



Doing It: Methodological Challenges of Communication Research on Sexuality

Editorial Introduction

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"You study *what*?" Those of us who conduct communication research on sexuality have heard this question countless times at cocktails parties, academic conferences, and anywhere else the topic of our research might come up. Often, this question is followed by another, almost predictable query: "What does *that* have to do with communication?" In this special section of the *International Journal of Communication*, we gather a range of articles that address the "what" of sexuality research in communication, some of the "hows" of doing such research, and what a specifically communication approach to sexuality studies might look like.

Sexuality research has a rich, interdisciplinary history that draws on work in the behavioral sciences, as well as on the humanities and social sciences. Among the latter, sociology, anthropology, and psychology have been especially well represented, with the publication of high profile edited collections, special journal issues, and ethnographic monographs, all of which have helped to establish these disciplines as leaders in an increasingly popular and growing field (see, for example, Hardy, Kingston, & Sanders, 2010; Seidman, Fischer, & Meeks, 2011; Weitzer, 2010). Communication studies has, somewhat curiously, lagged behind its social science siblings when it comes to creating institutional spaces that recognize the importance of sexuality research as a specialized area of study marked, for example, by divisions and interest groups in professional associations, peer-reviewed journals, and dedicated graduate programs. This delay is especially surprising given that the discipline offers a theoretically robust

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Date submitted: 10-10-2013

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framework for examining the production and circulation of sexual meanings, practices, values, discourses, norms, and identities across myriad material and symbolic contexts.¹

There are signs, however, that this is starting to change. Last year, for example, the University of Virginia advertised an opening for a tenure track position in media and sexuality studies. Routledge Press recently announced the launch of *Porn Studies*, the first peer-reviewed, international journal devoted to the academic study of pornography (Comella, 2013). Another peer-reviewed journal devoted specifically to sexuality research, *Sexuality & Communication*, is set to make its debut in spring 2014. And as we sat down to write this introduction, one of us received an e-mail query from a PhD candidate in mass communication at a large research university in the United States who is in the early stages of writing a dissertation on the history of sex toys. Combined, these developments suggest that now is a good time to take stock of the burgeoning area of communication studies of sexuality.

With the publication of this special section on communication research in sexuality, we hope to advance discussions about what the field of communication can bring to sexuality studies and why it matters, both intellectually and politically, that the discipline joins the interdisciplinary conversations about sexuality that have been occurring for some time in many other disciplines. To this end, we have assembled a diverse group of essays that reflect current research on sexuality from within media and cultural studies, interpersonal communication, health communication, and linguistics. We have asked contributors to reflect on how they navigate, both methodologically and practically, an emerging field of inquiry that has yet to find a firm footing within the field of communication. What makes a specifically communication approach to sexuality? What are some of the methodological challenges of studying sexuality in communication? Are these challenges unique to sexuality studies or are they only a question of degree?

This is not to imply that little to no work has been done on the topic of sexuality in the field of communication, for this is certainly not the case. Communication scholars have examined the terrain of sexual identity and media representation, fields of sexual rhetoric, and discourses of desire from the standpoint of health communication, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) studies, and feminist studies in particular. Communication researchers have interrogated the discursive terrain of AIDS, including the production of scientific discourses (Patton, 1990) and the circulation of cultural messages about "curing AIDS" (Erni, 1994). Health communication scholars have investigated context-specific communication interventions to help reduce the spread of HIV (Jemmott III, 2012), studied safer sex communication among transgender adults (Kosenko, 2011), and assessed the impact of sexualized media on adolescents' behavior (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011), among other areas. GLBT media researchers have examined the politics and ethics of "outing" (Gross, 1993), the emergence of the gay

¹ There tend to be more female scholars working in the field of sexuality studies than male scholars, which is reflected in the table of contents for this special section. Rather than being unique to communication studies, this gender imbalance is reflected in other disciplines. For example, member characteristics from the Sexualities section of the American Sociological Association in 2010 indicated that 307 members identified as female and 132 identified as male.

market (Sender, 2005), media and visibility among rural queer youth (Gray, 2009), and the online world of "gaymers" (Shaw, 2012). Communication and media studies scholars have also been well-represented in the growth of porn studies as a legitimate area of inquiry (Attwood, 2009; Henderson, 1991; Smith, 2007; Waugh, 2004).

