

Unknowing to Know More about Sexuality Education

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Louisa Allen's *Sexuality Education and New Materialism – Queer Things* provides a detailed account of how queer sexuality education is within the currently not-so-queer education systems, how research in the field has stagnated owing to methodological, theoretical, and socio-political limitations, and how a new and a queerer approach to studying and furthering sexuality education is possible.

Allen argues that sexuality education research has stagnated over the past few decades with predictable questions and answers and failed to progress beyond the developments that helped curricula move past either an abstinence-only or a risk-reduction orientation. Allen's critique of this stagnation is twofold. First, the most common methodologies used, namely qualitative, are strongly shaped by the predictability of their questions, observers, subjects, and sought-after answers. Allen's second critique is that the attempts at furthering sexuality education are often based on critique, which usually delivers more 'othering' than development in the field and is at times likely to land at a place where no other view than one's own seems tolerable.

Allen experiments with the new materialist approach to overcome the impact of what she sees as a Cartesian dualism that shapes education systems and affects the minds of students and educators who think about sexuality education through conventional binaries. With the aim of opening a window of opportunity, Allen uses new materialism 'as a queer tool, to *queer* queer theory' (p. 27). New materialism is 'queer' as it does not fit any of the standards that the scientific community uses to measure the merit of a methodology, such as the representativeness of a sample or the need for hypotheses to be tested. Allen also indicates how new materialism avoids the problems of a typical qualitative method.

Allen explains the underlying principles of the methodologies (qualitative, post-qualitative, and new materialist) and theories (queer and new materialist) in the book to guide the reader and to explain how new materialism's queerness is deserved. They point out that sexuality education is not an intellectual topic of study but a bodily topic and has a sensual and even pleasurable focus. Yet, as an exploration, she never promises to resolve the 'issues which continue to plague sexuality education' (p. 6), and this is part of the queerness of her method and the methodology she proposes.

She highlights two areas of ethical concern in her exploration of new materialism through a feminist perspective, which include the ethico-onto-epistemological conceptualisation of the curriculum and engagement in social justice issues. Allen attempts to apply an ethico-onto-epistemological approach, where ethics, ontology, and epistemology are no longer taken separately but are entangled 'in becoming', and the researcher bravely steps into the unknown. Allen also points out the power distribution in sexuality education studies and adds how this approach creates a more egalitarian plane, where power dynamics are no longer valid. In this approach, not only is agency distributed equally between the researcher and the researched, which is something we already see attempted in many feminist approaches, but through new materialism both the human and non-human aspects of where and how the study takes place are taken into account. This is somewhat difficult to understand if one is not an expert in new materialism, but the non-human aspects of a study refer to something more than just the 'context'.

To understand what value new materialism adds to sexuality education research, it is imperative to understand the main conceptual divergences of its theory and methodology from the traditional and post-qualitative work that dominated the field. First, new materialist methodology rejects representationalism. As a result, researchers, their object of study, and the output of the work are no longer separated. In this way, the methodology aims to dissolve the boundaries between the researcher and the researched, whereas in previous approaches the researcher had the role of knowing, leading, and reporting, and even the most common text outputs tended to reflect this centring of the researcher and the researcher's position of having the greatest agency. New materialism, by contrast, focuses on the intra-active production of a study.

Second, the researcher is no longer an autonomous, aware, or governing body but a part of the events that unfold in the study that attunes to these events with an open and wondering eye and mind. The researcher is no longer following a pre-defined method to answer pre-defined questions and is instead becoming immersed in the events that are brought on by studying what is being studied, with a focus on what the intra-action of everyone/everything involved creates, which is impossible to predict. Moreover, the researcher needs to be aware that their object of study and everything else involved in their interactions with the object of study will have an impact on how it will make itself intelligible to the researcher. For example, Allen mentions a photograph from an earlier study of how teens learn about sexuality at school that showed an empty locker room. Her first reaction to the photo was annoyance that the ethics committee would not allow people to be present in photographs, and that the real experience could not be captured. Another researcher might deem this photograph useless as it did not involve the very agents of sexuality, the humans.

However, the new materialist approach would take into account all the mental and physical reactions to the submission of this photograph as well as the photograph itself.

