

# Theoretical perspectives

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What is the relationship between sex and society? Beginning with sexologists who propose a view of sex as fundamentally biological, I review various social approaches to understanding sexuality. I take for granted the belief that there is a biological basis for human impulses, drives, and desires. However, it is social forces that fashion a biological reality into "sexuality." Individuals and groups give meaning to bodily sensations and feelings, make erotic acts into sexual identities, and create norms distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities.

## Sexology: a natural order of sexuality

Why do many of us in America and Europe view sexuality as natural? One reason is the development of a science of sexuality. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there developed a science aimed at discovering the laws of sexuality. This science has come to be called sexology.

Who are the sexologists? Among the more famous are Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld. While few of us today have heard of these nineteenth-century pioneers of sexology, many of us have heard of Alfred Kinsey or of Masters and Johnson. Sexologists have produced a body of knowledge that has influenced the way many of us think about sex, in part because their ideas have been stamped with the imprimatur of science.

What are the key ideas of sexology? First, sexology claims that humans are born with a sexual nature, and that sexuality is part of the biological makeup of all individuals. Second, sexology views sexuality as being at the core of what it means to be human: our sexual drive is no less basic than our need to eat or sleep. Sexuality is said to be basic to who we are. Third, sexuality is viewed as a powerful and driving force in our behavior. It influences all aspects of our lives, from the physical to the psychological. It motivates much of human behavior. Fourth, sexology states that the sexual instinct is, by nature, heterosexual. There is said to be a natural attraction between men and women. While few sexologists today believe that the chief purpose of sexuality is to procreate, they continue to think that heterosexuality is the natural and normal form of sexuality.

Sexologists aim to discover the laws of sexuality. Just as physics and biology distrust inherited ideas and test them in experiments, sexology has championed a vigorously scientific approach.

Facts, not beliefs, are to guide this science. The truth of sexuality is to be discovered by means of the "case study" method. Like physicians or psychiatrists, sexologists use intensive interviews and observation to uncover the true nature of sexuality. The details of human sexual desires, fantasies, and practices are recorded for the purpose of revealing the laws of the sexual instinct. Sexologists develop elaborate classifications of sexual types and detail the range of normal and abnormal forms of sexuality.

Sexology has always had a social purpose. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some sexologists sought to expand tolerance for different forms of human sexuality by emphasizing that sexuality is natural. Other sexologists saw their work as a way to contribute to creating a healthy, fit population. Often this meant that sexology was aligned to a belief in racial purity and improvement. Some sexologists even discouraged the sexual intermingling of races.

As racist ideas lost favor during the twentieth century, sexology has often been allied to a mission of strengthening the institutions of marriage and the family. Sexologists have argued that sex is at the core of love and marriage, and that a stable happy marriage requires a mutually satisfying sexual relationship. Individuals should not be burdened by guilt; they must be sexually knowledgeable and skilled. Sexology has aimed to make sexually enlightened and skillful citizens who would marry and stay married, in part because of a mutually satisfying sex life.

While their writings are sometimes technical and often tedious, sexologists have shaped Western sexual culture. Their ideas about the naturalness of sexuality have been popularized by an army of sex advice writers. Many of us believe in the idea of a natural sexuality because of the sexologists.

### Freud: between biology and sociology

Alongside sexology, the discipline of psychology has been the source of many of our ideas about sex. In particular, Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, has been probably the single most influential thinker in shaping Western sexual culture.

Freud aimed to uncover the roots of human psychology in our sex drives. Freud accepted many of the ideas of the sexologists. He believed in the biological basis of sexuality and insisted that sexuality is at the root of many of our feelings and actions. Freud also thought that there is a normal course of sexual development and there are abnormal or perverse forms of sexuality. The defining feature of sexual abnormality was deviation from genital-centered, intercourse-oriented heterosexuality based on love and monogamy.