This scholarship has laid important groundwork for the growth of sexuality research in communication, including occasions for frank discussions about sexuality (Corey & Nakayama, 1997). Yet much of the research on sexuality taking place in communication ends up being made the responsibility, often by default, of outlets focused on gender and sexual identification. Even more frustrating, at least from the perspective of those of us conducting this research, is the tendency for our work to be rejected by conference programs and publication venues due to an alleged lack of "fit," forcing many of us to find alternative places to present and publish our work outside the discipline. For some, it also means that our academic appointments are more likely to be within women's, gender, and sexuality studies programs rather than communication departments proper.

Communication studies of sexuality complement and form interesting interdisciplinary intersections with other disciplines that have rich traditions of sexuality research. Researchers in sociology and anthropology, for example, have examined the cultural construction of masculinity in Japanese hostess clubs (Allison, 1994), and the complex world of fantasy and desire among male strip club regulars (Frank, 2002). They have analyzed the erotic universe of San Francisco's pansexual bondage, discipline and sadomasochism (BDSM) scene (Weiss, 2011), and Nevada's legal brothel industry, paying particularly close attention, in the latter case, to how brothel workers describe their labor in terms of both sexual and emotional intimacy (Brents, Jackson, & Hausbeck, 2010). Other have examined the social organization of off-street prostitution in Britain (Sanders, 2005), and challenged the idea that migrant laborers who sell sex are passive victims in need of rescue (Augustin, 2007). Historians of sexuality have analyzed the history of gay New York (Chauncey, 1994), the heterosexual culture of "treating" (Peiss, 1986), and the sexual identity formation of rural gays (Johnson, 2013), among many other important studies.

We call for a deeper consideration of how the field of communication is particularly well-suited for more context-dependent and empirically driven research that places sexuality within broader contexts of cultural meaning-making, from sex museums to post-coital "pillow talk," to discussions of "virginity pledges" among family members (see Sender, Denes, and Manning in this special section). We argue that communication studies offers a useful framework, both theoretically and methodologically, for analyzing the processes by which things come to have meaning, how these meanings circulate, and how they are consumed in specific institutional, geographic, and cultural contexts. In what follows we foreground what a communication approach to studying sexuality might look like and outline some of the methodological and practical challenges of doing sexuality research.

What Makes a Specifically Communication Approach to Sexuality?

In a highly interdisciplinary field such as communication, what might a communication approach to sexuality look like? To bring this question back to communication scholarship more generally, the subject of study resides not in words, objects, bodies, or the brain, but in dynamic and complex processes

of meaning-making. This attention to meaning-making in social interactions and organizational contexts, as well as among media texts and interpretive communities, unites otherwise seemingly disparate subdivisions of the wider field.

Since the 1970s, poststructuralist theories of discourse and representation, as well as social constructionist theory more broadly, have significantly influenced social inquiry, disrupting the very idea that an "essential" meaning or "natural" state of being exists. One of the main virtues of social construction theory, according to anthropologist Carole Vance (1989), is the "new questions it encourages us to ask" (p. 15), questions that challenge assumptions which "impair our ability to even imagine these questions" (ibid.). Social constructionist theory encourages us to embrace ambiguity, acknowledge the instability of social categories and identities, and respect the complexly determining influences that both history and culture have on shaping individuals' lived experiences, and our beliefs about gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, nation, immigration, bodies, and belonging.

There is a strong theoretical affinity between efforts to historicize sexuality and poststructuralist approaches to communication. Foucault (1978), for example, argued that the history of sexuality is a history of discourses. What are the conditions under which the discursive production of sexual identities, behavior, and knowledge arise? Who is authorized to speak about sex, and under what conditions and with what effects? Foucault's work has had a profound influence on several generations of sexuality scholars who, using a variety of research methods, have examined the production and circulation of sexual discourses and practices as historical constructs with their own internal logic and relationships to power. This reformulation advances the idea that sexuality is not natural but cultural, opening up an entirely new set of questions for scholarly interrogation.