Third, given that epistemology is considered always to be ontological, so knowing is always a part of being, it is no longer enough to study discourse or linguistic turns to understand the production of new knowledge. A new thinking is needed to reflect the liveliness and forcefulness of matter (i.e. the photo of the locker room) in this knowledge production. To understand this, we must begin with the humanness of discourse and language before we can move beyond or add to the discourse. Language represents and discourse socially constructs knowledge in a schema in which only humans have agency in knowledge production. This kind of knowledge is limited to what language can represent and who can use it. The new materialist approach proposes that one can only create knowledge that one experiences, and experience is not only linguistic. Furthermore, experience cannot be predetermined or contained, as there is no way to know what will happen through intra-actions. Moreover, the representation of knowledge creation itself through language is also anthropocentric, as humans are the sole agents in the creation, sharing, and use of it.

Fourth, with respect to ethics, new materialism calls on researchers to consider what '[their] own and others' constitutive enactments of boundaries and of exteriorities and interiorities as involving [them], always, in asking in what ways the world in its doing is being made to matter' (Davies 2016:, as cited in Allen 2018). Researchers therefore need to be attuned to each intra-action with its ethical considerations in mind so that they can respond and consider how each of these encounters plays a role in what justice, reality, or truths are co-constituted. Again, the focus is not on the researcher's behaviours or ethical approach, but on the intra-actions that take place during the study, which will co-construct a new way of becoming.

Finally, new materialism, informed by Barad's (2007) work, considers matter to be an active participant. For sexuality education, this implies that 'sexuality does not pre-exist matter/meaning but comes into being via their relation' (p. 12). This defeats anthropocentrism, creates an agential cut, and makes every *object's* contribution – from a photo in the curriculum to the desks the students sit in to their corporeal selves and the intra-action between each of them in the becoming of the phenomenon studied – count among the researcher's ethical considerations.

New materialism, based on these clear differences from other research methodologies, and its foundational grounding in Barad's (2007) work on overarching intra-activity (where nothing can exist or be on its own and wherein human beings and non-human objects *become* by interacting with each other) can easily be considered an approach with no limits, and as one that even goes against the standards of the well-established research methodologies that have pre-determined rules, processes,

and expectations about findings in terms of what constitutes findings and how they can be presented. Allen references what Koro-Ljungberg (2016) refers to as 'methodology] without methodology...that may begin anywhere, anytime' (p. 1). This may simply sound like a phenomenological theory of how to understand the world and humans' place in it, rather than a methodology at all. But Allen tries to find a way to come up with a methodology that captures this theory.

Allen demonstrates and compares approaches using examples. Among the examples, one related to diversity and is presented in Chapter 5, 'Learning about Sexuality "Between" Home and School'. This chapter focuses on the case of how Chana, a 16-year-old Muslim woman, 'live[s] religion, culture, and sexuality between home and school' (p. 71). Allen provides an interpretive and a new materialist account of how her experiences come into being, providing an opportunity for the reader to learn the differences between the two approaches using this example. The interpretive approach, a commonly used qualitative method, falls into the trap of representation, as the researcher is assumed capable of understanding and knowing what Chana's use of representational tools (i.e. language, school/home worlds, etc.) mean through an interpretation of them based on research aims and questions. The excerpts provided from an interview with Chana address her and her family's beliefs, identity, how they see themselves and are viewed outside their community, how she learns about sexuality at school because she does not really hang out with school friends outside school, and how she intervened in an attack on her lesbian friends to protect them from bullies. Allen demonstrates how the following competing values and factors are observed through interpretive and new materialist accounts: (1) Chana wearing hijab in her secular school creating a divide/tension; (2) her identity as a devoted Muslim and a good person at home versus the negative stereotypical perceptions of Muslims at school; and (3) what she learns about sexuality (specifically about being lesbian in this case) at home (it is not tolerated) and at school (it is more open), where she shows her disapproval of violent actions and being lesbian, but also a tolerance for others because of her faith-based values.

