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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completion of this chapter, students will be able to . . .

- Describe the sociological approach to the study of sexuality
- Explain what it means to say that sexuality is socially constructed
- Identify key characteristics of a sexual revolution
- Depict sexuality across the life course
- Explain the sexualization of racial/ethnic minorities
- Discuss sexual minorities beyond lesbian and gay

Technological advances of the past several decades have changed every aspect of our lives, so it is unsurprising that people's sex lives are being increasingly influenced by technology. The sex tech market is a \$34 billion dollar market and includes "innovations in sex toy design, sexual health and wellness devices, virtual reality pornography, simulated sex video games" among other inventions (Hanson 2022:26). Apps such as Tinder and Grindr can facilitate hook-ups, easing otherwise awkward public interactions as participants wonder if the person they are talking to is also interested in a sexual encounter. Technology can also allow for romantic relationships with non-persons. For instance, digital romantic relationships are often part of the storyline in video games, allowing the player and a character to flirt, illustrate a sexual encounter, or verbally express feelings of love (Tomilson 2019). Sex robots, or robotic sex dolls that have human-like movement and some degree of artificial intelligence, are slowly emerging on the market, enabling a potential future where human-robot relationships are feasible (Kubes 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of social distancing and lockdowns as public health measures dramatically affected sexual habits. For some, "sex dolls and sex robots . . . helped people maintain sexual wellness during the pandemic" (Aoki and Kimura 2021:1). In fact, Abyss Creations, a leading manufacturer of sex dolls and sex robots, claims sales for such devices increased about 75 percent compared to pre-lockdown sales (Aoki and Kimura 2021). While there is nothing new about people seeking *virtual intimacies*, using communication technology to facilitate feelings of human connection and where the boundaries of the real and the virtual blur, the pandemic exacerbated it (McGlotten 2014).

The legal, social, cultural, and ethical implications associated with some of these technological advances are still being contested (Fitzgerald and Grossman 2021). Technology has also become a tool of sexual violence and harassment, through the non-consensual distribution of sexual images or nonconsensual pornography, also known as revenge porn (Henry and Powell 2015). Despite these concerns, scholar Kenneth R. Hanson is cautiously optimistic about the future of sex, because there is a push to “invent radical options for exploring the boundaries of sexual pleasure. Whether that means designing sex toys for diverse bodies, prioritizing sexual health, or something else entirely, feminist sex tech CEOs want to use their businesses for social good” (2022:25). We explore the intersection of technology and sexuality throughout this text.

You are reading this text during a period of unprecedented changes for and backlash against LGBTQ+ individuals. All state prohibitions on same-sex marriage in the United States were overturned in June 2015 with the Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*, making marriage equality the law of the land. Prior to that, in 2013, the Supreme Court declared as unconstitutional the Defense of Marriage Act, which was the federal prohibition on same-sex marriage. Yet a conservative political shift has put women’s, transgender (or *trans*), and LGBTQ+ rights in jeopardy, both here and abroad. Despite the *Obergefell* decision, for instance, gay marriage is not safe. When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, a dramatic overturning of fifty years of legal precedent, Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the concurring opinion and explicitly named other long-standing cases that he wanted the Supreme Court to reconsider, including *Obergefell* (Aguilera 2022).

As of May 2023, according to the Human Rights Campaign, the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer civil rights organization in the United States, state legislatures have introduced over 520 anti-LGBTQ+ bills, with over 220 of the bills specifically targeting transgender and gender non-binary people (Peele 2023). Professor and trans activist Jennifer Finney Boylan (2023) explains that overturning the right to an abortion and attacks on the rights of transgender people are “two sides of the same coin – issues that go to the core of what we mean by bodily autonomy and what kinds of choices individuals get to make about our private, physical selves.”

Globally, religious conservatives are emboldened. Uganda passed the most extreme legislation, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2023, which penalizes same-sex acts and, under certain circumstances, can impose the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality” (Shaw 2023). Kenya and Ghana are also considering similar anti-LGBTQ+ bills. In Poland, the 2020 presidential campaign of Andrzej Duda was successful at least in part because he “amplified the threat they [LGBTQ+ people] posed as a ‘rainbow plague’ and an ideology ‘worse than communism’” (Shaw 2023). Under conservative president Viktor Orbán, Hungary passed a “don’t say gay” law in 2021, banning discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in schools, which was modeled after a similar law in Russia. Comparable laws have been introduced in state legislatures in the United States, passing in North Carolina, Arkansas, Iowa, Indiana, and Florida, as of this writing (LaFrance 2023).

While the Republican Party remains officially opposed to gay marriage and other rights for sexual minorities and tends to support understandings of sexuality that favor heterosexuals and traditional gender roles, polls show that among younger voters of both parties, gay rights are a given. The 2021 elections witnessed so many LGBTQ+ candidates win that, for the first time in U.S. history, there were over 1,000 LGBTQ+ elected officials in office. In Pennsylvania, voters elected the first non-binary judge and in Salt Lake City two new LGBTQ+ members of the City Council were elected. Salt Lake City now has four

out of the six seats held by LGBTQ+ people, “making it one of the largest U.S. cities with a majority LGBTQ council leadership” (GLADD 2021). Despite the significant progress made, LGBTQ+ individuals still face discrimination and inequality both in the United States and across the globe. These include violence; harassment; legal discrimination in numerous institutions, from the residential sphere to the workplace; and the burden of stereotypical images in popular culture, all of which is explored in this book. It is worth remembering that progress is never a straight line.



Many books written by LGBTQ+ authors about gender identity and sexuality have been challenged and banned by conservative political groups in many places, including libraries and school districts.

Even in the face of this backlash against LGBTQ+ people, high-profile gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual athletes are coming out of the closet regularly. Families of sexual and gender minority students are pushing back against anti-LGBTQ+ school policies. Three parents of transgender children have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene and block Tennessee’s ban on gender affirming care, arguing that allowing the ban to stand will cause their children and others “severe physical and emotional harm” (Pierson 2023). In North Carolina, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group is pressuring schools not to follow the “Parent’s Bill of Rights,” otherwise referred to as a “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” because they argue it violates federal anti-discrimination law (Hui 2023). Social scientists have also shifted their focus from a disproportionate focus on the negative experiences faced by sexual and gender minorities, what some scholars have referred to as a joy deficit, to explorations of joy, pleasure, and euphoria in peoples lived experiences as sexual and gender minorities (Jones 2018; T. Jones 2023; Shuster and Westbrook 2022).

While cultural understandings of sexuality are always evolving, what might have seemed like undeniable evidence of progress for sexual and gender minorities can no longer be taken for granted, as LGBTQ+ people face ongoing inequality and even an erosion of rights today. Some examples of the ongoing contested nature of gender

and sexuality, of progress and backlash, include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida signed a number of anti-gay and anti-trans bills into law between 2022 and 2023, colloquially known as “don’t say gay” laws. One law prohibited school personnel from mentioning sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third-grade classrooms, a restriction that was extended to eighth grade in a second piece of legislation. He has also banned gender-affirming care for minors (Yurcaba 2023).
- Sociologist Laura M. Carpenter (2020) argues that instead of the COVID-19 quarantine producing the predicted baby boom nine months later, evidence suggests that almost everyone is having less sex than before the pandemic lockdown due to increased stress and boredom born of habituation, among many other reasons.
- According to the American Library Association, the year 2022 witnessed the highest number of attempts to ban or restrict books in the two decades since the organization began keeping such records. Almost half (45.5 percent) of the over 2,500 books banned or restricted were written by or were about LGBTQ+ people, while only 11 individuals are responsible for 60 percent of the book bans (Perfas 2023).
- In September of 2019, Merriam-Webster added a non-binary definition for the singular pronoun “they” to their dictionaries (Agrelo 2019).
- Believed to be the first bill of its kind passed by one of the 573 federally recognized tribes in the United States, the Oglala Sioux Tribe passed a hate crime law protecting LGBTQ+ and two-spirit people (Wakefield 2019).
- During COVID-19, some public health experts recommended the use of glory holes, sexual positions that involve physical barriers such as walls, as a way to safely seek sexual satisfaction during the quarantine (Moore 2021).
- Vice President Kamala Harris has made history as the first woman of color (she is African American and South Asian) to serve in this role. On June 12, 2021, she also made history as the first sitting vice president to march in a Pride parade (Jeffries 2023).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF SEXUALITIES

In this textbook, we explore sexuality through a sociological lens. *Sociology* is the study of human social behavior, culture, and interaction between individuals and groups. While sociologists do not ignore the importance of biology in sexuality, they instead emphasize the role social forces play in understanding sexuality. What does it mean to approach the study of sexuality through a sociological lens? First, this means we approach an otherwise familiar topic from an often unfamiliar angle. Most of us are socialized to think of sexuality as fixed and innate, for instance. If asked, most people easily identify their own sexual orientation. However, sociologists view sexuality as more complicated. What defines us

sexually? Is it our behaviors, the people we choose to have sex with, or the sexual acts we engage in? Or is it about identity—how we define ourselves along sexual lines? What about our sexual desires and sexual fantasies? Are these the “true” gauges of sexuality? Is there a genetic determinant to human sexuality? Sociologists point to instances where sexual identities, desires, and behaviors conflict with one another rather than the instances where they are consistent as evidence of how complicated defining sexuality really is.

