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Queers, Bodies and Postmodern Sexualities: A Note on Revisiting the "Sexual" in Symbolic Interactionism

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This article reflects on the linkage between developments in symbolic interactionist theory over the past thirty years and the sociological study of the social construction of sexualities. After some personal reflections on the development of the theory, four main themes are highlighted: the links to postmodernism and queer theory; the paths to new research styles; some internal problems with the theory; and the need to reinstall the importance of the body. The article concludes that symbolic interactionism remains a major approach to the study of sexuality.

KEY WORDS: sexuality; symbolic interactionism; postmodernism; queer theory; the body.

> The choice is not between throwing away rules previously developed and sticking obstinately by them. The intelligent alternative is to revise, adapt, expand and alter them. The problem is one of continuous vital readaptation.
>
> John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct

As is now very well known, at the heart of much sociological thinking on sexuality lies the work of what might be called the "social constructionist turn" and responses to it. In contrast to thinking about sexuality as biological, "natural" with the prime goal of reproduction, constructionists have aimed to show the myriad ways in which human sexualities are always organized through economic, religious, political, familial and social conditions. From the 1970s onwards, "constructionists," a group with diverse positions, have nonetheless argued that any analysis that does not at least recognize this must be seriously flawed.

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Sexuality, for humans, is not simply a free floating “desire” but is always grounded in wider material and cultural forces. There is no essential “sexuality” with a strictly biological base that is cut off from the social. From the social acts of rape to the social processes surrounding reproduction, sexuality for humans has no reality sui generis. Any concern with “it” must always harbor wider social issues, for human sexualities have to be socially produced (no human can ever just “do it”), socially organized, socially maintained and socially transformed. Overlapping with and omnipresent in all of social life, human sexualities are always conducted at an angle: they are never “just sex.” And yet the major traditions of studying sexuality—through clinical analysis, sociobiology (and evolutionary psychology), social survey research, cognitive psychology, medical research and “sexology” more generally—customarily remain obstinate in seeing the world in this social way.[2] Although constructionism—in its various guises—may have become a dominant “way of seeing” in the social sciences, its impact elsewhere remains slight.

LOOKING BACK TO THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES: ONE FOOT FORWARD . . .

My original forays into constructionist thought started in 1967 as part of the background to my Ph.D. thesis. Simultaneously becoming aware of the legal and political debate to change the law surrounding homosexuality, “coming out” as a young gay man, and hanging around London’s gay scene to conduct a somewhat primitive ethnography for my thesis, this was indeed a turning point in my life so far. My initial research goal was to “socialize” a world that had hitherto been almost wholly seen as a clinical aberration. I wanted to understand the social nature of an experience formerly designated as a biological and psychological one and I wanted to analyze this in a period when homosexuality was becoming partly decriminalized in the UK (I was also involved at that time in the Albany Trust and the Homosexual Law Reform Society—two leading reformist organizations aimed at changing the law).[3] My core reading for that period—albeit I did not fully

[2]A brief look at two of the leading journals in the field, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* and *Journal of Sex Research*, would soon reinforce this (although more so for the former than the latter). *Archives of Sexual Behavior* is almost exclusively clinical and biological, whereas *Journal of Sex Research* is certainly more eclectic and does contain both theoretical and socially linked articles. Its main focus however is what we might call the “psychological survey” study. This is an approach that draws out correlates of sexual functioning through survey samples. It is very common in most of the “sexological journals.” This is stark contrast with “queer journals” like *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* where social theory dominates.

[3]I did my Ph.D. part time at the London School of Economics between 1968 and 1973 initially with David Downes but primarily with Paul Rock as my supervisor. Paul Rock is a leading UK symbolic interactionist and author of *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism* (1997). My external examiner was John Gagnon, who was visiting Cambridge in the academic year 1972–73. The study *Sexual Stigma* (1975) was a modified version of the thesis.