The interpretive account of the empirical scene provided contains two discrete spaces, home and school, and two discrete approaches to sexuality and homosexuality. In addition, Chana is positioned/portrayed as having the greatest agency in navigating these tensions. An interpretive reading may see Chana as 'lead[ing] two lives, in which her actions at school diverge from those at home. This duplicity may be constituted as necessary for her survival in a contemporary world' (p. 80). Another interpretive reading can view these scenes as an attempt 'to reconcile her actions as commensurate with Islamic tenets'. As she says, 'I have my own religious views, but it doesn't mean I approve of people hitting other people.' (p. 80). Another statement with a similar sentiment is also provided: 'I'm not going to change someone because that's what

they are and I accept that, but I don't necessarily have to take on what they believe' (p.81). These statements can be read very differently, so that Chana can be viewed as shunning the Muslim values of home by having a stronger allegiance with her school's values as demonstrated by her friendships, or she can be viewed as upholding Islamic values by displaying her faith-based tolerance despite disapproval (p. 81). The main point of this demonstration is that both readings 'frame this issue dualistically, representing home and school as holding opposing views where one must prevail and the winner is determined by Chana's actions (agency)' (p. 81).

In the new materialist account, 'Chana is ... not seen as discursively positioned within the divergent sexual discourses of home and school which she must navigate', and she 'is no longer its central actor capable of exercising individual agency as to which path (home or school) she will follow' (p. 81). In this view, there are no distinct dominant players that shape Chana's choices through discourse or materialist means. 'Instead, Chana, home, school, and disparate discourses of religion, culture, and sexuality operate on the same ontological plain, so that none claim foundational status.' (p. 81) The boundaries assumed to separate these 'are now understood as porous, each enfolding into the other, making it impossible to see where they begin and end, rendering their separateness unintelligible' (p. 81). This makes what was once deemed passive and insignificant in what is being studied become active and forceful. Chana's hijab can no longer be (or only be) a mark or a signifier of who she is and how this is viewed by others. In this view, it has an active role 'in the becoming of Chana's religious and cultural identity. The materiality of the hijab intra-acts with Chana's physicality, spatial arrangements of home and school, and attendant discourses of religion, culture, and sexuality' (p. 81). This exemplifies how material and non-material are seen to be entangled. The hijab, the material, *does something*. And it is expected that differences, identifications, and various agencies will unfold through intra-action, through the intra-relating of objects and humans. Neither factor (human or non-human) mentioned above are viewed 'as separate entities exercising attendant powers' (p. 82). Allen writes that this view leaves behind the need to reconcile differences and opens up space for an intra-active relating that allows for new discoveries but claims this "'newness" is not nameable' (p. 82). Naming this newness 'would once again cast the researcher back into the ontological strictures of representational thought – as the "birdseye[bird's-eye]" figure who sees, and then explains what all this now means' (p. 82).

After describing these two different approaches to the same case, Allen remarks how materialist feminist readings aim to provide material realities with consequences, both political and material. She concludes by asking valuable questions that once again compare and contrast the approaches: 'What then are the political and material consequences of displacing the ontological foundations of home and

school as separate and conflicting entities in a contest for the ideological allegiance of students like Chana? What becomes of this issue when the research scene is flattened and conceptualised as intra-active material-non-material entanglements?' (p. 82) As a reader, it also seems hard to grasp how a methodology leads to the discovery of something new that cannot be named. This unnamed newness seems to be an output of the methodology, but how do we know and share this newness? What would it mean for Chana, and for those experiencing or interested in similar becomings? How do we inform others of such discoveries?

In the final chapter, 'Never(end)ing: Propositions for Sexuality Education'," Allen finishes her experimentation with new materialism providing an open-ended discussion and a critique. She asks what an intra-active understanding of sexuality education can do differently. She claims it 'offers a way of approaching some of sexuality education's binarisms differently', and this especially helps with the ongoing debates on diversity and the different roles of home and school in sexual education as no longer being 'a confrontation between discrete and binary opposites who disagree over the presence and/or content of sexuality education' (p. 127). New materialism moves in the direction of an intra-active becoming that calls for 'a reorientation of "this problem" and inherent ethical response-abilities' (p. 127). But she doesn't quite go far enough to show how thinking and writing about these interactions, as heady and intellectual as they are at present, might make a difference in actual sexuality education.

