern times.

Data have been gathered from the homepage of AVEN and forum debates with a focus on the first three years of the existence of the network. It may be argued that at the beginning, the process of establishing an identity and community was the most intense. However, there is an exception: that of using posts dated from 2007, which concern issues of gender, as these appear in discussions after the initial period.

Online Communities

Interactive communication brings a new form of interaction and structure. Yet, the relationship between the Internet communities and academic life is parallel. Both flourish with diversity of opinion and maintain stability at the same time (Costigan 1999, xi).

Analysis of online interactions draws attention to the specific methodological characteristics of Internet research, its advantages as well as the difficulties it poses. Theorists share the view that investigating virtual communities raises the issues of the interplay of technology and society (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999, 29). They recognise a world-wide society created by the Internet as consisting of heterogeneous sociocultural structures created by people representing different values, beliefs and material culture (1999, 42). In addition, it has been argued that interactions occurring in cyberspace cannot be separated from the social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives (Kendell 1999, 60). Indeed, an everyday experience of social prejudice induces asexual people to join AVEN. Likewise, online relationships are often established on the basis of real-life interactions, and are modelled on off-line resources and experiences (Mann and Stewart, 2000, 204).

Kendell (1999) also rejects the notion of a multiple and fluid virtual identity that is separate from bodily experience. In fact, he uses Goffman's theory to argue that off-line environments also offer opportunities to perform multiple identities, while members of online communities still perceive their identities as integral and continuous. Discussions on the AVEN forum indicate that participants are occupied with embodied experience; not only sexuality, but the issues of age and gender are also often discussed.

Approaches to Data Analysis

The unique character of online communities allows insight into the relations between individuals and social structures as well as into the regularities of an external reality (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999, 32). Although the Internet has given birth to new research fields, there are numerous attempts to apply traditional methodologies to these emerging environments. This research was conducted using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA), which aims at deriving a theory on the observed phenomena from data collection and examination (1999, 35). As such, it seems to be a desirable alternative when there is a significant shortage of relevant literature.

Simultaneously, a prior theory of identity, community, and representation was used to order and give pattern to the data. According to some theorists, naming or typifying objects incorporates them into the sphere of relevance, which can reduce the complexity of the researched realm (Layder 1998, 67). It is also the case that exploration of the data may challenge or complete emerging knowledge (Layder 1998, 55). Therefore, I strove to remain open to reject or modify the analytical concepts I used if they were not confirmed by the analysis of the data.

Through the analysis of online data, it was possible to get acquainted with the most popular narratives shared by AVEN members, and identify the pertinence of the main themes, i.e. those of identity or community. It was possible to derive a theory about the establishment of a distinctive asexual identity from the detailed examination of the fragments of discussion on the forum.

Ethics of Internet Research

It is also crucial to consider the ethical implications of online research. Sharf (1999) points to the ambiguity of the electronic medium with regard to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers need to be aware that they have access to 'sensitive' information shared by people who, encouraged by the possibility of staying anonymous, may exchange verbal intimacies normally withheld in other interactive contexts (Sharf 1999, 246). Here, the use of AVEN's members' nicknames secures their anonymity while allowing tracing sources of conclusions.

Furthermore, Sharf is also concerned about researchers interpreting the words of others and quoting them out of context (1999, 254). Hence, it is desirable for analysts to retain the entire content of the discussion.

The founders of AVEN declare their willingness to provide information for academic researchers (AVEN). The main reason for encouraging studies based on their resources is to make asexuality a legitimate and better-understood phenomenon. These purposes are also underlining this research.

Part III: Researching AVEN

I will present the analysis of data gathered from the AVEN forums. In each of the thematic sections, I will consider sequentially the ways of establishing an asexual identity, its relation to sexual populations as well as its potential for deconstructing gender stereotypes. Furthermore, I will discuss the representation of asexuality and the online community of AVEN.

Establishing the Asexual Identity – The Question of Sexual Desire

One of the central objectives of this research is to gain a picture of how asexual identity is sustained by members of the community and how it is determined by their sexuality. As it has been already argued, sexual desire lies at the heart of one's identity, which is dynamic, yet assumes some degree of consistence and continuity (Hall 1996). AVEN attempts to provide a sense of coherent identity by defining the lack of sexual desire as common among asexual people, and by distinguishing between sexual and asexual attraction. Scherrer (2008) pays particular attention to ways of establishing this division through revising some of the assumptions about physical intimacy. She remarks that sexual implications are often attributed to acts of masturbation, cuddling or kissing, but these are seen differently by the asexual community (Scherrer 2008, 629). The AVEN homepage as well as data collected from the forums also reveal the complexity of the meanings of these practices. Furthermore, despite the denial of sexual attraction, AVEN states that asexual people may experience sexual arousal: 'For some sexual arousal is a fairly regular occurrence, though it is not associated with a desire to find a sexual partner or partners.' Asexual people may also feel the need to masturbate or be stimulated by a fetish. They may occasionally engage in sex with their partners. Yet, what is said to distinguish them from a more sexualized part of population is the lack of sex drive towards others. If sex occurs, it is an expression of romantic or emotional attraction and not of sexual desire (AVEN March 24 2009).

On the other hand, many sexual people may be involved in sexual practices in spite of the lack of desire. Moreover, as it was argued before, desire follows rather than precedes behaviour, which, consequently, mirrors cultural expectations (Simon 1996; Laan and Both 2008). Sexual acts that are not related to sexual desire still respond to the mainstream sexual narratives, and thus compromise with the latter.

The ambiguous nature of sexual desire is the source of many uncertainties among the readers of the forum. Many of its members describe their feelings, share their doubts and ask for help in defining their identity. One is of particular interest here:

> I see my friends checking people out, but I just don't get it. I mean, I think some people are beautiful in an artistic way, but I don't 'want' them.
>
> And I'm so in love with my girl-

> friend, it's hard to describe how my love for her is deeper than friendship when I don't want to have sex with her… (true, October 10 2003)

Asexual people's focus on romantic attraction and commitment corresponds to the definition of asexuality.

Other posts challenge the definition of asexuality, which appear to be imprecise. For instance, some participants ask what behaviours are regarded as explicitly sexual. One of the members inquires:

> Does oral sex count as having sex? Does anal sex count as having sex? Does intimate touching count as having sex? Does cyber sex count as having sex? Does phone sex count as having sex? Does masturbation count as having sex? (guardianoftheblind, October 14 2003)

As the discussion becomes more complex, another member responds: 'The more you try to draw a clear line the hazier it gets...' (AVENguy, October 15 2003).

This may indicate awareness that sexuality is never fixed or static. However, forum debates indicate the necessity of demarcation of sexual and asexual practices for the process of identification. Confusion may also result from having dreams of a sexual nature. For some members they are contradictory to an asexual identity (I'm supposed to hate sex, right…') while others dismiss them as unrelated to actual desire.

Negotiating Definition

Considering the diversity of questions and doubts, AVEN attempts to organize the wide range of different forms of asexuality into four categories, accordingly to various levels of engagement in sporadic sexual practices and ultimately describing any occurring attraction as purely emotional (AVENguy, November 25 2003). The process reveals how providing understandable definitions of each category reduces confusion and enhances accessibility to the community. What is more, it may be argued that despite problems with providing a coherent definition of asexuality, this new emergent identity has a potential of challenging one of the basic cultural assumptions about human nature, the possession of sexual desire. AVEN exists not only in contradiction to the dominant heterosexual discourse, but also questions the politics of sexual minorities that have proliferated since the rise of the gay and lesbian movement a few decades ago. Asexual people who experience attraction may identify as lesbian, gay, bi or straight. Nonetheless, it has been mentioned on the forum that existing sexual orientations do not reflect the broad spectrum of diverse attitudes towards sexuality as words such as homosexual or heterosexual imply the involvement of sexual attraction (Jayann, December 24 2003). This issue evokes Scherrer's analysis, which traces the lack of appropriate language to engage with asexuality (Scherrer 2008, 630). Forum debates also consider this problem. Members argue that gaps in language indicate a common lack of understanding for and of asexuality. As language mirrors social contexts, linguistic insufficiency suggests that asexual relationships are outside common cultural experience. However, there is a belief expressed that the community of AVEN is capable of introducing new expressions into mainstream use (Marr, October 29 2002).

The awareness of the problem of communication in the process of sustaining asexual identity reflects a theoretical preoccupation with the instability of sexual identities. The following sections will consider further difficulties AVEN members face during discussions.

What is Natural?

The members of AVEN engage in a debate on the distinction between 'natural' and contrived aspects of asexual identity. It has already been indicated that essentialism persists within debates regarding sexuality, and identifying the latter as natural enables the articulation of politics (Fraser 1999). Furthermore, forum readers who are unsure about their sexual preferences seek guidelines in biology and medicine:

> Is there a way one can truly find out medically? Should I see a psychiatrist or maybe some other kind of doctor? (Legolas, December 3 2002)

Even though previous discussion indicated the conviction that sexuality is a social construction, medicine is still believed to provide definitive answers to questions about the sexual. Some of the expressions are explicitly essentialist: 'Asexuality, (presumably) is not a choice, it's a state of being', 'asexuality is completely independant [sic] from personality', 'The asexuality is biological' (Drum, December 19 2003).

It may be suggested that asexual people who frequently deny that sexual desire is a 'natural' part of every individual's life also present a lack of sexual drive as an essential component of their identity.

Furthermore, AVEN members also separate asexual orientation and antisexuality, where the latter is one's attitude towards sex and a personal choice: 'Anti-sexuality is more up front, more something you think, as opposed to feel,' 'I see asexuality as something that IS, I see anti-sexuality as something that is MADE' (Naeblis, December 19 2003).

These arguments evoke Fraser's stance, which differentiates 'natural' sexuality from actively chosen values and lifestyles (Fraser 1999). While asexuality stands for the lack of sexual desire, antisexuality implies the disapproval of sexual practices.

Sexual Populations – The Constitutive Other

As theories of identities locate identity in opposition to the other (Hall 1996), the process of establishing an asexual identity is preoccupied with its relation to the sexual populations. AVEN members frequently criticize the proliferation of sexual contents in contemporary culture that assumes that everyone is sexual:

> […] every newsagent has shelves stacked with magazines filled with articles on how to improve your sex life/have more orgasms/turn your partner on etc. There are similar things on TV and in books (Artemis, November 30 2002).

> I cant [sic] find a place for myself or see a place for myself in this OVERLY SEXUAL society. It's so disconcerting (VivreEstEsperer, March 18 2003).

Asexual people often describe feeling uncomfortable and unaccepted when confronted by this amount of content related to sex. By contrast, AVEN provides a safe space to discuss these experiences, and encourages a sense of social location. One of the members admits:

> But now that I realize that I don't have mainstream sexual motivations, it seemed less repulsive, or more 'normal' (R. M. Hester, August 11 2002).

Identification as asexual gives a sense of social location and a feeling of acceptance.

Simultaneously, there is an explicit tendency among the members to dismiss sexual people as dependent on a constant need to satisfy their sexual desire. Lack of temptation is perceived as an advantage that gives more freedom to the asexual individual:

> If you are a person who is that dependent on sex, doesn't it seem likely that those who are NOT dependent on sex for a happy life would seem to possess a freedom from being controlled by their bodies and urges? Perhaps, on a conscious or subliminal level, they wish, too, that they could be 'free' from the strong urges of their bodies (Luisa, October 24 2002).

Furthermore, an AVEN member who identifies himself as sexual shares a similar view wishing his mind was not controlled by 'animal reactions installed by evolution' (Marr, August 15 2002).

The superiority of the mind is juxtaposed to the purely instinctive body. Sexual drive is seen as natural yet oppressive at the same time. It can be seen that while asexuality emerges in the postmodern realm, rationalistic or dualistic positions are still present in its discourse. Expressions such as 'overly sexually active kens & barbies' indicate the use of stereotypes in defining the other (aury, January 12 2003).

Despite these constructions of the sexual population, the asexual community is also aware of the diversity of sexual people and the instability of identities:

> My hypothesis is that 'sexual identity' is not a very tangible item, and that it may even change several times over the course of a lifetime. I don't think that it can be used as gospel, but rather, a guideline, or perhaps a measuring instrument for how an individual feels about this (Luisa, October 27 2002).

What is proposed here is the need for recognising the fluid nature of the sexual.

Whilst AVEN establishes a dichotomy between sexual and non-sexual attraction, its overview stresses the affinity of asexual relationships to those of sexual people. Both are based on the same principles, such as communication between and closeness of the partners. Moreover, sexual and asexual people share similar problems of finding the right person and staying intimate and monogamous in a relationship (AVEN, March 25 2009). These resemblances echo Butler's claim (1999) that the boundaries between self and the other are never fixed or clear. Further analysis of the relations between sexual identity and one's recognition as a gendered subject will support the argument of the complexity of maintaining a coherent self.

Intersecting Identities

Sexual identity does not emerge in isolation, but is linked to a person's identification with a certain class, ethnicity or gender. Various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels and never act independently of one another. Gender has an especially significant relation to the discussion on sexuality and selfhood. Furthermore, issues of gender differences and stereotypes are consistently present in the debates on the AVEN forums. Whenever AVEN members admit feeling like a 'real' man or woman or, on the contrary, being confused about their gender, they use their actions and appearance as the main indicators of masculinity or femininity:

> Im [sic] the worlds [sic] biggest girly girl myself. I love make up […], I figure skate, I like dresses better than pants, Im [sic] a soprano […], I love pink and light blue, I love my puppies and kitties (skatepixie, September 23 2003).

> I don't identify with many masculine personality traits. I'm extremely sensitive and emotional,

> I'm not competitive, I don't care about being physically or emotionally tough […] (guardianoftheblind, September 24 2003).

Forum readers recognize that intelligible genders are maintained through coherent and continuous relations among sex differences, preferences of certain activities and the level of sensitivity. At the same time, they often express criticism of stereotypical gender roles. One of the posts states: 'After all, boys will be boys, if you make them' (Moose-Alini, September 24 2003). This particular remark evokes a constructionist view of gender.

Even though many asexual people prefer not to identify themselves with any gender, they still attach meaning to the commonsense understanding of femininity and masculinity. It may result from the fact that people follow gender roles, or perform them to secure their sexuality and social location (see Butler 2004). Defining oneself as a man or a woman imposes order upon an ambiguous social reality.

While for Butler, performativity is never simply the reproduction of certain ideas of gender and the sexual, it may be argued that asexuality enables enacting gender differently. For some female members, being asexual means more independence from men. One of them states:

> Being asexual, I truly don't need a man […] In other words, men admit to being perverts, and are damn proud of it! Women, however, are supposed to be nice. They want a man around for sex, however, so pretend (to themselves and others) that they are helpless and needy (thylacine, December 31 2007).

While other members suggest that independence of women is not determined by their sexual orientation, asexual women emphasize their self-sufficiency. According to what one can read on the forums, a lack of sexual desire gives an opportunity to challenge conventional relationships between men and women. This argument is parallel to the feminist critique of erotic intimate relationships as ones that enforce gender differences and inequalities (Hollway 1996). It also evokes an archetypical understanding of connections between sexuality and gender as proposed by Gherardi (1995).

Asexuality and Parenthood

It may also be argued that the emergence of asexual identity also influences social interactions, especially by redefining the role of the family. Asexual people often declare their willingness to engage in a committed relationship or to get married. Regardless of whether they identify themselves as gay or straight, they discuss the possibility of raising children. Yet, marriage for them does not necessary lead to the formation of a traditional family bearing children. Moreover, asexual people rarely express a readiness to conceive children. We read:

> I like children. I don't want to have sex just to have them. Sometimes I think I want children on my own, sometimes I think I'd be just as happy adopting them I don't really want to give birth either (nemesis, September 4 2002).

Adoption is the main solution for non-sexual couples, but the idea of artificial insemination is also an alternative. At the same time, people fear negative attitudes towards single parenting and same-sex marriages, and raising the issue of asexual orientation within the family. One of the members expresses her concern in the following way:

> I'd imagine most adoption agencies are unwilling to consider […] adopting a child into a single-parent home. […] And then there's the whole two-parent thing. A number of people in my family have expressed displeasure at the fact that I am disinterested in marriage, but wish to raise a family (fillerbunny41702, November 8 2004).

This post expresses awareness of social conventions and traditional beliefs that support heterosexual normativity.

Representing Asexuality – Against Biological Essentialism

Challenging social norms requires establishing a representation of asexual identity and an agreement to certain politics to increase its visibility and acceptance. Discussions relating to the representation of asexuality often refer to the gay pride movement. AVEN members propose the incorporation of the same slogans, such as being 'out and proud.' On the other hand, they point to the significant differences between the social locations of homosexuality and asexuality.

Firstly, these minorities encounter discrimination in different ways. While homosexual people may experience being called shameful, asexuality is seen as a state of being incomplete or underdeveloped. Ignorance is often experienced by asexual people who decide to come out. According to one AVEN member, admitting being asexual is more difficult than coming out as homosexual. It is because asexuality requires explanation as the most common reaction to this term is disbelief. The need to clarify what asexuality is causes discomfort and annoyance. Some of the seemingly warm responses can also be read as patronizing:

> I've also gotten the annoying and condescending 'Oh, you'll experience attraction someday' line — which of course has the unspoken addition of, 'You silly little ignorant

> and late blooming child' (Eta Carinae, June 17 2002).

Asexual people recognize that asexuality is often dismissed as medical or psychological underdevelopment. As they are made to feel uncomfortable and repressed but not ashamed, they believe they need to demonstrate being comfortable with asexuality rather than proud of it (AVENguy, January 11 2003). As members of the community attempt to form their manifesto, proposed narratives of asexuality appeal for acceptance and challenge the common understanding of the lack of sexual desire as requiring medical attention:

> Please do not send me or tell me that I should go to a doctor, psychologist, social worker, counsellor, priest, imam, pastor, guru or any other helper […] There is nothing wrong with being asexual… (ApolloSeek, January 16 2003).

(In)visibility of Asexuality

Yet, raising awareness of asexuality appears to pose significant challenges. While homosexuality is believed to be more noticeable as society is directly confronted with homosexual behaviour, the lack of sexual practices makes asexuality invisible. People decide to come out as asexual when they are asked directly about their sexual preferences. The lack of willingness to declare being asexual is explained as a result of the nature of asexuality. Asexual people are not confronted with the need to seek acceptance for their sexual practices (ApolloSeek, June 3 2003). The act of coming out is only motivated by the desire to reduce the stigma which asexual people experience as a minority. Nonetheless, asexual people also understand that the act of revelation has consequences of admitting being not 'normal,' but the other to the established cultural narratives (Cerberus, November 6 2008). This awareness mirrors a theoretical critique of representation, which, even if associates new identities with affirmative values, also creates exclusion (Fraser 1999, 143).

On the other hand, the process of identification helps AVEN members to accept themselves. Some of them admit: '(…) when I discovered asexuality, I didn't feel abnormal anymore.'

The sense of belonging to a community also encourages acceptance of their sexual orientation: 'but it's easier to accept when you know there are other people who are asexual' (Artemis, March 19 2003).

The process of identification as asexual builds the self-confidence of individuals. Yet, it may be achieved only within the community. The distinctive character of the asexual community will be explored in the following section.

Online Sanctuary

AVEN is designed to allow people to share their experiences with each other. Through these interactions, the members can explore the diversity as well as the similarities within the group, and learn how to be more comfortable with their orientation. AVEN, called a 'sanctuary' by its members, gives an opportunity to express asexual identity.

As asexuality is not recognized as a sexual orientation, there is a significant lack of exclusively asexual spaces. The members of AVEN often express their need to escape 'the constant, implied or obvious, presence of sexuality' (VivreEstEsperer, June 8 2003).

It was the Internet that started to function as a space for asexual people, just as it became an imaginary home for bisexuals according to Hemmings (2002). Furthermore, computer-mediated communication enables one to overcome geographical distance, which is especially significant in the case of new and small communities. Even though asexual people emphasize the importance of their network, they still willingly arrange local meetings.

Negotiating possible definitions of asexuality and formulating a common aim for community politics point to the involvement of individuals in the creation of the community. This phenomenon suggests democratic relations attributed to online communication in general (Harrison and Stephen 1999).

Online communication also allows anonymity, and, therefore, encourages honest discussion about sexuality. At the same time, AVEN members realize the need to increase the visibility of asexuality. They are also aware that such recognition may also entail losing this privacy. We may read:

> The more that I do asexual visibility type stuff, the more that I worry about losing my privacy in this community. […] Now that people in my 'real' life are possibly finding the site… I'm afraid of losing my sanctuary (VivreEstEsperer, November 1 2003).

AVEN members appreciate the advantages of a virtual community, of which anonymity appears to be the most important. Yet, they are also aware of the necessity of becoming visible within their local communities in order to educate people about asexuality.

Conclusion

Throughout this research I argued that asexuality fundamentally disrupts and questions the notion of a universal innate sexual drive, and, therefore, it can provide a better insight into formations of sexuality.

The theoretical study as well as data analysis focused on the process of establishing asexual identity in times when notions of identity and sexuality are believed to be increasingly fragmented and often constructed across intersecting or antagonistic practices and cultural discourses. One of the central objectives of the research was to gain a picture of how a sense of coherent identity is provided by identifying the lack of sexual desire towards others, a characteristic shared by asexual people. Yet, determining a definition involved negotiations over intimate behaviours and practices and problematizing the dichotomy of the sexual and non-sexual.

The diversity among the asexual minority suggests the fluidity of sexuality and the ambiguity of sexual desire. At the same time, linguistic insufficiency to articulate this multiplicity indicates that existing sexual orientations do not reflect the broad spectrum of diverse attitudes towards sexuality.

While AVEN members point out the instability of the sexual, they are also aware of the affinity of asexual relationships to those of sexual people. Still, they situate themselves in opposition to sexual populations, and making that distinction, asexual people use rationalistic mind/body dichotomy.

Rethinking formations of gender via a central focus on asexuality suggests possibilities of different enactments of gender roles, especially for women who often admit feeling more independent in asexual relationships with men. Nevertheless, a commonsense understanding of femininity and masculinity is still explicit in the forum discussions. Furthermore, asexuality has a potential to question social conventions of marriage and parenthood.

While asexuality challenges essentialist understandings of sexuality as fixed and innate, sexual essentialism persists in its aim to identify the lack of sexual drive as natural, which would assure a sense of coherent identity. It also allows establishing a representation that challenges the common notion of asexuality derived from the discourse of sexology. Yet, gaining recognition for asexuality is complex due to the lack of sexual practices, which makes asexuality invisible. Furthermore, there is an observable lack of willingness to come out as asexual, which may result from the fact that asexual people are not confronted with the need to seek acceptance for their sexual practices.

Ultimately, AVEN, called a ‘sanctuary’ by its members, gives an opportunity to express asexual identity and learn how to be more comfortable with it. Online communication is especially significant due to a lack of exclusively asexual spaces. The members of AVEN appreciate the advantages of this virtual community, of which anonymity is stressed the most often.

This analysis is far from exhaustive, but it highlights the contribution of asexual identity to a broader understanding of the construction of sexuality. As it is a relatively unexplored field, several suggestions for future research may be proposed. This research points to affinities and differences between the asexual minority and other marginalized groups based on sexual orientation. Future efforts should investigate if asexual culture, similarly to homosexual lifestyle, may be incorporated into the mainstream.

Furthermore, sexual identity is linked to a person's identification with other social identities. Future research should explore intersections between asexuality with class background and age. The latter may be especially significant as they are believed to affect access to the Internet, and therefore, of the virtual community of AVEN as well as similar online communities.

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Endnotes

[1] Launched in 2001, AVEN hosts an archive of educational resources on the phenomena of asexuality that is available for academic researchers and the press. AVEN's enterprise may be defined as an effort intended to serve as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion about sexuality. AVEN's members are actively engaged in distributing pamphlets, leading workshops and organizing meetings.

[2] A similar view is shared by Laan and Both (2008) who analyse the relation between women's sexual arousal and desire. With reference to their research, sexual arousal is generated by stimulating information and desire succeeds that state (Laan and Both 2008, 510).

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Pansexual Identification in Online Communities: Employing a Collaborative Queer Method to Study Pansexuality

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The research investigates different aspects of pansexual self-identification within contemporary online communities. To explore this, it is asked whether pansexual identification constitutes an anti-identity position against conservative conceptualisations of identity, as well as the new-homonormativities that mainstream LGBTQ movements of the West engage in to invest in normalcy. It must be noted that, while the research has the deconstructionist focus of queer theory, the anti-identity position of pansexuality investigated does not refer to a performative failure of the subject. As stated, the anti-identity position proposed is pansexual identification's possible opposition to 'traditional' and fixed readings of identity, and the 'respectable' features of new-homonormativities. The study explores the way in which pansexuality is understood as a multiple and flexible identity that exists in stark opposition to binaries of sex and gender in the eyes of the research respondents. As the research investigates pansexual identifications online by gathering data through an online survey, it follows a collaborative queer method that represents a conjunction of queer theory, sociology and cyberstudies.

Keywords: Pansexuality, queer theory, multiple and flux identity, new-homonormativities, collaborative queer methods

Introduction

As the Latin prefix *pan-* refers to *all*, pan-sexuality refers to a sexual orientation that encompasses an attraction towards all. The existence and recognition of an attraction that accepts and includes all, however, embodies a tension with the way in which mainstream gender structures perceive identities, sexual orientations and acceptance. While one can forward a general definition of pansexuality as applying to those individuals who are romantically, cognitively, and/or sexually attracted to all genders and sexes, this research aims to address the question of whether or not pansexual identification (as a sexual orientation) defines a position that stands against understandings of identity that are embedded within dualistic perspectives of gender, sex, and *new-homonormativities.* The research aims to contribute towards a determination of whether pansexual identification suggests a tension between certain gender dynamics, possibly constituting an *anti-identity* in relation to identities that base themselves upon those dynamics, even within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and 'queer' (henceforth LGBTQ) communities. Rather than pursuing a definition of pansexuality from a theoretical standpoint alone, the possible multiple position of pansexuality is investigated through an exploration of the accounts of pansexually identified individuals.

The possible existence of such a position can be explained by pansexuality's inclusiveness of the individual as a subject. Indeed, pansexuality not only refers to attraction to non-transgender and transgender males and females, intersex[1], agender[2] and differently identified individuals, but also suggests that the subjects themselves can be of any genders and/or sexes. As such, a different way of defining pansexuality would be based upon an attraction, regardless of gender, sex, or lack thereof. From this perspective, one can suggest that pansexuality entails a stand against being attracted to only 'men' (including Female-To-Male) and/or 'women' (including Male-To-Female) as well as being only a man or a woman. At this point, for the sake of the argument, Jan Clausen's ideas on bisexuality are useful:

> [B]isexuality is not a sexual identity at all, but sort of an anti-identity, a refusal (not, of course, conscious) to be limited to one object of desire, one way of loving (cited in Sullivan 2003, 39).

Taking this argumentation forward, one might suggest that pansexuality is also an anti-identity (perhaps even more so than bisexuality) not only because it takes a stand against this 'one type of loving', but also because the object of desire is not limited to two sexes. While both sexual orientations find possible attraction outside of the realm of monosexuality, pansexuality differs from *bi*-sexuality, as the understanding of attraction is not limited to dualistic social constructions of male/female and man/woman.

Closely correlated to these dualistic understandings, pansexuality as an identity position emphasises the borders of the 'respectable' spheres of *new-homonormativities* (Duggan 2003) that the mainstream LGBTQ[3] movements of the West seem to create. In an attempt to be 'tolerated' by the mainstream heterosexual community, it can be argued that most LGBTQ communities (largely led by white-middle class lesbian and gay identified groups) have a predilection towards normalcy and assimilation. Jane Ward suggests the respectable queerness of these organisations invest in the *homo* version of hetero-norms; differentiating themselves from sexualities that are not marketable to the patriarchal mainstream society:

> [L]esbian, gay activists embrace racial, gender, socioeconomic and sexual differences when they see them as predictable, profitable, rational, or respectable, and yet suppress these very same differences when they are unpredictable, unprofessional, messy or defiant (2008, 2).

Accordingly, these LGBTQ organisations become *de-queerised* as difference is normalised and turned into a shared uniform characteristic. This is a particularly problematic formation since this uniform characteristic is at the foundation of the created uniform gay identity:

> [C]onstructing provisional collective identities has proven to be a necessary tactical move for marginalized groups, [however] group identities are also vulnerable to countless forms of regulation and co-optation made possible by the shared belief that identities are (a) real, fixed, coherent, and knowable, and (b) unified by a common struggle for normalcy, safety, prosperity, reproduction and the like (Ward 2008, 18–19).

As such, the different lesbian and gay identities that commit to such movements become de-queerised themselves, since their identities become reduced into the appearance of uniform and singular entities. The 'common struggle' for normalcy and safety adopted by lesbian and gay groups position them outside of stereotypes about being gay, but in doing so align them with practices that are straight:

> [It can be argued that] gays and straights alike have an interest in defining themselves in opposition to bisexuals through the institution of monogamy. First, monogamy is a societal norm. And although straights, with their access to legal marriage, have perhaps greater investment in that norm than gays and lesbians do, monogamy has in recent years became a social norm among many American [as well as North Western] lesbians and gay men – especially as gay marriage and civil partnerships become legal. [They] distinctly wish to 'retire' societal archetypes of gay promiscuity (Esterberg 2002, 161).

In the current struggles of LGBTQ movements that cannot move beyond the gender, sex, and sexual orientation boundaries (while at the same time seeking normalcy by aligning with mainstream patriarchal norms of 'proper sexual conduct'), it is possible that they perceive polysexual orientations (including pansexuality) as representing deviance, messiness and unpredictability. Lisa Duggan picks up on the same idea, suggesting that the modern, mainstream *gay identity* is devoted to safe and respectable existences of the mainstream cultures. She calls this the *new-homonormativity*, which strives for access to heteronormative and conservative institutions of the patriarchal society (2003). By omitting any sexual orientation that does not commit to heteronormative constructions of gender and sex, the mainstream LGBTQ movements and organisations ironically lack queerness, since they suggest a fixed conception of the 'homosexual identity', and uniformise the differences that queer politics thrive upon. As a result, mainstream LGBTQ movements lack an emphasis on *dis-identification* that suggests an individual's identity is a process of passing and flexibility, one which serves to create an unpredictable subject:

> We are deeply mired in a period of prolonged conservatism, in which play around gender boundaries seems increasingly anachronistic. Queer organizing seems distinctly a thing of the past, and there seems little social movement organizing that celebrates anything queer or transgressive (Esterberg 2002, 163).

The analysis of new-homonormativities regarding polysexual orientations such as pansexuality can be better understood through an exploration of the tension between identity politics and queer activism (particularly of the 1980s). While identity politics that mainstream LGBTQ movements engage in suggest that political arguments are (and should be) shaped by the categorisation of identities, and such political argumentations will bring mainstream society's full acceptance, queer politics take a stand against this investment in inherent identity categories. Indeed, since queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for subsuming LGBTQ identities and contributing to the conceptualisation of fixed, closed, singular identities, it becomes 'the antithesis of identity politics' (Bernstein 2005. 56). Following this line of thought, pansexuality serves as a possible antithesis to new-homonormativites that not only deem certain sexualities 'unrespectable', but also contribute to the conservative conceptualisations of identity which formulate sexualities in inherent categories. Consequently, the antithesis forms an anti-identity that concurrently takes a stand against the uniforming politics of new-homonormativities, any conceptualisation that fails to recognise the multiplicity and flexibility of sexual identities, and any understanding that limits sexual orientation to binary constructions of gender and sex.

