Book Reviews


Reviewed by Alain Giami, Ph.D.¹

The arrival of this series of “essays in the study of sexuality” by Gagnon has been long awaited. During the decade of the 1990s, Gagnon became widely known for his involvement in empirical research in the field of HIV/AIDS, and his high profile participation in the National Health and Social Life Survey, perhaps better known as the “Sex in America” study (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). The visibility he gained during these years may well have obscured the intellectual background and the theoretical framework on which his empirical work is based, which dates back to the 1960s.

Gagnon is quite a unique character in the landscape of contemporary sex research, since he is interested and deeply involved in the production of theory—a sociological theory of sexuality—and at the same time in the production of empirical research based on systematic surveys, sociological observations, and analysis of discourse. Moreover, Gagnon has been interested, at different stages of his career, in different segments of sexual life, including sex offenders, adolescents, gays and lesbians, and pornography, as well as in the mainstream social organization of sexuality. The sum total of this work comes very close to providing a global view of contemporary sexuality in the U.S.

This volume represents both a collection of theoretical essays and a personal and existential journey that took place over the last 40 years. The prologue of the book contains an autobiographical essay in which Gagnon sketches some selected aspects of his personal and professional life-course. He is conscious that writing an autobiography does not produce an account of the “real life” and experiences of an individual. Writing an autobiography is the result of a complex process of selection of events and memories through the process of remembering and decisions about how to narrate this selection to an audience: “This version will be full of denied absences and illusory presences, of voices strangled and ventriloquism practiced; it will add up to truths and fancies masquerading as each other” (p. 1). One can read the choice of the autobiographical essay to open the book as a scientific statement: the practice of science is embedded in the personal life of the researcher. The last chapter of the book is the transcript of a 1998 interview of Gagnon by Schmidt on the shore of the Lago di Guardia in Italy during a meeting of the International Academy of Sex Research. Conversation is also an important part of the production of science, and Gagnon was extremely lucky in this regard to have had an intense and long term collaboration with Bill Simon, who died in 2000, and with whom he elaborated the theory of the sexual script.

Between the more autobiographical prologue and the epilogue of this volume, the first part of the book provides the genealogy of the “scripting perspective in sex research.” The six papers that are reprinted represent the process of the construction of the theory. The reconsideration of the Kinsey Reports is an important step in this process, followed by a discussion of the Masters and Johnson Human Sexual Response Cycle in light of the actual interpersonal script of sexual activity and by analyses on the status of sexual science in society and its links with politics. The second part of the book demonstrates the development of a social theory in sex research built from different materials, such as HIV/AIDS epidemiology, the ethnographic observation of an AIDS conference, the analysis of the diaries of Captain Cook, and the critique of a case study of a female homosexual by Freud.

One of the major contributions of Gagnon is the construction of a sociological theory of sexuality as opposed to a sociological approach to sexuality. Sociological approaches to sexuality can be seen as part of a multidisciplinary project in which different perspectives or fields (e.g., biology, psychology, sociology, ethnography, etc.) are used to analyze different aspects of the same object “sexuality,” which remains an independent and common taken-for-granted variable. The paradigm of the traditional sociological approach to sexuality is represented by the work of Kinsey, a zoologist, who measured socially determined variations (due to gender, age, education, marital status) in the accomplishment

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of a biological and natural function: the total outlet. Gagnon’s sociological theory of sexuality is grounded on a different scientific conception: it deliberately ignores, and considers as external to his theory, the natural (biological) dimension of sexuality, instead considering sexuality as a sociological object defined as a scripted conduct. The sociological point of view, inspired by Symbolic Interactionism, defines what sexuality is and gives a sociological status to the so-called natural dimension of sexuality as a social construction. Thus, Gagnon proposes an important shift in the way we think about sexuality (and let us remember that the concept of “sexuality” is an invention of Western physicians and scientists during the nineteenth century). The sociological study of sexuality includes the analysis and critique of sexual knowledge from a historical and political point of view, the description and analysis of the social scripts that organize at the social, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels the various forms of sexual conduct. In this view, sexual conduct is not simply reduced to the various bodily activities that can be performed alone or with one or more partners. Sexual conduct includes the mental activity that is related to sex “in a world that spent more time in sexual fantasy than in sexual activity” (p. 88).

The work of Gagnon also represents a contribution to a theory of scientific practice. The theoretical position of Gagnon regarding sex research is quite complex. It comes from various sources, as pointed out by Escoffier in his preface, though mainly from the Chicago symbolic interactionist school of sociology. Sexual science is the result of cultural influences and, at the same time, since the publication of the Kinsey reports, itself plays a major role in mainstream sexual culture. Sexual science is one of the many discourses on sex circulating in society propagated especially through the media. It is difficult to say if it is a specific voice since, as Gagnon writes in his “Reconsideration of the Kinsey Reports” that the Kinsey Reports have shaped American sexual life by providing a new social model (banalization of homosexuality, masturbation, and pre-marital sex both for men and women), by providing a topic of everyday conversation and perhaps as well providing a kind of erotica for personal use. In developing this view, Gagnon provides both an anthropology of and a critique of social science in general, and particularly of sexual science: sexual science cannot be considered as a totally autonomous mental and social practice. It is embedded in personal fantasies and values, takes place in daily conversations, is an important part of media discourse, and contributes to the organization and orientation of individual and collective behavior. Sexual science is not located in an ivory tower.

This book can already be considered as a classic in the sociology of sexuality and it will be an invaluable companion for all those who are interested in sex research, whether or not they are sociologists.

REFERENCE


DOI: 10.1007/s10508-005-6285-6


Reviewed by Julie Askew, M.Sc.1,2 and Maureen Davey, Ph.D.1

Regardless of the political climate, sex and sexuality continue to be salient issues for researchers. However, Bancroft (2000) reminds us that the field suffers from mixed epistemologies while atheoretical approaches are used in the pursuit of the scientific method. In order to advance the understanding of human sexuality, we need to “take both biological and cultural determinants into account” (Bancroft, 2000, p. vii), and Harding’s book may be a useful starting point for those wishing to address this shortcoming in their knowledge.

The aim of Harding’s book is to examine and challenge discourses of sex and sexuality using the lenses of theorists such as Foucault and Butler. This inevitably introduces the reader to a range of feminist perspectives and a strong focus on issues of gender, culture, politics, and power—the latter being the dominant theme throughout the chapters.

Harding’s assumption is that sex is not natural or innate, but a result of identities that are shaped by history and culture. The extent of these influences is something she attempts to explore here. Dichotomous views are pervasive throughout the text as topics are viewed from an either/or perspective. At times this can be frustrating as Harding attempts to define issues as either essentialist or constructionist, as public or private, as male or female; perhaps the world is not always so black and white, and Harding misses the opportunity to explore some of the more interesting shades of gray that might have been found on a continuum.

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