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The Nature of Sexual Desire, by James Giles

Review by Meg Barker

James Giles (2003)

The Nature of Sexual Desire

Praeger Publishers Inc, Westport Connecticut

218 pgs, including index

£52.99 hardback, ISBN 0 -275-95995-3

In *The Nature of Sexual Desire*, James Giles draws together work from psychology, philosophy, anthropology and psychotherapy, but mainly uses this to support his own thesis based on 'phenomenological inquiry' (7). Giles' overall thesis is that sexual desire is 'the desire for bodily vulnerability and care with someone of the desired gender, expressed through the desire for mutual baring and caressing with that person' (182). He unpacks this thesis throughout the book. In exploring the object of sexual desire he rejects notions that this could be reproduction, the achievement of orgasm, or engagement in a specific kind of sexual act. Rather he concludes that the object is to be physically vulnerable and naked in front of another and have them similarly vulnerable in front of you, and, within this vulnerability, to caress the other and to be caressed by them. Giles further argues that this desire is present even in practices which do not seem to be about such mutual vulnerability and caressing (such as voyeurism and fetishism).

Following this, Giles focuses on the importance of gender. He argues that sexual desire is an existential need which is rooted in the universal human awareness of having a gender, and that this inevitably leaves a person feeling existentially empty. This incompleteness calls out for fulfilment through mutual baring and caressing with someone of the desired gender. This would be someone of the 'opposite gender' for heterosexuals, of the 'same gender' for homosexuals, and of 'either gender' for bisexuals, although, he maintains, the gender of the person chosen is still vital for this latter group as it is for the former ones. Finally, Giles explores the experience of romantic love arguing that, whilst sexual desire is the desire for *bodily* baring and caressing, love is the desire for *emotional* baring and caressing. The two are linked because sexual desire is

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integral to love (although love is not necessary for sexual desire), because gender is also key in *who* one falls in love with, and because love relationships provide a structure in which sexual desire can be continuously fulfilled.

Giles rejects the biological essentialist arguments ~~that~~ tend to dominate psychology and popular science. He acknowledges that human desire occurs through the biological body but argues that this does not mean that it is directly caused by biological events or evolutionary history. He also rejects perspectives which see sexual desire as entirely socially constructed, whilst recognising that the ideal and available possibilities for sexual practices and identities vary across time and culture. He is persuaded that some form of sexual desire has always been present and argues that this means it is a universal human need requiring an existential explanation such as his.

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Giles' argument is interesting and thought-provoking. I particularly enjoyed his history of sexology and considerations of the sexual process. I was also impressed by the fact that, unlike many authors in this field, his considerations of sex almost always considered homo-sex as well as hetero-sex, and do not present men as necessarily active and women as passive. His terminology was frequently one of penises being 'sucked in' (p27), contained in, or enveloped by vaginas, mouths, etc. rather than of them 'penetrating'. However, there were slippages in this, for example when he agrees with Reich that orgasm involves 'the urge to receive completely on the part of the female and the urge to penetrate completely on the part of the male' (p36), a statement which excludes same-sex activities as well as, for example, sex in which a woman orgasms whilst anally penetrating a man with a strap-on vibrator.

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Equally I was impressed by Giles' exploration of the 'non-exclusivity of love' (p155). He disagrees with many past theorists to argue that it is perfectly possible to love more than one person at a time and states that jealousy is experienced in widely differing ways across time and culture. This perspective fits the stories of many of those in openly non-monogamous relationships better than many academic accounts. However, as elsewhere in the book, Giles did not draw upon all available evidence to support his claims. Often I felt that theorising in the book took precedence over presenting supporting examples, or exploring these in greater depth.