What does it mean when individuals identify as heterosexual yet engage in sexual relations with members of their own sex? It might mean that, due to a larger homophobic culture, they are hesitant to accept a gay or lesbian identity despite their actions. It also might mean that they do not have the opportunity to have sex with members of the opposite sex; a situation incarcerated people find themselves in. Researchers identify a sexual practice among Black men that is referred to as being on the “down low”; Black men who identify as heterosexual, often have wives or girlfriends yet engage in sex with other men (Boykin 2005; Collins 2005; King 2004; Snorton 2014). Latino men engaging in similar behaviors are categorized as MSMs, or “men who have sex with men” (Diaz 1997; Gonzalez 2007). Sociologist Jane Ward (2015) examines patterns of and meanings behind the sexual behaviors between straight white men who are not gay. Other scholars have explored same-sex sexual behaviors between white, rural, straight-identified men who are often married to women (Silva 2017). Sometimes the term *heteroflexibility* is used to describe a broad range of same-sex sexual encounters experienced by heterosexuals in which the actions are understood as meaningless and unlikely to fundamentally challenge a person’s presumably fixed sexual identity (Ward 2015). An example of heteroflexibility includes girl-on-girl kissing, whether at fraternity parties or among celebrities, which is generally done for men’s sexual arousal. Ultimately, identities, desires, and behaviors are not always consistent, thus a simplistic understanding of “sexuality” as based on only one of these criteria is problematic.

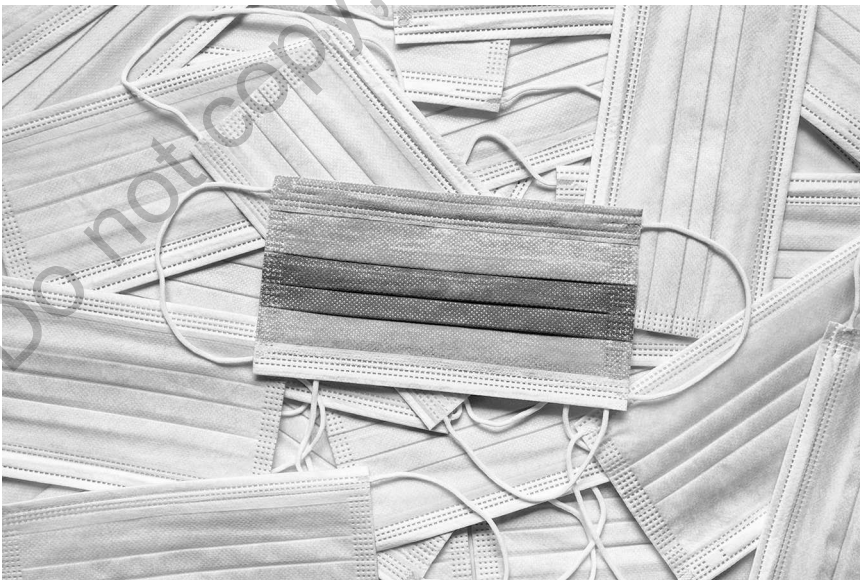
Second, a sociological approach to understanding sexuality requires us to understand it as cultural rather than as strictly personal. It is not inaccurate to understand sexuality through an individualistic lens, but that is not the only way to understand it. Sexuality is very much a product of and a reflection of society. While we may have learned to view our own sexual desires as quite personal, they are very much a reflection of cultural assumptions surrounding what is natural or unnatural, acceptable or unacceptable, sexually. We understand our sexual desires and behaviors through our social contexts and preexisting cultural scripts. Thus, sexuality is both personal and social. Even further, sexuality is political, as recent political contestation over sexuality- and gender-related issues that feminists and LGBTQ+ activists have repeatedly brought to our attention makes clear. Finally, because sexuality is culturally informed, it is important to note that this text will approach the sociology of sexualities primarily through a U.S. lens, with some historical and cross-cultural analyses and comparisons—particularly in the boxed inserts focused on “Global and Transnational Perspectives on Sexuality” found in each chapter. Third, and perhaps most important, a sociological approach to the study of sexuality emphasizes the socially constructed nature of sexuality, the cultural assumptions surrounding sexual behaviors, and the emergence of and significance of sexual identities—which are all introduced later in this chapter. Fourth, a sociological approach to sexuality also emphasizes the myriad ways social control is exercised, through the criminalization, medicalization, and stigmatization of certain sexual behaviors. Finally, a sociological approach to the study of sexuality allows us to explore how sexuality intersects with various institutions, such as media, the sports world,

schools, the workplace, religion, and the family. Through this approach, we can explore how sexuality influences social institutions and how these same institutions influence sexuality.

The rest of the book focuses on the following sociological topics: the science of sexuality; the intersection of gender and sexuality; the intersection of sexuality with social class and space/place; sexuality as a status hierarchy where one's group membership, either as a member of the privileged group of cisgender heterosexuals or as a member of a sexual or gender minority group, determines one's access to various societal goods and resources; the activism designed to overturn the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals; the ways sexuality operates in and through various institutions, such as the media, sports, schools, workplace, religion, and family; sex education, reproduction, disability and sexuality, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual health. Finally, a sociology of sexualities would be incomplete without an understanding of social issues associated with sexuality, such as technology and sexuality, the commodification of sexuality, pornography, sex work, sex trafficking, prison sex, and sexual violence.

COVID-19, Sex, and Sexual Minorities

One very clear example of the cultural nature of sexuality became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the world turned upside down, as lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing measures, border closures, and economic disruption led to an abundance of psycho-social issues in addition to the physical health threat the virus posed. While everyone was affected by COVID-19, research found that sexual and gender minorities were disproportionately affected. First, while 44 percent of non-LGBTQ+ adults report that they or someone in their household experienced a job loss due to COVID-19, job losses for LGBTQ+ adults or their household members was at 56 percent. Second, LGBTQ+ adults report more negative effects on their mental health (74 percent) due to the pandemic compared to 49 percent for non-LGBTQ+ adults. Third, LGBTQ+ adults face higher rates of comorbidities, are less likely to have health care, and



The COVID-19 pandemic affected every aspect of people's lives, including their sex lives. For many, the pandemic contributed to a decrease in the quality of their sex lives, while for others, the pandemic encouraged exploration, specifically a turn toward sexual technologies, from online porn to dating apps to the purchase of sex toys. Additionally, the pandemic had a disproportionately negative effect on sexual and gender minorities.

face stigma and discrimination in health care settings, all of which results in more dire consequences when contracting COVID because they may be unable or unwilling to see a doctor (Dawson, Kirzinger, and Kates 2021). Members of the LGBTQ+ community were also at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 due to their disproportionate employment in health care and food service industries (Whittington 2020).

COVID also affected people's sex lives, specifically as "stronger contact restrictions . . . limited opportunities for recreational sex" and, in effect, "mandated a period of celibacy" for those living alone (Lehmiller et al. 2020:295). One survey found that 43.5 percent of people say the quality of their sex life decreased during COVID and only 13.6 percent report that their sex life improved during that time (Lehmiller et al. 2020). As mentioned in the opening vignette, these restrictions resulted in many people turning toward technology, from online pornography to sales of sex toys and increasing numbers of people downloading dating apps. While stories surrounding the introduction of sexual technologies proliferated in the media, research finds that only 20 percent of people added a new edition to their sex life during this time (Lehmiller et al. 2020). However, when our abilities to touch one another were limited, some people turned toward "bold new pleasures" (Moore 2021).

