Introducing sexography: The situated study of men’s sexual selves

Sexography

This special issue of NORMA evokes the concept of sexography, which is not a conventional or established term in the vocabulary of social scientists or gender scholars. Rarely used and only scantily defined, sexography has, however, appeared in a number of different texts and contexts, where it has been used to designate phenomena as varied as the sex market (Sigusch 2001), the participant observation of the researcher in sexual action (Bolton 1998), and ‘the trend of “always more sex”, and “always more truth in sex”…’ (Foucault 1988, 116). While these meanings are all intriguing in their own right, the case made here is for an understanding that is at once more literal and more suggestive. On the one hand the postfix -graphy can be used to indicate a form of writing or a way of representing something, on the other it can also be used to indicate an art or a descriptive science. In this special issue the use of the term sexography should be understood in both these senses: as a descriptive approach to the study of men’s sexual selves, and as a way of writing up studies of sexuality in a particular time and place. The observant reader will then object that this only defines one part of the term, since it is not given what is implied by the concepts of sex or sexuality (Caplan 1987, Ortner and Whitehead 1981, Padgug 1998), just as it cannot and should not be taken for granted that there is ‘such a thing as “male sexuality”’ (Whitehead 2002, 163) or a singular male sexual self.
Male sexuality is most certainly not any single shared experience for men. It is not any single or simple thing at all – but the site of any number of emotions of weakness and strength, pleasure and pain, anxiety, conflict, tension and struggle […] Male sexuality cannot be reduced to the most popular meanings of sex acts, let alone to sex acts themselves. It becomes intelligible only if placed within actual histories of men’s intimate relationships with others – or the lack of them.

Segal (ibid. 106) further writes that it is unsurprising that it is often through sex that men ‘experience their greatest uncertainties, dependence and deference in relation to women.’ Still, sex and sexuality have often been linked rather singularly to questions of gender and power. Drawing heavily on Marxist theory and methodology and identifying sexuality as the primary social sphere of male power, MacKinnon (1982, 515) argued thirty years ago that ‘sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away.’ This implied an a priori view of male sexuality as predatory and overpowering, which according to Segal (2004) unfortunately reinstated rather than effectively challenged the dominant and phallocentric discourses and iconographies surrounding sexuality.

Writing about the same time as MacKinnon, Foucault (1981) developed another analytic that made it possible to study sex in terms of power, when he argued that sexuality is a particularly dense transfer point of power. Albeit, in his work the issue at stake was not gendered power per se but rather control over populations, which has led numerous feminists to critique his lack of an explicit focus on gender inequality (for an overview, see McLaren 2002). Instead, Foucault’s general idea was that power operates through the discursive production of sexuality and subjects, emphasizing that the power mechanisms of sexuality are socially constructed, unstable, and historically situated. According to Pigg and Adams (2005), Foucault has been instrumental in conceiving an analytical distinction between, on the one hand, sex as biological reproduction, and on the other, sexuality as cultural construction. They further claim that this distinction has often been embedded in an implicit separation between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’, where Western sexualities have taken center stage against a rhetorically constructed backdrop of sexualities found in other cultures. The unfortunate consequence of this sweeping cultural approach
would be a sort of ethnocartography of sexual practices based on culture-bound comparisons.

Although all the articles in this issue, do to some extent include culture as part of the explanatory framework, the concept of sexography should not be seen as culture-bound, since the situated aspect of the study of men’s sexual selves posited here relates less to a closed notion of culture than to immediate shifts in social situations and contexts of specific men. Rather, as Kimmel (2004, 267) has it: ‘Manhood means different things at different times to different people.’ In a recent volume Kimmel (2007b) has further underscored that sex and sexuality are core constituents of the self. The studies in that volume draw on Simon and Gagnon’s (1998) conceptualization of sexual scripts in order to highlight the ways in which selves and identities are constructed around sexual conduct. Pertaining to the cultural, the interpersonal, and the intrapsychic levels of sexuality, the concept of sexual scripts allows the analyst to simultaneously look at the larger frameworks of sexual experience, the routine patterns of sexuality in specific settings, as well as the internal dialogues about internalized cultural expectations. In keeping with this perspective the aim of this special issue is to bring together qualitative research articles that deal with the sexual selves of men placed in a variety of contexts and situations in order to facilitate a comparison and discussion of differently situated men. Consequently, the articles presented here analyze men’s sexual selves both in terms of how they come into being, how they relate to broader levels of discourse, meaning, and structure in the settings under study, and how they are constrained and enabled by developments and contingencies of the individual man’s life course.

**Situated studies**

This special issue of NORMA features articles that are based on a wide range of situated studies, stretching from sexual initiations and the purchase of sex in Argentina; sexual imperatives and situational masculinity among South African university students; the production and negotiation of heterosexuality in Swedish hip-hop; over the explicit sexualization of poor Mozambican men; to the experience of diabetes as a threat to male sexuality and masculinity among poor Brazilian men. Most of the articles thus stay close to the perspectives and experiences of the men studied, which is probably why this range of articles offer little evidence of ‘the dark side’ of male sexualities such as rape coercion.
and violence (Whitehead 2002, 162–3) and provides more insights into the anxieties and uncertainties or pleasures and lusts associated with men’s sexuality.

