

**Katherine Johnson, *Sexuality: A psychosocial manifesto*. Polity Press: Cambridge, 2015; 200 pp. ISBN 9780745641324**

‘Sexuality: A psychosocial manifesto’ is a bold, unique and creative undertaking that aims to overcome polarisations between psychological and socio-historical accounts of sexuality, which manifest in the familiar, problematic binaries of biological/constructionist, psychic/social and subjectivity/identity. The book explores key debates in sexuality studies, with the aim of working across and reimagining the discipline of psychology, which, as Johnson demonstrates, has always had wide-reaching impacts on sexual subjectivities. Central to Johnson’s definition of psychosocial studies is a commitment to working at margins and a refusal to be defined. It is a theoretical criss-crossing that critically engages with poststructuralism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and affect theories. The arguments move from broad to narrow, building to the succinct final chapter, the manifesto itself (as referred to in the title), which is a rallying call for a queered psychology that resists disciplinary boundaries, and is oriented to feelings, experience and community.

The first half of the book winds its way through a history of sexuality approaches in psychology, where an immense range of material is critically evaluated. The starting point is an examination of Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, followed by more contentious psychological projects from developmental psychology and neuroscience. Johnson highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each, but points out that even in gay affirmative developmental psychological models, dichotomous models of sexual identity are perpetuated (p.46) and there is a lack of attention to the social implications of “growing up gay” (p.50). Given the breadth of the material and Johnson’s insightful

commentary in these historical context-setting chapters, they will have a wide appeal, for readers both familiar and unfamiliar with the theories evaluated.

The biological and developmental oriented approaches are followed by contrasting constructionist approaches; whilst these perspectives are credited for constituting a major challenge to essentialism, there is emphasis on the critiques and limitations of such approaches. They are designated as insufficient through their lack of attention to both the realm of the psychic (p.59) and to “sophisticated engagement with sexual desire, bodies and pleasure” (p.82). The overarching claim is that social constructionist explanations lean towards socio-cultural reductionism, and discourse analysis methods in particular cannot account for the rich, lived, embodied, subjective experience of being a sexual subject (p.84). It is from these critiques that an argument for a psychoanalytic psychosocial approach is built, which is further developed in the chapter on queer theory.

Although the works of many queer theorists are brought into conversation, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thinking provides the cornerstone of the approach Johnson develops; in particular, readers are encouraged to seek out ‘reparative readings’. These are required to counter a type of critical ethos which is purported to hold a hegemony across the humanities and social sciences. Sedgwick claims that much contemporary scholarly effort is preoccupied with power relations and is motivated by the aim of exposing what is transgressive and what is repressive about whichever their object of study is. Drawing from Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic object relations theory, Sedgwick argues that the need to expose repression and transgression are produced from inhabiting a paranoid-schizoid position, where anxieties are managed by splitting texts into good (transgressive) or bad (repressive) categories. The solution proposed to counter this paranoid criticality is to instead take up a ‘depressive position’, where

good and bad characteristics are recognised simultaneously. Those who are able to take up a depressive position can be ambivalent about potentially ‘bad’ objects (eg. heterosexism) and may find ways of reassembling them, so as to build a different, and more sustaining, relationship with them. Johnson, after Sedgwick, argues that the paranoia of cultural critics is linked to an obsession with epistemology, and a concomitant compulsion towards knowledge and language. Thus the reparative ethic that Johnson promotes turns away from epistemology, and instead:

returns us to the ontological and the intersubjective, in ways that vibrate with a desire for feelings, community and experience rather than language, culture and knowing, which have become associated with epistemological critiques.

(p. 157)

The empirical analyses that Johnson carries out are based on this assumption of the need to prioritise ontology. In her queered psychosocial readings, she advocates for the splitting of feeling from knowing, and bringing feeling to the fore. In her analyses, Johnson draws on a body of queer literature on affect, particularly shame theories, and applies it to a range of data. The politics of ambivalence and affective solidarity are used to highlight the possibilities for collectively reducing shame. Material from an interview with a gay youth and suicide survivor is used to draw out themes of coming out and bullying, but also transformation. In a section where Johnson promotes community work and ‘affective activism’, she analyses images and public responses from a photo exhibition. The most in-depth analysis uses popular comedy programming featuring gay characters where Johnson concludes that the inequality experienced by LGBTQI is often masked by an equality agenda. This dilemmatic tension also features in Johnson’s reflections on marriage equality. The manifesto is presented in the final chapter, where Johnson advocates for theoretical mixedness and

creative methodologies that are oriented to inspiring new strategies for transformations, particularly for identity politics and social justice.