appreciate it at the time—was a series of early constructionist texts: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, Howie Becker's *Outsiders*, David Matza's *Becoming Deviant*, Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism*, Anselm Strauss's *Mirrors and Masks*, Norman Denzins's *The Research Act*, as well as Mary McIntosh's "Homosexual Role" and a series of papers by Gagnon and Simon, notably "Psychosexual Development" (which were later to become the book *Sexual Conduct*). Slowly I began to develop what I then started to call a "symbolic interactionist account of sexuality"—more general than just the topic of homosexuality with which I started. Bit by bit, this position was written up for a British Sociological Association Annual Conference in 1974,[4] which I later revised for the late Mike Brake's collection of essays, *Human Sexual Relations*, in 1982.[5] At the same time, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) came along and its exhilaration suggested how sexualities were changing before my very eyes. I was one of about ten who sat in a room at the London School of Economics hearing how GLF had happened in the U.S. a year earlier, and who started to make plans to organize it in the UK. Although I am not an activist by inclination, this meeting nevertheless changed my life. It was my epiphany. I could see that there was no need to stay in a closet (although I was already partially "out"). I found that the very experience of being gay changed dramatically once I was fully out and on the street. Interestingly, one of the first things that happened to me was to be thrown out of a gay bar for being too political: the conservative institutions of the gay world of the 1950s and 1960s disliked the new radicalism, seeing it as a major threat. They saw the new radical gays as their enemies. "Gay life" as it had been known would never be the same again, and this exciting sense of change fueled my thinking that sexuality—and gayness—were not simply "givens": they were wide open to social change and indeed comprised the very "social constructions" that Becker, Berger and others had been writing about. And so, both politically and theoretically, I came to see the world in constructionist terms.

My Ph.D. thesis became less an ethnography and more a series of theoretical statements about the social organization of sexuality and sexual differences. I suppose it was the first of its kind. It took symbolic interactionism and allied positions and applied them first to sexuality, then to sexual diversity, and finally to case studies of gay life. Eventually it became the foundation of my first book, *Sexual Stigma* (1975). Despite the serious limitations of our knowledge then, I would still support the general line that I argued in this early work. There was the critique of essentialism and the language of perversion; the importance of emergent and contested sexual meanings; a sense of the "constructed" nature of

[4]Presented at the University of Aberdeen, April 1974. Many of its ideas were to be expanded in my later book *Sexual Stigma* (1975). It was not published in the series edited from these conferences by Diana Leonard and Sheila Allen.

[5]I had worked with the late Mike Brake on a small study of male prostitution during the early 1970s while he was a colleague at Enfield College (now Middlesex University).

human sexualities; an awareness of the significance of variation and diversity in sexual life; and a growing sensitivity to the role of metaphor in thinking about the erotic. But it was written in the pre-AIDS era; when the Foucauldian deluge had not yet happened;[6] when the "Feminist Sexuality" debates were still being shaped,[7] but not fully formed; and when Thatcherism and Reaganism were just on the horizon. Postmodernism and all its accoutrements—from globalization to cyber sex—were waiting in the wings. My symbolic interactionist account of sexual conduct now borders on being nearly thirty years old!

Nearly three decades on, a lot of changes have happened, theoretically, politically and sexually. In retrospect, it is clear that there were problems with my early formulations. What was most conspicuously missing from the early writing (though not surprising) was a concern for the nascent feminist theorizing that was also taking place at that time. Indeed, my major encounters with feminist theory did not really take shape until the early 1980s—one key text being Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981). Extreme as it was for many people, I needed a book like that to jolt me into thinking about wider issues than the contextual and the gay (and it was soon followed by the *Pleasure and Danger* debate (Vance 1984)).[8] Yet much of the constructionist position has now become a commonplace for sociologists and many other social analysts (though sadly not, I hasten to add, for many sexologists or medical people for whom the biological world remains exclusive and prime).

Constructionism itself can mean many things to many people. A number of recent writers—especially in social psychology—often talk as though it is new.[9] I have always gravitated towards the version that flows from the theory of symbolic interactionism, which takes us back a century or so to pragmatism. Yet, retrospectively, there are actually very few theorists of the "constructionism of sexualities" who speak in interactionist terms—most simply do not acknowledge this branch of theory, or they have roots elsewhere (in history, cultural anthropology, feminism, materialist Marxism and activism). It is true that Gagnon and Simon may be seen as its key protagonists, but actually they rarely referred to themselves as symbolic interactionists.[10] Others—Jeffrey Victor, Pepper Schwartz, Barry Dank,

[6]Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* was published in the U.S. in 1978 (and in the UK in 1979). It is mentioned here only briefly. Its significance for sexuality studies became truly apparent only during the 1980s, largely after Foucault's death.