Journalist Madison Moore (2021) points out that the COVID-19 restrictions were not as new to LGBTQ+ people, as "queer and trans people have a rich history of pursuing pleasure, especially during dark times when that very pursuit is dangerous, even illegal. This drive stems from the fact that many queer and trans people—especially those of color – live under a kind of sociocultural duress in which our livelihoods and human rights are constantly subject to negotiation and popular debate, to say nothing of our physical safety."

TERMINOLOGY

Some of the terminology used throughout this text is assumed to be straightforward; however, this can be misleading. What does it mean to speak of a *sexual orientation*, for instance? Sexual orientation refers to an individual's identity based on their enduring or continuing sexual attractions and may include behaviors and membership in a community of others who share those attractions. Sexual orientation generally falls into four categories: *heterosexuality*, when one's romantic and sexual attractions are directed at members of the opposite sex; *homosexuality*, when those feelings are primarily directed at individuals of the same sex; *bisexuality*, when such feelings exist for both members of one's own sex and members of the opposite sex; and *asexuality*, which is broadly defined as having no sexual attraction at all, or being indifferent to sexual activity, or sometimes even being repulsed by sex. The term *graysexual* recognizes that there is a sexual gray area, an in-between sexual orientation. Specifically, people who identify as graysexual fall somewhere between asexual and sexual, in that they may feel sexual attraction on occasion, but mostly do not (Pichardo 2023).

The term *pansexuality* gained prominence in the 1990s. It refers to having sexual attractions to individuals, regardless of their sex or gender; a sexual attraction to all sexes/genders. Pansexuality may at first seem similar to bisexuality, except that pansexuality is a more fluid concept than bisexuality, which assumes a gender binary, something we will talk about in great detail throughout this book. Pansexuality rejects the notion of a gender or a sexual binary (the notion of either/or: gay or straight, male or female) and is often understood as an anti-identity, embracing a deconstruction of sexual and gender categories (Hayfield 2021).

It can also be understood as a sexual attraction not based on sex or gender (Pismenny 2023). Then there are *demisexuals*, people who require an emotional connection with someone to be sexually attracted to them (Sheikh 2023). Another term, *digisexuals*, refers to people whose primary sexual identity is linked to technology (McArthur and Twist 2017). As technology becomes an increasingly important part of the human sexual experience, it remains to be seen if there will be a corresponding increase in people identifying as digisexual.

Sexuality refers to one's sexual desires, erotic attractions, and sexual behaviors, or the potential for these; physical acts and emotional intimacies that are intended to be pleasurable, and that are embedded within a larger, socially constructed, body of meanings. For many people, their sexuality is congruent, meaning their identities, desires, and behaviors align. For others, however, this may not be true. Their identities, desires, and behaviors are not always congruent, and instead are inconsistent. They may identify as heterosexual, but desire sexual relations with members of their same sex, for instance. Thus, the definitions we rely on to describe human sexual variation are somewhat problematic, yet we live in a culture that assigns meaning to certain sexual behaviors. The definitions above, limitations and all, reflect those cultural meanings.

Our culture treats sexual categories as real, emphasizing that for each sexual orientation there is a specific set of fixed traits that are associated with it, something social scientists refer to as *essentialism*. Essentialist thinking implies a permanence to sexual orientation; that it is static, unchanging, and innate. Essentialism naturalizes differences between groups. As we will see, this is a weakness of the essentialist position on sexuality. Yet, despite such weaknesses, essentialism is the foundation of Western understandings of sexuality. Sociologists do not take an essentialist position on sexuality; instead, we take a social constructionist position, which is introduced later in this chapter.

This text relies on the acronym LGBTQ+ to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals and communities. However, that is simply an editorial decision, because there are other, more inclusive, umbrella terms used to refer to the community of gender and sexual minorities. The acronym LGBTIQQAAP (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, asexual, allies, and pansexual) is also sometimes used. We have already defined sexual minorities such as bisexuals and homosexuals (men who are homosexuals are generally referred to as gay while women are referred to as lesbians), but we have not yet defined gender minorities. *Transgender* refers to people whose gender identity is inconsistent with their assigned sex at birth (see Chapter 3). *Queer* is also a label that recognizes the fluidity of sexuality, someone who falls outside the norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Queer is a term that has political origins and emerged during a specific historical era, the 1990s (see Chapter 6). This broad overview of terminology is evidence of the changing cultural understandings surrounding sexuality and thus, should not be understood as fixed.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

Sociologists understand sexuality as a *social construction* rather than as something biological. By this we mean that sexuality is defined within particular social and cultural contexts, and, thus, definitions of appropriate sexual behavior change across time and place. Social constructionists emphasize the ways sexuality is learned and is a product of culture rather than as something that is innate. British sociologist Jeffrey Weeks (1981) introduces the notion of constructionism as an opposing position to essentialism for understanding sexuality. What is defined as sexually acceptable and natural in our society today has not

always been so, just as what some cultures define as appropriate and natural sexual behaviors can be seen as deviant in other times and places. For instance, the Ancient Greeks had a very different sexual order than we do today. In that time and place, adult men of privilege were expected to have young, adolescent men as lovers, while at the same time they formed sexual relationships with women. Such behaviors today are viewed not only as deviant but as criminal, due to the ages of the participants.

Sociologists John Gagnon and William Simon (1973) are the first sociologists to question existing essentialist claims of *biological determinism*—the idea that sexuality is determined primarily by our genetics—and instead to emphasize its social nature. Their research challenges psychoanalytic ideas about sexuality popularized by Freud, primarily that there is an innate sexual drive that should be understood as an overwhelming force requiring societal control. Simon and Gagnon also emphasize the “everydayness” of sexuality rather than treating it as special or something separate from everyday life (Jackson and Scott 2015; see Chapter 2).

Our understandings of sexual behaviors and physiological reactions, such as virginity loss and orgasms, can also be understood as social constructions. While most of us may think that losing one’s virginity is rather easy to delineate, research by Laura Carpenter (2013) finds that it is anything but unambiguous. Virginity loss is generally understood to be the first time a man or woman engages in vaginal-penile intercourse. One problem with this definition is that it is *heterocentric*, centered on and biased toward heterosexuality. Gay men and lesbians are more likely to define their virginity loss as their first time engaging in oral or anal intercourse rather than their first experience with vaginal-penile intercourse. Research also finds that individuals tend to not include coerced sexual experiences, such as rape and sexual assault, as virginity loss. Additionally, if the sexual experience is physically ambiguous in some way or if it is an unpleasant experience, people are less likely to define that experience as virginity loss (L. Carpenter 2001).

Finally, there is the idea of “secondary” virginity or “born-again” virgins. This refers to people who have lost their “true” virginity, but then decide to abstain from sex until marriage or until some future date when they are in a committed, significant relationship (L. Carpenter 2013). Secondary virginity is more often found among young, white, conservative, Christian women, particularly those born after 1972. It is linked to the Christian-influenced, “abstinence-only” educational curriculum that gained prominence in the 1980s (L. Carpenter 2011; see Chapter 9). Moreover, this revirginizing phenomenon is gendered because virginity has been socially constructed as more important for women than for men. For example, some evangelical men embrace abstinence before marriage, yet they do not seem to place any emphasis on the importance of their virginity (Diefendorf 2015).

Research finds that orgasms can also be understood as social constructions because people learn to understand certain feelings as sexual and pleasurable. While orgasms are physiological reactions, they are not comparable to digestion or sneezing; in fact, orgasms vary considerably across time and across cultures. Women’s orgasms vary much more than men’s orgasms. In cultures where women are believed to have less interest in sex, the concept of the women’s orgasm is unknown (Richters 2011). Much popular media attention is devoted to the issue of women’s orgasms. In fact, since the 1960s, women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, under the editorship of Helen Gurley Brown, became notorious for their discussions of women’s sexuality, women’s orgasms, and the radical notion that women should enjoy guilt-free sex. In reaction to the publication of Helen Gurley Brown’s book *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), a male editor of *Life* magazine said, “The assumption that a woman is

supposed to get something out of her sexual contact, something joyful and satisfactory, is a very recent idea. But this idea has been carried too far” (Allyn 2000:21).

