

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Haven of Affectionate Relationships: Uses and Gratifications of Lesbian and Gay Semi-Formal Groups

Amit Kama

(Academic College of Emek Yezreel, Israel)

Amit8860@yahoo.com

Moshe Shokeid (2015). *Gay Voluntary Associations in New York: Public Sharing and Private Lives*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 232 pages.

and

Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap (eds) (1996). *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Moshe Shokeid delves into a unique *communitas* or ‘a spontaneous fraternity’ (p. 8, all quotations from Shokeid, 2015, unless otherwise stated) of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (from now on, *lesbigays*) who gather in various voluntary organizations in New York City in order to seek and offer empathy and friendship, advice and warmth. They assemble to express and perform distinctive *lesbigay* identities in the company of like-minded strangers. He focuses on seven such groups: Senior Action in Gay Environment, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, Bisexual Circle, Men of All Colors Together, Gentle Men, Metro Bears New York, and four religious congregations (Dignity [Catholic], Unity [African-American], Metropolitan Community Church [Protestant], and Congregation Beth Simchat Torah [Jewish]). The book ends with two gay men’s life stories that shed light on the inherently homosexual emotional contradiction between immediate (typically anonymous) sexual gratifications versus a life-long quest for an enduring, intimate relationship.

Shokeid concludes that the main theme of his book is ‘generous openness’ (p. 9). He is repeatedly astonished by the profound and even overwhelming sense of solidarity and mutual trust exhibited in the meetings of the above-mentioned groups, especially among people who are mostly strangers to each other. The *lesbigays* who attend these groups are ‘exceptionally open in exposing intimate life experiences not only in the company of close friends, but also when participating in groups wherein they engaged with many strangers’ (p. 30). Nearly all of them exhibit ‘the desire and the ability [...] to publicly reveal their most intimate feelings and share their very private experience with strangers’ (p. 200). Shokeid strives to account for this phenomenon by offering several elucidations, of which the following is vital and actually sums rather well the uniqueness of the *lesbigay* experience shared by *lesbigays* anywhere. Many, if not all, *lesbigays* experience alienation, exclusion, and discrimination after being stigmatized. Hence, these groups offer consolation and a sense of finally ‘coming home’ and being unconditionally welcome. Here they do find and can nurture ‘affectionate relationships’ (p. 174) in a world that is largely antagonistic or hostile in varying degrees. Another possible way to explain this extreme *communitas* is rooted in the unrelenting quest for a lover/life-

partner. It is in these premises that attendees may ultimately find the One they have been looking for.

Gay Voluntary Associations in New York: Public Sharing and Private Lives can be read in roughly two ways: Readers interested in theory and are knowledgeable in anthropology and/or other social sciences can surely find a veritable treasure in Shokeid's explication of various aspects of voluntary organizations and their American socio-historical context as well as a wide array of issues that characterize lesbian identities and collective endeavors. At the same time, other readers can enjoy an insightful, and at times rather moving, narrative rendering the stories of both individuals and communities. Shokeid is a skilled storyteller who can captivate his audience in these empathic, sensitive, albeit sometimes necessarily critical, vignettes of lived experiences. Indeed, the book 'is rooted in the ethnographic tradition that aims to present life in vivo' (p. 4); thus obviously neither formal interviews nor questionnaires were employed. What this ethnographer employs as his methodological tools are empathy, wisdom, and eager willingness to understand.

Shokeid elaborates extensively on a theme that characterizes ethnographic work since its inception, namely the roles an ethnographer — particularly one who is not an 'insider' or native to the groups under study — plays in the 'field'. He forever grapples with the tensions that are fundamental to his position as an outsider (that is, a heterosexual Israeli professor) who resists the long history of 'foreign travelers' (p. 6). In spite of this position and despite his own self-labeling as 'an alien anthropologist' (p. 200) and the assertion that he 'maintained the position of an ordinary participant' (p. 90), Shokeid immerses himself wholly at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center and the religious institutions mentioned above where he gets involved for rather lengthy periods and befriends several men who serve as his guides and informants. Moreover, when opportunities to stray away from the standpoint of a vigilant observer occur, Shokeid rarely hesitates in engaging himself (including in sexual escapades). Indeed, he is continuously reflexive about the thin (and fragile) line he threads; a line between 'going native' — becoming too immersed in the activities he participates in — and remaining an aloof 'voyeur'. The result is a book, which is not told by a 'transparent' witness, but by an affectionate friend.