Allen then considers the decentring of the human in sexuality education and what that might achieve. For researchers, the acceptance that they can no longer be the informed researcher within the new materialistic view can impact the identification and the investment at the 'level of identity, fiscal concerns, personal and organisational purpose, national and international social, and economic and political advancement' (p. 128). According to Allen, '[n]ot knowing is a productive failure that entails a response-ability, an openness, and a vulnerability to 'the other' in the sexuality classroom' (p. 129). Thus, she believes that if researchers can stop reducing interpretations to binaries, they will stop othering those with differing beliefs and focus on the material world that exists through intra-action and will thus make ethics a necessity and not a choice. It isn't clear, however, what ethic is being evoked.

Finally, Allen questions what thinking with new materialism does to sexual subjectivity, sexuality education curricula, pedagogy, teacher-student relations, and sexuality education research. By moving from an understanding in which each person is 'a separately bodied individual' towards one where we examine 'intra-active phenomena', sexuality become 'an incipient subjectivity' (p. 129), 'the conditions of which are contingent upon the assemblage it is inextricably entangled with/in' (p. 130). In terms of curricula, 'ontologically, sexuality is intra-actively part of our

being, to the extent that the world is sexuality education' (p. 132). This means that not only the location or the very act of education but also the content lies in our becoming. In this perspective, consent is a more difficult concept to digest, as it is based on human agency, which the new materialist approach tries to unravel and replace with the phenomenon of becoming through intra-action. Allen points out how the centring of most phenomena on human agency raises questions about whether notions of consent are obsolete in this view. Pedagogy and teacher–student relationships are both shifted more towards a process or emergence rather than pre-defined aims and ends. The focus is no longer on the power dynamics and roles or what is taught; instead, greater emphasis is placed on how knowing, being, and reactions are handled in the classroom.

Based on this new politics of attention to interaction, Allen invites readers to think about not the pre-existing roles, ends, and aims but the overall purpose of education. The new materialist approach aims to elicit fascination, wonder, and openness, and to push for new ways of thinking, ridding us of pre-conceived ideas about what research questions, data, and results should look like. It pushes researchers to look at data more as capital for future thinking than as something they work on or have mastery over. The openness of this thinking, as Allen points out, is bound to make institutional and ethical reviews, in the way we understand them, simply impossible.

As the new materialist approach requires, Allen does not finish, but stops by touching on the boundaries of new materialism. She is frustrated by new materialism's rejection of language as a limitation to openness. Still, she finds language and writing to be the most efficient way to share her understanding and experimentation as she envisions them. Allen points out how ethical considerations and diversity can be better handled in absence of power imbalances, as the approach calls for. And she does this without naming the ethical points under consideration. However, she also touches on aspects of this approach that are difficult, and focuses mainly on the decentring of humans and social justice.

Considering sexuality education as the whole classroom, and no longer just what happens within the classroom, and as including even enactments of the past in intra-action in the classroom, is difficult when ideas about 'what sexuality education is are so entrenched and politically invested that suggesting the learning pillars of this subject (safer sex and contraception) be replaced by a pedagogy of being-doing seems unfathomable. While thinking with new materialism is not all that easy, operationalising it and escaping our anthropocentric selves can feel (im)possible' (p. 141). Pointing out how deeply human both politics and social justice are, Allen rightfully asks, 'How can we pursue social justice with a theory which is humanly represented (by those thinking with it) and yet which occludes in its very viability the possibility of human agency and centrality?' (p. 143)

Allen's work successfully provides the reader with a critical view of the conventional conceptualisation of research on and the portrayal of sexuality education and shows how new materialism can offer a different and more complex set of lenses to enhance our understanding and enable newness in the field. The book was written as simply as it possibly could be on this hard to grasp subject. And her closing remarks leave the reader with questions similar to her own about the boundaries the new materialism, and how hard it would be to operationalise the new materialist approach. While it is clear that how we study sexuality education needs to be expanded, it is less clear how new materialism might influence actual curricula, when, under any approach, things like consent and social justice are difficult to operationalise, and the conduct of the humans that education seeks to influence are under ethical and legal constraints. Does one teach what we and students do is intra-actively constituted at every moment of a decision? Where would agency and ethical responsibility for the intra-actively imagined student come into play?

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Sexualita od dětství po dospívání

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Lamb, S., Gilbert, J. (eds.). 2019. *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Editorky Sharon Lamb a Jen Gilbert nabízejí v knize nebývale komplexní pohled na roli sexuality jak v dospívání, tak i v dětství. Příspěvky autorek a autorů v knize *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development, Childhood and Adolescence* se