[7]Carole S. Vance's edited collection *Pleasure and Danger* (1984) is seen as the locus classicus of this debate.

[8]And it was in *The Social Uses of Sexuality* (Plummer 1984) that this first really became apparent.

[9]Partly in texts like that by Vivienne Burr (1995). Ken Gergen's (1999) work also seems to be unfamiliar with the sociological traditions of constructionism but it is a very wide-ranging analysis.

[10]In their later works, it is possible to see Gagnon gravitating towards Durkheim and Simon towards psychoanalysis. They certainly came from the Chicago tradition and they attended symbolic interactionist conferences, but they did not seem to have a passion to label themselves this way. (The latest edition of their major work, *Sexual Conduct* (1973), is being prepared for publication at this time.

Richard Troiden and Martin Weinberg, for example—have made brief linkages. Many others have let it inform their work without acknowledging the roots. But all in all, it would seem that the symbolic interactionist version of sexuality is a minority position within constructionism.

And, in a sense, what does this matter? It matters to me because of the continuing development of the theory itself, for it has not remained shrouded in its foundations but has gone on, generating lively debates that may well continue to refashion the way we think about sexualities. A number of happy circumstances—a new journal, a new organization, new leaders, new students and new ideas—brought about a certain revitalization of the theory during the 1980s and 1990s, so that one review of interactionist fortunes, published in 1993, could talk of the "sad demise, mysterious disappearance and glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism."[11] Several others have recently claimed that interactionism is indeed the understated foundation of all sociology! (Maines 2002; Atkinson and Housley 2003).

We need not go this far, but it can be sensed that interactionism has indeed generated a series of lively new concerns. There has been the development of a sociology of emotions and a sociology of bodies. There has been a turn to cultural studies, with much work now focusing upon narratives, storytelling and semiotics, as well as on mediated communication. Some have re-asserted the importance of structures and histories, and most agree on the importance of power. An awareness of racism, sexism and heteronormativity has become more prominent. There have been challenging new directions in qualitative research and interpretative research strategies. There has been an interest in the field of inequalities. And there has been a hearty debate about the links between symbolic interactionism and postmodernism[12] as well as major attempts to re-work and re-integrate many of its theoretical concerns. All of these have implications for the continuing study of sexualities. In what follows, I wish to suggest how just a few of these issues can take the study of sexualities forward.

WORRING ABOUT POSTMODERNISM: ON GOING (A BIT) QUEER

Nobody writing in the 1990s could seriously have avoided the issues posed by postmodernism for very long and, indeed, the theme of postmodernism has been a recurrent issue in interactionist writings over the past fifteen years or so. Some, like Norman Denzin, a long-time interactionist and leader in the field,[13] have

[11] See Gary Alan Fine (1993). I have also provided a review of the state of modern symbolic interactionist theory in Plummer (2000). There is also a bibliographic guide to the field.

[12] A standard source for these complaints was Meltzer et al. (1975, ch. 3), which I have reprinted in my edited collection (Plummer 1990, vol. 2).

[13] He has long been the editor of the annual yearbook of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, and has written a number of influential texts, not least *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies* (Denzin 1992).

been taking a strong adversarial line that the contemporary social world is indeed postmodern; that the theories and methods used to study it should be postmodern; and that interactionist ideas should be ruptured through an engagement with the works of Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard and others. Postmodernism can take us beyond the limits of interactionist analyses. Others—and I would count myself among these—argue against the worst excesses of some postmodern analyses while suggesting that there is indeed an elective affinity between much symbolic interactionism (with its foundations in pragmatism) and postmodernism. I tend to agree with David Maines, who has argued that while symbolic interactionism "finds an easy affinity with much of postmodernism," it "has no need for it" (Maines 1996, p. 323). In short, because of the strong interpretative center of both theories, there is an affinity. Both accounts of the world highlight localism, ambiguity, differences, instability, signs and symbols, and a certain playfulness. They tend to withdraw from accounts of the world that overgeneralize, seek totalism and closure, stress homogeneity and unearth heavy structures. But interactionism—unlike much postmodernism—does not wish to lose its grip on the "obdurate empirical world" and its search for a truth that will at least hold for the time being.