As a result, in this research, the

concept of 'anti-identity' does not refer to a group of subjects deconstructed into a *performative failure* (Butler 1990), but rather it suggests an anti-conservative reading of identity. Going back to dualistic understandings of sexual orientation, gender, and sex, alongside new-homonormativities, *conservative* in this sense applies to any understanding of identity which falls under these normativities and binaries, including those within LGBTQ communities. Moreover, the way in which the research conceptualises 'conservative' also reflects upon traditional readings of identities: that identities are fixed, finished and singular. By establishing the 'conservative' as such, it is suggested here that the pansexual anti-identity position forms the flux, progressive and transgressive identity category through locating itself (or being located by) outside of these identity categories.

The research follows a *collaborative queer method* (Dahl 2010), as it chooses to investigate pansexual identification without limiting itself to text and discourse analysis. Aspiring to explore the formations of pansexual identifications that 'circulate between the everyday practices of people within the spaces of their life-world' (Burkitt 1998, 500), the research invests in a methodology of interdisciplinary work between queer theory, sociology and cyberstudies, and serves as an exercise in the application of collaborative queer methods. As a result, the method follows queer theory's conceptualisations of the multiplicity and the fluidity of identity, and the sociological tools of gathering data and interpreting. In addition, the research also bases itself upon a queer perspective of analysing sexual orientation. By understanding sexual orientation as a continuum, rather than a binary of 'heterosexual and the rest' (Silverschanz 2009), the research design once again commits to queer theory's ideals of capturing the diversity and fluidity of sexual identifications. Through rejecting conservative conceptualisations that equate sexual orientation to experiences of sexual attraction, this research perceives sexual orientation rather as a complex structure that builds upon the cognitive, behavioural and effective dimensions of sexual attraction (Parks et al 2009).

Accordingly, this analytical framework invests in the multiplicities of social structures, concurrently fitting within the conceptualisations that cyberstudies have to offer. As cyberstudies suggest that the online personae that Internet users engage in do not represent a false fictiveness, but rather a part of their multiple selfhoods (Turkle 1997; 1999; 2011), the research finds a space of interrogation, where pansexual identification can be explored from queer theory's perspective. Moreover, conducting the research online enables the investigations of possible tensions between pansexually identified individuals and the LGBTQ communities of 'real life', as it offers the concept of *virtual communities* as a part of everyday life-space.

It should also be noted that while conducting the research on pansexual identification online offers the researcher aforementioned possibilities in exploring the intricacies of such identification, questions of representativeness also arise. Since Internet users are rarely fully identifiable, the researcher has no option but to employ convenience samples, as random sampling becomes virtually impossible (Hash and Spencer 2009). While from the sociological perspective the lack of random sampling may be read as a coverage error that creates the lack of representativeness of diversity, this problem becomes minimal when the sample group is understood as a pilot. On the other hand, when viewing this design from queer theory's perspective, it fits perfectly with the theory's dedication to the unorthodoxy of knowledge. Indeed, since queer theory suggests that knowledge is never fully representative or generalisable (Jagose 1996), findings based on convenience samples is hardly problematic, in that queer knowability never offers universal truths.

The Survey

In exploring whether pansexually identified individuals define their sexuality in ways that run counter to conservative understandings of identity, binary conceptualisations of gender and sex, and the new-homonormative politics of mainstream LGBTQ communities, the survey was designed to investigate the way in which the respondents directly or indirectly exercised *multiplicity* through identification. To enhance the depth of this analysis, the survey's content was designed to assess how the respondents viewed their pansexuality in relation to other sexual orientations and communities. Such investigation was conducted through use of a web-based mixed survey employing open access to gather data. This was done for several reasons. For one, it allowed a feeling of visual anonymity to respondents, which becomes useful in a study of sexualities. The sense of anonymity was furthered by using a web-based survey, rather than an email-based one. The research also benefited from a web-based survey system as it created the opportunity of *open access*:

> Open access can be used when the researcher wants any potential participant to be able to link directly to the website and take the survey without contacting the researcher. [F]or [LGBTQ] persons, open access may provide a sense of anonymity and increase their comfort in answering the survey questions (Riggle et al 2005, 15).

Moreover, following the ethical protocol addressed by the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee 2002), it is suggested that anonymity achieved through open access offers minimal risk of harm, and secures the integrity and the autonomy of the respondents. In addition, the mixed method employed led to the production of knowledge that is both to be adequate and pertinent to the research goals.

Since the research is in a critical dialogue with self-identification, it called for employing a method that can capture individuals' specific experiences, opinions and desires. To this end, the survey incorporated a mixed method that contains both closed-ended and open-ended questions. While the closed-ended questions helped structure the survey with a focus on the sensitive topic of sexual identification, the open-ended questions were of utmost importance towards capturing the personal experiences, opinions and desires that touch upon pansexuality, self-perception, and also the perception of other sexualities vis-a-vis pansexuality. According to Riggle et al, employing these open-ended questions are especially crucial when researching LGBTQ groups online:

> As the empirical literature on [LGBTQ] populations is still in its infancy compared to other research areas, many exploratory questions remain. [R]esearch efforts can benefit enormously from the collection of qualitative data that elicits direct feedback from participants on their experiences by using open-ended rather than close-ended questions (2005, 4).

To capture these experiences, the content and design of the survey was based on the format used in traditional face-to-face interviews, and were developed with a view towards the exploration of the anti-identity position that is suggested in this research. The mixed design that the survey was based on was used as a means of exploring anti-identity positions, without steering the respondent into giving 'desired' answers. Thus, while the survey included targeted closed-ended questions, such as what respondents thought it was that constituted their sexual orientation, it also employed rather general open-ended questions, for instance, by asking how the respondents would explain their pansexuality to others. The latter was done in order to gather answers which may indicate an anti-identity position without influencing the respondent. In this way, the answers given to the open-ended questions were interpreted in relation to the research questions of the study.

To commit once again to a sociological method, the quantitative data gathered was analysed using SPSS[4]. Indeed, the program is an efficient tool towards minimising possible measurement errors and enabling the researcher 'to analyse quantitative data very quickly and in many different ways (Bryman and Cramer 1990, 16).In order to further minimise measurement errors, the survey was put on the Internet using the online survey software provided by Survey Methods[5]. Formulating the closed- and open-ended questions through the templates created by the software, a twenty-question long survey divided into two sections was published on the website. The URL of the web-based survey titled 'Pansexual Self Identification' was posted on web pages frequented by the target population of the research.

Alongside the URL link, an informative text explaining the purposes of the study, the position and contact information of the researcher was posted on these web pages. When explaining the position of the researcher, and in order to increase overall motivation amongst possible research respondents, this informative recruitment text contained an *emotional appeal* (Farrell and Petersen 2010, 121). The text stated that the researcher identified as pansexual, and while the motives behind the research were academic, there was also a personal desire to produce research data on pansexuality, given that it seemed to be lacking, even within LGBTQ studies.[6] Once the URL link was clicked, the participant was welcomed by a page of consent that informed them of 'procedures of [the] study, the identity and affiliation of the researcher, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdrawal, and the promise of anonymity for participants' (Hash and Spencer 2009). Given that this explanation and the possibility of contacting the researcher were presented before accessing the survey, clicking the 'continue to survey' button at the bottom of this page enabled the participants to submit their consent.

The recruitment text and the link to the survey was posted on the web pages of five pansexual-identified groups on the Internet: the group titled 'Pansexual' on radio based networking website LastFm[7] (116 members); the 'Pansexual Pride' group on networking website Facebook[8] (779 members); the 'I Am Pansexual' group on experience-based networking website Experience Project[9] (251 members); the blog 'Pansexual Pride' maintained by a pansexually identified individual on Tumblr[10] where other bloggers submit comments, entries, and information about themselves; and finally the 'Pansexualitet' group on Nordic queer-networking website Qruiser[11] (20 members).

The survey was accessible for a period of ten days (April 15–April 25, 2011) and gathered data from 57 research respondents, with an overall dropout rate of 8.7 per cent. As mentioned previously, the number of respondents does not constitute a signifier of the sample group, since online researches rarely offer the researcher measurability towards the response rate. However, as previously noted, because the research does not invest in the generalisable representativeness of the sample group, the impact of this immeasurability is regarded as minimal. Avoiding the establishment of generalisable representativeness becomes crucial when assessing the demographics of the group. According to answers provided, 61.4 per cent of respondents identified as non-transgender woman, 12.2 per cent identified as genderfuck[12], and 10.5 per cent identified as agender. Respondents were informed that they could choose more than one option on gender identification, and 21 per cent chose to do so.13 Following up, 89 per cent of the research respondents ethnically-identified with Anglo/White/European descent; 68.4 per cent of respondents chose United States of America as their home country; 50.8 per cent stated that they were under the age of 20; 52.6 per cent of the respondents chose 13 to 15 years of education (which suggests at least some postsecondary education); and finally, 52.6 per cent stated that they were students and unemployed. It is reiterated here that the sample group's 'whiteness', youth, locality (North America) and gender does not create a research problem in terms of external validity, as the research has 'opted out' from generalisability in order to better align with queer aspirations. Moving beyond this methodological indication, an analysis on the survey results shows two recurring themes[14] when respondents explain their pansexual identification; the multiplicity of identity, and the tension with new-homonormativities.

The Multiple, Flexible Pansexual Identity as Ongoing Process

The first recurring theme in research respondents' answers was the way in which pansexual identification was described, experienced, and understood as a multiple identity. Within the survey, multiple questions dealing with pansexual identification made it possible to analyse these issues in a substantive manner. When research respondents were asked what they sexually identified with, 57.8 per cent chose more than one sexual orientation. Moreover, amongst respondents identifying as pansexual, 55.3 per cent chose more than one sexual orientation to identify with. In her research on bisexual identification, Paula Rodriguez Rust highlights similar observations towards the multiplicity of sexual identification and suggests 'that many individuals [...] have more than one concurrent sexual self-identity' (2009, 112).

Indeed, when research respondents were given an option that allowed for an explanation of the way in which they used different sexual identifications together, their answers provided insights on the complexity of identification with multiple sexualities:

> [I] describe relationship[s] with other cisgender women as 'Lesbian,' and Queer if I do not feel like describing pansexual (Research Respondent No. [Henceforth RR] 10, original emphasis).

> I think either bisexual or pansexual could accurately describe my sexuality. I think pansexual describes me slightly better, but I feel comfortable with bi as well (RR 34).

Answers describing these multiple and fluid identifications are not only suggestive of a level of comfort the individual found in addressing the multiplicity of the self, but also signal a possibility of using these identities strategically in their daily life. As respondents answered questions on their sexual identification, they suggested that they tended to use sexual orientation 'labels' that were more widely used (within mainstream patriarchal discourses) when they felt the need to:

> I usually say queer when I don't want to explain what pansexual is, if I want to shock people with word choice, or if I want to encapsulate my gender and sexual orientation both (RR 56).

> I'm pansexual. When I don't want to explain, I'm queer. I'm in a straight marriage and have straight privilege. If someone calls me bisexual, I do not always feel the burden to correct them (RR 48).

Indeed, according to the responses, this strategic use primarily depended on the other party's ability to understand, or familiarity with non-heteronormative ideas, such as the rejection of gender and sex binaries, and an open mind about different sexual orientations:

> I came out as bisexual to my parents in middle school. [A]ll of my friends know that I am bisexual (I tend to use that word unless I'm around people who are familiar with [pansexuality] because it is easier for them to understand) and no one has ever reacted negatively. Sometimes I tell coworkers, if they seem open minded, but usually feel comfortable not discussing my personal life at work (RR 34).

The strategic use of these multiple sexual identifications is also reflected in the fact that 22 out of 57 research respondents indicated that they referred to themselves differently, often using non-pansexual 'queer' sexual orientations, with different audiences. This strategic differential self-referral, according to respondents, depended on the extent to which they perceived given groups of people as familiar with pansexuality. This is reflected in Figure 1, which indicates self-reference was influenced by the audiences' lack of knowledge of pansexuality's existence, or when they attributed negative connotations to pansexuality:

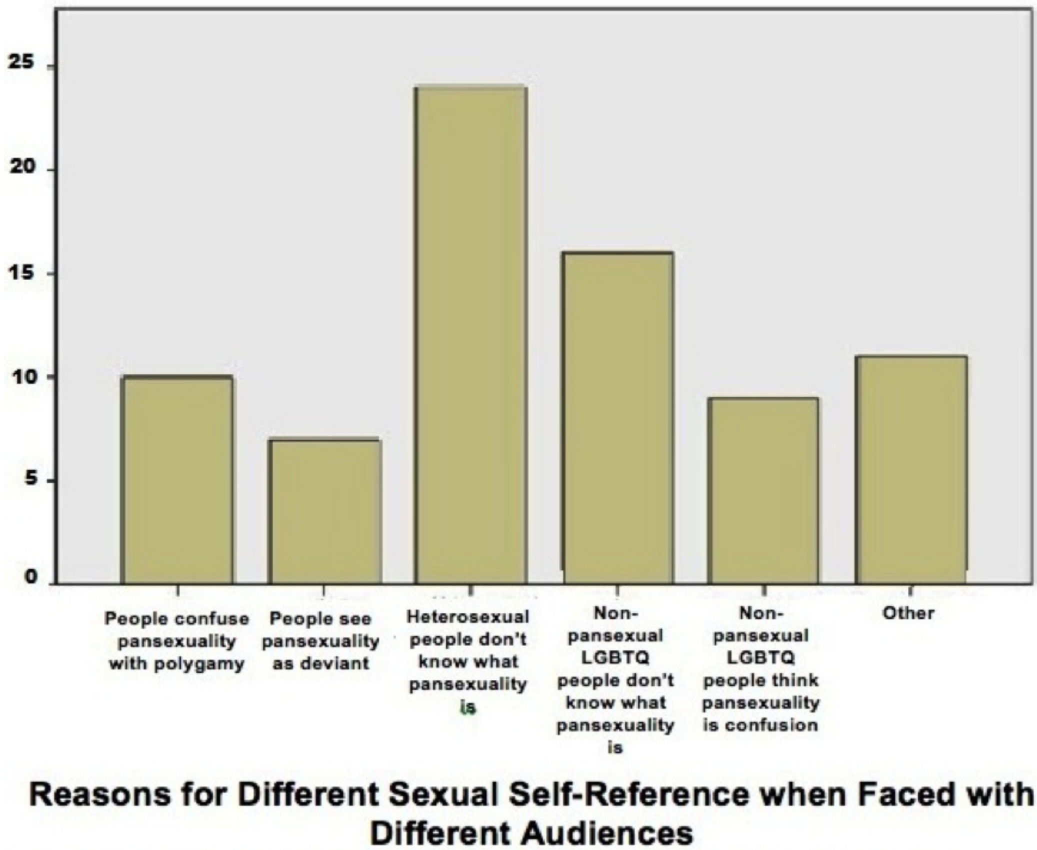


Figure 1.Research respondents' reasons for different referral when faced different audiences

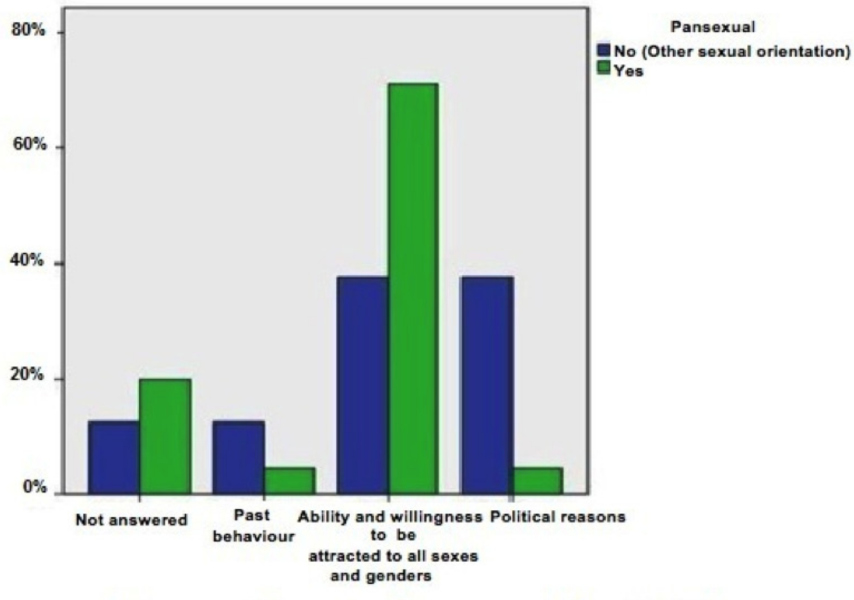
Furthermore, the multiple and fluid identification observed suggests that research respondents viewed their sexual identification as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed and finished part of their self. The way in which the respondents explained their sexuality as a never-ending process became more evident when they were asked to describe their coming out experiences:

> I have had to come out to the same people several times, and explain my sexuality each time (RR 17).

> At first, I thought I was bisexual, so after some time thinking about it, (to be absolutely sure), I came out to some friends, and eventually family. After that, I started being really open. I soon came to

find that I was pansexual, (or so I thought), so then I came out as that too. Now I'm thinking that I am actually more panromantic. But I'm tired of coming out (RR 21).

As previously mentioned, in order to capture the multiplicity of sexual identity, this research defined sexual orientation not solely based on past experience, but also on potential cognitive and effective entitlements. The survey was designed in a manner that allowed for an analysis of whether the respondents also realised their sexuality as not being limited to physical experience alone. This produced outputs that suggest that the respondents perceived pansexual identification through a complex structure that does not depend solely on behaviour. To better understand this, the research respondents were asked to assign a numeric value from *1* to *3* for what they thought constituted the most important part of their pansexual identification, with *1* being the strongest aspect, and *3* being the weakest. Results showed that the respondents considered the ability and willingness to be attracted to all genders and sexes as the most important aspect of their pansexual identification, their past behaviour as the second in importance, and political reasons as the weakest aspect:



Strongest Aspect of Pansexual Identification

Figure 2. Percentage chart on research respondents' opinion as to what constitutes the most important aspect of their sexual identification

The same tendency of the respondents to perceive their pansexual identification through their ability to love all genders and sexes (or beyond them) also became apparent when they were asked to describe what pansexuality is in their own words:

> I have the ability to be attracted to any person, wether [sic] they are trans* or cis or intersex or some other non binary gender/sex. I don't like everyone, but I could (RR 10, original emphasis).

> [Pansexuality is] the potential to be attracted to someone of any gender (RR 12).

Interestingly, an in-depth analysis of respondents' definitions of pansexuality indicated two distinct and perhaps contrasting ways in which individuals understood and experienced their sexual identification. While some respondents suggested that pansexuality was a sexual orientation that saw *beyond* genders and sexes, others suggested that it was a sexual orientation that was defined by attraction to *all* genders and sexes, as opposed to viewing them as irrelevant:

> I tell them that I believe that love is love, and I don't think gender, which is a socially imposed constraint anyways, should have an affect [sic] on that, and it doesn't for me. I will love someone regardless of what they are, because I only care about who they are (RR 5).

> Pansexuality indicates that you are physically and emotionally attracted to people regardless of what reproductive organs they have, or what gender they identify with (RR 26).

According to this definition of pansexuality, the pansexual individual's ability of attraction is considered to be gender-blind', in that it allows for the potentials of loving persons regardless of their gender and sex. However, another way the research respondents defined their pansexuality suggests that the pansexual individual understood that there were many genders out there, not only two, and that the pansexual had the ability to be attracted to all these genders:

> Pansexuality is attraction to all genders, sexes and gender identities. [I]disagree with many pansexuals who define pansexual by the catchphrase 'I love you no matter your gender or *sex*' [sic] To me this is panromantic, but I define pansexual as a physical and sexual attraction, as in I would totally tap that, penis, vagina, or other (RR 57, original emphasis).

> Simply, 'attraction to all genders: male, female, and people who

aren't part of the gender binary', or perhaps 'you know how someone can be really awesome and you can acknowledge how great they would be to date/fuck, but you couldn't do it because you just don't swing that way? I just happen to swing every way.' (RR 25, original emphasis).

While these different definitions of pansexuality viewed the 'object of desire' quite differently, they shared the common understanding that the pansexual was a person who could see beyond the binaries of gender and sex. The way in which pansexuality stands in tension with these binaries will be discussed later.

The research respondents' answers hint at another aspect of the multiple sexual identity, through a suggestion of 'outness on the Internet' as an element of experiencing their sexuality. Indeed, when respondents were asked to indicate the level of their outness, 26.7 per cent stated that they were only out on the Internet, and explained this 'online outness' in detail:

> The internet [sic] communities I'm a part of are very open about sexuality, so I was able to mention it 'casually' as a way of 'coming out'. As for the few family members I've told, it was rather awkward and required a lot of explanation (RR 25, original emphasis).

> When I got a tumblr, I decided I would identify myself as pansexual right away, to help me build the courage to really come out (RR 27).

From the perspective of the multiple, and flux identity, the individual who is not out in the 'real world', yet identifies as pansexual on the Internet, and thus engages in virtual communication patterns through this outness, does not constitute a false and fictive deception, but a persona that is part of the self. As the online persona may be a step towards being out in the real world, it can also be a means through which the individual finds comfort and support that they may fail to receive in the mainstream heterosexual society. In this sense, the online groups that these individuals are coming out to, can be understood as *communities*, and rather appealing ones at that:

> On the Internet, people have the potential to experience the benefits of communal life with none of the burdens. They can share their deepest, darkest secrets without risking their personal privacy. [F]or many, these new forms of social connection promise not only a fundamental change in our experience and understanding of interpersonal relationship but also a change in the process, a transformation of public life (Song 2009, 1).

Indeed, while these groups on

the Internet are virtual, the feeling of support, comfort, solidarity, gratification, security, as well as the platform of expression that they offer, are *real*:

> I've told my mother that I'm bisexual, as well as a few friends. Everyone has been supportive and respectful. However, I feel like I can't really discuss my sexuality with the people I'm close to, I've sought out Internet communities in order to connect with other people who identify as queer. I'm 'out' on Tumblr and on a blog, but not on Facebook (RR 29, original emphasis).

Research respondents' involvement with virtual communities, can be further explored through how they regard binaries of sex and gender, as well as the 'real' life LGBTQ communities which are perceived to invest such binaries; another possible theme in their answers.

Pansexuality in Tension with New-Homonormativities

While research respondents provided different opinions as to what constituted pansexual orientation, what their sexual orientation meant to them in different situations, and the experiences they had in terms of their outness, there has been one common thread that ties together their definitions of pansexuality. According to their responses, the respondents perceived pansexuality to be in contrast with dualistic social constructions of gender and sex:

> [Pansexuality is] accepting and embracing the fact that there are more genders in the world. Acknowledging that love and attraction truly are blind (RR 53).

> I like people for people. Gender identity is very important and I respect and acknowledge it while at the same time I have the potential to be attracted to people of any gender and sex. Depending on the [sic] what I know of the person's background knowledge I might also explain the fact that pansexual by definition reject the existence of a gender binary or a sex binary, and thus realize and accept that there are people of other genders and sexes than the two typically assigned, portrayed and accepted in mainstream culture (RR 56).

This rejection of the gender and sex binaries was also apparent in the way in which they related their pansexuality to bisexual and monosexual orientations. Respondents suggested that pansexuality could be seen as an 'advanced' version of bisexuality; one that has a broader scope for attraction:

> Pansexuality is an update on bisexuality, taking into account the concept of gender as a spectrum or a continuum rather that a binary of strictly man and woman (RR 41).

Respondents' coming out stories can also be analysed from this perspective. The way in which most answers suggested identity as an ongoing process can be understood through the majority of the respondents' initial bisexual identification:

> I came out as bisexual to myself in eight grade after having my first crush on a girl (I just assumed that I was straight up to that point) and my family soon after. I grew up in a pretty liberal family so they were fine with it. After that I started coming out to my friends and anyone else who asked. Thankfully my friends are all big supporters of glbtq rights so it was easy. This past year (I'm senior in high school) I started learning more about what it's like to be transgender and, after learning about people who fit outside of the gender binary I decided that pansexuality fits me better (RR 26).

While respondents suggested a degree of connection with bisexuality (especially in their past, with most of them coming out as bisexuals first, or choosing to tell people that they are bisexuals because of its wider recognition than pansexuality), research respondents also suggested that bisexuality invested in gender and sex binaries, and therefore was different than pansexuality. When asked whether being pansexual was different from being lesbian, gay or bisexual, respondents situated their pansexual orientation in contrast to these other orientations, mainly in terms of rejecting binaries of gender and sex:

> The only difference (assuming that bisexuality is referring to the attraction of the binary genders, which it typically does) is that pansexuality has no limits and there is the possibility to be attracted to anyone within, and outside the binary (RR 22).

> Pansexuality rejects all notion of a gender-binary by definition, something that is usually perpetuated by other sexual orientations. Of course someone who identifies as lesbian [sic] gay or bisexual is not limited to the gender-binary, but it is much more likely that someone will assume they are, and in many cases that assumption is correct (RR 17).

Indeed, the way in which pansexuality takes a stand against such binaries also suggested that the biggest problem they faced when they were explaining their sexual orientation to others was that people failed to understand a position outside of those same binaries (see figure 3).

Interestingly, while research respondents in general suggested that they expected a certain rejection of gender conformity from non-pansexual LGBTQ individuals and communities, this was not always the case:

> I would say that I've probably en-

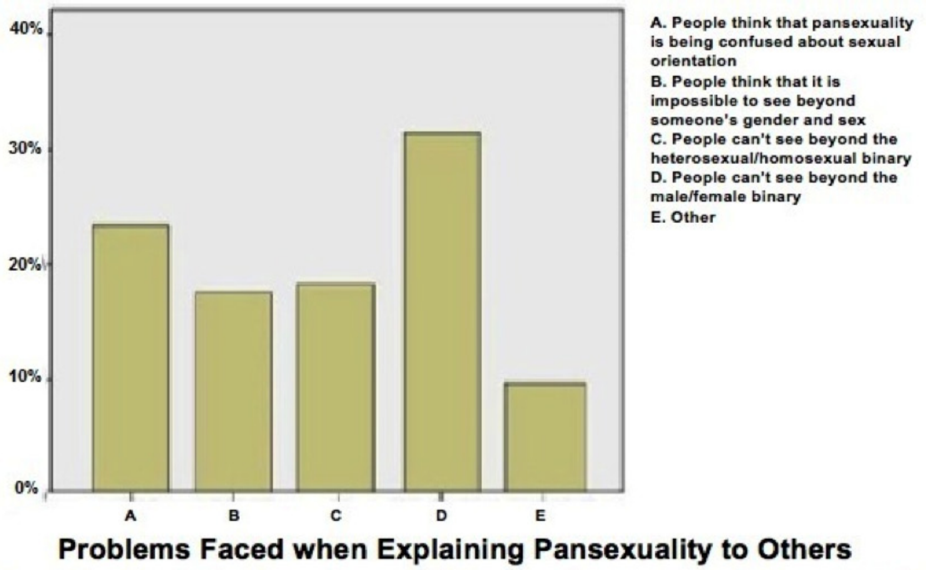


Figure 3. Percentage chart on the most common problems research respondents faced when explaining their pansexual orientation to other

countered more disbelief/disrespect/panphobia from the queer community than from my straight friends, which I think is really interesting. The negative response is not typically from bisexuals/pansexuals/polysexuals/queer-heterosexuals/queer-identified-individuals/non-labeling-individuals but from gay men and/or lesbian women. They've called me 'desperate', 'confused', implied that I was STD15 ridden (I think this is partially because many lesbians think that lesbianism alone is an effective STD prevention [I am female-bodied]), they've erased my identity by calling me a lesbian (responding 'You know what I mean!' when I correct them) or bisexual. Straight people are usually curious/confused (RR 56, original emphasis).

When faced with perceived discrimination emanating from within the LGBTQ community, research respondents' answers suggested that they aligned themselves with bisexuality in response to being confronted with this non-tolerance:

> [P]ansexuality is a rather unknown term, even for those in the LGBT community. People tend to classify everything in a binary fashion; you're either black or white, gay or straight. Pansexuals, in my experience, have often been discriminated in the same way bisexuals have (people told me that 'bisexuals are just gay people too afraid to fully come out of the closet') (RR9, original emphasis).

While most research respondents

stated that they felt discomfort when people suggested that bisexuality is the same thing as pansexuality, one respondent stated that her understanding of pansexuality did indeed equate to bisexuality, but it was different in the sense that it was a label that could be used to avoid biphobia within the LGBTQ community:

> [T]he other reason people tend to use [pansexuality] is because it is hard to be labeled bisexual. Straight people just hate on you and call you 'Fag' and the mainstream Lesbian and Gay community is nasty too, calls you 'closeted' and 'half-gay'. Also people say [that] bisexual means slutty or that you are a '2-Beer-Queer'. So people don't want to stand up because face it, it's hard. So they say 'oh that's not me, I'm pansexual'. well [sic] really only other bisexual people care you know? Everyone else just snickers and rolls their eyes (RR 55, original emphasis).

Although the majority of the respondents would likely reject this definition of pansexuality, this statement is potentially indicative of a disharmony within LGBTQ communities. Respondents' accounts suggest a possible reason for the manner in which they felt as if they were not accepted by lesbian women and gay men. This tension can be understood in that being gay or lesbian are monosexual orientations, where pansexuality (as well as bisexuality) falls under polysexuality. Indeed, multiple respondents have indicated that monosexuals perceived their pansexuality as a way of engaging in promiscuity:

> People [...] think that pansexuality means 'I'll jump anything with a pulse' (aka low standards and promiscuous, of which I am neither (RR 47, original emphasis).

> People think that pansexuality is desperate promiscuity (e.g. 'Anything I can get') (RR56, original emphasis).

This attribution of 'unrespectable' qualities, taken together with the investment in social constructions of heteronormativities, can be viewed as a product of the subsuming politics that mainstream LGBTQ communities of the contemporary West engage in, and how pansexuality embodies the counter-point. Mentioned earlier, it can perhaps be said that the mainstream LGBTQ movements are found lacking in presenting a *queer* that is less about same-sex practice and more about a resistance to fixed-identity hetero- and homonormativity, and the mainstream respectability. In this way, as a sexual identification that frames itself vis-a-vis a rejection of socially constructed binaries of gender and sex, and invests in the multiplicity of sexualities, pansexuality stands in stark opposition to these new-homonormativities:

> [Pansexuality] is an identity that is often erased, ignored or disrespected. [I]t's easier to be a straight ally, especially a casual straight ally, for LGB people than for trans* or pansexual/polysexual people (RR 56, original emphasis).

