BOOK REVIEW

The health of sexual minorities: public health perspectives on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations, edited by Ilan H. Meyer and Mary E. Northridge, Heidelberg, Springer, 2007, xx + 732 pp., ISBN 10: 0387288716, US$89.95, £57.50 (hardback), ISBN 13: 9780387288710

 Sexual inequalities and social justice, edited by Niels Teunis and Gilbert Herdt, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, 281 pp., ISBN 10: 978-0-520-24614-0, US$55.00, £32.95 (hardback), ISBN 13: 9780520246157, US$21.95, £12.95 (paperback)

Since the explosion of anti-identitarian sexuality scholarship in the 1990s, originating in the humanities and often referred to as ‘queer theory’, social science research on sexuality has struggled to find its voice. The speed at which this ‘pomohomo’ movement spread throughout the academy was matched by the rapid decline of its predecessor, ‘gay and lesbian studies’. It appears now that the queer moment has similarly lost its appeal (except perhaps for the flourishing of work from scholars of colour), yet it remains unclear what rubric will take its place. Two new anthologies clearly illustrate one potential shift. While they differ dramatically in scope, both illustrate a very different direction for sexuality scholarship, away from identity and towards a focus on inequality and public health.

The Health of Sexual Minorities is a comprehensive collection of articles concerning the health of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) (mostly American) people. As editors Ilan Myer and Mary Northridge indicate, this book was not intended to be ‘encyclopedic book that covers all areas of interest to LGBT populations’, but instead a cross-disciplinary collection that ‘would rely on the best available thought on issues of concern to LGBT health’. With twenty-seven articles from over fifty contributors, however, the book is certainly exhaustive as an introductory text. The collection is divided into six parts, each focused on a different topical concern.

The collection begins with a series of articles that attempt to explain who is encompassed by the term ‘sexual minorities’, a term that is often used interchangeably with LGBT people. Three of these four articles are concerned with developmental ‘stage models’ of sexual identity that psychologists have proposed and debated over the past three decades, a lineage of scholarship that Eliason and Schope trace back to the work of Erving Goffman’s (1963) highly influential work, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. In reviewing the various models proposed since – from Ken Plummer’s (1975) four-stage model for gay men (‘Sensitisation’, ‘Significance’, ‘Coming Out’ and ‘Stabilisation’) to Devor’s (1994) complex, fourteen-stage model for transgender identity development – Eliason and Schope question whether any rigid, linear stage model will ever be able to account for all LGBT people, while acknowledging the utility of such models in counselling and treatment settings.

Perhaps the collection’s most forward-thinking section, titled ‘LGBT Health and the State’, includes a series of essays on activism, social justice and legal issues facing
sexual minorities. In ‘The Importance of Being Perverse: Troubling Law, Identities, Health and Rights, in Search of Global Justice’, legal scholars Stefano Fabeni and Alice M. Miller argue that ‘policy makers and practitioners concerned with sexual health or with the health of persons of diverse sexualities can and should be part of a global struggle for justice and rights’ (p. 93). Rather than rallying for social change under the banner of ‘freedom’ or ‘equality’, social justice movements globally are increasingly turning to health within an international human rights framework to organise their arguments. This is in part due to a realisation that foundations and government agencies are much more likely to be interested in funding HIV-prevention programs than, say, a campaign to end homophobia (although the two may have similar ends). As such, this section’s essays are timely and useful for understanding this shift in organising.

Throughout the collection, a common problem acknowledged in studying LGBT populations is that of methodology. Who gets counted and based on what criteria? How do you find them? Indeed, in his article on LGBT youth development, Savin-Williams points to a history of negligence by social scientists who made a habit of sampling the most convenient sub-groups available (sex workers, the homeless etc.) and reporting these data as if they were representative of entire communities. The result was that most of the early research on LGBT youth indicated that ‘many were suicidal, lived on the fringes of society and felt rejected and disdained. These youth needed rescuing and researchers advocated for them with data highlighting societal contributions to their destitute lives’ (p. 28). As a result, studies that followed early projects focused on ‘negative’ life scripts and have thus ‘tainted the perception of same-sex attracted youth, characterising them as necessarily troubled individuals destined to lead sad, risky lives’ (p. 42). As long as survey-based, quantitative population modelling remains – as Gary Dowsett terms it later in the collection – the ‘dominant and default methodology’ (p. 419) in public health, these questions of sampling and representation will be of utmost importance in designing and interpreting future studies.

Ironically, numerous articles throughout The Health of Sexual Minorities are focused on the very negative outcomes that Savin-Williams describes for LGBT youth. A cursory read of the book’s included articles might leave an unfamiliar reader thinking that lesbians have high rates of breast cancer; Latino gay men are addicted to methamphetamine; LGBT people are alcoholics and heavy smokers; and of course, many men who have sex with men are having unprotected sex and contracting HIV (particularly men of colour). This is not to say that any of these things is particularly inaccurate, per se. Rather, it seems that getting public health research funded and published requires reporting the worst evidence possible from minority populations. Public health officials and scholars are continually allowed to denigrate and scold minority groups for their bad habits, while rarely (if ever) reporting on any of the positive potential health outcomes from being gay (or, for that matter, the negative health outcomes from being heterosexual). The same could be said for public health scholarship on race and/or gender. This perspective has unfortunately been buttressed by some scholars of ‘queer theory’ who have insisted on painting ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identities as dangerous and backwards.