When this debate is applied to sexualities, the interactionist/postmodernist offers up a much more modest account of sexualities than many in the sexological world would have us believe. It throws into doubt any "Grand Narratives of Sexuality"—from Freud to sexology—that have haunted much of the modern world's analysis of sexuality. It can see that the modern discourse of "autonomous sexuality as a separate sphere of existence" (Halperin 1993, p. 418) is deeply flawed. Indeed, all the theoretical talk of "queer" over the past fifteen years has in part been talk about a postmodernization of sex in signaling a breakdown of clear and stable categories and a loss of faith in any compelling grand narrative of sexuality. Queer theory is really poststructuralism (and postmodernism) applied to sexualities and genders.[14]

The late William Simon's too neglected study *Postmodern Sexualities* (1996) has charted some of this critique and change. In his view, we are now increasingly living our lives in ways that are "different from any that humanity has previously known," with pluralization, individuation and multiplying choices making social life very different from any previous era. Spaces start to emerge for new kinds of sexualities; "sex" is no longer the source of the truth; and human sexualities become destabilized, decentered and de-essentialized. The sexual life is no longer seen as harboring an essential unitary core locatable within a clear framework (like the "nuclear family," or even the "gay lifestyle") with an essential truth waiting to be discovered: there are only fragments. It is, as Simon says, "accompanied by the problematic at every stage" (1996, p. 20).

[14]Often distinctions are made between queer theory, queer politics and queer culture. Here we are talking mainly about queer theory (see Stein and Plummer 1994).

I am very sympathetic to this view but cautious too. The postmodern world is really the world of only a few at the present time. For as Steven Seidman, himself both a postmodernist and a "queer theorist,"[15] has argued: "Modernity is not abruptly coming to an end. In most parts of the globe, modernization remains the chief social goal . . . it may be in crisis, but it continues to shape the contours of our lives" (Seidman 1994, p. 1). So while there is a newer space for the more problematic thinking generated by such developments as "queer theory," there should still be plenty of room for traditional kinds of analyses. When I read some of the wilder textual analyses of the queer theorists or hear of the fragmenting sexual identities championed by the postmodernists, I do sometimes wonder just whose worlds I am entering. They rightly raise very challenging ideas, and I am often excited when I read them. But I also have a gnawing feeling that they are very much removed from the ordinary everyday lived experiences of sexuality that most people encounter across the world in their daily lives. And to see this, we do also need a more conventional interactionist style of grounded ethnography alongside the queer studies.[16]

WORRYING ABOUT RESEARCH: ON TAKING NEW ROUTES

Behind much interactionist writing has been a pragmatic concern with methodology. Most recently this can be found in *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) and in the influential *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). There has been a challenging new turn in methodology, which brings a more experimental feel to research along with new ways of gathering and presenting data. An important issue is to sense ourselves in and around our research, jolting the reader in almost Brechtian ways to rethink what the data is actually about and what is being presented. A much greater self-reflexivity is generally being encouraged.

Such exhortations may well benefit the study of sexualities, because it seems that despite a great deal of research and theory remarkably little of it confronts head-on (so to speak) the nature of sexualities, sexual meanings and sexual lives. Apart from a few constructionist ethnographies and studies, the interactionist study of sexualities has not actually been very innovative or empirical. The classic *Tearoom Trade* (Humphreys 1970), for all its flaws, is a major exception, and in its wake did come a series of linked studies which showed how gay men had sex in public places—for example, cruising the truckers, sex on the highway and the silent community (e.g., Delph 1978). Others have told us a great deal about communities,

[15]Queer theory may be regarded as a theory of sexuality closely allied to postmodern theory. See Seidman (1996).

[16]I also feel that the use of the world "queer" is a younger person's game. Knowing the history of the word, and how it was used on my childhood playgrounds, I found it very hard to use for a long while. Even now, I use it reluctantly.

cultures and identities (from *Identity and Community in the Gay World* [Warren 1974] to *Sex and Sensibility* [Stein 1997]). But in such studies the sexual often disappears: we have identities, interaction patterns and managed selves, but the body and its orgasmic moments is hardly a presence. There are odd flashes of innovation, but in the main we could speak of a "vanishing sexuality"—a certain absence of the sexual in much contemporary constructionist/interactionist research on the sexual. Mainstream sexual research has focused on the sexual but gives it no meaning while much constructionist thought overwhelms the sexual with meanings and gives little focus to the sexed body and its lustful desires.

