



## CONFERENCE REPORT

# Sexuality Studies at the 2003 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting

Atlanta, Georgia, August 16-19, 2003

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The discipline of sociology has long been an important site for understanding the social construction and organization of sexuality. While sexuality is still widely understood in biological or psychological terms, sociologists have long focused their analysis on sexuality's institutional, societal, and cultural underpinnings. Arguably, the legacy of sociological traditions—for example, interactionist and labeling theories—has provided an indispensable foundation for the explosion of interdisciplinary work in sexuality studies that we have witnessed over the past fifteen years. Sociology continues to be a vibrant site for the study of sexuality. This was evident at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA), held in Atlanta, Georgia, August 16-19.

The ASA includes within its structure several components that support sexuality research, including the Sociology of Sexualities Section ([www.asanet.org/sexsection](http://www.asanet.org/sexsection)), the Sex and Gender Section (<http://www.asanet.org/sectionsexgend/>), the Sociologists' Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus, the Caucus on Research on Gender and Sexuality in International Contexts, and the Sociologists' AIDS Network (<http://www.csusm.edu/dbarrett/SAN/>). The annual meetings provide an opportunity for members of these groups to meet, share ideas, institution build, and recognize achievements of the previous year.

While section business and networking are an

important part of each year's ASA meetings, the intellectual heart of the conference is of course to be found in the research presentations. The theme of the 2003 ASA meetings was The Question of Culture, with sexuality research appearing in a wide array of sessions. Since it is not possible to summarize the full range of this research activity in a condensed report, we have opted to focus on some substantive areas that papers tended to cluster around, as well as on particular sessions of interest.

On the first day of the conference, a series of back-to-back sessions focused on various aspects of the Sociology of HIV/AIDS: A Critical Demography of AIDS; AIDS: A Family Affair; and, following the conference theme, Social Dimensions of AIDS: Culture and Living with HIV/AIDS. The topics of papers in these sessions included:

- examination of the ways that families in “high risk” neighborhoods enact measures to protect family members and friends (Friedman, 2003)
- the impact of the criminalization of African Americans both on the spread of HIV/AIDS and on the efficacy of existing HIV prevention strategies (Lemelle, 2003)
- focus group research with young gay and bisexual men, discussing the meanings they attach to television representations of HIV and the implications of those understandings

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- for HIV awareness and prevention among young queer men (Farrell, 2003)
- interview and focus group-based studies arguing for the important link between depression and women's HIV risk and between sexualized domestic violence and women's HIV risk (Klein, Sterk, & Elifson, 2003)
- and finally, a study of the meanings that poor African American mothers who use crack cocaine attach to motherhood, and the potential importance of those meanings in HIV prevention (Kemp-Gentry, 2003).

One theme throughout these papers is the use of sociological methods, theory, and analysis in the development of policy-relevant knowledge. They also build on work in the area of the sociology of HIV/AIDS that critically examines the efficacy and assumptions of existing prevention practices concerning HIV/AIDS, their applicability to various and diverse communities, and the importance of community generated knowledge in the formation of effective prevention strategies.

Another set of papers cluster around the relationship between forms of gendered and sexualized transgressions. For instance, one study (Pascoe, 2003), based on ethnographic research at a northern California high school, focused on "the faggot" as an important discourse about sexuality and gender in adolescence. Pascoe argued that the trope of "the fag" is not only a tool for policing teenage boys' gender and sexuality, but also actually serves to structure the larger organization of the school. "Faggot discourse" thus becomes a key component in making the organization, culture, and policies of the school central to the reproduction of dominant, heterosexual masculinity. Another paper (Carr, 2003), based on life-histories with adult women of diverse sexual and gender identities, works to understand in more nuanced terms the often taken-for-granted association between lesbianism and tomboyism. Carr found that women differed significantly in their recollections of childhood gender transgression and its motivations depending on their adult sexual identity. She argues that these kinds of narratives can only be understood once we have a

complex understanding of the relationship between gender and sexuality, seeing them as both connected and distinct. Finally, another paper (Bryant, 2003) examined the psychiatric diagnosis Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood in order to understand the ways in which sexual nonconformity and gender nonconformity have played mutually constitutive yet distinct roles in constructing ideas about mental illness. This research, which examines a set of published and archival materials centering around debates over the legitimacy of the diagnosis, traces the ways that sexuality and gender identity have been differentially deployed within these debates. Bryant argued that while the diagnosis has been critiqued heavily in the name of the "pre-homosexual" child, no similar defense has been mounted in the name of the "pre-transgender" child.

