

## “The Sociologist as Voyeur”: Social Theory and Sexuality Research, 1910–1978

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*Sociology has a long history of social theory and ethnographic research in the area of sexuality. Although it has been largely overlooked, this body of work prefigures later advances by social constructionists and queer theorists. This article reviews some of the early theoretical and empirical contributions to the sociology of sexuality, organized into five broad themes: the denaturalization of sexuality and its origins; the historicization of sexuality; the analytic shift from “deviants” to “deviance”/margins to center; the destabilization of sexual categories and identities and emphasis on the fluid and diverse meanings of sexual acts; and the theorization of sexuality and gender as performance. This article suggests that sexual stigma may contribute to the marginalization of sexuality studies in sociology.*

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In *Tearoom Trade* (1970), Laud Humphreys explained that he was able to conduct research on public sex among men by posing as “watchqueen,” the term for a man who serves as lookout in the tearoom. It was, Humphreys observed, “a role superbly suited for sociologists . . .” (p. 28). His methods section—entitled “The Sociologist as Voyeur”—pointedly collapsed the distinction between those who observe for sexual motives and those who observe for the passionate pleasures of social research. Humphreys sought to normalize his somewhat unconventional topic by locating it under the broad umbrella of qualitative research; his methodological dilemmas, he argued, were of the type that is “for the most part, shared with other ethnographers . . .” (p. 18). Unfortunately, if Humphreys’ methodological challenges were indeed prosaic, his strategies for solving them were, as we

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know, creative but idiosyncratic.<sup>2</sup> As punishment for its alleged sins, *Tearoom Trade* languishes in the purgatory of ethics textbooks, condemned to extended suffering alongside Stanley Milgram's controversial experiments on obedience to authority. Laud Humphreys' pre-eminent status as ethics outlaw has had unfortunate outcomes. It obscures his brilliant theoretical and empirical contributions to the sociology of sexuality and further consigns to the shadows the rich legacy of sexuality studies within sociology. *Tearoom Trade*, after all, was not *sui generis*, but rather part of a tradition of interpretive social research into diverse sexual worlds. This special issue of *Qualitative Sociology* examines a piece of this sociological history.<sup>3</sup> It covers theoretical and empirical contributions starting from 1910 with the early Chicago School, and ending in 1978, the year of the publication for the English language translation of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. This volume is in memory of Laud Humphreys and William Simon (both now deceased), and in honor of the myriad other pioneers in the sociological study of sexuality.

Sociology's history in sexuality research has recently prompted mixed reviews. The classical sociologists, as Steven Seidman writes in the introduction to a symposium on queer theory, "offered no accounts of the social making of modern bodies and sexualities" (1996, p. 167). Despite this failure, sociology has an impressive history of denaturalizing sex and theorizing its social origins in a body of scholarship dating from the early twentieth-century Chicago School. Indeed, anthropologist Gayle Rubin, in her rich history of ethnographic research on sexual subcultures, notes "... the work of establishing a social science approach to sex, of producing ethnographic studies of contemporary sexual populations, and of challenging the privileged role of psychiatry in the study of human sexuality was mostly accomplished by sociologists" (2002a, p. 21). This early sociological theory, Steven Epstein (1994, 1996) has argued, made possible the contemporary work of lesbian and gay studies, and queer theory. And yet, Epstein notes that sociology represents "... the curious case of a discipline whose contributions have been forgotten, both within and without" (1996, p. 159). Despite a history of groundbreaking empirical research and critical theory, the study of sexuality has always been marginal within sociology itself, while the sociological legacy has been overlooked in the broader interdisciplinary project of sexuality studies. These intriguing discontinuities inform this special issue of *Qualitative Sociology*. It is my hope that these articles will further the ongoing conversation about sociology's complicated place in sexuality studies.

<sup>2</sup>See the Enlarged Edition for a series of articles discussing the bitter ethical debates over methods (Humphreys 1975). For reflections on Laud Humphreys and the contributions of *Tearoom Trade*, see also Goodwin, Horowitz, and Nardi (1991) and Nardi (1995).

<sup>3</sup>This article, and the special issue as a whole, is confined to a discussion of sociological theory and research in the interpretive and ethnographic traditions of the Chicago School, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy and ethnomethodology. For the positivist tradition, see Julia Ericksen's (1999) history of sex surveys in the social sciences.

Sexuality studies is an umbrella term for a broad, interdisciplinary field that has burgeoned over the last several decades. Contemporary sexuality studies, which includes but is not limited to lesbian and gay studies and queer theory,<sup>4</sup> insists that sexuality be studied as an analytic category rather than as an ascribed characteristic. As a subject of research, sexuality is a broad social domain involving multiple fields of power, diverse systems of knowledge, and sets of institutional and political discourses. The social construction of sexuality, as a loosely coherent perspective, emerged in the mid 1970s. An interdisciplinary group of scholars and political activists in the U.S. and England, such as Jonathan Ned Katz, Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks, studied the history of sexual communities and argued for the mutability of sexual categories (Vance 1991). French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) amplified these themes, while also underscoring the significance of institutional discourses and articulating a new conception of the operations of power. The social constructionist argument that sexuality was best studied as a domain whose meanings change across cultures and history, rather than as a universal, biological drive, prompted rich case studies on sexual populations and communities. This research explored the social organization of sexualities in particular regions or contexts, and the history of sexual identity formations by race and ethnicity, gender, class and other factors.

Sexuality studies grew increasingly sophisticated, inextricably bound with the intellectual influences of poststructuralism, feminist theory and cultural studies, as well as feminist, queer and AIDS activism. Its theoretical contributions are too expansive to be summarized here, but some important elements include recognition that: 1) sexual identities and categories are diffuse and internally fragmented rather than stable formations; 2) relations of power not only regulate but also produce sexualities; 3) the practices of both sexuality and gender are fluid, and best understood as social accomplishments rather than as manifestations of an immanent self; and 4) the institutional discourses and practices that reproduce and naturalize dominant categories must be investigated alongside the study of sexual minorities. Collectively, these insights challenged the essentializing discourses of early sexology with the recognition that sexuality is profoundly historical and social, a theme long present in sociology.

As several scholars have complained, social construction theory is routinely attributed to the poststructuralist cultural theory of Michel Foucault, its long intellectual lineage erased (Vance 1991; Stein and Plummer 1994; Epstein 1994; Weeks 1998; Rubin 2002a). For example, Steven Epstein noted, "... to some recent students of sexuality working outside sociology, the concept of social construction

<sup>4</sup>The research parameters of sexuality studies are broader than investigations into sexual categories and identities, even accounting for queer theory's capacious analyses of myriad aspects of the "crisis" of homo/heterosexual definition" (Sedgwick 1990, p. 1). Of course, these various fields of study overlap. However, an interdisciplinary group of scholars in sexuality studies has produced studies outside the deliberately ambiguous purview of lesbian and gay studies/queer theory.

