



Conference Report

Sex and Secrecy: The 4th Conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society

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Background to Sex and Secrecy

Sex is often a barometer of social change, and power struggles and political conflicts around matters of sexuality often reveal wider social anxieties. Sexual behavior, attitudes towards sexuality, and the values, norms, and beliefs that surround sex can also reveal underlying social tensions. In the Southern African region, an area experiencing rapid social transformation, such tensions are evident in fierce public contestations about HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, and homosexuality. There is thus a particular urgency surrounding issues of sexuality in the societies within the Southern African region.

In order to provide an international forum to address issues pertaining to sexuality in a South African and international context, the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, The Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Witwatersrand, and the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa hosted Sex and Secrecy, the 4th conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society (IASSCS). Meeting on the WITS campus in Johannesburg, South Africa, in June 2003, this was the first IASSCS International Conference to be held in Africa. Previous conferences were held in Amsterdam, Melbourne, and Manchester.

The Theme—Sex and Secrecy

Attitudes toward homosexuality, silence surrounding domestic violence, and the whisperings and coded references that accompany HIV/AIDS related deaths are suggestive of broader cultural norms that are usefully understood in relation to secrecy. The themes of secrecy, silence, and taboo provided a new perspective from which to explore these and other issues.

Secrecy also offered an innovative way of thinking about sex in relation to the public/private sphere. Media attention given to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, public visibility of gay and lesbian cultures in the wake of moves toward greater legal equality in some areas, and the increasing prominence of women in public life have meant that issues of gender and sexuality are at the forefront of public debates in Southern African countries.

The theme of the conference, sex and secrecy, sought to engage with pressing concerns emanating from the South African situation, while simultaneously resonating with and encouraging international scholarship in the field of sexuality. The conference aimed to provide a forum for new ethnographic work and theoretical insights from a range of disciplines, emerging from diverse social contexts. The scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and of sexual violence in the

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Southern African region meant that these topics were at the forefront of the conference agenda. In addition, extreme homophobia in neighboring states juxtaposed with constitutional equality for lesbians and gay men in South Africa highlighted the ambivalent responses to homosexuality in the region.

This conference was not a sex conference in the biomedical tradition, but rather its aim was to look at the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of sex, sexual practice, and sexuality. In coupling sex and secrecy, we aimed to foreground the issues of power, stigma, and silence. We needed to understand when sex is secret and why.

As Lenore Manderson, outgoing president of the IASSCS succinctly stated in her opening address:

The intent of this conference is the inquisition of matters sexual and secret and sexual and silenced: the scrutiny of acts, identities, practice, relationships, and desires that are illicit and illegitimate, proscribed and hidden. The value of exposing these and of questioning the nexus of sexuality and secrecy is to break the control over individuals whose sexuality and sexual lives are marginalized.

The Proceedings of the Conference

The conference papers were organized around six main themes that formed the intellectual pillars of the conference: The Power of the Secret; Hidden Codes, Local Rules; Unsettling Sexual and Gender Identities; The Politics of Sexuality; Sexuality, Sexual Meanings, and HIV/AIDS; and Public Discourse, Private Realms.

Sex and Secrecy was unique. The overwhelming response was unprecedented at the University of the Witwatersrand, with 150 papers presented and 300 registered delegates. Representation at the conference was thoroughly international with delegates from as far afield as Indonesia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Vietnam. The issues addressed were of global relevance. These included insights into the international dimensions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, exemplified by the plenary presentation by Carlos Caceras of Peru (Caceras, 2003) and carried through in several other conference sessions. Gender-based violence and exploitation were addressed from a variety of different perspectives

ranging from child prostitution in the U.S. (Pittman, 2003) to child rape in South Africa (Ford, 2003; Posel, 2003).

Papers presented at the conference had the effect of unsettling some long-standing assumptions about sexuality. For example, a paper on female initiation rituals in Northern Mozambique (Arnfred, 2003), where emphasis is placed on enhancing women's sexual pleasure, served as a refreshing challenge to the idea of women's sexual passivity in some traditional African societies. This paper was in stark contrast to reports of research on female genital mutilation in other parts of Africa.

Masculinity also came in for interrogation at the conference, with several papers looking at the changing nature of masculinity in South Africa. The idea of new masculinities interacting with older more conventional male roles provided a window into creative alternatives that men are exploring in opposition to traditional prescriptions for violence and machismo. For example, one paper (Hunter, 2003) looked at the evolution of the Zulu term *Isoka*, which means a man who is "successful" with women, as an indicator of how masculinity has changed. Traditionally the figure of the *Isoka* represented a realm of socially permitted sexual experimentation for young men who were expected to later marry one of their girlfriends. However, social and economic deprivation in South Africa has made marriage unaffordable for many men and as a result *Isoka* has become synonymous with having multiple sexual partners. This research also showed that the impact of AIDS deaths, and women's resistance was challenging this form of *Isoka* masculinity. As another example, a paper by Liz Walker (2003) on new masculinities looked at strategies adopted by young men in an urban township north of Johannesburg who sought to escape from the cycle of violence that had characterized their family lives.

The paradox of simultaneous acceptance and rejection of gay lifestyles was explored in a paper dealing with small town gay beauty pageants in South Africa. The researcher, Graeme Reid (2003), suggested that homosexuality was often seen in the South African context as a marker of modernity that accounted for both acceptance and rejection in the public sphere. A number of papers (de Vos, 2003; Fritz, 2003; Haslam

& Lind, 2003; Klaaren, 2003) examined the implications of the South African Constitution on same-sex identities in South Africa. A paper by Peter Geschiere (2003) explored the connections between witchcraft and homosexuality in Cameroon.