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There are two main problems with this book. First, the aim to present a universal theory of sexual desire serves to shoehorn or exclude certain experiences. Secondly, this is not a very reflexive account. I felt it could have benefited a great deal from Giles reflecting on what his own agenda was and what personal, political and cultural assumptions he might be bringing to his work. The phenomenological method does, indeed, include the notion of ‘bracketing off’ ones own assumptions to enable a detailed exploration of immediate experience. However, many phenomenologists acknowledge that it is never possible to bracket entirely and that we always bring something of ourselves to any object of study. Open and critical reflection on our taken-for-granted assumptions is one, commonly advocated, way of being transparent about this. There were several places in the book where I had a strong sense that Giles’ own experience were assumed to be shared by the rest of humankind.

Lack of reflexivity often means that certain views are presented as fact, rather than as just one potential possibility, and this is a problem that occurs several times in the book. For example, Giles reports that people with sadomasochistic (SM) desires and fantasies have ‘typically been victims of the abuse that is now the object of their desires’ (p61). This common belief has been challenged by much of the recent literature on SM communities (e.g. see Barker & Langdridge, 2005). Interestingly the main researcher that Giles draws on here is Kaplan, whose accounts of the sexual process he critiqued strongly in the previous chapter. This example highlights a general tendency in the book to present universal theories which fail to encompass the diversity of meanings that an activity, like SM, might have for people. Earlier in the book Giles give a thoughtful reflection of the different possible meanings of sexual intercourse for individuals (p12) and the opportunities these might open up or close off. It is a shame that he does not carry this notion of multiple possible meanings of practices through to other issues covered within the book.

It is on the issue of gender that this book is most problematic. Because the thesis rests on the existence of two and only two genders, and because it is vital that gender is very significant in a person’s choice of sex and love partners, Giles has some difficulty when tackling the existence of bisexual, trans and intersex people. The language used in these sections is not always as respectful as it could be. For example, the terms

'hermaphrodite' and 'pseudo-hermaphrodite' are used rather than 'intersex', and Giles frequently uses gender pronouns for trans people that reflect their pre-operative rather than post-operative gender, including stating that a post-operative male-to-female transsexual was 'not a real woman' (p60). The work of authors like Fausto-Sterling and Kessler are rather swiftly dismissed, although it is good to actually see them considered when many books on gender leave them out entirely. There is no consideration of more recent moves in nonlinear biology to see biological sex and sexual orientation as variable and diverse in humans and other organisms (Hird, 2004). Also, considerations of the variety of social gender identities or performances are very quickly dispensed with because Giles argues that genitals are fundamental in our experience of gender (p105).

In relation to bisexuality, Giles does challenge the common ideal (based on a misinterpretation of the Kinsey scale) that the more a person is attracted to one sex the less they are attracted to the other. Again, it is heartening that Giles acknowledges the existence of bisexuality at all when many recent authors have denied it entirely because it does not fit their particular theories (usually of dichotomous straight/gay sexual orientation). So Giles gets beyond the common perception that sexual orientation is strictly dichotomous. However, he does argue that *gender* is dichotomous, and further that bisexuals are not indifferent to their partners' genders but rather that they experience homosexual desire to partners of the 'same gender' and heterosexual desire to those of the 'opposite gender'. As well as ignoring the wealth of recent 'queer' academic perspectives (Foucault is dismissed in one paragraph on page 18!), this also disputes the reported lived experience of many who identify as bisexual and who state that they are attracted to others 'regardless of gender' or find other aspects of sex more important than gender (such as the sexual practice engaged in, or who is active or passive).

The dismissal of self-reports of trans and bisexual people does seem to go against the phenomenological aim of this book. Moreover, I would have liked to see the more suspicious, critical approach turned on Giles' own ideas as well as those of others. However, this is a thought-provoking book which would be useful for students of sexuality as well as sex and relationship therapists particularly if considered alongside alternative accounts from psychology, sociology and queer theory.

References

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Biography

Dr. Meg Barker is a senior lecturer at London South Bank University. She is the honorary secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society, she is training as an existential sex and relationship therapist, and she researches sexual identities and relationships, particularly bisexualities, non-monogamies and SM.