



Backdrop: The Politics and Personalities Behind Sexual Orientation Research

Gayle E. Pitman. Sacramento, CA: Active Voice Press, 2011, 278 pp.

Within the field of sexual orientation research, there are no bigger names than that of Simon LeVay, Dean Hamer, J. Michael Bailey, Evelyn Hooker, and Gregory Herek. These researchers are known as pioneers in a field of study that for years was often dismissed as a “specialty topic.” Thankfully, times have changed and the work of these authors now can be found in top-tier academic journals and even cited in legal briefs before the Supreme Court.

While our field has become familiar with the brain structure study of LeVay and Herek’s research on homophobia, few of us really know much about the personal lives of these men and women who have changed the discourse of how society thinks and talks about human sexuality and gender. Many would argue that this is all well and good and that a scientist’s personal life has no bearing on the “objective” pursuit in scientific investigation. Others, such as Gayle Pitman, a professor of psychology at Sacramento City College and author of *Backdrop*:

The Politics and Personalities Behind Sexual Orientation Research, see things quite differently.

Pitman challenges the notion that scientific psychology can, or even should, be completely objective, arguing that when it comes to sexual orientation research, “we could potentially glean more insights from the ‘backdrop’ of politics and personalities behind the research than from the research itself” (p. 4). Her highly persuasive argument reminds me of what the German poet Johann von Goethe once said about science: “We see only what we know”; and what we know is inevitably influenced by our own personal experiences.

Backdrop is written in a scientific journalistic style that is thoughtful, engaging, and timely. With the recent passage of same sex marriage in New York State and the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT), Pittman’s *Backdrop* provides a unique perspective in which to understand these landmark decisions and the psychological research that has played such an important role in bringing about social change. The book is divided into three “stories,” starting with the research on the biological origins of homosexuality, moving to the politics of transgender and intersex identities, and finally concluding with an exploration of the controversy surrounding reparative therapy, DADT, and same-sex marriage. Each story is unique but they all share a common narrative of “Context is essential.” It is this context that ultimately informs the questions researchers ask and how they go about interpreting their data.

In reading this book, an interesting parallel process emerged. In keeping with the book’s thesis, I found myself being curious about Pitman’s own personal “backdrop” and how her experience as a researcher of lesbian mental health might inform her investigation of sexual orientation research. As one might expect of a scholar who has devoted her academic career to this topic, Pitman is not without her own bias. Despite her own efforts to maintain a neutrality, there are moments when even she lapses into polarizing rhetoric, like her conclusion that when it came to the passage of Proposition 8 in California, “fear and anger won out over appeal to reason,” a sentiment that I too share but one that is not completely objective. *Backdrop* is an important addition to sexual orientation research as it forces us to truly look at not only the research that has been done but also the influence researchers’ personal lives have had on their scientific findings. If anything, it will remind us that we are all human and products of our own vastly different and unique experiences.

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