The Need for Research on Caribbean Sexual and Gender Cultures

Until recently sexuality was not a central topic in Caribbean studies, and it is only in the 21st century that it has become a discrete arena for study in different parts of the world, including this region. Indeed, some would say that it is now fashionable or trendy to study sexual culture, and that may be the case. However, having myself been engaged with the subject since the early 1990s, I am convinced that even with a recent proliferation of studies, we have only just started to scratch the surface of what Pat Mohammed once quite aptly described as an area of social life that is “deeply embedded in subterranean aspects of culture, in mythology and rite.” In other words, even though we have made great strides recently in recognizing that sex is worthy of study, I would argue that we have barely begun the excavation work that is needed to unearth it and make it visible or knowable.

However, research on sex, sexuality, sexual practice, etc is a tricky business. We may ask, why is it important to make the private public, or why study a subject that everyone knows something about? Shouldn't we leave this subject where it belongs – in the bedroom – and leave the state and the public out of it? Why should we, as a friend asked me, be “spying up in people business,” or as Bajans say, “why be malicious”? 

What I want to suggest here is that although we need (more) research on sex in the Caribbean, for a number of reasons, only one of which is to craft better policy on HIV and AIDS, as with any other social research, including research on gender, this needs to be done in ways that are not harmful, unethical, or “malicious.” In other words, we need research on sexuality, but we need to be mindful about the kinds of questions we ask, the methods we use to gather information, how we analyse data, and the kind of interpretations and recommendations we make regarding wider interventions, actions and policies. And if done carefully, we could produce research results that would support positive social change.

In this project we have deliberately used the idea of sexual culture as the starting point to conduct research in order to produce informed recommendations for HIV and AIDS prevention policies and programmes and which could help to close the “KAP-gap” or help to reconnect knowledge about sex to sexual behaviour. The focus on sexual culture is vital to this project for it refers to an approach that does not simply examine sexual acts, desires or identities, but more significantly focuses on the ways in which social, economic, political contexts and environments construct specific acts, desires and identities and imbue them with meaning. Thus instead of spying on who does what with whom and trying to figure out how people identify themselves sexually (is a person gay, lesbian, hetero, trans, bi, etc) it is vital to carefully examine and question how law, religion, the media, gender relations, ethnicity, and class and any other significant factors such as ability, create a particular culture or cultures with their own set of
understandings, norms and values, and which produce particular sexual knowledge, actions and identities. In understanding what constitutes sexual culture, we expect to be better able to identify what motivates certain sexual behaviours, what people hold dear, find pleasurable or desirable in their sexual relations, and why at times their sexual acts may sometimes contradict their rational knowledge about unsafe sex.

By taking this approach, it becomes possible to discern the structure and discourses that make up a dominant or hegemonic sexual culture in a country as well as the marginalized or dominated sexual cultures, which may be singular or multiple according to the specific contexts. For example, Trinidad and Tobago may have several more discernable subordinated sexual cultures than Barbados, due to the more pronounced ethnic heterogeneity of the country, and on this score Suriname may be even more complex than Trinidad and Tobago. However, we could also consider that Barbados’ history of class and racialized arrangements may create its own version of cultural heterogeneity. Alternatively, there may be no discernible or distinctly different sexual cultures, and a sameness may be the most pronounced feature of a society (although I am not entirely sure where that would obtain, given that few countries today are marked by homogeneity). Dominant sexual cultures may also differ from nation to nation, as could the dominated – and the research that will be presented here will describe aspects of both dominant and subordinated sexual cultures in three different countries. However, this research, when taken together with that of others before, such as by the late Barry Chevannes, Jaquie Alexander, Gloria Wekker, David Murray, Tracy Robinson, Christine Barrow, Deborah Curtis, and the late Robert Carr as well as some
of my own, is beginning to establish some significant similarities in the main national sexual cultures, whereby it may be possible to speak about a hegemonic Caribbean sexual culture in the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean.