Thus, for some time it has seemed to me (although I am not brave—or interesting—enough to do it) that we are in need of auto/ethnographic research: the study of the sexual self of the sexual researcher in the mode of "On First Being a John"—still almost unique and too neglected (Stewart 1972). How such work can proceed is partly exemplified in the (nonsexual) auto/ethnographies of Carolyn Ellis's *Final Negotiations* (1995) and Susan Krieger's *Social Science and the Self* (1991). The work of Carol Rambo Ronai on strip dancing, where she discusses her multiple feelings as she strips, provides a clearer exemplar (Ronai 1992). Here she engages in self-reflection and provides what she calls a "layered account" which allows different aspects of the researcher's self to "roam around the text."[17] The complexity of being sexual is partially brought to the fore.

It seems to me that sociology could learn some lessons here from queer theory.[18] Queer is seen as partially deconstructing our own discourses and creating a greater openness in the way we think through our categories. Queer theory is, to quote Michael Warner, a stark attack on "normal business in the academy" (Warner 1993, p. 25). It adopts a "scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidently excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour." In its most general form this is a refusal of orthodox method. Again, I am a very cautious queer theorist—worrying that it sometimes goes incomprehensibly too far and removes itself from interactionist concerns with grounded, everyday life. But some queer theorists' ethnographic reconstructions around texts prove very telling. D. A. Miller's odd study of the musical and gay life *Place for Us* (1998) proves annoyingly insightful about a lurking homophobia in the gay love affair with musicals and piano bars; while Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) jolts the reader into thinking about the diversities of womanly experience.

Halberstam's study argues for a "certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods" as she "raids" literary textual methods, film theory, ethnographic

[17] Some recent social science anthologies make a virtue of these new modes. Ellis and Flaherty's (1992), for instance, presents ethnographic research in the forms of drama, personal narrative with multiple voices, and poetry.

[18] I have made some preliminary moves into this analysis in a paper with Mahoney and Kong (2001), where we attempt to "queer the interview."

field research, historical surveys, archival records and taxonomy to produce her original account of emerging forms of "female masculinity" (Halberstam 1998, pp. 9–13).[19] This is a mode of "deconstruction" and in this world the very idea that types of people called "homosexuals" or "gays" or "lesbians" can be called up for interview becomes a key problem in itself. Instead, the researcher should become more open to sensing new worlds of possibilities. Many of these social worlds are not immediately transparent, while others are amorphously nascent. Here, then, is a ragbag of ethnographic descriptions: of aristocratic European cross-dressing women of the 1920s, butch lesbians, dykes, drag kings, tomboys, black "butch in the hood" rappers, trans-butches, gender inverts, stone butches, the female-to-male transsexual (FTM), raging bull dykes and the tribade! She is quite happy to also raid the film world to show, through films as diverse as *Alien* and *The Killing of Sister George*, at least six prototypes of the female masculine: Tomboys, Predators, Fantasy Butches, Transvestites, Barely Butches and Postmodern Butches (ibid., ch. 6). All of this research brings to the surface social worlds only dimly articulated hitherto—with, of course, the suggestion that there are many more, even more deeply hidden.

Side by side with this new turn to a queer ethnography, there also comes a concern among both queer theorists and interactionists with writing strategies. As editor of the journal *Sexualities* I have become more and more aware of the conventionality of academic writing and how it often does not do justice to interesting material. Nor do many contributors seem aware of the very formal *conditions which shape textuality*. In a major summary of this growing concern, anthropologist James Clifford comments about the writing of one major social science form—ethnography—but I think it can be applied to most presentations of "academic sexuality":

> Writing is determined in at least six ways: (1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieu); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or a travel account); (5) politically (the authority to present cultural realities is uniquely shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing). These determinations govern the inscription of coherent ethnographic fictions (Clifford and Marcus 1986, p. 6).

The simplest way of grasping this is to take any finished "text" on sexuality (like a research report or a book, but even a film or a web site), hold it in your hands, look at it, and ponder: Just how did this writing or imagery come to get there with those "sexual" words in that form? What were the social conditions that enabled this text about sexuality to be organized in this way?[20]

[19] Halberstam borrows from Eve Kasofsky Sedgwick's "nonce taxonomy": ". . . the making and unmaking and remaking and re-dissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical meanings concerning all the kinds it takes to make up a world" (Sedgwick 1990, p. 23).

