Sexuality: Attempts at a Broad View

Human Sexuality. A Comparative and Developmental Perspective. Papers from a conference, Stanford, Calif., Jan. 1977. HERANT A. KATCHADOURIAN, Ed. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979. vi, 358 pp. $14.95.

Some of the most interesting questions about human sexuality concern the relationships among biological sex, sexual behavior (in the narrowest sense, of consciously erotic, genital activity), and the host of other behaviors that are (in a similar narrow sense) nonsexual but are influenced, however indirectly, by a person's maleness or femaleness. This book ambitiously takes on this whole area of inquiry—sexual development in the broadest sense of sexuality—and examines it from five different perspectives: evolutionary, biological, psychological, sociological, and anthropological. That no synthesis emerges is hardly the fault of the editor or the contributors.

The volume grew out of an interdisciplinary conference and is the first installment of a projected three-volume series entitled "Human Sexuality." The series will constitute the special studies program of Population Education Inc.'s Project on Human Sexual Development (initiated by John D. Rockefeller III but now supported by the Carnegie Corporation and other funds as well). The second and third volumes of the series will focus more specifically on the sexual learning process and its social context. (The stated focus of the project as a whole is "the importance of early learning for sexual development" [p. 4]; the other major project activities have been a survey of parental attitudes toward sexual learning and workshops on television and sexuality, held with media representatives.) This first volume seems intended to define a very broad theoretical context for the study of the sexual learning process, including properties of the learner as well as the nature of the "subject matter" to be learned in various social settings.

According to the jacket, the book is addressed to "a broad range of professionals," presumably including educators and other helpers who are concerned with human sexuality in the broad sense. Such an audience will find this book mostly readable, certainly stimulating, and often useful in outlining (if not always clarifying) the major issues. All 18 contributors have excellent credentials; that their chapters vary greatly in quality, selectivity, breadth of focus, and bibliography has more to do with the complexity of the respective subjects they attempt to cover than with the writers themselves. The combined result is wonderfully eclectic, although it lacks much sense of interdisciplinary communication; this reader wished that the conference's discussion sessions had been included in the volume.

A major problem in the interdisciplinary "field" of sexuality, well illustrated here, is terminological. The authors do agree on a very broad definition of "sexuality," and many of them attempt to unscramble the usages of other terms within their own disciplines. Editor Katchadourian devotes an entire chapter to trying to do this across disciplines. Unfortunately, these efforts fail to standardize usages, even within the volume, but they do serve to warn the reader of some pitfalls in the paths across disciplinary boundaries. For instance, "role" may be used to mean social expectations, actual behaviors, or both (p. 29). We are reminded both by Katchadourian (p. 30) and by Eleanor Maccoby (p. 199) that the (often pejorative) term "stereotype" is sometimes misapplied to real statistical differences in and to social prescriptions for (as opposed to ascriptions of) behavior. Similarly regrettable is the widespread use of the term "critical period" to describe both the time of pre- or perinatal androgen "imprinting" of certain sexually dimorphic structures and (probably) behaviors and the much later stage of human development when a stable sense of "gender identity" is acquired, presumably through learning.

With respect to the terms "sex" and "gender," the situation is so muddled that one is tempted (and many have succumbed) to coin neologisms for such common if fuzzy distinctions as that between those aspects of sexuality which are "sexual" in the narrow sense and the "nonsexual" facets, including especially those peculiarly human (or so we believe) cognitive and affective processes, self-perceptions, and social (or antisocial) behaviors which are components of the symbolic, cultural, social definition of "masculine" and "feminine." "Gender" has often been used to denote the entire latter set, although this usage is awkward for animal nonsexual behaviors that are sexually dimorphic or for human erotic behaviors that are influenced by cultural milieu.

There is really more than a terminological problem here, because the relationships among these aspects of sexuality are so complicated and because the major questions in the field center around these very relationships. The distinction between sex and gender tends to get confounded with any or all of the following distinctions: erotic-nonerotic, biological-social, nature-nurture, physical-mental, subjective-objective, stable-variable, fact-value. Such confusions only add to the emotional fog that so often surrounds the subject of sexuality.

We do perhaps need terms that classify behaviors *as* behaviors, without implying anything about their causation; alas, "gender" has been hopelessly contaminated. Katchadourian (pp. 8–9) suggests the term "psychosocial derivatives" to denote all those psychosocial manifestations of sexuality (gender identity, sex role, and so on), pointing out that this label doesn't imply exclusively psychosocial (rather than biological) determination; "derivation" can take place by many routes. But reforming existing usage may be impossible, even within a field. For instance, the process by which children learn to label themselves and others as consistently and permanently male or female, according to genitals (rather than clothing or hair style) is commonly termed (by analogy to Piaget, via Kohlberg) "achieving gender constancy," in spite of the fact that many sex-typed "role" behaviors appear prior to that achievement. Both children and scientists are bewildered by the multiple links between sex and its psychosocial derivatives.

