

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAMES WARD, *Sexualities, Work and Organizations: Stories by Gay Men and Women in the Workplace at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Routledge, 2008; Taylor & Francis e-library, 2007, 192 p., index.

Sexualities, Work and Organizations Ward explores stories shared by self-identified gays and lesbians concerning the politics of sexuality at work. Based on hundreds of interviews as well as several focus-group encounters, Ward emphasizes the usefulness of narrative analysis for shedding light on a “pervasive fear of discrimination” (27) that continues to influence gays and lesbians in their struggles for equity and a sense of belonging in organizations.

Ward’s motivation for writing *Sexualities, Work and Organizations* came from one of his own life experiences: he was once fired from a corporate job after refusing to be transferred to Singapore where male-with-male sex is criminalized as “gross indecency,” which would have made living with his partner untenable. One of the author’s key arguments is that labour law does not translate automatically into equity. For example, the introduction of Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations across the UK in 2003 has not eliminated homophobic discrimination in the workplace. Stereotypes concerning gays and lesbians are firmly entrenched in the way we think about sexuality and work.

Ward is careful to argue that there is an unequal distribution of discrimination against gays and lesbians at work. The intensity of discrimination depends on occupational culture, the geographic location of the organization, as well as union politics. Ward’s cases deal specifically with the United Kingdom. Interviewees were selected from organizations such as banking firms, government departments, as well as police agencies and firefighting brigades. A narrative-based method was selected by Ward, because for the reason that “telling stories about the organization was a useful medium for employees to articulate issues of sexuality at work, which otherwise they would find difficult to describe” (8). Ward’s approach is quite clearly indebted to Ken Plummer’s (1995) book *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*.

The central argument of this textbook is that workers who prefer same sex relations must be secretive about their intimate lives. For Ward, “being in the closet, and not feeling able to tell anybody at work about one’s sexual orientation can put constant pressure on an individual and have a negative effect on them and their work” (28). “Coming out” by through declaring a definitive sexual identity is often one of the most significant moments in the lives of gays and lesbians. Coming out at work, however, is fraught with potential negative consequences. Again, the specificity of the organization matters for how coming out will be received. Police agencies, for instance, foster notoriously queer-hostile cultures

of masculinity. These milieus can be competitive and antagonistic. Ward demonstrates that when someone comes out, or more often, is outed by a co-worker, they are shuffled around the organization, demoted, or even promoted in order to remove them from that particular department.

Fear of judgment and rejection creates situations where gays and lesbians stay in the closet and silently eke out their organizational lives, says Ward. Silence is pervasive in organizations as it concerns questions of sexuality: "silence can also be a means of suppression by the majority, by not allowing certain things to be talked about" (82). When sexuality is discussed in organizations, the language used is subtly derogatory and based on essentialist binaries. On the other hand, Ward provides examples of how some organizations are now purposefully trying to create more inclusive and tolerant occupational cultures, including a few banks in the UK that are making efforts to be more queer-friendly.

Ward's book does fill a gap in organizational studies, insofar as "there is a relative dearth of data-rich discourse analytic studies pertaining to the experience of sexual minorities in the workplace" (126). The focus-group encounters Ward facilitated allowed respondents to address the workplace tensions facing them in an open forum. Ward hopes his research has "lifted the shroud of invisibility and silence in those organizations that took part..." (136).

One issue I have with *Sexualities, Work and Organizations* is that the book does not offer a great deal of much conceptual clarity concerning "homophobia." versus comparable concepts. Gregory M. Herek (2004) points out in his article "Beyond 'Homophobia': Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century" (*Sexuality Research & Social Policy*) that the concept of homophobia has been "overly narrow in its characterization of oppression as ultimately the product of individual fear" and at the same time "too diffuse in its application" (11). "H [I do not disagree with "too diffuse" but I think you need to clarify this in your text." Give us some examples of homophobia being used in a manner which is too diffuse.]omophobia" is used, for example, in reference to individual prejudice but also discriminatory governmental policies – the concept loses analytical usefulness when applied to all cases. "Homo-negativity" and "heteronormativity" have been proposed as substitute replacement concepts, but are similarly narrow and diffuse. It is necessary to develop a more analytically specific language for referring to how power operates in relation to sexuality and gender – Ward does not really take on this task. Stereotyping and persecution of same sex relations is based on more than an amorphous fear.

Ward's engagement with Foucault and Derrida is also somewhat superficial in that his bibliographical references to these influential thinkers are vague. Ward also ignores the questions Foucault raises concerning confession, sexuality and power. In volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 Foucault (1978) argues that desire is not simply repressed; instead, desire is joined with power in an impetus to confess the truth about one's self and thereby take pleasure in knowing a truth, as if one were sharing a secret treasure of self-identity. By ignoring this central thrust of Foucault's pivotal text, Ward tends toward reifying sexual identity rather than considering how identity is socially organized through work and personal relations. Sexualities are not ready-made.

When reading *Sexualities, Work and Organizations*, I also had the sense of impression that Ward was trying too much to let respondents' stories speak for themselves. This lack of data analysis will prove disappointing for scholars not only in sociology but also in socio-linguistics and discursive psychology who pay more close and systematic attention to the subtleties of language and are more scrupulous when it comes to narrative. Another problem with the "sexual stories" approach is that the researcher can sometimes focus too much on individual lives, too little on how theory and context matter for the account that is produced; some readers might think that this is the case with Ward's book.

Nevertheless, the focus-group element of *Sexualities, Work and Organizations* is methodologically innovative. The empirical contribution offered by this book is first-rate. Ward's book will certainly appeal to scholars interested in narrative analysis, gay and lesbian studies, as well as the sociology of work and organizations.

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