[20] I take this much further in my chapter on writing in Plummer (2001).

WORRYING ABOUT THEORY: ON NOT BEING TOO *GRAND*

Interactionism insists on being a humble theory, not claiming too much and not dealing with major abstractions and false dualisms. Indeed the real task of an interactionist is to simply look at social life as people "do things together":[21] its core interests lie in the doing of ethnographies and in an intimate familiarity with ongoing social (sexual) worlds. It is a hands-on "down-to-earth" empirical approach—even though there have always been those who have spoken more theoretically about it. (Both the early pragmatists and Herbert Blumer wrote major defensive essays[22] where there was no empirical data at all.) In general, the tradition is one steeped in the exploration and inspection of data.

Yet the theory has tended to remain lodged in false binaries and dualisms: biology versus the social, determinism versus choice, essence versus construct. Pedagogically, overstated "splits" and "dualisms" may often be needed to clarify debates: a one-sided accentuation of a position can often shift arguments and can be a useful teaching device. But the lived, empirical world is never that simple. "Reality" has to be more messy than this. And indeed, a symbolic interactionism that wants to make these false splits is unfaithful to its roots. For the founders—Mead, James, Dewey and others—all wanted to avoid these false philosophical dualistic antinomies and show how the dilemmas they posed were worked through practically in everyday circumstances. Not for them biology versus the social, determinism versus choice, essence versus construct. False dualisms were shunned. Hence, the biological and the social interact; chance, choice and determination interact; childhood learning and adult life interact; symbols and the material worlds interact. Even words like "perversion" and "normality" interact in everyday worlds. And in this interactive process, of course, new forms emerge. For interactionists, the task is to step into the flow of practical life and to break down the spurious and false abstractions of the philosophical world. The task is not to take a side with one position on these debates; rather it is to see how supposed antinomies work their way through practically in everyday affairs.

To take an example, one of the dualistic splits that I overstated in an earlier work[23] (and I fear I may have done it again at the start of this article!) was that between "essences" or "emergents" along with the importance of process. I would now worry that the emphasis on process may get taken too far. Of course, symbolic interactionism has always properly highlighted the fluidity, emergence and processual aspects of social life. Their analytic focus is always on becoming and emergence and change. But interactionism has never said that there are no stable

[21] In a recent interview I conducted with Howard S. Becker (2003), he claims to not recognize much of what passes as interactionism these days and returns to his old theme of "Doing Things Together" (1986).

[22] And classically, Blumer's central major book of essays (1969) is full of abstractions and polarized debates!

[23] Notably, Plummer (1982) and reprinted in Williams and Stein (2002).

patterns of routine interactions or that selves do not become routinized, lodged, committed and stabilized. Indeed, process and pattern commingle and the task of interactionists is to chart this stable process. Thus the precarious everyday flux of life is open to constant stabilizing and essentializing. And this has important implications.

Thus, for instance, sexual radicals—like Kate Borenstein and Suzie Bright (and maybe theorists like Judith Butler or Kath Weston)—usually claim that our sexualities and our genders are open to wide, wild and wobbly transgressions. They sense identities as malleable and variable, sexuality as transforming performances, and the like. I have some sympathies with this group. But it has to be said that while the sexual/gender fringe may indeed be a little like this (but only may be and only a little), empirically I have found it very rare indeed to come across people who live their lives in such fleeting, fragmentary and unstable ways. Radical theorizing apart, it is quite the contrary: sexualities and genders tend to be organized very deeply indeed. Gender pervades almost every aspect of our lives, and seems to have a very deep structure. It cannot be lightly changed, performed or wished away very quickly. Likewise, patterns of sexual desire also seem subject to deep routinization. This is not, of course, to say that gender or desire cannot be changed over lives or over cultures, or that they do not vary over time and space—all the constructionist writings point to the fact that they can and they do. Those who argue that there are universal women and men, universal homosexuals or universal transvestites striding around history and across cultures simply miss the importance of precarious and contingent social organization. But with the exception of some radically sexual transgressors, changes do not happen that easily or quickly. And the unstable, identity-less, utterly fractured sexual and gender identity seems to be largely a myth created by social science!