A similar emphasis on how discourses and representations "work" to produce meanings, identities, and values was part of the critical turn in communication studies in the 1970s and 1980s, marked most notably by the work of Stuart Hall and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Hall and his contemporaries helped to advance the idea that discourses and representations were signifying practices that implied "the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmission of an already existing meaning, but the more active labor of *making things mean*" (1982, p. 64, emphasis in original). There was marginal value, then, in abstracting texts and artifacts from the social practices and institutional contexts that produced them. To do so, Hall argued, was a "fetishization" that "obscured how a particular ordering of culture came to be produced and sustained" (1980, p. 27). Rather, Hall called on scholars to attend to the specific processes by which a particular cultural order and set of meanings became preferred. Who preferred this order and with what kinds of effects? But more than this, cultural studies practitioners, including Hall, helped to make the academic study of popular, yet often marginalized cultural forms acceptable, bringing the ostensibly "low brow" into sharper scholarly relief. Since sexuality is considered by many to be the lowest of the cultural low, the move toward studying popular, yet heretofore under-examined texts, scenes, practices, groups, relationships, and pleasures marked a significant shift for scholars interested in advancing critical studies of pornography, prostitution, strip clubs, swinging, and sex toy stores, among other cultural tableaux.

What might a specifically communication approach to studying sexual culture look like, and how might such an approach differ from, say, a more traditional sociological method? Let's take, for example, an examination of feminist sex toy shops, businesses that currently exist in more than a dozen cities in the United States and in other countries too. A sociologist might use a case study approach and begin by situating a feminist sex toy business within the broader literature on feminist organizations. What is the goal of the organization? What functions does it fulfill? What do its day-to-day operations look like? How are feminist values and ideals reflected in the work of the institution? (Better, 2011; Loe, 1999). A communication scholar, on the other hand, would likely choose a different entry point, one that positions feminist sex toy businesses as distinct cultural formations that not only reflect sex-positive feminist ideology, but, importantly, help produce it. What are the dominant discourses that operate within the context of these businesses, and how are these discourses—for example, sexual empowerment, education, feminism, and capitalism—articulated together to form a complex set of meanings with a particular set of effects? Rather than presupposing what the term "feminism" means in a for-profit milieu, where a vibrator is simultaneously positioned as a device of pleasure and a tool of liberation, feminism itself becomes a focus of interrogation. Likewise, if interviewee after interviewee uses the phrase "classy not crass" to describe the design of the retail settings in which they work, these "discourses of distinction" are worthy of analysis not as afterthoughts but as organizing principles that produce a particular set of meanings about the relationship between gender, sex, class, and consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). These discourses are neither abstract nor free-floating, but once organized, they produce measurable effects. One effect, for example, is a version of "marketplace respectability" that doubles as a valuable currency in an industry known more for its "seedy" porno shops than for its being brightly lit and inviting sexual health and resource centers geared toward women. Having recourse to the mantle of respectability has allowed feminist sex toy stores to differentiate themselves from more conventional adult businesses, giving them a degree of moral authority in an increasingly competitive sexual marketplace, something that has made it easier for them to find landlords willing to lease them commercial spaces and avoid running afoul of local zoning ordinances (Comella, 2010).

If we can increasingly see both coherence and value in a specifically communication approach to studying sexuality, then what are some of the methodological challenges that come with this? Are these challenges specific to studying sexuality, or are they merely more pronounced as a result of the positioning of sexual communication and cultures as taboo? Drawing on our contributors' research experiences, as well as our own, we provide a framework for understanding some of the particular methodological constraints on sexuality research, with a specific focus on how this shapes communication approaches.

