

The Handbook of Sexuality in Close Relationships

Edited by John H. Harvey, Amy Wenzel, and Susan Sprecher. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2004, 686 pp., \$125.00.

Reviewed by Elaine Hatfield

Published online: 31 October 2006
© Springer Science+Business Media, Inc. 2006

Although for many men and women in close, intimate relationships, love and sex can be sources of great delight and/or concern, until recently scholars have devoted surprisingly little attention to these topics. This *Handbook* rectifies that situation. It reviews what psychologists, sociologists, communication researchers, family studies experts, and psychiatrists (as well as scholars from a wealth of other disciplines) have discovered about sexuality in various kinds of close, intimate relationships, at various stages in a person's life cycle, and in various settings.

This is a handbook that any scholar interested in close relationships and sexuality should add to his or her personal library. It isn't an easy book to read. It is intended for "advanced students, scholars, and researchers interested in close relationships and sexuality." Graduate students who perused this text would indeed emerge with a comprehensive knowledge of the field. (It would actually serve as a comprehensive study-guide for men and women preparing for comps.) Unless scholars limited their reading to a few chapters a day, however, I suspect they would find the project a daunting one. In truth, this handbook will best serve scholars who wish to gain an up-to-date view of what is known in the field as a whole (reading the outlines and text and skipping most of the references.) They can immerse themselves in the topics in which they are specially interested. In this *Handbook*, they will find a state-of-the-art outline of all recent research that has been conducted in their favorite area, supplemented with a plethora of appropriate references. Difficult reading—but an invaluable source of information.

This *Handbook* is divided into six parts:

- *Part I: Introduction.* In this first section, theorists consider the major conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues involved in studying sexuality in close relationships. They offer a variety of suggestions as to how researchers can improve future research.
- *Part II: Role of Sexuality in the Formation, Development, and Maintenance of Close Relationships.* In this section, a variety of scholars attempt to shed light on the psychological, social, emotional, and behavioral determinants that shape the ways in which sexuality is experienced at various stages of a personal and sexual relationship.
- *Part III: The Dark Side of Sex.* The editors include coverage of unrequited sexual lust, sexual aggression, and sexual jealousy.
- *Part IV: Sexuality in Special Types of Couples and Contexts.* Various scholars discuss sexuality in lesbian and gay couples, marital sexuality, families and sexuality, sexuality during pregnancy and the postpartum period, and sexuality in mid-life and later-life couples.)
- *Part V: Applications and Clinical Aspects.* In this section, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines suggest clinical applications based on the preceding scientific research. They discuss contraceptive use and safe sex issues, the impact of psychopathology on sexual functioning, offer recommendations for therapists and couples involved in couples therapy and sex therapy. Material in these chapters is designed to provide guidance for both health professionals and policy makers.
- *Part VI: Commentaries.* In this section, two scholars, P. Schwartz and Perlman (and co-author Campbell), provide commentary. Schwartz attempts to place the book's basic themes in a real life-context. She focuses primarily on the current "fad" for assuming that men and women are

R. E. Hatfield (✉)

Department of Psychology, University of Hawaii,
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822
e-mail: elaineh1@aol.com

tions, and behaviors, arguing that humans are more similar than different. Perlman and Campbell critically evaluate the most prominent theories that have been applied to the study of sexuality in close relationships. They conclude by discussing the opportunities and challenges facing future generations of researchers.

This handbook is an impressive testament to how much scientists have learned about these once neglected topics. Most the chapters are extremely good. Of special interest are the wise and carefully crafted chapters by DeLamater, Hyde, and Wiederman, who set the stage for the rest of the book by discussing the theoretical and methodological issues scholars can expect to confront in studying sexuality in close relationships. Also of special value in discussing the initiation of relationships is Regan's commentary on the evolutionary perspective in mate selection. (This review is notable for avoiding the pitfalls of the tiresome nature *versus* nurture debates that blight much current commentary. Regan is both fair and knowledgeable; she neatly balances the many contending perspectives.) This text also does a fine job of discussing the dark side of love. For some reason, previous texts have had a surprisingly "sunny" view of love and lust. In this text, the dark sides of love—concerns with unrequited lust, aggression, jealousy, and so forth—are amply covered. The chapter on "Unrequited Lust" by Cupach and Spitzberg is especially compelling.

The hottest areas for researchers interested in close relationships and sexuality are: (1) cross-cultural and historical approaches to love and sex, and (2) evolutionary approaches to these topics. Yet, in spite of the burgeoning literature, the editors include no single chapter devoted to cross-cultural and historical research as they relate to sexuality in close relationships.

True, in Chapter 1, DeLamater and Hyde remind readers that that contemporary scholars must be sensitive to cross-cultural issues in research. True, also, that cross-cultural research is scattered throughout the text. Still, I wish a single chapter had drawn all this fascinating theory and research together. One can retrieve the necessary material but it requires quite a bit of work and a pre-existing knowledge of the area to do so.

Nor is there a *single* chapter summarizing the state of knowledge on "evolutionary psychology." True, a leading scholar (Regan) discusses evolutionary psychology's theorizing concerning the *initiation* of relationships, and others discuss the theory's importance in maintaining and ending relationships, but once again, this research is scattered throughout the chapters. The citations (although abundant) would read better if the topic was discussed in one place. Missing also is the recent work on incest.

Yet, this is a fine compendium and there is no need to quibble about the few things omitted from this text. The *Handbook* is indeed a valuable contribution to the field.