

THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF SEXUALITY

Comment on Andersen

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Margaret L. Andersen provides an insightful overview of the development of feminist studies in sociology and a roadmap for the future. Using her impressive history as a feminist sociologist as a backdrop, she illustrates the inroads women and gender scholarship have made into mainstream sociology. However, as a junior gender/sexuality scholar and generational product of third-wave feminism, I raise three queries to Andersen's conceptualization. I first argue that her framing of the current status of feminist sociology downplays the challenges newer gender and sexuality scholars still face—challenges that, unfortunately, are not dissimilar to those women faced in the past. Second, illustrating the continued tension between social construction and biological determinism, I question whether we can close the chapter on the early themes of feminist studies she lays out. Finally, while I agree with Andersen that the integration of the study of sexuality is crucial to the future of feminist sociology, I see her hesitation to award sexuality similar analytic status to race, class, and gender as deeply problematic. Rather than engaging in generational boundary guarding that separates “serious” research on the political economy of sexuality from seemingly less weighty research on communities and identities, I suggest we recognize how these forms of research—and the diversity that comes from mixing the insights of feminist generations—work together to strengthen feminist sociology.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE JOB MARKET

Andersen makes a clear case for just how far women scholars and the study of gender have come during the past 25 years. The enormity of these

changes is encapsulated in the story of Jessie Bernard fighting for the right of women sociologists to sit unescorted by men in the hotel bar at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association (ASA). And to Andersen's credit, in recounting just how bad the "bad old days" were, she does not forget to capture exciting developments of the times—such as the emergence of the feminist journals *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Feminist Theory*, and *Gender & Society*. Yet while women have won a place at the sociological bar, they still may be excluded from drinking at the men's table, particularly if they are women of color, lesbians, transgender, and/or untenured.

Acknowledging this, Andersen still concludes, "Women and men can now work where feminist studies are an assumed and largely legitimate area of study" (2005, 439). To someone who just navigated the job market, this assessment seems surprisingly rosy. I had mixed emotions each time I received a job notice on the Sociologists for Women in Society listserv in which the sender encouraged list members to apply because *their* department supported feminist scholarship. As useful as these e-mails are, their very existence indicates that many departments remain unwelcoming to feminist studies. As I compared notes with my gender and sexuality colleagues, we shared stories of committee members who asked questions like: "Can you teach anything else besides gender?" Limits to the inroads of feminist studies into sociology also were clear as faculty explained, "Well, we already have a gender person." And, talking about sexuality research often was met with uncomfortable silence, jokes, or the most dreaded comment—"You wrote a dissertation on that?" Thus, when Andersen wonders if those coming of age in sociology today can imagine "the ridicule and sometimes contempt with which the study of women was perceived by so many in the academy" (2005, 440), I think I speak for many junior scholars when I say, yes, yes we can.

Women now comprise 25 percent of full professors in sociology, a monumental shift that allows many graduate students to work with established, tenured women. Yet women are still 60 percent of lecturers in the field.¹ Assistant professors still struggle to balance family responsibilities and the tenure clock. Scholars whose work is widely regarded within the fields of gender and sexualities studies are still denied tenure in sociology departments. And though being openly homosexual may now carry less stigma, gay and lesbian partner hires remain uncommon practice. It is important to remember how far we have come from the time when women were excluded from the hotel bar. But let us also recognize the commonalities between the experiences of Andersen's generation and mine. The sexism (and homophobia) that undermines women (and gay men, transgender men,

and transgender women) may be less overt, but it has not disappeared. And while topics such as gender and the workplace may now be legitimate forms of study, research on sexualities and/or transgender lives remains largely on the margins of the discipline.

SEX, GENDER, AND BIOLOGY—WE’VE GOT UNFINISHED BUSINESS

My second point in response to Andersen relates to feminist theorizations of “sex” and “gender.” As she notes, conceptualizing gender as a cultural process distinct from the biological realm of sex was a central theme of early feminist sociology. She adds that recent scholarship now suggests “even biological differences can be interpreted as social constructions” (2005, 440). This casual line dismisses the growing contention in some arenas of feminist scholarship that the sex/gender distinction—a neat way to teach students about social constructionism—may be a convenient fiction. Research on people born with a variety of intersex conditions reveals that chromosomes do not always fall neatly into XX and XY patterns (Fausto-Sterling 2000), making the boundaries of what constitutes sex increasingly blurry. Women who have a “chromosomal” claim to the category of female can begin to see themselves as merely passing as women after losing the ability to bear children because of hysterectomies (Elson 2004). Conversely, while female-to-male transmen do not alter their chromosomes, many achieve social maleness, which can bring gender privilege (Schilt 2006). Taking these issues out of the textbooks and into the classroom, we often now are teaching about how gender and sex “work” to students who challenge binary categories of gender in their self-presentation or who transition during the course of a semester. That our analyses are being outpaced by our students’ lived experiences suggests that we as feminist scholars need to engage more critically with what it means to “[do] sex in a gendered world” (Dozier 2005).

