

Sexualities in Anthropology

A Reader

Edited by Andrew P. Lyons & Harriet D. Lyons



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Sexualities in Anthropology

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Introduction: Problems in Writing About Sex in Anthropology

In her well-known essay, "The Bubble, The Burn, and The Simmer," reproduced in this Reader, Kath Weston remarks:

In the early years of social science, researchers staked out a territory for fledgling disciplines based upon case studies, illustrations, and debates that prominently featured matters of sexuality. So it is not merely that there is a theoretical component to research on sexuality in the social sciences. There is also a sexual component to the most basic social science theory. Without it, there wouldn't be a social science. Or more precisely, there wouldn't be *this* social science. (See p. 13)

As practitioners of *this* social science for more than 40 years, we were pleased to be asked to assemble a Reader that reflects some of the topics we have recently written about. A mere 12 years ago, when her book *Long Slow Burn* appeared, Weston remarked that there was still a tendency to ghettoize the study of sexuality in social science. Anthropologists studying sexuality were still marginalized in the discipline, although from the 1970s to the 1990s there was a gradual but sustained increase in interest in the topic, nourished by some significant fieldwork in both Western and non-Western countries. Furthermore, outsiders might turn to anthropologists only for data rather than for theory – "flora and fauna" tidbits such as "how often per night?," "with whom?," and "where?." Perhaps, the appearance of this Reader is one more sign that sexuality is moving closer to center stage in anthropology.

This Reader incorporates short selections from the writings of key figures in the history of anthropology about sexualities, morality, and the family. It is easy for modern students of the anthropology of sexuality to ignore significant work that was done by our disciplinary ancestors and to misread that work even when they acknowledge it. Even the errors of our predecessors can be instructive. In the

nineteenth century debates about “race” and humanity’s place in nature, and, from 1860 onwards, theories about the origin of the family, morality, religion, and private property, all involved speculations about sexuality.

Literature produced since the 1970s on both heterosexualities and same-sex sexualities is well represented in this book. Readers will note that to some degree anthropology has witnessed the birth/rebirth of two traditions (gay and straight) in sexuality studies, which don’t always address each other. Until 2005, most of the significant new work was in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) studies, but recently that picture has changed a little.

We incorporate material on controversies both past and present, including discussions of “primitive promiscuity” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, supposed ignorance or “nescience” of physiological paternity and the “facts of life,” clitoridectomy and other forms of “genital cutting,” homosexualities and how we discuss them, the Mead–Freeman “debate” over whether Samoan adolescents enjoyed sexual freedom, and the usefulness of discussions of love in other societies.

And What Do We Mean by Sexuality?

“Sexuality” is not merely a loaded term, it is pre-eminently ambiguous, yet most of us (which means most anthropologists) are reasonably sure what “it” means. It might be said, like the word “game,” to be an odd-job word, a signifier with numerous, sometimes contradictory, referents. It can be used to mean a biological given, whether a propensity or a drive; it may refer to individuals or groups; it may refer to “unconscious” or conscious impulses; it may describe behavior, whether indulged in, observed, desired, or related in narrative; it may be a concept in discourse which refers to some or all of the preceding.

The broadness of such a discursive concept may reflect the view that there is no verifiable reality beyond talk – that “sexuality” is best viewed as a social construct. “Sex” itself is similarly ambiguous. It can be seen as the biological “counterpoint” to socially constructed “gender,” in which event either category could be and has been viewed as dependent on the other.¹

The anthropologists whose work we have selected vary greatly according to time, place, interests, and ideology, so that it is hardly surprising that they do not, did not, or would not all agree as to the meaning and purview of “sex” and “sexuality.” Most writing before the 1950s (or even perhaps the 1970s) assumed that “sexuality,” albeit it was culturally mediated and to some extent variable, was at root a biological given. For example, Westermarck, Ellis, Malinowski, Messenger, and even Mead adhered to positions that would now be called *essentialist*. Some more contemporary writers on heterosexuality (e.g., Marjorie Shostak, William Jankowiak, and Thomas Gregor, and, in this volume, Pamela Stern and the late Richard Condon) might also be described as essentialist, inasmuch as they adhere to either modern Darwinian (sociobiological) or some Freudian viewpoints. Most but not all writers of the new gay, lesbian, and transgender anthropology (e.g., Weston, Boellstorff, Sinnott, and Valentine in this volume) may be described as constructionist. They are much less concerned with whether or not homosexuality is rooted in a “gay gene” than with the fact that different societies and different sectors of society classify (or

