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An Education in Sexuality & Sociality: Heteronormativity on Campus

Jason K. Wallace
University of Georgia

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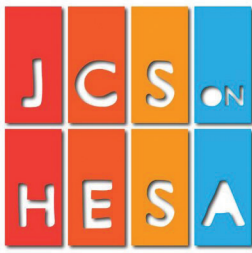
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Book Review

An Education in Sexuality & Sociality
Heteronormativity on Campus

Jason K. Wallace

— Abstract —

In *An Education in Sexuality & Sociality: Heteronormativity on Campus*, Dr. Frank Karioris discusses the role of universities in creating sexed and gendered relationships and hierarchies within society. Through his ethnographic study, Dr. Karioris explores homosociality and challenges heteronormativity on college campuses. This book review provides an overview of this work along with critique and implication for higher education.

Keywords: homosociality, student affairs, heteronormativity, higher education

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“So take a good long look around you tonight. Some of these people will become your lifelong friends. They’ll dance at your wedding. They’ll be with you to watch your children grow up. It is a good bet that your future spouse is in this room right now.”

– *President of the University of St. Jerome*
(Karioris, 2019, p. 111)

Though not explicitly stated in mission statements, many universities assume the responsibility of matchmaker for members of their student body during their undergraduate years (Karioris, 2019). Dr. Frank Karioris in *An Education in Sexuality & Sociality: Heteronormativity on Campus* discusses the role of universities in creating sexed and gendered relationships and hierarchies within society, while simultaneously emphasizing the function that sociality plays in the lives of students. Karioris’ book is the culmination of his year-long ethnographic study of an all-male residence hall, Regan Hall, at the University of St. Jerome (USJ) - a private, Catholic, four-year institution situated in an urban city center. Karioris’ fieldwork resulted in over one thousand single-spaced pages of field notes. He conducted seventy-five semi-structured interviews with residents, resident assistants (RAs), former residents, and resident directors in Regan Hall. These data resulted in a rich description of college life for the residents of Regan Hall at USJ which Karioris use to make a robust argument for universities’ cupid-like role in the lives of their students as well as an explanation of the homosocial relationships between college men.

An Education in Sexuality and Sociality seems to be most useful for higher education professionals, particularly those in student affairs, who seek to disrupt systems of heteronormativity on campuses and those looking to understand homosocial relationship among college men. Karioris’ academic background is primarily situated in gender studies with an emphasis on sociology and anthropology, thus providing

an honest critique of higher education and student affairs from an *outsider* perspective.

In this book, Karioris primarily centers his arguments based on the relationships between men in three social groups, which he named, the Step Kids, the Man Cave Guys, and the Third Floor Group – all residents of, or somehow related to, Regan Hall. He notes that rather than using a theoretical framework, per se, he grounds his book in concepts related to “masculinity, homosociality, liminality, feminism, and friendship” (p. 12) as tools for discussion and deeper understanding.

Karioris (2019) presents this work for a few primary reasons:

- 1) To explore universities’ role and participation in a system of “sexuality, marriage, and child rearing” (p. 1)
- 2) To plainly discuss and trouble the universities’ prominence in setting up social hierarchies as well as specific, arguably rigid, forms of relationships between its students (p. 2)
- 3) Make visible and explicit the “intricate and complex formations of homosocial relationships” (p. 2)

This work is necessary for higher education professionals to put a critical eye to longstanding traditions, practices, and policies and recognize our role in perpetuating heteronormativity and masculine hegemony on college campuses. In the following section, I provide brief synopses of the chapters in the book followed by my critique of the work. I conclude by discussing the important contributions and implications of this work in the field of higher education and student affairs.

Chapter Synopses

Karioris begins his book with a foreword written by his friends titled “Friends Writing about Friend Writing about Friendship” – an endearing primer which sets the tone for his exploration of friendship between college men. In the preface, Karioris then provides brief vignettes from his study that further

sets the mood for readers. In the introduction, he makes the case for his claims, giving the readers context about higher education in the United States, the role of the residence hall, gender on campus, the myth of community, as well as the philosophical groundings for where he begins the conversation. His road-map gives readers excellent context as he then dives into the study.

Chapter 1 – Going to college: Meetings and methods. In the tradition of ethnography, Karioris begins by providing a vivid description of his research site, methods, and methodology. He describes, in meticulous detail, the residence hall, the university, and the city in which the university is located. He then provides the readers with a preliminary introduction of the three groups of college men who serve as the center of his study – the Step Kids, the Man Cave Guys, and the Third Floor Group. He ends the chapter by emphasizing the homogenous nature of the identities of the men he interacted with, who were White, lower-middle to middle class, and self-identified as heterosexual. While this was not all of the men he interacted with (he notes that he chatted with some men who identified as Black, working-class, and/or queer) this was the primary group he interacted with during his time at USJ.

Chapter 2 – Geographies of life: Work, space, and relations. Chapter two begins with Karioris offering more detail about the three groups of men he interacts with, but this time through the lens of geography. He discusses the role of space and how the layout of campus impacts interaction between these students. He offers a poignant critique of universities in this chapter by naming universities' role in creating a system of hierarchy on campus through the inequities between residence halls. He provides examples of inter-residence hall conflicts which have undergirding of social hierarchy, toxic masculinity, and classism. The chapter illuminates the role of space and place as well as the fluidity and mobility of space-based relationships.