This is not to say that all LGBTQ organisations are embedded in panphobia, that they all invest in these new-homonormativities, or that non-pansexual LGBTQ individuals singlehandedly discriminate against pansexuals. However, the ways in which respondents felt as though they did not belong to LGBTQ organisations can be understood through this conceptualisation of new-homonormativities. According to the survey results, 80.7 per cent of the research respondents were not heavily involved with LGBTQ organisations, while half of these respondents were not involved with any LGBTQ organisation. Moreover, 56.4 per cent of these respondents suggested that this was due the fact that pansexuality was not represented, their needs as a pansexual were not addressed, or that they did not feel welcomed. The way in which pansexually identified individuals turn to online communities can also be viewed in the same light. By failing to find 'queer' communities that accept them as pansexuals, represent their sexual orientation adequately, or address their needs, these individuals may be turning to online communities for support, advocacy, and as means for meeting other pansexuals.

Moreover, respondents expressed a link between pansexuality and queer as 40.4 per cent of those whom identified as pansexual and chose more than one option for their sexual orientation have chosen queer as a part of their sexual identity. Interestingly, within academic queer theory there exists a possible paradox in that 'queer' is indefinable in that it rejects the categorisation of the subject, while simultaneously the street usage of 'queer' poses an identity category that bases itself on sexual transgression (O'Driscoll 1996). Consequently, the tension arises within queer theory since the 'original' street term refers to a material sexuality that suggests 'non-heterosexuality', whereas the academic usage refers to sexual transgression that does not necessarily refer to non-heterosexuality. The way in which respondents understand 'queerness' as an identity on the other hand, suggests a combination of the above. According to respondent accounts, queer as an identity suggests a degree of inclusiveness and fluidity. This inclusiveness and fluidity arises because queer implies a non-heteronormative way of loving, without going into details of who is loving who. It flows from this that while queer still constitutes an identity category for these respondents, it represents a rejection of labelling due to this ambiguity surrounding the issue of inclusiveness. As such, respondents see a possible link between identities of pansexuality and queer: both fluid, both inclusive, and both transgressive in that they reject binaries of gender and sex, heteronormativities and new-homonormativities:

> I use bisexual mostly because it's easier for people to understand, but I think that pansexual and queer are the most accurate (and open) labels for my sexuality (RR29).

> 'Queer' describes the general broadness and fluidity of my sexuality (I find it nearly synonymous to pansexual) (RR 24, original emphasis).

Accordingly it can be suggested that respondents find queer as an identity category they find comfort in: one that welcomes individuals that invest in fluidity and multiplicity.

Conclusion

The analysis of research respondents' answers suggests that pansexual identification stands in contrast to conservative understandings of identity and heteronormative social constructions that mainstream LGBTQ communities of the West borrow from. This is seen in a number of ways. First, respondents suggested that they use more than one orientation to sexually identify themselves, and that they usually do for strategic reasons. They suggested that their sexual identification was a complex reality that could not solely be based on past behaviour. They also signalled the possibility of understanding their online personae as a part of their sexual identification of multiplicity.

Secondly, respondents' answers highlighted the way in which gender and sex binaries are embedded within communities (even within LGBTQ ones), and how pansexuality from their viewpoints stood against or contrasted with these binaries. Respondents suggested that pansexuality existed in tension with 'other' non-heterosexual orientations, such as being gay, lesbian or bisexual. As those orientations were perceived as an investment in the binaries of gender and sex, respondents' answers also indicated a certain understanding of similarity between bisexuality and pansexuality, considering they both fall under polysexuality. In this sense, they suggested a potential link between the problems they faced when expressing their sexualities and biphobia. In particular, respondents noted that the mainstream LGBTQ communities led by non-transgender, monosexual lesbian and gay identities, not only did not recognise pansexuality, but created a *dequeerised* environment in which pansexuals struggled to successfully establish their identities.

In addition, following a collaborative queer method that takes research on pansexual self-identification online proved to be successful in creating possibilities of further analysing the multiplicity of pansexual identification. It not only reinforced that the pansexual self was based on multiplicity and flexibility, but also made it possible to analyse the way in which the respondents who were pansexually identified chose to form online communities rather than joining 'real world' LGBTQ communities.[16]

This research concludes that pansexual identification in the online communities studied *does* establish an anti-identity position against conservative conceptualisations of identity, and the manner in which new-homonormativities have possibly 'hijacked' Western mainstream LGBTQ movements. Respondent accounts of how they define their pansexuality starkly contrasts with the conceptualisation of inherent identity categories, and politics associated with this type of essentialism. Faced with the new-homonormativist identity politics of the mainstream LGBTQ movements, pansexual identification through respondents' answers align with queer activism. Indeed, as queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for their assumptions on fixed cores of identities, pansexuality embodies this criticism in that respondents suggest that their sexual identity is multiple, ongoing and transgressive. As queer activism criticises gay-only identity politics for subsuming queer identities, respondents suggested that their pansexuality exhibits the same criticism, since they do not align themselves with the new-homonormativist mainstream LGBTQ movement that does not recognise their sexuality, or establish them as respectable, due to the fact that pansexuality does not invest in binary social constructions of gender and sex.

With this considered, it can be suggested that pansexuality expressed through respondents' accounts not only commits to queer activism's position as the antithesis of identity politics, but also forms the anti-identity position against conservative readings of identity in that it embodies these criticisms into the expression of a sexual attraction. However, considering that any academic queer position would reject an attempt to generalise these findings into universal truths, it must also be mentioned that the anti-identity position of pansexuality should be understood from a temporal point of view. As the research respondents themselves suggest, pansexuality as a sexual orientation still lacks large-scale recognition from both mainstream and LGBTQ communities, thus suggesting the possibility of a position outside of heteronormative and new-homonormative ideals. On the other hand, it can be argued that the anti-identity position of *pansexuality as an out-*

sider can only exist as long as it is new, that is, until it is taken over by the mainstream. From this perspective, contemporary pansexual anti-identity can be understood as 'perfectly queer' through the way in which it embodies the sexual transgressiveness that queer thought thrives upon, but only as long as it stands its ground in opposing conservative constructions of identity and new-homonormativities.

Endnotes

[1] Refers to individuals who were born with an anatomy that combines female and male biological characteristics.

[2] Refers to individuals who feel as though they do not belong to any particular gender category.

[3] As this research argues, within these LGBTQ movements, the trans, queer and bisexual identities are not the protagonists; in fact they are 'still at the back of the bus' (Gan 2007, 136). However, the research still semantically employs the umbrella term, since most non-heterosexual organisations still commit to the usage of the term.

[4] Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

[5] http://www.surveymethods.com

[6] For instance, a simple search on the 'EbscoHost LGBT Life' database will show a pronounced lack of academic research on pansexuality as a sexual identity or sexual orientation.

[7] http://www.last.fm/group/Pansexual

[8] http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=75944101351

[9] http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Am-Pansexual/1039

[10] http://pansexualpride.tumblr.com

[11] http://qruiser.com

[12] Refers to individuals who intentionally identify outside or in between the gender binary.

[13] Moreover, questions regarding identification featured the 'other' option. As the research aimed to capture the fluidity and multiplicity of sexual identities, it was accepted from the initial design that any number of identity options, no matter how general, popular, or obscure they are, would fail to capture the diversity of sexual identifications of respondents. For instance, when respondents were asked to indicate their gender, they had the ability of choosing from nine options differing from non-transgender man to, genderfuck, but they also had the chance to choose the 'other' option, and explain. The same applied for the question on sexual orientation. Thirteen answer options, including pansexual, straight, prefer not to label oneself, also came with the 'other' option.

[14] While thematic analysis was used in assessing qualitative datum, here the word 'theme' is used in its colloquial meaning.

[15] Sexually Transmitted Disease.

[16] The research at hand initially set out to explore pansexual identifications in 'real world' LGBTQ communities. As LGBTQ advocacy and community organisations were contacted, it became clear that these organisations were not engaged in representing pansexuality. Hence, the way in which the research transformed into an online study can also be read as an indicator of the possible tension between pansexual identification and mainstream LGBTQ movements.

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From the 'Polymorphous Perverse' to Intersexualization: Intersections in Cross-Cultural Ethnographies

Lena Eckert

In this article I analyze the anthropological quest for what can be deemed male, female or intersex. I show that this pursuit is based upon theories which have been developed at the turn of the nineteenth century. The same theories are still present in current ethnographical research into sex, gender and sexuality. I specifically trace the origins of the psychoanalytical concept of the 'polymorphous perverse' in discourses of sexology and evolutionary theory and interrogate the application of the same concept in twentieth century anthropological research in Papua New Guinea. The use of this concept in ethnographic research is part of the process of what I call cross-cultural intersexualization. By lining out historical accounts of sexualization and racialization, I show how the use of the 'polymorphous perverse' refers to narratives of development that are intrinsically bound up with heteronormative and colonialist discourses originating in the 19th century. I analyze how a sexualized and racialized 'Other' has been created that is still present in current anthropological research. Cross-cultural intersexualization, as I argue, is based upon this two-fold othering process.*

Keywords: Intersexualization, racialization, gender, anthropology, sexology

Introduction

Anthropologists have already problematized ethnography as the method of anthropology. James Clifford argued that ethnographic representations are always 'partial truths'; yet, these partial truths are also 'positioned truths' (Abu-Lughod 1991, 142). Ethnographers (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973) are, according to Elspeth Probyn, still 'united in their use of ethnography as a means of constructing a fundamental similarity of the world's cultures which is firmly based in the referent of the West' (Probyn 1993, 78). Here, the 'referent of the West' is at stake, together with its diverse modes of re-installing itself as the center, the 'other' as 'lacking' (relative to the West). In the anthropological account I want to focus on in this paper, 'the referent of the West' is reiterated through the use of some of the most powerful discourses of the West—psychoa-

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nalysis, sexuality and evolution.

The anthropologist Gilbert Herdt is a well-known academic in his field, and a pioneer in introducing the issue of sexuality to his discipline. Herdt, famous for his research in Papua New Guinea, created the concept of ritualized homosexuality (1984) and also became interested in intersexuality (Herdt and Stoller 1985; Herdt 1990, 1994).[1] Herdt's own extensive research on sexuality, and on tropes such as the sexualized/gendered 'Third' (discussed in Herdt 1994), occupies a crucial space in anthropological research on sexuality in general, and intersexuality in particular. It is this anthropological account of intersexuality that I interrogate in this article: it has had major implications for future research into intersexuality and is tied up in specific discourses which are still present in cross-cultural research into sexuality.

In this article, I map out, and draw together, the different discursive preconditions upon which Western anthropology, here represented by the ethnographer Gilbert Herdt, bases its truth claims about 'the Other'.[2] My aim in this article is to identify the narratives and modes of representation in ethnographic work on gender and sexuality. As such, I interrogate the language that is applied to formulate these claims, and pose questions about the translatability of the cultural and symbolic systems of 'other' cultures. I focus on the issue of intersexuality in questioning how and when Herdt has decided to speak about intersexuality in 'the Others'. By interrogating the interconnected workings of anthropology, sexology, psychoanalysis and bio-medicine in Herdt's work, I also reflect on the historical origins of these disciplines themselves.

Here, I wish to critically engage with the use of psychoanalytical concepts in cross-cultural research, particularly in my readings of the notion of development. I will focus on the concept of the 'polymorphous perverse' in Herdt's work, which he used to describe the sexuality of 'the Other'. I map psychoanalytical and sexological discourses, and their intrinsic evolutionary framework. By examining how nineteenth-century sexology construed the homosexual and/or the hermaphrodite as an abnormal 'invert' (with regard to sexual dimorphism as the achievement of civilization), I show how this construction is analogous to racialized discourses that position non-Western cultures as primitive and less developed. I trace the heritage of these discourses in anthropology, and how they merge into what I call 'cross-cultural intersexualization' at the end of the twentieth century. I see the process of intersexualization as the quest for a scientifically verifiable distinction between men and women. Intersexualization is, therefore, at the core of the process of the construction of a dichotomously sexualized/gendered society. Historically, the category of intersexuality has been, and continues to be, formulated as a distinction between male and female and masculinity and femininity (e.g. Holmes 2000; Kessler 1998; Fausto-Sterling 2000), and as a distinction between homo- and heterosexuality (e.g. Adkins 1999; Foucault 1980; Butler 1990). Yet, in the case of cross-cultural intersexualization, we find another distinction mediated through gender and sexuality – the distinction between the civilized and the primitive. As I will argue, in what I call cross-cultural intersexualization, the 'immaturity' of the intersexualized body – the other to the two sexes/genders – stands for the 'immaturity' of the 'other' culture. The terms applied in this twofold othering process vary, yet the notion of development and maturity (concerning the psyche, the culture and the body) is ingrained in the discourses that produce cross-cultural intersexualization.

The Third and its Analogies

Harriet Lyons and Andrew Lyons describe Herdt's *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and Histor*y (1994) as an 'extremely influential volume' (Lyons and Lyons 2004, 297), in which Herdt brings together various accounts of so-called 'Thirds' through time and space. The 'Third' (sex or gender) has to be understood as the addition to the first and second sex that is men and women (even if we do not use Simone de Beauvoir's notion of the 'second sex', the 'Third' is the addition to the dualism). The title of this edited book can be read as symptomatic of recent developments in ethnological/ethnographical cross-cultural approaches to sex-gender-sexuality-systems. The volume contains a variety of accounts of sexualized and gendered identities, in different historical periods and across different geographical sites: analysis ranges from the Byzantine period, to sexology at end of the twentieth century, and from the Balkans to India and Polynesia. Moreover, this volume is unquestionably an 'excellent stimulus to further work along this path' (Conway-Long 1995, 711). Kath Weston and Morgan Holmes both praise the collection for avoiding the traps in Western notions of what sex this so-called Third 'really' is (Weston 1993, 349; Holmes 2004, 4).

There is no doubt that the initial motives of ethnologists to interrogate so-called third sexes and third genders incorporated the desire to depict 'other' cultures adequately, and that they were searching for accurate terms to describe their findings. However, the question remains whether this is possible at all. Morgan Holmes, in her article 'Locating Third Sexes', has noted that 'caution is necessary when culturally specific symbolic orders are employed to prove a(ny) point about Western sex/gender systems; the notion of learning from "other" cultures raises serious problems' (Holmes 2004, 5). Holmes states that ethnological research into third sexes/genders is likely to fall into the trap of idealizing cultures which are thought of as representing a version of a symbolic order, to be seen as superior to the limited Western dichotomous conceptualization of sex and gender (Holmes 2004, 2). Furthermore, Holmes criticizes Herdt's collection for 'lumping all the erotic and symbolic elements of these cultures together under one rubric of "third sex and gender" categories' (Holmes 2004, 5). She sees this as a sign that many anthropologists still think 'along a dimorphic axis, permitting the occasional disruption to be entertained,' but fail to consider that the so-called 'third' might be a 'first' or even 'one of any of a multiplicity of possible sex categories' (Holmes 2004, 5). The two dimensions, which Holmes criticizes in Herdt's accounts are, firstly, the hierarchical connotation the third takes on in relation to the first and second sex, and secondly, the limitation of the multiplicity of categories through the construction of the third. To this, I wish to add a third dimension: the implicit construction of the 'other' culture as childlike and uncivilized, thereby permitting a third sex/gender. In Western discourse, this third sex/gender, i.e. intersexuality, is constructed as the result of 'arrested development', and refers to an 'unfinished' embodiment. Yet, anthropological research into intersexuality situates it as cross-cultural, and combines two othering processes – sexual othering and racial/ethnic othering, as I will show.

In the preface to his *Third Sex, Third Gender* collection, Herdt states that 'the hermaphrodite, for instance, may become a symbol of boundary blurring: of the anomalous, the unclean, the tainted, the morally inept or corrupt, indeed, the "monsters" of the cultural imagination of modern Americans' (Herdt 1994, 17). Yet, as I argue, in 'Mistaken Sex', Herdt's own chapter in the collection, he works against this characterization of the hermaphrodite as a 'symbol of boundary blurring', repeating a common manoeuvre by explaining cultural and individual expressions through the framework of psychosexual development. As such, Herdt engages in an othering process, both at the level of the subject and the culture. This move towards cross-cultural intersexualization entails the biological essentializing of tri-morphic sexual difference. This complex frame of reference presents another dichotomous component: the construction of ethnicized and racialized psychosexual difference.

The distinction between sex and gender does not solely rest on the binary between man/male and woman/female, but rather, as Sally Markowitz writes, on 'a scale of racially coded degrees' which causes sex/gender difference to culminate 'in the manly European man and the feminine European woman' (Markowitz 2001. 391). The history of the construction of these racially coded degrees in the coordinate system of the 'manly European man and the feminine European woman' has already been interrogated by a number of feminist researchers (Markowitz 2001; Stepan 1993, 1986; Traub 1999; Young 1995). These constructed and coded degrees rely on analogies, and interacting metaphors that only work when they are congruent with cultural expectations. One could say that these analogies only work when they suggest new hypotheses; new systems of implications; and therefore new observations (see Stepan 1986). Stepan elaborates on this process:

> Because a metaphor or analogy does not directly present a preexisting nature but instead helps construct that nature, the metaphor generates data that conform to it, and accommodates data that are in apparent contradiction to it, so that nature is seen via the metaphor and the metaphor becomes part of the logic of science itself (Stepan 1986, 274).

The similarity evoked in these analogies is not something that can be discovered, but rather, is something that has to be established. Scientific texts, as Linda Birke puts it, are like any other text: they draw upon 'narratives [that] are culturally available; powerful metaphors and gendered fables' are to be expected (Birke 1999, 10).[3]

The 'Polymorphous Perverse'

Herdt (1994) introduces a 'powerful metaphor' in his description of the Sambian culture in his chapter in *Third Sex, Third Gender*. In his attempt to describe the events in which the *kwolu-aatmwol4* could emerge as, what Herdt calls, a third sex and/or gender, he searches for the preconditions that could make such a cultural position possible. Herdt is curious about the circumstances under which the *kwolu-aatmwol* achieves his_her[5] meaning in the Sambian culture; he asks how the Sambian culture could make 'androgyny' a significant motif in cultural representation. Herdt answers his own question, with the help of the Freudian 'polymorphous perverse'. He states that:

> polymorphous cultures such as those of the Sambia of Papua New Guinea, by contrast, define persons as more fluid and as relatively male or female, according to social and development characteristics such as lifespan stage, socioeconomic status, and body ritual (Herdt 1994, 425).

Herdt applies the psychoanalytic term 'polymorphous perverse' to this 'otherness' he detects in the social construction of the Sambian culture, and he states that their permissiveness can be characterized by this Freudian concept (Herdt 1994, 425).The concept of the 'polymorphous perverse' in Freudian terms describes a state of being, in an early stage of development, before the infant enters into culture or the symbolic order. The resolution of the Oedipus complex guarantees that the child becomes a sexualized/gendered being and therefore intelligible. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1961 [1927]), Freud describes the painful process in which civilization chooses certain body parts and makes them represent so-called sexual difference, as well as the use of those parts to justify the only permitted sort of love and bodily unions and pleasure which is 'heterosexual genital love'. Interestingly, in this account, women become more prone to sexual sensitivity since they have two 'sex/gender zones' that can give them pleasure. Man supposedly, however, has only one 'sex/gender organ' which makes him more unisexed/-gendered.[6] Therefore, women have a greater tendency towards the 'polymorphous perverse'. Freud talks about the child and 'das unkultivierte Durchschnittsweib' which is translated as the 'average uncultivated woman', which implies that class and race play here a big role in suppressing the 'polymorphous perverse' (Freud 1961 [1927], 97). Every woman has the potential to become a prostitute and therefore 'polymorphous perverse' if not properly cultured into patriarchal, misogynist, heteronormative society. In the 'polymorphous perverse' there is undifferentiated possibilities of pleasures (and embodiment) which the subject learns to contain and control according to societal, and I want to add, political censure, rules and requirements. In this sense, everything that remains 'polymorphous perverse' is aberrant and deviant in terms of sexuality, race and class – be it women or children.

Therefore, in the cross-cultural context of the anthropological realm I analyze here, the 'polymorphous perverse' takes on a problematic position. First of all, Herdt ignores the fact that the Euro-American world also includes intersexualized people, who are regarded as differently sexed. What is more, some people claim an intersexualized or transgendered identity, and live in subcultures where they are perceived as such: in other words, there are spaces in the West which are also 'permissive' to sexual variance. However, in contrasting these two cultures that are supposedly so different, Herdt homogenizes not just the 'other', but also his own Western culture. Secondly, while Herdt deploys the Freudian metaphor, he fails to explain why the Melanesian society is supposedly 'polymorphous perverse' – is it due to their bodies, their desire, their gender system, or their 'otherness'? I suggest that in cross-cultural intersexualization, in the case of Herdt's work, all these combine in the process of othering and produce a sexually and racial 'Other'. Instead, as I argue, these othering processes are dependent on each other and join forces in the case of cross-cultural intersexualization.

By referring to the term 'polymorphous perverse' which clearly denotes a state of child development (regarded as prior to 'civilization'), Herdt describes the socio-cultural system of the 'other' *in relation* to civilization. He constructs the 'other' culture (as a whole) in a developmental psychoanalytical framework, and understands it through a cross-cultural analysis. Herdt, I argue, falls into the trap of one of the most common racializing/ethnicizing analogies; that of positioning 'the Other' at a stage that is less developed, more childlike and primitive, in relation to the civilized, sophisticated and developed Western civilization. This evokes common themes of the West as superior, and of 'the Other' as defined by lack. Following Neville Hoad, I would argue that the theories of intersexuality – the processes of intersexualization – are not understandable without looking at the imperial and neo-imperial contexts of such theoretical productions (Hoad 2000). The processes of cross-cultural intersexualization are comparable to Hoad's emphasis on the emergence of the homosexual through a 'hierarchical staging of human difference under the historical period of imperialism and globalization and the attendant logics of evolution and development respectively' (Hoad 2000, 133). This notion combines theories of the body with theories of the mind to jointly constitute this 'one signifier' by 'progress through its various others, which are then posited as vestigial, arrested, anachronistic or degenerate' (Hoad 2000, 134).

Even though the Sambian culture Herdt discusses does not organize itself in the same manner as Freudian nineteenth-century bourgeois Vienna, and does not share this history, he uses the concept of the 'polymorphous perverse' to describe the psychological processes, and the organization of sexuality, of the 'other' culture. Herdt's representation of the Sambian culture as permissive, and therefore actually progressive, with regards to sexual variation, invokes psychoanalysis as a universal discourse. However, the connotation of this concept works against the argument Herdt wants to make, since the 'polymorphous perverse' implies lack (of sexual differentiation) with regards to civilization *and* sexuality, and therefore forecloses the perception of the culture as progressive perception.

Psychoanalysis as a Colonial-Evolutionary Discourse

Sigmund Freud's theories, developed in *Totem and Taboo,* relied, as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks notes, 'on the parallels between primitives and neurotics' (Seshadri-Crooks 1994, 190). Freud conceptualized so-called primitive cultures' minds as fundamentally different to the thinking of the logocentric West. To him, the 'primitive mind' does not differentiate the mystical from reality; rather, it uses 'mystical participation' to interpret and manipulate the world. As such, Freud invests in imperialist and colonial discourses, which were present in his time; the mind of the 'savage' had a specific function in anthropological discourses at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), a philosopher and 'armchair anthropologist', published various texts on the 'primitive mind' and the 'essential difference between the primitive mentality and ours' (Lévy-Bruhl 1975, 4). Seshadri-Crooks notes that 'the difference between the savage and the civilized man is expressed on a diachronic axis, as a temporal difference in "our past" and is not subject to an interchangeability of the actors' (Seshadri-Crooks 1994, 195).

In her analysis, Ranjana Khanna goes further, examining the embeddedness of psychoanalysis in geopolitical and historical coordinates. In her book *Dark Continents,* she understands psychoanalysis as a colonial discipline, which allows her 'to see how nation-statehood for the former colonies of Europe encrypts the violence of European nations in its colonial manifestations' (Khanna 2003, 6). Her arguments conceptualize psychoanalysis as an ethnography of nation-statehood, and examine the impossibility of adequately understanding psychoanalysis 'without considering how it was constituted as a colonial discipline through the economic, political, cultural, and epistemic strife in the transition from earth into world' (Khanna 2003, 9). Khanna argues for a provincializing, politicizing and historicizing of psychoanalysis, to counter the intrinsic universalizing motions derived from its geo-political and historical origins. This is needed not only for anthropological psychoanalysis, but also for a re-examination of some basic texts by Freud, such as *Totem and Taboo* and *Culture and its Discontents,* which rely heavily on the distinction between the civilized world, the Western capitalist nation-states and the so-called 'savage' societies. For example, in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud borrows from a theory of homology that assumes that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: this means that the individual repeats the stages of the development, or the evolutionary stages of the species. According to Khanna, psychoanalysis cannot be considered without inclusion of the 'evolutionary logic that informs Freud's sense of the growths of repression in civilization' (Khanna 2003, 11).

Not only is this notion of repression enabling civilization problematic, but so too are the evolutionary tropes found in Freud's theories on psychosexual development. In 1939, Freud admitted that 'I must, however, in all modesty confess that (…) I cannot do without this fact in biological evolution' (Freud 1939, 100). Indeed, Freud heavily relied on Lamarckian theories to support his claims about so-called psychosexual development. Freud also depended on Charles Darwin's theories about the arrangement of early human societies, thus locating the beginnings of the Oedipus complex in the origins of human society.[7] Examining the Freudian concept of psychosexual development, the resolution of the Oedipus complex appears to be the stage in which the child, and culture, leaves the childlike and generic form of an uncivilized being behind, and emerges into a 'mature' organization between self and others. Freud enveloped the psychic and social in an evolutionary rhetoric. By referring to Johannes Fabian's classic *Time and the Other*: *How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), Neville Hoad states that the social evolutionists 'discarded Time altogether'. Moreover, 'the temporal discourse of anthropology as it was formed decisively under the paradigm of evolutionism rested on a conception of Time that was not only secularized and naturalized but also thoroughly spatialized' (Fabian 1983 quoted in Hoad 2000, 135). Here, the paradox regarding the uses of Time demonstrates the construction of development as highly geo-political. Underlying this construction are evolutionary theories that date back to the nineteenth century. As the child of colonialism, anthropology is immersed in these theories, and as such, has significantly contributed to a hierarchical ordering of the world. The notion of development is crucial in this process. By temporalizing space, contemporaneous non-European cultures become understood as the representatives of Europe's past. Through this model, the possibility of understanding cultural difference is precluded, since it insistently implies that the 'civilized' Western culture has already been the 'primitive', the non-Western (Hoad 2000, 142).

Steven Angelides states that the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 'effectively canonized evolutionary thinking, leaving few spheres of Western thought untouched' (Angelides 2001, 29).[8] The origins of psychoanalysis and of anthropology, especially anthropology concerned with sex, gender and sexuality, indeed demonstrate traits of evolutionism. The simultaneous development of the two basic, but rival theories of diffusionism and evolutionism in the nineteenth century created debates about the differing underlying theoretical frameworks. Jack Stauder describes the anthropological tradition around the turn of the twentieth century as being 'dominated by controversies between diffusionists and evolutionists who held in common, however, an historical and often speculative approach that was primarily concerned with reconstructing the past of mankind' (Stauder 1993, 409). While the diffusionists were interested in tracing wildly dissimilar societies back to commonly shared cultural origins and connections, the evolutionists relied on a theory of linear and separate development of societies. This notion of a linear but separate development was based on Darwinian narratives of evolution. Applied to the development of human societies, this produced narratives about the evolution of humankind, ranging from 'savagery' and 'barbarism' to 'civilization', on an evolutionary continuum that can be seen across different cultures. The conclusion drawn in the imperialist era at the end of the nineteenth century was that 'advanced' societies have the responsibility of civilizing 'primitive' societies. I argue that the anthropological power/knowledge complex crystallizes in its most material form when linking the 'past of mankind' with the evolutionist explanatory framework concerning sexuality.[9]

Anne McClintock elaborately describes this 'vital analogy' of (arrested) development and 'other' cultures in evolutionary theory. According to her, we can assume that if the 'white child was an atavistic throwback to a more primitive adult ancestor', this child 'could be scientifically compared with other living races and groups to rank their level of evolutionary inferiority' (McClintock 1995, 50). The adults of inferior groups ('savage cultures', 'non-sophisticated' societies, etc) must be like the children of superior groups (industrialized societies); in this analogy, the child represents a primitive adult ancestor who is thought of as being in the same stage of mental development as the adult of the so-called savage society (McClintock 1995, 50). Stephen Gould relates this to racialization, stating that 'if adult blacks and women are like white male children, then they are living representatives of an ancestral stage in the evolution of white males' (Gould 1981, 115). He concludes that 'an anatomical theory of ranking races – based on entire bodies had been found' (Gould 1981, 115). Gayatri Spivak, questioning the entire foundation of scientific knowledge production, states that 'in fact, if the analogy between primitive peoples and children were not scientific, the fundament of the science would be blown away' (Spivak 1993, 20). I suggest that Herdt's use of the metaphor of the 'polymorphous perverse' is the foundation for his claim about the permissiveness of 'the Other' towards sexual variation intelligible to his Western audience. However, as I argue, the use of this metaphor is further consolidated when intersexualization is at work in the same maneuver.

The influence of Darwinist ideas on categorizations of sex, gender and sexuality has already been widely discussed (e.g. Somerville 1994; Hoad 2000). Siobhan Somerville notes that one of the basic hypotheses within Darwinian thinking was that organisms evolve through a process of natural selection and, therefore, also show 'greater signs of differentiation between the (two) sexes' (Somerville 1994, 255). The notion of sexual dimorphism as the pride of evolution, and therefore civilization, is central to intersexualization. In this evolutionary narrative, racialization features even before Darwinism gained influence. Imperialism and colonialism existed before the end of the nineteenth century, and already needed justification through the construction of the 'inferior other' who can be exploited/extinguished without further explanation; the inferiority of 'the Other' made any explanations redundant. Moreover, the trafficking between cultures and continents endangered the purity of the civilized white 'race'; miscegenation was a trope that began to cause anxiety. The notion of 'mixed-breeds', so-called hybrid products of a marriage between a 'white' and a 'non-white' person, is deeply intertwined with nineteenth-century eugenicist and scientific-racist discourse (Young 1995; Mitchell 1997; Werbner 1997).

Therefore, in the nineteenth century, sex and race increasingly came to define social value. Anatomists from this period studied sex and race, and according to Londa Schiebinger, positioned the European white male as the 'standard of excellence' (Schiebinger 1989, 212).The analogy between sex and race, as Schiebinger suggests, has drawn on a variety of reference points, at different points in time, since the eighteenth century. The early framework of the production of racial differences was rooted in anatomy, which molded differences into muscles, nerves, and veins. Like sex, race, Schiebinger concludes, came to penetrate the 'entire life of the organism' (Schiebinger 1989, 211). According to Markowitz, with the beginnings of sexology, the focus shifted to measurements of the pelvis (Markowitz 2001), which was thought to be equally important for understanding the physical and moral development of the 'races'. Schiebinger states that 'with pelvis size, sexual (though not racial) hierarchy was reversed. Here the European female represented the fully developed human type, outranking the European male' (Schiebinger 1989, 212). However, this did not mean that European women became the superior 'species'; they just became, in a eugenic framework, the best choice for the white man for procreation, reaffirming 'blonde heterosexuality' (Markowitz 2001, 404).