But Freud also disagreed with the sexologists. Whereas sexologists defined the sexual instinct as reproductive and naturally heterosexual, Freud argued that the sexual instinct is oriented to pleasure. Moreover, humans get pleasure not only from sexual intercourse, but also from kissing, touching, caressing, looking, and sometimes dominating and being dominated. Freud argued that the body has many erotic areas and there are many ways of experiencing sexual satisfaction. Accordingly, he held that nongenital pleasures are not necessarily abnormal. It is normal, for example, to enjoy the range of pleasures that are today called foreplay.

Viewing the sexual instinct as a drive for pleasure blurs the line between normal and abnormal. To most sexologists, any sexual expression that deviated from a heterosexual reproductive aim was abnormal. However, Freud allows for a wide range of normal sexual expression beyond heterosexual reproduction. Pursuing nonprocreative pleasures is not in itself abnormal; sex drives become abnormal only when they are fixated on one specific sex act or pleasure. For example, it is normal for individuals to feel pleasure from looking at someone or from kissing and touching. It is abnormal, though, when these pleasures replace heterosexual intercourse.

Freud was convinced that sex is at the core of the self. It is, he thought, the drive for erotic pleasure that places the individual in conflict with social norms of respectability and self-control. Sexuality is then a major focus of psychological and social conflict. The psychological character of the individual rests on how the sex drive is managed. Too much sexual expression leads to psychological and social instability. Excessive social control results in psychosexual frustration that brings personal unhappiness.

Freud held to a much deeper social understanding of sexuality than the sexologists. If the sexual instinct is somewhat flexible in its purpose, it is society that shapes its form and meaning. In particular, the family is the formative social environment shaping our psyches and sexualities. Our psychological and sexual selves take shape as we struggle with the conflict between a drive for sexual pleasure and the social expectation to be productive, responsible citizens.

### Marxism: the economics of sexuality

The ideas of the sexologists and psychologists have established important traditions in thinking about sex. However, they emphasize the natural, biological roots of sexuality. They have little to say about how social forces such as religion, the state, or the economy actually form biological impulses into sexual desires, create sexual identities, and establish rules and norms that regulate our sexual behavior.

In the twentieth century, *new social ways of thinking about sex* appeared. We will review some of the chief social theoretical perspectives that continue to influence the sociology of sexuality.

We begin with Karl Marx. Now, Marx himself had little to say about sex, but he was a great social thinker. One of his key insights was that human nature, including our sexuality, is shaped by society and changes historically.

Marxists argue that the economy is the most important social force shaping human behavior. Consider the way a capitalist economy shapes sexuality. Capitalism is oriented toward profit and economic growth. Marx believed that profit is based on exploiting labor, and growth occurs by reinvesting profits back into an enterprise. Marxists distinguish two phases of capitalist development in Europe and the United States. A market-based capitalism was dominant throughout the nineteenth century; since the early twentieth century, capitalism has been shaped by large corporations.

In the market phase, the chief challenge is to produce enough goods to meet the needs of the population. The answer: a disciplined labor force must be created. Individuals must adapt to the rhythms of a system of mass production that progressively strips work of individual imagination and skill. Ideally, capitalists would like to see laborers become machine-like. Anything that interferes with maximizing production, such as emotional or erotic feelings, is an impediment to efficient production. In other words, capitalists try to desexualize the work process and the body of laborers.

Business owners too must learn to avoid personal indulgence in order to remain competitive. While capitalists may flaunt their class status by acts of conspicuous consumption, their lives are fraught with anxiety. The market is unpredictable, and competitors threaten to take away their own and their family's livelihood. This drives capitalists to become economically and socially disciplined.

In a market economy, a repressed personality type is prominent. This kind of person is performance- and success-oriented and exercises tight internal controls over emotions and sensual desires. To this type of person, sexual impulses and desires are potentially disruptive of discipline; sexuality needs to be rigidly controlled. Accordingly, in market economies the pressures of industrial production and discipline shape a sexual culture that values self-control and the avoidance of sensual pleasure.