What I see emerging through the existing studies and research is that central to the hegemonic sexual culture is a number of dimensions, which I wish to share with you here. Upfront I have to say that this is a very preliminary outline, and one which is tentative and open to suggestions, modifications and corrections.

1) A norm of heterosexuality that is unmarked and often unnamed yet privileged, (sometimes known as heteronormativity) and which is inscribed in many laws and held as the only ‘real’ way to express one’s sexuality. It produces a fear of homosexuality or homophobia as well as discrimination against, stigmatization of, and intolerance for those acts, desires, and identities that who do not adhere to this norm.

2) A quite wide acceptance of multiple partnering, including informal polygamy, as Barry Chevannes found in his research on men, and which is structured through, for example, laws that provide child support for or access to “outside” children, and which refer to a baby-mother or child-father who is not the spouse or partner;

3) A profound link between livelihood and consumer needs and desires and sexual acts, expressed through prostitution and transactional sex, which are widely tolerated, if not always legal;

4) A norm of masculine violence or aggression in sexual intercourse, whereby some “slamming” or “stabbing” is expected, irrespective of gender, with ‘vigorous’ sexual
intercourse constituting pleasure, yet with rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment also being very common occurrences (see Chevannes, Cooper, etc);
5) A norm of first sexual intercourse at around the age of fourteen and before marriage, although this may vary quite significantly by ethnicity and religion; and
6) Although I haven’t yet had a chance to learn much about the recent research project undertaken by Professor Reddock and team about child sexual abuse from other reports from around the region it would seem that the dominant sexual culture upholds a notion of an adult man’s (sometimes the father’s) right of sexual access to (taking the virginity of) his own or other children in the home.

This does not of course complete the picture, and necessarily there are other components that can be identified and some of these will need to be qualified. But what we must not forget is that the dominant sexual culture that I am attempting to outline here does not imply that everyone agrees with it or practices it. As I mentioned earlier, there may be multiple sexual cultures in any given nation, some of which may be very prominent and competing for dominance, others may be oppositional, some only lived amongst small groups and be shrouded from public view, but all of which in some form of fashion rely upon some of the components of the hegemonic culture and all of which are subject to change. Few, I would argue stand completely outside the hegemonic culture, although how they negotiate space requires careful attention if we wish to support the enlarging of that space, empowerment of the sexually marginalized, and a greater acceptance of diversity in sexual identity and practice.
Important to keep in mind is that although sexuality may at times seem to mirror gender, they are not necessarily the same. Indeed, it has been argued and substantiated through research since the early 1990s by many sexuality studies scholars, including Gloria Wekker in her study on Mati in Suriname, that gender and sexuality are semi-autonomous domains. That is, gender and sexuality are closely related, yet so significantly different as to warrant separate attention. For example, knowing what constitutes mainstream Caribbean masculinity – such as being strong, powerful, a lover of women, and fathering children, etc. – does not necessarily tell us much about why some men in the region desire sexual intercourse with other men or transgen-
derers, or why some men may identify as gay. Similarly, research into femininities may give us insights into what is considered a ‘good woman’ yet does little to help us understand why adolescent girls continue to be attracted to sexual relationships with adult, sometimes married, men – relationships that appear, to many onlookers, to be exploitative and abusive – or why women may be in loving relationships with other women while continuing to live with their husbands. Only investigations into the deeper meanings of sexual desire and pleasure could give us a better idea. And the analysis of those pleasures and desires in light of the dominant sexual culture could deliver some insights into the relevance of certain acts and identities and why sometimes they are concealed, disavowed or simply appear unknown (as Debra Curtis notes in the conclusion of her recently published study on girls’ sexuality in Nevis).

