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Review: If You Seduce a Straight Person, Can You Make Them Gay?: Issues in Biological Essentialism Versus Social Constructionism in Gay and Lesbian Identities (John P. DeCecco and John P. Elia, Harrington Park, 1993)

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"Community" is the last segment of the book and several passages of work deposited here complain of gay men and Lesbian political schisms. One woman describes an experience in a bar seeing a woman with "close-cropped grey hair, was smoking and, to me, she looked like the butchest dyke I could imagine. I never went back again." Another writes, "I wouldn't go to the main lesbian gatherings if I was paid to." The last passage in the book moans, ". . . then when something like the Gay Centre opens, one of the first thing it does is get into a furious argument about what gay people it can keep out. What should be a unifying force becomes negative and divisive. Goddess help us. . . ."

Indeed.

It is not to say these experiences of "community" are not true for these women, but that the organization and selection of this raw material, written in response to directives we as readers do not have, and produced within a provocative frame must be continually problematized lest the publication seduce.

If You Seduce a Straight Person, Can You Make Them Gay?: Issues in Biological Essentialism versus Social Constructionism in Gay and Lesbian Identities, edited by John P. DeCecco and John P. Elia. (New York: Harrington Park Press.) 1993. xvi, 266 p., index.

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I really wanted to like this book. The subject matter is certainly in need of a timely reconsideration. The last few years have seen a spate of articles providing hard data about the biological and genetic correlates of homosexuality (e.g., Bailey, Pillard, Neale & Agyei, 1993; Hamer et al., 1993; LeVay, 1991). These new data certainly do not "prove" that sexual orientation is a matter of biology, but they intensify the debate on both sides, raising it above the platitudes which too often have taken the place of scientific argument.

On the other hand, I still remembered DeCecco's letter to the Advocate, wherein he warns that "Genetic and surgical intervention, as in the case of Jews and the Holocaust, is always just around the corner in our homophobic and racist society" (DeCecco, 1989), and his intimation that his apocalyptic visions alone should preclude investigations into the biological substrates of sexuality. Although clearly an impassioned advocate, how effective and impartial a moderator could he be in a debate on the subject?

Sadly, the answer is "Not very," and in fact the volume makes no real pretense to be a balanced airing of the issues. Instead, it is a manifesto of the social constructionist perspective. Fine, I thought, this may be disappointing, even deceptive, but it could still be a good read.

Still feeling hopeful, I read the penultimate chapter while waiting in my doctor's office for my latest checkup for one HIV-related problem or the other. My eyes bugged when I read that "virtually all of the gay male AIDS patients were regular and heavy users of... 'recreational' drugs" (p. 227). Had I missed something? And I wondered what data supported this author's unreferenced claim that disco music was inherently immunosuppressive. But the truly disgusting statement was yet to come.

Dismissing in a footnote the role of HIV in AIDS, the author, one John Lauritsen, rails against "the Public Health Service's untenable etiological hypotheses, its statistical prevarications, its incompetent epidemiological research, its hysteria-mongering, and now its unconscionable promotion of AZT" (p. 230). Finally, the author clues us into what is the real cause of AIDS: "Obviously poppers are not the cause of AIDS. But, in light of their toxic effects, they are likely to be a major co-factor" (p. 229). Incorrect.

For those who don't know, the poppers-AIDS link was tested, and rejected as early as 1981, and there has been nothing to warrant its reconsideration in the twelve years

since. Indeed, the November 19, 1993 issue of AIDS Treatment News (#187) rehashes the topic, and reminds us that "there is no definitive proof that poppers are harmful," although I don't think anyone wants to argue that they're good for you. For this volume still to be beating the drum of an environmental cause of AIDS, while denying the clearly established FACT that it is a sexually transmitted viral disease -- is scandalous. That such statements would pass muster by DeCecco, the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Homosexuality, and someone who presumably should know better, shows clearly the sorry state of affairs with this volume, and for that matter with the Journal itself.

Lauritsen's is the worst, but not the only example of a plainly -- and I'll say it out loud -- stupid claim which DeCecco should have caught. To take another example, try this one out: "According to every theory of evolution, biological determinism or genetic essentialism we should be extinct. But we are not extinct. Nor are we threatened by extinction, or dependent upon biological reproduction to make more of ourselves" (Franklin, p. 38). This statement is factually wrong, as would be clear to anyone with a post-Darwin understanding of evolutionary models. One needn't agree with theories such as kin selection, but one cannot simply make them go away by rhetorical fiat. Where, we must ask again, were the editors?

I confess that the silly article by Lauritsen colors my entire perception of the volume. The real question is whether it was abherant excess, or whether it was typical. How, exactly, did it fit into the debate between biological essentialism and social constructionism? The answer: it didn't. In fact, very little of this book actually pertains to the title subject. Two out of sixteen, to be exact. Three, tops.