The sexologist Havelock Ellis suggested, echoing the Darwinist tradition, that 'since the beginnings of industrialization, more marked sexual differences in physical development seem (we cannot speak definitely) to have developed than are usually to be found in savage societies' (Ellis 1911, 13). Angelides quotes Carl Vogt, who stated that 'it is a remarkable circumstance, that the difference between the sexes, as regards cranial cavity, increases with the development of the race, so that the male European excels much more the female, than the negro the negress' (cited in Angelides 2001, 34). In *The Sexual Life of Our Time* (1907), Iwan Bloch stated that, with the progress of civilization, the contrast between the sexes becomes 'continually sharper and more individualized' (58). In relation to 'civilization', Bloch positions the 'other', not just in 'primitive conditions', but also 'in the present day among agricultural laborers and the proletariat' where, according to him, sexual difference 'is less sharp and to some extent even obliterated' (Bloch 1907, 58). Thus, the achievement of sexual difference as a sharp contrast between the sexes is implied to be contrasted between the white middle-class, Western lady and gentleman of the 'civilized' world. This contrast, however, needs to be literally mediated by a figure which lies 'in-between' the two parameters of sexual difference and racialized/ethnicized – here 'class' is also at stake – to make these two continua intelligible.

In his monograph *The Intermediate Sex* (1896 [1921]), Edward Carpenter served these two continua with the principle of 'the third'. He disputed Xavier Mayne's[10] direct analogy between biracial people and the 'in-between' body of the intersexualized, which Mayne positioned as a necessary principle within the natural order. However, in his attempt to resist the association between homosexuality and degeneration, which was common in his times, Carpenter also occasionally appropriated the trope of 'racial mixing'. In *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter attempted to free homosexuality from the discourse of pathology and abnormality. He used the term 'intermediate sex' to refer to homosexuality, and suggested that 'intermediary types' existed on a continuum 'in-between' the poles of the exclusively heterosexual male and female. Carpenter offered notions of 'shades' of sexes and sexual 'half-breeds' to assign homosexuality a place in the natural order. He drew on scientific vocabulary, which was dominant in the discourse of racialization. Therefore, the analogy between the 'sexual invert' and the 'mixed racial body' was employed in contradictory ways. On the one hand, this analogy was used to assign the homosexual a legitimate place within the natural order; on the other, it was used to evidence degeneration (Somerville 2000, 33). Yet, this contradiction becomes the central feature of the continuum of the natural order, in which the 'pure' bodies of white heterosexual men and women are positioned at the far end of civilization, by reference to the 'natural' developmental stages of 'in-between'. Carpenter stated that 'anatomically and mentally we find all shades existing from the pure genus man to the pure genus woman' (Carpenter 1921, 133).

In their highly influential and widely read 1889 publication, *The Evolution of Sex,* Patrick Geddes and Arthur Thomson state that 'hermaphroditism is primitive; the unisexual state is a subsequent differentiation' (Geddes and Thomson 1889, 80). The notion of natural selection made it possible to view hermaphroditic/intersexualized bodies as anomalous evolutionary 'throwbacks'.[11] Referring to this history, Ulrike Klöppel states that hermaphrodites were therefore regarded as 'atavistic monstrosities' (Klöppel 2002, 161). Foucault demonstrates that during the nineteenth century, the hermaphrodite was placed in the category of a 'monster' that disrupted the whole intelligible order and rationalizing apparatus (Foucault 2003). The assignment of meaning to certain identities, or the construction of these identities in the first place, cannot be detached from the subsequent assignment of a place in the order of beings for these newly-created identities. This order is hierarchically configured, and derives its parameters from the discourses that explain what 'human nature' or the human species is supposed to be – who can be included and who cannot. The othering processes we find in this literature are already two-fold; they need each other to be made intelligible.

In these accounts we find the 'polymorphous perverse' hidden, yet emerging through underlying concepts such as development (cultural or sexual). In several instances, the psychological, sexological, and the evolutionary discourses interlink and produce the Freudian notion of the 'polymorphous perverse' which will be transformed into the sexual *and* racial 'other' in Herdt's work nearly a century later. However, the etymology of gender and genus, as well as the interconnected epistemologies of bisexuality and intersexuality demonstrate even more thoroughly the conceptual origins of cross-cultural intersexualization.

Genus and Gender

Thus, the hermaphrodite came to be seen as atavistic, and as unfinished in its development. The term, degeneration, as related to evolutionism, also entered the debate. Havelock Ellis noted that conflating the homosexual and the hermaphrodite in one term was common for sexologists, stating that 'strictly speaking, the invert is degenerate' (Dreger 1998, 138). Alice Dreger claims that Ellis disliked the term, and made it clear that he only used it in the 'most scientific sense,' which meant that the hermaphrodite 'has fallen away from the genus' (Dreger 1998, 138). 'Genus', a Latin term, means 'race' or 'kind'. 'Degeneration' derives from the

Latin word ‘generare’, which means to procreate or breed, but also to generate, to foster and to produce. It implies deterioration from the norm, in terms of being the type of human being considered to be the norm, and being a (re)productive member of society. Therefore, to degenerate, or to be degenerate, means to not belong to the human race, but also to not be generative or productive. Degeneration is inexorably linked to development and maturity.

The notion of the hermaphrodite as having ‘fallen away from the genus’ means that intersexualization functions through an exclusion from the norm of the human species, and from its subdivision ‘genus=gender’. In the sexological discourse of Ellis’ time, this implies that the ‘invert’ (here, standing for the homosexual and the hermaphrodite) could not, or rather should not, reproduce; not only because of the invert’s negation of reproduction made consistent through the heterosexual matrix, but also because degeneration is inheritable and is also intrinsically linked to eugenics (Barnett 2006). In 1968, the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller argued that intersexualized people do not really belong to the human race (Stoller 1968, 34). Thus, since gender is constructed as so fundamental for the intelligibility of the human being (Butler 1993), in the case of intersexuality gender becomes genus, meaning the human species. Here, the term ‘genus’ is used in relation to a biological classification, which is ranked below the term species that refers here to ‘human being’. Yet, it is a term that is charged with cultural and socio-political meaning. McClintock describes degeneration as a social figure, rather than a biological concept, that is linked to the idea of contagion and fears concerning ‘fallibility of white male and imperial potency’ (McClintock 1995, 47).[12] According to Angelides, who works on the trope of bisexuality – the epistemological sibling of intersexuality – a multiplicity of different disciplinary theories such as atavism, degeneration, and arrested development were unified. In their unification, they reaffirmed the evolutionary logic of the political differentiation between civilized and primitive evolutionary entities (Angelides 2001).

Sander Gilman argues that sexuality is the most salient marker of otherness, organically representing racial difference (1985; 1993). I argue that intersexuality serves to organically represent racial/ethnic difference. The interconnection of the tropes of degeneration and the ‘human race’ is made comprehensible in terms of a continuum of sexual dimorphism and racial/cultural difference. This continuum combines the discourses of racialization/ethnicization in intersexualization. Ellis, Bloch, Carpenter and Vogt were not the first ones to draw on this interconnection to make their sexological theories intelligible to their contemporaries. The categories of race, class and sex/gender, as well as sexuality are not structurally equivalent; however, through analogy and metaphor, they are co-constructs in scientific discourses. Their historical heritage feeds into current conceptualizations of cultural and ethnic difference, and informs interpretations and explanations of the body, desire and difference.[13]The interconnection and/or analogies which Ellis and his contemporaries built on are based on a tradition that dates back to the Enlightenment and the beginnings of imperialism (and, therefore, anthropology as a discipline) (Stepan 1996; Schiebinger 1993). Not only did the material body have to bear theories of inferiority and degeneracy, but the categories of 'morality' and 'social worth' also informed and underpinned these theories, mainly through craniology. This branch of science is only intelligible if social categories are added to theories about the differences between racialized and sexualized bodies and identities. Hoad has called this process the 'reinscription of biological evolutionism into the sphere of the psychic' (Hoad 2000, 141). In cross-cultural intersexualization this twofold process is mediated by the notion of development.

Infantile Sexuality

A powerful association between sexual development and 'maturity' emerged from the early theories on psychosexual development and sexuality (and later, on gender identity); Freud emphatically stated in 1905, 'every pathological disorder of sexual life is rightly to be regarded as an inhibition in development' (Freud 1905, 208).[14] Jerome Neu notes that 'perverse sexuality is, ultimately, infantile sexuality' (Neu 1991, 185).In this Freudian sense, infantile sexuality must be understood as a space of non-genital forms of pleasure. Myra Hird states that 'perversions are now associated with "regressed" and/or "fixated" pleasures rather than mature genital love (Hird 2003, 1075). Further, Neu reads in Freud the collapse of 'the individual's experienced concern for genital pleasure together with the biological function of reproduction, so that the development and maturation criterion for perversion reduces to the question of the suitability of a particular activity for reproduction' (Neu 1991, 187). Neu also refers to the 'ideal of maturation', which, according to him, 'gives a central role to that function [reproduction] and makes all earlier sexuality necessarily perverse. The infant's multiple sources of sexual pleasure make it polymorphous perverse' (Neu 1991, 187). Freud moved from conceptualizing homosexuality as a variant of sexual function, to inscribing it as 'arrested sexual development'. Psychoanalysis, even after Freud, draws heavily on most of the evolutionary vocabulary. The notion of 'normal sexuality' became tightly bound to notions of adulthood and 'healthy and mature' development, also with regard to cultural differences. This tying of the concept of sexuality to the notion of development relies on analogies and metaphors, which appear in constructions of cultural (or racial) difference, as well as in constructions of sexualized/gendered difference. Hoad states that 'the difference between the perverse and the normal can only be understood in terms of development' (Hoad 2000, 145). Concerning intersexualization, this statement about homosexuality has to be extended to physical 'abnormality'. I argue that, in intersexualization, the discourses of psychological and physiological 'abnormality' merge when the terms of development are concerned. Moreover, 'abnormality' is construed in evolutionary terms, with cross-cultural reference, in order to create a notion of the normal, mature and civilized white, Western, binary, hetero-relational matrix comprised of two distinct sexes/genders. The distinctions which are mediated in cross-cultural intersexualization are racial *and* gendered/sexualized boundaries.

Bisexuality and Hermaphroditism/Intersexuality

While Steven Angelides' work demonstrates the place that the concept of 'bisexuality' took in the theories described above, my focus rests on intersexuality. Both categories have, at times, been interchangeably applied or separated. Bisexuality, as Angelides historicizes it, can be regarded as 'not unlike the evolutionist's "missing bisexual link"', which, just as the hermaphrodite, 'served as the dialectical link between the two forces structuring Freud's work: the biological and the psychological' (Angelides 2001, 53). Angelides states that biological or innate bisexuality, which is hermaphroditism in Freud's understanding, 'was Freud's link to the natural sciences' and 'epistemologically bisexuality was figured not only as the "other" to sexual ontology itself, but as the liminal figure through which, and against which, racial, gender, and sexual identities were invented as distinctly separate species of humankind' (Angelides 2001, 24). Angelides traces this back to the theoretical developments and sums it up as follows:

> The universal starting point for all human development, and thus human differentiation, was embryological bisexuality. As children, men passed through physical and psychical stages of bisexuality until maturity, until *(hu)manhood. Women and blacks, on the other hand, remained children, undeveloped men; or in Irigaray's terms, sexes which were not ones. This meant that each of them was therefore a (hu)man that was not one. For it was in the evolutionary process of becoming (hu)man that one was to transcend the physical and psychical animal ancestry of primordial bisexuality. In*

> *the Darwinian chain of being, this was an upward movement out of the domain of nature and into that of culture; an evolutionary progression from sexual ambiguity to sexual distinction* (Angelides 2001, 33 [emphasis in original]).

Thus, biological bisexuality – that is, in this account, intersexuality – held a specific place in the ordering of human nature, not just with regard to sex, but also to race/ethnicity. From this time onwards, the tropes of 'maturity', 'arrested development', 'development' and the definition of 'human nature' were intrinsically connected. Innate bisexuality was the pivotal epistemic tool, instrumentalized to keep the crisis of white masculinity of the late nineteenth century at bay. Sexologists worked with tropes used by anthropologists, and anthropologists founded a discursive culture based on sexological terminologies. In the processes of cross-cultural intersexualization, these different strands merge and produce a twofold othering process.

Conclusion

Anthropological research and discourse is colored by evolutionary discourses and notions which date back to the nineteenth century, and have provided the foundations for the work of anthropologists. A similar evolutionary discourse is found in theories about intersexuality, in terms of biological and psychological theories. The interdisciplinary agendas of medical and psychological anthropology, particularly when it comes to sex-gender-sexuality-systems, are saturated with new concepts and categories that are invented to apprehend 'the Other'. The set of ideas discussed here shaped sexology at the turn of the twentieth century, and continued to inform research into sex, gender and sexuality as it developed throughout the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, the acceptance of Darwinism was total; human beings were conceptually connected with the smallest entity[15] and the idea of evolution with Man on top was established – that is to say, anthropocentrism in its most explicit form. Every being was considered to have a place in the evolutionary process of creation: progress was perceived in those species that exhibited the greatest degree of sexual difference, and where heterosexuality was organized around procreation. The notion of development is deeply ingrained in Western research into non-Western societies, where one's own culture and gender regime is set as the highest possible form of development and 'civilization'. The model of development is intrinsically interwoven into the very history of psychoanalysis/psychology, sexology and anthropology, and therefore in cross-cultural intersexualization.

Lyons and Lyons identify two motivations for anthropological accounts of homosexuality: one, to make available information that has previously been distorted, and two, addressing contemporary gay political issues. However, they state these motivations are 'by no means exclusive but are often merged' (Lyons and Lyons 2004, 295). Lyons and Lyons assert that some 'anthropologists are not so much studying the "sexuality of the Other" as implicitly diagnosing "otherness" on the basis of sexuality, even though they have, in many cases, been attracted to their field subjects because of a "sameness" of sexual orientation' (Lyons and Lyons 2004, 305). In this regard, the study of homosexuality is very similar to the anthropological study of intersexuality, at least in accounts by Herdt (Herdt and Stoller 1985; Herdt and Davidson 1987; Herdt 1990, 1994). With regards to cross-cultural intersexualization, Herdt's quest to argue for less restrictive and more flexible sex-gender-sexuality-systems produces the 'other' culture as 'other' because of their 'permissiveness'. Applying the metaphor of polymorphous perversity to the representation of the 'other culture' entails positioning it at the stage of immaturity. To cross-culturally intersexualize as Herdt does, is to solidify this claim to invoke the notion of the 'incomplete' intersexualized, and construct it as emblematic for the incomplete, or even childlike, primitivism of the 'other' culture. In cross-cultural intersexualization, the immaturity of the intersexualized body stands for the immaturity of the culture in which the intersexualized body can exist as such.

For Herdt, the call for acceptance of sexual (biological) variation is made with reference to psychological terminology. By applying the term 'polymorphous perverse', Herdt evokes the coordinates of arrested development/maturity and savage/civilized. The implicit supposition of non-maturity, in terms of a socially restrictive interpretation of sex-gender-sexuality-systems – and the positioning of the hermaphrodite in this immature organization – produces, as I suggest, 'the Other' as doubly othered. The permissiveness of 'the Other' in the example by Herdt which I interrogated, and an openness to the polymorphous multiplicity of existence, are othered through the trope of intersexuality; subsequently, the system that enables this is also othered. Mutual metaphorical affirmations of the two processes of sexual and ethnic othering work towards cross-cultural intersexualization. The pathological characteristic of 'the Others' – their psychosexual non-maturity – is reproduced in the singular 'intersexualized' body and in the collectivity of the 'other' culture.

Endnotes

1 Herdt was not the first one to interrogate hermaphroditism (which is the historically older term) or intersexuality in other cultures. One of the most famous examples is Robert Edgerton who conducted research in East Africa (Edgerton 1964).

[2] The concept of 'the Other' is derived from the works of Luce Irigaray (e.g. 1995) and Stuart Hall (e.g. 1997). Irigaray writes, from a feminist perspective, on the 'fundamental model of the human' which is 'one, singular, solitary, historically masculine, the paradigmatic Western adult male, rational, capable. […] The model of the subject thus remained singular and the "others" represented less ideal examples hierarchized with respect to the singular subject' (Irigaray 1995, 7). Stuart Hall shifts this perspective slightly, describing a form of racialized knowledge of 'the Other' with reference to Edward Said and Franz Fanon (1986) who, using the concept of 'Orientalism', have shown how the hegemonic construction of the white subject is always based on the construction of another non-white model: 'the Other'.

[3] Rudi Bleys writes that 'historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect' (Bleys 1995, 106). What lies at the heart of an anthropological configuration of the power/knowledge complex is the 'pervasive understanding within anthropology (…) that the human body generates a host of potent metaphorical constructions for ordering the world' (Sharp 2000, 315). But 'the metaphors are inappropriate for translating the concepts of the particular culture: they assimilate alien cultural forms "too easily" to European [i.e. Western] categories and conceptions' (Street 1990, 242). The assumption that the 'other' culture under investigation uses the same metaphors or signifiers to designate their peoples' 'sex' and 'gender' is intrinsically colonizing.

[4] Over the course of his research, Herdt has given different translations of the word *kwolu-aatmwol*. In 1981, he explains that the Sambia 'identify' with two sexes male (*aatmwul*) and female (*aambelu*). In 1988, he states that beside this 'sexual dimorphism', Sambia recognize the *kwolu-aatmwol*. The term, he states here, is a compound morpheme referring to 'male-like-thing' (*kwolu*) and an 'adult person, masculine' (*aatmwul*). This emphasizes the *transformational quality of changing* from a 'male-like thing into masculinity' (Herdt and Davidson 1988, 38). In 1990, Herdt states that *kwolu-aatmwol* indexes 'male thing-transforming-into-female-thing' (Herdt 1990, 439). In 1994, Herdt translates it simply as 'changing into a male thing' (Herdt 1990, 432). Apparently, Herdt was not able to find an accurate translation of the term *kwolu-aatmwol.* However, I suggest that the change of translation in Herdt's course of research denotes the impossibility of adequately capturing what *kwolu-aatmwol* might possibly mean. The semantics of the term elude Herdt's attempt to translate the word and thereby the (im)possibility of translating the symbolic meaning.

[5] I use the underscore between his and her to demarcate the space between the two genders. This underscore has been introduced into the German language by Kitty Herrmann in 2003; it is called Gender_Gap and opens up written language (as well as spoken language) for people who do not identify as either man or woman, or they identify as both or as something that is not to be found on a so-called continuum of gender. In Germany this style of writing has by now found quite some resonance and is often used in academic publications.

[6] Freud obviously did not know anything about the prostate, which can be described as a second male sexual organ. The prostate produces part of the semen and is located between the bladder and the rectum. In Western discourse this organ has not been regarded as a sexual erotogenous zone. For thousands of years the prostate is known as a male sexual organ in traditional Chinese medicine or the Tantra.

[7] Frantz Fanon, for example, famously disempowered the Oedipus complex as

a universally adaptive psychoanalytical structure. Fanon denied the existence of the Oedipus for Martinique, mainly because no black father exists to mirror as The Father and, therefore, no struggle for the mother can take place. He argues that the father is always the White Father, the Colonizing Father – a structural father and not a personal one (Fanon 1986).

8 Charles Darwin actually returned from his voyages unconvinced that species had emerged through a naturalistic and mechanistic process of evolution. It was not until Darwin read Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) that he found a theoretical construction he could use to frame evolutionary processes in nature. Malthus' political views of the necessity of a 'capitalistic defense of middle class accumulation, expansion and domination' as well as the male control of reproduction, found their way into Darwin's theory of evolution (Gross and Averill 1983, 75).

9 The so-called 'father of anthropology', E. B. Tylor was a crucial figure in establishing evolutionist notions of the development of civilization. He published *Primitive Culture* in 1871 (1958) and *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* in 1865 (1964). Tylor relied heavily on Darwin's theories and often likened 'primitive' cultures to children. To describe the relation between 'savage intelligence' and 'civilized mental culture', Tylor used tropes from evolutionary theory. He also reasoned that 'throughout all the manifestations of the human intellect, facts will be found to fall into their place on the same general lines of evolution' (Tylor cited in Leopold 1980, 31). The analogy of human evolution and the difference between cultures at the level of the individual and the 'species' became a fashionable rhetorical maneuver in anthropology. Tylor often relied on the standard Enlightenment classifications of societies as 'savage' and 'childlike' or 'civilized' (Leopold 1980).

10 Xavier Mayne was the pseudonym chosen by Edward Stevenson to advocate for homosexual rights in America. He wrote *The Intersexes. A Study of Semisexualism as a Problem in Social Life* in 1908.

11 Geddes and Thomson discuss Darwin's theory of sexual selection at length in the first chapter of their book (1889, 3–31).

12 McClintock explains the social power of the image of degeneration by referring to the description of social classes or groups as 'races', 'foreign groups', or 'nonindigenous bodies', which 'could thus be cordoned off as biological and "contagious," rather than as social groups' (McClintock 1995, 48). McClintock concludes that the usefulness of the quasi-biological metaphors of 'type', 'species', 'genus' and 'race' was that they gave 'full expression to anxieties about class and gender insurgence without betraying the social and political nature of these distinctions. As Condorcet put it, such metaphors made nature herself an accomplice in the crime of political inequality' (McClintock 1995, 48).

13 Anne McClintock argues that history is not produced around one single privileged social category and that racial and class differences cannot be 'understood as sequentially derivative of sexual difference, or vice versa' (McClintock 1995, 61). To her, the determining categories of imperialism come into being only in their historical relationship to each other and emerge, in this relationship, in a 'dynamic, shifting, and intimate interdependence' (McClintock 1995, 61).

14 The rhetorical gymnastics used to justify surgical intervention in intersex-identified newborns also draws on this notion of development. The parents are not told of the physician's diagnosis, as it is imagined as being too difficult to cope with. This relies on the notion that their child is not fully developed yet, and that physicians must operate in order to secure full sexual differentiation.

15 Over the years and centuries, this small-

est entity has become smaller and smaller; now we have reached the level of hormones, chromosomes and genes. For a critical analysis of genetics, see Joan Fujimura 2006; on endocrinology, see Nelly Oudshoorn 2001.

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R v Peacock: Landmark Trial Redefines Obscenity Law

Alex Antoniou

The acquittal of Michael Peacock, who was charged with distributing DVDs featuring male fisting, urination and sado-masochism, has cast doubt on the English obscenity law. The 'deprave and corrupt' test under the Obscene Publications Act 1959 has been controversial since its inception in England and Wales. One of the strengths of the 1959 Act is its ability for juries to recognise changing moral standards in accordance with modern social values. While such content has been found in the past to be capable of debasing and destroying the moral purity of its likely audience, the question put before the jury in R v Peacock *was if this is the case nowadays. For some, the not guilty verdict represents a victory for freedom of expression and the end of an era; for others, moral degeneration. This article provides a more perceptive view of the implications of the* Peacock *outcome. It argues that we have not seen the demise of obscenity yet. On the contrary, more insidious obscenity provisions have replaced the 'archaic' 1959 Act and more censorship laws with real teeth are likely to be just over the horizon.*

Keywords: Obscenity, pornography, fisting, urination, sado-masochism

Introduction

The Obscene Publications Act 1959 (OPA or the 1959 Act hereafter[1]) passed over half a century ago, was quite recently wielded against Michael Peacock, a male escort professionally known as 'sleazy Michael,' who had been accused of distributing obscene DVDs for gain. However, his determination to challenge this 'arcane and archaic legislation' (Richardson, cited in Solicitors Journal 2012) was vindicated on 6 January 2012, when a unanimous jury in a landmark obscenity trial returned a not guilty verdict.

This paper builds on an interpretative and qualitative analysis of the principal legislation for the regulation of sexually explicit content of any kind in England and Wales with reference to primary and secondary sources. In light of notable cases in the past and the defendant's acquittal in the recent obscenity case of

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R v Peacock (unreported, 6 January 2011, Southwark Crown Court, London, UK), the paper explores how the obscenity test has been applied and developed since its inception with respect to both written and visual material. Furthermore, the examination of the outcome in *Peacock* and its implications is complemented by a non-doctrinal approach, which relies on the interpretation of up-to-date quantitative data concerning the number of prosecutions in England and Wales under the Obscene Publications Act 1959 and its prospective successor (section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008), with a view to providing a more comprehensive and well-balanced insight into the true meaning of the verdict in *Peacock*.

The Facts

The defendant in *Peacock* was charged on indictment with six counts under the 1959 Act for distributing allegedly obscene DVDs. The recordings at issue had been advertised for sale on the Internet and *Craigslist*. Mr. Peacock had been selling them from his flat in Brixton. Officers from SCD9, the Metropolitan Police unit investigating human exploitation and organised crime (the former Obscene Publications Squad of the Metropolitan Police), came across Mr. Peacock's services and made an undercover test purchase in January 2009. Six DVDs were deemed obscene and Mr Peacock was prosecuted.

The Content of the Publications

The recordings at issue featured hardcore gay sexual activities: *First*, fisting, namely the practice of inserting the hand and arm into the vagina or anus. In *Peacock*, fisting involved the insertion of five fingers of the fist into the rectum of another male. Many people have difficulty in understanding fisting as a specific form of sexual intercourse. It is argued that, far from being perverse, this practice is from a psychoanalytic perspective 'erotically exciting in just the same way as other sexual practices are' (Denman 2003, 194).

Second, urolagnia [also called 'urophilia,' 'urophagia,' 'ondinism' and 'undinism' after *Undine*, a water nymph, from the Latin, *unda*, 'wave' (Money 1986)], namely the sexual arousal and interest in urine and the act of urination itself. The terms have been used to describe any erotic use of the urinary stream, which may or may not involve a partner (Milner et al. 2008, 395). Interest in urolagnia may take various forms, including watching others urinate, urinating on others, being urinated on (aka 'golden showers' or 'water sports') or even drinking urine (Greenberg et al. 2011, 506). This sexual variation is often associated with sadomasochistic activity and represents a form of domination (Steen and Price 1988, viii). In *Peacock*, the DVDs involved men urinating in their clothes, onto each others' bodies and drinking urine.

Third, the recordings also featured BDSM, the acronym for bondage, domination, submission and masochism, but can also mean the combination of two related pairs of the terms: 'bondage and discipline' and 'sadism and masochism.' In *Peacock*, BDSM practices involved hard whipping, the insertion of needles and urethral sounds, electrical 'torture,' staged kidnapping and rape, whipping, as well as smacking of saline-injected scrotums.

More specifically, the first clip, approximately 25 minutes long, consisted of a fisting scene, culminating with a foot being inserted into an anus and double fisting. The second one depicted a man in boxing gloves engaging in a threesome to the accompaniment of country music, some ballbusting (punching to the testicles and stomach), as well as simulated kidnapping. The third clip involved multiple participants engaging in fisting and anal play with the penetrator masturbating whilst spitting into one recipient's anus. The *fourth* commenced with a warning specifying that the video should not be viewed, unless the viewer is specifically interested in hardcore BDSM. The message of the clip also specified that mutual consent had been given and all participants were aged over 18.

In the first scene of the fourth clip, a man was being flogged on his back outdoors in the countryside. His hands and feet were restrained, while red welts rose. The second scene, set in a dungeon, showed a man being flogged on the chest and pinned against a wall. A close up of the chest followed; the recipient says 'thank you Sir.' In the third scene, a man was hung upside down suspended from his feet and was whipped on the chest; then, he was tied upside down from a tree and his chest was hit with a riding crop. Furthermore, in the fourth scene, a man was flogged on a rack; his testicles were hoisted in a chain with his legs in a spreader bar. He was flogged on his chest and legs. The fifth scene moved outside again depicting a man who was bullwhipped on his back; some bleeding ensued. Finally, the sixth scene returned inside showing caning to the buttocks, needles and electrodes to nipples, as well as urethral sounds to the penis. The final shot showed clothes pegs attached in a row to the chest and nipples.

On the second day of the trial, two additional clips were shown in the courtroom: they included a man being tattooed in a chair, whilst being fisted and then penetrated with a dildo. Following scenes showed a fully clothed man in a chair receiving oral sex, whilst an unseen man behind them urinated into the mouth of the clothed man and over his body. His face was pushed into the urine, his penis gripped and his anus fingered. In the final scene, set in woodland, a skinhead was rolling a cigarette and urinated into another man's mouth.[2]

This is exactly the kind of material that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the police have long claimed was still considered obscene by the jury. More precisely, the CPS has devised a list of 'material most commonly prosecuted' (CPS 2012) within the context of the English obscenity law. This is not an exhaustive list though. As the CPS states, 'it is impossible to define all types of activity which may be suitable for prosecution' (CPS 2012). The categories of material deemed obscene consist of:

1. Sexual acts with an animal.
2. Realistic portrayals of rape.
3. Sadomasochistic material which goes beyond trifling and transient infliction of injury.
4. Torture with instruments.
5. Bondage (especially where gags are used with no apparent means of withdrawing consent).
6. Dismemberment or graphic mutilation.
7. Activities involving perversion or degradation (such as drinking urine, urination or vomiting on to the body, or excretion or use of excreta).
8. Fisting.

The CPS will not normally initiate proceedings with respect to material portraying actual consensual sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal), oral sex, masturbation, mild bondage, simulated intercourse or buggery, fetishes which do not encourage physical abuse, unless any of the aforementioned factors are present in the case concerned.

It is noteworthy that the official CPS guidance refers not only to the depiction of acts that are necessarily non-consensual, but also to a fair number of sexual activities that may be entirely consensual. Consent is a defence against criminal liability to a charge of assault. In the absence of some 'good reason' (*Attorney-General's Reference* (No. 6 of 1980) [1981] QB 715), for instance properly conducted games and sports, lawful chastisement or correction, reasonable surgical interference etc, an assault *cannot* be rendered lawful by virtue of consent, if it caused, or was intended to cause, actual bodily harm. Consent to the intentional infliction of actual or grievous bodily harm for satisfying sado-masochistic sexual desires does *not* constitute a 'good reason' and therefore, it will not be a valid defence for reasons of public policy: The House of Lords judgment in *R v Brown* [1994] 1 AC 212 established that a defendant may be convicted of unlawful wounding and assault occasioning actual bodily harm in the context of sado-masochistic activities that involve injuries which are greater than transient or trifling (essentially the drawing of blood), despite the fact that the acts were committed in private, that the participant on whom the injuries were inflicted consented to the acts in question and did not sustain any permanent injury.

In *Peacock,* no one contested the legitimacy of consenting to being fisted or punched in the testicles. More to the point was the question of who might see it happening, which in essence exposes the disparity between what the law permits consenting adults to do and what it permits them to see, hear or read of others doing. In other words, what was on trial in *R v Peacock* was *not* sex, but rather the *depiction* of sex.