is assumed to have sprung, like Athena, fully formed from the head of Michel Foucault . . .” (1994, p. 189), and Jeffrey Weeks complained, “It is frustrating for those of us who have been toiling in this particular vineyard since the turn of the 1960s and 1970s to have our early efforts in understanding sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, refracted back to us through post-Foucauldian abstractions . . . and then taken up as if the ideas are freshly minted” (1998, p. 132). Although overlooked, in significant ways sociological research from the early twentieth century to the mid 1970s foreshadowed the radical transformations in sexual theory that are so often credited to Foucault. Early sociological studies on sexuality broke from nineteenth-century biological and medical discourses to theorize that sexuality is profoundly shaped by the social. In this volume, Chad Heap examines sexuality as a distinct area of research for the urban sociology of the Chicago School. Using the city as a sexual laboratory, Chicago School faculty and students studied “vice” through diverse methods such as life histories, observation and informal interviews, along with analysis of census data, court records, diaries and other documents. Research in these early decades opened complex sexual worlds to ethnographic inquiry. In addition, the social theory of George Herbert Mead helped launch an interactivist tradition that would radically challenge the biologicistic paradigm of sexuality. In the 1950s and 1960s, researchers combined theoretical perspectives such as Herbert Blumer’s symbolic interactionism with ethnographic methods to investigate topics such as homosexuality, prostitution, nudism, stripping and premarital sex. These studies yielded sociological insights not only on how social factors *shape* sexuality, but perhaps more importantly, allowed some social scientists to argue that the social *produces* sexuality. Many of the analytic themes in this early work were later refined by social constructionists and then advanced to new levels by queer theorists. In the following sections I review some of these early theoretical and empirical contributions, which I have organized into broad themes. These include: the denaturalization of sexuality and its origins; the historicization of sexuality; the analytic shift from “deviants” to “deviance”/margins to center; the destabilization of sexual categories and identities and emphasis on the fluid and diverse meanings of sexual acts; and the theorization of sexuality and gender as performance. Like sexuality itself, these categories are fluid and overlapping.

## THE DENATURALIZATION OF SEXUALITY AND ITS ORIGINS

Late nineteenth-century medicalization superseded religious authority over sexuality with a scientific discourse of “the natural.” Far from singular or internally consistent, early sexology nonetheless developed new methodologies, languages and taxonomies of bodies and pleasures. Sex became an object of medical study, as early sexual scientists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis wrote about it as instinctual and congenital. This medical model of sex was not, of course,

morally neutral; rather it effected instead an epistemological shift from “badness to sickness” (Conrad and Schneider 1980). As Gayle Rubin (2002b) has noted, the sexologists reproduced hierarchical valuation in the form of new systems of perversions. In this paradigm, deviance, or “sexual perversion,” was an inherent characteristic of the individual. Although some sexologists also thought that individuals could acquire unnatural desires, for example through excessive masturbation, this would most likely happen if such individuals were constitutionally predisposed. In general, sexologists located perversion in biology. These logics of biological determinism were the structuring metaphors for sociologists who began studying sex in the early twentieth century.

The sociological challenge to sexual essentialism was gradual. Sociologists of the Chicago School sometimes echoed the languages and regulatory impulses of some sexologists, as inflected by the new theories of Sigmund Freud. In his important studies of the city, for example, Robert Park examined “vice districts,” noting that “men are brought into the world with all the passions, instincts, and appetites, uncontrolled and undisciplined” (Park and Burgess 1925, p. 43). Sex, in this view, was still an unruly drive. Moreover, the ethnographic methods of the Chicago School lent themselves to the anti-vice initiatives of the early twentieth century, and faculty such as W. I. Thomas and various graduate students cooperated with local organizations committed to stamping out prostitution and homosexuality in the city. Still, as Chad Heap (this volume) describes, members of the early Chicago School were pioneers in the sociological study of sexuality. The city, Park noted, was a “laboratory” for the study of social and cultural life, and his elaboration of the emergence of “moral regions” in urban environments prefigures a later social history of communities which were structured around particular sexual desires (Park and Burgess 1925, p. 22). Moral regions were areas of the city in which populations segregated themselves on the basis of unique passions. Park insisted that a “moral region” was a place that was not necessarily criminal or abnormal:

It is intended rather to apply to regions in which a divergent moral code prevails, because it is a region in which the people who inhabit it are dominated, as people are ordinarily not dominated, by a taste or by a passion or by some interest which has its roots directly in the original nature of the individual. It may be an art, like music, or a sport, like horse-racing” (ibid., p. 45).

Park knew, as later historians of sexuality would also document, that these tastes might also be sexual.

Although he posits these passions as rooted in nature, Park nevertheless claimed that social structures can produce unique sexual worlds. This epistemic shift away from the natural would be more fully realized by symbolic interactionists at mid-century, who asserted that sexuality is wholly social. For example, Manford Kuhn wrote, in a critique of Alfred Kinsey’s volume on female sexuality, “Sex

acts, sexual objects, sexual partners (human or otherwise) like all other objects toward which human beings behave are *social objects*; that is they have meaning because meanings are assigned to them by groups of which human beings are members for there is nothing in the physiology of man which gives a dependable clue as to what pattern of activity will be followed toward them" (1954, p. 123; italics in original). Kuhn's critique may indeed have been "lost" in the pages of *Social Problems*, as Ken Plummer put it (1982, p. 225), reflective of mainstream sociology's disinterest in sexuality studies. Still, his review was part of the major reconceptualization of sexuality effected by some sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s (Gayle Rubin 2002a; Chad Heap this volume; Ken Plummer this volume). No scholars were more central to this endeavor than William Simon and John Gagnon.

Individually and as a team, Simon and Gagnon, both of whom trained at the University of Chicago, produced a body of work intended to demystify sex and unmoor it from the natural. They wrote against the grain of the dominant sexual discourses of their time: the biological determinism of the sexologists; the therapeutic essentialism of Freud; and the critical theories of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, for whom sex was a repressed energy with revolutionary potential. In an extraordinary, but largely overlooked, early paper, "Sex Talk—Public and Private" (1968), they challenged conventions on everything from the origins of sexuality to the hype over the sexual revolution. They argued that although sexuality has a biological aspect, "... there is some evidence that suggests its power to shape social behavior is substantially less than that of other biologically rooted behaviors. We would like to argue, somewhat tentatively, that if sex plays an important role in the conduct of human affairs, it is because societies have invented or created its importance, and not because of some nearly irresistible urgency stemming from the biological substratum. In other words, it is possible that most human societies have proscribed most of the possible outlets of sexual expression not to constrain some inherently anti-social force, but to assign it an importance it might not otherwise possess; constraint and proscription thus making the activity intense, passionate, and special" (Simon and Gagnon 1968, pp. 173–174). They countered arguments from both the sexual right and the sexual left about the overriding power of biology to effect either chaos or liberation. For example, at a moment of unprecedented public sexual visibility in which cries for "free love" morphed from the counterculture to the mainstream in novels such as *The Harrad Experiment* (1967) and plays like *Hair* (1967), Simon and Gagnon suggested that if social prohibitions on sex were lifted "... the outcome might not be an enlarged capacity for joyous and passionate copulation but an experience of utmost banality" (ibid., p. 175). (Subsequent decades seem to have borne this out.)

Simon and Gagnon turned upside down the Freudian notion of sexuality as a dangerous instinct operating as a basic motive for social behavior. It was "naïve,"

they argued, to posit sexuality as the salient developmental influence of childhood. Explicit in their own work was “the assumption that social roles are not vehicles for the expression of sexual impulse but that sexuality becomes a vehicle for expressing the needs of social roles” (Gagnon and Simon 1973, p. 45). In contrast to the prevailing wisdom, Simon and Gagnon argued that particular activities and body parts are not inherently sexual, rather they only become sexual through the social meanings we attribute to them. Sex, they argued, was not uniquely outside of the social; rather, “In any given society, at any given moment in its history, people become sexual in the same way they become everything else. Without much reflection, they pick up directions from their social environment” (Gagnon 1977, p. 2). The origin of sex was not biology but “the sexual” emerges only through a complex set of social negotiations and definitions. The “sexual script” was the conceptual apparatus by which they explained the acquisition and performance of sexuality (Simon and Gagnon 1968; Simon 1973; Simon and Gagnon 1984; Simon and Gagnon 1987).