The questions before us are largely these: Is sexual orientation fundamentally (not necessarily wholly) a social or a biological construct? Imagine an unsocialized human animal. If the former theory is correct s/he would have no sexual preferences. Indeed, the tone of some statements would suggest that s/he would have no sexuality or sexual motivations at all. If the latter, biological theory is more accurate, such an animal, untouched by the molding influences of culture, would still display sexual orientations, preferences and strategies as are evinced in most mammals, and especially the higher primates. These are two fairly clearly opposed theories, and the reader hopes the articles in the volume do something to facilitate the choice between them.

As the Preface notes, these papers were presented in 1987. Not being published until 1993, most were hopelessly outdated before the spine was even cracked. Still, some few of them have aged well, especially those with an eye towards history. For instance, Hutter's chapter on German jurisprudence, and Bao's description of Venezuelan cultural interpretations of homosexuality at the turn of the century should be read by anyone interested in these topics. Also worth the read would be Brodsky's "retrospective ethnography" about the Mineshaft, a New York S&M bar. But they are ill-suited here, and do nothing to further the debate.

Most articles assume homosexual orientation, and then document how social identity management can take many forms (e.g., Dankmeijer, Buntzly, van der Geest), which brings us no closer to the central question of "Whence that orientation?". If the theme is to be one "versus" the other, the reference to "identity" in the title is a red herring. Biological theories make no claims about psychological identities at all, but only about sexual strategies as mediated by psychological motivations. Discussions about sexual identities are therefore utterly beside the point.

Only two pieces come even close to being pertinent. Always provocative, Dickemann's reads more like a juicy abstract of some more thorough work than a self-contained article. She raises many interesting arguments, proposes many potentially testable hypotheses, but always stops just short of presenting any actual data. The article

develops a largely deprivational theory of male homosexuality, where, in one instance, younger sons of the higher classes are somehow edged into homosexual roles to protect the rights of the first born. By this reasoning, male homosexual orientation should have had higher incidence rates among later born children than among first-born (after controlling for the age of mother at birth), but we do not find whether this is the case.

In any event, granting that all this is true, it does not at all rule out the possibility of a biologically grounded sexual orientation. She concedes that

Which individuals, in any specific social gender category, prefer more or less homosocial or homosexual contact, is of course a matter of temperament.

Temperamental differences may indeed rest in part on innate factors, but this is a far cry from a gene for homosexuality. (p. 66)

Six years later, she may not wish to change her position, but were she writing today she could not make such an assertion without acknowledging that the best available empirical evidence (Hamer et al., 1993) contradicts her.

The only other article which clearly relates to the problem is the one which gave its title question to the book. The answer, according to this author, is "Yes, straight men can be seduced into being gay." Meijer bases this claim upon three cases of allegedly "straight" men who, through social influences, later became "gay." But this conclusion is a non sequitur, since none of the three were uncontestably "straight" to begin with. Two of the case studies are entirely retrospective, making dubious the claim that they had initially been "straight." And even the third, who we trace through contemporary journal entries, admits that he was bisexual, not heterosexual, so his transition to "gay" is less than groundbreaking.

Unless "straight" is defined by the unremarkable physical capacity to copulate with members of the opposite sex, regardless of whether the act is emotionally rewarding -- as it seemed not to be for any of Meijer's cases -- then none of the author's cases advances his thesis. It remains unproven, in other words, that one's sexual orientation can undergo radical change, although the same cannot be said for one's sexual behaviors.

No other contributions within the volume make any specific reference to the theme of this volume. For this reason, our attention turns toward the editors' introductory essay.

My standards are reasonable. A debate, or "issues" volume is a success if it achieves one of two goals. At the very least it must cogently frame the terms of the argument so that we are all agreed upon the questions to be answered. If we are very lucky indeed, what follows the clarification will actually advance our understanding of the subject.

Relative to the first criterion, we are immediately disappointed with the characterization of DeCecco's bogey-man of "biological essentialism." DeCecco speaks in vague terms without citing a single exemplar of work he intends to criticize, a favor he did not fail to grant his constructionist summary. Some of his generalizations I would agree with ("Biological essentialism depicts a process in which the biological influences precede the cultural influences and set pre-determined biological limits to the effects culture can have in shaping sexual and gender expression"). Others, however, are more problematic. The statement that biological essentialism "assumes that each biological ingredient (i.e., genes, hormones, and brain tissue) is an independent agent that, in some additive and sequential fashion, exerts its influence without itself undergoing change" accurately applies to some essentialist models, but it is not a logical entailment of every one.

When all the dust has settled DeCecco and Elia have not lined up their pins very well. Does this biological essentialism mean that biology determines sexual orientation, or that it predisposes toward a particular sexual orientation? These are separate claims which often become conflated, as when Jay Paul speaks interchangeably about the biological

basis, biological determination, and biological substratum of homosexuality (pp. 46-47). Are they arguing against the assertion that biology is a necessary condition, a sufficient condition, or both a necessary and sufficient condition for adult homosexual orientation? Spiro (1964) lays out in clear terms how each of these possibilities requires separate argumentation.