fail to classify) minority sexualities in different ways. People may create classifications through talk and action, and they may seek to affirm or modify social classification by performing (or failing to perform) an expected role, or indeed by performing it in an exaggerated fashion (which is “camp”). Constructionism (or constructivism) is rooted in the mid-to-late twentieth-century movement in North American sociology known as symbolic interactionism, and the later philosophical writings of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

Some Problems Relating to the Anthropology of Sexuality

Arguably, all anthropologists are nosy parkers all of the time. As Margaret Mead, Donald Tuzin, and Ernestine Friedl noted (Mead 1961: 1434–5; Tuzin 1991: 270–4, 1995: 265, 266; Friedl 1994), with some very rare exceptions, the sex act is the most private of all acts in most societies, and sexuality in general is a field where boundaries are sharply drawn. Such a situation may present problems of both an evidentiary and an ethical nature even to the most resolute of nosy parkers. The problems are particularly acute where issues of power and inequality are involved. Arguably, sexuality is a topic around which such issues cluster with a greater frequency than is the case with most other areas of study, as Michel Foucault reminded us.

In the popular imagination most anthropological inquiries into sexuality are conducted in very cold or very steamy places, far removed from modern urban settings. Such a stereotype fits the imaginings of the cultural evolutionists and the early ethnographic work of Malinowski and Mead and the contemporary studies of scholars such as Gilbert Herdt. However, the Western metropolis was implicitly or explicitly present as a comparator in all of this work. In the late twentieth century much of the new lesbian and gay anthropology focused its attention on sexuality in contemporary urban contexts throughout the world.

Most discussions of sexuality in the academic literature have a moral or political, as well as a scientific, agenda. Recognizing this fact does not mean that anthropologists have discovered nothing of value, nothing new, or nothing “true” about sexuality, though critics of relativist approaches equate such recognition with just such denials. Anthropologists have sometimes disturbed outsiders by questioning supposed moral universals on the basis of ethnographic evidence; more recently, they are disturbing each other by questioning the premises that underlie the ethnographic enterprise, from the entry to the field to the inscription of data. Freeman’s critique of Mead’s portrayal of Samoan sexuality stirred the popular imagination in the 1980s, largely because it presented a challenge to a famous woman’s reputation. A number of scholars, including anthropologists who had long been skeptical of some of Mead’s conclusions, were disturbed by Freeman’s attack. To them, it seemed to champion a discredited assumption that sexual behavior and gender roles were biologically determined, and to open the way for other biological determinisms, particularly with regard to race, although Freeman denied that his work was in any way about race.

The debate over sexuality in Samoa is one of the later controversies linking comparative studies of sexuality to pressing social issues. In our book *Irregular Connections* (Lyons and Lyons 2004), we discuss a long history of the “conscription”

of sexuality, particularly the sexuality of relatively powerless populations, into debates about morality and hierarchy in the places where anthropological works were written and read and from which anthropologists set out for the field. The sexuality of aboriginal populations of Australia, the Pacific Islands, the Americas, and Africa has figured in debates about slavery in the US South, colonialism in Africa and elsewhere, and the appropriate treatment of women, homosexuals, and the working classes in Europe and North America.

From 1775 to 1900, including the years before 1860 when there was no academic discipline called social anthropology, there was a debate among academic and popular biologists, including some of the founders of physical anthropology, concerning the basis of racial hierarchy. There were discussions concerning the definition of species, and it should be noted that one of the contested criteria of species was sexual, the ability of matings to produce fertile offspring. Genitalia were given racial rankings along with every other part of the body. The findings of biological science were sustained by, and in turn helped to maintain, stereotypes about the sexuality of non-Western peoples as well as abject populations at home. Most commonly, there was an assumption that "primitive" peoples were oversexed both physically and socially. The story of Saartje Baartmann, the so-called Hottentot Venus, discussed in the paper by Magubane is a case in point (see Chapter 2).