Consistent with symbolic interactionism’s view that meaning is not inherent in objects or events but is the fluid product of interpretation (Blumer 1969), Simon and Gagnon’s sexual scripting concept suggested that sexuality was historically and culturally contingent. It also foregrounded the significance of discourse, and its expressive elements of language and symbols, in the construction of sexuality. Sexual discourses were an important element in “cultural scenarios,” one of the three levels of sexual scripts (along with interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts) providing the individual with “roadmaps” for sexual activity (Simon and Gagnon 1987, p. 365). “Communicating the sexual” does not simply shape sexuality but actually creates it (Gagnon and Simon 1973, p. 37). The sexual was constituted by, and could not exist outside of, language. In “Sex Talk” they argued that we derive our sexual scripts through sexual communication, and they underscored that when we talk with children about sex its impact is not to activate a dormant sexual instinct. Rather, “Our talk about sex will begin to affect them by creating responses on their parts appropriate to our talk” (Simon and Gagnon 1968, p. 178). The metaphoric shift from drive to script (Plummer 1982), from sex as an uncontrollable energy to sex as a social accomplishment, was a foundational insight of what would later emerge as social construction theory.

## THE HISTORICIZATION OF SEXUALITY

If sex was social, it was therefore necessarily historical. A central premise of the social constructionist approach to sexuality, which would emerge across several disciplines in the mid 1970s, was that the meanings of sexual acts varied across cultures and historical eras. As John Gagnon noted about his 1973 book, *Sexual*

*Conduct*, “In its opening chapter we argue that sex between men in Classical Greece and on 42nd Street in the 1950s were not the same kind of conduct, even though the bodily organs engaged were identical. The anus, the penis and the mouth do not have trans-historical meanings, nor do such social actors as men and boys” (1999, p. 124). Although this is commonly recognized now, the social constructionist-essentialist debates over the question of the historical stability of sexual categories and experiences were widely argued throughout the eighties. For example, social constructionists argued against a historiography that excavated an allegedly stable gay past, as represented by research such as John Boswell’s (1980) comprehensive study of Christianity and homosexuality in the middle ages. They said that rather than imposing contemporary meanings upon the past, scholars of sexuality should instead be investigating the myriad discontinuities in the organization of sexuality in different eras. This was, as anthropologist Carole Vance put it, “an extremely outrageous idea” (1989, p. 13), given that naturalistic frameworks of sex are so culturally entrenched.

Sociologist Mary McIntosh was an early architect of the social constructionist approach. Her 1968 article in *Social Problems*, “The Homosexual Role,” has since been recovered from that largely forgotten period of sexuality research by sociologists, although at the time her insights “vanished like pebbles in a pond” (Vance 1991, p. 877). McIntosh’s contributions were multiple, one of which was the integration of sociological and historical analysis. When she argued that homosexuality was not an inherent individual condition but a social “role” (using the functionalist term later abandoned by sociologists), she also insisted that comparative sociology offered the analytic tools to interrogate historical changes and cross-cultural differences in how sexual categories are defined and socially organized. Although she acknowledged their limitations, McIntosh went to the Human Relations Area Files in order to speculate about the homosexual role in different societies and then she turned her gaze to a schematic but provocative history of how the idea of “homosexuality” developed in England. She suggested that an early form of what we might today recognize as male homosexuality emerged in London in the late seventeenth century, while she also cautioned that the use of definitional terms, as well as analyses of categories and behaviors, must be historically specific. In a thirtieth anniversary appreciation of her article, Jeffrey Weeks (1998) wrote that Mary McIntosh’s historical analysis was highly influential to an early generation of historians, including Weeks himself (Weeks 1977), who took up questions about the historical invention of sexual categories, subcultures, belief systems and languages. Commonplace now, at the time McIntosh’s observations constituted a radical challenge to the dominant paradigm of sexuality as a timeless and universal biological drive. While honoring its unique contributions, it is also important to recognize that “The Homosexual Role” was part of a larger sociological literature resolutely dismantling the universalizing frameworks of sexual essentialism.



### THE ANALYTIC SHIFT FROM “DEVIANTS” TO “DEVIANCE”/MARGINS TO CENTER

Sociologists in the 1950s defied Cold War pressures toward loyalty, deference to authority, corporate culture and mass consumption (Reisman 1950; Whyte 1956; Mills 1959). In the early 1960s, they theorized against the tide of conformism by challenging the very premise of deviance. U.S. sociology underwent a significant transformation in deviance theory, most fully articulated in Howard Becker's 1963 study *Outsiders*. This approach located the origins of deviance in the proliferation of social rules rather than in the inherent characteristics either of certain behaviors or of individuals who engage in those behaviors. “The central fact about deviance,” Becker asserted, is that “it is created by society” (1963, p. 8). Inflected by symbolic interactionism, Becker's perspective cast deviance as the outcome of a “transaction” between rule-makers and rule-breakers or, more specifically, between rule-makers and an individual *perceived* as breaking the rules (*ibid.*, p. 10). One of the many important contributions of *Outsiders* was that it effected an analytic shift from those on the margins—the deviants—to the rule-making strategies of social institutions and “moral entrepreneurs.” This focus unsettled previously stable categories of “normal” and “deviant,” making it necessary to ask new questions such as “Whose rules?” Becker argued that social rules are contingent, with disagreement “along social class lines, ethnic lines, occupational lines, and cultural lines. These groups need not and, in fact, often do not share the same rules” (*ibid.*, p. 15). An individual, then, could be an “outsider” in relation to one social group but not another. More important, Becker flipped the analytic point of view, arguing that from the perspective of the “rule-breaker,” “outsiders” might well be the very people who make the rules. As exemplified by Mary McIntosh's “The Homosexual Role,” sociologists applied the new analytic tools of labeling theory to a wide range of sexual groups.

As Carol Warren notes in this volume, the reconceptualization of deviance theory prompted “appreciative” studies of sexual subcultures. Like students of the early Chicago School, mid-century sociologists found sexual networks and communities to be rich research sites. They produced case studies about sex offenders (Reiss 1960), prostitutes and hustlers (Reiss 1961; Jackman and O'Toole 1963; Bryan 1966; Cavan 1966), nudists (Weinberg 1965), topless barmaids (Ames et al. 1970), the gay bar (Achilles 1967), homosexuality (Leznoff and Westley 1956; Simon and Gagnon 1967; Warren 1974; Weinberg and Williams 1974), and transvestites and transsexuals (Feinbloom 1976). Much of this research appeared in sociology journals such as *Social Problems* and in collections such as *Sexual Deviance* (Gagnon and Simon 1967) and *Observations of Deviance* (Douglas 1970). Like Warren's ethnography of the gay world in “Sun City” (1974), some of these were studies of communities on the brink of the myriad social changes popularly dubbed the “sexual revolution.” Sociology made visible the diverse social worlds

of sexual cultures long before *Ellen, Will & Grace* or *Sex in the City* made them routine. In comparison to the pathologizing gaze of 1960s psychology and psychiatry (e.g., Bieber 1962; Socarides 1968), these studies were a world—or at least a discipline—apart.