In the market economies of the nineteenth century, a sexual culture takes shape organized around procreation in marriage. Sex that is oriented to pleasure, sex outside marriage, autoerotic

sex, sex in public, all nonheterosexual sex, and nongenital sex, were viewed as deviant. These sexualities were at odds with capitalism's need for disciplined, productive workers.

In the twentieth century, the corporation replaced the small business as the major economic institution. This development brought about changes in modern sexual culture. New technologies and a scientific approach to the labor process created a new problem: how to ensure that the vast sea of goods being produced would be consumed?

Many corporations looked to expand the domestic market. They brought commerce into areas of daily life such as leisure, recreation, and entertainment. For example, every aspect of sports, from clothes and equipment to games, has gradually been commercialized. Capitalists also tried to convince individuals to consume more goods. But how does this shift to consumption affect sexuality?

Marxists argue that the new consumer economy weakens the Victorian culture and its emphasis on privacy, self-control, and the desexualization of the body and intimacy. In the process of creating higher levels of consumption, advertising gains a new importance. Sex is used to sell commodities; the public realm is now filled with images and talk of sex.

The commercialization of sex challenged Victorian culture in another way: capitalism places a new value on sex as a source of pleasure. As sex is used to sell goods and sex businesses flourish (porn, sex toys, phone sex), sex is no longer just a procreative or loving act, but a form of pleasure and self-expression. From a Marxist perspective, business owners want one thing: to make money by selling their goods. If sex can be marketed as pleasure or as an authentic form of self-expression or identity, then sex becomes a valuable marketing resource.

Corporate capitalism promotes a view of sex as a basis of self-fulfillment. To most Marxists, however, this pleasure-oriented sexual culture does not promote real sexual freedom. A culture that celebrates a superficial drive for pleasure leads to an aimless, unhappy search for gratification. Moreover, with its focus on sexual performance, sex has come to resemble work; accordingly, it has lost much of its tender, intimate, and caring qualities. Finally, Marxists argue that, as we search for personal happiness, the gross inequalities between rich and poor go unchallenged. There can be no real sexual freedom until there is real individual freedom, which is impossible under capitalism.

### Feminism: the gender of sexuality

Feminism offers an equally forceful social view of sexuality. Feminists challenge Marxists. They point out that all of us step into the world as men or women, regardless of the economic system. Our gender identity is not a superficial part of our lives, but shapes the personal and social aspects of our lives in important ways. Feminists view gender as a social identity and a set of norms that guide behavior. We are not born men or women but acquire these gender identities through a social process of learning and sometimes coercion. Feminists believe that our sexual desires, feelings, and preferences are imprinted by gender.

Feminists say that individuals acquire a sexual nature as they develop a gender identity. What exactly is the relationship between gender and sexuality?

In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow argues that when women do the chief parenting work, gender patterns of sexual and individual development are different. For both boys and girls, the mother is often the primary source of love. However, girls sustain an intimacy with their mothers throughout their maturation; boys separate from their mothers at an early age in order to learn to be men. This difference shapes the psychosexual character of girls and boys.

The extended and intense intimacy between mothers and daughters results in girls developing a psyche that is relationship-oriented. Accordingly, girls tend to connect sex with intimacy and as a means of caring. They often approach sex more as a means of communication and

intimacy than as a vehicle of erotic pleasure. Because boys typically break sharply from their mothers at an early age, and identify with their achievement-oriented fathers, they are more performance- and goal-oriented. Boys' sexuality tends to be more performance- and body-oriented. Boys can be intimate, but they will likely express sexual love in terms of the giving and receiving of erotic pleasure.

Chodorow's perspective is important because she holds that the family plays a crucial role in the making of the sexual self. Also, she says that boys and girls develop different sexual values and orientations.