ON WORRYING ABOUT THE BODY: ON FACING THE LUSTILY EROTIC

Symbolic interactionism may have travelled some way in rethinking the sexual over the past thirty years, but it may also have gone too far. A now commonly recognized weakness with much of the new thinking of sexualities from the 1970s onwards is its lack of concern with the body. There has been an exaggeration of the symbolic at the expense of the corporeal being. Of course, this was much needed in the 1970s: sexuality is most certainly a hugely symbolic, social affair—a point that flew in the face of much sociological thought then. But it is also (and not contradictorily) a lusty, bodily, fleshy affair. And it is a stunning omission from many earlier formulations that the living and breathing, sweating and pumping, sensuous and feeling world of the emotional, fleshy body is hardly to be found. This has posed a problem: there is little humping and pumping, sweatiness or sexiness in much sociological work. Instead we have discourses, identities, cultures,

patriarchies, queer theories, transgender politics . . . you name it. Anything but the lustily erotic. Until recently, the body and emotions are largely absent. This is a serious error, as Dowsett says:

> We must no longer refuse the sedition of ordinary human bodies-in-sex . . . Were we to follow this path, we might find a new sexuality exists . . . we may see sexuality in modes of sociality that confound conventional structural categories. We may begin to take seriously the sex experiences and activities of other peoples, places and times. We may even cease that pastoral project, stop seeking to clean up sexuality in some liberal pluralist project of purification, and instead begin to enjoy a little more of creative potential in its sweat, bump and grind (Dowsett 2000, p. 44, 1996).

It is no longer possible to ignore this body, as it has started to play more and more of a central role in social thought. It is true that in the past the body has been "an absent presence in sociology" (Shilling 1993, p. 9) with its own "secret history" (Turner 1996), but since the 1980s there has been a major development of a "sociology of bodies" that transcends binary thinking and grounds social life, subjectivities, discourses and bodies together. For some sociologists, the body has indeed become the core feature of social life on which all social processes seem to be founded. "The body" has increasingly moved center stage.[24] Still, it remains something of an irony that the two contemporary sociological literatures on sexualities and bodies somehow rarely manage to connect. It is true that the gendered body has been much discussed. But the sexualized or eroticized body has generally been of less concern to those who study the body. Indeed, when it is discussed it is usually the sexualized text or representation and not the corporeal body. And at the same time, as we have seen, those sociologists who have studied sexuality have generally focused on it more as a script, a discourse, a power strategy or an identity, and only rarely as a body, body project or embodiments. But the body, surely, is both a central site of concern for both the symbolism and the practices of sex. We can see the body as both an erotically charged symbol harboring a host of meanings and a series of material practices of embodiments. We can think first of just how much sex comes to be represented and how it touches nerves through, for instance, pornography—the persistent litmus of social conflict around sexualities. But we can think also of comingled skins, of being inside another's body or having another's body inside you: to be penetrated, to be invaded, to be engulfed, to be taken. What too of a sociology of embodiments around the erotic activities surrounding the mouth, the vagina, the anus, the breast, the toe? It is apparent that the body needs to be brought back into sexuality studies.

We might start to speak of the embodiment of sexual practices, of doing body work around sex. "Sexualities" involve social acts through which we "gaze" at bodies, desire bodies, taste (even eat) bodies, smell bodies, fashion and adorn

[24]Indeed, by 1998 the British Sociological Association could organize its annual conference around the theme "Making Sense of the Body," and just a year earlier the journal *Body and Society* was launched.

bodies, touch bodies, hear bodies, penetrate bodies and orgasm bodies. These bodies can be our own or those of others. "Doing sex" means "doing erotic body work." Sex body projects entail, at the very least, presenting and representing bodies (as sexy, non-sexy, on the street, in the gym, in the porno movie); interpreting bodies and body parts (the "gaze" and the "turn-ons" and "turn-offs"—sexual excitements of different kinds from voyeurism to stripping); manipulating bodies (through the use of fashion, cosmetics, prosthetics); penetrating bodies (all kinds of intercourses from body parts like fingers and penises to "sex toy objects"); transforming bodies (stages of erotic embodiment, movements towards orgasms); commodifying bodies (in sex work, live sex acts, stripping, pornography and the like [Chapkiss 1997]); ejecting and ejaculating bodies as all kinds of bodily fluids—semen, blood, sweat, saliva—even urine and fecal matter—start to commingle; possessing bodies (as we come to own or dominate others' bodies); exploiting bodies (as we come to abuse or terrorize them); and transgressing bodies (as we go to extremes in the use of our erotic bodies).