These new scholars of deviance produced a number of significant insights about sexuality. First, they argued that research on sexual minorities was impossible without a concurrent examination of dominant sexual institutions and definitions. In an early collection of “deviance” studies, William Simon and John Gagnon remarked, “. . . it is important to view deviant behavior, including sexual deviance, in terms of its essential relationship to the conventional structures and processes of collective life” (1967, p. 1). Consistent with this new perspective on the instability of deviance and stigma, Ken Plummer showed that deviance designations could emerge even within dominant sexual categories. Any sexual experience might be seen as deviant, he claimed:

I have suggested that while members of a society may come to experience a wide range of sexual meanings in their day to day life, it is only when public or self-labelling as deviant arises that damaging consequences may ensue. By this kind of argument, the wife who experiences strong guilt feelings about sexuality may come to see herself as significantly different from other women when she refuses to co-operate with her husband's desires in the marital bed. From this may flow a full-bodied deviant identity, consequential avoidance of the marital bed, and the possible breakdown of the marriage. The deviant is someone whose life is organized around the fact of her deviance. And in this example, deviant sexuality is located in heterosexual marriage (1975, p. 88–89).

Later sexuality researchers, both inside and outside of sociology, would examine the history and practices that continually re-established heterosexuality as a dominant and compulsory sexual category and social institution (Rich 1980; Katz 1995; Ingraham 1999; Best 2000).

A second contribution from new deviance theorists was the challenge to the assumption that sexual categories, and the individuals who inhabited them, were homogeneous. Some researchers argued instead that social groups are internally diverse. For example, Simon and Gagnon wrote that their study “approaches homosexuality as a heterogeneous category” (1967, p. 177), and by the late 1970s sociologist Martin Weinberg and psychologist Alan Bell spoke of “homosexualities” as a way to capture this plurality (Bell and Weinberg 1978). Some ethnographers stressed the multiplicity of meanings and experiences that was possible among individuals in specific sexual communities. For example, Carol Warren noted that when she shared drafts of her ethnography on the gay world with members of that community, the reactions included, “. . . condemnation, agreement, lack of understanding, and amazement” (1974, p. 14). She concluded, “My sociologist's knowledge, then, is like theirs—shared with others, but representing only a fragment of the meanings that are possible within that world.” Warren's acknowledgement of multiple viewpoints among community members, her destabilization of the researcher's authority, and her decision to solicit feedback from her informants all anticipate the intense epistemological, political and ethical debates

among ethnographers that would transpire during the 1980s and 1990s (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Lewin and Leap 1996; Shokeid 1997).

Third, the new theories of deviance discouraged the view that sexuality was simply an individual characteristic of a small minority. As Becker, Simon and Gagnon, and other theorists stressed, deviance was not inherent or anomalous. Everyone was likely to be deviant in some fashion, and almost anyone could be sexually deviant. This prompted studies of sexual “careers,” the paths by which sexual deviants such as nudists, call girls and street prostitutes learned, organized and negotiated their worlds (Weinberg 1965; Bryan 1965; Simon and Gagnon 1967). The “career” metaphor enabled sociologists to examine how the social elicited and sustained deviance in different ways. Recalling the Chicago School’s notion of moral regions, for example, Simon and Gagnon noted, “As Robert Park pointed out over a quarter of a century ago, a person who might be a socially isolated and sexually inactive homosexual in a small community can, in the large urban metropolis, be a member of a community of homosexuals” (1967, p. 6). As part of the moral leveling implicit in the new deviance paradigm, they added that this dynamic also operated for “poets, drunkards, atheists, druggists, and business executives” (ibid.). In a recent reflection on their work, John Gagnon said, “If we could understand sex using the same mundane concepts as sociologists use to explain getting a job, becoming a banker, or choosing a career, then we would have remapped a terrain previously mapped as the enchanted and the irrational” (1999, p. 117).

Finally, sociologists took up the new frameworks of deviance to examine the role of stigma in the social control of sexuality. Labeling theory allowed for an analysis of stigma, secrecy and shame as social rather than individual processes. Published in the same year as *Outsiders*, Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) showed how disgrace was the outcome of social categorization. Goffman argued that, like deviance itself, stigma was not inherent but contingent: “The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of *relationships, not attributes*, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (p. 3; emphasis added). In *Stigma*, Goffman discussed homosexuals along with many other socially ostracized types. Later sociologists more fully applied the theoretical strands of symbolic interactionism and reconceptualized deviance theory, Goffman’s dramaturgy and a newly emerging social constructionism to the study of sexuality. The challenge to systems of oppression explicit in the research of sociologists such as Goffman and Howard Becker inspired research on the sexual underdog. For example, in *Sexual Stigma: An Interactionist Account* Ken Plummer called homosexuality a “stigma label” in our culture, noting that “a central fact of the experience thus becomes the necessity for the homosexual to manage a discreditable identity . . .” (1975, p. 175). However, stigma could be paradoxical. Carol Warren argued in her ethnography of a gay

male community that secrecy “entails both sacrifices and delights” (1974, p. 4). She said, “The overt adaptation to stigmatization makes the gay world more important to its members than other worlds; the secret response, I feel, adds excitement to stigma and makes the gay world doubly important” (ibid., p. 5). Ethnographies like Warren’s helped show how stigma and other mechanisms of the social control of sexuality often produced unexpected consequences.

Ultimately, the reformulation of deviance theory contributed to its own obsolescence, at least with regard to sexuality. By the late 1970s, the political activities of the lesbian and gay movement helped problematize the very notion of sexual deviance. As Gayle Rubin noted about the rise of identity politics among erstwhile deviants such as homosexuals, bisexuals, sadomasochists and transsexuals, “Sexualities keep marching out of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and on to the pages of social history” (1984, p. 287). Similarly, they stepped out of the deviance textbooks to interrogate the motives and practices of researchers and to criticize their conceptual frameworks. For example, Carol Warren (this volume) describes how gay activists complained in 1975 that they wanted only openly lesbian women to write about lesbians, not “straight women or closet cases.” While from today’s vantage this may seem like quaint essentialism, at the time it was a challenge to the power of social and medical researchers who pathologized categories of sexuality through definitions of deviance. This was an early moment in which feminists, sexual minorities and communities of color began to question what effects the standpoint of the researcher exercised on studies of diverse cultural groups. The political mobilization of deviants themselves and the reformulation of deviance theory both contributed to an erosion of the category of sexual deviance within sociology. At the same time, deviance theory of the 1960s also blurred the status of insider/outsider, allowing sociologists to challenge the commonplace of stable sexual categories.

### **THE DESTABILIZATION OF SEXUAL CATEGORIES AND EMPHASIS ON THE FLUID AND DIVERSE MEANINGS OF SEXUAL ACTS**

Mid-century sociologists studied sexuality amid the “generalized crisis of identities” of a discontinuous political landscape (Corber 1997, p. 7). Early sexology’s enduring legacy—the categorization of discreet homosexual and heterosexual “types”—was simultaneously reinforced and undermined by a range of constituencies. The 1950s marked the broad political mobilization of lesbians and gay men who organized as an oppressed minority subculture. Groups like the Mattachine Society (1950) and the Daughters of Bilitis (1955) helped consolidate identity categories as they contested social marginality and the pathologizing gaze of psychiatry. Simultaneously, Cold War politics fueled anxieties about the homosexual as a dangerous Other, as lesbians and gay men were forced out of the federal government as threats to national security. However, alongside these

discourses of fixed sexual identity was the antithetical anxiety that deviance, in fact, might be far more uncontained. Alfred Kinsey, in his 1948 report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, challenged the sexological organization of sexualities into distinct categories. Although widely considered an ally among lesbian and gay activists of the 1950s, Kinsey refused to talk about homosexual persons or posit the existence of a homosexual identity. He believed everyone had the “capacity” for homosexuality, and so he spoke only of homosexual patterns of behavior: “There may be considerable fluctuation of patterns from time to time . . . For instance, there are some who engage in both heterosexual and homosexual activities in the same year, or in the same month or week, or even in the same day.” He cautioned that “the world is not to be divided into sheep and goats” (Kinsey et al. 1948, p. 639), further fueling Cold War paranoia with anxiety about ubiquitous deviance. As cultural critic Robert Corber put it, rather than simply spies and perverts, suddenly the “enemy within” might include the potentially transgressive desires of the psyche (1997, p. 10). Many sociologists agreed. As John Gagnon wrote, “The deviant is really not a stranger . . . we are all potential deviants” (Simon and Gagnon 1967, p. vii). During the anxious years of the 1950s and 1960s sociologists criticized the social pressures toward conformity (Riesman 1950; Whyte 1956; Mills 1959) and demonstrated the social origins of sexual roles and identities.