Thinking Sex Research: Methods and Methodology

There are three interrelated processes that shape sexuality research, including in communication: exceptionalism, marginalization, and essentialism. Exceptionalism describes how studying sexuality is seen as of an entirely different order to studying other kinds of media, discourses, identity groups, cultural activities, and so on. Almost 40 years ago, Gayle Rubin (1992 [1984]) identified two elements to this kind of exceptionalism. One is "sex negativity" (p. 11), marked by the fear of sex in Western cultures that has been imported into scientific and academic domains from Christianity (however secularized, see Foucault,

1978). This negativity in turn produces the “fallacy of the misplaced scale” (Rubin, 1992, p. 11) that considers matters of sex, especially sexual non-normativity, in a scale entirely out of proportion with other cultural and social practices (that a single act of consensual anal sex between men constitutes a capital crime in some countries would be one example).

The second, related process that shapes sexuality research is marginality. Sex-related communication research must wrangle with the ways in which (some kinds of) sex are marginalized legally, socially, intellectually, academically, and professionally. Mainstream institutions, including social services, the military, the legal system, and educational establishments are invested in keeping frank, nonjudgmental sex talk out of their public domains (however much managing sex motivates their rationales and practices). Institutional barriers are more stringent for those researchers planning, funding, carrying out, and being evaluated for sexuality-related research. People engaged in moments of sexual contact, those in subcultures, those making sexual media, and those studying these practices must brave these processes of marginalization; “doing sex” always requires an explanation and, for academics at least, a well-crafted intellectual justification. Even U.S. Surgeon Generals who make the case for comprehensive sex education too loudly risk not only censure but also termination.

The third process that communication scholars of sexuality must grapple with is the siren call of essentialism, or “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and [that considers] sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical” (Rubin, 1992, p. 9). Scholars must remain vigilant to how themes of individualism and the evidence of the body (hormones, genes) are seductively reproduced within the armature of the social sciences and bolstered by investments in methodological objectivity. Reflexivity about sexual essentialism can productively inform every stage of research, starting with how a study is conceptualized. In this special section, Amanda Denes’ article asks: What do we mean by “intercourse”? What is an “orgasm”? Such reflexivity can shape how to report findings. Sara Mourad, in her piece in this collection, considers how to describe the complexities of nonheterosexual sexuality in languages where “gay” and “homosexual” have no direct correspondence. Becoming reflexive about essentialism not only enriches sexuality research but also engages scholars’ political commitments to investigating how power works discursively to reproduce what seems like common sense.

Exceptionalism, marginality, and essentialism in research on sexuality can interlock in ways that close down the kinds of questions researchers consider, how we conduct research, and the ways our work is received both in the academy and beyond. We will consider some of the methodological pressures these three processes put on sexuality research, as well as the strategies that sexuality scholars in this collection and elsewhere have suggested to address them. Through reflexive engagement with this triumvirate, researchers can resituate sexual practices and cultures within broader economic, technological, and social phenomena and by doing so illuminate continuities with these phenomena.

1. Processes

Among the tasks of the earliest phases of any research project is specifying one’s field of enquiry. What constitutes the boundaries of the sexual behavior, culture, language, or media we are interested in studying? Lauren Agustin (2005) and Ronald Weitzer (2009) observe that studies of commercial sex in

anthropology and sociology, respectively, have focused almost entirely on women street sex workers. This kind of exceptionalism mobilizes sex negativity to sequester the most vulnerable and marginalized sex workers from a diverse and complex labor sector that involves people who exchange sex—however loosely conceived—for resources in a range of spaces. Katherine Sender has also struggled with defining what is “sexual” in her study of sex museums. For example, would an ancient talisman from Pompeii that depicts a flying penis be considered a sexual object? Whatever original meaning this object may have had for Pompeians in 79 BCE, curators at the Naples Museum of Archeology mobilized sexual exceptionalism when they placed it within the Museum’s “Secret Cabinet,” accessible only by adults and by appointment. Lisa Henderson, in this collection, criticizes overdetermined arguments about the chilling effects of commercial media cultures on diverse representations of sexuality—arguments that are the product of essentialism, exceptionalism, and marginalization in media and that reproduce these in textual analyses. She recommends drawing upon communication’s long tradition of intersectionality, multidisciplinary, and diverse methods: “Queer and sexuality studies in Communication is transnational, post-colonial, intersectional, multi-vocal, mixed method, aesthetic, restorative, and brightly critical.” Being attentive to how sex is made exceptional and marginalized, as well as what have become routine ways of addressing this, encourages us to think about the continuities of erotic phenomena (sex as part of everyday lives, rituals, economies) and of methodological approaches (diverse methods reinvigorate conversations about the nonexceptionalism of sexuality).