Many pornography producers have been reluctant thus far to challenge the presumption that practices involving fisting and urination are obscene. Arguably, this supposition has endured because the existing obscenity test, discussed below, is notoriously obscure, inviting a great degree of subjectivity. Retailers, publishers or pornographers are not in the position to know in advance with certainty whether an article is obscene or not, while most people charged under the OPA plead guilty, since a not guilty plea and a court case resulting in a guilty verdict could lead to a more severe sentence. Nevertheless, Michael Peacock's decision to pursue this case constituted the first test of the 1959 Act before a jury for many years, thereby challenging the so far uncontested views of the police and the CPS on what is obscene.

The Obscenity Test

The long title of the OPA provides that the purpose of the Act is 'to amend the law relating to the publication of obscene matter; to provide for the protection of literature; and to strengthen the law concerning pornography.' Despite the reference to pornography, depravity and corruption are not confined to matters of sexual desire and sexual behaviour. The British courts have interpreted the statutory notion of obscenity so as to encompass the encouragement to take prohibited drugs or engage in brutal violence. In *Calder Ltd v Powell* [1965] 1 QB 509, Alex Trocchi's novel, *Cain's Book*, which described the life of a heroin addict in New York, was found to be obscene on the grounds that potential readers of the book might be tempted by the attractive descriptions of drug consumption to experiment with heroin. Thus, the width of the definition could theoretically embrace the fostering of attitudes which the court or the jury might find morally objectionable.

Section 1 features the contentious 'deprave and corrupt' test, according to which:

> […] an article shall be deemed to be obscene if its effect or (where the article comprises two or more distinct items) the effect of any one of its items is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it.

The statutory test is derived from Chief Justice Cockburn's judgment in the *Hicklin* case of 1868, which 'hung [...] like a London fog above every case of obscenity which has come before the courts ever since'

(Hansard, HC Deb 29 March 1957 vol 567 c 1492, Viscount Lambton). Until 1959, the publisher of a book containing any 'purple passage' that might have a tendency 'to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall' (*R v Hicklin* (1867–8) LR 3 QB 360, 452) was liable to imprisonment. Put in a word, the *Hicklin* test required a publisher to prove that his publication was an appropriate reading matter for an innocent schoolgirl.

To *deprave* means 'to make morally bad, to debase or to corrupt morally.'[3] To *corrupt* means 'to render morally unsound or rotten, to destroy the moral purity or chastity, to pervert or ruin a good quality; to debase; to defile.'[4] Whether the material under consideration would deprave and corrupt those who are likely to read, see or hear it is a question of fact for the jury to consider. The strength of the current obscenity test lies in the fact that it is flexible, allowing the jury to interpret it in line with shifting moral standards. Its weakness is the reverse of its strength. Its flexibility and the subjectivity inherent in jury verdicts constitute its major drawbacks.

It is the potential effect of the article on *its likely audience* that matters. An article cannot be inherently obscene in isolation from it. The publication in question does not have to be judged against the society as a whole or against particularly impressionable people, unless they are part of the likely readers, viewers or listeners. It is incorrect to invoke the standards of the average man or woman. In other words, whether an article is obscene depends on what is being or is going to be done with it. Therefore, where a case is tried on indictment, the jury must put themselves in the shoes of the likely audience.

The CPS stated that it was in the public interest to prosecute Mr Peacock: 'The prosecution was not only about the content of the material, but the way in which it was being distributed to others, without checks being made as to the age or identity of recipients' (Green 2012b). They maintained that customers were not aware of the explicit content and the defendant paid no attention to the identity of his buyers.

The jury was not convinced though. People likely to see the DVDs at issue were gay men specifically looking for this type of material. The defendant stated that, in fact, customers asked him for specific titles and knew exactly what they were buying (Beaumont and Hodgson 2012). In essence, the jury had to decide whether knowledgeable customers with certain sexual proclivities, who had actually sought out and paid for DVDs featuring a specific niche of porn, would be depraved and corrupted by it.

It could be argued that the prosecution had been initiated by a desire to discipline (hetero)sexuality. The structural heteronormativity embodied in the history of the enforcement of obscenity laws is manifest; from the 1928 orders for destruction of *The Well of Loneliness* because it 'would glorify the horrible tendency of lesbianism' (Brittain 1968, 91–2) to the prosecution of the publishers of Hubert Selby Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* for its descriptions promoting 'homosexuality or other sexual perversions' (*R v Calder and Boyars Ltd* [1969] 1 QB 151, 172) and convictions relating to businesses concentrating on homosexual pornography (*R v Phillip James McGuigan* [1996] 2 Cr App R (S) 253) or obscene video tapes depicting homosexual activity (*R v Land* [1999] QB 65). However, after having watched large parts of the 'hard core' male-on-male DVDs over several hours during the trial and after having been carefully warned against sentencing out of any impulse of homophobic antipathy, the jury, who presumably had not been depraved and corrupted in the process, decided – in less than two hours – that the material at issue is unlikely to 'deprave and corrupt' the viewer. Interestingly enough, Nigel Richardson, the defendant's lawyer, commented that although the jurors were initially shocked, they looked quite bored very quickly (BBC 2012). They finally found Michael Peacock not guilty on all counts. Had the jury found the defendant guilty of distributing material capable of 'depraving and corrupting' its viewers, he could have faced up to five years imprisonment.

The jury's verdict in the case at issue has a dual meaning. Readers, viewers or listeners who are already depraved and corrupted may become more so, according to case law. The defendant's bookshop in *DPP v Whyte* [1972] AC 849 sold pornographic books. The court found that the majority of the customers were middle-aged men and upwards. Having identified the likely audience, the court took the view that the pornographic material at issue was not capable of depraving and corrupting that readership, a significant proportion of which was 'inadequate, pathetic, dirty-minded men, seeking cheap thrills – addicts to this type of material, whose morals were already in a state of depravity and corruption' (*DPP v Whyte* [1972] AC 849, 862). However, the House of Lords rejected this approach. The 1959 Act does not necessarily centre only upon the corruption of the wholly innocent. According to Lord Wilberforce's opinion,

> The Act's purpose is to prevent the depraving and corrupting of men's minds by certain types of writing: it could never have been intended to except from the legislative protection a large body of citizens merely because, in different degrees, they had previously been exposed, or exposed themselves, to the 'obscene' material. The Act is not merely concerned with the once for all corruption

> of the wholly innocent; it equally protects the less innocent from further corruption, the addict from feeding or increasing his addiction (*DPP v Whyte* [1972] AC 849, 863).

Granted that section 8 of the Contempt of Court Act 1981 makes it a contempt to 'obtain, disclose or solicit any particulars of statements made, opinions expressed, arguments advanced or votes cast by members of a jury in the course of their deliberations in any legal proceedings,' for all we know, the jury found that pretty severe sadomasochistic practices, fisting and urination for sexual purposes *would* deprave and corrupt members of the public who have *not* viewed this kind of material before. However, those who have *already* been exposed or those likely to be exposed to it again, are already depraved and such content would not take them any further; hence, the jurors found it is not obscene. If they did consider this, then *Peacock* can be contrasted with *DPP v Whyte*.

What is bizarre and perhaps paradoxical about *Peacock* is that given how cautious the defendant was about distributing the DVDs at issue (his customers had to indicate some kind of interest, contact him and go to this home), the only people in the UK who saw the DVDs without being willing to, was the jury in the public gallery as a result of the police and CPS action.

The Significance of the Outcome: The Bright Side

The outcome in *R v Peacock* has been warmly welcomed. The case hit the headlines and the media pronounced 6 January 2012 'a great day for English sexual liberties. […] For gay rights campaigners and for every one of us that believes in social and sexual liberty, it's a day to make a five-digit victory sign' (Hodgson 2012). The defendant's solicitor, Myles Jackman, who provided support for the defence case, commented that: 'The jury's verdict – in the first contested obscenity trial in the digital age – seems to suggest "normal" members of the public accept that consensual adult pornography is an unremarkable facet of daily life' (Jackman 2012).

Moreover, Feona Attwood, Professor of Sex, Communication and Culture at Sheffield Hallam University, who attended the trial, asserted that the law has been overtaken by new understandings of how people think about sexuality and the portrayal of sex. She remarked:

> I think the law does not make sense. All the evidence that was heard was about whether the material had the ability to harm and corrupt. The question now is, what does that actually mean? What is significant is that the jury understood [the issues at stake] (quoted in Beaumont and Hodgson 2012).

David Allen Green, solicitor and *New Statesman* legal blogger also welcomed the verdict and commented that:

> […] obscenity is a curious criminal offence, and many would say that it now has no place in a modern liberal society, especially when all that is being portrayed in any 'obscene material' are the consensual (if unusual) sexual acts between adults (Green 2012a).

Describing the idea that depictions of consenting adult sexual activity can be deemed obscene as 'a throwback to an earlier age,' Jerry Barnett, Chairman of the Adult Industry Trade Association (AITA), observed:

> The adult industry continues to develop and adopt technologies that prevent children from accessing sexual content. We see no need for adults to be protected from it – a free society should protect the rights of adults to participate in any consenting sexual act they choose (International Union of Sex Workers 2012).

In addition, Hazel Eracleous, Chair of Backlash, the umbrella organisation that provides academic, legal and campaigning resources in defence of freedom of sexual expression, also remarked:

> Backlash is delighted that a jury decided it is no longer appropriate to prosecute people based on consensual adult sexual activity. We support the rights of adults to participate in all consensual sexual activities and to watch, read and create any fictional interpretation of such in any media (International Union of Sex Workers 2012).

The majority of previous prosecutions under the OPA in relation to *written* material ended in failure. Penguin Books were unsuccessfully prosecuted in 1960 under the same statute for publishing DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* after its acquittal on an obscenity charge in the USA. The parade of distinguished figures of English intellectual life to provide expert evidence rendered the case *a cause célèbre* in England. The obscenity law has been marked by seminal cases since: Hubert Selby Jr's prosecution in 1968 for his frank portrayals of drug use, street violence, gang rape and homosexuality in his 1964 novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, the *Oz* magazine trials in 1971, the *Inside Linda Lovelace* trial in 1977 and the trial of D. Britton's novel *Lord Horror* in 1989.

What do these cases have in common? They were all subject to failed prosecutions (the convictions in *Lovelace*, *Oz* and *Lord Horror* were overturned on appeal). After the Court of Appeal overturned the conviction in *Inside Linda Lovelace*, the Metropolitan police were reported as saying that if that work was not obscene, then nothing was. Therefore, there had grown an assumption that the written word fell outside the scope of the 1959 Act.

There are two exceptions to this rule: the *Little Red Schoolbook* in the early seventies, which contained chapters on sexual intercourse, masturbation and abortion and was found to be obscene, as well as the more recent *Girls (Scream) Aloud* case, which in the summer of 2009 provoked much comment about the CPS abandonment shortly before trial of the prosecution of Darryn Walker, who had been charged with publishing a 'popslash' fantasy on a blog involving the mutilation, rape and murder of each member of the girl band by their coach driver. In both cases, the key factor that prompted the prosecution was that the likely audience was likely to be people of impressionable age and thus more vulnerable to being depraved and corrupted.

Peacock clearly demonstrates that the public opinion in 2012 has moved on considerably with respect to supposedly obscene *visual* material as well. The case under consideration clarified the law in respect of fisting and urination pornography and the CPS abovementioned list needs to be reviewed in light of this latest judgment. Overall, the history of the 1959 Act appears to be littered with cases like this, revolving around who can be corrupted and who cannot. The outcome in *Peacock* rearranged the boundaries of the English obscenity law and could be 'the final nail in the coffin for the Obscene Publications Act in the digital age' (Jackman quoted in BBC 2012).

Furthermore, it may be argued that the unanimous 'not guilty' verdict in *R v Peacock* indicates that society has become more comfortable with the idea of consent in sexual activities and less condemnatory as far as unusual sexual predilections are concerned. *Peacock* shows that the general public, along with appropriate guidance, is able to distinguish between real corruption or actual harm and what consenting adults opt for. Note for example the 'thank you Sir' offered by one punishment-recipient in the second scene of the fourth clip mentioned above. Failure to differentiate between consensual and nonconsensual sexual activities is something that must be addressed, so as to shape the debate about sex issues in a way that is more reasonable and less antiquated.

The obscenity test in England and Wales, as presently constructed, has attracted much censure for being out-of-date, 'puritanical' and 'unworkable' (Edwards 2002, 125). It was effective at the time when there was a consensus on sexual values enforced by religious teaching (Orr 1989) but, nowadays, sexual attitudes are so diverse that the concept of a common set of values is not viable. Moreover, the current test is not based on the offensiveness of the material in question, but on the effect it has on its potential audience. The most offensive material may not be considered as obscene, because it might repulse its audience, rather than 'deprave and corrupt' it (the 'aversion' defence, *R v Calder and Boyars Ltd* [1968] 3 All ER 644, 647, Salmon LJ). Hence, it is argued that the test is 'paternalistic – it robs the viewer of their rational status. […] [it is] one from a different era that offends our most basic personal autonomy' (Glenister 2012). The definition of obscenity depends on the inescapable subjectivity and cultural relativity of vague terms. How many of us would consider *Lady Chatterley's Lover* a threat to public morals now? Its consequence is that sexual subcultures are criticised for the employment of practices which are essentially outside the average person's experience and that individuals' private choices are regulated by what the police, the CPS and 'twelve shopkeepers'[5] (Dicey 1959, 246) consider as tolerable.

Last but not least, certain 'torture' scenes included in the clips described above are practically what the 'extreme porn' law seeks to outlaw. The new offence of possession of extreme pornographic images (sections 63–7 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, CJIA 2008 hereafter) came into effect on 26 January 2009. It has been more than three years in the making and involved a considerable degree of Parliamentary scrutiny, as well as thorough media analysis and public debate.

Prior to the CJIA 2008, it was not an offence merely to possess obscene material, but under the OPA it is a criminal offence in England and Wales to possess an obscene article for publication *for gain*. During the sixties, it was possible to control the circulation of prohibited material in the form of photographs, books, videos or films and DVDs by taking action against publishers within the UK. In addition, the Customs Consolidation Act 1876 and the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 tackled the problem of physical importation of obscene material from abroad by empowering Customs' officers to seize it. However, the global nature of the Internet makes it very difficult to prosecute those operating from abroad. Thus, the new legal provisions were put forward as a response to the ineffectiveness of the existing regulation in controlling a certain category of pornographic images, which is produced outside of, but procured by Internet users within England and Wales.

An image must come within the terms of all three elements of the offence before it can fall foul of it: (i) *Pornographic*: An image is deemed pornographic, if it is of such a nature that it must reasonably be assumed to have been produced solely or principally for the purpose of sexual arousal. This is a question for the magistrate or jury to consider by personally examining the material at issue. (ii) The image *is grossly offensive, disgusting or otherwise of an obscene character.* (iii) The image must portray in an explicit and realistic way one of the following:

1. An act which threatens a person's life.
2. An act which results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person's anus, breasts or genitals.
3. An act which involves sexual interference with a human corpse.
4. A person performing an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive), and a reasonable person looking at the image would think that the animals and people portrayed were real.

It should be noted that 'explicit and realistic' means that graphic and convincing scenes will be caught. Thus, the offence is not limited to photographs or films of real criminal offences; even staged sexual activities may be covered by the law.

Given that the new criminal offence is intended to catch 'only material that would be caught by the OPA were it to be published in this country' (Hansard HL vol 699 col 895, 3 March 2008, Lord Hunt), it may be argued that *Peacock* clarifies what types of material it is legal to possess under the extreme pornography provisions in the CJIA 2008, under section 63(7)(b) of which fisting may be considered 'an act which results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person's anus, breasts or genitals.'

Not Much Scope for Celebration: The Dark Side

The Metropolitan Police has pledged to meet with the CPS and the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) to review the current guidelines on obscenity. There is also potentially scope for a Law Commission review of the law on assault regarding sexual consent. The BBFC, the statutory authority for age rating videos under the Video Recordings Act 1984, has been rejecting works citing the current interpretation of the OPA and has repeatedly considered whether cutting a work might address obscenity issues. On which basis do they order the editing of a certain work? They simply take into consideration the police and CPS abovementioned guidance on what they believe members of a jury would find obscene. This prevents the publication of certain kinds of images by filmmakers, since the Board gives high priority to the CPS interpretation of what would be covered by the 1959 Act.

Peacock questions the entire edifice of film classification, since the BBFC position thus far has been that the CPS has a good idea of what would be considered as obscene by a jury. Certain prohibitions can now be dropped, but it remains to be seen how the BBFC will take *Peacock* on board, since it is still entitled to order re-editing of a film based on its own guidelines.

Currently, *fisting* is restricted to the 'four finger' rule, which irrationally means that depictions of fisting are legitimate as long as the thumb is not inserted into a participant's anus. Following *Peacock*, some allowances may be made for fisting under the proviso that it does not cause any discomfort to participants and forms part of a 'moderate, non-abusive, consensual activity' (BBFC 2009, 31). However, 'strong physical […] abuse, even if consensual, is unlikely to be acceptable' (BBFC 2009, 31), while the infliction of pain or acts in a sexual context which may cause lasting physical harm, whether real or simulated, won't be tolerated. As far as BDSM scenes are concerned, it may be argued that *Peacock* will not significantly impact on the BBFC policy, since *R v Brown* [1994] 1 AC 212 (aka the 'Spanner' case, discussed above) remains effective law.

Moreover, although consumers would expect that urolagnia may now be generally allowed, the BBFC still believes that licking urine could 'deprave and corrupt' R18 viewers; hence, changes may be required as a condition of classification, if a submitted work raises concerns over its degrading content. Following the resounding *Peacock* case, in which the jury found urolagnia not to be obscene, the Board published its decision to make compulsory cuts to the R18 adult DVD entitled *The Best of Lucy Law* in order to remove the depiction of a woman licking urine from another. 'Cuts were made in line with current interpretation of the Obscene Publications Act 1959, BBFC Guidelines and policy and the Video Recording Act 1984,' the Board explains (BBFC 2012). Likewise, a cut of 20 seconds was required to remove from *Slam It! In A Slut 2* sight of a female performer expelling urine directly onto a man underneath her in order to obtain the R18 category (BBFC 2012). Therefore, it appears that the OPA still exerts a fair influence over the policy of organizations such as the BBFC and it is unlikely that the UK film industry will see the implementation of more liberal classification standards:

> The role of the BBFC is not to decide the law but to enforce it and in this we will be guided by the law enforcement agencies. In relation to this [Peacock], the CPS have stated that the fact that a jury has acquitted someone does not mean that the guidance is incorrect. There are no current plans to revise our Guidelines.[6]

In addition, section 3 of the OPA is still active: this allows the CPS and the police to seize and bring supposedly obscene material before a magistrate, who can in turn issue an order for its destruction. This is usually the preferred option for the majority of defendants, since charges under section 3 are brought against the material in question rather than its publisher or distributor. Furthermore, Customs and Excise take into account a long and comprehensive list of prohibited images, which proscribes the importation of images depicting: 'anal fisting, analingus, bestiality, bondage, buggery, coprophilia, cunnilingus, defaecation [sic], domination, ejaculation, enemas, fellatio, insertion of an object, intercourse, masturbation, necrophilia, paedophilia, sado-masochism, scatophagy, troilism, urination (urolagnia) and vaginal fisting.'[7] Officers are empowered to seize this kind of material, place it before local magistrates and request that it be destroyed.

Does *Peacock* really usher in a new epoch of sexual liberation? Although the verdict in *Peacock* heralded the end of an era for proponents of greater freedom of expression in the erotic arena, the political prognosis for the current obscenity law is rather pessimistic in the long run, 'just as the death of one evil and malignant creature in the Wizard of Oz heralded an even nastier arrival, in the form of the Wicked Witch of the West' (Fae 2012b).

Not everyone is delighted with the not guilty verdict. The CPS stated that it respected the jury's verdict, yet they stood by their decision to prosecute. *Mediawatch-UK,* the organisation which campaigns against violent, sexually explicit and obscene material in the media, maintained that *Peacock* calls for the strengthening of obscenity law rather than its abolition. For them, the not guilty verdict is actually a red flag of the malfunction of the current law. Commenting on the trial outcome, the director of the organisation, Vivienne Pattinson, pointed to the lack of concrete guidance as to what constitutes obscene and the difficulties in obtaining a conviction. 'As a society we are moving to a place where porn is considered as kind of fun between consenting adults, but porn is damaging,' Pattinson asserted (BBC 2012). The Recorder in *Peacock*, James Dingemans QC, also remarked in his summing up that 'in a civilised society, lines must be drawn' (Jackman 2012).

Additionally, latest figures indicate a substantial fall in the number of prosecutions under the OPA 1959: the volume of offences in which a prosecution commenced in magistrates' courts in 2008–9 was 152, compared to 82 in 2009–10 and 71 in 2010–11 nationwide (CPS 2011, 50). Ironically, it is just after this that prosecutions under the new sections introduced in January 2009 (sections 63–7 of the CJIA 2008) related to extreme pornographic images have dramatically increased in the last two years: according to the Crown Prosecution Service, in 2009–10 prosecutions were brought in respect of 213 offences, whereas in 2010–11 the number of offences reached 995 (CPA 2011, 50). It is noteworthy that these latest figures relate only to possession of images portraying bestiality. In fact, between 2009 and 2010, a total number of 1,977 offences under sections 63–7 of the CJIA 2008 reached a first hearing in the magistrates' court.[8] Thus, it may be argued that the CJIA 2008 seems to be substantively replacing the 1959 Act sub silentio.

The truth is in numbers. Anti-censorship advocates need to stay alert: a meticulous review of obscenity law might ensue after Peacock, but in the current climate of sexualisation anxiety (Papadopoulos 2010) it is likely that we will see not the end of obscenity, but the widening and strengthening of existing laws, such as the provisions criminalising the mere possession of extreme pornographic images.

The UK Parliament legislated in the CJIA 2008 despite the absence of conclusive evidence as to whether objectionable material online normalises distorted views of sexuality and sexual pleasure. Simultaneously, the experimental and criminological evidence base as regards the relationship between the consumption of pornography and sexual offending is 'patchy and inconsistent' (Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone 2009, 245) and a consensus on this empirical question has not yet emerged. Additionally, by criminalising mere possession, the fundamentally intrusive offence has shifted criminal responsibility from the producer (who is in principle more likely to access appropriate legal advice) to the consumer. The 'grossly offensive, disgusting or otherwise of an obscene character' threshold also renders the new law unworkable and extends government powers to censor consensual adult conduct simply on the grounds that some people find it unpleasant or repugnant. In light of this, it is submitted that the OPA has functioned or could function as a bulwark against more draconian and repressive regulation.

Concluding Remarks: Obscenity Law is Not Dead; At Least, Not Yet.

The result in *Peacock* does not set any precedent. It is not binding upon other courts and may be overturned by a higher court. Theoretically, it is possible for the police to arrest and charge someone under exactly the same circumstances, over exactly the same recordings now.

On the one hand, notwithstanding the lack of judicial determination of precedential force, it may be argued that the obscenity law in England and Wales is at a turning point. *Peacock* has the potential to whittle the CPS list down to half of the 'likely to be found guilty' representations of adult consensual behaviour and thus, the verdict might discourage the CPS from future prosecutions. To put it bluntly, we should expect more fisting and urination in porn films hereafter.

On the other hand, with a dedicated 'extreme pornography' squad (the London Metropolitan Police's Abusive and Extreme Images Unit) and many previous defendants pleading guilty rather than having their fetishes publicized during court proceedings, it appears that *Peacock* was merely another episode in the ongoing saga of unnecessary, expensive and unsuccessful obscenity prosecutions. Because of the absence of determination and budget to challenge the authorities, the fear of prosecution hangs over filmmakers' heads like the proverbial sword of Damocles. In practice, there would be no difference, if the OPA is sidelined, but the BBFC does not liberalise its approach.

Obscenity is a focal point where constructive political and moral debates intersect. It is important to illuminate the issues at stake, since otherwise misconceptions flourish, on which knee-jerk legislation is then built. The obscenity law, more than ever, calls for radical amendments, not for simplistic legislative changes by adding more unworkable and fundamentally intrusive offences, such as the newly introduced extreme porn provisions. However, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has no plans to amend the legislation and the law on assault regarding sexual consent. As Myles Jackman, a solicitor with a special interest in obscenity law, pointed out in an interview on the BBC Radio 4 PM programme regarding the implications of the verdict in *R v Peacock*:

> […] the MoJ, along with the BBFC, the police and the CPS are perfectly happy to shift the burden on to juries, instead of actually saying we need to re-evaluate what is obscene and what is not. They are saying, no, defendants, like Michael Peacock, *they* must go to court, *they* must go through the trauma of the process of thinking they may go to prison as a consequence of that and that is clearly not a desirable state.

The stressful, excruciating and expensive vagaries of the process should not be neglected: the police raids on homes and offices; the uncomfortable moment of arrest; the never-ending meetings with lawyers; revelations about an individual's privacy and names publicly dragged through the mire. The disappointing conclusion must be that one of the areas of law in urgent need of reform is less likely to receive it.

Finally, the verdict in *Peacock* probably suggests that 'the British stereotype of being prudish and conservative may not be completely true' (Glenister 2012). While many commentators rushed to hang the flags of sexual freedom out and rejoice over the fact that the Obscene Publications Act 1959 is 'on its last legs' (Beaumont and

Hodgson 2012), the case heard before Southwark Crown Court has implications far beyond Michael Peacock's acquittal. Its true significance will emerge in the long run. It has re-ignited the debate concerning the abolition of obscenity laws just like blasphemy law in 2008, which was treated as a similar legal anachronism, and has initiated a major discussion with two potential consequences. *Peacock* might lead to the OPA being dispensed with on the basis that it is no longer applicable in modern day Britain. Nevertheless, one must be careful what they wish for. Wishing away the 1959 Act might lead to a more conservative approach. *Peacock* may lead to a consultation and eventually result in new legal provisions that will replace the old OPA (presumably with a stricter one) or even in the expansion of the existing list in the extreme pornography law. In a nutshell, we can celebrate the outcome in *R v Peacock*, but we can certainly not remain quiescent and complacent.

Endnotes

1 According to section 5(3) of the OPA, the 1959 Act does not extend to Scotland or to Northern Ireland.

2 The description of the clips shown was obtained through live tweeting. The content of the clips shown on the first day of the trial (Tuesday 3 January 2011) is summarised by *Backlash* and can be found here: http://www.backlash-uk.org.uk/wp/?p=1024 [Accessed 4 January 2012].

3 As defined by Byrne J in *R v Penguin Books Ltd* [1961] Crim LR 176 (aka the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* case).

4 Ibid.

5 'Freedom of discussion is, then, in England, little else than the right to write or say anything which a jury, consisting of twelve shopkeepers, thinks it expedient should be said or written' (Dicey 1959, 246).

6 Email communication with the BBFC Chief Assistant (Policy), JL Green, published on the *Melonfarmers.co.uk* anti-censorship campaigning website. Available at <http://www.melonfarmers.co.uk/bw.htm#Depraved_Thinking_at_the_BBFC_8465> [Accessed 25 January 2012].

7 HM Customs and Excise, Volume C4: Import prohibitions and restrictions, Part 34: Indecent or obscene material, Appendix F.

8 Evidence acquired through personal communication with the CPS Principal Researcher on 20 June 2011.

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Are We Nearly There Yet? Struggling to Understand Young People as Sexual Subjects

Freya Johnson Ross

This paper seeks to explore how the academic concept of 'sexual subjectivity' appears in government Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) publications (researched between 2000 and 2010), and the understandings of key stakeholders. This follows work by Louisa Allen (and others), suggesting that there is a knowledge/practice gap within school-based SRE, which could be addressed by acknowledging young people as legitimate sexual subjects. Although much important work has been written on the concept of sexual subjectivity in wider popular and subcultural contexts, exploring the concept through an analysis of SRE curricula and stakeholders has much to contribute to the narrowing of the knowledge/practice gap. This could contribute to the training and self-reflection of practitioners, as well as assisting them in making the case for more balanced SRE guidelines. I conclude that a more confident and nuanced recognition of young people's sexual subjectivity is also important in the context of contemporary panics over the sexualisation of young people.

Keywords: Sexual subjectivity, Sex and Relationship Education, Personal, Social and Health Education, education policy, discourse analysis

Introduction

Numerous researchers have examined the sexual cultures of schools (such as Kehily 2002; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Mac an Ghaill 1996). Within this, Louisa Allen's work has been particularly important in highlighting the gulf between schools' and Sex and Relationship Educations' (SRE) representation of students' sexuality, and young people's[1] actual experiences of it (Allen 2001). In thinking through the implications of this knowledge/practice gap, Allen identifies the importance of recognising the sexual subjectivity of young people within SRE (Allen 2008; 2007; 2005; 2001). That is to say, if young people are not positioned discursively as agents in this context, it ultimately hinders the goals of SRE – such as encouraging young people to have safe and positive sexual experiences. This article contributes to this discussion by examining the

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extent to which young people are actually positioned as sexual subjects in UK government SRE publications between 2000 and 2010. In addition to this, I examine the understandings of key stakeholders in the development and delivery of SRE. By reflecting on sexual subjectivity in these two interconnected areas, this paper also sheds light on the limited articulation of ideas between academic research, stakeholders, and policy. I reveal that there is only minimal development in the extent to which the government documents acknowledge the sexual subjectivity of young people, though of course producing such guidelines will typically reflect compromises. However the stakeholders – despite having a keen awareness of the knowledge/practice gap – appeared also to undermine their own moves to acknowledge young people's sexual subjectivity. This is an important insight for stakeholders and researchers to consider as it reveals the way in which discursive patterns can persist despite intentions to the contrary. This is also particularly important given the pressure on SRE from public and political anxiety over cultural sexualisation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to unpick the complex ways in which sexual subjectivity as defined by Allen (2007) intersects with gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability and age. However, it can be seen from my analysis that the government guidelines are a long way from addressing this complexity as they hardly recognise young people's sexual subjectivity at all.

Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in England holds an unusual position within the national curriculum. Split into two parts, the majority of SRE is not statutory and parents have the right to withdraw their children from it (1996 Education Act) up to the age of 19. This includes discussion of issues such as relationships, emotions, contraception, abortion, sexually transmitted infections etc. The non-statutory nature of this part of SRE means provision is limited and extremely variable throughout England (Ofsted 2005). However, schools are required to create and make available their SRE policy (1996 Education Act). Local education authorities also, 'must have regard to the guidance issued by the Secretary of State' (2000 Learning and Skills Act) on SRE provision in maintained schools. Primary legislation on SRE is thus limited, meaning guidance produced by the government (for local education authorities, schools and teachers) is significant in structuring provision.