Shokeid insists that a good ethnography is not and should not be clouded by the ethnographer's identity (that is, sexual orientation), and in his case he is right. However, already nearly twenty years ago Ellen Lewin and William Leap (1996) have collected an inspiring and critical anthology, in which prominent lesbian anthropologists attest to the complexities of doing fieldwork in lesbian contexts. The prevalent idea in *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* is that 'nativ' anthropologists in this context may be more receptive and reflexive in addressing the subtleties inherent in the (cumbersome and oftentimes painful) management of a lesbian identity and their social worlds. Walter Williams, for example, writes: 'It is not that sensitive heterosexuals lack the ability to do research on homosexuality; indeed, non-gay anthropologists [...] have made important contributions to the study of sexual variance. But it is still clear that [...] openly gay ethnographers have an advantage. [...] Because native homosexual often see themselves as different, sometimes as outsiders in their own culture, they are likely to feel an immediate

identity with others they perceive to be “like themselves” (1996 p. 79). I wish to add that from my own experience, being a gay researcher paves the way for a reciprocal relationship between my life and the informants’ experiences. Our positionality within the same framework of stigmatized ‘outsiders’ usually produces dialogically intertwined stories. Thus, an intimate rapport between us eases their self-disclosure. Some of their biographical elements — similar dilemmas and parallel patterns of life trajectories — do echo my own. My experiential equivalents constitute a catalyst for the informants: As someone whose life course is in many respects similar, I can assist informants in the difficult task of reflexivity (Kama 2000).

Gay Voluntary Associations in New York may be informative and edifying for scholars of urbanity for it seems that these groups are ingrained in the urban context of a metropolis where lesbians who have no immediate families (that is, spouses) inevitably run the risk of existential isolation and emotional loneliness. In fact, most of the people who inhabit the book contrast the haven of affectionate relationships found at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center with the faceless or alienating arenas of commercial venues and other lesbigay sites, especially those that afford spaces for casual sexual activities. In other words, the Center and its activities constitute a sort of a metaphorical island where ‘the promise of generous sociability and a measure of affection’ (p. 86) may safeguard an urban lesbigay individual from getting lost, so to speak, in the harsh and relentless city in spite of all the attractions it offers.

The book is based solely on ethnographic observations and conversations, thus the following critique may be construed as unfair or petty; yet, readers may wish to be acquainted with the larger picture of the social life of lesbians in New York City. The Center and the religious congregations cater, as indicated by Shokeid, to a few hundreds of men and women, at most. The organizations he attends accommodate on the average a couple of dozens of people, some of whom regularly attend more than a single organized activity. One cannot but wonder whatever happens with the tens (hundreds?) of thousands of lesbians that most certainly populate NYC and its environs. Moreover, based on the literature on the prevalence, nature, history, and socio-demographic attributes Shokeid reviews of American voluntary organizations, the inevitable expectation is that the number of attendees would be much, much larger. The book does not tackle the fact that after all the Center serves but a tiny — perhaps even insignificant — fraction of the lesbigay population.

Another problematic question relates to the ‘anonymous sex sites’ (p. 197), about which Shokeid as well as his informants often talk at length. These include commercial and non-commercial bathhouses, saunas, darkrooms, clubs, public restrooms, deserted alleys, and so on. There is no doubt that for many years these sites constituted an indispensable and pivotal meeting place for men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) regardless of acknowledged sexual orientation and identity. However, since the dawning of the Internet and its vast supply and endless opportunities, MSM can and do enjoy its many symbolic as well as material benefits (for example, no cost, ease of access, no threat of being stigmatized or seen by others and many more). Media scholars have already accentuated the omnipresence of computer-mediated communication in the lives of gay men especially as an easy and ever-present means

for meeting other men (see, for example, Kama 2007, McGlotten 2014, Roth 2014). In other words, it seems that the aforementioned anonymous sex sites play only a negligible role today and can hence be considered obsolete. In other words, based on contemporary evidence I would surmise that Shokeid's informants' dichotomy between the sex sites and the organized groups might no longer be so common today.

Finally, I wish to add a personal note. As a gay man myself, I found in the book many echoes of my own life. Paramount among these I was utterly touched by Shokeid's reflection that gay men are 'engaged in a continual search for long-term partners. This effort was a permanent element in their daily life and was conducted at a variety of venues. [...] The continuous trial-and-error process they were engaged in reflected a yearning for a stable relationship' (p. 198). Sadly, neither Shokeid nor I — an elderly man, veteran activist and researcher — can offer a lucid explanation for this conundrum.

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