Adrienne Rich also believes that gender dynamics creates sexual differences between men and women. She emphasizes the social creation of heterosexual men and women. In "Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" she argues that we are all taught and coerced into adopting conventional gender identities. Why? Gender difference, Rich says, reinforces a society organized around the norm of heterosexuality. Shaping individuals into heterosexual men and women is a complex social process. Societies use positive inducements like economic rewards or a culture that romanticizes heterosexuality, but also resorts to ridicule, harassment, and violence to punish gender nonconformists and nonheterosexuals. The belief that heterosexuality is normal and natural plays a key role in creating heterosexual men and women. For example, many Europeans and Americans believe that there is a natural attraction between the sexes, that their bodies and minds "naturally" fit. Heterosexuality is then viewed as an extension of a natural order composed of two complementary sexes.

Catherine MacKinnon insists on the role of male dominance in shaping women's sexuality. She views sexuality as a product of men's power; sex is a means by which men control women. Indeed, it is the very basis of male domination. To the extent that men have the power to define what desires, feelings, and behaviors are sexual, they can define women's sexuality in a way that positions them as subordinate. For example, in male-dominated America, women's sexuality is supposed to be oriented to vaginal intercourse in marriage with the ultimate aim of procreation. This view defines women as heterosexual, or needing men, and as motivated to become wives and mothers, and therefore dependent on men.

Feminists like Rich and MacKinnon claim that the very essence of sexuality expresses men's wish for dominance. Every sexual desire and behavior in male-dominated societies is said to be related to gender dynamics, and either expresses men's dominance or women's resistance. From this perspective, feminists criticize the notion that women's sexual liberation is about claiming the right to pleasure or the freedom to do as one pleases, an approach that expresses men's view of sexual freedom. Instead, women's sexual liberation involves fashioning a sexual life that reflects their own needs, feelings, and desires. The point is not to liberate sexuality from social control, which could lead to more violence or unwanted pregnancy, but to claim the power to define one's own sexual desires and forge sexual-intimate lives.

Some feminists, like the anthropologist Gayle Rubin, have objected to the view that sexuality is a direct expression of gender politics. She argues that this perspective ignores considerable variation within women's and men's sexuality. Rubin believes that sexuality is connected to gender, yet also has its own dynamics.

In "Thinking Sex," Rubin makes the case that sex is fundamentally about erotic desires, fantasies, acts, identities, and politics — none of which are reducible to gender dynamics. She argues that all societies create sexual hierarchies that establish boundaries between good and bad or legitimate and illicit sexualities. Societies value specific desires, acts, and identities as normal, respectable, good, healthy, and moral; other forms of sexuality are classified as unhealthy, abnormal, sinful, and immoral. Society supports and privileges the "normal and good" forms of sexuality and aims to punish the "abnormal and bad" ones through law, violence, ridicule, or

stigma. These sexual hierarchies create a series of outsider sexualities. This system of sexual regulation applies to both men and women. American society considers heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage, and reproductive sex to be considered good and normal; S/M (sadomasochism) and multiple-partner sex, commercial and public sex are defined and treated as bad. There are of course many sexualities that fall somewhere in between – for example, promiscuous heterosexuals or gays and lesbians in long-term monogamous relationships. It may be less socially acceptable for a woman to have multiple sex partners or to engage in S/M because of a gender order that associates femininity with purity and maternal feelings; still, these behaviors are disparaged by both men and women. Those who engage in such behaviors, regardless of gender, will be stigmatized and subject to a range of sanctions, from ridicule to criminalization. Rubin's point is simply that gender influences patterns of sexuality, but there is still a great deal about the organization and dynamics of sexuality that cannot be viewed solely through the lens of gender.

### Sociology

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, sociologists have researched the role of religion, gender, class, race, and social values in shaping patterns of premarital, marital, and extra-marital sex. In the 1960s and 1970s, Ira Reiss charted cultural and behavioral shifts among American youth as a sexual morality that associated sex exclusively with marriage transformed into one that permitted sex in a context of affection. Reiss believed that this cultural change was related to women's growing economic and social power. In this regard, he observed the decline of a double standard that permitted men to have sex outside of marriage, while labeling women who engaged in the same behavior as "bad girls."