The idea that sexuality is a social construction challenges how we have been taught to think about sexuality, which is that sexual orientation is innate and that heterosexuality is natural. In the following section, we provide evidence that sexuality is a social construction. We begin by exploring the extent to which sexuality is innate versus the extent to which it is a product of the environment. From there, we analyze the construction of sexual binaries; the invention of heterosexuality and homosexuality; the gendered nature of sexuality and sexual socialization; and finally, the variation in acceptable sexual behaviors cross-culturally and historically.

Nature Versus Nurture

Is sexuality innate? The short answer is we do not know. Scientists have been unable to identify a genetic marker linked to sexuality. There is no evidence of a so-called “gay gene,” or combination of genes, despite considerable scientific efforts directed at this question and much popular interest in the idea. This is the first piece of evidence that sexuality is a social construction; the fact that we do not have solid evidence that it is innate or biological. For the record, there is somewhat of a cultural preoccupation with the “nature versus nurture” question, not just pertaining to sexuality but also to issues like criminality, intelligence, and illness. The nature versus nurture question in this context asks: To what extent is homosexuality a result of a genetic predisposition (nature), or is it a reflection of social forces in an individual’s environment (nurture)?

Research by Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard (1991) at Northwestern University finds that 52 percent of identical twins of gay men are also gay, compared to 22 percent for fraternal twins, which offers some support for the biological basis of homosexuality. However, since twins are most often raised in the same environment, this research cannot disprove the influence of social factors on sibling sexuality. In 1993, molecular geneticist Dean Hamer and his colleagues at the National Cancer Institute announced that they found a genetic link to male homosexuality on the X chromosome, specifically genetic marker Xq28. By 1999, these findings were seriously challenged by other researchers for lacking *reliability*, the ability to replicate the research findings (replication is a key criterion of science). We explore other research into the genetic links to homosexuality in Chapter 2.

Ultimately, there is no conclusive evidence that sexuality is genetic. While genetic predispositions to particular sexualities may someday be identified, such findings will still not negate the significance of society on sexuality. Indeed, the nature versus nurture frame is far too simplistic. Human experiences like sexuality, intelligence, criminality, and health and wellness are better understood as complex interactions between genes and the environment rather than as the result of genes or the environment.

It is worth considering why we invest so much time and energy into seeking a genetic explanation for homosexuality. Some argue that such research questions reflect a purely scientific pursuit: We seek such knowledge simply for the sake of knowledge; to understand our world and ourselves better. Since the triumph of reason in the Enlightenment Era, people have widely accepted that science can help us understand the mysteries of nature and society. However, a more sinister argument could be made: Finding a homosexual gene will allow us to address it. In other words, we could find ways to “cure” homosexuality through genetic engineering (Hamer et al. 1993). Such an approach is offensive to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Efforts to find a gay gene are also problematic

because they limit human sexual agency, the idea that human sexual behaviors are a result of conscious decisions and are not simply genetically determined. However, some members of the LGBTQ+ community embrace the search for a “gay gene” as a form of *strategic essentialism*. They argue that finding a genetic link to homosexuality makes discrimination against them morally unjustifiable because, if sexuality is innate, then it is inherited in the same way as eye color (Meem et al. 2010).

“Even if there were a gay gene, it could not possibly explain the varied historical patterning of homosexuality over time, or even within a single culture” (Weeks 2011:19).

Sexual Binaries

Seeking a genetic explanation for homosexuality (and by default, heterosexuality) supports the idea of a *sexual binary*: the idea that people are either homosexual or heterosexual. That people are either “gay” or “straight” is an integral part of the popular understanding of sexuality today; however, it is a false binary. In fact, the mere existence of bisexuals and pansexuals challenge this idea explicitly. Rooted in the seventeenth-century philosophies of Rene Descartes, also known as Cartesian dualities, the Western worldview is bifurcated—split into two, opposing, categories. Binaries are best understood as pairs of opposing concepts, such as nature/nurture, man/woman, straight/gay, white/Black, masculine/feminine, and superior/inferior, among others (Fausto-Sterling 2013). These terms have no meaning in isolation; instead, their meaning emerges from what they are in opposition to. This perspective reduces the understanding of sexuality to an either/or binary, excluding a wide spectrum of diverse sexual experiences and realities. The existence of sexualities that are not just gay or straight is evidence that sexuality is a social construct. We live in a society that constructs sexuality as a binary when, in fact, human sexual behaviors and identities are much more varied than that.

Research by Alfred Kinsey and colleagues (1948, 1953) challenges this false “gay or straight” binary by arguing that sexuality should be thought of as a continuum rather than as a binary (see Chapter 2). People who identify as bisexual have difficulties being accepted as bisexual. Too often, they are viewed as insincere—either they are homosexuals who are clinging to their heterosexual privilege or are too homophobic to admit who they really are, or they are heterosexuals who are simply engaging in sexual experimentation. The doubt surrounding the authenticity of bisexuals stems from our cultural understanding of sexuality as binary.

More evidence of the sexual binary is the erasure of bisexuals from the historical record. For instance, while Oscar Wilde has long been identified as a gay icon, he was married to a woman and had children by her. Thus, while he can easily be classified as bisexual, he is instead always referred to as “gay” (Meem et al. 2010:181). Another example of the erasure of bisexuality is found in the discussion of the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The film is about two men who are cowboys and engage in a decades-long, on-again off-again, sexual relationship. However, both men are also married to and sexually active with their wives. The film is always referred to as a gay film, yet some argue that it is actually a film about bisexuals (Andre 2006). Whether those characters are truly bisexual or really just gay men who are passing as heterosexual through their marriages is, of course, impossible to answer. Another example is the portrayal of Freddie Mercury of the band Queen in the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*

(2018). While many aspects of the film were praised, it was criticized for soft-pedaling Mercury's sexual relationships with men and specifically erasing his bisexuality (Dry 2018). A more current example is the erasure of Lady Gaga's bisexuality. While she has always been open about her bisexuality, she is generally not perceived as part of the LGBTQ+ community in media portrayals (Olson, Grant, and Fuentes 2023). These examples show that we live in a culture that fails to take bisexuality seriously (Meem et al. 2010).

“The terms heterosexual and homosexual apparently came into common use only in the first quarter of [the twentieth century]; before that time, if words are clues to concepts, people did not conceive of a social universe polarized into heteros and homos” (Katz 1995:10).

What is the significance of our cultural support for a sexual binary? Reinforcing a clear distinction between “gay” and “straight” ultimately allows heterosexuals to maintain their privileged status. Sociologists view sexuality as one of a number of status hierarchies, where groups can be dominant or subordinate, benefit from privileges, or be discriminated against. Regarding sexuality, heterosexuals are privileged and sexual minorities face discrimination and inequality (see Chapter 5). The presence of bisexuals challenges this status hierarchy and those that benefit from it and supports the notion that sexuality is a social construction.

The Invention of Heterosexuality and Homosexuality

Another piece of evidence that sexuality is a social construction is the historical emergence of the concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The terms heterosexual and homosexual emerged in a particular time and place; this implies that prior to that time, the world was not divided into such categories. That does not mean that same-sex sexual behaviors were unheard of or that men and women did not engage in sexual relations with each other. Instead, it means that such behaviors did not define a person.

The concept of heterosexuality did not exist before 1892 (Katz 1995). Men and women formed sexual unions prior to then, but these unions were not referred to as heterosexual. Historian Jonathan Ned Katz (1995) refers to the emergence of the concept of heterosexuality as the “invention of heterosexuality.” Prior to his work, heterosexual history had remained taken for granted, “unmarked and unremarked” on (Katz 1995:9). If something is invented in a particular time and place, it can hardly be innate, natural, and timeless, as heterosexuality is mistakenly understood to be today.