The marginalized status of sexual activity and research also has consequences for the processes of gathering data. Using an interview-based approach, for example, presents scholars with recruitment and sampling issues. Denes describes how challenging it was for her to recruit GLBT participants for her study of postsex pillow talk. This was despite her care to use language that was neutral regarding the gender of participants and their lovers. As with interview-based research not concerned with sexual practices, middle class, white, heterosexual people do not suffer the same kinds of institutional invasions of privacy that less privileged people do. Further, privileged people can more easily afford to look sexually compromised.

During the interview process itself, the usual issues of how to gain an interviewee’s trust, how to navigate sensitive (including possibly illegal or embarrassing) topics, and how to gauge the quality of the data may become more fraught than with other, less marginal or marginalized subjects. Yet as contributors Beth Hartman and Denes found, people love to talk to them about sex and about sex research, affirming Foucault’s suggestion that we cannot, in fact, shut up about sex.

Participant observation in sites of sexual activity comes with its own challenges, as sociologist Teela Sanders (2006) has helpfully outlined. From her study of brothels in the UK, she notes that finding a gatekeeper to help gain access to a field, afford some insider knowledge of it, and offer some protection at times of personal risk helps to offset the trials of getting into and understanding sites of marginal sexual legality. She also raises questions of what it means to be a participant observer in highly sexual situations and discusses the “field-generated stress” of managing an identity as a researcher in sites of stigmatized, sometimes sexist, underground, or illegal activity. Hartman’s article, included here, describes her own attempts to navigate between the productivity of “feeling foolish” while taking a pole-dancing class and her disinclination to face the humiliation of a public performance at a local club’s amateur night.

Participant observers must navigate the specific norms of marginalized fields and can make productive use of their responses to these fields as rich data for analysis.

Not only do field-based methods pose challenges for researchers in sexuality, archives also are shaped by essentialism, exceptionalism, and marginalization that demand shrewd appraisals, detective work, and a willingness to interpret the absences of a collection. Postcolonial feminist scholar Anjali Arondekar notes a tension between a positivistic approach to archives as repositories of evidence and a reflexive critique of how they encode systems of thought: "The intellectual challenge here is to juxtapose productively the archive's fiction-effects (the archive as a system of representation) alongside its truth-effects (the archive as material with 'real' consequences)" (Arondekar, 2005, p. 12). Historian John Wrathall (2002) discusses the problems of censorship of historical materials. Both collectors and curators have investments in the reputation of a prestigious archive, the presence in which of erotic materials might pose challenges for an otherwise august institution. Nora Draper's article, in this collection, asks how to read a series of "winks and nods" in materials in the Kodak archive concerned with the branding of the Swinger Polaroid camera in the 1960s. She argues for restraint against the temptation to make anachronistic assumptions about the term "swinger" or the company's or advertising agency's awareness of the sexual associations that this term would later acquire. In some cases, explicitly erotic materials have been disposed of by worried relatives and protectors of a deceased figure's reputation. Curators of Henry Wellcome's vast archive and library in London, for example, deaccessioned much of his erotic collection after his death, believing it to be incompatible with his image as a noble philanthropist.² Archival researchers must learn to read a collection symptomatically, not as a complete set of all available objects but as a discursively arranged group of materials that speak as much about the investments of an institution (its funding, brand, forebears, and so on) as it does about sexual topics. This requires a move from focusing solely on the origins and biographies of objects to look at the contemporary discursive strategies that are mobilized to make sense of a collection. As with the data garnered from interviews and participant observation approaches, researchers working in archives must be reflexive about the ways that essentialism, exceptionalism, and marginalization shape the materials they find and how these items are organized by people and institutions.