Chapter 3 – Myths of community: Materialist

practices and student subjectivities. This chapter offers a thoughtful discussion regarding community on college campuses. Karioris posits that universities attempt to craft communities among college students as opposed to allowing community to grow organically. He argues that the “sense and semblance of community being put forward by the “administrative university” are fictive, fictitious, and fictional” (Karioris, 2019, p. 81). Karioris problematizes this myth of community by exploring traditional and modern definitions of community as well as investigating the ways community was formed and destroyed between a few of the men in Regan Hall.

Chapter 4 – Sexuality in education: The university's marital pushes and programs. In chapter 4, Karioris begins to paint a clear picture of the role universities play in promoting heteronormativity, marriage, and ideas of reproduction among students through examples of events hosted by USJ. It is in this section when he offers critique of the USJ president who offered the following words to the first-year class at a first-year welcome ceremony:

“You hardly know, in most cases, the people to your left, to your right, in front of you, or behind you. You hardly know them tonight. Yet you are about to plunge into the experience of your lives with them. . . . So take a good long look around you tonight. Some of these people will become your lifelong friends. They'll dance at your wedding. They'll be with you to watch your children grow up. It is a good bet that your future spouse is in this room right now.” (Karioris, 2019, p. 111)

It is this chapter that Karioris describes a, seemingly, organized pedagogical effort by administrators, student affairs staff, and student leaders, instructing first-year students to engage with members of the opposite sex and spend the next few years on campus finding their spouse. Although the word “spouse” is used often at USJ, Karioris notes that in no way is

it used to suggest a queer-supporting environment for students as the usage of the word spouse at USJ consistently denotes a member of the opposite sex. The major takeaway from the chapter is the assertion that “the university wants people connected without touching, in love without sex, married without the implications” (Karioris, 2019, p. 121). Essentially, Karioris posits that universities are complicit in promoting heterosexual relationships in and beyond college.

Chapter 5 – “Let’s bang!”: Heteronormativity and the divide of sociality/sexuality. While the dominant narrative on college students may suggest that students are constantly engaging in sexual intercourse, Karioris ends his book by offering a counter-narrative that suggest more nuance in sexual encounters and only a few instances of sexual intercourse between college men and women. It is the finding that students are privileging and seeking social relations over sexual relations, that runs in direct conflict with the unspoken, heteronormative goals of the universities. Students favoring heterosociality and rejecting sexual encounters with members of the opposite sex disrupts the “marital religio-hetero-patriarchal” (p. 136) society in which we live. What does this mean for universities who have settled in their role of pushing these covert messages?

The book concludes with a summation of the lessons learned in the study situating those lessons within the larger context of higher education and student affairs. In concluding, Karioris emphasizes the importance of critique of higher education and student affairs naming some of the ways that these entities are currently receiving critique. He then situates this work in larger discourse within the fields of anthropology, critical pedagogies, and critical studies of men and masculinities. Lastly, he offers a challenge that questions what American universities would look like with decentralized programming, beyond formal entities on campus (i.e. student governments, student affairs). It is in this that he subtly urges higher education administrators to reconsider the ways program-

ming and pedagogical praxis is currently approached on college campuses.

Critique

This work offers higher education professionals an analytical lens to view university practices related to residence life, programming, policies, and campus environments. While this work provides much value to higher education and student affairs scholarship by providing honest critique through the lens of another discipline, incorporating higher education and student affairs scholarship could have strengthened Karioris’ arguments. As an example, Karioris offers a thoughtful discussion on geography and space that assist readers to understand further how campus environments impact student interactions. However, Karioris does not include notable campus ecology scholars (e.g., Strange & Banning (2015), Bronfenbrenner (1994), Hurst (1987)) that could bolster arguments in that chapter and offer a more holistic discussion grounded in campus ecology theory.

Additionally, though Karioris names early in the text that the study spotlights White, middle-class, straight men, he fails to interrogate the role of privilege, power, and heteropatriarchal socialization in the lives of these college men and how that influences their relationships with each other and impacts the ways they navigate USJ. I wish this work would have provided more background on how heteronormativity, substantiated by universities, impact men who do not hold these privileged identities such as men of color, men from low-income backgrounds, queer men, trans men, or men with disabilities. The inclusion of scholarship that interrogates Whiteness (e.g., DiAngelo, 2018; Gusa, 2010) would allow for greater discussion on the ways White college men engage with each other. Though Karioris acknowledges that this work would not do justice to conversations around intersectionality, it felt as if topics related to any groups experiencing systemic oppression were then ignored for the remainder of the text. If we are to have full, nuanced discourse about heteronorma-

tivity on campuses we must continue to include those who identities lie in the margins (hooks, 1990).

Conclusion

This book offers a profound analysis of homosociality, an authentic critique of universities, and an up-close look into the lives of a subset of college men. I believe this book has the power to impact praxis for many student affairs practitioners and higher education administrators by allowing these professionals the opportunity to take a hard look at their practices and seek to gain a better understanding of their role in perpetuating heteronormativity on college campuses. This work is important in an age of increasing diversity on college campuses. I look forward to seeing the impact this text has on the landscape of higher education.

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