Some sociologists urged a full-blown sociology of sexuality. John Gagnon and William Simon proposed a "script" theory of sexuality. Instead of understanding humans as born sexual, they argued that sexuality is socially learned. In the course of growing up, society teaches us what feelings and desires count as sexual and what the appropriate "scripts" for sexual behavior are. Sexual scripts tell us with whom we're supposed to have sex (based on age, race, or class), where, when, and what it means when we do. Gagnon and Simon were in effect saying that sexuality is not an inborn property, but a product of social labeling.

The British sociologist, Ken Plummer, developed a labeling perspective on sex. In *Sexual Stigma*, he argued that individuals aren't born homosexual, but learn to be homosexual. An individual may feel desire or attraction to people of the same sex, but he or she must learn that these feelings are sexual and that they indicate a homosexual identity. People learn this in the course of interacting with both the straight and gay world. For example, a high-school student hearing derogatory comments about "fags" and "dykes" begins to associate homosexuality with a stigmatized identity. This same individual may eventually be exposed to a gay subculture, which champions a view of homosexuality as natural and good.

One of the pioneers of a sociological approach to sexuality was the British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks. He introduced the ideas of essentialism and constructionism. Essentialism is the notion that sexuality is a basic and essential part of being human. Constructionism states that sexuality is a product of social forces. Weeks proposed a strong view of the social character of sexuality: "First, we can no longer set 'sex' against 'society' as if they were separate domains. Secondly, there is a widespread recognition of the social variability of sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies, and behavior. Sexuality has ... many histories. ... Thirdly, we must learn to see that sexuality is something which society produces in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, to struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle."

## Gay and lesbian studies

Paralleling the rise of a gay movement, many advocates argued that some people are just born homosexual. If homosexuals have always existed, it is a natural status and therefore they should not be punished.

However, this view has been challenged by the new gay/lesbian studies. These new scholars assume that homosexual behavior is a natural part of the human condition, but the appearance of a homosexual identity is a rare historical event. When and why did a homosexual identity emerge, and how has the meaning of homosexuality changed historically?

Jonathan Katz argued that, between colonial times and the 1970s, homosexuality in the US changed from indicating a behavior (sodomy), to an abnormal personality (the homosexual), and finally to an affirmative social identity (gay/lesbian). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg showed that Victorian women, whose lives were organized around domestic tasks, often formed close ties with each other that at times blurred the line between friendship and romance. These intimate bonds sometimes developed into romantic relationships that were celebrated as complementary to marriage. These "romantic friendships" were often life-time romantic bonds. Similarly, Lillian Faderman wrote the first history of lesbianism in the United States, in which she documents changes in the meaning of same-sex behavior and in the social organization of lesbianism. Both Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman make the provocative argument that tolerance for intimacy between women diminished in the first decades of the twentieth century. As women started to attend college, work outside the home, and demand equal rights, their close ties to one another were often viewed as threatening. These women were stigmatized as lesbians.

Building on this growing body of historical scholarship on sexuality, John D'Emilio offered the first detailed analysis of the rise of a homosexual identity and community in the United States. He analyzed the social forces that shaped homosexuality into an identity, community, and social movement. For example, D'Emilio argued that the Second World War played a key role in shaping an awareness of homosexuality and homosexual bonds. During the war, many soldiers were, for the first time, exposed to individuals who thought of themselves as homosexual. Moreover, the intense closeness among the men and women in the military encouraged homosexual experimentation. After the war, many of these men and women with homosexual feelings settled in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. It was in these cities that the first major gay and lesbian political organizations initially took shape in the 1950s.

Historians have continued to refine their conceptions of the sexual past. One significant revision is in George Chauncey's *Gay New York*. Whereas historians and sociologists had come to believe that the modern homosexual emerged in the early twentieth century and was immediately stuffed into the closet, Chauncey argues that, in working-class New York, individuals were not classified as either homosexual or heterosexual, but as either "normal men" or "fairies." The former were masculine men, while the latter were effeminate. In other words, the homosexual indicated a type of gender deviance. If you were a masculine man who had sex with effeminate men, you were not necessarily considered a homosexual. Gender expression, not sexual preference, defined being a homosexual. Moreover, rather than being isolated and closeted, an open public gay life flourished in bars, taverns, speakeasies, restaurants, ballrooms, and parks.

