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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Mythbusting Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities

Review by William J. Robertson

50 Great Myths of Human Sexuality

by Pepper Schwartz and Martha Kempner

Wiley Blackwell, 2015

Unfounded beliefs about bodies, genders, and sexualities are running rampant in Euroamerican societies. These beliefs are more than mere misgivings or misunderstandings, they have real effects on people's lives and can support structures of marginalization and oppression. In *50 Great Myths of Human Sexuality*, Pepper Schwartz and Martha Kempner attack many of these insidious and omnipresent beliefs head on, providing a succinct but well cited rebuttal to fifty of the most pernicious myths around gender and sexuality. Schwartz, a sociologist, and Kempner, a sexual health writer, draw on a wide array of sources across the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities to craft a text that is eminently readable.

The text is divided into nine chapters each containing several myths (consecutively numbered 1 through 50). Chapter 1 focuses on body parts and addresses myths concerning penis size, vaginal odor, penile circumcision, testosterone, and binary biological sex. Chapter 2 addresses sexual orientation and identity and covers myths about homosexuality and gaydar, bisexuality, transgender surgery, gay conversion therapy, children raised by same-sex parents, and child molestation and homosexuality. Chapter 3 covers a variety of myths concerning "normal" sexuality, including the differences between single and married sex lives, sex and age, and anal sex. Chapter 4 examines myths concerning sexual performance, including first-time sexual encounters, simultaneous orgasm, faking orgasms, domination and rough sex, masturbation, and aphrodisiacs.

Chapter 5 discusses conception and contraception and covers myths concerning the health dangers of oral contraceptives, withdrawal as a birth control method, condoms, and abortion. Chapter 6 addresses sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and myths concerning HIV/AIDS, STI medications, and HPV vaccination. Chapter 7 deals with relationships and addresses myths about hooking up, feeling attracted to other people while in monogamous relationships, female sexual fantasies, infidelity, and (mis)matches in couple's sexual desires. Chapter 8 addresses health and sexuality and tackles myths concerning jealousy, alcohol, pain during intercourse, erectile dysfunction, sex addiction, sexual assault, and pornography. Finally, Chapter 9 covers public sexualities and includes myths about sex education, promiscuity, sexting, and gay rights.

The myths within these chapters span only a few pages, each with its own references section. Any one of these myths could warrant an entire text of its own, so given the project's scope and size it is commendable that Schwartz and Kempner have been able to distill these myths into quickly readable and easily digestible essays that cover the most essential points of each myth. Unfortunately, doing so also has the effect of erasing or ignoring much of the nuance and subtlety in the gendered and sexual lives of humans across societies—these myths are American-centric and largely lack any substantive cross-cultural engagement.

There is also the problem that some of the responses and explanations provided by the authors produce new myths in place of the old ones. For example, the only mention of polyamorous relationships in the entire text is at the end of the myth that “no one is really bisexual” in Chapter 2. The only sources cited for this mention of polyamory appear to be psychology sources, which is a missed opportunity considering the vast anthropological literature on the place of polyamory in kinship and sexual relationships. The definition of polyamory provided by the authors— “a desire to live in romantic and sexual situations with both men and women” (p. 48)—is misleading and heteronormative and is presented as a synonym for bisexuality. Yet, there are homosexual polyamorous relationships in which all partners are of the same gender (which is odd for the authors to exclude from their definition considering one of the sources cited for their definition is from a study of lesbians). This may seem pedantic, but it is important as polyamory is becoming more known in popular culture and as more polyamorous people are coming out and being open about their non-normative relationships that the topic be treated with care and not merely reproduce the very problem the text itself is trying to combat.

Despite these issues and given the project's inherent limitations, Schwartz & Kempner have written an accessible and wide-ranging text that does a good job of addressing many common misunderstandings and problematic beliefs about genders, bodies, and sexualities. Their book is probably most pedagogically useful for undergraduate courses ranging across scientific and humanistic disciplines, though is probably most useful in the social sciences. Any individual myth could make for a great introduction to its topic, which could then be covered in more depth in the classroom or in research papers or class essays. Any of the myths within this book could also be useful in non-academic settings as well, as it is written for an audience that does not need a deep background in these topics or the science behind them.

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