2. *Institutions*

Exceptionalism, marginalization, and essentialism are also fundamental to understanding and working with the institutions that facilitate, disseminate, and evaluate academic work in sexuality. Funding agencies, academic departments, professional associations, journal editors, and publishers are among these bodies that shape sexuality work in communication. They influence research projects and career trajectories, as well as how cultural knowledge about sexuality is valued more broadly.

Funding bodies and ethics boards (Institutional Review Boards or IRBs) often demand much more stringent criteria for sex-related applications than they do for projects that are seen as neutral, demonstrating Rubin's (1992) fallacy of a misplaced scale. Here the scale is of danger: Studying sex poses excessive risks to participants, researchers, and the reputation of institutions (Sanders, 2006). Janice

² Interview by Katherine Sender with a Wellcome archivist July 31, 2013.

Irvine (2012) conducted a survey of sociologists working on sexuality topics and found that 45% of her 155 respondents reported that they had experienced unusual difficulty getting IRB approval for research projects. Those working with children or adolescents faced serious challenges, but "IRBs [also] routinely blocked research on adult sexual minorities, particularly LGBTQ communities due to their alleged vulnerability" (p. 32). Irvine suggests IRBs are overstepping their areas of responsibility and are unaccountable to communities of researchers studying sexual phenomena.

Funding committees may fail to see the contributions of research that do not directly address public health and epidemiology issues, for example, reproducing a sex negativity that collapses sexuality with disease and death (Epstein, 2006). Research projects outside of the sexual health context suffer from "credibility struggles" (p. 2) of a greater magnitude than do other communication-oriented studies. IRB and ethics boards demand higher vigilance than is normally required to protect participants and researchers, reflecting the view that sex is inherently dangerous. When Sender applied to her university's ethics board to complete field research at sex museums, she was instructed not to observe museum visitors, because this might make them uncomfortable. We can't imagine a similar prohibition being placed on researchers in other kinds of public space and wrestle with what it meant for Sender not to observe visitors in the sex museums: The exhortation "Don't look!" applies here not to the explicitly erotic exhibits but to fully clothed, adult compatriots in the museums.

Disseminating research currently suffers from marginalization within the major communication institutions. Currently, neither of the two largest communication associations (the U.S.-based National Communication Association and the International Communication Association) have sections devoted to sexuality research, whereas the American Sociological Association has a Sexualities section. The authors' attempts to get panels and papers accepted by NCA and ICA conference reviewers have proven highly uncertain. For example, we submitted a panel that was the precursor to this collection to ICA's Popular Communication section, arguing that that pornography, sexual commodities, tourist museums, and so on were clearly popular according to standards of revenue generation (the burgeoning sex toy industry), public interest (the growing demand for pole-dancing classes), and marketing efforts (Kodak's advertising campaign). One reviewer commented that the panel wasn't appropriate for PopComm and suggested that the GLBT Special Interest Group might be a more appropriate place for it, even though few of the papers addressed specifically GLBT issues. In this example of institutional marginalization, it is often the case that anything to do with sex is collapsed onto queers who are presumably all "doing it" all the time anyway.

In terms of journals, the new journal, *Porn Studies*, is a welcome addition for publishing sex research in communication, yet it has a particular remit that excludes, for perfectly good reasons, a whole range of communication research in sexuality beyond pornography. Other communication journals have published excellent work on GLBT topics, including the recent special issue of the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* (see Karma Chavez's introduction, 2013). But sexuality research outside of health communication arenas is less common. In his piece for this issue, Jimmie Manning describes a general antipathy in interpersonal communication journals to his qualitative work in sexuality. He advocates a strategy of "guerilla scholarship" that engages the often interdisciplinary approach to sexuality research by publishing in journals outside of interpersonal communication. Lynn Comella also argues here for the importance of public intellectual work in sexuality, disseminating information about

sexual cultures and practices beyond the “often insular world of academic research.” She suggests how to gain a broader public for temperate, well-informed ideas about sexuality by becoming a smart source for journalists and has found, in some ways, a more receptive audience for her own writing on sexuality in the pages of independent weekly newspapers than she has in academic journals.