The concept of heterosexuality changes in meaning over the course of the century as well. In its original usage in the 1890s, heterosexual did not refer to “normal,” sexual relations between a man and a woman as we understand the term today. Instead, it referred to a kind of sexual deviance, specifically someone with an abnormal sexual appetite. It also referred to individuals with an abnormal attraction to both sexes. This connotation lasted until the mid-1920s among the middle class. Eventually, the term heterosexual came to refer to “normal” and “natural” sexual relations between men and women. This shift occurred as a reflection of a larger cultural emphasis on procreation: Heterosexuality is “natural” simply because of its procreative potential. Homosexuality, constructed as the opposite of heterosexuality in this newly emerging sexual binary, is viewed as “unnatural” because it lacks procreative potential.

Heteronormativity

Thus, a cultural ideology known as the procreative imperative paved the way for heterosexuality to become normative throughout the Western world. Previously, we discussed the search for a “gay gene.” This may cause us to pause and question why there hasn’t been a similar research quest for a “straight gene.” This is evidence of what social scientists refer to as *heteronormativity*, the idea that heterosexuality is the natural, normal, inevitable, and preferred sexual orientation; it confers privilege on those who conform to the societal norm, which we discuss in Chapter 5 (Warner 1991). Heterosexuality became synonymous with “sexually normal” by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Blank 2012). Perhaps surprisingly, heteronormativity even influences gay and lesbian activism, for instance, in the pursuit of the right to marry and adopt children (Schippers 2016). Essentially, gay activists pursuing these agendas are making the case that they are “normal,” just like heterosexuals. There are a number of problematic manifestations of heteronormativity. First, it justifies hatred and fear of homosexuals. Anyone who deviates from the societal norm of heteronormativity risks facing discrimination. Second, it contributes to the invisibility of sexual minorities in media and popular culture (see Chapter 7). Finally, it helps perpetuate heterosexual privilege and discrimination against sexual minorities.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

An extreme form of heteronormativity is the idea of *compulsory heterosexuality*, a concept first introduced by feminist Adrienne Rich (1980), who argues that women are coerced into heterosexuality and into viewing coupling with men as the only relationship option available to them. Coming from a specifically lesbian feminist point of view, she argues that heterosexuality is not innate to human beings. To use Rich’s own words, she questions “how and why women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise” (1980:229).

While coerced may appear to be a strong term, Rich argues convincingly that a barrage of political, cultural, and legal forces coalesce to limit women’s sexual and coupling options. In previous eras or in other cultures, men have had the power to deny women their sexuality through the use of clitoridectomy, chastity belts, the death penalty for women adulterers, and incarceration in psychiatric facilities for lesbian sexuality, among other punishments. Men force their sexuality on women through rape and sexual assault, but also through the idealization of heterosexuality in literature, advertising, and the media. Women are sometimes coerced into heterosexuality through their limited economic opportunities, which too often make them economically reliant on men for their survival. Ultimately, male control operates along a broad continuum ranging from violence to control of consciousness, resulting in a culture of compulsory heterosexuality in which men primarily benefit (Rich 1980).

The Invention of Homosexuality

Just as heterosexuality is invented in a particular time and place, its opposing concept, homosexuality, is also an invention. The first person to use the term heterosexual, Dr. James Kiernan, is also the first person to use the term homosexual. He defines homosexuals as gender benders, people who rebel against traditional notions of masculinity

and femininity. While heterosexuals are viewed by Kiernan as sexual deviants, homosexuals are gender deviants. Homosexuality develops in opposition to heterosexuality. As Jonathan Katz explains, “This inaugurated a hundred-year tradition in which the abnormal and the homosexual were posed as riddle, the normal and the heterosexual were assumed” (1995:55). The science of homosexuality will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

Importantly, the emergence of the “heterosexual” and the “homosexual” does more than just place people in categories based on their sexual behaviors. It creates a hierarchy where members of one group are granted favorable status and the other is stigmatized as deviant (see Chapter 5). The emergence of the heterosexual and the homosexual also contributes to the creation of *sexual identities*. For the first time in history, people begin to define themselves and understand themselves in terms of their sexual desires and behaviors. French social theorist Michele Foucault (1978) argues that the creation of gay identities contributes to the emergence of gay and lesbian communities, which eventually led to the gay liberation movement. For Foucault, the emergence of sexual identities is both liberating and constraining, an issue we explore in more detail in Chapter 2.

The Gendered Construction of Sexuality

One of the most obvious ways sexuality is socially constructed is through gender. While gender is explored in much greater detail in Chapter 3, here we identify its basic role in understanding sexuality. *Gender* refers to socially created expectations about behaviors associated with one’s assignment within the sex binary. People defined as “men” are expected to be masculine, while those defined as “women” are expected to conform to norms of femininity. Historically, definitions of homosexuality centered on gender. German physician Karl Westphal uses the term “invert” to describe people with contrary sexual feelings, or sexual feelings toward people of the same sex. He describes these men as “effeminate” and the women as “mannish.” This description reveals how sexuality is often understood and explained through the lens of gender.

Expectations surrounding sexual desires, sexual behaviors, and sexual satisfaction are socially created and differ for men and women, as our previous discussion of variation in orgasms and virginity shows. Gendered expectations are associated with the roles we play in our intimate and sexual relationships. In earlier eras, it was accepted knowledge within the medical community that women biologically lacked sexual desire. From today’s perspective, we can see this expectation as constructed around gendered ideals of womanhood and femininity, but it is fair to consider how this belief impacts women’s actual desire for and experience of sex (see Chapter 3).

Sexual Socialization

Sexual socialization refers to the process by which we learn, through interaction with others, sexual knowledge, attitudes, norms, and expectations associated with sexuality, sexual behaviors, and sexual relationships. The societal belief that men have more sexual urges than women creates a *sexual double standard*, which refers to greater sexual permissiveness for men and more sexual restrictions for women (Greene and Faulkner 2005; Muehlenhard et al. 2003). This double standard generally prohibits premarital or promiscuous sex outside of love relationships for women, while it encourages similar behaviors for men.

Sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) brought the first real sociological analysis to the study of sexuality with the idea of *sexual scripts*, which emphasize the significance of the meanings people assign to sexual desires and encounters. There are three levels of meaning people use to create their sexual scripts: cultural and historical scenarios, interpersonal experiences, and intrapsychic interactions. We can think of a script as a guide, a blueprint to help us make sense of the sexual. Thus, culture, history, experiences, and self-reflexive interactions all contribute to the role we see ourselves playing in our own sexual desires, interactions, and behaviors. Sexual scripts are learned rather than innate, a major distinction from the Freudian perspective on sexuality. An example of a traditional sexual script is that men should be sexual aggressors and women should be sexually passive. Sociologist Héctor Carrillo expands on this notion with the idea of *sexual schemas*, which highlight the importance of culture and refers to the “publicly available and partially internalized understandings from which individuals draw sexual meanings” and that inform potential courses of action (2017:10). Carrillo’s concept of sexual schemas is broader than Gagnon and Simon’s (1973) concept of sexual scripts as it includes both structural determinants and cultural tools that can help facilitate “analysis of structural inequalities in sexual contexts” (2017:10).

SEXUAL REVOLUTIONS

Studying sexuality sociologically requires us to take context into account. Thus, some eras of history are more significant to the study of sexuality than others. The late nineteenth century, for instance, is known as the Victorian Era, specifically in Great Britain and the United States. In this period of relative sexual repression, doctors believed sexual desire in women was pathological and masturbation could lead to criminality. The remnants of such attitudes are still with us today, most notably in the sexual double standard. While sexual repression was the dominant sexual ideology of the Victorian Era, counter-ideologies simultaneously existed. For instance, a *free love*, or *sex love*, movement began in the late nineteenth century that espoused the belief that people should have the right to have sex with someone they love, whether or not they are married, and advocated for women to have the same sexual rights as men (Mann 2012). Many early U.S. feminists were free love advocates, primarily because they viewed marriage as a form of servitude for women. Such ideas were groundbreaking for women at the time, since any woman who engaged in a sexual relationship outside of marriage was considered promiscuous, and often called a prostitute for such behaviors (Mann 2012). Prostitution was and is a controversial term with a negative stigma reserved for women considered to have immoral characters (see Chapter 12).

