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Jenny Hockey, Angela Meah and Victoria Robinson, Mundane Heterosexualities. From Theory to Practices. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, 206 pp.

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Book reviews

Jenny Hockey, Angela Meah and Victoria Robinson, *Mundane Heterosexualities. From Theory to Practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, 206 pp.

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The book is the common enterprise of three sociologists coming from different research backgrounds: life-course and ageing (Hockey), feminist epistemology and methodology (Meah) and gender studies (Robinson). They have chosen to undertake the challenge of dealing with heterosexuality as a dominant identity category which has remained largely invisible, unexplored, taken for granted and naturalised, while “sexual diversities” have been a major area of scrutiny. This is why “we now know more about the narratives of lesbian and gay identities within relationships which do not conform to prevailing norms than we do about heterosexual lives” [p. 28]. The status of heterosexuality as an unmarked and silent category makes it particularly difficult to account for, i.e. for empirical research to elicit explicit reflexive narratives about how people experience and make sense of their heterosexuality. As the authors point out, “practices of concealment therefore emerged as an aspect of the living out of heterosexuality” [p. 117].

The research design comprehended biographical interviews with 72 people (60 women and 12 men aged 15-90) across three generations from 22 families living in East Yorkshire, UK. Although “how heterosexuality is ‘done’ is (...) something which happens differently, across generation, class and gender” [p. 128], the researchers grasped some general mechanisms of the making of heterosexuality. While heterosexuality infuses the times and spaces of everyday life, its reproduction is more explicit in some “key heterosexual moments” (like first coitus) and “mundane extremities” (like sexual pressure). “Nevertheless, the differences, contradictions and continuities in people’s perceptions of and experiences of heterosexuality can be seen in the everyday mundanities, rather than necessarily ‘revealed’ in extreme or peak moments. This is borne out in our discovery that when people are asked to be reflexive about their experiences, they do so in everyday terms” [p. 138].

Heterosexuality is investigated first as a residual category, emerging mainly to account for something that has gone wrong: as the authors point out, “for our interviewees and their families, therefore, ‘being’ heterosexual equated to ‘doing what comes naturally’ – and so could be left unsaid. What *could* be articulated, however, was how individuals might transgress, or digress from its boundaries” [p. 10]. Secondly, heterosexuality is analysed as an organising principle making sense of people’s mundane heterosexual experiences: “with respect to heterosexuality, then, the domain of mundane improvisation and routine has been selected in order to make sense of its capacity to demand conformity, whilst remaining unremarked” [p. 13]. In-depth interviews aimed at two results: to trigger the interviewees’ accounts of what is perceived as problematic, disappointing or shocking as a way of understanding what might lie at the core of heterosexuality but it is not clearly articulated by individuals leading heterosexual lives; and to explore “the fine grain of everyday lives organised around the heterosexual principles” [p. 15] by focusing on some institutions (marriage, family practices) through which institutionalised hetero-

sexuality is reproduced. As the researchers admit, “though these well-researched social arrangements were our *empirical* concern, therefore, the institution of heterosexuality was our *analytical* focus” [p. 16]. Therefore, “it is important to ask about the extent to which the family has been a key site within which heterosexuality is reproduced, resisted or renegotiated” [p. 38]. In this perspective, “non-sexual practices can be crucial to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality” [p. 129]: notwithstanding that, the interviewees strictly connect sex as an arena of practices to heterosexuality as an organising principle. Although heterosexuality transcends the simply sexual, for the interviewees sex is an empirical category framing how they understand and make sense of heterosexuality.

The ways in which people account for their heterosexualities have changed dramatically during the twentieth century: some of the older cohort’s interviewees tended to cover sexual matters with silences, omissions and euphemisms, as the typical expression “to keep yourself clean” reminds. This was especially true for the women of this cohort, who had been socialised to sexual passivity, to a notion of sex as a marital duty towards a husband who, as a man, is perceived as more sexually interested and trained by nature. In a retrospective reconstruction of the biographies and of “relational past,” by which previous experiences are framed through present meanings, in the older cohort too some room for negotiation and resistance to institutionalised heterosexuality emerges: for instance, when a woman recalled her first sexual intercourse by telling explicitly that now it would be defined as “date rape.” The following cohorts experienced a redefinition of gender relations, an expectation about intimacy and a broader sexual experimentation, but also a backlash due to the Aids moral panic during the 1980s: therefore, the younger cohorts show some elements of ambivalence in the way they experience and make sense of heterosexuality (dependence and independence; precocious sexual expertise and ignorance about non-sexual dimensions of heterosexuality; etc.).

To sum up, the book is an attempt to embrace Stevi Jackson’s suggestion to “cease to theorize at an entirely abstract level and pay attention to what is known about material, embodied men and women going about the business of living their sexualities” (1999:26). The three authors explored the ongoing doing of heterosexualities through lay people’s mundane experiences and biographies. Looking at the mundane meant to acknowledge the variety of ways people perform heterosexuality, and to unravel the making of heterosexuality as a matter of practices, thereby (potentially) of agency. In-depth interviews provided a sort of practical reflexivity that is implicit rather than unconscious: through their everyday narratives, people make reference to a repertoire of socially available discourses and imaginaries about heterosexuality, not only by reproducing them, but also by redefining or resisting them in the way they make sense of their heterosexualities.

This qualitative study opens up a path for further research on the doing (and interweaving) of heterosexualities, gender and sexualities: while this study has focused more widely on women’s (hetero)sexual agency, some space has been left for exploring the specific connection between the reproduction/redefinition of institutionalised heterosexuality and of hegemonic masculinity.

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