Another, more conceptual, difficulty in interdisciplinary work is different levels of explanation. Consider the following exchange, which occurs within the evolution section. Jane Lancaster, summarizing recent primate studies, describes work that documents the occurrence of extrareproductive (involving juvenile or same-sex partners or nonovulating females) sexual behavior in nonhuman primates. (Why are we surprised when animals engage in sex just for fun?) She relates these findings to the older notion that the sensory rewards of

sexual behavior may have served as "social glue" in the development of group living among primates (pp. 56, 60, 73–74), an idea of considerable interest given the importance of touching in human social development. Richard Alexander, representing the sociobiologists, dismisses Lancaster's explanation as too "proximate." Alexander argues that the biological costs (disease, competition) of group living would have eliminated sociality if the only rewards to social individuals were sensory. He offers a more "ultimate" mechanism by which external pressures (for example from predators) led to a relatively increased reproductive success for group-living individuals, the association of increased sexual behavior with group living being a side effect of increased sexual competition in high density (p. 93). To this reader it seems that both the costs and any extrasensory benefits of group living would accrue equally to group-living individuals who got sensory rewards for their sociosexual activities and to those who did not, but that individuals who had the physiological apparatus and behavioral propensities to get such rewards would be more likely to be found in groups, and hence to reap both kinds of benefits (increased survival/reproduction *and* fun). In evolutionary terms the issue here boils down to whether groupies left more descendants (than nongroupies) and their groupy descendants secondarily became sexy or whether sexier primates tended to group and hence reproduced better, leaving more sexy and groupy descendants. (In fact we know so little about the steps between genes and behavior that we cannot judge the relative plausibility of the two evolutionary courses.) Most students of human sexuality won't care much about such points, although similar ones are made about the evolution of orgasm and sexual skin swelling in female primates. For many readers, "proximate" explanations (dare I use the word "motivation"?) will be of more interest than "ultimate" ones.

Another variety of ultimate explanation is the work of the materialist anthropologists (well summarized by Judith Shapiro), who attempt to explain intercultural variation in male-female roles in terms of economic systems. Like sociobiology, any overarching structuralist or functionalist explanation may lack appeal to readers who are interested in social change, for at least two reasons. Not only do such approaches seem to imply the inevitability of the status quo (or at least the inseparability of the component parts of the system), they seem to leave out the level of the individual. Gene pools and societies don't behave, individuals do; and if one wants to influence that behavior (for example through sex education) one must give attention to more proximate mechanisms.

More proximate levels of explanation are well represented, by biology, developmental psychology, and sociology. Relevant literature of each field is discussed by such authorities as Richard Green, Julian Davidson, Anke Ehrhardt, Zella Luria, Eleanor Maccoby, Robert Sears, John Gagnon, and Lee Rainwater. As we get closer to the proximate causes (for example hormones, early socialization) we find more coherence of paradigms. Also, the extent of our ignorance comes into clearer focus. There is a real (not just a communication) gap in our understanding of human sexual development between the molecular or genetic level and the level of all the psychosocial phenomena that have symbolic relationships to the genitals. And this gap is accentuated, as the testable hypotheses become more explicitly causal rather than correlational, by an increased uneasiness about "determinism," whether biological or social.

All of the contributors stress the need for more research: longitudinal studies of normal human sexual development (especially in the early years), cross-cultural studies, field studies of other primates. Direct, detailed observational data are sparse in almost every area (although there are relevant studies of infant sexual behavior, for example by Roiphe and Galenson, suggesting very early awareness of genital differences that are not cited here). The barriers to such research are formidable; in addition to ordinary prudishness, there are legal and ethical issues of informed consent and invasion of privacy. We certainly also need research on the outcomes of specific "experimental" sexual learning experiences (such as educational interventions) during development; one hopes volumes 2 and 3 of this series will examine this matter in more detail.

Alongside the need for more research is the often-stated concern about the politicalization, and possible social misuses, of research on sexuality. Almost all the chapters recite the usual litany about nature-nurture interaction. Many chapters also include protestations that animals aren't people, that "is" isn't "ought," and that research on the causes of a given behavioral outcome (for example observed sex differences or sexual orientation) does not necessarily imply anything about the changeworthiness of that outcome. Three authors specifically condemn the recent treatment of male sex offenders in Germany with antihormones or brain surgery (pp. 120, 128, 145, 158). A different kind of evidence of political concern is a discernible, often explicit, feminist bias in some areas of current sexuality research. Of the work summarized here, this is most evident in primatology and social anthropology, but it has happened in biology, psychology, and sociology as well, perhaps in all cases a healthy reaction to previous androcentric bias.

With their protestations about the social consequences of sexuality research, these authors, perhaps wisely, avoid coming to grips with the knotty moral and philosophical issues here, even beyond those involved in doing the research. Once we "know the answers," understand the complex interactions in human sexual development, know how to influence its course, can we do it? Should we do it?

In its effort to be value-free, science naturally tends to concentrate on objective, quantifiable, overt behavior, ignoring the more interior, subjective, experiential level. Not only is there no pornography in this book (except maybe a reprint of Chevalier-Skolnikoff's illustrations of the polymorphous sexual activities of *Macaca arctoides*), there is scant consideration of the symbolic, subjective meanings of sexuality, except in the anthropology sections. And it is ironic that Freud—surely the originator of the notion that "sexuality" pervades most, if not all, of human experience—receives little more than passing (and sometimes unfriendly) nods in a volume whose avowed purpose is to broaden our definition of sexuality. This disregard of psychoanalytic concepts does reflect the present trend in sexuality studies, and no doubt also the fact that those concepts have not proven to be of much practical use in influencing the human behaviors included under sexuality—or even in figuring out how we might like to influence them. On the other hand, neither has any other set of concepts, so far.

But before we reach the point of needing to decide how or whether to systematically change things, there is much more work to be done. The disciplines represented in this book need to keep talking to each other, and future observational research needs to be guided by all of these perspectives. Although the volume falls short of creating a new field, "human sexuality," it does perhaps delineate the perimeter.

HELEN H. LAMBERT
Department of Biology,
Northeastern University,
Boston, Massachusetts 02115