Comella does note, however, the professional risks of doing both sexuality research and public intellectual writing in terms of promotion and tenure. The marginalization of sexuality as a legitimate field of study means that scholars working in this area have to carefully frame their activities (especially those not usually considered “scholarly,” such as writing for a popular venue) to the departmental and university committees responsible for making decisions about their career progression. Tania Israel (2002) compares the strategies that strip club workers (the focus of her study) used to negotiate the stigma of their work with those strategies available to academics doing their own kind of sex work in academic institutions. While acknowledging that the resources available to academics and strippers are not the same, these strategies include: developing informal supportive networks; protecting one’s identity, for example with cover stories (although Israel notes that cover stories and silence perpetuate the taboos of sex work and research); deflecting intrusive questions; and enlisting the support of people in key institutions (professional associations, scholarly mentors, and colleagues). Exceptionalism and marginalization, therefore, shape the trajectories of researchers and research projects in their progress through academic institutions.

3. *Politics and Power*

Because of the fraught position of sexuality research in many disciplines, those of us engaged with sexual topics are necessarily embedded within systems of politics (both micro and macro) and power. As Rubin (1992) writes, “A radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression” (p. 9). Research on sexuality must similarly engage with the political effects of current systems and envision alternatives to these systems. Most centrally here is the issue of sexual essentialism and the ways that this framework has been used to justify, bolster, and reproduce sexual hierarchies among groups of people, as well as nations and regions of the world. In her introduction to a journal special issue devoted to queer intercultural communication, Chavez (2013) argues that scholars need to situate queer experience and theory within national and transnational contexts and not assume the same conditions for queer people everywhere. Similarly, approaches to sexual practices need to be attentive to hierarchies of privilege as these become revised and confirmed through global flows of capital, knowledge, language, labor, tourism, and so on. Kimberly Hoang (2011), for example, argues that researchers must complicate the dominant narrative of global sex work that white men come to Asian countries for cheap sex with poor, vulnerable women. She analyzes “a sex industry in a developing economy [Ho Chi Minh City] where not all women are poor or exploited and where white men do not always command the highest paying sector of sex work” (p. 393). Mourad’s contribution to this collection considers the challenges for researchers working in an Anglophone context who study Lebanese queer communities, not least due to issues of translation between Arabic and English. She problematizes the essentialism involved in simply importing English terms such as “gay” into Lebanon and the Arabic-speaking world more generally. She also addresses the limits of Arabic terms for same-sex relationships that have negative connotations. Rather than resolving these tensions in favor of English or

Arabic, she suggests that scholars find productively generative the ambiguities between Anglo and Arabic sexual language. Also in this collection, Sender considers how orientalism can come to play in transnational studies of sexuality, given how fundamentally sex has been deployed in oriental fantasies and colonial operations (Fanon, 1967 [1952]; Said, 1978). She considers how to "disorient" herself as a researcher coming from an Anglo context to East Asia by working with collaborators, disrupting an East-West binary relationship, and using her visceral and emotional responses to field sites as data. Part of the politics of studying sexual cultures and communication must include relationships of gender and sexuality, as well as consider how colonial and racialized essentialisms shape gender and sexuality across the globe and not only in "the Orient."

Communication sexuality scholars, like sexuality scholars in other fields, must be attentive to issues of exceptionalism, marginalization, and essentialism when considering what to study, how to study it, and what consequences these decisions might have for funding, ethics approval, dissemination, hiring, promotion, and tenure. At the same time, the field of communication has been particularly effective in honing methodological approaches that situate the productive work of discourses as fundamental to understanding how power operates in fields of sexuality. Further, the discipline has been attentive to networks of globalization (for example, theories of cultural imperialism, indigeneity, and hybridity) that are informative in studying transnational flows of sexual discourses, language, media, and materials. The strength of the contributions to this collection, ranging from interpersonal to archival to participatory approaches, is that each engages with questions of power while maintaining a commitment to the methodological rigor we share as communication scholars. If researchers are to resist sexual exceptionalism, marginalization, and essentialism, we must address sexual cultures and processes not as peculiar or wholly different from other contemporaneous communication phenomena but in continuity with these as an imbricated part of complex cultural contexts.

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