In the first article, Rikke Louise Knudsen offers a reading of how young men from the upper middle classes in Buenos Aires are often sexually initiated at brothels through the mediation of senior family members and friends, and how the purchase of sex continues to play an important role throughout their years as unmarried youths. Knudsen interprets these practices as a response to the Argentinean gender order, where young women are not supposed to engage sexually with their peers. Instead, as part of a ritual coming of age, the young men visit sex workers who have often specialized in accommodating the sense of awkwardness and anxiety felt by male youths who have little or no sexual experience. In terms of the continued purchase of sex by men, Knudsen shows how visits to brothels become rituals for the enactment of male bonding, where even those who do not want to take part in the action, still accompany others to the door so as to maintain a sense of the male group. In this way Knudsen situates male sexuality both in terms of class position, culture, and the individual’s place in the life course which brings to the fore not only class and gender based inequalities, but also issues of uncertainty, pleasure, and sociality.

In the following article, Bjarke Oxlund investigates the importance of a demonstrable and active love and sex life for the social standing among peers of male students at a South African university campus. Like Knudsen, Oxlund takes an interest in transitional rituals and contrasts the developments he observed on campus with traditional ways of becoming a man through attendance at circumcision lodges. Oxlund contrasts this importance with traditional ways of becoming a man through attendance at circumcision lodges and makes the case for an appreciation of the ways in which notions of masculinity are specific according to different situations and social contexts. Drawing on the analysis of several in-depth cases, he shows that the individual who is considered ‘a man’ in the village is not necessarily considered ‘a man’ on campus and vice versa. This leads Oxlund to suggest that there is a need for a situational approach to masculinity and sexuality if we want to account for the ways in which several different scripts are simultaneously brought to bear on the life of an individual.

Situated in the realm of popular culture, Kalle Berggren’s contribution takes us to the world of Swedish hip hop lyrics, where it has become common to use the expression *no homo* as a rhetorical means to sustain heterosexuality. Drawing on queer theory, Berggren uses the concept of straight inoculations to analyze how the disavowing of homo-
sexuality is used in homo-social environments exactly at times, when things appear to be ambiguous. By doing so, Berggren demonstrates the usefulness of a queer approach to the study of men, since his analysis succeeds in destabilizing the notions of masculinity purported in hip hop while at the same time providing a nuanced and balanced analysis through careful attention to the ways in which heterosexual scripts are implied by the lyrics.

In her contribution, Sofia Aboim provides an intriguing reading of how poor Mozambican men living in Maputo use their bodily capital in an attempt to emerge as the good lover. The point is that through the explicit sexualization of their bodies and selves these materially subordinate men can (re)construct a powerful sense of manhood. Aboim does not conceive of this as a singular process, since her ethnographic material demonstrates that male hierarchies are organized around a highly complex and unstable structure of capitals, where being attractive and having a sexual reputation may compensate for the lack of material goods. Focusing on the tensions that saturate men’s constructions of their masculinities, Aboim provides a detailed account of how notions of masculinity have changed from one generation to the other and from the era of struggle to the era of the market. Aboim writes of this as the marketized semantics of masculinities in contemporary Maputo, where investments in sexuality can be understood as an effective strategy for the symbolic appropriation of manhood. In this manner Aboim forcefully makes the case for the multiple capitals available to men, which is an important addition to the point made in critical studies of men, where it has been more common to make the case for masculinities in the plural.

Finally, Marie Kolling shows how men living in urban poverty in Northeast Brazil who are afflicted with diabetes struggle to maintain a sense of their sexual and masculine selves. Kolling shows how the illness experience translates into an emasculating experience, which she understands as a diabetic disruption to their gender identity. Not only do the male participants in Kolling’s research have to deal with the physical symptoms and impairments of diabetes, they also have to (re)negotiate the social relationships and responsibilities that make up the environment of their daily lives. Kolling singles out sexuality and employment as two arenas for the enactment of masculinity that are deeply influenced by diabetic disruptions, since diabetes often leads to erectile dysfunction and bodily difficulties which prevent the men from going to work. Making reference to cultural scripts of men as breadwinners and heads of households and to sexual scripts of men as active, potent and virile partners in bed, Kolling lays the ground for an under-
standing of how the men attempt to do away with diabetes in order to do gender. She argues that because they do not fully acknowledge the fact of their chronic disease, the men do not observe the recommendations for diabetes care and thereby put their health at further risk. As a consequence, they will eventually be further emasculated, although in the first instance some men view their disregard for the chronic condition as a manly response in itself. Over and above the attention paid to men’s situation in terms of race, class and disease, Kolling provides a situated analysis of how the men’s struggle for their male gender identity plays out differently in the domestic sphere and the public sphere respectively.

Re-thinking men’s sexual selves

In sum, the articles all make a valuable contribution to the situated study of men’s sexual selves. As sexographies, the articles provide us with detailed descriptions of specific men living their sexual lives in particular times and places and under differing circumstances. As a testimony to the inherent variation of male sexuality argued by Segal (2004), the articles thus document different elements of weakness, strength, pleasure, anxiety, tension, and struggle. The different interpretations and analyses found in this special issue also correspond with Segal’s (2004, 105) observation that ‘the need for men to reassert and confirm masculine gender identity lies behind the obsessive force propelling men into sexual engagements.’ The main point, however, is that the action of men is always played out in particular circumstances, where a variety of scripts inform the selves that the men are trying to appropriate. As Jackson (2007) has noted, the sexual self is developed on the basis of the prior construction of a gendered self rather than the other way around, which makes human sexuality one facet of the self rather than the very foundation of human subjectivity. In order to embrace the variation found in these constructions, the case is here made for the situated study of men’s sexual selves based on sexographic descriptions and analyses.

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References