In 2010 the Labour-led Children, Schools and Families Bill attempted unsuccessfully to legislate to raise the status and quality of SRE. This would have capped the age of parental withdrawal at 15, ensuring all young people received at least a year of SRE before leaving school. Although this was unsuccessful, the attempt marked a significant milestone in mainstream political acceptance of what practitioners and academics have long been saying about the subject – that official recognition of the importance of SRE could contribute to improving and standardising its provision. However, it is unclear to what extent the Bill reflected a greater impact of academic research and debate on SRE policy. Several researchers have analysed and critiqued the 2000 Sex and Relationship Education Guidance (Alldred and David 2007; Monk 2001). This has pointed out its shortcomings from the perspectives of gender, sexuality and young people's rights. This article adds to these insights by analysing the subsequent guidance documents and curriculum outlines of the past 10 years, and specifically evaluating them in relation to their recognition of young people's sexual subjectivity.

Literature Review

A considerable body of academic literature has critiqued the content, style and delivery of school-based SRE since its introduction into the national curriculum in 1986. A key notion is that of a knowledge/practice gap between what young people are taught in SRE and what they actually experience (Allen 2001). Research suggests that SRE is overly focused on the biological and reproductive elements of sexual activity, and over-emphasizes the risks and dangers. This focus on teenage pregnancy and infection also dominates the evaluation of SRE programmes (Ingham 2005). Ultimately this results in significant absences from SRE; discussion of emotions and relationship dynamics (Measor et al 2000; Lees 1993), information about sexual pleasure and erotics (Allen 2006; 2001; Measor et al 2000), discussion of alternatives to penetrative, vaginal sex (Hirst 2008; Ott et al 2006; Ingham 2005; Epstein and Johnson 1998), or the diversity of sexualities (Corteen 2006; Kehily 2002; Measor et al 2000). Without any discussion of the positive motivations young people may have for engaging in sexual activity (Ott et al 2006; Ingham 2005), their sexual subjectivity is thus constructed as illegitimate.

Strikingly, this account of young people as illegitimate sexual subjects is present at a time when there is considerable interest in how sexuality and sexual imagery takes an increasingly prominent place within contemporary culture. Various authors have highlighted the complexity and ultimately ambivalence of the sexualisation of culture thesis (Gill 2009; Attwood 2006; Plummer 1995), rather than seeing this development as ultimately positive (e.g. McNair 2002) or negative (e.g. Gill 2003). Nonetheless, young people provide the focus of much anxiety in relation to sexualisation and culture (Papadopolous 2010; Buckingham and Bragg 2004). This makes it particularly important that we interrogate the way subjectivities are shaped in the context of SRE, as a site where political intervention could potentially uncritically reflect public anxiety and close down open discussion.

Research engaging with young people actually challenges the conception of school pupils as asexual. Large-scale research suggests that 30% of young men and 26% of young women report first heterosexual intercourse before the age of 16 (Wellings et al 2001). However, sexual intercourse is not the only way in which sexual subjectivity can be manifest. For example, Mary Jane Kehily has examined the ways in which young people engage in processes of meaning making about sexual identity at school (Kehily 2002). Other researchers have also explored the complex ways in which sexuality is negotiated and enacted within the school setting (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Mac an Ghail 1994). Louisa Allen's work is also important as she has investigated young people's understandings of what it means to be knowledgeable about sex (2001), and what a discourse of erotics might look like (2008; 2006). Young people's views on how sex and relationship education might be improved also reflects their self-positioning as legitimate sexual subjects (Allen 2005; Forrest, Strange and Oakley 2004).

As Louisa Allen's work in particular has highlighted, addressing the knowledge/practice gap – i.e. making SRE relevant to young people – means acknowledging their sexual subjectivity. Without this, SRE undermines its own aim to encourage agency and positive/safe sexual practice, as it constructs young people as illegitimate sexual subjects (Allen 2008; 2007; 2005; 2001) and in need of moral guidance. With this in mind, this article focuses on the extent to which young people are constructed as sexual subjects within government SRE documents between 2000 and 2010, looking for possible links between this academic research and policy. Previous work has considered the understandings of SRE practitioners, so this article extends this to consider the degree to which a range of stakeholders (including policy-makers and campaigners in this area) regard young people as legitimate sexual subjects. Given the longstanding nature of critical and constructive research on SRE, it is interesting to question whether official guidelines and stakeholders have recognised and absorbed this insight about the knowledge/practice gap and sexual subjectivity.

Key Terms and Conceptual Framework

Discourse analysis offers a useful framework for examining the extent to which guidelines and stakeholders acknowledge the sexual subjectivity of young people. This is because the notion of sexual subjectivity itself, as conceptualised by Allen (2007; 2001), is rooted in an understanding of the significance of discourse in constructing subject positions. Foucault uses discourse to refer to historically specific systems of meaning (Foucault 1972). As such they both reflect and shape social relations (Allen 2008).

The notion of sexual subjectivity is connected both to the notion of discourse and to agency. From a post-structuralist perspective subject positions are produced (at least partly) through discourse. It is as a subject (in this context sexual) that individuals can exercise agency. That is to say, have a sense of autonomy, and capability to enact it through their sexual desires and relationships. Of course structural relations of power also affect people's ability to enact their sexual subjectivity, but it is arguably difficult for SRE to address this. Within the bounds of SRE Allen highlights the need for young people to be discursively positioned as agential sexual subjects. Without this positioning, exhortations that young people practice safe sex will continue to be ineffective.

Foucault's account of power/knowledge is also useful here, as the type of and extent to which knowledge is ascribed to young people is key to their construction as sexual subjects (or not). His conceptualization of knowledge as an effect of discursive power (Foucault 1980) grounds my consideration of the way in which claims about social problems (in this case young people's sexuality) and their solutions are made and justified (Miller and Rose 2008). This means knowledge is not tied to the accurate experience of an independent reality. Instead, the dominant paradigm or 'episteme' (Foucault 1980, 197) of truth operates to delineate what is and is not comprehensible as knowledge, and who can possess it. Thus from a Foucauldian perspective we can denaturalize the ascription of young people as asexual and in need of instruction.

The method of discourse analysis I will employ to examine government documents and interview transcripts, originates partly in Foucault's conception of discourse within power/knowledge. Discourse analysis then works to place these systems of meaning within broader historical and structural contexts (Howarth 2000). The new meanings produced can then act as a basis for critique and potential transformation.

Method

The discourse analytic approach treats spoken and written testimony as windows into the assumptions and understandings of groups and individuals (Quinn 2010). This hermeneutic endeavor recognizes knowledge production is dependent on interpretation; mediated by the subjectivity of the researcher (McLeod and Thomson 2009), hence the centrality of reflexivity in the research process. Examining recent history stemmed from a desire to reveal discourses as the medium for making truth claims. More specifically it enabled critical reflection on the categories of young men and women as sexual subjects.

To examine how young people are constructed as sexual subjects in government publications between 2000 and 2010, I selected documents relating to SRE and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) for analysis using key word searches of online archives. This included all publications available from the Department for Children, Schools and Families, Department for Education and Employment, and the National Curriculum. Key documents analysed included the 2000 and 2010 guidelines for SRE, the 2004 document PSHE in Practice, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's PSHE curricula, and the 2009 MacDonald review of the proposal to make PSHE statutory.

Seeking to understand how stakeholders of SRE understand young people as sexual subjects, I utilised multiple elements within the sample. Firstly, I identified six key national campaigning organizations through intensity sampling (Roulston 2010). I selected organizations on the basis of their prominence, longevity and involvement with contemporary SRE lobbying. Of the six selected, I interviewed policy workers in four of the organizations. I supplemented these interviews by examining their organizational documents on SRE, in addition to documents produced by the two organizations that did not participate in interviews.

I also sought to recruit participants working on SRE policy and the recent development attempts within central government. This relied on contacts with other researchers working in this area to identify relevant civil servants, and it was challenging to find contact details for them. I ultimately undertook one interview with a senior civil servant involved in the areas identified.

In order to understand how SRE practitioners understood young people and sexual subjectivity in a local context, I selected an inner-city Local Education Authority. I approached all of its thirteen secondary schools and gained interviews with the Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (including SRE) co-ordinators in two schools. In addition to this I examined their school SRE policies and teaching materials. I also interviewed the borough-wide SRE co-ordinator, and a practitioner working in schools throughout the borough.

I designed flexible, semi-structured interview schedules to last between 30 and 50 minutes. For the analysis of transcripts and documents I followed a discourse analytic approach, stressing the importance of meaning within historical and structural context (Howarth 2000). The approach taken here is situated between the Foucauldian and realist approaches. The realist approach to discourse retains a stronger place for the material in its account, suggesting 'study of the dynamics which structure texts has to be located in an account of the ways discourses reproduce and transform the material world' (Parker 1992, 1). The Foucauldian in turn emphasizes the contingent and ambiguous nature of social structures (Howarth 2000). The realist element is necessary for my approach which sees the material reality of inequality as something to be identified and challenged. The Foucauldian provides an excellent way to understand the contradiction and contingency found within government texts and their development process.

I familiarised myself thoroughly with the interviews and documents, transcribing the interviews in their entirety. I followed this with three stages of coding (King 2010). First, preliminary descriptive coding where some codes were taken from my initial research questions and others emerged inductively from the data (Roulston 2010). I then re-considered my initial coding and gathered illustrative quotes to assess the volume and interpret the meaning of particular codes. Lastly I considered the larger themes, paying attention to the continuities and contrasts within and between interviews and those of different stakeholders. During analysis I also returned to my research diary and field notes. This allowed me to check and compare my initial impressions and understandings as time progressed, scrutinizing my own working process.

Analysis – Sex as Singularly Risky

Seeking to assess the extent to which central government publications positioned young people as legitimate sexual subjects, I will now discuss my analysis of the documents sampled. I will show their maintenance of an unbalanced account of sex, their denial of young people's sexual subjectivity in the present, and their undermining of young people as knowing subjects. I will also examine the ways in which various stakeholders constructed the sexual subjectivity of young people from their position to produce and interpret government publications.

The documents reveal a construction of sex as singularly risky. Although not proposing abstinence outright, the benefits of 'delaying' sexual intercourse are frequently reiterated. For example, secondary pupils 'should learn to understand human sexuality, learn the reasons for delaying sexual activity and the benefits to be gained from such delay, and learn about obtaining appropriate advice on sexual health' (DfEE 2000, 4). The notion of risk in relation to sexual intercourse adds to its construction as something fundamentally dangerous to be avoided. The personal wellbeing curriculum at key stage 3 and 4 (QCA 2007a;

b) maintains this perspective, outlining the need for pupils to learn to recognize and reduce risk, particularly in relation to sexual practice. This is not counter balanced by any account of the pleasures or positive elements of sexual relationships. As Allen and others have highlighted, this message does not fit the experience of young people who may have, want or believe in their capacity for sexual pleasure. From a Foucauldian perspective where knowledge is no longer singular, the government documents seek to exert a singular understanding of young people's sexuality as risky. Although this might be the understanding taken by schools, it fails to engage with the ways young people might seek to resist or contradict it.

Another persistent theme adding to the sense of anxiety in the texts is that of protection or safety. Even in many of the most recent documents (DfCSF 2009; Macdonald 2009), the protective argument for SRE remains prevalent. The national documents are overwhelmingly focused on the avoidance of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and pregnancy. For example, 'the key task for schools is, through appropriate information and effective advice on contraception and on delaying sexual activity, to reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies' (DfEE 2000, 16). Avoiding STIs and teenage pregnancy are presented as health promotion. This portrayal of SRE as contributing to 'healthy' pupils is arguably the most significant emphasis within the texts examined, and endures over time. Yet this notion of health as purely infection and pregnancy-free is a limited one, ignoring the psychological and social elements of health. As with the government's teenage pregnancy agenda (SEU 1999), the National Healthy School Standard (introduced in October 1999) emphasizes the imbrication of healthy pupils and effective SRE.

This health focus is maintained in the 2009 independent review of PSHE which states pupils need information and skills 'to help them grow and develop as individuals, as members of families and society so that they can live safe, healthy, productive and responsible lives' (Macdonald 2009, 13). The 2010 guidelines continue the centrality of health, the introduction emphasizing 'the contribution that good quality SRE makes to helping young people deal with the health challenges they face in adolescence' (DfCSF 2010,1). Critiques of public health and education from a Foucauldian perspective have highlighted the control exercised through these discursive regimes. Instead of enabling young people to develop and enact their own sexual subjectivity, they work to produce subjects engaged in self-regulation in line with the aims and morality of central government. Framing the guidelines around a discourse of health also serves to bolster their legitimacy as relating to medical science. The goal of health, backed by the episteme of scientific knowledge behind it, becomes unanswerable in the context of SRE, especially by young people themselves.

What makes this risk and health focused construction of sexuality and sexual practice so powerful is the lack of any alternative within the texts (Ingham 2005). The benefits or pleasures of sexual relationships of any sort are largely unmentioned. Delayed, heterosexual, reproductive sex (ideally within marriage) can easily be identified as the only acceptable form of sexual act[2]. This one-sided perspective on young people's sexual relationships contributes to their construction as illegitimate sexual subjects.

The analysis of my interview data in some ways serves to temper this unbalanced account of young people's sexual relationships. The idea of involving young people in planning SRE as a way to address the knowledge/practice gap (Allen 2001) (and recognize their sexual subjectivity) emerged clearly from the data. The understanding that the knowledge/practice gap makes SRE less effective was repeatedly mentioned across the different groups, and arguably illustrates some recognition of young people as sexual subjects. For example, one participant remarked:

> you've got to engage young people with the subject and if you're not dealing with the reality of their lives you're not gonna engage them with it (David – civil servant).

Along the same lines, another participant commented:

> one of the things is actually about the reality for young people and when you only talk to them about disease and prevention and condoms and not getting pregnant, and then they engage in sexual activity and actually quite enjoy it – the two don't sort of match in a way…It kind of just doesn't ring true for young people and they're very good at spotting where people are not telling the truth. So you know it kind of almost undermines some of the messages (Jane – NGO worker).

There was also recognition of the knowledge young people already possess:

> I think the sex side of things a lot of them know, a lot of them, they don't necessarily know all of it, but they're quite, the young people of today are quite knowledgeable (Claire – School SRE co-ordinator).

This reflects a degree of sharing in the academic notion of sexual subjectivity. However, the knowledge ascribed to young people still largely remained restricted to the biological, physical elements of sexual practice. This arguably reflects the Cartesian hierarchy of knowledge prevalent within educational establishments (Paechter 2006), where the mind is separate from and privileged over the body. This means that knowledge of the physical elements of sexuality is regarded as the least valuable. Assumptions were also made about pupils' capacity for critical thinking, as they were seen as in need of instruction in the moral and emotional aspects of relationships. This account of young people as amoral is not only inaccurate (Thomson 1994), but reflects the historic role of the state in conceptualizing young people as in need of moral training. We can see here the operation of power/knowledge restricting who is deemed the subject of knowledge (and of what sort), undermining young people, as the cerebral understanding of relationships and values remains monopolized by adults.

The manner in which young people were to be engaged to close the knowledge/practice gap also remained restricted by the regulative process of 'needs assessment'. At the borough level, the structure of these assessments arguably impacts significantly on what is 'sayable' by pupils. To assess what pupils want to learn in SRE they are asked to choose from a range of options. However, the options are different depending on the age group being assessed (years 7/8 or years 9/11), reflecting the existing curriculum for these age groups. Thus the problems with the existing guidelines and curriculum are replicated. There is no mention of desire or pleasure, further reducing their visibility as valid suggestions to counteract the focus on risk. For years 7/8 this is followed by, 'Is there anything else that you think people your age need to know about?' This could potentially allow young people to offer suggestions, but remains framed in terms of age appropriateness. While acknowledging that young people of differing ages may well have different needs, from a Foucauldian perspective, we can see the practice of needs assessment as partly implicated in the circumscription of knowledge (about what young people want and need in SRE).

The topics young people may contribute to are also restricted to content and style, as this quote illustrates:

> not on policy but on kind of the content, as I say the needs assessment it was very much looking at, it was what did they want to know, what did they need to know and what should they know and kind of looking at all of that (Claire – School SRE co-ordinator).

Thus what pupils *want to* and *should* know remains distinct, and SRE knowledge remains driven by the moral ideals of adults. The tension is evident between the demand that pupils take responsibility for themselves, and the denial of their opinion on the foundational policy, i.e. their rights to SRE. Here individualisation (of responsibility) can be seen as working to contain rather than facilitate the agential sexual subjectivity of young people.

One might also wish to consider the ways in which notions of childhood play out in relation to the teaching of apparently controversial subject matter with substantial moral signifiers. As we discussed needs assessment, practitioners constantly raised the issue of 'age appropriateness' as guiding which ideas from pupils they would act on. Thus age becomes a moralizing regulator to legitimate the marginalization of young people's opinions. For example, one participant expressed regarding pupil feedback:

> And if it's relevant, if it's appropriate, you know we wouldn't necessarily teach a year 7 about the full details of sexually transmitted diseases…So it becomes I would say, age appropriate (Claire – School SRE co-ordinator).[3]

Although the issue of age in relation to SRE provision is in itself an area of debate, the stress on the futurity of young people's sexuality does not even seem to acknowledge that 16 is the current legal age of consent for sexual intercourse. Given that 16 is currently the median age for first intercourse, we might also speculate that young people could well have had sexual desires and experiences prior to this. This arguably supports the notion that discourses around needs assessment, age appropriateness and the futurity of young people's sexuality have more to do with rejecting the sexual subjectivity of young people, than seeking to engage with nuances of development within this.

Future Sexual Subjects

The illegitimacy of young people as sexual subjects is reinforced by the way sex is constructed as something they will experience in the future, following delay. SRE is portrayed as preparing them for adult life, rather than their lives at present, potentially including sexual relationships. On one hand the 2010 SRE guidelines (DfCSF 2010) display a significantly increased mention of the positive benefits of relationships. However, examined closely, such mention is always of supportive relationship benefits, rather than physical or erotic pleasure. Such benefits also remain firmly fixed in the future of young people's lives when they are adults. For example, schools and parents want children to 'be *able as an adult* to enjoy the positive benefits of loving, rewarding and responsible relationships' (DfCSF 2010, 5) (my italics). Also, that young people should be able to 'delay until they are able to enjoy and take responsibility to ensure positive physical and emotional benefits of intimate loving relationships' (DfCSF 2010, 13). Thus the guidelines still fail to address the sexual reality young people experience at school. This is especially true when we consider secondary school pupils and findings that suggest the median age of first intercourse is 16, with around 30% of respondents reporting intercourse before this (Wellings et al 2001). We could also add to this the engagement young people will have had with cultural and media representations of sex and relationships.

In contrast to the government documents, the interview data revealed support for the inclusion of positive accounts of sex and desire in SRE. Many interviewees identified how this linked to presenting a more balanced view of the realities of sexual relationships. As the most enthusiastic participant responded:

> I think you've actually hit the nail on the head. We've got to recognize that young people and children can be sexual beings (Tom – NGO worker).

It seemed that this idea was one which could be incorporated into their existing understandings of the requirements of SRE (if it wasn't already), although not always as explicitly as this quote implies.

Although this suggests recognition of young people as sexual subjects, it was not a dominant theme. As discussed previously, the notion of age-appropriateness provides a temporal brake on what is/is not considered appropriate sexual knowledge for young people. Framing young people's sexuality as only happening in the future provides a second constraint on the recognition of their subjectivity. This diffuses the power of the acknowledgement that young people can have legitimate desire and positive sexual experiences. This was particularly evident in discussions at the level of NGOs and policy-making. For example:

> I think it sets you up to have good well-balanced meaningful relationships *in the futur*e (Sarah – NGO worker) (my italics).

Equally:

> I mean I think SRE very much to me is about *preparing children and young people for real life, adult life*, the world. And I think generally that's what schools are supposed to do; equip children and young people with skills *so they can go and have jobs and be proper people* (Jane – NGO worker) (my italics).

Also, explicitly referring to sexual relationships:

> I want my children to have happy fulfilling sex lives in their partnerships *when they're older* you know and I don't think, and parents would, that's what you would

want for your children (David – civil servant) (my italics).

This temporal register may provide a way for actors to distance themselves from the controversial reality of young people's sexuality. Yet it seriously undermines their attempts to address the knowledge/practice gap. If we consider Heidegger's notion of dasein – where past, present and future intermingle, as we must apprehend the former and latter in the present (McLeod and Thomson 2009) – this full understanding of being a subject is rejected in the discourse surrounding SRE. We cannot expect positive agency from young people when the discourses and practice of SRE position them as partial, inadequate subjects.

Peer Pressure, Knowledge, and Rationality

The undermining of young people's sexual subjectivity is also illustrated in discussions about peer influence. For example, 'resisting unwanted peer pressure' (DfCSF 2010, 11) is mentioned repeatedly from 2000 to 2010. It is recommended that teachers 'link sex and relationship education with issues of peer pressure and other risk-taking behaviour' (DfEE 2000, 10). In the 2010 guidelines this continues including the suggestion that pupils think about, 'what are some of the influences on our choices about sex and relationships and how can I deal with peer pressure?' (DfCSF 2010, 34). Thus peer influence is regarded as almost singularly negative 'pressure', exhorting young people to have risky, unhealthy sex. Without denying the occurrence of negative peer pressure on some young people, the national documents minimize the positive role peers might have. Mention of peer educators provides a rare positive counterweight to this, but is only briefly discussed in both the 2000 and 2010 guidelines. The more recent guidelines do present a slightly more positive perspective on peer education, suggesting it can give 'small groups of young people an opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills' (DfCSF 2010, 47). This contrasts with the 2000 guidelines that state 'peer education does not seem to have an impact on the development of skills and positive attitudes and values' (DfEE 2000, 28).

By failing to fully acknowledge the ambivalence of peer relations, the texts suggest that young people are uncritical vessels of peer influence, without individual agency or insight as sexual subjects. There does not appear to be awareness of the contradiction inherent in insisting peer influence is negative, while demanding young people should as individuals act to responsibly ignore it and delay sexual relationships. Young people are also arguably simultaneously peers and individual subjects. From the perspective of Allen's sexual subjectivity, the guidelines hardly recognise young people. This is underpinned by a problematic epistemology insistent on singular truth, in contrast to post-structuralist perspectives which have highlighted the multiple and constructed nature of knowledge.

A similar negative construction of young people is evident in the portrayal of information and its validity. A clear hierarchy is constructed throughout the documents, with information provided by peers firmly resigned to the lowest tiers. Here the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge helps to clarify the way in which this hierarchy, and construction of young people as invalid sources of knowledge, serves to delegitimize them as sexual subjects. The 2004 resource pack for teachers states that PSHE develops:

> critical skills that would enable them to identify 'persuaders' and influences. Pupils can identify key messages, facts or information and assess their validity. In addition to the media young people are much influenced by what they believe their friends are doing… They tend to believe that their friends are behaving in ways that are more 'risky' than are likely to be true and this in turn puts pressure on them to experiment. Normative education is an approach that attempts to challenge beliefs and myths and to give young people correct information about what their peers are doing (DfES 2004, 10).

This extract encapsulates the lack of discernment and agency ascribed to young people, coupled with a denigration of their own knowledge. The official knowledge provided by schools is simultaneously rendered as unquestionable. The hierarchy of knowledge and mistrust of young people is also reflected in the more recent consultation process, as parents are also reported as considering information from peers as wholly inaccurate (DfCSF 2009).

The subject emphasized throughout the texts is one of rational individualism. This aligns with the simplistic version of a health psychology behaviour model that underlies the SRE recommendations (Stone and Ingham 2006). This model suggests that given the correct factual information, young people will choose to modify their behaviour; i.e. have delayed and protected sex. Thus, individual control and responsibility is demanded constantly from young people, arguably reflecting the individualisation which has been theorised as characteristic of the contemporary social world (Bauman 2001). For example, 'in order to be able to take responsibility for their actions, young people need to be more generally aware of the law in relation to sexual activity and local confidential services' (DfEE 2000, 31). Learning to take responsibility is also defined as one of the key elements of learning within PSHE (DfES 2004) and this continues in the 2010 guidelines. This model refuses to acknowledge the complexity of influences on behaviour, or indeed the alternative rationalities that might be used in decision-making. In epistemological terms, the poststructuralist exposure of rationality as one logic among many, rather than the ultimate path to true knowledge reveals the limitations of an approach that cannot see desire, fantasy or curiosity as coherent modes of operation, and indeed can barely even acknowledge them. Foucault has also highlighted the way in which individualisation, arguably at play here, can act as a tool for the engineering of normalized conduct through self regulation (Foucault 1977). The limited attempt made in the documents to acknowledge this complexity (such as peer pressure discussed above) does nothing but reinforce the idea that non-rational influences should be resisted without discussion. While responsibility is exhorted, young people are simultaneously framed as passive vessels to be filled with the correct information, as a quote from a parent participant in government research exemplifies: 'they need to be educated on what is right and wrong' (DfCSF 2009, 11). This is later supported by the statement, 'SRE is learning about our bodies, our health and our relationships. It should be taught gradually based on factually accurate information' (DfCSF 2010, 1). The underlying ontology within the documents is internally inconsistent, on one hand stressing the individual responsibility and agency of young people, while simultaneously denying their sexual subjectivity, knowledge and agency. We might have expected practitioners working on the ground to be better able to see this, but as I have suggested, they were also silent on the issue.

Human Rights and Parent Power

Another way in which young people are both supported and undermined as legitimate sexual subjects is through the discourse of rights. Within the research literature, the argument for improved and standardized SRE on the basis of young people's rights is clearly present (Thomson 1994). However, it is only in the most recent review (Macdonald 2009) and guidelines (DfCSF 2010) that the language of rights in relation to young people begins to become visible as PSHE is described as 'a common entitlement' (Macdonald 2009, 16). As mentioned above, this arguably reflects the limited transition of ideas from the academic world to more mainstream politics, as seen in the recent attempt to make PSHE and SRE statutory.

At present there is a notable conflict expressed between the rights of parents and of young people. Parents' opinions, values and co-operation are constantly referred to, here prioritized: '[e]very parent and every school wants to see children grow up safely and be able as an adult to enjoy the positive benefits of loving, rewarding and responsible relationships' (DfCSF 2010, 5).

They, rather than young people, are regarded as the clients of SRE. The document reporting on research about SRE with parents tellingly titled, 'Customer Voice Research' (DfCSF 2009) clearly signals this. Strangely, this very research highlights the reluctance of parents to have a role in SRE, few seriously discussing such issues with their children. It seems odd then that parents are repeatedly focused upon given their lack of engagement with SRE. Thus it would appear that although a discourse of human rights is increasingly being used to support SRE provision, the deeper implications of young people's rights – their sexual subjectivity – are not really reflected in the guidelines.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to examine the extent to which government SRE guidelines (between 2000 and 2010), and SRE stakeholders, acknowledge young people as legitimate sexual subjects. This acknowledgement has been seen as an important component in closing the knowledge/practice gap in SRE (Allen 2001), and enabling young people to enact sexual agency (including the negotiation and practice of safe sex).

I found that government documents generally maintained an unbalanced view of sexual activity as almost singularly negative and risky. They framed SRE within a discourse of health promotion, and implied that young people should delay sexual behaviour, rather than acknowledging their sexual subjectivity in the present. These conditions limited the benefits of the slight increase in the positive mention of young people's relationships between 2000 and 2010, as they remained restricted to the future. The hierarchy of knowledge further undermined the acknowledgment of the legitimate sexual subjectivity of young people. This positioned young people as unreliable and in need of moral guidance, with the government guidelines and information provided by teachers or parents the singular truth. The recognition of young people's sexual subjectivity within government documents does not appear to have grown hugely within the last 10 years, suggesting the limited adoption of this academic insight.

Interviews with stakeholders were more mixed. In comparison to the texts, they largely showed an acute awareness of the knowledge/practice gap – and the need to address this through recognising the sexual subjectivity, desire and experience of young people. However, young people's questionable legitimacy as knowing subjects, the notion of 'age appropriateness' and the positioning of their sexual relationships in the future still served to undermine their sexual subjectivity in the present.

My research suggests that although aware of the need to address the knowledge/practice gap, and attempting to do so, stakeholders may not be aware of the extent to which they simultaneously undermine this discursively. The notion of sexual subjectivity could potentially be useful for practitioners as a tool for reflecting on their own experiences of working with young people and perhaps opening up discussion about the uses and limits of the government guidelines. For those engaged in seeking to develop local or national SRE guidelines, thinking through sexual subjectivity could also assist in explaining the necessity of a more consistent approach to bridging the knowledge/practice gap. As I hope is now evident, this is by definition much more than an academic debate. Without changing particular discourses, SRE will continue to undermine its aim to enable young people to make positive and informed choices. It is also vital that this insight is included in debates on young people and the sexualisation of culture.

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Endnotes

[1] I refer to young people or pupils throughout this paper, in order to encompass the range of ages involved in secondary education – roughly the second decade of life. This spans the official age of consent for sexual intercourse in the UK, which is 16. The use of 'young people' as opposed to children stems from an approach that problematises age as the sole indicator of capacity and recognises that agency and subjectivity are not solely the preserve of people over 18 (O'Donovan 2000). Where children are referred to (other than in quotation) it is not to make a distinction of age, but to mark the relationship young people have with their parents. Definitions of children, and childhood are laden with assumptions of incapacity and asexuality – which has been discussed in depth elsewhere (Waites 2005; Heinze 2000; O'Donovan 2000; Piper 2000; Jackson 1982). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail this literature and I am focusing on secondary education, it is important to note that it is arguable that both capacity and sexuality are present throughout the lifecourse (Hawkes and Egan 2010; O'Donovan 2000), even if in varying degrees and forms.

[2] Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss it fully here, it is important to note that the documents hardly mention gender at all, and when they do, it is understood as biological sex. They focus on women's bodies as problematic in relation to puberty and reproduction, and are unambivalently heteronormative.

[3] Ultimately, gaining a real understanding of this consultation with young people would require research directly engaging them. Although aware of this, ethics committee advice did not concur. The protective argument given in response to my proposal to engage with 'vulnerable' sixth form pupils on 'risky' topics has been documented more widely (see Louisa Allen 2009.) In my sample of NGOs I ensured three of them worked specifically with under-twenty-fives, in the hope of rectifying this silence to some extent.

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The Experimental Neuro-Framing of Sexuality

Isabelle Dussauge

Brain scans of homosexuality, sexual desire and images of male and female brain function are becoming a common element of popular scientific news. How is sexuality re-described and re-produced when studied in brain scanners? This article explores the cultural production of sexuality in the growing field of neuroimaging research. In focus is the neural framing of sexuality, i.e. the process by which sexuality is understood as a matter of brain activity and visualizable with medical imaging technologies. The neuroframing of sexuality enables a reproduction of socio-cultural notions of difference, but also of neuroscience's own notions of agency. The neural framing of sexuality remediates an idealized sexuality: ageless, neatly oriented, bodiless although haunted by the de-animated body, unfolding neatly as a sequential response of a psychological inside to an inanimate outside, and essentialized as independent from its feelers and objects.

Keywords: Neuroscience, sexuality, brain imaging, emotion, sociology of scientific knowledge

Introduction

Can there be a brain image of an orgasm? In contrast to the 1990s neuroscientific research on sexuality which primarily attempted to find anatomical differences between the brains of homo- and heterosexuals or men and women (e.g. LeVay 1991; Swaab et al 1992; analyzed in Stein 1999), the emergent program of neuroscientific research on sexuality in the 2000s aims to map and interpret how sexual desire takes place in the human brain. A subproduct of this process is familiar brain scans where certain regions seem to fire in red and yellow.