From this we could also start to talk about the new body technologies of sexuality. These new technologies include, at one extreme, how erotic bodies are (and have been for some time) managed through medical interventionism. I think here not only of the long histories of birth control, but of the more recent medical interventions, such as Viagra, that work to engorge the body with eroticism; of transgender realignment surgery, which helps refashion the genitalia; of the new methods of assisted conception (artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, embryo transfer, gamete intra-fallopian transfer), that further disconnect the acts of sex, reproduction, gestation and childbearing: sexed bodies, genetic bodies, gestating bodies and nurturing bodies; and of the multibillion-dollar cosmetic industry, where the breast, face and body become transformed through medical procedures, often towards a sexual end. These are but instances of technology at work to shift the sexualizing body (see Marshall 2002; Holmes 2002). And they also suggest the tip of the iceberg of such transformations. The body is being reconstituted for postmodern times and we are entering the age of the post-human and the cyborg (e.g., Gray 2001). This also means new modes of (dis)embodied sexualities such as those found in the rapidly growing world of cyber sex. Through telephone sex, on-line porn, sex chat rooms, web cam erotics, virtual realities, etc. new disembodied sexual worlds may be in the making. Masturbation, solitariness and isolation may be hallmarks of such a world. But accessibility to sexual imagery on a global scale and a permanent supply of partners is another.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST WORLDS AND THE FUTURE OF SEX RESEARCH

Human sexualities have been studied and theorized for over a century, and as with all such studies they have congealed into various "social worlds" (Strauss

1978, 1993). One world, for instance, the "medical models of sexuality," will have its own history, language, journals and conferences; and these worlds may indeed have little contact with another, such as the world of "queer theory," which will also replicate its own history, language, journals and conferences. Thus, to juxtapose some of the writings from *GLQ* with those from the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* would be to enter different planets (ironically, Michael Warner's book is called *Fear of a Queer Planet* [1993]). The social worlds of studying sexualities can and often do overlap, but in the main they function more or less autonomously. While there are already some interesting histories of sex research and theory,[25] an account of their social worlds and the tensions therein must be awaited.

But the symbolic interactionist occupies one of these social worlds. Although part of a larger set of theory worlds, symbolic interactionism has been a persistent, if not always manifest, influence on social thought in general throughout the twentieth century. Its concern with meanings, process, interaction and a grounded familiarity with everyday life make it a prime tool for approaching all aspects of social life as they emerge and transform. This is no less true for its study of the erotic and the sexual. Although there have been remarkably few self-confessed interactionist students of sexualities, I have suggested throughout this article that nevertheless the influence of interactionism has been considerable. It may be a small social world when compared with the medical worlds of sex research, but it has had some impact within sociological circles at least. Yet like any theory, it is constantly subject to revision in changing times. It has, for instance, had to engage with debates around the body, with new trends in queer theory, with new styles of ethnographic work, and with the fashions of postmodernism. There are other issues that I have not had space to deal with here—like the need to connect theories of sexual action to sexual order, and the promise of interactionist analyses of sexuality in looking at power. But my goals in this brief essay have not been exhausitive. I have merely wished to signpost the continuing vitality of one major theoretical approach to the study of sexualities functioning in its own social world. There is plenty more work to be done.

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[25]Paul Robinson's *The Modernization of Sex* (1978) is now a classic and details the work of Kinsey, Masters and Johnson and Ellis in terms of both their content and their social impact. More recently, Kath Weston (1998), Janice Irvine (1990) and Julia Eriksen (1998) have provided major critical reviews (though again strongly tied to the U.S. traditions). Other works have brought together some fo the key "sexual documents" of our time (including Jeffreys 1987; Porter and Hall 1995; Bland and Doan 1998). We do have starts, then, in looking at the histories and social worlds of sex research and theory and it is clear that there are both massive data and secondary for such a project.

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