Nevertheless, that does not mean we can ignore constructions of gender and gendered relations of power (patriarchy). On the contrary – these become critical to our study of sexuality if only because gender is a primary way that Caribbean societies know and
express themselves – and because patriarchy has been and continues to be a structuring relation of power and privilege in the region. The restrictions and limitations that patriarchy places on women in employment and education, in providing for the household, in politics and the law, and in wider society, places women in subordinated and vulnerable positions vis-a-vis men, with feminine sexuality positioned in the service of masculine sexual desires and pleasures. Moreover, Caribbean patriarchy is hostile to anything that disrupts the dominant constructions of gender, which holds a masculine/feminine binary dear, and seeks to oppress any way of being or practice that transgresses the constructions and binary. Gender and patriarchy then create part of the structure and discourse of the sexual cultures in Caribbean societies, serving to make invisible, deny any existence to, or violently evict from the nation those that transgress the dominant norms and values around masculinity and femininity. And as organizations such as UN Women has made abundantly clear, because men hold economic, political, social and often the physical power over other genders – and can, and very often do, dictate or enforce the terms of social and sexual engagement, women who sell sexual services, gays, lesbians, transgenders, bisexuals, men and women who desire sex with, or love a person of, the same sex or gender, and adolescent girls, are at greatest risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections. Any attempt to intervene in the HIV and AIDS epidemics must then take up the unequal gendered and sexual relations that not only render women and girls vulnerable but obscure sexual longings, desires and activities that do not conform to heteropatriarchal norms.
Still, we need to acknowledge that identification and targeting of specific populations, as the “endangered” has barely led to reduction in the rate of infection. Rather, as some argue, it gives rise to a pathologization or stigmatization of certain populations, which can lead to a blaming of the victim. Thus research on sexual culture needs to interrogate how inequalities amongst social groups are encoded and structured, in what ways gender, but also ethnicity, class and other axes of power, operates to structure and inform sexual relations and desires, and to ask questions about whose norms and values are upheld, which groups are privileged in sexual relations and how, and whose desires and needs are held to be “moral” and whose not. We need then to dig deep into how constructions of gender, ethnicity, race or class work together and produce power and inequality, pleasure and violence, desire, love and lust, fidelity and infidelity, monogamy and multiple partnering, and so forth. We thus need to take a look at the very precise and complicated sexual arrangements and engagements, into what sex means in peoples’ everyday lives, about what makes sexual acts and expressions desirable and pleasurable. We could then also ask and perhaps answer what it is in the sexual culture that enables people – sometimes very wise, knowledgable or responsible people – to put themselves and others in danger.

However, such research is not produced overnight. It requires training and time – and while anyone can, in theory, conduct research with some training, research on sexual culture cannot be manufactured quickly or cheaply. Indepth insights into cultural life that are buried and silenced take time to build or acquire, and knowledge about sexual culture can only be built gradually, and only once there is enough commitment and
funding to do a good job. Participatory action research offers a very good possibility, as do methods that require extended and intensive interviewing, listening and observation. We will hear today from teams that have been thoroughly trained to conduct qualitative research, but we need also to keep in mind that research can also be quantitative and does not need only to be produced by those with academic credentials. Research on sexual culture also requires an open-mindedness to an area of social life that is deemed secret and private, as well as specific conceptual and analytical skills that can discern difference and diversity and can identify and interrogate relations of power. Without such skills and frame of mind, the research could remain descriptive and fill more of a voyeuristic or titillating function than anything else. Or, a too rigid morality about sexuality may produce narrow views on sexual culture that foreclose an appreciation of diversity within or across the region. And while there must be space for competing interpretations of sexual culture, I would suggest that one of the primary objectives of any research on sexual culture, whether policy oriented or not, should be to stand in the service of those who are oppressed, outlawed, silenced, harmed, or threatened with death due to their sexual orientation or activities, their desires and needs.

So in short, in the coming two days we are offered an opportunity to engage with research on sexual cultures that offers us new ways of thinking about sexuality as well as new insights into the social and gendered forces that hinder the effectiveness of existing HIV and AIDS prevention programs. I look forward to engaging with you all as we discuss this new work and its implications.
References:


