
*COMMENTARY ON THE STATUS
OF SEX RESEARCH*

Introduction:
The Sex Researcher as Commentator
on Modern Times

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It could hardly be more fitting than for Gunter Schmidt to be the first German sex researcher to publish his views on the current state of sex research in the *American Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, for as well as being a leading expert in the field, he and his research work neatly personify that blend of admiration and amazement that marks relations between American and German sex research.

Thanks to Gunter Schmidt's efforts, the work done by sex researchers in the United States became available in the old Federal Republic of Germany and was widely discussed. With his backing as editorial advisor, the renowned Rowohlt Verlag published a sexology series that included the main American publications from the late 1960s and early 1970s: Broderick, Ford and Beach, Money and Ehrhardt, Gagnon and Simon, Reiss, Gebhard.

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Already in those days—he was just 30—Schmidt had made a name for himself as a sex researcher by carrying out, in conjunction with Hans Giese, then director of the Hamburg Institute for Sex Research, a large scale survey in 1966 on sexual behavior of university students. Whereas at that stage he was largely an importer of American ideas on research, a little later he became an exporter of the West German approach with his experimental studies on reactions to sexually explicit material, carried out with his twin brother Volkmar Spigusch. The results played an important role for the first “Commission on Obscenity and Pornography” set up by the U.S. administration in 1967. The fact that after more than 30 years German sex research was once again a subject of serious discussion in the USA certainly had something to do with the advantage Schmidt enjoyed as a West German living in a relatively permissive society where he could carry out investigations that would not have been feasible in America at that time.

Two scientific sojourns in the USA—one at the Kinsey Institute in 1967 and another as visiting professor at the Family Studies Center at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis—brought him in close touch with the American research community and gave him a chance to exchange views with American colleagues. These sojourns laid the foundation for his long-lasting and ambivalent affection for American research; he is full of admiration for its openness and verve but highly skeptical about its tendency to interpret changes along positivist lines.

Schmidt has never contented himself with just carrying out competent empirical research. The results he has found have always stimulated him to consider their implications in a wider frame. More than anyone else he has from the outset regarded sex research as both an analytic instrument for describing social and individual phenomena and as an object in itself, a “symptom” of social change. Long before we knew this perspective to be termed constructivistic, he was arguing along these constructivistic lines.

As a researcher he is patient and persistent; brief and limited research projects have never appealed to him. He has always been particularly averse to just publishing results and then moving on to a new topic. There is more profound impetus behind all his research work, a pronounced passion for discovery with an emphasis on

looking further. He is not interested in just being skilled as a researcher but seeks to comprehend the matter under scrutiny, to grasp its meaning and how it fits into the general social context. He has always been especially attracted to the perspectives offered by history and politics, as he categorically acknowledged in his presidential address to the International Academy of Sex Research (1982). Elected as one of the first presidents (1980/81) he deplored the general lack of interest in historical or political thinking among sex researchers and recommended it as a way of integrating sexology into a social context. "We sex researchers often do not give sufficient thought to the social background against which our work is set. The special problems that we are effectively working on sometimes cause us to ignore our proper theme—sexuality—and prevent us from seeing the forest instead of the trees" (p. 97).

A great deal of his theoretical work starts out from this premise and leads back to the basic questions: Why has this phenomenon occurred now? Whose interest is served by this research? This dual perspective as an empiricist and a historical-cum-political analyst is his intellectual trademark and can be traced through all his work—the large student survey with Hans Giese (Giese & Schmidt 1968), research on pornography with Volkmar Sigusch (Schmidt & Sigusch 1973), sociological studies on adolescent and working-class sexuality again with Sigusch, an extensive examination of therapy for couples with sexual dysfunctions, which he never wanted to term sex therapy (Arentewicz & Schmidt 1983), and his inquiry into adolescent sex in the AIDS era (Schmidt et al. 1994). His commentaries to these studies orbit them like satellites. And anyone who has worked with him has very soon come to realize that the horizons of sex research stretch far beyond the boundaries of empirical results. This approach has not only won him friends, he has often risked quarrels with colleagues and—especially with his American friends—has had to face the criticism for arguing along ideological lines and daring to make value judgments.

His article, "Emancipation and Social Change in Heterosexual Relationships," is a typical Schmidt product. His acute sense for zeitgeist phenomena is a fruit of many years of clinical experience, plus wide reading, being up-to-date on the latest data, doing his own research and especially having an open mind for other

people's opinions. He never relies on just one source of information, whether they be clinical evidence or results of huge samples, or weighty statements by brilliant thinkers. He painstakingly fits the fragments together and only then draws his startling and striking conclusions.

Behind the macro-trend in current discussion on sexuality with its disparate elements—lack of sexual appetite, violence and new gender relations—he discerns a new morality that he calls interaction morals, which are counter-erotic and constraining. With Stoller in his heart and Giddens before his inner eye, he uses his image to pin down a whole range of current sexual phenomena that are bound to seem contradictory. And here he would be very glad—and this I know!—if his honored American colleagues would not take his as a positive description but that they would understand that he is seeking terms to describe the quintessence behind these contradictions and that contradictions, dear positivist friends, are certainly nothing research should be ashamed of. He would then have the feeling that he has managed to convey what dialectic thinking is without calling it such.

What contradictions? Gunter Schmidt is skeptical when social developments are consistently seen as a change for the better. Twenty-five years ago he saw through sexual liberalization as being just another soft-sell ideology, a new moral code that fitted in so closely with society's consumer morality that any emancipatory or liberalizing effects were very likely to get lost. In those days he formulated an idea that he has taken up repeatedly every since: "In a society which is consumption oriented and dependent on the immediate satisfaction of so many needs as possible, there is no area of needs which is left unexploited or used sparingly. This means that sexual liberalization is a socially conforming, more precisely a socially adaptive process" (p. 98). Nowadays in a discourse focusing no longer on sexual freedom but on women's assault on established gender roles, he does not allow himself to be lured into the moral dead end of the discussion on sexual violence. By accepting reality as it is, the fact that men and women are not equals and by unequivocally asserting that sexual violence is a worrying phenomenon, he enables us to understand the morally

motivated efforts to revert the situation and halt or restrain the violence and inequality, refusing, however, to obey the new role of sexual correctness, and at the same time seeing the price sexual experience has to pay when it is properly negotiated.

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