3 Anthropological foundations of sexuality, health and rights

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To examine the nexus between sexuality, health and rights in the foundations of anthropology requires a historical review of the emergence of the ‘culture’ concept and cultural relativism in studies of sexuality, allowing a perspective on how ethnographic work, over the period from approximately 1920 to 2000, created a new way of thinking about sexual meanings and practices. During this time, older theoretical approaches evolved and died out, new voices emerged and the colonial history of anthropology ended, leading to a call for a different and more interdisciplinary vision of sexual, gender and reproductive rights and health in research, policy and advocacy.

In the social sciences in the USA, anthropology and sociology played pivotal roles in the twentieth-century reaction to evolutionary and social Darwinist approaches (Harris 2001; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988) in medicine and sexology. By the beginning of modern anthropology around the time of the First World War, these discourses on sexuality were so heavily influenced by the language of pathology that the label ‘medicalised’ in respect to such work seems apt (Irvine 2000). Creation of a unified concept of ‘culture’ (defined here as a system of meanings and social practices) during this period, and the rise of the epistemology of ‘cultural relativism’ (the world view that all cultures have equally good knowledge sets) was foundational to this reaction and subsequent social learning and environmental or ecological perspectives on sexuality, sexual meanings, roles and scripts (Bell et al. 2001; Gagnon 2004; Herdt 1997; Laumann et al. 1994; Rubin 2002).

Anthropology’s critical role in the invention of functionalism, too, and then structural-functionalism in theory and methodology, allied with sexuality study early on, was paradoxical, however, in that the work of the early pioneers was all but forgotten until decades later, an hiatus that led anthropology to ‘rediscover’ sexuality after the advent of Foucault, explained below (Vance 1999; Herdt 2004; Herdt and Stoller 1990). Activism in anthropology has always been complicated and with regard to sexuality, this long silence on sex created a formidable barrier, even in the fight against AIDS and HIV.

Early anthropological pioneers in sexuality

The colonial origins of anthropology are foundational to understanding the invention of the culture concept and contextual sexual ethnography. I take my cue in reflecting on this history from the most influential American anthropologist of the late twentieth century, Clifford Geertz (1988). Although not interested in sexuality
per se, Geertz’s prime examples come from anthropologists who were (Malinowski, Benedict, Mead, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, K. E. Read). Reacting to the hegemonic evolutionary thinking of the nineteenth century, by extending the culture concept through the participant–observation method of ethnography, anthropology found a means of grounding social study in the lived experience of learning another language and culture.

Yet Geertz (1988: 82) argues that this pioneering work contained two distinct and perhaps oppositional images of authority: the anthropologist as Pilgrim and the anthropologist as Cartographer. The Pilgrim was on a romantic journey, told as a ‘quest story’ (p. 42), describing the anthropologist in highly contextual and emotional but persuasive terms as a ‘seeker’ (p. 45), whose compassion could provide deep insight and understanding. Conversely, in reaction to this image, another school of thought viewed the role of classical anthropology as objective; mapping out a culture by ‘being there’ in exotic places, ‘seeking through to the foundations of strange looking lives, not through ‘personal immersion’ (p. 48) as is so commonly believed, but by analyzing the cultural productions of each society – its myths and rituals, art and history. Thus, it is helpful to think about how anthropology’s romantic rebellion against the Enlightenment (Shweder 1990) gave impetus to the theme of the Pilgrim in sexual study, which years later infused a variety of rights movements.

Malinowski’s (1929) magisterial classic, The Sexual Life of Savages, was thus not only the premier attempt of an anthropologist to establish how a Pilgrim from another world would chart an exotic sexual culture. His work showed the ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ manner in which sex ‘functions’ to maintain that society, even when the folk culture lacks a category of ‘sex’. Sexual customs thus ‘maintained’ marriage and kinship in tandem with other major institutions such as religion, to use the functionalist theory and language of the founder of social anthropology and ‘participant–observation’.

The reader will find that the natives treat sex in the long run not only as a source of pleasure, but, indeed, as a thing serious and even sacred. Nor do their customs and ideas eliminate from sex its power to transform crude material fact into wonderful spiritual experience, to throw the romantic glamour of love over the technicalities of love making ... it is in this richness and multiplicity of love that lies its philosophic mystery, its charm for the poet and its interest for the anthropologist.