## Queer studies

The new gay/lesbian studies proposes a deeply social view of homosexuality. It helped to give rise to so-called "Queer studies." A queer perspective advances two key ideas. First, the idea of

a natural human sexuality is a belief or cultural notion, not a biological truth. Second, this idea divides sexual behaviors and identities into those that are normal and healthy, and those that are abnormal and sick. Queer studies shifts the focus from homosexuality to sexuality and broadens our view of sexuality to see it also as a type of social control.

The ideas of Michel Foucault are central. He challenged the idea that sex was biological and natural. He proposed that it was the very idea or, in his terms, the discourse of sexuality that created what we know as sex. We are not born sexual, but learn to be sexual beings; this occurs only in societies that have created the idea of "sexuality."

But when did this idea of sexuality originate, and why? The birth of the science of sexuality in the nineteenth century was crucial. Scientists aimed to discover the hidden truth of human nature by uncovering the secrets of the sexual instinct. Sexologists charted the physiology and behavior of sexual desire, psychiatrists listened to their clients confess to a shadowy world of sexual fantasies, and demographers surveyed human fertility. But these researchers did not discover an uncharted territory of sex; they fashioned human pleasures, excitations, and acts into a new object of knowledge and social regulation: human sexuality. Foucault is not saying that the feelings and behaviors associated with the body were created by these discourses. Rather, these discourses compelled us to view these bodily experiences as expressions of human sexuality. The science of sexuality conceptualized our diverse somatic experiences into a coherent, organized subject called sexuality.

Why did a discourse of sexuality appear and what was its social importance? Foucault thought that the modern state and other social institutions had good reasons to want to control people's sexuality. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in many European nations there were massive migrations to cities, a growing need for mass literacy and schooling, intense economic competition between nations, and the growing dependence of national power on economic prosperity. These developments created a strong political interest in gaining detailed and useful information about human bodies — how they reproduce, stay healthy, react to different external stimulation, and can be made more productive, efficient, and cooperative. For example, as cities became social and economic centers, governments and other institutions responsible for keeping order and for the care of the indigent sought information about migration patterns, fertility rates, nutrition, and health. This growing need to know and control bodies helped to create the idea of sexuality. To control sex is to exercise great control over the individual and whole populations. Sexuality is at the center of a modern system of social control.

Did Foucault give up the notion of sexual freedom? He wrote during a period of sexual rebellion. Sexual liberationists of all types declared that today we are more enlightened; the present is pregnant with possibilities for sexual freedom. Sexual liberation had two aspects. The first was a negative freedom — freedom from unnecessary control. Liberation also had a positive aspect — the right to express one's true sexual nature and identity.

Foucault agreed that expanding individual choice is a good thing. He supported the fight for gay rights. But gay rights is not liberation. It does relieve individuals of horrific stigma and social discrimination. Also, the gay rights movement has reinforced a system that forces individuals to declare themselves either straight or gay, and reinforces the deviant status of bisexuality and other nonconventional sexualities. Moreover, a gay movement has its own ideal of how a gay person is supposed to look and act. In other words, the gay movement exercises control over its members, pressuring them to identify exclusively as gay and to act in ways that are recognized as gay.

If sexuality is today a system of social control, then ironically sexual liberation might involve freeing ourselves from the idea of sexuality. This would mean approaching our erotic desires and acts not as expressions of sexuality but as simply feelings and acts that give pleasure, create



social ties, or are a source of cultural creativity. Foucault advocates a politics against sexuality – against a society that sexualizes selves, identities, and acts. Why would this be a good thing? By not assigning a moral meaning (either normal or abnormal) to adult, consensual sexual desires and behaviors, individuals would be subject to less social regulation. For example, instead of reversing the stigma of homosexuality by championing a normal gay identity, we could approach homosexuality as a desire and as a source of pleasure, new relationships and cultural expressions. Or, instead of celebrating the sexualization of the human body and all of its feelings and sensations, perhaps it is more liberating to desexualize pleasures, focus on nonsexual pleasures, learn to enjoy a wide range of sensual pleasures, and be free of controls that rely on notions of normality.