Perhaps the editors should not be faulted for this omission, as there is little data out there of the kind I have described – although that is changing (see, for instance, Kana’iaupuni 2005). Public health has for many years now been focused on
changing people’s bad behaviours, which is perhaps why so many contributors are psychologists and psychiatrists. While *The Health of Sexual Minorities* aims for a ‘cross-disciplinary’ perspective, the vast majority of the data presented here is either behavioural or biomedical in scope, relying heavily on quantitative methodologies – analysis of the norms, cultures and meanings of described practices is largely absent. The editors should be commended for their inclusion of an innovative and useful section on human rights, advocacy and legal issues facing LGBT communities, but in general, the collection could have benefited greatly from the inclusion of more rich social science analysis.

On the other end, perhaps, of the disciplinary spectrum in the sciences is Niels Teunis and Gilbert Herdt’s recent anthology, *Sexual Inequalities and Social Justice*. Like *The Health of Sexual Minorities*, the health of LGBT populations is a focus of much of the scholarship selected for inclusion, but it differs in its focus on qualitative research from scholars primarily in anthropology, sociology and psychology. Editors Teunis and Herdt (well-known for his ethnographic work in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s) have assembled a collection of ten essays that, while topically diverse, are written predominantly by scholars located in one geographic area: San Francisco. Of the sixteen contributors, only four live elsewhere. In particular, many are affiliated with San Francisco State University, where Herdt founded a MA Programme in Sexuality Studies (of which I am a graduate). Pulling away from the identity-based models of scholarship provided by ‘gay and lesbian studies’ and ‘queer theory’, this new programme attempted to provide a home for a diverse range of social science sexuality scholarship, including such issues as reproductive rights, sex education and sex tourism. This collection reflects that effort and particular strain of scholarship.

The collection’s ten essays are divided into three conceptual sections: ‘Sexual Coercion and Sexual Stigma’; ‘Seeking Sexual Pleasure’; and ‘Sexual Inequality and Sociality’. In each section, essays focus on the social mechanisms that (re)produce systems of sexual inequality, such as Jessica Fields’ incisive analysis of how gender is infused into North Carolinian debates on sexuality education and the actual in-class curricula. Fields attempts to locate and give voice to the various stakeholders in these debates, particularly the young people whose education is at stake, but also sexual health educators, school boards and the North Carolina General Assembly. In this way, Fields effectively paints for readers a portrait of what it might look like to stand in the middle of the controversy, with various social forces swirling around them, pushing and pulling the debate in different directions.

As Fields does throughout her analysis, many authors in the collection are careful to call attention to their own place within the debates and movements they describe. In Sonya Grant Arreola’s ‘Childhood Sexual Abuse and HIV among Latino Gay Men’, she describes her research on the topic as stemming from her experience working as the director of an HIV-prevention organisation in California in the mid-1980s. She describes hearing ‘experiences of forced sex in childhood that sounded more severe, longer in duration and more buried in secrecy than those I would here from the men in the English-speaking groups’ (p. 35). In this way, she is both contextualising the data she goes on to present and locating herself as a political player in debates on sexuality and HIV/AIDS of the past three decades. This kind of disclosure is common throughout the anthology’s included essays, drawing on the feminist tradition of calling attention to researcher’s own subjective relation to their scholarship.
At the extreme of this tendency is Christopher Carrington’s ‘ethnographic reflections’ on his years of experience in the gay ‘circuit culture’, characterised by large dance parties frequented primarily by white gay men that extend over several days in cities across the world. Here he attempts to describe the experiences of the participants (including himself) of this subculture, a kind of analysis that he argues has been largely absent in a literature on circuit culture that has mostly focused on its potential ‘risks, dangers, norm violations and political costs’ (p. 125). Carrington instead relies primarily on the narratives collected from his participants, narratives that he describes as ‘rather positive’. This is exemplified in lengthy excerpts from a powerful interview with a forty-one year old circuit participant, Daniel, who describes the cathartic experience of learning, on the dance floor, of his friend Antonio's recent HIV infection. Initially angered, Daniel left his friends, only to return soon thereafter to find his friends huddled around Antonio in a ‘ball of human flesh’:

At first, I couldn’t get in, they were so tight together. So, I just danced behind them with my arms on their backs and shoulders. Finally, Antonio sees me, and his face is filled with tears. They all opened the circle and embraced me, and I am telling you, I was overwhelmed. Everyone was crying, and telling each other how much we loved each other. (p. 141)

While the chapter itself feels muddled and a bit disorganised – there is far too much material crammed into the short space, with little room left for building a coherent argument – Carrington’s commitment to letting circuit boys like Daniel speak for themselves is admirable.

This kind of participant-focused, rich qualitative analysis is shared to varying degrees with most essays included in *Sexual Inequalities and Social Justice*. As Carrington indicates with debates around circuit culture, scholarship on sexuality and sexual subcultures has largely been framed in disease and risk paradigms common in the field of public health. As such, this anthology proves to be a welcome companion piece to *The Health of Sexual Minorities*, which offers readers quantitative breadth, but little in the way of the qualitative depth provided by *Sexual Inequalities and Social Justice*. Perhaps the most pressing goal of future sexuality scholarship will be to find some peace between the two methodological ‘camps’, acknowledging that each provides different levels of understanding and that neither alone will suffice in providing a complete understanding of sexuality. In the meantime, both collections provide differently useful tools for researchers, activists and practitioners, both inside and outside the academy.

References
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