



Book Review

Researching Sex and Sexualities

Morris, C., Boyce, P., Cornwall, A., Frith, H., Harvey, L., & Huang, Y. (Eds.). (2018). London: Zed Books. ISBN 9781786993199 (paper); £18.99; ISBN 9781786993205 (cloth) £70; ISBN 9781786993229 (ePub) £18.99. 392 pages

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Researching Sex and Sexualities is an enormous contribution to sexuality studies and its affiliates. A large collection, it builds on and archives work delivered at an international conference held at The University of Sussex in 2015. In the introduction, Boyce, Morris and Cornwall beautifully state that “sexualities research...has come to speak of wider life and death worlds, and the contemporary fragilities and futurities that might be born or foreclosed amidst divergent globalisms” (p. 5). A sexual encounter, they point out, can “bring life or hasten death” (p. 5). Positioning the collection here, between pessimism and optimism, they continue to ask, “How might sensation and desire, for instance, reside within sexualities research at different scales of analysis and effects” (p. 5)? As if to answer this question, the editors have compiled essays that are not exactly in tension with each other, but offer a varied appeal to readers and other researchers to consider their own definition of what counts as sex, as sexuality, and as research. The book is divided into four parts: Knowability; Creative Methodologies; Negotiating Research Contexts; and, Researcher Bodies, Identities, Experiences. There is not a unified theory of sex or sexuality offered here, or an enshrined, exemplary model of research, but a wide-ranging collection of perspectives on what and who counts as subject, object, participant and researcher in the study and act of sex and sexuality.

The book produces the field of sexuality as much as reflects on it. Underlying the text’s production are considerations of the erotic encounter present in research and writing, the ongoing consent needed from research

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participants, and what it means to be seduced by theory. *Researching Sex and Sexualities* offers a way forward for academics, policy makers, health care providers and other interested readers who are sure sexuality is worthy of study, but would like guidance or demonstration for how to do so. The difficulties and pleasures of crafting methodology for studying sexuality, an arena of intimacy that finds its pulse in the enigmatic spaces between subject and object, takes centre stage here. The authors put it this way: “For research informed by such concerns we need methodologies that are sensitive to the importance of the indecipherable, to the conceiving of sexualities as out of reach even as we study them” (p. 13). While seemingly impossible, the collection shows us that there are still ways forward despite sexuality’s resistance to being known and completely understood.

Ensnared in neo-liberal models of “diversity” and their individualizing ethos, categories of sexual identification often elide the creative and unconscious drives towards pleasure that cannot be solidified because of its affective surge beyond knowability. The coercive nature with which sexuality becomes registered under the confines of identity means that its enigmatic contours must often be shaved off so that identities can be built and protected. Sourced differently, outside of such classificatory impulses, methodologies for researching sex and sexuality might be transformed. This edited collection shows, for example, some of the ways that sex and sexuality are not easily domesticated or isolated from their specific geographic or social locations. They cannot exist independently from formations of race, class, gender and disability, for example. The authors make this clear: “The sexual is a symbolically interactive site – a field of intimacy at the interface of cultural, social and bodily infractions” (p. 12).

Interdisciplinary by nature, the field of sexuality studies draws theory and method from assorted canons and traditions. Relatedly, when taken together, the essays in *Researching Sex and Sexualities* provide ideas for how to leverage the tools of, for example, sociology, sound and performance studies, anthropology, sexual health, and epidemiology. There is something very physical about this collection, which has not only to do with its large size (reaching over 350 pages). It is constantly moving towards the material and bio-political stakes of research on sex and sexuality. It thinks and feels through the imperative to use ethical models of care when studying sexuality, all the while knowing it is a field of study resistant to knowledge. That is, sexuality cannot be contained within our questions about its origin or practice, and yet its consequences for people are severe and potentially life altering. Part One of the collection, “Knowability,” asks, for example, “how sexualities might become knowable” (p. 19). Part Three and Four, then, return us to questions of how the knowability of sexuality is tied to the contexts and experiences of the researchers themselves.

Part Two of the book, “Creative Methodologies,” studies the creativity needed to ensnare (and then potentially release) sexuality in order to research it. Barrett’s study of how to “build empathy and momentum” (p. 117) for

“older people’s sexual lives” (p. 113) stands out as an example of creative method. Barrett describes the use of body mapping as research method that can move beyond the regulatory nature of biomedical models of analysis. As Barrett explains, “A body map is usually a life-size body image created by storytellers who trace the outline of their body and then use drawing, painting or other art-based techniques within the outline to visually represent their lives, their bodies and their world.” For the researcher, “it offers the opportunity to explore the rich stories held in older people’s bodies” (p. 113), and can assert the need for their “sexual wellbeing and safety” (p. 116). McGeeney, Robinson, Thompson and Thurschwell make a contribution to creative methods by asking how karaoke and other acts of what they term “ventriloquism” can provide young people with an innovative space to work out new renditions of old scripts (i.e., performing cover songs). Barrett, as well as McGeeney et al., take methodological instruction from their research participants, re-routing the centre of mastery so that a more collective form of wisdom is produced.

The interview conducted with Ken Plummer, printed at the back of the collection, provides genealogical succession and historical memory. Plummer is the founder of the research journal *Sexualities*, was its editor for 16 years, and is a widely published sociologist in the field of sexuality studies. In his interview with Charlotte Morris he provokes us to reevaluate the line between theory and method when he proclaims: “I don’t really ‘do’ methods, though I have been tagged as such. I did theory all the way and actually that’s what I’ve done for most of my life” (p. 344). Plummer elicits attention to the usefulness of theory *as* method, that is, the ways that queer theory, for example, is a mode not only for thinking but also for archiving, collecting, witnessing, and responding. Earlier in the text, Eva Cheuk-Yin Li hints toward queer theory’s shortcomings when she asks, with a tone of soft indictment, what queer theory offers in the realm of empirical analysis, which it both tries to work against and make claims of doing (p. 48). When placed within the same book, Plummer and Li, along with other authors here anthologized, produce a negotiation concerning what queer theory is and can offer to the study of sexuality.

From both within and outside of communities often subject to the professional advice of medical doctors, clinics, researchers and service providers, *Researching Sex and Sexualities* asks who research about intimacy and embodiment is actually for. The inclusion of graduate students in the collection is noteworthy. Indeed, many of their projects are cutting edge and sit with authority beside more established scholars. The impact this book will have on sexuality studies and its related affiliations will be widely felt.