With brain research's new appealing technologies, functional neuroimaging methods,[1] scientists from various disciplines have been charting a new territory of their own at the crossroads of neuroscience and sexology, witnessed by the wide range of journals in which such studies have been published: from sexology-oriented (*Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, *Menopause*) through neuropsychological (*Brain and Behavior*) to neuroimaging journals (*NeuroImage*, *Human Brain Mapping*).

The brain is an arena where

Western culture expects crucial questions about human subjectivity to be resolved. Concomitantly, we witness the cultural cerebralization (Vidal and Ortega 2011) of human phenomena such as sexuality. How does it matter that the brain is a site where sexuality and human emotions are being explored? How is sexuality transformed (if at all) when studied as something of the brain? More prosaically, what is sexual desire when experimentally framed as something of the brain, i.e. shaped as an object of the new neurosciences?

Neuroimaging Sexuality: Overview

The first neuroimaging study of human sexuality was published in 1988 under the title 'Positron Emission Tomography and Sexual Arousal in a Sadist and Two Controls' (Garnett et al 1988). In the two decades that followed, about 60 experimental articles reporting on neuroimaging research on 'normal' human sexuality were published in scientific journals.[2] This body of scholarship deals primarily with sexual arousal, but also sexual orientation and orgasm. Most of these medical publications have focused on the brain functionings of non-pathological sexual arousal in men, sometimes in comparison with women.[3]

Neuroimaging studies of sexuality are based on experiments which share a common frame with functional neuroimaging research in general. Research subjects and controls are selected, and are asked to perform specific tasks, such as viewing a given sequence of pictures, while lying in a scanner that registers brain activity. The researchers then process brain activity data with statistical methods in the subject group and control group, and create visual displays of the data, the most familiar of which feature areas 'lit up' in yellow and red on a grayscale background. On the basis of the comparative brain activity data/images and statistical analysis, neuroscientists draw conclusions about the differences between subjects and controls, or between different psychological states in the same subjects (Dumit 2004).

A striking feature of neuroimaging studies of sexuality is the kinds of tasks performed during the measurements. In some of these neuroimaging investigations, the research subjects are asked to masturbate or reach orgasm according to a certain timing. In other, more conventional experiments, they are shown pictures with and without erotic content. Sometimes research subjects are asked to report the arousal they experience during the experiment, or bodily measurements are taken for correlation with the brain activity data. The experimental designs vary widely and the reductions, productions and reproductions of sexuality take place at different steps and levels of the experimental settings, which the following highlights.

Ideal Subjects and Ideal Categories of Desire

By procedures of investigation of the volunteers, neuroscientists align the historically new experimental apparatus of functional neuroimaging with classical technologies of sexological investigation like questionnaires and scores to categorize the subjects and their sexualities. In this section I argue that the participants are selected and treated as the bearers of an idealized sexuality.

Ideal Subjects

An early, preliminary study by a French research group (Stoléru et al 1999) is interesting to examine here because of the thoroughness of its description of the selection criteria. The volunteers were 'eight right-handed, physically and psychiatrically well, unmedicated male volunteers who were likely to have intense sexual responses to visual sexual stimuli' (Stoléru et al 1999, 4). The selection of very sexually responsive participants was effected by means of questionnaires: 'only subjects answering they were 'generally' or 'always' aroused by sexually explicit films were included' (Stoléru et al 1999, 5). Additionally, volunteers had to be below 45 years old 'to eliminate possible effects of age on sexual arousability' (Stoléru et al 1999, 5). The selected participants were between 20 and 25 years old.

In the second study published by the same research team, the range of selectees was intentionally broader, 'to increase the generalizability of the first study by including subjects with a larger range of age and sexual arousability' (Redouté et al 2000, 164). This time the participants were between 21 and 39 years old, and they were not selected on the basis of being exceptionally sexual.

In the body of subsequent publications in the field, most experiments were designed with participants between roughly 18 and 40 years of age; in half of those, the participants were between 18 and 30. Often, only the data in participants with a 'sufficient' level of arousal is kept. Even in the publications which focused on a young and narrow age group, there is usually no rationale provided for the choice of age limits. It is as if it was self-evident that sexuality is best studied in people in their twenties.

Of course, there are good reasons to do so. For instance, statistically more performant participants ensure the feasibility of the experiments. My point is, however, that unflawed sexuality is what is studied in twenty-year old males, and other groups can be described by difference with that group. If young sexuality is taken as the best representative of human sexuality, then what the experimenters map, I argue, is a pure sexuality unmarked (unflawed) by age.

Oriented Participants

It is also clear that most published

experiments study male sexual desire; among those, a focus on heterosexual arousal (and/or erection and/or orgasm) is also more common.[4]

Virtually all studies aimed to recruit participants with some sexual experience; exclusively heterosexual, and, when needed, exclusively homosexual[5] – although this seems to have been difficult to achieve, as we shall now see.

When explicit, the sexual orientations of the participants were established either based on subjects' self-definition or, more commonly in studies with homosexual people, based on more complex assessments such as questionnaires and interviews in which several dimensions of the volunteers' sexuality were assessed, such as past experiences and felt attractions.

For instance, one unusually detailed publication explains that in order to select 28 heterosexual men and women:

> subjects were pre-screened to verify that they were heterosexual (self-reported as having only opposite-sex sexual desire and sexual experiences), had experience viewing stimuli [erotica] similar to those in the study, and found such materials significantly arousing. Thirty-four males were pre-screened: four (12%) were excluded because they reported same-sex desire or experience... Forty-five females were pre-screened: 16 (36%) were excluded because they reported same-sex desire or experience and 7 (16%) ... because of insufficient response to erotica (Hamann et al 2004, 415).

However, not all studies seem to be that strict in their selection. In studies featuring only heterosexuals, the stringency of selection (and in reporting the selection procedures) with regards to sexual preferences varies greatly.[6]

In studies featuring homosexuals, the use of Kinsey scales (Kinsey et al 1948) to categorize an individual's current and past sexual preferences between 0 and 6 was common, where 0 means purely heterosexual and 6 purely homosexual. Attraction or feelings, sexual behavior, and fantasy, are common dimensions on the basis of which participants were attributed a score and selected – or not – for participation. Most often, the participants selected had scores of 0–1 (hetero+) and 5–6 (gay+).[7]

The apparent reason for selecting 0–1 and 5–6 instead of 0 and 6 is pragmatic. Some researchers defend such a choice by arguing that a somewhat loose selection on the scale is more representative of the sexual diversity in hetero- and homosexuals (Paul et al 2008, 731). But mostly, it seems to have been difficult to find participants with a pure sexual orientation, especially amongst lesbians. For instance, Berglund and colleagues (2006) wrote that '[b]ecause it was important to collect the data from … subjects within the same period' – i.e. because they could not spend more time looking for the perfect participants – and 'because of the reportedly higher sexual fluidity in lesbian women (a strictly homosexual choice of sexual partner seems more unusual among the lesbian women than HoM) ..., the study group consisted of lesbian women who rated >5 [sic] on the Kinsey scale' (Berglund et al 2006, 8273).

The Unflawed Compass of Sexual Orientation

There is a remarkable contrast between the handling of sexual orientation for selection purposes and for experiment design and interpretation. On the one hand, in the selection tests, researchers often give detailed attention to volunteers' sexual orientation and acknowledge several dimensions of sexual preference (feelings, acts, fantasies, attractions, and even changeability in time). On the other hand, these details are used only to exclude imperfectly oriented volunteers, and the qualitative information on people's sexuality generated for the selections is as good as discarded in the rest of the experiment design and interpretation of results.

This contrast points to an experimental logic: research participants are not interesting for their sexualities; they are interesting as the bearers of idealized and ideally oriented homo- and heterosexuality. Homo- and heterosexuality are idealized by the central contemporary cultural logic addressed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, according to which 'of the very many dimensions' of individual sexual preferences, 'precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the [twentieth] century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation"' (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990, 8–9).

The neurostudies of sexuality are not studies of homosexual and heterosexual – nor bisexual – people's lived sexuality; they are, instead, studies of idealized homosexual and heterosexual desire, treated as the only coordinates needed to describe human sexuality. This is not because bisexualities (and diverse sets of preferences) are considered non-existent, but because they are not necessary to the neuroscientific project of describing the main coordinates of human sexuality. To put it bluntly: in the world of neural sexuality, people may well be bisexual, but desire is not.[8]

Philosopher Sara Ahmed writes the following about sexual orientation:

> If sexual orientation becomes a matter of being, then 'being' itself becomes orientated... [T]he term 'orientation'… points to how one is placed in relation to objects in

> the sense of 'the direction' one has and takes toward objects... So sexual desire orientates the subject towards some others (and by implication not other others) by establishing a line or direction... It is not simply the object that determinates the 'direction' of one's desire; rather the direction one takes makes some others available as objects to be desired. (Ahmed 2006, 69–70).

Ahmed goes on theorizing the norm of the 'straight line' and, in contrast, same-sex desire as off line (Ahmed 2006, 71). In other words, orientation is a feature of our being in the world which unfolds in relation to culturally normed life lines.

In the current sexually-oriented world we inhabit, the directions a sexual compass point to are homo and hetero (and to some extent, male and female, as we shall see further on). This cultural logic is reproduced in the neuroimaging science of sexuality, where it organizes the design and interpretation of experiments around an idealized notion of sexuality.

This section aimed to highlight the idealization of the human participants in the neuroimaging experiments. My point is not a criticism of whose sexuality is being studied, but rather what sexuality is being studied as: an ideally oriented sexuality, unflawed by age and bearer. Let us now turn to how, experimentally, this is done.

Subtractions

Neuroscience treats sexuality as it treats emotions – as processes in themselves which take place within the individual (more about this further on). In his study of neuroimaging experiments, medical anthropologist Simon Cohn (2011; 2008) highlights a general feature of experimental design in neuroimaging science of emotion: the same assumptions about the nature of emotions guide the design, conduct, and interpretation of experiments. Consequently, 'only those elements that can be localized and delimited emerge as components of the [neural] pathways and maps used to represent the experience' (Cohn 2008, 151). Similarly, in neuroscientific work, sexuality is defined through what it is experimentally enacted as (what it is), and what it is compared to (what it is not).

Experimental Productions: That Which Sexuality Is

Sexual desire and pleasure are produced in a range of different ways in the neuroimaging experiments.

The neuroimaging studies of orgasm or ejaculation use direct bodily stimulation such as vibrators (Komisaruk and Whipple 2005; Komisaruk et al 2004) or sex given by a partner (Georgiadis et al 2006; Holstege et al 2003). One study featured an experimental condition in which the participating women were asked to think themselves to orgasm (Komisaruk and Whipple 2005).

In neuroimaging studies of sexual arousal, the most common experimental situation consists in having participants watch sequences of videos or pictures with 'erotic content' while lying in the scanner. These sequences are usually series of shorter movies or pictures, from a few seconds to several minutes.

Although generally drawing on mainstream pornographic imagery, the contents of the visual materials – and the precision with which they are described – vary across the publications. Often the contents of the films and pictures are labeled as 'erotic' or 'emotionally neutral' but not described beyond indications such as 'featured heterosexual intercourse' (Miyagawa et al 2007, 832). Sometimes, however, the authors make explicit what sexual practices are visible; or in the case of still photos, what poses the bodies represented have. For instance, Beauregard et al describe the videos they used as follows: '[they] depicted different kinds of sexual interactions (e.g. oral sex, vaginal intercourse, etc.) between one woman and two or three men, two women and one man, and between two or more women' (Beauregard et al 2001, 2) Arnow and colleagues describe the videos and their selection as such: 'The content of erotic segments involved four types of sexual activities: rear entry intercourse, intercourse with the female in the superior position, fellatio and sexual intercourse with the male in the superior position. Of eight different sexual activities depicted in film, these four activities were associated with the highest levels of penile tumescence' (Arnow et al 2002, 1016).

This points to a crucial feature of the experimental design: choosing pictures or videos which produce a sexual state in a predictable manner. Although not a standard procedure, it has become common that the erotic video excerpts or pictures be tested in advance by a test group matched with the group of experiment participants for variables like age and sex (e.g. by seven students in Stoléru et al 1999). In such procedures, the test group is presented with a range of pictures and videos with erotic materials and attribute a grade to those: from not arousing (grade 0) to very arousing (grade 9). From the broad range of graded visual materials, a set of videos or pictures is then selected which fulfills certain given characteristics, such as being equally exciting to men and women, or being very exciting to all, or being slightly exciting. Other studies do not select films on an equalizing basis but monitor participants' arousal in order to compare responses for similar degrees of arousal.[9]

Thus neuroscientists seem to be aiming at producing effective sexual stimuli that produce sexual activity at a given level of intensity.

This aligns with the circular logic of mainstream sexology, which defines normal sexual response as the response to 'effective stimulation', itself defined as 'orgasm-oriented stimulation that facilitates the human sexual response cycle' (Tiefer 2002, 81). That, in turn, has 'defined sex as what occurs during the response cycle and produces orgasm' (Tiefer 2002, 82).

The great effort deployed by the neuroscientists in experiment design to make arousal comparable across participants and categories of participants, independent of their qualitative relation to pornography and sexuality, reveals an ontological assumption: that there is a universal desire and pleasure which, once triggered, is the same for everyone. The assumption acknowledges that desire and pleasure may have different intensities and possibly different pathways – but no different expressions depending on what triggers it. Desire and pleasure are described as versions of the same thing, no matter if what makes them happen is mainstream porn, gay erotica, nude images, or, in the case of orgasm studies, a partner, vibrator or masturbation.

Implicit Sexological Model

The experimental production of this extensively standardized sexual arousal builds on – and reproduces – implicit categories and models of sexual arousal.

First, as suggested in the previous section, socio-cultural categories of sexuality and gender come to frame the experiments and the construct of a desiring brain along a series of binaries: a gender binary, a binary of sexual orientation, and notions of normal/impaired sexual function.

Second, sexual desire and pleasure are produced along implicit sexological models, which set up assumptions about the temporality of sexual desire/pleasure. For instance, an implicit sexological hypothesis at work is that participants are turned on in a way that resembles their own sexuality while watching depictions of sexual activity which echo with their own.[10]

Just like in any neuroimaging design, experiments are scripted to follow strict timelines: of sequences of stimuli, control and rest conditions, all of which have definite durations and sequential order. For instance, in the experiments by Stoléru et al (1999), 'documentary films showing the Amazonian forest and an island off Brittany' were shown for ten minutes each, then a humor video (ten minutes), then another humor video (ten minutes), then a 'sexually explicit cli[p] depicting heterosexual coitus' (ten minutes), then another ten-minute long sexually explicit film. The sexual condition was the last one in that order because the arousal from it was expected to last longer. The study of orgasm by

Georgiadis et al (2006) had participants follow a strict timeline of rest, imitation of orgasm, clitoral stimulation, and orgasm attempt.

Beyond these temporal choices, there is a crucial, underlying temporal order that organizes the shape of the experiment. Obvious both in the studies of orgasm and studies of erection is the assumption that sexuality (desire and pleasure) follows a sequence of phases: from desire, excitement, through a plateau phase, to orgasm. This is the 'human sexual response cycle model' (HSRCM) originally proposed by William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1966): the normative description of a sexuality as dominantly genital, heterosexual-coital, physiological, and naturally unfolding along this given temporal order.

Masters and Johnson's HSRCM was revised in the 1970s and subsequently included in the psychiatric classification system DSM, which defines sexual dysfunction. Thus it is not surprising that a more or less exact version of it is reproduced in the neuroimaging experiments.

The HSRCM has been criticized by feminist sexologists and allied views for equating sexuality with successful orgasm-oriented sexual activity in a 'linear, genital game plan' (Tiefer 2002, 85).[11] Sexual practices not focused on orgasm; pleasure other than orgasm; non-physiological dimensions affecting the possibility of sexual pleasure for many, such as emotions, relations, communication; and the political etiology of 'sexual dysfunction' i.e. of the variations from the HSRC's norm of what constitutes healthy performant sex, are not visible in this model. Rather, sexual performance is measured, for women, in terms of the frequency orgasm reached, and for men in terms of erection, ejaculation and orgasm.

Tellingly, Masters and Johnson developed their HSRC model on the basis of experiments in which only people with a 'positive history of orgasm' participated, i.e. 'devotees of a particular, goal-oriented sexual style' (Tiefer 2002, 80).[12] This is also the way neuroimaging experiments function. They select participants with a positive sexual history without dysfunction. They design and use 'effective' sexual stimulation, and exclude data from participants who do not perform sexual arousal well enough in experiments.[13]

The culturally dominant HSRCM-assumptions about the nature of arousal thus run through the experiments and become embedded in the neural facts of sexuality which appear as the results of the experiments but are, instead, the results of a self-fulfilling circular embeddedness.

Experimental Productions: That Which Sexuality is Not

Most neuroimaging experiments use comparisons with control conditions in order to produce meaningful data. Neuroimaging data are relative and acquire meaning first when a specific experimental state such as 'sexually aroused' is distinguished from another, e.g. 'rest' or 'imitation of pleasure'. What counts as sexuality is thus defined as much by what does not count as sexual pleasure/desire.

For instance, in orgasm studies, a control condition used for comparison is sexual pleasure before orgasm (Holstege et al 2003; Komisaruk and Whipple 2005; Georgiadis et al 2006). Another control condition is the 'imitation' of orgasm (Georgiadis et al 2006). This deserves attention: when asked to imitate orgasm, women participants are asked to contract their muscles (both vaginal and other bodily muscles) in a way that resembles what happens for them upon orgasm. By a statistical comparison, called subtraction, between the orgasm data and the imitation data, the muscular body is erased from brain data and therefore only a specifically non-fleshy, non-bodily aspect of orgasm is kept as a brain depiction of orgasm. This, in turn, promotes brain activity to the ontological level of being the site where it 'really' happens.[14]

Similarly, in the experiments on sexual arousal, the researchers use as control conditions different experimental ways of having participants doing nothing – in a focused manner. Participants may be asked to stare at a black cross on a white background, or at a monochromatic green image, or at a blurred 'mosaic' video. In some experiments, an emotional nothingness is produced by having the participants watch 'emotionally neutral' videos such as excerpts from a documentary about the dull landscapes of Brittany. Or participants may be asked simply to breathe quietly.

The subtraction between, on the one hand, brain data produced during a condition of sexual arousal, i.e. watching erotic videos, and on the other hand, a control state, i.e. excerpts from a documentary, yields a 'cleaned up' version of the brain data on sexual arousal. The comparison functions as a removal of unwanted noise such as the changes in brain data linked to the task of watching a movie (independently of its content). The subtraction also erases rest (what counts as rest) from the realm of the sexual.

Additionally, beyond such 'baseline' conditions, more advanced control situations are used in the neuroimaging science of sex. In virtually all experiments, control conditions are chosen which are used by the researchers to identify the specifically sexual component of the sexual response. The epistemologically threatening question is this: What in the sexual response makes it, specifically, sexual and not just emotional (cf. Walter et al 2008)? What is the brain activation pattern which makes an orgasm, an orgasm – and not, say, simply a pleasurable bodily experience?

I tentatively call this an epistemological anxiety of specificity.[15] Control conditions are designed to contain this anxiety. For instance, control conditions for sexual arousal (showing erotica) may be showing images of sports. The rationale varies across experiments. For example, sports pictures or videos are used as control conditions to induce a general but nonsexual excitement (e.g. Arnow et al 2002; Walter et al. 2008); or to elicit a response to viewing nonsexual interactions between bodies (e.g. Ferretti et al 2005; Brunetti et al 2008; Safron et al 2007).

Using subtraction (comparison) between participants' brain data upon sexual arousal and upon viewing sports, respectively, the neuroscientists isolate what they consider a specifically sexual excitement.[16]

By the same logic, in the experiment by Stoléru et al (Redouté et al 2000; Stoléru et al 1999), humor clips were used to induce the control states positive and nonsexual condition to compare with showing erotic videos and pictures of sexy women to induce positive and sexual conditions. This is different from the comparison with landscape videos in the same experiment: whereas the landscape was considered to yield an 'emotionally neutral' baseline condition, the humor scenes were handled as a tool to isolate what makes sexual arousal something different from, say, a nice fun moment of laughter in front of television.

Of course, many assumptions are at work here about what can or cannot be sexual, or emotional. People are not expected to get aroused by watching pictures of Brittany or when viewing sports. This indicates that the experimental settings reproduce culturally available boundaries of what counts as sexual and, more broadly, as emotional.

In addition to sports, recurrent stimuli and control situations are specifically designed to remove interactions between people from brain data. Experiments use a range of control videos or pictures showing situations defined as 'social interactions' such as interviews, carpentry (Beauregard et al 2001), therapeutic massage (Hamann et al 2004), sports (Ferretti et al 2005), or 'couples during regular nonsexual activity such as gardening, working together, or talking' (Paul et al 2008).

This logic of removing representations of interactions from the brain data is epitomized by the experimental design chosen by Ponseti et al (2009; 2006) who chose to induce the sexual condition by showing pictures of aroused genitals only (instead of pictures of sexual activity). The justification was to avoid the part of the brain response that could be associated with seeing and responding to people's facial expressions and bodily gestures. This approach defines the 'social' brain response as a disturbance of the data about sexuality.

As a result of such experimental design, what many scholars in the social sciences and humanities would refer to as 'the social' is irremediably absent from the experiments' conceptualizations of desire. But the social is not forgotten or simply absent (cf. Martin 2010; Cohn 2008), it is cleaned up.[17] This cleaning up is, in turn, enabled by an implicit, additive psychological model according to which sexuality equals a core sexuality plus (possibly) interaction. Core sexuality is confined within the individual body.

Of course, the experiment is not a non-social setting. Rather the specific social-material configuration of the experiment is designed so as to produce, by design, and yield, by subtraction, a sexuality cleaned up from (a certain idea of) the social.

Disappearances

The Ghost of the De-Animated Body

The human body of the neuroimaging experiments of desire is visible by its absence from the models of desire proposed. In neural models of sexual arousal, the body's sexuality consists of being activated by automatic reactions (higher pulse, erection) and by brain arousal (as in Redouté et al 2000; Stoléru et al 1999). The erect male body becomes part of the imaginary of desire which feeds back to the brain: neuroscientists propose that the pleasant consciousness of erection is 'visible' in the brain activation during desire – i.e. the pleasure of desire is the pleasure of feeling one's body erect (e.g. Redouté et al 2000; e.g. Stoléru et al 1999; Hamann et al 2004).

Here, the brain is given an agency over the person who carries it and who becomes a mere bodily vehicle for that brain. This rehashes the traditional philosophical separation and hierarchy, in Western culture, of the mind-in-the-brain (Beaulieu 2000) over the body, which is crucial to the modern figure of the cerebral subject (Vidal 2009) or of what historian Robert Martensen has called the 'cerebral body', the cultural-medical understanding of the body as dominated by the brain (Martensen 2004).

However, the brain activation patterns that match the reactions of the aroused body are those that the neuroscientists consider to constitute the 'neural networks' of sexual arousal. The arousable body thus crucially defines the brain machinery of desire. Ironically, the crucial bodily correlations almost never make it to the press releases or media articles where the brain is portrayed as 'the most important sexual organ' – to paraphrase the title of a Nature article (Dennis 2004). The material but disembodied desire-in-the-brain is hence a result of an omission of the bodily references used to produce it, a re-enactment of the modern cerebral subject/body. But the de-animated body comes to invisibly haunt the neural networks of desire.

The Disappearance of the Objects of Desire/Pleasure

In most neuroimaging studies of sexuality, the researchers look for the brain data that follows the increase/decrease of sexual arousal or pleasure.[18] Sexual arousal/pleasure is, in turn, given by 'extracerebral markers of sexual performance and orgasm' (Georgiadis et al 2006, 3305) which are either 'objective' measurements produced by monitoring bodily processes throughout the experiment, or 'subjective' reports of perceived arousal/pleasure. These provide an indirect referent for sexual arousal/pleasure. This non-brain bodily measure then defines experimentally, and quantitatively, what counts as arousal.

Both objective and subjective measures of sexual arousal/pleasure are, by means of quantification, disconnected from the situations that they arise in. In these descriptions of neural networks of arousal, what is left as relevant from the experimental situations is how much aroused the participants become – not what made it happen. Similarly, the orgasm studies do not differentiate between different methods used to stimulate the participants; although the researchers use only one method per experiment (e.g. clitoral stimulation with a vibrator), they refer freely to other studies which used other methods to induce pleasure or orgasm – such as masturbation given by one's partner.

This quantification is used by the researchers to create commensurability between instances of sexual desire/arousal in the experiment. Commensuration is a social process, which sociologists Wendy Nelson Espeland and Mitchell Stevens define as 'the transformation of different qualities into a common metric' (Espeland and Stevens 1998). The commensuration of different things change our relation to these things as we lose our special relation to them when they lose their integrity: the commensuration of sexuality effects a de-qualification of desire.

What we therefore witness is the disparition of the objects of desire/pleasure in a commensurable world. As we have seen earlier, sexuality keeps an orientation (for an idealized gender) but it loses its 'towardsness', its relation to its erotic object (cf. Ahmed 2006; Cohn 2008). Instead, the implicit model at play in the neuroimaging science of sex is one in which situations function as triggers of desire and pleasure: they effectively make it happen without being part of it, without shaping it or our subjectivity. In this model, erotic films, pictures of naked bodies, vibrators, partners and fantasies all function as just different versions of Aladdin's sleeve brushing the lamp. They all unleash the same old genie, always already entrapped in the individual.

Abstract Experiments: Ideal Sex

The special appeal of neuroscientific reductions of sexuality comes from the world that they are productive of, the stories opened up by the neural models (cf. Martin 2010). They reproduce the promise that we evolve in a world in which there is a pure sexuality, where we move around with this special agency made neural. A world where the drama of emotions unfolds in the convolutions of the brain before it is experienced by the body. This is a world re-centered towards an authenticity gone neuro: a world with the promise of communicating with our true selves, the inhabitants of an 'interior space' (cf. Rose 2007) no longer only psychological but tellingly neural.

To understand this world, we need to engage with the universe of which the reductions operative in the neuroscience of sex are generative. This is what the next sections begin to engage with.

We have seen that not only are the experiments self-referential (they construct and find sexual desire in line with their own definitions of gender, sex and sexuality) but they are 'abstract experiments', to use a term from social psychologist Steven D. Brown (2012). Brown writes about psychologist Norman Triplett's famous experiment about social competition in the late 19th century. Triplett noticed that cyclists tend to have faster times when biking in a race than on their own. In order to prove this, he designed a laboratory experiment – without bikes. Instead the laboratory settings involved reeling a fishing reel as fast as possible; people reeled faster in the presence of a competitor. There is no similarity whatsoever between bike and reel – but both articulate social competition in the right settings, Brown writes: 'the point is to create something approaching equivalence rather than direct replication in experiential terms. The laboratory task feels something like the bicycle race' (Brown 2012, 6).

In this example, the mode of realism of neuroimaging experiments is not one that seeks to reproduce the sexual world outside of the scanner (the bike race). Rather, the experimental settings are expected to work like the fishing reel: to induce emotional states that 'feel something like' sexual arousal or orgasm. Brown explains that psychological experiments really study aspects of life idealized to an extreme:

> It is common to observe that experimentation is reductionist...and that, ultimately, the findings which emerge tell us nothing we did not know already. ...There is, however, a more interesting aspect of this reductionism. Psychological experimentation aims for a certain kind of purity of expression. It does not seek the complexity of social life as it is lived, but rather

> the essence of a phenomenon reduced to the simplest possible set of co-ordinates. Or put slightly differently, it attempts to make visible social phenomenon in a form in which they could never possibly be lived, never otherwise made manifest (Brown 2012, 7).

Consequently, the interesting criticism of the reel-study of social competition is not that a reel is not a bike.

Similarly, the neuro-sexual experiments investigated here work with ideal notions of sexual desire/pleasure portrayed in ways they could never be lived: The experimental world of ideal sexuality is made of ideal participants, essentialized desire and pleasure. Ideal sexuality unfolds unhindered as a sequential response of the subjective inside to external stimuli. Ideal sexual desire and pleasure take place as a performant, genital, non-social, focused excitement of the cerebral body. A historically unsurprising version of sexuality: a clean version of Masters and Johnson's sexual response, but crucially featuring the brain. Ideal desire and pleasure are unmarked by age (or actually, by any kind of life). They are triggered by specific situations but not qualitatively influenced by those. Ideal desire and pleasure are thus detached from their feeler and from their objects: unflawed by them, leaving for desire/pleasure a 'core' commensurable phenomenon that seems to exist all by itself, a latent capacity of the individual brain.

Cleaning-ups of human sexuality (including, but not limited to, the selection of participants and the design of subtractions) enable the experiment to live up to that abstract idealization of desire. There, the brain is given the role of the place where the specific, characteristic aspects of sex, desire and pleasure crucially happen: it is a neurocentric account, where the neuro- and its experimental frames also set the terms in which sexual desire is described.

Appearances: Brain Descriptions of Sexuality

Let us now turn to how sexual desire/pleasure is described when experimented with and given the shape of neural networks.

What is a Brained Pleasure?

The neural framing of sexuality implies that sexuality becomes equated with sexual activity, since functional neuroimaging tools primarily enable the study of people doing specific tasks. Here the main tasks consist most often in watching erotica or receiving stimulation, which researchers take as a proxy for the arousal the participants experience when in real-life sexual situations. But of course, these tasks (just like reeling the reel) are assumed to tell us the most essential thing we need to know about the non-experimental world of sexuality (the biking in a bike race). There is nothing dishonest about this reduction. However, this reductionism suggests that all we need to know about outside-scanner sexuality is accurately portrayed by a few well-chosen, meaningfully and carefully idealized, tightly scripted, sexual acts. Sexuality is produced and modeled as brain-sexual activity independent of its own outside.

When described as a neural network, sexual arousal becomes described as a messy system of brain areas and, sometimes, different kinds of 'pathways'. The amygdala, the hypothalamus, and the thalamus are brain areas frequently emphasized in neuroscientific studies of sexuality. Dopamine and the dopaminergic system are recurrent figures of pathways in the publications about sexual pleasure.

These brain areas and pathways are in turn, the bearers of a certain psychological or emotional function, which, in the publications, is attributed to them on the basis of previous studies. For instance, proposing interpretations of the involvement of brain region VTA (ventral tegmental area) in orgasm, Holstege and colleagues write: 'VTA was also seen during cocaine [Breiter et al., 1997] and heroin rush [Sell et al., 1999] …. the VTA is the key element in both heroin and sexual orgasm ... anatomical substrate for the strongly reinforcing nature of sexual activity in humans' (Holstege et al 2003, 9183). Through reference to previous neuroscientific studies, brain areas and sex acquire here the addictive character of 'rush'.[19]

One general neural model of arousal used in many neuroimaging publications was proposed in the late 1990s (Redouté et al 2000; Stoléru et al 1999). It described the sexual response in the brain (in men) as made of four psychological/brain components: first, a cognitive component, by which situations could be identified as sexual and their 'incentive value' assessed; second, an emotional component, which reflected that it feels nice to be aroused (often, this component was proposed to reflect the pleasurable awareness of erection); third, a motivational component: expecting something pleasurable to happen; fourth, an 'autonomous' bodily component, erection happens. When interpreted through the lenses of neuroscience, sexuality thus becomes a set of classical neuroscientific functions (cognition, emotion, motivation).[20] To the neuroscience hammer, everything may well look like a cognition-motivation-emotion nail.