(Malinowski 1929: xxiv)

This passionate, exoticising and romantic voice captured, in Geertz’s terms, the conjoining of sex in both the Pilgrim and Cartographer roles, ensuring fascination by the public and scientific acceptance by academics: what John Gagnon (1997: 24) later aptly called the ‘dense assemblage of collective myth and individual fantasy’ belonging to the era.

Prior to the 1980s, while sexuality clearly remained peripheral to the mainstream of theory and fieldwork, sexual (and reproductive) rights as such were treated as wholly contextual; they were densely connected, if at all – to reproduction (Paige and Paige 1981); to kinship and family and childbearing, and sometimes to religious roles. However, cultural relativism was background to all sexual customs.
Malinowski’s (1929) famous description, for example, of Trobriand Islanders biting their lover’s eye-lashes at the peak of sexual excitement is thus of no less or more meaning than any other element of culture (Herdt 1999), although it was connected to the sense in which Trobriand sexual culture was egalitarian and complementary to the rights of women. Yet because these accounts of local sexual culture were pockets of colonial time and space (Newton 1993), often omitted from the study or erased in the ethnography (Appadurai 1996), the sexual ethnographies became suspect and were mostly ignored in later decades: they ignored critical historical change, encapsulation by western authorities and the sense in which local customs were in decline (Lévi-Strauss 1955).

The anthropologist in this ideology should look, but not touch; the taboo suggested that anthropologists again were Innocents, even Celibates, having what the British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1957: 81–2) dared to call ‘a certain kind of character and temperament’. Suffice it to say that the sexual engagement with the natives, whether in fantasy or reality, was removed from the ethnography. The Cartographer account was antiseptic and clean, without an erotic slant. In fact, of course, since the time of Malinowski’s (1967) posthumously published diary, this image has been unsustainable (Herdt and Stoller 1990). The majestic biography of Malinowski (Young 2004: 405) reveals just how deeply flawed the idea is, in view of Malinowski’s sexual fantasies of local girls and his racist revulsion and fear of caste pollution regarding them, all part of the Catholic conscience within his own thoughts.

Sexuality was handled, if it were handled at all, as an individual need or biological function in this approach (Vance 1999), and same-sex relationships were treated as a form of deviance, pathology or mental illness (Rubin 1984), rather than as a social issue or matter of social difference (Herdt 2004). This same colonial legacy discursively linked the sexual ethnography to the medical discourse in sexology (Foucault 1980). No doubt a significant reason for this approach was Freudian developmentalism (Herdt 1991; Robinson 1967). The Freudian influence on early anthropology, as in virtually all of the social and behavioural sciences (Harris 2001: 422–48), was nearly hegemonic, countered by the Marxism, which, of course, typically ignored sexuality; for the materialist, sex is marginal to the production of goods and services, not a prime mover but a decoration on the cake of political economy (Harris 2001).

Freudian universalism opposed the cultural relativism of the times, particularly when it came to the interpretation of sexual ‘abnormality’ and ‘perversion’ (Herdt 1991), was nonetheless the cultural mode of describing sexuality in its day. The unfortunate effect of Freudian developmentalism in combination with sexology was to treat sexuality as an individual psychological problem that relied on Freudian diagnostic language, pathologising much of native cultures. For example, the sexual ethnography of the Mohave Indians typifies this trend, in such areas as masturbation, sexual play in childhood, homosexuality and Two-spirit (Berdache) roles (to name but a few of the significant psycho-cultural patterns), described by Georges Devereux (1937), the French-American anthropologist turned psychoanalyst. By adherence to an Oedipal framework, as in the case of Mead’s work (1935, 1949) or by reaction to it, as in the case of Malinowski’s Sex and Repression in Savage Society (1927; see Spiro 1982), the possibility of contextual rights was undermined. Not until the decisive counter-hegemonic influence of Foucault’s History of Sexuality
filtered in the 1980s (Knauft 1994) did Freudianism decline, and rights begin to have a clearer modern profile. Even Mead’s (1935) allusion to ‘sexual exceptionalism’ in *Sex and Temperament* could not escape this pathologising tendency (reviewed in Herdt 1991).

The same schism between Pilgrim and Cartographer, local and universal, is apparent in the neo-Freudian accounts of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, teacher and student, two of the great American anthropologists. They were intent on bringing sexuality more clearly into the ethnographic approach and they succeeded to a considerable extent (Herdt 1997: 11ff). Benedict clearly believed that homosexuality was normal, and Mead was of the conviction that bisexuality was the best sexual identity, although neither of them could say so publicly (Banner 2003: 119, 150, 348–51). Curiously, however, to note a convergence of gender and sexual ideas in this early work, Mead disliked the Freudian active/passive dichotomy; disliked the concept of homosexuality because it merged identity and behaviour, linked gendered masculinity/femininity to sexual expression; and disliked passivity in homosexuals (Banner op cit.: 357–8).

