BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Erick Janssen, PhD

Volume VIII of the Annual Review of Sex Research starts off with a chapter by Murray, a historian, on seminal emissions and sexual anxiety in the Middle Ages. In the Introduction, she notes that medieval Christians “perceived the male body as dichotomous and conflicted; made in the image of God, it was also a constant reminder of humanity’s fall from grace” (pp. 1–2). An historical examination of seminal emissions and other “movements of the flesh” might, in Murray’s opinion, reveal something of the anxiety that accompanied “men’s experience of their own embodiment,” an anxiety that, according to her, influenced, if not guided, the medieval construction of human sexuality. What follows is a meticulous and at times rather entertaining review of the struggle of medieval moralists to give meaning to (e.g., nocturnal) seminal emissions. Are they sinful, immoral, or the innocuous result of humoral build-up? Can they be willfully induced or do they result from carnal thoughts? We are introduced to the theories of Augustine, Pope Gregory, and Aquinas, among others, and we are presented with persuasive examples of how the discussion of emissions (and related sins of gluttony) shifted from celibate men to all men, and, finally, to all people. Although the chapter is interesting and well-written, it is somewhat repetitious. Also, the author’s claim that anxiety was both a basis for and an outcome of discussions regarding emissions is unfortunately not examined with the same rigor as her exploration of the discourse on seminal emissions per se.

Blanchard, in his chapter on birth order and sibling sex ratio in homosexual males and females, observes that researchers began asking at least 60 years ago whether the mean birth order of homosexual persons is unusually early or late. After reviewing previous research, Blanchard presents the findings of an impressive and ingenious series of studies involving thousands of participants, which

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he conducted with his colleagues at Toronto’s Clarke Institute of Psychiatry. Blanchard concludes that a late birth order in homosexual men “is one of the most reliable epidemiological variables ever identified in the study of sexual orientation” (p. 33). From sibling sex ratio studies, a more intricate picture emerges, suggesting that in particular extremely feminine homosexual men tend to have a greater number of older brothers, not sisters. The data for women, no matter how they are analyzed, reveal no consistent tendencies, and do not allow for any conclusion regarding birth order or sibling sex ratios. Blanchard devotes a good third of his chapter to possible explanations for these findings. He is critical of most, including ones he offered and tested himself, but seems to lean toward biological interpretations of the birth order effect, the most interesting one involving maternal immune reactions. As for sibling sex ratio, Blanchard does not exclude psychosocial causes (e.g., gender conformity pressures), but offers as a possible alternative that different degrees of maternal immune reactions may lead to different degrees of brain feminization.

Paredes and Baum discuss the role of the medial preoptic area/anterior hypothalamus (MPOA/AH), a steroid-hormone sensitive area located at the border of the diencephalon and telencephalon, in the control of masculine sexual behavior. Lesions in this brain area disrupt masculine sexual behavior in many (vertebrate) species, although responses such as (“noncontact”) erections and ejaculation may or may not be affected. The MPOA/AH contains sexually dimorphic cell groups that are larger in the male than in the female and that are believed to play a role in male sexual behavior and in protecting males from the influence of “female” hormone exposure on sexual behavior. Although the MPOA/AH is believed to be important in the control of sexual behavior, the mechanisms involved are not well understood. There is evidence of lesions affecting consummatory aspects (e.g., motoric responses) but not motivational or appetitive aspects of behavior, evidence for lesions affecting motivational aspects—a number of studies, including some conducted by the authors, show that MPOA/AH lesions can affect partner preferences—and evidence for lesions affecting both. Single cell recordings in monkeys have led to the suggestion that MPOA/AH neurons integrate visual and/or olfactory cues, leading to sexual arousal and behavior. Paredes and Baum refer briefly to research on homologous structures in humans and conclude that research in ferrets and rats supports “the possibility that neurons in this part of the human diencephalon play some role in the male-typical profile of preference for a heterosexual partner” (p. 92). Neurobiological papers can be hard to digest (especially for nonbiologists) but, with the exception of a few concepts that perhaps could have been explained better, Paredes and Baum managed to write a very comprehensive and comprehensible review.

Doll, Myers, Kennedy, and Allman examine the relation between bisexual behavior and HIV risk, comparing data from Canada and the United States. In their Introduction, Doll et al. state that sexual identity development involves an