New deviance theories and symbolic interactionism enabled researchers to show the mutability of sexual categories and argue for the significance of motives and meanings. In 1954 Manford Kuhn wrote, “In short the sexual motives which human beings have are derived from the social roles they play; like all other motives these would not be possible were not the actions physiologically possible, but the physiology does not supply the motives, designate the partners, invest the objects with performed passion, nor even dictate the objectives to be achieved” (p. 123). The social framework of sexuality launched empirical challenges to “sexual types,” which came in two important mid-twentieth century sociological studies: Albert Reiss’s article, “The Social Integration of Queers and Peers” (1961), and Laud Humphreys’ pioneering book, *Tearoom Trade* (1970). “The Social Integration of Queers and Peers” examined the social and sexual transactions between adolescent male hustlers (“peers”) and their adult male clients (“queers”), while Humphreys studied the social organization of impersonal sex among men in public spaces. Both sociologists were strongly influenced by prominent interactionists such as Howard Becker, Everett Hughes and John Kitsuse, as well as by psychologist Evelyn Hooker, whose research undermined clinical categories that pathologized homosexuality. As Gayle Rubin noted about “Queers and Peers,” “Reiss’s essay is yet another example of how work in what was then called ‘sexual deviance’ had already incorporated several conceptual innovations, the implications of which would eventually contribute to a major shift in the theoretical paradigms governing research on sexuality” (2002a, p. 35). Their research was very much a product of its time.

Based on interviews of delinquent boys and social observation of sexual meeting places, "Queers and Peers" made several significant contributions to the emergent sociology of sex. First, Reiss disaggregated sexual identity, behavior, desires and pleasure. He showed that, despite their routine participation in fellatio, the boys did not define themselves either as street hustlers or as homosexuals. Second, he animated the interactionist claim that the sexual was constituted through meaning and did not exist in the absence of such meaning. The boys' motives and collective definitions of the physical activities of fellatio were economic, not sexual. Reiss quoted one of them as saying, "No matter how many queers a guy goes with, if he goes for money, that don't make him queer. You're still straight. It's when you start going for free, with other young guys, that you start growing wings" (1961, p. 103–104). Moreover, the boys avoided a self-definition as homosexual by assuming the role only of fellatee not fellator, which they defined as the "queer" or female role. Third, "Queers and Peers" is an early contribution to studies on the social organization of sexuality. Without explicitly mentioning Robert Park, Reiss nonetheless richly described one particular corner of an urban "moral region." He detailed the norms that governed transactions in the "common culture" of community space, showing how the role behavior of "peers," for example affective neutrality and prohibitions on specific physical acts, was essential for the maintenance of the queer-peer social system. Echoing some of Kinsey's findings, the article spoke to the salience of social class in sexual expression, as Reiss stressed that the queer-peer culture was "an institutionalized aspect of the organization of lower-class delinquency oriented groups" (ibid., p. 109). "The Social Integration of Queers and Peers" emphasized that sexual meaning is not inherent in particular activities or body parts. It was the first empirical, sociological study to so dramatically undermine the link between behavior and identity. Although it focused solely on the "peers" in the queer-peer dyad, at the end of the decade Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* (1970) took up the perspective of the men who engaged with each other in "impersonal sex in public places."

Notorious primarily for the ethical debates it provoked, *Tearoom Trade* is nonetheless a monumental study of sex in the city. The book is a study in contrasts. A winner of the C. Wright Mills Award of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, *Tearoom Trade* triggered controversy that nearly resulted in the revocation of Humphreys' doctorate by the Chancellor of Washington University. Although very much a part of its time, it nonetheless stands alone. Methodological constraints will forever disallow research that so intimately explores the intersectionalities of sexual lives and social worlds. *Tearoom Trade* examined the dehumanizing operations of stigma, while also putting a very mundane face on the men who pursue sexual pleasure in public places. Although it is about a demonized group engaged in highly stigmatized behavior, *Tearoom Trade* is ultimately a lesson in how all sexuality is a routine social accomplishment. It is about out-of-the-ordinary sex in ordinary lives.

Humphreys began his dissertation research on the social organization of the tearoom in 1966, at a time of volatile civil rights activity, and on the cusp of radical social change movements that would more fully emerge at the end of the decade among women and lesbians/gay men. *Tearoom Trade* was many things: a vivid portrait of the public culture of impersonal sex; a thick description of the social norms and interactions of the tearoom (including, for example, approaching, positioning, signaling and contracting); and a study of the structural locations and characteristics of the men who frequent the tearoom. The study was influenced by the dramaturgy of Erving Goffman, the reconceptualization of deviance by Howard Becker, the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel, the sexuality studies of William Simon, John Gagnon and Albert Reiss, and the ethnographies of Evelyn Hooker. A meticulous piece of research, *Tearoom Trade* also answered Howard Becker's call for sociologists to "consciously take the perspective of the oppressed rather than the oppressor" (Galliher 1995, p. 169; Becker 1967). A former Episcopalian minister, Humphreys was a committed progressive activist, once spending several months in jail after being arrested at a draft board demonstration. His principles inhered in *Tearoom Trade*, wherein he argued that sexual psychopath laws and harsh police tactics were destructive and spurious.

*Tearoom Trade* makes numerous empirical contributions, but here I will confine myself to a discussion of how the book destabilized conventional assumptions about sexual identities. The tearoom would seemingly be the quintessential homosexual site, a restroom in which men engage in oral sex with other men. First, however, Humphreys separated the sexual acts the men engaged in from any assumption about who they were or how they identified themselves. He stressed that his book was "not a study of 'homosexuals' but of participants in homosexual acts" (Humphreys 1975, p. 18). Identity was not inherent in the activity, and he stressed the diversity of his subjects: "Many men—married and unmarried, those with heterosexual identities and those whose self-image is a homosexual one—seek such impersonal sex, shunning involvement, desiring kicks without commitment" (ibid., p. 2). Amazingly, he could prove it, which of course contributed to later ethical debates. Humphreys had tracked down approximately one hundred of his tearoom subjects and interviewed many of them under the guise of conducting a different survey. He therefore found out exactly who they were; most of them (54 percent) were married men living with their wives. His profiles of these married tearoom participants, barbecuing in their suburban backyards with their children playing nearby, struck another blow against the notion that the world could be divided into sheep and goats. (In a related challenge to conventional assumptions, Humphreys found that many of them were profoundly conservative politically. Some were members of the John Birch Society, and many were strongly religious. Humphreys commented that after these interviews he formed "the impression that 'the Bible on the table and the flag upon the wall' may be signs of secret deviance more than of 'right thinking'" [p. 146]. This finding remains intriguing, especially

in the current political climate. Social conservatism, Humphreys argued, was “a product of the illegal roles these men play in the hidden moments of their lives” [p. 139].)

