“Knowledge of Desire, Desire of Knowledge”

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Foucault was there. The first talk of the “Epistemologies of Desire” workshop was a genealogy of the concept of “sexual repression” by Joanne Meyerowitz, much in the spirit of History of Sexuality, Volume 1. The concept of sexual repression, Meyerowitz explained, has been tremendously productive for the generation of all kinds of knowledge about society, both progressive and reactionary. Other investigations into the production of knowledge about sexuality followed. Tom Waidzunas and Steven Epstein traced the history of a technology, phallometric testing. This technology, they found, has been put to various uses, from the “treatment” of homosexuality to the prediction of sex offender recidivism, which can all be described as productions of “sexual truths” that strengthen the normalization of sexuality. Jennifer Fishman, in turn, looked at the use of similar technologies to measure female arousal by the pharmaceutical industry in their (failed) attempts to define and cure female “sexual arousal disorder.” And in her second appearance, Meyerowitz drew attention to the links between the “meta-narratives” of sex and race and the importance of studying the two together.

Other contributors, however, sought to generate new knowledge about sexuality in the present. Here, the variety of epistemologies was striking. While psychologist Allen Rosenthal described his experimental research into “sexual arousal patterns” of bisexual men, which relies on a phallometric device to quantify arousal, Philip Hammack advocated the analysis of narratives to investigate the meaning of desire for individuals in particular contexts. Lisa Diamond, meanwhile, appeared to situate her research on female “sexual fluidity” in between these two poles of biology and discourse, though closer to the latter. Her study relies largely on self-reported data: of women’s attraction levels to both genders on the one hand, and their sexual identity on the other. E. Patrick Johnson presented yet another epistemology, and spoke about the self-conscious play with gender performance of a genderqueer person from his southern home town known as Charles, Chaz and Chastity.

The conference, then, juxtaposed two types of inquiry: on the one hand, research about desire; on the other, research about our desire for knowledge about desire. That this is not a clear-cut distinction was made clear by the contribution of Héctor Carrillo and Amanda Hoffman, who stressed the importance of the framework of sexual identity categories for men’s self-understanding of their sexuality. Nevertheless, I think that this distinction has real implications that go beyond
disciplinary boundaries and are ultimately political. The conference raised the question for all participants not only of how to study desire, but also of why.