Sexual revolutions are an integral part of larger social revolutions, as “the development of new sexual values, scripts, policies, and behaviors is related to all other aspects of social change” (Kon 1995:2). The decades during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States are often referred to as a period of *sexual revolution*, a period of dramatic social change in sexual norms, mores, and attitudes. In this era, there was an increased emphasis on sexual liberation, the introduction of technologies to facilitate sexual liberation, evidence of changing sexual behaviors, as well as a “new candor in American culture, especially the sudden acceptance of nudity in film and on the stage” (Allyn 2000:5). The introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 is an example of a technology that contributed to this sexual

revolution. Premarital sex became increasingly normative. Gays and lesbians began to feel free enough to publicly identify as gay. Hippies embraced the phrase “make love, not war” to represent the changing cultural values. In schools that offered sex education courses, they were radically redesigned to avoid scare and fear tactics and instead to approach the subject matter from a rational standpoint (Allyn 2000).



During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States witnessed a sexual revolution, where young people embraced free love and sexual liberation and norms surrounding sexual behaviors changed dramatically, captured by the mantra “Peace, Love, and Music.”

By the late 1970s, a backlash against this culture of sexual permissiveness emerged. Thus, it is imperative to explore the social and cultural context that facilitated the emergence of the sexual revolution during the 1960s and 1970s. Sexual revolutions are a form of resistance to sexual repression, particularly resistance to understandings of certain sexual behaviors as deviant. For example, during the sexually repressed 1940s and 1950s in the United States, “One could go to jail for publishing the ‘wrong’ book or distributing contraceptive devices to the ‘wrong’ person, or saying the ‘wrong’ word aloud in a public place” (Allyn 2000:6).

To understand the social and cultural context that contributes to such dramatic changes in sexual behaviors and understandings, it is helpful to look at different eras also known as sexual revolutions. The United States in the 1920s, for instance, was a period some scholars refer to as our first sexual revolution. During this period in U.S. history,

significant changes for women took place in the home, workplace, education, and politics. The concept of the “new woman” was born, which described unmarried women stepping outside of traditional gender roles, becoming icons of changing norms and attitudes about women in society. Sexual connotations were associated with this liberated “new woman.” She rebelled against her mother’s generation who still clung to outdated and prudish Victorian Era sexual mores of restraint and repression and began adopting Freudian ideas of sex as pleasurable. The “new woman” included both women on the fringes of society, such as sex workers, radicals, artists, and lesbians, as well as working- and middle-class women who began exploring their sexuality. There was an increasing acceptance of the idea that women had sexual desires and a questioning of the importance of marriage. Birth control pioneers of this time, such as Margaret Sanger, sought to educate and empower women with the knowledge of how to have sex without fear of pregnancy. Although some sexual norms were recast during this revolutionary decade, lesbians and gay men still suffered abuse, the sexual double standard persisted, and eventually most “new women” gave up on their youthful ideas and married men.

BOX 1.1 THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA’S SEXUAL REVOLUTION

This chapter explores the ways digital technology influences sexuality and sexual revolutions separately. But of course, they are not separate topics. As previously noted, the invention of the birth control pill, a development of medical technology, was a major factor in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Some scholars argue that China is experiencing a sexual revolution facilitated by digital technologies. China is a nation that has historically held conservative views regarding sexuality, including the idea that sex is intended for reproduction rather than pleasure, premarital and extramarital sex are considered immoral, women exist for male pleasure, and that underage people as well as elderly people should not engage in sexual activity (Liu, Cheng, Wei, and Yu 2020). During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), expression of sexuality was considered taboo and repressed. During the 1980s, a new regime in China known as the Open-Door Policy embraced modernization. Despite this, attitudes toward sexuality remained rather conservative in China for decades. However, recent surveys find a dramatic increase in acceptance of extramarital, premarital, and commercial sex compared to previous generations and increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights, especially among younger people (Farrer 2006; Liu et al. 2020). The changes have been so dramatic they are being referred to as a sexual revolution, and while scholars cite many factors that have led to these changes, Internet access and social media are two key factors. General Social Survey data from 2012, 2013, and 2015 finds that “Internet-usage frequency significantly enhances respondents’ sexually permissive attitudes . . .” specifically regarding premarital sex, same-sex relations, and extramarital sex (Liu et al. 2020).

During the first half of the twentieth century, sexual revolution was underway in Germany as well. There was a radical remaking of sexual norms during the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) (Marhoefer 2011). Clinics across Germany opened and began distributing information about birth control and abortion; there was an embrace of sexual liberation; sex work

was decriminalized; the field of sexology thrived; and the law against male homosexuality known as Paragraph 175 was nearly repealed (see Chapter 5). This movement was cut short by the political turmoil and the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany during the 1930s.

While there was a backlash against the American sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, it still resulted in several significant cultural changes. First, it destigmatized birth control. Sociologists define *stigma* as an attribute that is deeply discrediting that challenges one's identity (Goffman 1963). Prior to the introduction of the birth control pill, women who used any method of birth control were stigmatized as sexually promiscuous. Since the 1970s, this has changed; the idea that women are sexual beings is less likely to be stigmatized. Second, the sexual revolution weakened the sexual double standard in which the rules about appropriate sexual behavior differ for men and women. Third, it encouraged media acceptance of premarital sex, which means that media representations of cultural behaviors began to more closely mirror cultural norms.

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS: BEYOND MONOGAMY

Sociologist Steven Seidman (2015) questions whether there really was a sexual revolution in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. While there have indeed been dramatic changes, he argues that some fundamental aspects of American sexual culture remain intact; primarily, monogamous marriage and a cultural emphasis on heterosexual romance. This is referred to as *mononormativity*, the dominant assumption of the normalness and naturalness of monogamy. As sociologist Mimi Schippers (2016) explains, culture teaches us that to achieve loving relationships and emotional intimacy, we must be monogamous. Even the passage of marriage equality reinforces monogamy as the dominant, accepted relationship form, albeit for same-sex couples. While the science of monogamy is discussed in Chapter 2, in this section, we introduce consensual nonmonogamous relationships.

Consensual nonmonogamous relationships need to be distinguished from infidelity, which is when both parties have not agreed to be in a nonmonogamous relationship. Consensual nonmonogamous relationships can take a variety of forms. *Polyamory* refers to people who choose multiple relationships in which participants are sexually and emotionally bound to one another. Open relationships, sometimes referred to as swinging, can involve strictly sexual relationships with other people, without emotional bonds, and can involve one or both members of a couple (Adam 2006; Barker and Langdrige 2015; Jenks 1998). Importantly, polyamorous relationships place an emphasis on gender equality, which differentiates these relationships from polygamy, which tends to be male-dominated (Cascais and Cardoso 2012; Easton and Hardy 2009; Schipper 2016; Sheff 2013; Taormino 2008).

Many who engage in nonmonogamy do so as an explicit critique of mononormativity. They argue that there is nothing natural about monogamy, and, indeed, it is rare among animals and relatively rare among human cultures. Research finds nonmonogamy to be normative among some gay men couples (Adam 2006; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Coelho 2011). Some researchers point out that while we have a cultural commitment to monogamy, our behavior is often contradictory. In other words, infidelity is commonplace (Duncombe et al. 2004). Others argue that monogamy is an inherently patriarchal tradition and that women, in particular, benefit from nonmonogamy since it helps protect them from patriarchal oppression (Jackson and Scott 2004). Participants identify some of the benefits associated with nonmonogamy: First, it is a more honest way of relating

compared to secret infidelities (Phillips 2010). Second, it is viewed as superior to monogamy in the freedom it allows each participant and the level of communication between the partners (Ho 2006).

Couples who choose nonmonogamy face considerable obstacles. For instance, family and friends often choose not to acknowledge the relationship or one of the partners in the relationship, new partners are perceived as threatening to the existing relationship by outsiders, there is a lack of social support for such relationships, and people in nonmonogamous relationships are falsely assumed to be promiscuous (Barker 2005; Mint 2004; Schippers 2016).

SEXUAL INVISIBILITY

For most of the twentieth century, sexual minorities were invisible. While today their visibility is less of an issue, there are still aspects of sexuality that our culture deems unacceptable and thus tends to minimize. The invisibility of bisexuality in our culture is captured by the term *bisexual erasure* (Yoshino 2000). Bisexual erasure happens because bisexuality is often subsumed under gay and lesbian identities, while at other times it is an artifact of the delegitimation and stigmatization of bisexuality. Despite progress, we still have “blinders on” when it comes to certain aspects of human sexuality.