*Tearoom Trade* went even further in undermining assumptions about fixed sexual identities. “Queers and Peers” had portrayed a sexual system organized by the rigid maintenance of sexual roles. By contrast, *Tearoom Trade* was a kaleidoscope of sexual fluidity. The men shifted from insertor to insertee with alacrity, such “role drift” sometimes happening within the span of a single encounter. Humphreys explained, “By ‘instability’ of a role, I mean its observed tendency to melt, slip, fuse, or drift into another of the standard roles. This tendency is manifested regardless of who may take up that role in the course of an encounter. The role of the ‘straight’ is transient. In a deviant encounter, this label is not adhesive; it does not stick to a person for an extended period of time” (p. 55). Myriad factors could account for role drift. Although Humphreys discussed influences such as aging, attractiveness, style or personal preference, he underscored that the structural pressures of risk and exposure in the tearoom made it necessary for the men to be able to move quickly among a variety of roles. This fluidity meant that it could not be determined who played which role until the absolute end of the sexual act—the payoff. The roles of the many actors unfolded in the interaction: “The players (insertees and insertors) are identifiable only in the sex act; waiters—and even straights—may be transformed into players; chicken may turn out to be hustlers, toughs, straights, or participants; social control agents (nearly always in plain clothes) are generally identifiable only when disaster strikes” (p. 50). Nor did these physical activities of inserting or receiving have stable meaning. Humphreys noted that while he had assumed, in accordance with “straight society,” that the insertor would be the aggressor and the insertee would be the passive actor, his data undermined this notion. His observations showed that the insertee was the “aggressor,” the person who initiated the act, in almost half of the sexual events. He concluded that “active” and “passive” were “systems of strategy” (p. 52) rather than an inherent characteristic of the players involved.

Together, “Queers and Peers” and *Tearoom Trade* challenged the notion that sexuality is an immanent individual characteristic and revealed it to be a dynamic social interaction instead. These studies showed how sexuality is produced and constrained by structuring categories. And they depicted versatile sexual actors who were shaped by social structures while also actively engaged in inventing the sexual. In the world of the tearoom, sexual categories and meanings are contingent and plural, not stable and singular. These empirical findings foreshadowed the arguments of queer theorists by several decades. They were, however, of a piece with the critical theories of mid-twentieth century sociology. Like the “self” of the symbolic interactionists, “sexualities” emerged in interaction. And, like the social actors on Goffman’s stage, individuals performed their sexual lives.



## THE THEORIZATION OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER AS PERFORMANCE

In the 1990s, feminist and queer theorists posited the performative aspects of both gender and sexuality. In her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler extended Nietzsche's claim that there is no doer behind the deed, arguing that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 25). The concept of performativity drew on diverse intellectual influences such as philosophy, psychoanalysis and performance studies while, as Eve Sedgwick noted, it carried "the authority of two quite different discourses, that of theater on the one hand, of speech-act theory and deconstruction on the other" (1993, p. 2). Theorists deployed the concept of performativity in myriad ways, for example, to challenge stable notions of identity, to examine how gender performativity produces (hetero)sexuality, and to interrogate the power and practices of speech acts such as coming out (Butler 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Sedgwick 1993). Interpretive sociology of the 1960s and 1970s lacked this broad and sophisticated theoretical power. However, the Meadian concept of the interactive self, along with dramaturgy and ethnomethodology, did support a body of sociological work that prefigured at least one dimension of the concept of performativity that emerged in the 1990s—it used metaphors of the theater to challenge both sexual and gender essentialism. Using the language of their time period, sociologists argued that sexuality and gender were dialogic performances, dramatic roles, scripted dramas, displays and accomplishments. Judith Butler (1993b) rightly emphasizes that *performance* (a bounded act) cannot be conflated with *performativity* (a coercive and productive reiteration of norms). As I will show, it is clear that the work of sociologists such as Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, and Simon and Gagnon much anticipates this later notion of performativity without using the term itself. It was, for its historical moment, a bold theoretical move.

Having rejected the notion of an essential, biologically determined sexuality, early sociologists of sexuality fashioned various explanatory vocabularies for the sexual. In doing so they turned to dramaturgy, a model consolidating diverse influences in the 1959 publication of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman, who posited social life as a series of performances, popularized metaphors of the theatre—settings, cast, audience, staging, masks—for explaining human behavior. He concentrated on surfaces, appearances and impressions rather than on a fundamental, core self. Although sociologists have argued over whether Goffman locates a "true" self behind the masks he painstakingly described (Tseëlon 1992; Schwalbe 1993), there is certainly evidence that the notion was problematic to him, at the least. In *Presentation of Self*, Goffman warns that a correctly performed scene will lead the audience "to impute a self to a performed

character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented . . .” (1959, p. 24; italics in original). There were multiple selves and multiple realities, none with any necessarily privileged status. In his discussion of lies and misrepresentations, Goffman noted that “. . . there is often no reason for claiming that the facts discrepant with the fostered impression are any more the real reality than is the fostered reality they embarrass” (ibid., p. 65). The notion of sexuality as performative was an apt metaphor for the early sociologists of sexuality who, in their ethnographies of moral regions, had seen the plurality and fluidity of sexual selves.

Dramaturgy underscored that sex was profoundly social. This was evident in the script metaphor, which was first articulated in the 1960s. As Simon and Gagnon discuss in this issue, the concept of sexual scripts drew on interdisciplinary intellectual traditions such as symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, Kenneth Burke’s theoretical discussions of symbolic systems, and a Freudian perspective on symbolism in intrapsychic life. Simon and Gagnon used dramaturgical language to describe the staging of the sexual. For example, Simon noted, “. . . much of pre-coital petting or foreplay may serve less as facilitators of a physiological process than as elements in a ritual drama . . .” (1973, p. 74). And, of course, the sexual actors might not even share the same drama: “. . . the same overt gesture may have a different meaning and play a different role in organizing the sexual ‘performance.’ It is not unlikely that the identical gesture undertaken during sexual activity may be read by one participant with a content that might resemble that of DeSade or Sacher-Masoch, while the other derives from *Love Story*” (ibid., p. 71). Their concept of the sexual script grew increasingly sophisticated in revisions over the course of two decades, always arguing that symbol and metaphor brought into being the sexual body.

Some sociologists argued that the sexual emerges in interaction, in the performance. This most radical aspect of the sexual script concept is one that was often overlooked. As Ken Plummer notes, some researchers treated the script as a “wooden mechanical tool” that determines sexuality instead of analyzing it as an artifact of the encounter (1982, p. 228). Simon and Gagnon stressed that the script does not pre-exist and shape the encounter; it emerges in the interaction itself. Consistent with this usage, although he used dramaturgy without using the term sexual script, Laud Humphreys, who was deeply influenced by Goffman, showed the tearoom as one large stage with performers and performances. He wrote of roles, players and drama, stressing that the sexual was emergent: “In this type of ‘living theater,’ even the actor may not know his role until the action is finished” (Humphreys 1975, p. 50). The sexual script became a useful conceptual device for later sociologists to analyze the negotiation of sexuality in local settings (Almaguer 1991). In his study of contemporary gay pornography, Jeffrey Escoffier,

in this issue, shows the continuing relevance of the sexual script and other early sociological research on sexuality.