Beyond enabling us to rethink our analytic tools, these sex and gender discussions can breathe new life into an early, but still fundamental, theme of feminist studies: the challenge to biological determinism. We now have a quarter century of research that unravels the social processes behind the reproduction of gender difference and gender inequality. However, recent popular press articles show the continued allure of using biological explanations, such as purported differences in the brains of men and women, to naturalize gender and, increasingly, sexual inequality. As Andersen acknowledges, seeing biological sex differences as

socially constructed does mean we have come full circle in some ways. Yet, this shift—rather than unproductive backtracking—illuminates that when inequality continues, the old debates about the sources of this inequality continue. Rather than ceding this conversation to the dustbin of feminist sociological history, we should continue to weigh in on these cultural discussions from the vantage point of feminist sociologists.

IS THERE ROOM AT THE TABLE FOR SEXUALITY? THEORIZING THE FUTURE OF SEXUALITY STUDIES

My third point focuses on Andersen's conceptualization of sexuality research. While she acknowledges sexuality as an important part of the future of feminist studies, almost in the same breath she awards sexuality less analytic power vis-à-vis race, class, and gender. Explaining her position, she writes, "One of the major differences between sexuality and relations of race, class, and gender is that sexuality has not been used as an explicit category to organize the division of labor, as have race, class, and gender" (2005, 450). She adds, "This history really matters—not because sexual oppression is historically insignificant but because . . . the use of racial/ethnic groups as forced labor, cheap labor . . . is deeply linked to concepts of citizenship" (2005, 451). These statements raise important questions about the relationship of sexuality to both labor and citizenship.

Sexuality, in fact, has not been a basis for exploitation of labor in the same way that class, gender, and race have. But, since the development of visible gay communities in the United States in the early twentieth century, homosexuals have had a contentious relationship to employment. *Fairies*, a term used to refer to effeminate gay men, supported themselves through sex work in the early part of the last century when they were excluded from legitimate avenues of employment because of gender presentation (Chauncey 1994). Lesbians who did not pass by marrying men in the pre-Stonewall era struggled to support themselves financially (Kennedy and Davis 1993). The rigid inscription of heteronormative gender roles in the 1950s brought a wave of "lavender scares" that expelled gay men and lesbians from government jobs on the basis of *being homosexual* (D'Emilio 1989). In 2007 it is still legal to fire an employee for being gay, lesbian, or bisexual in 33 states.² Thus, gay men and lesbians may not be an exploited class, but they certainly constitute an unprotected one. And, demonstrating the importance of an intersectional lens, gay men and lesbians who have nonnormative gender presentations, who are working-class, and/or who are racial/ethnic minorities are often those who end up being most excluded from legitimate avenues of employment.

Being an unprotected class ties into the denial of citizenship—the second aspect Andersen argues separates sexuality from race, class, and gender. She acknowledges that the ban on “gay marriage” denies some citizenship rights to homosexuals. She quickly adds, however: “Sexuality has never been formally used to deny sexual groups the right to vote, nor has it been used in the formal and legal definition of personhood as is historically true of African Americans and other groups” (2005, 451). But are these the only measures of inclusion and citizenship? Systemically denying a group of people—homosexuals—the right to do something other groups can do—get married—is a denial of full citizenship, particularly as marriage is touted as a central “American value.” Sexual minorities also cannot immigrate to the United States to be with a romantic partner. “Out” homosexuals are restricted from joining the military. Only 11 states provide hate crime protection on the basis of gender identity—the predominant reason homosexuals and transgender people are targeted as violence victims.³ Hate crimes based on race, in contrast, are penalized in 45 states. Thus, while sexuality may not have played the same explicit historical role in regulating personhood as race, gender, and class, it does matter when considering who currently counts as a citizen.

Andersen raises an important point about the necessity of analyzing state regulation of sexuality. However, to argue that sexuality is important but “different” from race, class, and gender creates an impoverished theoretical starting point for sexuality studies. As many feminist scholars point out, state regulation of sexuality extends to other institutions (family, education, media) in ways that have important implications for race, class, gender. Rather than creating divisions between sexuality and other vectors of inequality, why not focus on the connections between the history of feminist sociology and the future of sexuality scholarship? Let us take a page from our own works and remember that feminist generations, while often conflicted over tactics and analytic frameworks, should work together, as they ultimately share the goal of social change.

NOTES

1. This information comes from the American Sociological Association (ASA) Web site: <http://www.asanet.org/page.wv?section=Profession+Trend+Data&name=Gender+Data>.

2. In 42 states, employees can be fired for gender identity—something that affects transsexual, transgender, and genderqueer individuals, as well as some gay

men and lesbians. See <http://www.hrc.org/issues/transgender/1511.htm> for more detail on sexual identity and employment protections.

3. This information comes from http://www.hrc.org/documents/hate_crime_laws.pdf

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