**Transition to the later twentieth century**

The upsurge of social science interest in deviance as a problem of social development and sexual behaviour formed a cornerstone of anthropology’s latter transformation. A significant conference in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1934, showed the differences in attitudes about sexual normality among key anthropologists of the times, ranging from the negative and homophobic (Edward Sapir) to the enlightened feminist critiques of Mead (Banner 2003: 351). Benedict’s (1938) subsequent essay on discontinuities in cultural conditioning actually used ‘ritual homosexuality’ as an example of how cultures may intervene into development in positive and negative ways, implicitly connecting sexuality, culture and rights, as these ideas would be understood 50 years later (Herdt 1997).

Virtually in tandem with this anthropological work was the hugely influential Chicago school of sociological community studies. Gayle Rubin’s (2002) masterful review of this work and the reformulation of ‘deviance’ as normal or presentational demonstrates how ‘subculture’ and ‘deviance theory’ typified American symbolic interactionist approaches following George H. Mead, defined by functional-structural theory or grounded theory (Kurt Lewin and, later, Erving Goffman). British sociology Cohen (1972) also followed with the construct of ‘moral panics’ in relation to youth culture, sexuality and subcultural deviance (reviewed in Herdt 2009). Symbolic interactionism grew from this paradigm, through the work of Goffman (1959), which was highly influential in the creation of symbolic anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s – paving the way for feminist anthropology, gender studies and subsequent forms of sexual ethnography (Weston 1991).

Goffman’s landmark study, *Stigma* (1963), a brilliant functionalist analysis of ‘the natural cycle’ of passing as a homosexual, was perspicacious for its time, anticipating the impact of cultural stigma on health and rights. But this approach also led to the influential work of John Gagnon and William Simon (1973), collaborating at the Kinsey Institute in the late 1960s, which laid the foundations for later social constructionist accounts of sexuality, same-sex relations and HIV studies. Gagnon’s (2004) major pieces about culture and sexual scripts are also foundational here.
Major work being conducted nowadays on minority stress, following the research of Meyer and Northridge (2007) provides new and still to be studied insights into issues of sexual health and minority status.

The post-Second World War influence of famed zoologist Alfred Kinsey largely passed by anthropology, in part because of the tendency of Kinsey to treat ‘culture’ as the enemy of sexual freedom (Herdt 2009). However, it paved the way for the emergence of second-wave feminism, gay and lesbian social movements and anthropological studies of gender and later sexuality (Herdt and Stoller 1990; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). Oriented toward issues of women’s gender roles, reproduction and the subsequent break between the sexual and reproductive, this work responded (at least in part) to the invention of the contraceptive pill in the early 1960s, the advent of what Laumann et al. (1994) have referred to as the paradigm of ‘sex as recreation’. Rosado and Lamphere’s (1974) classic anthology illustrates new and older ideas, such as the neo-Freudian approach of sociologist Nancy Chodorow (2008), whose work was highly influential in anthropological and sociological construction especially during the 1980s.

As Rubin (1984) critiqued this work, the feminist approach toward sexuality was sometimes hostile, and the politics created complications both for rights and health. Feminism during this period was, of course, also labouring under the difficulties of various identity splits between heterosexual and lesbian identities (Lewin 1996) and white middle class versus women of colour voices (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988), which were anticipated by events that unfolded in the women’s health movement in the 1970s (Schneider 1997). A critical overview of these social movements reveals a trend toward a new thinking about health, gender and rights (Epstein 1999), which is especially productive of asking questions about social policy. The role that women began to take vis-à-vis the HIV epidemic paved the way for a different approach to sexuality. There is no question but that the obstacles to sexual and reproductive health coming out of very detailed case studies, for example, in South America (Shepard 2006) reveal themes of continuity with this past, and new moves away from it, as for example, toward a different conception of sexual citizenship (Weeks 1985), recently taken up in US LGBT marriage rights debates (Herdt and Kertzner 2006).