This essay concerns sexuality, but since the notion of gender performativity became a cornerstone of feminist and queer theory in the nineties (Butler 1990), it is worth briefly noting some early appearances of this idea in sociology. One instance is Harold Garfinkel's famous ethnomethodological study of Agnes (Garfinkel 1967). In 1958, Agnes consulted psychiatrist Robert Stoller at UCLA requesting a sex-change operation for what she described as testicular feminization syndrome. Agnes, whom Garfinkel described as "a nineteen-year-old, white, single girl" (ibid., p. 119), had been born a physically normal boy and lived as such until the age of seventeen. Agnes reported that she began living as a girl after developing feminine sex characteristics at puberty. In 1959 she received a sex change at the UCLA medical center. Between November 1958 and August 1959, Garfinkel and Stoller conducted the series of interviews with her that formed the basis of Garfinkel's study of sex as what he termed a set of management strategies. The case of Agnes is beset by complexity, not the least being Agnes's casual disclosure to Stoller a decade later that she had lied to them about having a testicular disorder and in fact she had been taking hormones since the age of twelve. In the early 1990s, sociologists re-examined Garfinkel's analysis of Agnes, debating issues of gender, power, discourse and the practice of ethnomethodology (Denzin 1990, 1991; Hilbert 1991 Rogers 1992; Zimmerman 1992).

These dilemmas aside, Garfinkel's approach to the case of Agnes from the late 1950s into the mid 1960s showed a conceptual willingness to disengage gender from biological sex well before this theoretical move had been widely effected. (Indeed, Garfinkel did not use the term "gender" rather than "sex," since it had not been popularized at that time.) First, Garfinkel problematized the assumption of a natural or original sex: "From the standpoint of persons who regard themselves as normally sexed, their environment has a perceivedly normal sex composition. This composition is rigorously dichotomized into the 'natural,' *i.e., moral*, entities of male and female. The dichotomy provides for persons who are 'naturally,' 'originally,' 'in the first place,' 'in the beginning,' 'all along,' and 'forever' one or the other" (1967, p. 116; italics in original). Gender, Garfinkel argued, was better understood as social, not biological, even the seemingly irreducible physical aspects of the body. He argued that "normals" wielded body parts as "insignia" or "socially employed evidences of 'natural sexuality'" and he cautioned that "the possession of a penis or a vagina as a biological event is to be distinguished from the possession of one or the other or both as a cultural event" (ibid., p. 123). Using the language of ethnomethodology, he described sex (*i.e.* gender) as an accomplishment, saying, "The work of achieving and making secure their rights to live in the elected sex status while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin carried out within the socially structured conditions in which this work occurred I shall call 'passing'" (p. 118). As a case study in that particular historical moment, Agnes's broader significance lay in its theoretical articulation of gender

as a set of strategies enacted for “passing.” Sociologists would later refine the notion.

But first there was *Mother Camp*. Although anthropological, Esther Newton’s ethnography of the drag world—completed as her dissertation in 1968—relied heavily on the deviance theory and sociology of sexuality of its time. According to Gayle Rubin, Newton’s dissertation director pointed her toward the work of Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, among others, since “if there was little help in anthropology, there was a great deal in the extant sociology of ‘deviance’” (2002a, p. 47). Published in 1972, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* ranks prominently among the “appreciative” studies of deviance that sexuality scholars produced in the early seventies. Given its topic—female impersonators—it stands as one of the quintessential texts on gender performance; it explores impression management, staging, acts, roles, appearances and all the intricacies of performing femininity. There are two aspects of Newton’s analysis of gender performance that I especially want to highlight. First, she examined gender styles within the gay world itself, well before this was openly explored. Her discussion of “butch and nellie styles as aspects of the management of personal front, in Goffman’s terms” (1972, p. 32) stressed fluidity and context as she explained how lesbians and gay men managed such styles differently depending on whether they were in straight or gay situations. Second, *Mother Camp* argued that one consequence of drag was that it called into question “the ‘naturalness’ of the sex-role system *in toto*; if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the ‘wrong’ sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not inherited, by the ‘right’ sex” (ibid., p. 103). Thus, at the same time as Harold Garfinkel and several years in advance of Goffman (see following), Esther Newton helped denaturalize gender (sex-role, at the time) through her nuanced depiction of how it is a skillful, deliberate and very social performance.

The intellectual and political contexts of the mid 1970s supported further sociological analysis of gender as socially performed. In both activism and scholarship, feminism challenged gender essentialism. In sociology, the same interpretive tradition that allowed for analysis of sexuality as interactively emergent enabled some to apply these perspectives to gender as well. For example, Erving Goffman (1976, 1977) argued that gender is a social arrangement and organizational device that is expressed in ritualized portrayals or, as he also put it, the “dialogic performance of identity” (1977, p. 326). There was no essential gender, Goffman said. In *Gender Advertisements* he argued, “One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender . . . And what these portraits most directly tell us about is not gender, or the overall relationship between the sexes, but about the special character and functioning of portraiture” (1976, p. 8). Although the multiple expressions of “genderisms” implied an original gender underneath the displays, Goffman said, “Nothing dictates that should we dig and poke behind these images we can expect to find anything there—except, of course,

the inducement to entertain this expectation” (ibid., p. 226). The *practices* of gender, for Goffman, *produced* the social categorization of what he called sex-class: “gender displays” that “do not so much allow for the expression of natural differences between the sexes as for the production of that difference itself” (1977, p. 324).

Other sociologists during this time period, for example, Candace West and Don Zimmerman in a 1977 paper at the American Sociological Association meetings (Zimmerman and West 1977), argued that gender was not an inherent characteristic but a routine accomplishment. Drawing on Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, Goffman’s dramaturgy and feminist scholarship, they suggested in a later article that gender was produced, addressing the implications for social change: “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)” (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 146). The view of gender as performative was not the dominant paradigm in sociology; in the 1980s, feminist sociologists complained that a functionalist conceptualization of gender persisted within the discipline. Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne (1985) argued that, unlike in other disciplines, sociology had failed to incorporate a view of gender that would transform the conceptual frameworks of the field. However, alongside mainstream sociology’s persistent indifference to feminist theory (Always 1995), it is also the case that the traditions of symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy prompted a fairly radical, if contained, sociological analysis of gender performance in the mid-1970s.

## SEXUALITY RESEARCH AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The work of these early to mid-twentieth-century sociologists represented a profound revisioning of sexuality. At the same time, I do not want to misrepresent either the scope of these contributions or their prominence at the time. For one thing, this early scholarship suffered some of the limitations of its historical moment. For example, references to sexuality as a biological drive stubbornly persist in some of the most ardent social constructionist research of the early 1960s. More importantly, there is relatively little examination of the intersectionalities of race, gender, class and sexuality. Interpretive theory and methods fostered an emphasis on meanings rather than institutional structures, therefore a comprehensive analysis of power and inequality is often absent, even from the studies of sexuality and stigma. Those theoretical and empirical advances would all come later, as an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars from the late 1970s to the present advanced sexuality studies to a thriving subfield. As for the prominence of this work, as scholars have pointed out (Epstein 1994; Rubin 2002a), the early contributions

in the sociology of sexuality have largely been forgotten both inside and outside the discipline. Some of this is no doubt a function of the times. In the absence of cohesive structural, political and theoretical frameworks for research on sexuality, individual studies could—and did—slide from view. (It is worth highlighting Carol Warren's observation in this volume that the only ethnography of sexuality from the early 1970s to remain in print is *Tearoom Trade*, mainly as a result of the controversy it generated.)