Evolutionary social theory at its zenith, represented by the writings of Lewis Henry Morgan, Sir John Lubbock, John McLennan and Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, reflected the self-confidence of Victorian progressives who imagined a zero point of sexual promiscuity from which all peoples progressed at different paces on the road to monogamous, bourgeois marriages. Friedrich Engels, the revolutionary communist who borrowed his conjectural history of the family from Morgan, hoped for a better future, and for a while his theories were used as the basis for experiments in free love in the Soviet Union.

By the turn of the century, confidence had waned after an international economic depression. The Victorian family was under attack from feminists and evangelical Christians who wished to enforce male as well as female chastity, and occasionally from sexual libertarians like Richard Burton interested in more freedom, particularly for men. During this same period sexologists created typologies of normality and perversion, and the first stirrings of homosexual consciousness occurred. It was surely no coincidence that questionings of received morality were integrated into anthropological works that negated the grand narratives of social evolution, such as the denial by Westermarck, Ellis, and Crawley of universal primitive promiscuity. Burton, Westermarck, and Ellis all wrote about the cross-cultural incidence of homosexuality in such a way as to naturalize it, though Burton made disapproving comments while doing so.

Malinowski, who studied with Westermarck, furthered the rejection of social evolution, and portrayed Trobriand adolescence with its measured freedom as a useful training for marriage rather than as an instance of promiscuity. He urged anthropologists to advise colonial administrators and missionaries concerning sexual matters in order to prevent social instability. He also became active in the birth control movement in Britain. Mead's career as a popular expert on family issues began with her controversial portrait of Samoan adolescence.

From the late 1930s anthropological research on sexuality was largely subsumed in other projects such as kinship studies in Britain and the British Empire, and culture and personality studies in the United States. This continued till the 1970s.

In the 1960s a curious debate erupted when Sir Edmund Leach attacked some of his contemporaries for accepting Malinowski's assertions that the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands had been ignorant of the facts of physiological paternity when Malinowski studied them during World War I. Although Malinowski rejected Victorian ideas of primitive matriarchy in studying this matrilineal people, Leach argued that accepting such "ignorance" at face value could not be separated from its roots in Victorian ideas of savages who were too promiscuous to be certain of their father's identity and too stupid to figure out the facts of life.

Issues of power and inequality and memories of a racist past also haunt current debates about female circumcision. The conflicts between anthropology's relativist tradition and its humanitarian and feminist commitments may be resolved by its ability to create dialogue and by attempts to empower women in communities that have practiced genital cutting.

Empowerment is necessarily a critical issue in GLBT anthropology, which played a leading role in reviving anthropological field studies of sexuality in the past three decades. Many of them have taken place in North American as well as non-Western settings. In the 1990s Weston observed in her article, "The Virtual Anthropologist," that the lesbian or gay anthropologist who studies lesbian or gay subcultures "at home" might be told that she was not doing "real" fieldwork, because she had not gone to a foreign place and was studying her own kind. Questions of categorization and conscription are encountered in gay and lesbian studies, most notably those conducted abroad. These are discussed in detail in our introduction to the section on GLBT studies (see Part X).

Curiously, "love" was not a common topic in anthropological studies of sexuality. When it was mentioned, it was often accompanied by denials of its social recognition outside Western society. Studies in this volume by Stern and Condon, Smith, and Spronk are part of a growing literature that suggests that such assumptions should be questioned and more attention paid to the cross-cultural study of love.

Despite the hopes of some anthropologists that our discipline would be able to point the way to a "healthy" or "normal" way for people to "do sex," such an outcome has not ensued. Rather, what we have learned is the *hubris* entailed in any assumption that such universal prescriptions are possible. What the anthropology of sexuality does tell us is that humans have lived under many different sexual regimes, each with its own unique internal dynamics. This knowledge does not provide solutions. Rather, it asks some very challenging questions.

NOTE

- 1 This paragraph and the previous one are taken from the Introduction to our book, *Irregular Connections* (Lyons and Lyons 2004: 12).