Title
The Sexual Field: A New Theory for Classic Questions

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At a talk, entitled “Outline of a Theory of Sexual Practice: Bringing Bourdieu to the Sexual Field,” which was organized by the Center for the Study of Women and cosponsored by the Department of Sociology’s Gender Working Group, Adam Isaiah Green, a University of Toronto sociologist, offered the audience an exciting glimpse into the broad and ambitious theoretical framework he is developing to explain the intimate connection between the social world and sexuality. He was only able to present a small slice of this expansive project during the talk but demonstrated the compelling potential this framework has not only to generate novel approaches to the classic sociological questions of sexual behavior and identity but also, and more importantly he suggests, to better understand the elusive grey area of sexual desire.

Green’s recent articles, “The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach” (2008a) and “Erotic Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Desire” (2008b), published respectively in *Sociological Theory* and *Theory and Society*, represent somewhat of a paradigm shift in the field which has heretofore been dominated by scripting theory. For those who are not familiar with it, Gagnon and Simon’s (1974) concept of “sexual scripts” explains how individuals learn, internalize, reproduce, and sometimes change the social rules and expectations regarding sexuality, romance, and love. They argue, along with those who later operationalized and expanded their idea (see for example: Brekhus 2003; Hammack 2009; Laumann 1994; Plante 2006) that sexual scripts are (in order from macro to micro): 1) cultural, 2) subcultural, 3) interpersonal, and 4)
intrapsychic. Our culture, on the broadest level, sets up the major social outlines about the rules of sexuality but those expectations are tempered, modified, or contradicted by membership in a smaller community, whether racial/ethnic, sexual, or local/regional. We learn about these scripts in interaction with individuals and institutions and then play them out with others. Finally, we even integrate them into our fantasy lives where they shape our desires and perceptions.

He suggests that while scripting theory allows us to study the processes through which individuals transform social norms into ideas and practices, it does not allow us to answer the question such analysis begs: “Why do individuals differentially select sexual scripts and what is the process of differential acquisition?” (Green 2008b). What is essentially missing from scripting theory, Green argues, are the social structures and power relations that shape how and why people find things erotic. His theory of the sexual field proposes to overcome this limitation by conceptualizing erotic life as a series of historically, culturally, and geographically bounded terrains. During his talk, Green described how we can think of a sexual field as both a force-field, orienting subconscious and conscious desires, and a battlefield, in which actors compete to gain access to the object of desire. The logic of competition thus necessarily ungirds Green’s approach.
Green’s theoretical approach allows us to ask these and other questions that require us to consider sexuality in new and fruitful ways even if not everyone will be persuaded to use this theory. His talk sparked a lively and thought provoking discussion that proved just how productive this new line of work will be for the study of sexuality. He has given us something to hang our hats on and offered us ways to contribute to a new research agenda that should animate the field for years to come.

Green is using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977; 2002) theory of the field that the French sociologist originally developed to explain why members of different social classes have different kinds of tastes in food, clothing, or entertainment, and the effects those habits have on social stratification. Actors acquire and use economic, social, and cultural capital, to navigate the hierarchies that structure the field. Green sees erotic worlds, such as gay leather-bars or college fraternity parties, as sexual fields that are structured by their own particular hierarchies in which actors mobilize a fourth and embodied resource: erotic capital. Defined as the “quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses [that] elicit an erotic response in another,” erotic capital can include “physical traits (e.g., the size of breasts, height, hair color), affective presentations (e.g., butch, nebbishy, animalistic), and eroticized sociocultural styles (e.g., the blue-collar construction worker, the Catholic schoolgirl)” (2008a: 29). The value of erotic capital’s components, like other forms of capital, will vary according to the hierarchies, such as those based on race, class, and gender, that traverse a specific erotic world. Finally, the sexual field of a given erotic world produces “tiers of desirability” into which actors fit according to how much desired erotic capital they possess (2008a: 32).

At the talk, Green illustrated how the sexual field operates by analyzing the visual mediascape along the main strip of Church and Wellesley, Toronto’s gay district. Taking a look at all the advertisements and posters that vie for attention along the street, Green points out that images of thin, muscular, young, and well-groomed white men dominate. From the posters to the nightclubs, bars, and bathhouses, the tier of desirability is such that young middle-class white gay men possess the most erotic capital and can easily find partners. Individuals who have less erotic capital, because they are not white or young for example, will have a harder time finding partners. Those low in erotic capital have several options for dealing with their situation. They could gain more erotic capital by modifying what can be changed, by say lifting weights or dieting; they could compensate by using other kinds of capital, like using money to purchase sex; or they could go to another sexual field in which the erotic capital they do possess is more highly valued. This last option, Green suggests, is one of the hallmarks of our digital online era, in which ever more specialized groups can form around highly specific sexual tastes and practices.

Because Green places competition and power at the center of his theory, sexual fields are better able than sexual scripts to address the inequalities that sexual desires produce. People are not simply socialized into using sexual scripts onto which already existing social hierarchies are written in a static way. On the contrary, in competing
for sexual and romantic partners in given erotic worlds, actors are constantly defining what counts as erotic and, in so doing, inscribe inequalities into desirability. Green suggests that his approach is thus able to use feminist insights to shed light on how power and the erotic are intimately linked but warns that if we collapse erotic inequalities into other larger systems of stratification, we lose sight of what is unique about the sexual. The sexual field is “organized by a system of relations that draws from but is irreducible to alternative fields”(2008a: 35). This is not to suggest that patriarchy or racism do not matter in the sexual field but that they play out in ways that are specific to erotic worlds and function according to the logical of the sexual field.

This novel approach brings up questions about what the theory of fields is able to teach us, how we might carry out work in this vein empirically, and what its limitations might be. As Green has studied them in his own work, sexual fields are bounded geographically and correspond, more or less, to urban erotic subcultures. How then can we use the idea of sexual fields as the size and scope of analysis increases to encompass, say, groups in an entire city or country? In other words, are sexual fields necessarily bounded by geographical limits? Green would suggest that although sexuality is informed by cultural factors produced in larger cultural structures, like the mass media, individuals always enact their sexuality in specific local contexts that are situated in some kind of sexual field. If the sexual field approach is most useful in explaining what people desire and how their desires produce systems of stratification that structure their ability to get sexual partners, does the sexual field approach apply when sexual partners are not the goal? Sexual identity – the meaning and importance a person attaches to her sexual behaviors or desires – is an aspect of sexuality that is not about acquiring sexual experiences. We might then need other field dynamics outside the sexual field to explain when, how, and why a person mobilizes—or not—parts of her sexual identity.

Green’s theoretical approach allows us to ask these and other questions that require us to consider sexuality in new and fruitful ways even if not everyone will be persuaded to use this theory. His talk sparked a lively and thought provoking discussion that proved just how productive this new line of work will be for the study of sexuality. He has given us something to hang our hats on and offered us ways to contribute to a new research agenda that should animate the field for years to come.

Michael Stambolis is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at UCLA.

WORKS CITED