In this special issue on sexuality research, it may be useful to consider other reasons why the subfield has been overlooked both inside and outside of sociology. Like feminist theory, sexuality studies has been marginalized and its theoretical impact muted within sociology.<sup>5</sup> Many of the reasons for this are no doubt similar to the containment of transformative gender paradigms and I will not retrace the steps of sociologists who have already covered this explanatory ground (Stacey and Thorne 1985; Always 1995; Karides et al. 2001; Stein and Plummer 1994; Epstein 1994). However, I do want to stress that the dominance of a positivist epistemology within sociology has no doubt contributed to the marginalization of early sociological research on sexuality, grounded as it was in symbolic interactionism. Further, I would argue that it is these very factors *internal* to sociology—the dominance of positivist over interpretive approaches, quantitative over qualitative methods—that have likely fostered the tendency of sexuality scholars *outside* the discipline to overlook sociology's contributions. The sociology of the survey is irrelevant for a cohort of scholars who reject traditional social science in favor of interdisciplinary approaches and "queer methodologies" (Halberstam 1998). Postmodernism dispelled grand theorizing. Number crunchers were irrelevant in the "linguistic" or "cultural turn" (Bonnell and Hunt 1999) in the academy. Despite affinities between symbolic interactionism and postmodernism,<sup>6</sup> some queer

<sup>5</sup>The chilly climate for sociological research in sexuality is reproduced through lack of funding resources, little representation of sexuality research in top-tier journals, no promising career track, and restricted opportunities for graduate training. The section on Sexuality Studies was only established by the ASA in 1997; its membership hovers around 300. There is little infrastructural support for such work in the form of jobs or journals oriented to sexuality research. The major sociological journals publish almost no work on sexuality (Karides et al. 2001; Misra personal communication) and there are few academic positions for scholars of sexuality. It is worth noting that two of the most prominent sociologists of sexuality, William Simon (1999) and John Gagnon (1999) each wrote about his marginality within the discipline. Sociology is not alone in these weaknesses. In 1991, Carole Vance described the bleak state of anthropology: "Few graduate departments provide training in the study of human sexuality. As a result, there are no structured channels to transmit anthropological knowledge concerning sexuality to the next generation of students. The absence of a scholarly community engaged with issues of sexuality effectively prevents the field from advancing; students interested in the topic perceive that they must rediscover past generations' work on their own . . . Never attaining the status of an appropriate specialization, sexuality remains marginal" (Vance 1991, p. 875).

<sup>6</sup>This has been a subject of much debate, and is further complicated by diverse perspectives on what constitutes postmodern theory. However, some key aspects of interactionism are certainly congenial with a postmodern perspective. This includes, at the very least, the notion that the self is an emergent, socially constructed process rather than a stable, core entity, and the insistence that social meanings are multiple, fluid and emergent. See Denzin 1992, Plummer 1990, and Farberman 1991 for a range of opinions on this topic.

theorists saw sociologists (and other social scientists) as narrow empiricists trying to “squeeze truth from raw data” (Halberstam 1998, p. 10; also see Case 1993). The positivist public face of sociology supports such misunderstandings, obscuring the discipline’s early history of interpretive social theory and rich ethnographic research on sexuality.

I would like to suggest one additional reason why sociology tends to marginalize sexuality studies: it is a stigmatized subject casting suspicion upon those who study it. The history of sexuality research throughout the twentieth century has been one of stigma. The topic is controversial, even disreputable to many, and researchers have been repeatedly warned against studying sexuality. Sexologists—both researchers and educators—have been particularly vulnerable to such stigmatization. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, the time period during which most of the research I have discussed in this article was conducted, sexologists were routinely attacked for studying sexuality. The Rockefeller Foundation terminated the funding of Alfred Kinsey in 1954 after a Congressional investigation prompted by public outrage over the publication of *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953). Sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson, who published the landmark study *Human Sexual Response* in 1966, had their laboratory sabotaged in the early years of study. Mary Calderone, who founded the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States in 1964 to advocate for objective sexuality research and education, was denounced as a communist and a pervert as a result of her efforts. Calderone and other sex educators were not infrequently spit upon and threatened in the sixties (Irvine 2002). Sex is stigmatized, as is those who research it.

Historically, those who study sex have been subject to public speculation about, even attack upon, their own sexuality. This has been the case regardless of the sexual identity of the researcher, since as Goffman (1963) notes, those who associate with a stigmatized individual (or subject matter, in this case) acquire a “courtesy stigma.” Masters and Johnson sent their children to boarding school because of continual teasing that their parents were “sex mongers” (Irvine 1990, p. 69). Recent biographers have argued that alleged sexual kinkiness drove the scholarly pursuits of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey (Jones 1997) and philosopher Michel Foucault (Miller 1993). Sociology has not been immune from these tendencies. Carol Warren (1977; this volume) notes that sociologists who studied sexual “deviants” in the 1960s were the subjects of gossip about their sexual preferences and assumed to be gay. For example, sociologists Martin Weinberg and Colin Williams wrote, “The questioning of motivation is not confined to laymen; colleagues in sociology (no doubt searching for ‘latent functions’ or latent homosexuality) have also warned us of the sorry spectacle we present in mixing with social outcasts” (1972, p. 170). The approach to sexuality as an inherent characteristic rather than an analytic category fosters this tendency to equate research interest and sexual interest. Sexuality is reduced to something someone

*has*, or, more specifically, that gay researchers and other sexual minorities have, since heterosexuality is the dominant, therefore unmarked, category in our culture. Researchers pursuing either sexuality studies or lesbian and gay studies (which are often incorrectly conflated) are often assumed to be gay, pursuing a special interest, their research sometimes dismissed as “advocacy.”<sup>7</sup>

Stigma, and the impression that sexuality studies is a special interest, have consigned it to marginality. Times have changed, of course. Sociologists over the last decades made significant contributions to the interdisciplinary study of sexuality. Some examples include (to mention only a few): research on teenage sexuality (Luker 1996); the history of sex surveys (Ericksen 1999); the sociology of sexual stories (Plummer 1995); postmodern sexualities (Simon 1996); sexual politics and ethics (Seidman 1992); the culture wars over sexuality (Irvine 2002; Stein 2001); sexual practices in the U.S. (Laumann et al. 1994); the institutional practices of heterosexuality (Ingraham 1999; Best 2000); and sexual nonconformity and tabloid talk shows (Gamson 1998). Some of us, myself included, have successfully established our careers on the study of sexuality. This special issue on sexuality research covers the period between 1910 and 1978, and so I leave it to other sociologists to write the next chapter. One certainty is that sexuality studies is inextricably bound to sexuality itself; all the anxieties, pleasures, ambivalence and stigma that we attach to sex affect its legitimacy as a subfield of sociology.

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<sup>7</sup>There are two related but distinct impulses: the assumption that sexuality researchers *are* sexual minorities; and the insistence that research on sexual minorities *should be* done by sexual minorities themselves. Both rely on essentialist models of sexuality and identity. But the former is generally based on the assumption that no one but sexual minorities would be interested in conducting sexuality research, and that such research is simply for advocacy purposes. The latter rests on a belief that subcultures are best studied by their own members. By the 1990s, postmodern and other theories that destabilized concepts such as culture, identity and objectivity problematized this latter conviction among many scholars and activists whereas the former impulse seems considerably more tenacious among its adherents.



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