Beginning in the 1970s, same-sex behaviour began to be an explicit object of study in anthropology, indirectly through the cultural performance study of Newton’s (1972) Mother Camp, well reviewed in Rubin (2002). Explicit new ethnographies of same-sex behaviour then got underway, such as my own studies of age-structured boy-inseminating practices among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea (Herdt 1981). As I have reviewed this paradigm of work in Melanesia (Herdt 1984), it was not there were no prior ethnographic mentions or vignettes, they just were not investigated in depth; certainly they were not theorised. In fact, heterosexual male ethnographers who worked in Melanesia for decades (and the vast majority of ethnographers were men) found the expression of same-sex practices repellent or embarrassing; theoretically, they were completely unequipped to deal with these remarkable symbolic and material practices (Herdt 2009). In other words, there was no anthropology of the body (Burton 2008), a lack of a critical medical anthropology that was concerned with sexuality, and the absence of a theory of agency that might connect sexual subjectivities to desires (Hostetler and Herdt 1998), compounding the difficulty of how to handle the ethics of sexual study in the perspective of cultural relativism.
With the emergence of the HIV and the AIDS social movements and their focus on the health and health provider impact of HIV on individuals and communities (Herdt and Lindenbaum 1992), a whole new range of sexual ethnography emerged (Parker 1991). As has been so well conceptualised, HIV resulted in a huge transformation in anthropology and social science study in general, leading not only to new conceptions of sexuality (Parker and Gagnon 1995), but also to a more explicit theory of the body, of the role of qualitative ethnography in these endeavours and the place of sexual health in culture theory. The subsequent emergence of queer theory as a distinctive voice in the early 1990s, and the ways in which high theory was to be somewhat detrimental to the expansion of thinking about rights, are not easily reviewed but definitely played a decisive force during this period. Certainly, the work of medical anthropologists and those who have followed in the tradition of the early anthropology of sexuality has gone in other directions (Teunis and Herdt 2006), for example, in understanding how transgender rights are grounded in a variety of indigenous cultural practices (Herdt 1993; Valentine 2007). Here again we see the tension between playing out the historical roles of Pilgrim and Cartographer in the field of sexuality studies.

Conclusion

Anthropology’s rediscovery of sex in the past three decades has introduced new and vital work into work on rights and health. Our enduring contribution is, of course, cultural relativism and the respect for each culture in its own context in relation to sexual and reproductive rights and health. Anthropological forms of cultural constructionism of sexuality remained largely peripheral to the development of rights and health (Cowan et al. 2001; Corrêa et al. 2008). Even in the extraordinary work of the medical anthropologist Paul Farmer (1999), who is rightly cited in both articulating and in making popular the structural violence framework, sexuality played a very small role in its foundations, in spite of the HIV discourse (Teunis and Herdt 2006). There is an epistemological reason for this hiatus: the source of this work, including liberationist theology, applied medical anthropology and the radical pedagogy of Paolo Freire, largely omitted sexuality from its view of human nature. On the practice side, however, Parker (2007) has written well concerning another problem for the field: the emergent rights discourses came from the grassroots, with academics largely lagging behind.

The lag between the trenches and the Academy has occurred in many policy areas, such as the emergence of HIV and AIDS research and interventions, which began among activists in response to huge impact of the loss of friends and lovers, while academics were slow to catch up – psychology preceding other disciplines, such as anthropology (Herdt and Lindenbaum 1992). In this work, we see the continuing struggle between local context and universalism; between the respects for each culture as unique, which is suggested by cultural relativism; and the commitment to find support for each unique human being’s struggle for rights.

The struggle between the Pilgrim and Cartographer in anthropology remains in place, and, in some ways, this tension is productive of new forms of thinking, including research and activism on rights. It is true that anthropology has been remiss in its lack of support for empirically based advocacy, as some have argued, and that its contributions on culture and relativism have made few inroads into American
society. In the USA, for example, sexual rights are often placed together with reproductive rights in rightwing discourse (DiMauro and Joffe 2009), and moral panics continue to surround the basic right to full sexual citizenship. Not so curiously, the USA as a society remains gripped by a fundamental preconception that sex is ‘natural’, a huge barrier to advocacy for human rights; we shall have to see if greater sexual literacy emerges. In these ways, the emergent field of rights and health is helping to change opinion and lead toward a different future. Where once this was a drag on theory and a barrier to policy formation, the situation now suggests a necessary and healthy tension between local experience and universal claims to rights in all times and places.

Note

1 These classics include but are not limited to: Malinowski Sexual Life of Savages (1929), Ruth Benedict’s Patterns of Culture (1934), Margaret Mead’s Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935), Lévi-Strauss’ (1955) Triste Tropiques, and K. E. Read’s The High Valley (1965).

References