“Homosexuals were invisible. They fought in wars, but no one knew; they were everywhere, but no one was aware of them. They were ‘closeted’ or hid their identity for fear of losing their jobs and their families. Homosexuals lived through most of the twentieth century with a hidden identity that imbued their lives with shame and fear” (Seidman 2004:246).

Another example of sexual invisibility is asexuality. Scientific research has only recently begun to study asexuality, the lack of sexual attraction or indifference to sexual activity. Asexuality was historically viewed as a disorder requiring treatment. Today, activists are working to get it accepted as a valid sexual orientation rather than a disorder and are addressing visibility and needs for public acceptance (Bogaert 2006; Travis 2007). One such group is known as the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Despite the simplicity of the definition of asexuality, someone who does not experience sexual attraction, there is considerable diversity among people who identify as asexual (Carrigan 2015). Many asexuals, for instance, make a distinction between romance and sex rather than viewing the latter as the culmination of the former. Some asexuals are sex positive, viewing sex as positive, even though they have no sexual desire themselves. Others are sex-averse, deeply troubled by both the idea and the act of sex (Carrigan 2015).

SEXUALITY ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

While we live in a culture that emphasizes the fixed nature of sexuality, we spent much of this chapter exploring its socially constructed nature and the considerable sexual diversity that exists. We explored the changing nature of sexuality across genders, cross-culturally, and historically. In this section, we extend that analysis to explore the ways sexuality varies across the life course. To understand sexuality across the life span requires us to pay attention to both the physiology of sexuality as well as the social construction of sexuality.

Childhood Sexuality

We live in a culture that is not comfortable with the idea of childhood sexuality. In fact, we link notions of childhood innocence to sexuality, and, by extension, when children experience sexual abuse, we describe them as “losing their innocence” or “losing their childhood.” We assume children do not and should not know anything about sexuality. In fact, we make sexuality “the most highly cherished marker delineating the boundaries between childhood and adulthood” (Angelides 2019:x). Freud is one of the first to challenge the idea of the asexual child (see Chapter 2).

Research on child sexuality generally involves interviews with caregivers (most often mothers) concerning sexual behaviors they observe in their children. This research makes it abundantly clear that children are sexual beings. Both girls and boys engage in what appear to be pleasurable behaviors, including genital stimulation, penile erection, and pelvic thrusting, as early as infancy (Yang et al. 2005). A wide range of sexual behaviors in children are identified, including touching one’s own genitals, touching other children’s genitals, and masturbating. Numerous studies have concluded that a “substantial proportion” of boys and girls experience their first orgasm before puberty (Crooks and Baur 2011; Janssen 2007). It is risky to assume that childhood sexuality carries the same meanings as adult sexuality, but researchers do believe these are indicators of sexuality in children (G. Ryan 2000; Thanasiu 2004). Despite this evidence, we live in a culture that erases childhood and adolescent sexuality (Angelides 2019).

Adolescent and Young Adult Sexuality

The physiological changes we go through during adolescence makes it a period in which adults understand children as shifting from an “asexual” childhood to a “sexual” adulthood. During this stage of life, young people enter puberty, a period of rapid physical changes, including increasing hormone levels and the development of secondary sex characteristics such as breasts and pubic hair, among others. Menstruation begins in girls. For boys, puberty provides them with the ability to ejaculate, usually around the age of 13, with the initial appearance of sperm about a year later (Crooks and Baur 2011; Janssen 2007; Wheeler 1991).

With these physical changes comes an increase in intimate relationships and sexual behaviors. Masturbation increases in frequency, with rates for women lower than rates among men (Robbins et al. 2011). Young people engage in noncoital sex, which refers to a wide range of erotic behaviors that do not involve intercourse such as kissing, manual stimulation, or oral sex. Research finds that rates of oral sex have increased dramatically among teenagers (Brady and Halpern-Felsher 2007; Halpern-Felsher et al. 2006). But the practice of oral sex is gendered. Research finds that adolescent girls are expected to give oral sex and that it can be the path to popularity for them, but boys rarely reciprocate (Orenstein 2016). The preference for oral sex among teenagers is due to multiple reasons. First is the belief that it allows them to engage in sexual behaviors without the health risks. Unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding. While it can help young people avoid pregnancy, it does not reduce transmission rates of sexually transmitted infections, since most sexually transmitted infections can be passed through oral, anal, and genital contact (see Chapter 11). Second, young people prefer oral sex to traditional intercourse because many believe it maintains their virginity. As we discussed previously in this chapter, our understandings of virginity are social constructions (Crooks and Baur 2011).

In addition to the increase in noncoital sexual behaviors, there was a dramatic increase in rates of sexual intercourse among American adolescents between the 1950s and the 1970s, with the numbers leveling off since this period. Research finds this varies by race/ethnicity, with adolescent sexual intercourse defined as being 20 years of age or younger at first sexual intercourse (Biello et al. 2013). African American adolescents are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse (91.5 percent) than white adolescents (85.6 percent). Mean age at first sexual intercourse is younger for African Americans (at 15.26 years of age) than for white (16.15 years of age) adolescents (Biello et al. 2013). These differences may be an outcome of poverty since poverty is strongly linked to early sexual activity, and poverty rates are higher among African Americans than among whites.

“For what researchers say is an array of reasons – including technology, heavy academic schedules, and an overall slower-motion process of growing up – millennials and now Gen Zers are having less sex, with fewer partners, than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations did. The social isolation and transmission scares of the COVID-19 pandemic have no doubt played a role in the shift. But researchers say that’s not the whole story: The ‘no rush for sex’ trend predates the pandemic” (Fry 2023).

After decades of increasing sexual behavior among young people, researchers are now seeing a dramatic decline in sexual activity among adolescents over the last twenty years. Research finds declines in all sexual activity, from masturbation to penile-vaginal sex, to giving and receiving oral sex. Adolescent males who reported no sexual activity, either alone or with a partner, over the past year increased from 28.8 percent in 2009 to 44.2 percent in 2018. Female adolescents also saw a dramatic increase, with 49.5 reporting no sexual activity in the past year in 2009 to 74 percent in 2018 (Herbenick et al. 2022; Willingham 2022). Perhaps relatedly, the research finds an increase in “rough sex,” which includes choking or strangling during sex, mostly among college students. While this often is consensual, it is also scary. As the researchers point out, “[I]t’s not clear from our research how much of those elevated rates are wanted and pleasurable or unwanted” (Willingham 2022).

More research is needed to explain these changes but some scholars speculate that young people are spending more time on computer games, social media, and video games (Willingham 2022). Others attribute this to the fact that young people are not growing up as fast as they once did, including “delaying milestones such as getting their driver’s licenses and going to college. And they’re living at home with their parents a lot longer . . . the whole developmental trajectory slows down . . .” affecting their romantic relationships and sexual development as well (Fry 2023).

In addition to variation in adolescent sexuality by race/ethnicity, we find that it varies along gender lines as well. The sexual double standard is most forcefully enforced against adolescent girls. Girls’ sexual coming-of-age requires them to navigate a highly sexualized culture that tells them they need to be simultaneously sexy and virginal. Today, girls are having sex at younger ages than previous generations, yet for many, their first sexual experiences are not completely voluntary and instead are coerced (Erdmans and Black 2015; Gullette 2011; Orenstein 2016). Research finds that there is a “missing discourse of desire” among adolescent girls (Fine 1988). A discussion of girls’ sexual desire is problematically absent from sex education curricula, while the sexual desires of boys are acknowledged (Fine 1988; Tolman 1991, 1994). Girls do not learn to recognize or acknowledge

their own sexual desires and instead are taught that boys' sexual desire is more important. Adolescent girls then interpret their own sexual desires as troubling; they inherit the cultural message that silences their sexual desires and can even lead to disassociation from their bodies (Tolman 1994).

“Even the most comprehensive sex education classes stick with a woman’s internal parts. . . . Where is the discussion of girls’ sexual development? When do we talk to girls about desire and pleasure? When do we explain the miraculous nuances of their anatomy? When do we address exploration, self-knowledge? No wonder boys’ physical needs seem inevitable to teens while girls’ are, at best, optional” (Orenstein 2016:62).

