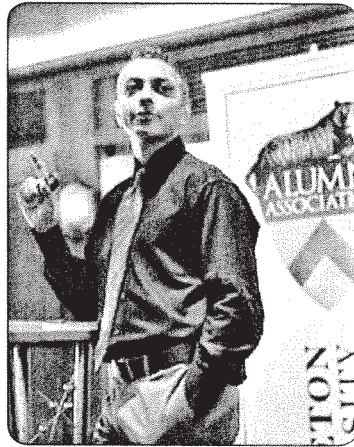




SOCIAL CONTROL OF SEXUALITY



AN INTERVIEW WITH

AMIN GHAZIANI

SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

*Amin Ghaziani, Ph.D., is assistant professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia. He received his Ph.D. from Northwestern, after which he earned a postdoctoral fellowship with the Princeton Society of Fellows. His research considers political dissent among LGBT activists, the changing meanings of sexuality in today's "post-gay" era, and most recently, the in-migration of straights into gay neighborhoods. His 2008 award-winning book, *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington*, examines the effects of infighting in national LGBT demonstrations (University of Chicago Press).*

What led you to begin studying sexuality?

The summer after my junior year in college in 1997, I signed up for a San Francisco Field Studies Program with Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy. NU offered an internship-based practicum as a way to apply analytical frameworks from an advanced research methods course to a worksite. I worked

with Positive Resource Center (PRC), the first organization in the country dedicated to helping people living with HIV/AIDS return to work. Where once people were getting sick, leaving work, and embracing inevitable death, advances in antiretroviral medical technologies in the mid-1990s enabled them to renew their lease on life. Many of these people desired to go back to work. I worked with an incredible organization that was doing just that.

That summer changed my life. It ended with me writing a 20-page report for my class. PRC used my policy recommendations to restructure many of their programs, and then—Mayor Willie Brown even acknowledged them. I had been a progressive activist during my undergraduate years, but that summer taught me that I could also use my intellect to create social change. I knew then that I wanted to go to graduate school to study sexuality.

Of the projects you have done over the course of your academic career, which was most interesting and why?

After spending my first two years of undergraduate study at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, I felt intellectually restless and overwhelmed by the large student body. So I transferred to Northwestern—which was indeed rigorous and stimulating in the classroom—but my new campus felt politically apathetic and rife with non-reflexive privilege.

I had to shake things up. Drawing on progressive organizing skills that I had learned in Ann Arbor, I organized a Queer Kiss-In event on April Fool's Day. My idea was to have queer students meet in a central campus area and, at noon when many classes let out, to make out. Straight people often take for granted basic acts of intimacy and affection. Queer couples that hold hands or kiss in public risk hate speech and even violence.

A week prior to my event I did what any undergraduate student organizer would do: I taped fliers throughout the campus. I quickly discovered that the groundskeepers selectively removed my fliers. In response, the day before the Kiss-In, I purchased fabulous fuchsia paint for "The Rock," a large boulder at the center of campus where it is customary for students to paint messages and advertisements of social events. When I arrived at the site around three in the morning, a group of sorority women were already there painting the rock to advertise a party. They had also pitched a tent next to the rock to guard it so no one else painted over it. And so there I was with this gorgeous paint and an occupied rock! Bleary-eyed, I looked down on the ground in a sleepy haze—and that's when the proverbial "a-ha" moment struck. All over the ground were chalked messages and taped fliers. If chalk and tape were permissible, then why not paint? A fervent fury awoke within me, and I painted "QUEER POWER" across the entire plaza area.

The NU administration responded by threatening me with possible arrest for defacing private property because of the high cost of removing the graffiti, and I retaliated by defining their threat as a breach of my First Amendment rights. As fate would have it, I was taking a course entitled "Problems and Principles in the

First Amendment." I used what I learned in that class to write op-ed pieces for local papers and to give public radio interviews. Talk about knowledge in action! After much legal and political deliberation, the university compromised. In exchange for not pursuing a lawsuit, NU allowed me to revise their policy on the allowable "medium of expression" to advertise student activities.

What ethical dilemmas have you faced in studying sexuality?

I once did a research project on club drugs, risky sex practices, and sexually transmitted infections among self-identified gay and bisexual men who attended circuit parties. These are weekend-long dance events at which sexual activity and drug use are generally prevalent among several thousand revelers. As you might expect, my co-author Tom Cook and I had some trouble with the Institutional Review Board. How do you ethically conduct an ethnographic study of drug use in a club context where you want party-goers to accept you into the fold of their friends—and where you are observing potentially illegal behavior of both drug use and sex?

We managed this problem in four ways. First, we secured a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institute on Drug Abuse that protected us from subpoena. Second, circuit parties attract an older demographic; you have to be at least 21 to get in the door. This resolved issues of interacting with minors. Third, when I engaged in participant observation, I deemed it necessary to appear as a partier and did not explicitly reveal my professional role. This enhanced the authenticity of my observations. And finally, because I was not going to take drugs like the majority of the attendees, I instead brought aspirin tablets with me into the party which mimicked the appearance of ecstasy. Because much of the community interacts within smaller groups of friends who ritualistically consume drugs, there was a real issue of credibility that I had to confront if I was not a part of the ingesting group. In any case, the study was a big success. We published it in a medical journal, and it was picked up by more than forty international media outlets.

How do people react when you tell them you study sexuality?

The reactions are as varied as the diversity inherent in all human beings, of course, but one particular episode stands out in my mind. I struggled during my first round on the academic job market. As I sought to make sense of my unfavorable situation, one of my advisors shared with me a shocking assessment from a colleague who taught at a sociology department where I had applied for tenure-track position. "What is his dissertation about?" asked the colleague in a private telephone conversation with my advisor, who proceeded to explain my topic of infighting in LGBT Marches on Washington. "And he's gay?" the colleague retorted. Although puzzled by the question, my advisor nonetheless replied, "Yes. So what?" Then the curtains were lifted: "Well, that's the problem: he's narcissistic."

I choose to remember this offensive and homophobic remark as an isolated incident, rather than how sociologists in general react when I tell them what I study. But it still stung. It taught me that bias operates at all levels, even among highly

educated people. To be gay and to care about gay issues is somehow narcissistic. The personal is always political, yes, but sexuality penetrates into our imagination in unique ways.

Why is sex research important? How does your work on LGBT social movements relate to everyday life?

Sex research is important for so many reasons, but I'll just share the first two that come to my mind. One of society's favorite myths about gay people is that we're all alike. Social psychologists call this the "out-group homogeneity effect," a majority-group perception that minority group members are fairly similar to one another. Sex research enables us to debunk this pervasive bias about LGBTQ individuals. From a personal perspective, part of what makes studying sexuality right now so exciting is that we're living with a generation of scholars who have pioneered the writing of our history. Unlike other minority groups, queer people have a comparatively weaker sense of our own heritage and history. Sex research is important because we still have much about queer lives that needs to be collectively remembered and preserved. There are many more stories to tell.

If you could teach people one thing about sexuality what would it be?

The world appears and feels so much more effervescent when passion and pleasure accompany the pursuit of your craft. It's important to love what you do. Studying sexuality offers opportunities for intense intellectual stimulation and unbridled pleasures in the process of doing it.