The neuroscientific braining of sexuality thus entails the attribution of specific psychological, emotional or behavioral functions to sex.

Differential Braining of Sexuality

Brained pleasure is no more universal than the cultural notions of sexuality that underpin it. In particular, the cerebralization of sexuality re-creates, in a messy manner, versions of a male and a female sexuality (although paradoxically subjecting both to the HSRC model which feminist sexologists have characterized as representative of a specific male sexual style).[21]

The differential attribution of qualities to male and female sexuality takes place through researchers' special focus on a few areas of the brain for which they find different activation patterns among men and women. Two striking points in this practice emerge:

First, the gender differences claimed as found are not consistent throughout the publications. They vary in what they are a difference of, for example, whether they concern sexological results (such as the degree of arousal reached in reaction to similar stimulation), or whether they concern the neural networks involved, and, in case of the latter, which areas of the brain make what difference. Some studies identify brain areas as central to sexual arousal whereas others do not find involvement at all of the same brain areas.[22] The results also vary as to whether there is an overall difference between the neural networks of male and female sexuality. For instance, some studies claim that they have found a universal network of arousal which is the same in homo- and heterosexual men and women (e.g. Ponseti 2006).

Second, sex differences in neural networks of sexuality are a recurrent topic in the investigations. The efforts to identify the role of the hypothalamus as a key structure of sexuality in general, and of male sexuality in particular, generates figures of female sexuality as elusive and difficult to explain. For instance, a recurrent observation of sexual difference seems to generate some confusion among neuroscientists. In male participants, subjective and objective arousal are often found to match well. In contrast, a divergence was recurrently observed between how sexually aroused female participants feel, on the one hand, and physiological measurements of their arousal, on the other. Using the male 'match' as a reference renders the sexual experiences of the female group unintelligible and makes women's sexuality an obscure thing as a whole. Two neuroscientists write: 'the average differences between the sexes were striking...It is unclear, therefore, which neural system mediates the sexual arousal reported by the women in this study [Hamann et al. 2004]' (Canli and Gabrieli 2004, 325–6).[23]

In order to explain these brain-sexual differences between men and women found in a few studies, neuroscientists take to more elaborate arguments about the neuropsychological processes at work in sexual arousal. Karama and colleagues (2002) proposed a neural version of the interpretation that men's subjective arousal matches their objective arousal because erection makes men aware of their sexual excitement. They explained this by reference to another structure of the brain, the thalamus. In this hypothetical model, the thalamus stands for a 'conscious awareness': The lesser activation of the thalamus could represent a lesser awareness of ongoing arousal and explain that women experienced less sexual arousal even when objectively aroused (Karama et al 2002, 9). In their model, the hypothalamus would make the connection in men between high arousal level, erection and felt arousal – but the hypothalamus is not activated in such a way in women, whose consciousness thereby is described, implicitly and again, as failing, for reasons unintelligible to scientists.

It is not surprising in itself that neuroimaging studies dedicate so much attention to the hypothalamus, since it has often been thought to be involved in reproduction and therefore in sexuality (cf. Dussauge and Kaiser 2012). The consideration that female sexuality is mysterious and complex is not surprising either, in the sense that it repeats a figure dear to nineteenth-century sexology (cf. Irvine 1990).

Rather, this illustrates that the stabilization of neural networks as systems of functions (not only as maps) generates difference. Since the qualitative relations of participants to erotic imagery or sexuality in general are erased, the only interpretative frame left for neuroscientists to make sense of possible group differences is gender, which in turn comes to function as an implicit explanatory factor of sexuality (even if not causally so).

The amygdala is also salient in the neuroimaging studies of sexuality, just as it is a central but messy figure of the neurobiological imaginary of emotion. Nicole Karafyllis and Gotlind Ulshofer write:

> In current emotions research of the neurosciences, the map of the human brain has a new earth at its center (no sun), around which many planets, metaphorically embodying scientific approaches, are orbiting: the amygdala. Particularly social (cognitive) neurosciences have been creating a new cosmic system around this small area of the brain, and the hope to one day finally understand 'it all': emotions, sexuality, behaviors, attitudes, relationships, social norms, personal success, and more – in short, the human and the society (in singular). However, this new anthropology which is now on the horizon is still working with classical stereotypes...Even if this sounds like an old story to feminists, the rhetorics and entities recently have changed: It is not women and men, or their bodies and their brains, but female brains and male brains. (Karafyllis and Ulshöfer 2008, 2).

Here in sexuality studies, the amygdala is attributed emotional almost-agency with conveniently blurry functions such as 'mediating', and especially 'mediating' putative differences, as for instance, the figure of men's purported greater interest in bodily appearance and visual erotica: 'the human amygdala may also mediate the reportedly greater role of visual stimuli in male sexual behavior,' (Hamann et al 2004). The elusive relation of 'mediation' between these salient brain structures and behavior is mobilized in changing directions. Sometimes sexuality is treated as a variable which mediates gender, i.e. which makes gay men similar to straight women as regards the structure of the amygdala. This, in turn, would explain gay men and heterosexual women's greater emotional reactivity and their 'higher vulnerability' to stress, depression and suicide (Savic and Lindström 2008, 9407).

One caveat is that the amygdala and hypothalamus have been found to be involved in such a large range of human functions that the meanings neuroscientists attach to sexuality through the amygdala are extremely varied (for instance aggressivity and jealousy upon infidelity in men in Takahashi et al 2006).

The braining of emotions cannot be less differentiating than the notions of emotions, gender and sexuality mobilized in the process. The point is that the horde of possible functions attached to the hypothalamus, thalamus, and amygdala in previous neuroscientific literature makes them convenient tools to make a long jump between patterns of brain activation (and differences in those), and emotions/behavior. This attribution of emotional/behavioral functions to parts of the brain network is a crucial site of the reproduction of tales of difference and likeness, now in allegedly neural terms.

Universal and Binarized

There is an apparent paradox between the way sexuality is studied as a universal human/neural phenomenon, on the one hand, and the insistence of categories male/female and homo/hetero, in the neural descriptions of sexuality.

The neuroimaging studies consider that sexual arousal unfolds following a linear response cycle, and that the brain is the seat of that unfolding in all healthy individuals. In that sense, neural sexual desire/pleasure is treated as a universal phenomenon. (Of course, this universal desire deployed in the experiments is dependent on the erasure of the specificities of lived sexual lives and lived sexual practices.)

However, the neuroimaging studies also often argue that there are differences between men and women, or between homo- and heterosexuals, at some of the following levels: brain structure, the patterns of neural activation, the sexological patterns (when people are turned on), and/or the physiological response of participants during the experiments.

For instance, some neuroscientific publications (Hamann et al 2004) propose that men and women differ in neural networks (structure/activation) and in sexological response (intensity of arousal), and that the two levels might be linked. Others propose universal brain models of desire independent of gender or sexual orientation (e.g. Kranz and Ishai 2006; Ponseti et al 2006), reducing the homo/hetero difference to an unexplained sexological difference: people are simply turned on by different genders.

The paradox between the implicit assumption of the existence of a universal sexual desire and that of the existence of binary categories of the person (women/men, homo/hetero) also rests on unresolved (or neglected) inconsistencies between publications. A few papers call for caution, especially in the interpretation of the relation between brain results and sexological results (Canli and Gabrieli 2004; Komisaruk and Whipple 2005).

Thus today's sexual neuroscience recapitulates two contradictory historical trends in sexology (Irvine 1990): on the one hand, the 1950s–1960s model of likeness between men and women, pursued by Kinsey and colleagues and later Masters and Johnson, and on the other hand, an insistence (both older and more contemporary) on the difference between men and women. This renewed insistence on difference seems to belong to the conservative contributions to the highly political field of sexuality in a historical era which has seen both huge changes in sexual liberties (among others with feminist and LGBT movements) and a concomitant conservative counter-current promoting traditional gender roles and values (cf. Lancaster 2003).

Discussion: Neural Framing

What counts as 'the brain' matters at a number of levels for how sexuality can be defined, studied, and described. Borrowing again from Brown's work, we may say that just like the reel functioned as the right tool to talk about racing as social competition, if functional neuroimaging is the right tool to talk about sexuality, it defines, in part, what sexuality can be.

I call this productive reduction the 'neuro-framing' of sexuality. With this term, I mean to acknowledge the transformative power of the neurosciences: neuroscientization of sexuality, gender and emotions affects the ways these are culturally conceived of (and, probably, how they can be lived).[24]

This neuro-framing takes place throughout the production of neuroscientific facts: from participant selection and experiment design, through interpretation of data as meaningful differences (between conditions; between groups), and their becoming embedded in a brain geography of the human phenomenon under study.

When neurally framed, sexuality is idealized: as pure (ageless), perfectly oriented along the homo/hetero-axis, bodiless, distillated to an essence independent of its objects and feelers. In turn, sexuality is described as taking place in an individual subjective body, a placeholder, and sexual desire/pleasure arises more or less strongly in that body in interaction with triggers outside of it. In that sense, sexuality is re-embodied as the same universal in a multitude of individual but dequalified placeholders.

The neuro-framing of sexuality operates both at a conceptual level and at a material level. The conceptual level entails the notions of sexuality, gender, behavior and the brain with which the experiments are designed and conducted, and with which the results are interpreted. On the material level, bodies and brains are recruited, instructed and made to perform sexual scripts which in turn build on implicit or explicit assumptions about sexuality, gender, behavior and the brain. Bodies (including brains) and their subjectivities are instrumentalized with regards to one goal: neuroscientific knowledge production (Burri 2007). Therefore neuro-framing effects a material-semiotic production of sexuality along reductionist lines.

Making sexuality neural with neuroimaging retains of sexuality only what is reflected/effected as statistically significant patterns of brain activity. In the existing configuration of neuroscientific investigations, this means that all human activity which can be inferred to occur outside of a certain version of well-directed sexual and cognitive situations is obliterated. The possibility of the erotic outside of the pornographically or contact-wise triggered sexual is erased; as is the possibility of the erotic as something other than responsive brain/sexual activity.

Neuro-framing does the same job for the notions of desire and pleasure as the HSRCM has done for sex: it contributes to their decontextualization, physiologization, de-politicization, and focus on a linear physiological performance or activity. At the same time, in a paradoxical gesture, sexuality is de-corporealized as the crucial site of its existence. Lived experience and agency are displaced from the body to the brain. Not only does this de-corporealization erase its prior de-politicization – it also opens for the fantasy of re-describing sexual agency in neural terms.

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Endnotes

[1] In the present study, 'functional neuroimaging' refers to PET, fMRI and SPECT.

[2] Search conducted on the online databases for medicine and psychology MEDLINE and PsycInfo.

[3] A smaller group of studies addresses the neurobiology of love and 'attractiveness' but for the sake of clarity I do not attend to these two themes here.

[4] Two-thirds of the published experiments feature men, and one-third feature women. About two-thirds of the papers feature heterosexuals; less than twenty percent feature homosexuals; and less than twenty percent work with participants of unspecified sexual orientation (who we can fairly assume are presumed heterosexuals).

[5] One published experiment working with sado-masochism about pleasure and disgust features explicitly bisexual participants (see Stark et al 2005). One study (Arnow et al 2002) excluded volunteers who had no experience of sexual intercourse.

[6] For instance, several studies (e.g. Karama et al 2002; Miyagawa, Tsujimura et al 2007; Walter et al 2008) do not report how the sexual preference of the subjects was identified, and several studies (e.g. Rauch et al 1999; Beauregard et al 2001; Park et al 2001; Childress et al 2008; Roberts et al 2008) do not specify the sexual orientation of the participants at all. In contrast, many studies (e.g. Bocher, Chisin et al 2001; Stark, Schienle et al 2005; Brunetti, Babiloni et al 2008) used self-definition as assessment of sexual orientation, and most studies report the use of standardized questionnaires.

[7] This was the case in Berglund et al (2006); Ponseti et al (2006); Paul et al (2008); Savic and Lindström (2008), although in Berglund et al (2006) and Savic & Lindström (2008), the heterosexuals scored 0.

[8] This notion that sexuality is describable as a set of distinct sexual preferences (homo, hetero, and bi as something in between) defined by a sexually preferred gender echoes some of the misinterpretations of the Kinsey scale within sexology and the history of sexuality described by historian Donna Drucker (2010). Kinsey's intention in proposing the 0–6 scale in 1948 was, Drucker explains, to 'eradicate sexual identity categories' by proposing a model of sexual behavior as not only diverse between individuals, but individually changing along a person's lifetime. In that sense, the 1–5 parts of the scale refer to different places in sexual life, so to speak, and not to a combination of homo- and heterosexuality.

[9] The extent to which sexual desire and pleasure are being studied as a universal phenomenon is fascinating indeed. In particular, one study went to great length to select pornographic materials that men and women find equally arousing (Hamann et al 2004). But why do this, if women and men sociologically (and statistically) differ in their relation to porn and in how arousing they find mainstream erotica? Of course, this is because the participants' qualitative lived relation to erotica does not matter to the experiment design. What turns people on and why is not the object of neuroimaging study. What is under investigation, rather, is the possible difference in patterns of brain activity when people or groups are turned on to a similar extent.

[10] A most flagrant example is the experiment by Paul et al (2008) who had the partici-

pants view two kinds of erotic videos: homosexual and heterosexual erotica, respectively. The two experimental conditions were called 'corresponding' and 'opposite', referring to the participant's own preferred sexual activity. This is not the only way to organize a sexual experiment: for instance, Safron et al (2007) design their experiment and choice of stimuli around the alternative assumption that men's arousal is 'category-specific', i.e. that men are turned on primarily by watching at least one person of the gender they themselves have a sexual preference for engage in sexual activity.

[11] For a commentary about the feminist criticism of the HSRCM, see Pernrud (2007).

[12] Cf. Karafyllis and Ulshöfer's short but similar comment about 'sexual elites' in brain research (2008, 21).

[13] Explicit examples of this are Miyagawa et al (2007) and Hamann et al (2004).

[14] Cf. also Karafyllis and Ulshöfer's observation (2008, 21).

[15] About specificity's special epistemological value in the life sciences, see Lee (2011) and Mulinari (2011).

[16] I.e. the 'sexual' in 'getting sexually aroused by watching erotic pictures'. This follows from the logic of subtraction of the brain data for watching bodily interactions from sexual arousal brain data.

[17] About epistemological 'cleaning up', see Cartwright (1997/1995, 90; 81–106), Amman and Knorr Cetina (1990) and Dussauge (2008, 175–179; 86).

[18] A cultural trope is that the neuroimaging scanner can yield the answer to such questions, and identify what kinds of feelings are going on inside the participants' brains. However, we realize here that the logic of identifying arousal works the other way around: neuroscientists need to know whether subjects are aroused or not or how much precisely in order to statistically extract the brain data which in turn yields 'sexual arousal'. Such epistemological strategies reveal a distinct epistemological anxiety 'of the first person' which is pivotal to all neuroimaging experiments: how do you know whether participants are aroused, or what that arousal is like? About challenges and serious attempts of first-person perspectives in neuroscience and cognitive sciences, see Jack and Roepstorff (2003).

[19] I address elsewhere more thoroughly the shaping of sexuality through references to neuroeconomics and the neuroscience of addiction ('Sex, Cash and Neuromodels of Desire', submitted to BioSocieties).

[20] Cf. Aud Sissel Hoel, conversation 21 December 2011.

[21] The insistence on gender differences along competing claims of gender similarities within the same neuroscientific field recapitulates trends of emphasizing difference or likeness in the history of sexology, see e.g. Irvine (1990).

[22] For instance, Karama et al (2002) suggested gender-different activations of the thalamus and hypothalamus, whereas Hamann et al (2004) found gender-related differences in amygdala activation (which Karama and colleagues did not find). Walter et al (2008) found involvement of these regions in sexual arousal but no gender differences in the activation of these regions nor in reported arousal. Note that Moulier and colleagues (2006) suggested that problematic inconsistencies of this kind exist – and are problematic – in the whole field of neuroimaging studies of sexuality.

[23] On the same topic, see Downey (2009).

[24] Karafyllis and Ulshöfer acknowledge this transformative power of the neurosciences: 'in recent years, models and terms (from the field of neurosciences and cognitive sciences have colonized the epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina 1999) of many other disciplines, in the process transforming some of their ideas about what is normal, what is human, and, not

least, what determines a functioning society' (Karafyllis and Ulshöfer 2008, 5).

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Lenore Manderson, ed. 2012. *Technologies of Sexuality, Identity and Sexual Health*. London and New York: Routledge.

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Dildos, female condoms, pornography, and penile implants are just a few of the fascinating topics presented in Lenore Manderson's *Technologies of Sexuality, Identity and Sexual Health*. Manderson is a Professor of Medical Anthropology at Monash University, Australia and an inaugural Australian Research Council Federation Fellow. The articles that comprise this innovative work include a discussion on transgender technologies in the United States and their impact on transmen's identities; the influence of globalisation on obtaining sex-selection technologies; and an analysis of the highly sexual and erotic culture of the busy bus terminals of Dhaka. Each article delves into the effects of sexual technologies on the health, identity, and welfare of individuals and groups in diverse regions that have previously received little attention by scholars in order to discern how these technologies can restrict or liberate people from social norms and expectations. This collection explores the relationship between how technologies are produced and marketed and how they are used, manipulated, or rejected by individuals to fit their sexual needs and lifestyles.

Previous works on technology and sexuality focus on the historical context and requisition of specific technologies, and fail to explore the distinctive qualities, diverse uses, and meanings of these objects. Furthermore, there are few studies on sexual health, gender, and sexual technologies, and hardly any works s on the materiality of birth control products and procedures. *Technologies* contributes to the field of sexual technologies by investigating the effects of these technologies on identity, health, and wellbeing in an increasingly globalised world where individuals cross borders for reproductive procedures that are unavailable in their home country, and where technologies of sex such as dildos and contraceptive devices are appropriated by women for unique purposes unforeseen by manufacturers and product distributors.

This anthology is loosely divided into three sections: female contraception, concerns over masculinity and men's roles in society, and sexual technologies that cross sexual and gendered identities and social borders. In the first part, anthropologist Silvia de Zordo investigates how Brazilian women manage discrimination in family planning clinics and a lack of freedom in their family homes in order to enjoy motherhood and their sexuality. Carolyn Sargent and Laurence Kotobi contribute to the discussion of social policies and their impact on women's contraceptive choices with their article on North and West African women's migration to France in the early twenty-first century. Both articles demonstrate that a lack of male support places the responsibility of birth control primarily on women with the result that women are blamed when birth control methods fail, or they do not produce the number of children desired by their partners. Anita Hardon continues the discussion of contraceptives with her article on the availability of female condoms and microbicides in Africa to curtail HIV infection. She argues that the acceptance of both these technologies can ameliorate gender relations by promoting mutual pleasure and the protection of sexual partners from STIs.

In the second section, this book explores sexuality in the context of penile modifications in Papua New Guinea and the sexual culture of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Holly Buchanan, an anthropologist who specializes in public health and penile-cutting, found, along with her colleagues, that penile modifications and implants were undertaken to heighten sexual experiences; however, gender inequalities and male unity indicate that penile implants are also used to violate women. Sabina Faiz Rashid and her co-authors' article states that men's perceptions of their masculinity are heavily influenced by the overly erotic and sexual imagery they view in magazines and movies in Dhaka. In the following chapter, Marcia Inhorn investigates former residents of Lebanon who immigrated to escape the civil war, only to return later for in vitro fertilisation treatments that are not available in their current countries. Andrea Whittaker explores sex-selection for non-medical purposes, which is banned by many countries. She claims that without global regulation, its illegality does not inhibit couples from seeking treatments abroad where it is legal.

In the last part, Saskia Wieringa argues that women in Africa and Asia, as well as in Western countries, have used dildos to enhance female pleasure, engage in same-sex intercourse, and signify 'sexual prowess'. Wieringa argues that dildos are not used by lesbians to mimic male sexuality, but rather to demonstrate 'the possibility of women's pleasures and the plasticity of women's desires' (180). Ryan Plis and Evelyn Blackwood's article moves the book from the realm of instruments for sexual pleasure to tools for transmen to overcome the challenges of passing. Unlike previous studies which centre largely on transwomen, Plis and Blackwood explore how transmen use various apparatuses and implements to navigate their sexuality. They claim that packers, binders, and devices that help transmen to use public restrooms are empowering because they gives them more security in their masculine identity. The final article, by Riki Lane, a sociologist, is the least accessible to readers due its over-reliance on jargon to illustrate the transitional relationship between transpeople and clinicians. In the 1950s, clinicians provided a diagnosis of mental illness for their transgender patients, whereas now there is a movement for transpeople to actively manage and organize their own health care and challenge psychiatric dominance over medical diagnoses.

On the whole, the articles in this work are provocative, captivating, and unique. The book covers a wide variety of topics. While this does not allow for coherent transition, it exposes the reader to various issues relating to sexual technologies in many parts of the world. *Technologies* utilizes several case studies to demonstrate how the use of specific sexual technologies is dependent on the desire of individuals and communities to enhance their sexual health and identity, and fulfill their sexual needs. For example, women in Africa use microbicides to increase their sexual pleasure and lubrication, even though it was produced to prevent STIs and its use as a lubricant was unforeseen by its developers. This work also employs surveys and interviews to illustrate the obstacles that sexual minorities face; however, some of these sample sizes are quite small. Plis and Blackwood interviewed transmen to demonstrate how everyday materials can be manipulated by them to help them pass and increase their confidence. However, they only interviewed six transmen of the same socio-economic status, which limits the authors' ability to make conclusive claims about the lives and situations of transmen.

This work recognizes the need for further research into technologies of sex, reproduction, and contraception to build on the worthwhile studies by these authors. It is recommended that this work be read by graduate students and researchers who are searching for inspiration for a new project on sexuality, gender, and technology since this collection presents areas of inquiry which need further exploration. Activists who are interested in reproductive rights and the relation of technologies to sexual identity would benefit from this work as well, since it illustrates the impact of sexual technologies on sexual health and identity in different cultures across the globe and identifies the actions that are needed for individuals to gain access to effective health care without discrimination. As a whole, this work contributes to the discussion on sexual health and identities by exploring how technologies of sex are manipulated by individuals and groups to suit their lifestyles and desires.

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Laura Schettini. 2011. *Il Gioco Delle Parti: Travestimenti e Paure Sociali Tra Otto e Novecento*. Milan: Le Monnier. Paperback.

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Laura Schettini is one of Italy's foremost young historians of women and gender. She joins historians such as Chiara Beccalossi, Lorenzo Benadusi, Mary Gibson, and the late pioneer Bruno Wanrooij in exploring the intersecting roles of the press, psychology and criminal anthropology in the modern construction of homosexuality and gender non-conformity in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Italy. Her debut work, currently only published in Italian, is a fascinating walk through the years leading up to the fascist persecution of homosexuality and gender non-conformity that seeks to explain the role of the popular press and the sexologists in the persecution of working-class gender non-conforming Italians.

Historiographically, Schettini's work contributes to a vast and still growing body of literature on the history of homosexuality and gender non-conformity in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Europe. Readers should add this work to their bookshelves if they enjoy the work of historians on sexology (e.g. Lucy Bland, Laura Doan and Siobhan Sommerville), or historians on policing (e.g. H.G. Cocks, Matt Houlbrook, William Peniston, Dan Healey, Florence Tamagne, and Theo van der Meer).

Schettini begins her work with an explanation of how various forms of gender non-conformity, or what she calls 'transvestism,' have a long European history both within the contexts of the Catholic Church and the theater. She explains, however, that there are more Italian sources on people who transgress gender boundaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of the explosion of published scientific and social investigations on gender and sexuality. This era, identified by Foucault as the time of the 'birth of the homosexual,' is significant in Italian and European history because many psychologists, criminal anthropologists, and medical doctors published thousands of studies on homosexuality and gender non-conformity. As Schettini notes, in these years, which directly followed Italy's Risorgimento, or the movement for national unification, Italians found new identities and social circles – those of the 'homosexual' and of the 'New Woman' (activists and benefactors of feminism's first wave) – that complimented this proliferation of public discourse on gender non-conformity. This is precisely why studying gender transgression can be a useful way for historians to better understand the making of the Italian citizen. Gender non-conformity can be an illuminating lens through which to understand the gendered expectations of the new Italian citizen. As Schettini writes:

> That way, transvestism became on one hand, a metaphor for the aspirations for change and to stretch the liberties for important, new social subjects; and on the other, it embodied the personifications of fears and the anxieties felt by most of society while confronting the changes that were threatening the old order of sexual models and traditional genders (7).

Any expression of gender change in this era was important because it echoed the new freedoms of turn-of-the-century women and the increasingly less masculine roles of men as well. The decadent authors popular before World War One and the treatment of World War One veterans as increasingly feminine exemplify this anxiety. In a time of 'making Italians,' transvestism stood for the anxieties and fears of the hegemonic Italian citizen. Schettini explains how her book is a 'framework where you can witness the complex and mutual game between models of gender and sex, scientific discourse, the construction of the nation, and the role of media in public life, which is still present today' (8). But readers will not find decadent authors or members of the elite in this work; one of Schettini's major historiographical contributions is that she focuses on working-class subjects (both masculine and feminine) persecuted for their gender non-conformity.

Schettini's work is situated within turn-of-the-twentieth-century Italy for many reasons. Firstly, it is the era in which Italians defined citizenship in their new nation and therefore hegemonic models of gender were all the more important. Secondly, it was the era of the sexologists – a cadre of Italian and European scientists ranging from criminal and social anthropologists to psychologists and social-advice authors who wrote about gender non-conformity and sexual deviancy in an effort to promote a healthy 'race' under the guise of eugenics. Thirdly, Schettini chose the years 1870–1930 because of the court cases that demonstrated a paradigm shift between these years. She begins in 1871 with a case of a person who was hardly punished for crossing gender lines and thus received only a light sentence. She ends in 1931 with a similar case that, contrastingly, resulted in the defendant receiving a year's imprisonment and being labeled as 'socially dangerous.' This shift was marked by the enactment of TULPS (Consolidated Laws of Public Safety) and the new civil code in the early years of the fascist regime. TULPS sought to regulate the daily life of individuals and give authority figures a standardized way of monitoring the activities that could be seen as threatening to public security. Therefore, Schettini's book follows the transition from the semi-compassionate sexologists (for example, European sexologists Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld both made arguments against the criminalization of homosexuality) to the homosexual-as-criminal model espoused by the fascist regimes.

Regarding sources, Schettini surveyed thirty-four years of two major daily newspapers, 'Roma' and 'Il Messaggero/The Messenger.' From these, she found approximately seventy articles pertaining to cross-dressing and other instances where people physically transgressed gender norms. From psychological journals, she studied fifty cases of gender transgression, and from the Criminological Museum in Rome, she utilized approximately twenty unpublished photographs of individuals, some of which are reproduced in the appendix. She claims that these photos enabled her to better understand how gender ambiguity was a common attribute to those assigned the stereotype of the criminal and social deviant in turn-of-the-century Italy. But most notably, in her analysis of these photos, she explains how one can see the influence of the police departments themselves in the choice of costume, jewelry, shoes and backdrop for the images. In this way, the police helped to construct the image of the gender deviant. The police were trained by a new school of investigation, which began in 1902 as the Italian Forensic Police. Schettini's investigation of police records focuses on this department and their methods and training of officers in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Brilliantly, Schettini does not just study the cases of the people accused of gender non-conformity, but also the methods of profiling developed by the Forensic Police in the first years of the twentieth century. Building on the conclusions of famous criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, the Forensic Police trained investigators and patrol officers to identify criminal types both inside the prison and on the streets. But while this style of profiling seems reminiscent of Lombroso, Schettini notes that those practising these new methods distanced themselves from believing completely in the criminal profile. They used the profiles to highlight potential for criminality, but did not want to assume criminality or guilt based on the physical characteristics highlighted by the photographic profiles. Yet, as her work demonstrates, police were taught to look for gender non-conforming individuals and regularly brought them in for questioning, detainment and often, prosecution. Schettini's book brings to life the lives of the investigators and scientists, such as the criminal anthropologist Angelo Zuccarelli, as much as the lives and stories of the gender non-conforming Italians.

Another protagonist in her story is the press itself, whose role is investigated in the book's second chapter. For each newspaper she used, Schettini tracked its publication history, the number of copies printed daily, its readers' tastes for sexual scandals, and how each publication handled these gripping curiosities. Schettini paints a picture of an early-twentieth-century Italian readership entranced by stories of mistaken identity, eloping couples, infanticide, brutal and clever crimes, scientific studies of deviance and abnormality, and among all of this, individuals who wear 'travestimenti' or cross-dressing 'disguises' that portray something other than the gender of their birth. For example, while soldiers, bicycle messengers and barbers were generally thought to be men's trades, women occupying these positions populated the country's popular press resulting in increased paper sales. Unlike the scientific studies that proliferated in the publishing industry and were consumed by the intelligentsia, the newspapers regularly brought the transvestite, the invert and the homosexual into the minds of more Italians than any scientific book ever could.

Schettini's work takes the reader on a journey through the Italian cities, its streets, asylums, prisons, and imagination. Readers are treated to the viewpoints of those in power and those being analyzed. Unlike much work on the history of gender non-conformity and homosexuality in Europe, this is not a story of the bourgeoisie or a story that focuses on only one gender; readers can get a sense of working-class sexualities that are not limited to the masculine or feminine. Because of this in-depth investigation of the popular press, they are also treated to a voyeuristic tour through the Italian sexual imagination. It becomes evident what type of sensation was sold in the press and how that sensation marked the turn of gender non-conformity from curiosity to criminality. For these reasons, Schettini's book is quite successful. Educators may also want to share the photographs in the appendix with their students in order to demonstrate the availability of visual evidence for turn-of-the-century gender non-conformity and/or police manipulation.

Schettini's work suffers from one issue. I suspect that it has exposed just the tip of the proverbial iceberg of sources on working-class gender non-conformity in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Italy. This is for two reasons – neither of which were within the author's control. Firstly, Schettini is a pioneer in this field. While she joins a vast group of European historians, there are only a few scholars who do this type of research in Italy although their numbers are growing. Schettini has chosen to focus on major newspapers and I suspect that in the near future, others will utilize her methods and discover parallel stories of gender non-conformity in the local press. Secondly, every year research like this gets more efficient due to the growing availability of electronic sources and databases. Future research may include searching Italian records for name changes, which would further enable more comprehensive searches in police and medical archives as well as in the popular press. Transgender history is currently, and excitingly, further enabled by new digital technologies, so it will be fascinating to see what other evidence is found by Schettini and other Italian researchers following this pioneering work.