And when the volume speaks of biological essentialism, is the reference to genetic, hormonal, or perhaps neurological essentialism, or some combination thereof, again, each of these being different theories requiring individual confrontation. But none of this comes out in this volume. There is merely an unfocused "biological essentialism," which "looks back" to the seventies, which must be soundly trounced by an enlightened, "forward looking" social constructionism. In any event, the first goal of an issues volume, to clarify the questions being debated, is unmet.

What about the second goal, to further the discussion, to leave the field in better shape at the end of the book than it was at the beginning? Despite the volume's serious shortcomings, I can point to two themes which perhaps bode well for the longer course of the debate. While DeCecco has never tried to hide the political influences upon his work, for the first time I notice a statement of its philosophical foundation. Specifically, he denies the existence of a "human nature." "We...are maintaining that all the ingredients, biological, individual, and social, co-determine the effects that each has on the other and on the shaping of human preference" (p. 11). While everyone would surely agree that there is significant interaction among levels, to deny biology its preeminent place in the schema is to hold that there is no limit beyond which humans cannot go, and also that humans, by definition, need have nothing significant in common.

The denial of a human nature, of the psychic unity of mankind, is both powerful and precedented (e.g., the new school of cultural psychology), and obviously has major implications beyond the question of sexual orientation. Should this perspective prove to be untenable, more specific models derived from it, such as the social constructionist explanation of sexual orientation, must also be untenable. Anytime hidden premises are revealed and made amenable to discussion, progress has been made.

A second possible advance comes from the editors' willingness to at least consider a middle-ground between the two schools. It is reasonable that the same overt behavior will have multiple, discrete causes. As a simplistic analogy, blue eyes can come from either the appropriate gene combinations or cosmetic lenses. Both biological and social causes are possible for any particular instance of the behavior, although later information may rule out one or the other. The question for social constructionists is not whether homosexual orientation can be socially constructed (they have already succeeded, I think, in this project), but whether it must be. I do not feel they have properly recognized, much less addressed this much different problem.

We can easily imagine, then, that there are fairly clear instances of biologically caused homosexual orientation, and some which largely arise from social causes. Most cases would represent a combination of the two influences. Although DeCecco perhaps means to point in this direction, he cannot go very far in it, given the amorphous, ill-conceived concept of biological essentialism used in the book. But the effort, small though it is, might take us beyond the mere lip-service paid to such synthesis we have heretofore endured. The first step, of course, will be for DeCecco et al. to overcome their fear of biology.

In sum, this volume is not utterly devoid of merit, if read generously. Given the many interesting but thematically irrelevant pieces, this is one of those rare instances where the sum of its parts is greater than the whole. As a whole, the book's value lies

largely in its indications about what could be done, rather than in any actual accomplishment of its own.

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Gay Studies from the French Cultures: Voices from France, Belgium, Brazil, Canada and the Netherlands, edited by Rommel Mendes-Leite & Pierre-Olivier de Busscher (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1993) 339 pages.

reviewed by Thomas K. Fitzgerald, Greensboro, N. C.

Having been a graduate student in France in the sixties, I eagerly awaited the review of Gay Studies from the French Cultures in anticipation that I might learn something new about gay studies but, more specifically, about how gayness might be alike or different in French cultures. I was a bit disappointed on both counts.

This is a collection of diverse papers on research on homosexualities pursued by French-speaking scholars from France, Canada, Belgium, Brazil, and the Netherlands without any common denominator other than the fact of its French kinship. Like many collected readers, no particular theme holds the texts together. As the articles are largely translations, a few are not aesthetically pleasing to read. Nonetheless, the disparity of subject matter and different points of view in this volume add to the increasingly acknowledged plurality of homosexuality. Recognizing this problem, Haworth Press makes available individual articles for purchase from their Document Delivery Center.

Reading between the lines and assuming that these articles are more or less representative of French culture, one can pick up a few uniquely Francophone approaches to the subject of homosexuality. Although the French aesthetic tradition concerning this subject is an acknowledged fact (being especially prominent in works of some first-rate French authors), the sciences in France have demonstrated noticeably less intellectual involvement in gay and lesbian research (Pierre-Olivier de Busscher 1993: 3-4).

Claudie Lesselier, in her article on "Silenced Resistances and Conflictual Identities," makes the interesting point that between 1900 and 1925 France witnessed the birth of a unparalleled "lesbian cosmopolitan world," but from the thirties until the emergence of the new feminist/homosexual movements of the seventies, silence and social invisibility have been more characteristic (p. 106). Lesbians as a group, then, are largely marginalized in France, socially and politically restricted in space. Therefore, lesbian research--unlike in the USA--remains weak in this country (p. 123).

Another uniquely French characteristic, I believe, is its elaboration of an epistemological approach to this scholarship. Homosexuality is not as likely, as in the USA for example, to be seen as a "thing." See Rommel Mendes-Leite's Introduction, "It's Only a Word" (p. 1-15). Insisting on the specificity of context, Mendes-Leite claims that it is not