One of the liveliest sessions was the Sociology of Sexualities Roundtables. In this session 19 papers were presented at tables organized around various overarching themes. The session format, and above all the interesting and often provocative combinations of paper topics, made for a great deal of productive conversation. Tables were organized around the following themes: Rethinking Sexuality, Health, and "Risk"; Sexuality and Social Movements; Women, Gender, and Sexualized Labor; Sexuality and Relationships; and Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Culture.

Finally, there was a session dedicated to the memory of the life and work of Lionel Cantú. The presentations in this session celebrated, extended, and productively challenged Cantú's truly groundbreaking work. Cantú, who passed away unexpectedly in 2002, was a young assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at University of California Santa Cruz. Beginning with his dissertation and continuing through his short career, Cantú's research examined Mexican gay identities within the context of migration. His pioneering and promising body of work combined diverse areas—studies of sexuality, race/ethnicity, culture, political economy, and migration—in new and challenging ways (see Cantú, 1999; Cantú, 2000; Cantú, 2002).

Other presentations at the conference reported on the effects of queer visibility on the organization of heterosexuality; the effects of long-term relationships

on intimacy; the role of social stress in teenage sexuality; the productive functions of gay bathhouse and circuit cultures; a reassessment of the demedicalization of homosexuality; a reappraisal of the Boy Scout discrimination practices in light of “Scout culture”; the relationships between sexuality and the market, sexuality and work, sexuality and cultural representation, and sexuality and the global political economy; and many, many other topics. Abstracts for most of the papers presented at the conference are available online at (<http://www.asanet.org/convention/2003/program.html>).

Along with the intellectual exchange that took place in paper sessions, the meetings were also a time to celebrate accomplishments. The Section on the Sociology of Sexualities recognized exemplary work in the field with its annual awards. E. Jane Ward (PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of California Santa Barbara) was the recipient of the graduate student paper award. Her paper, “Producing Pride in West Hollywood: A Queer Cultural Capital for Queers With Cultural Capital” (Ward, 2003), applies a Bourdieuan (1984) analysis to the tensions between working class organizers of an urban LGBT pride festival and the local gay press, government, and professional communities. Ward argues that within the broader context of the growth of gay capitalism and the mainstreaming of LGBT movements, pride celebrations are moving away from their grassroots origins. Instead, they are becoming sites for class-based distinction inflected with the tastes and skills of powerful stakeholders.

The 2003 Simon and Gagnon award went to Steven Seidman (SUNY-Albany). This award honors career contributions to the study of sexualities, and commemorates the decades of groundbreaking research and writing on sexualities by sociologists and longtime collaborators, William Simon and John Gagnon. Seidman is an internationally recognized social theorist whose books include *Embattled Eros: Sexual Politics and Ethics in Contemporary America* (1992), *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics* (1997), and *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* (2002).

The 2004 ASA Conference—with the theme of Public Sociologies—will provide another opportunity

for sexuality researchers within sociology and related fields to share work and strengthen professional networks. Slated again for August, this time in San Francisco, many sexuality-related sessions are already on the program (for more information, go to (<http://www.asanet.org/convention/2004/index.html>)).

Section sponsored sessions will include: HIV/AIDS and Communities of Color (co-sponsored by the Sociologists’ AIDS Network and the Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities); Reproduction and Health Care Access as Basic Human Rights (Sex and Gender Section); Trafficking, the Global Sex Industry, and Human Rights (Sex and Gender Section); Cultural Differences in Union Formation and Fertility (Section on the Sociology of Population); Sexualities and Law (Sociology of Sexualities Section); and Sociology of Sexualities Roundtables (Sociology of Sexualities Section). In addition, several non-sponsored sessions on sexuality-related topics are planned, and as always, the innovative and hybrid nature of sexuality studies will be reflected with the appearance of sexuality research in diverse arenas throughout the conference. ♦

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