A study by Sasha Gear (2003) of endemic violence and systematic rape among male prisoners in South African jails and another paper by Niehaus (2003) on the social history of rape in the Lowveld (Limpopo Province, South Africa) gave insight into the roots and the social context of sexual violence in the country. Gear found that the majority of rapists were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and wanted to imitate masculine domination that they had either failed to achieve or felt they had lost.

A paper (Epstein, 2003) on the link between conspiracy theories of HIV and high-risk behavior in Tanzania provided a way of understanding this particular form of denial. Conference delegate John Lwanda (2003) showed how popular culture was used as a way of communicating about sex and AIDS in the repressive context of life president (1961–1993) Hastings Banda's Malawi, where any discussion of sexuality was erased from the public sphere.

A concurrent theme throughout the conference was the Women's Same-Sex Forum, which included reports on an innovative research initiative, the African Women's Life History Project (see Conference Report by Evelyn Blackwood in this issue). The Women's Life History Project comprised an ambitious strategy to train individuals in research and presentation techniques. Women from several African countries participated in two pre-conference workshops and generated a body of material in under-researched areas. The project had an academic as well as an activist component. The conference also provided an important opportunity for lesbian women in Africa to bring their experiences into the public domain and to organize the African Lesbian Network.

Several papers (Burns, 2003; Erlank, 2003; Harris, 2003; Klausen, 2003) addressed the history of sexuality in Africa. A paper by Natasha Erlank (2003) showed how sex education at the beginning of the twentieth century emphasized the pleasures of sex in contrast to current programs that link sex with disease. Another presentation (Delius & Glaser, 2003)

suggested that the traditional practice of polygamy in South Africa failed to contain male lust. It also argued that sexual mores had changed considerably over time and highlighted the impact of Christianity on sexual behavior.

Promoting an Academic—NGO Interface

An important feature of *Sex and Secrecy* was the strong presence of research based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), made possible by the generous support of the Ford Foundation and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS). During *Sex and Secrecy* four panel discussions were aimed specifically at creating a dialogue between researchers and NGOs. One such session was devoted to South-South exchange, with the purpose of linking NGOs working in different parts of the developing world. Another panel brought together organizations working on gender-based violence in Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique, and in a third, groups working on HIV/AIDS in Vietnam were brought into an exchange with others working in this field in Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Other sessions focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues.

Impressions From Sex and Secrecy

During the concluding remarks of *Sex and Secrecy*, made by Carolyn Hamilton, Achille Mbembe, and Isak Niehaus, some gaps in research and presentation were highlighted. One of these was the need for more reflexive research in sensitive and intimate areas such as sexuality. Other comments pointed to the dearth of research presented on heterosexual sexuality. Isak Niehaus, an anthropologist from the University of Pretoria, commented:

I thought the conference was a bit quiet on heterosexuality. We need to ask ourselves what has happened. Why do we not speak so much about female to male, male to female practices? Why? Is it because there is no secrecy or is it that there is an impasse in theorizing about heterosexuality? We need to ask ourselves why there is the paradigm of women's oppression and

little attempt to go beyond it. Feminism is an ideology of liberation and I would argue for looking for new kinds of feminist inspired writing on perhaps more pleasurable aspects of sexual encounters.

Professor Achille Mbembe from the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research provided additional commentary on the conference:

I do not have much to say after such a rich conference and not much to add to the rich text we have been privileged to read, the reflections and the debate we have attended during the last few days. Personally I have learnt a lot from what I have heard and read. I was very much impressed by the extreme variety of empirical research. Overall I think we seem to be on the verge of a new wave of research, very located and ethnographically rich, on issues of sex, sexuality, and life in general. I was also impressed by what was going on in another realm of practices and pedagogies. I think it was good to bring NGOs here—they brought a lot of understanding to the topics debated.

Maybe the next step is to look into sex and...publicness, the publicness of sex, the public faces of sex, and sex in the public imagination. After all, we have come to assume that it is in the nature of the sexual act to be a secret act. That is what we expect. These are the norms we are socialized in and we are educated to expect this. But what is striking in the place we live today and in the world in general is how sex has become public. What type of new explorations can we undertake that would lead us to reflect on that publicness of sex and the ways in which that publicness leads to some of the issues we are dealing with here.

To end, it seems to me we did not think too much about sex as a gift. After all how can we imagine life without such a gift? The gift of sex. It is impossible to imagine ourselves living in a sexless society. Let us just imagine where we would be. It would be quite a nightmare. It is time to think of sex as a gift and to recover therefore the

potentialities of joy and happiness embedded in it.

The IASSCS conferences serve as a vehicle for generating and stimulating further research about sexuality. The conferences have continued to grow in strength and diversity, expanding in 2003 for the first time to Africa, where previously a limited amount of work has been done in the field of sexuality research. Sex and Secrecy aimed to give impetus to research about sexuality in this part of the world and to develop a new research agenda regarding the association between sexuality and secrecy. It is our hope that many of the intellectual concerns raised during the presentations and discussions at Sex and Secrecy will be elaborated and developed at future IASSCS International Conferences. ♦

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Key conference papers will be available in the IASSCS journal, *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. A full set of conference papers is available from the conference office: robbie.cameron@pixie.co.za

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