Johnson explicitly states that this text does not aim to invigorate debates on epistemology - this is seen as antithetical to exploring ontology, which *is* an aim of the book. Nonetheless, the arguments contained within 'Sexuality: A Psychosocial Manifesto' are positioned by and within ongoing epistemological debates on theorising subjectivity and affect, including those within the field of psychosocial studies. In particular, whilst Johnson insists that the conceptualisations of subjectivity that she advocates are a hybrid that both represent the 'outer' and 'inner' workings of the mind (p. 10), and are therefore always social, there is not a counter to the suggestions of other scholars, who argue that this theorising of subjectivity cannot capture the to-and-fro of the psychological that exists between people. By avoiding engaging in such debates, it is not clear, for example, how Johnson conceives of the process of cultural messages contained in the comedy sketches analysed becoming part of individuals' 'psyches'.

I am convinced by Johnson's arguments that some form of reparative move is needed to increase interdisciplinarity on the topic of psychosocial accounts of sexuality. As such, it might have been beneficial to include exploration of how reparative thinking might be injected into contemporary constructionist theories, rather than rejecting them. Omitting greater discussion on the role of discourse in psychosocial processes in the text closed down opportunities for doing this. Indeed, much of the analyses show just how difficult it is to bracket out discourse, where, effectively, some form of discourse analysis is carried out throughout (on the effects of attempting to separate language from meaningful interaction, see Taylor, 2015). A wish to avoid discussion on discourse also meant that there is very little coverage on discursive approaches to

psychosocial studies. Spearheaded by Margaret Wetherell (2012), these discursive affective practice accounts are equally committed to including biology and bodies in explanations and are oriented around questions of how “the relays and ricochets of the human body [can] be grasped, and the visceral be put in touch with the social” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 10). Stephanie Taylor’s work clearly demonstrates how discourse *is* capable of accounting for individual experience and life histories (2015).

Meanwhile, Jan McAvoy develops a convincing case for the ‘visceral bite’ of affect as co-constitutive of subjectivity (2015). Such approaches provide an alternative to Johnson’s claim that discourse analysis produces depoliticised subjectivities. These practice based approaches are fundamentally guided by a need to bridge the same dichotomies that are presented as the key premise of Johnson’s text.

In providing a counter to Wetherell’s suggestions that a more coherent theory of affect is needed, which would entail conceiving affect and emotion as social practice, Johnson suggests that creative and non-prescriptive (queer) theories do not need to have this aim, because of their transformational capacities.

In the context of queer theory, which is concerned with doing, and unsettling normative assumptions, how affect is conceptualised may not be a problem if it results in transformation.

(p. 119)

In response, I find it difficult to avoid asking why we should be prevented from working towards having a queer psychology that both unsettles normative assumptions and acknowledges experience as socially constituted. Gay shame may be habituated and seem automatic, as Johnson excellently demonstrates. However, gay shame can also be conceived as a recurrent effect of unequal social relations that can be studied

empirically, through attention to practical activity, which includes doing routine shame (or desire or pain), *collaboratively*. Exploring how shame/shaming is produced through shared meaning making does not mean turning our backs on affect, but turns us towards its complexity, multivalency and always social character, whilst keeping individuals' investments in the frame.

Johnson's commitment to crossing boundaries and working creatively results in a multifarious offering, always extending and blending theory in a bid to do justice to the complexity of gay subjectivities. The aim of this book is not to produce a theory of sexualities, but to put forward a mode of psychosocial engagement with sexuality, and to encourage greater collaboration through abandoning unnecessary disciplinary divides. I am not sure it will convince those with constructionist attachments to replace them with reparative tendencies in order to cross those divides. This book nevertheless makes an important contribution by bringing into view the possibilities of a rich, creative, queered psychology.

## References

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