Foucault emphasized the role of discourses or networks of ideas in producing and regulating human sexuality. The philosopher Judith Butler has drawn from Foucault in order to offer a new social point of view on gender and sexuality.

Butler thinks that societies that believe in a natural gender order are also organized around the norm of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is the basis of a culture of romance, marriage, and the family, and is enforced by our laws, government, churches, schools, and military. Viewing men and women as naturally complementary makes heterosexuality seem like the natural, normal, and right way of living.

A system of compulsory heterosexuality may help to explain why societies divide individuals into two gender types, but it does not explain how gender – and sexual – identities are sustained daily. Butler's ideas about gender identity have been very influential in the sociology of sexual identity.

Growing up in a society that classifies feelings, behaviors, and social roles as appropriate either for men or for women, we learn how to act in gender-correct ways. By means of a system of rewards and sanctions, we learn to present ourselves as either men or women. We come to know, almost without thinking, what gestures, styles of dress and grooming, and ways of walking and talking are considered "normal" for men and women. If a male acts "masculine," if his posture, talk, friends, dating, and job conform to masculine norms, his gender identity as a man will be taken for granted. If a male acts "feminine," he may not be considered a "normal" man.

Furthermore, Butler argues that, as we conform to gender norms, others will likely interpret our behavior as expressing a core gender identity. For example, most of us would probably assume that a male who looks and acts like a man (e.g. is aggressive, competitive, or decisive) is a man, and this status is at the core of his identity. In other words, his masculine actions are understood as expressing a deeply rooted male gender identity. However, Butler suggests that there is no core gender identity that drives our behavior. Rather than viewing our gender performances as expressing an inner gender identity, she says that these behaviors are modeled after images of what it means to be a woman or man that we take over from our families and our culture. The illusion of core feminine and masculine gender identities conceals the social and political forces that shape humans into gendered selves. Similarly, the ideology of a natural gender order conceals the role of gender in the perpetuation of heterosexual dominance.

Butler's ideas encourage us to view sexual identity as a process. We project a sexual identity by our actions. Accordingly, researchers would analyze the micro-dynamics of identity formation. For example, we would try to explain which behaviors and things (clothes, cars, homes, furniture, eyeglasses) come to be signs of sexual identity, and why. How do individuals acquire the skills to read each other's behaviors in terms of sex identity categories? A performative approach does not claim that sex identities are not real because they are produced through a performance. They are quite real as we experience them and in terms of their personal and social consequences. And, while they may be performances, they are hardly chosen; a system of

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compulsory heterosexuality exerts enormous social pressure on each of us to "perform" the appropriate gender and sexual identities. Deviance from gender or sexual norms carries serious dangers, from being denied respect to being the target of harassment or violence.

To summarize this chapter, there has been a revolution in the way scholars think about sexuality. Until recently, scholars believed that humans were born with a sexual nature; the natural order created a series of sexual types: heterosexuals, homosexuals, masochists, pedophiles, and so on. A science of sexuality would reveal the nature of the sexual instinct. The idea of sexual normality would serve as the standard to judge and regulate sexual behavior.

Today, the leading edge of scholarship views sex as fundamentally social. We're born with bodies but it is society that determines which parts of the body and which pleasures and acts are sexual. And, the classification of sex acts into good and bad or acceptable and illicit is a product of social power; the dominant sexual norms express the dominant social groups. If we are supposed to grow up to be heterosexual, and if we are expected to link sex to love and marriage, this is because specific groups impose these social norms. Beliefs that there are natural and normal ways to be sexual are ideologies. How we come to have such beliefs, and their personal and social consequences, are important questions for the study of sexuality. Indeed, the question of who gets to define what is sexual and which institutions are responsible for regulating our sexualities are key sociological and political questions.

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