LGBTQ+ Adolescent Sexuality

In our heterocentric culture, sexual and romantic relationships are defined along heterosexual lines that leave LGBTQ+ youth unable to define themselves as sexual beings. As we have already explored, our cultural understandings of virginity are heterocentric. Establishing intimate relationships and engaging in sexual experimentation is important for all adolescents, including LGBTQ+ youth. Research finds that establishing an intimate relationship helps LGBTQ+ adolescents find self-acceptance (Silverstein 1981). Establishing a same-sex relationship while still in high school is especially difficult for LGBTQ+ youth since many fear harassment from their classmates, especially if they are not already out (J. Sears 1991). Most young people are still in the closet, so it is hard to know who is even a potential partner, which is less of a problem for straight youth. When LGBTQ+ youth do have intimate relationships, they are often hidden; thus, they are not celebrated and supported in the same way that relationships involving straight youths are (Savin-Williams 2015). Interestingly, our culture is more accepting of strictly sexual relationships versus romantic relationships among same-sex adolescents. Ultimately, this all means that sexual minority youth feel isolated and socially excluded at a very vulnerable point in their lives (Savin-Williams 2015).

“Not My Child”: Parental Views on Adolescent Sexuality

Despite clear evidence of teenage sexual activity, research by Sinikka Elliott (2012) finds that most parents do not believe their children are sexually active. They believe other children are sexual, some even hypersexual, yet they insist their own children are sexually naïve and, thus, asexual. While parents of teenagers view adults as potential threats to their children’s sexuality, they also view other teens as sexually active and, thus, as threats to their child. The image of the highly sexual teen is raced, classed, and gendered. African American boys’ behavior is perceived by many parents as insidious and adult-like (R. Ferguson 2000). Such stereotypical perceptions of Black men as hypersexual and a threat to white women have a long history in the United States. Black and Latina girls are routinely portrayed as sexually opportunistic (Bettie 2003; Collins 2000; Collins et al. 2004; Fields 2005). Young people from poor families are described as not sharing the same values associated with sexuality as their middle-class peers. Parents often describe their sons’ girl peers as hypersexual and a threat to their less mature sons, even though research finds girls report feeling pressured by boys to have sex before they are ready. Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents of teenage girls view boys as sexual aggressors and as threats to their daughters (Elliott 2012).

Sexuality and Adulthood

Adulthood is viewed as the stage of life most appropriately linked with sexual expression. Since the shift toward sex for pleasure and away from sex for reproduction (see Chapter 2), sexuality has been viewed as an integral aspect of life, contributing to one's mental and physical well-being. This shift, while welcomed, places great pressure on people to perform, leading to the emergence of advice columns, marriage counseling, sex therapy, and a medical focus on sexual dysfunction (see Chapter 11; Greenberg 2003).

According to recent research, sexual frequency has declined in the United States, UK, Australia, Germany, and Japan. Relying on data from a nationally representative online survey of 14–49-year-old participants between the years 2009 and 2018, researchers find that adults in 2018 “were significantly more likely to report no PVI (penile-vaginal penetration) in the prior year (28% in 2018 vs. 24% in 2009)” (Herbenick et al. 2022). The study asked about more than PVI and included a wide repertoire of sexual practices including solo and partnered masturbation, giving and receiving oral sex, and anal intercourse. In the same period the researchers found a decrease in PVI for adults, they did not find a corresponding increase in other sexual practices.

Sexuality and the Aged

Media images too often portray sexuality as the sole purview of young adults. We are rarely exposed to images of sexually active senior citizens, which results in a warped understanding of sexuality, where stereotypical and stigmatizing images of older adults as sexually active pervade the media (Towler et al. 2021). Even sex researchers historically neglect aging, although that is starting to change (Levy 1994; Towler et al. 2021). It is essential for social scientists who study sexuality not to ignore sexuality among the aged, because this is a growing population. The baby boom generation (1946–1964) make up the bulk of the aged population throughout the Western world. This is the cohort that lived through and participated in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Will they alter our understandings of sexuality and aging in the same way they altered so many other aspects of the culture? Perhaps the fact that ABC has introduced a new dating show, *The Golden Bachelor*, featuring contestants who are over the age of 60, shows some recognition of aging baby boomers and their power to alter our understandings of the world. Even though baby boomers were integral to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and make up the bulk of the elderly population today, scholars argue that, so far, this “has not translated to positive sexuality as people have aged” (Curley and Johnson 2022). A new sexual revolution that includes changing social norms to recognize the importance of sexual pleasure and satisfaction as we age so that older adults who enjoy sex face less stigma may be necessary.

“Sexy’ could be redefined as confident, self-assured, and authentic, and no longer limited to being youthful, physically fit, or visually attractive . . . it is time for a new sexual revolution” (Curley and Johnson 2022:3).

Despite such cultural and academic neglect, sexuality can be enjoyed throughout the life course. In fact, in their survey of over 27,000 middle-aged and older adults from 29 different countries the Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors (GSSAB) finds sexual well-being is linked to physical and mental health as well as happiness (Curley and Johnson 2022; DeLamater 2012; Laumann et al. 2006).

What is not missing is the medicalization of sex for older people (Towler et al. 2021). Pharmaceutical companies trafficking in drugs like Viagra and Addyi (known as the “female Viagra”) send a mixed message (see Chapter 11). The first unmistakable message is that aging results in inevitable sexual dysfunction. For men this takes the form of erectile dysfunction while for women it takes the form of an abnormally low sex drive. The second message being sent is that seniors have a right to remain sexually active; that geriatric sex is not a contradiction in terms. Despite this message, too often our cultural narrative portrays youth sex as spectacular and sexuality among the aged as, at best, rare. According to Margaret Gullette (2011), we need to get away from this idea of a glory/decay binary associated with sexuality over the life course and embrace a positive aging story. Research by the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals finds that while desire and sexual frequency decreases with age, sexual satisfaction remains constant from the 50s until the 70s (Gullette 2011).



Despite the lack of media images of sexually active senior citizens, sexuality can be enjoyed across the life course.

Our images of sexuality among seniors are gendered—with the assumption being that women lose interest in sex, especially once they are postmenopausal. In other words, the sexual double standard continues into our senior years. Women’s sexual attractiveness is perceived as declining as she ages whereas aging men capitalize on a “distinguished” appearance. A 1990 study titled the Midlife Women’s Health Survey found that 60 percent of women had not experienced any change in their sexual responsiveness after menopause, while nine percent claim to enjoy sex even more than they did when they were young (Gullette 2011). Importantly, part of having a healthy sex life in one’s senior years involves overcoming one’s own ageism “to consider same-age people and their behaviors sexy” (Gullette 2011:138). A second factor determining women’s sexual enjoyment during their senior years involves their empowerment as they age; women become sexual subjects rather than objects (Travis and White 2000). Another variable that determines women’s sexual satisfaction in her later years is her overall marital satisfaction (DeLamater, Hyde, and Fong 2008).

Some physiological changes do occur as we age that can influence, and potentially interrupt, a healthy sex life (see Chapter 11). Some men find they struggle to get an erection while others are slower to climax. Many women struggle with vaginal dryness associated with menopause. Some medications can reduce libido. Aging often results in less mobility and flexibility. These changes require adjusting expectations surrounding sex, the necessity of new sexual scripts, relearning effective techniques, and focusing less on orgasm and more on cuddling and flirting (Gullette 2011; Levy 1994).

“Decline is taught as a physiological fact in medical settings, textbooks, and feature articles on sex, but when researchers ask new questions of women, decline becomes an artifact of youth bias and assuming that males are the model” (Gullette 2011:138).

Like any group of people, there is great variation in the sex lives of the aged. Some research finds gay men report higher satisfaction with their sex lives as they age, despite the fact that frequency of sex declines (D. Kimmel 1980). Other research finds that the overemphasis on youth in the gay male community results in older gay men’s exacerbated experiences of stigma. Older gay men describe no longer being seen as able to compete for the attention of younger men, while fewer older heterosexual men express similar views about their ability to attract younger women. There is a dearth of research on the sexuality of older lesbian and bisexual women (Towler et al. 2021). The few studies on aging queers portray a dire situation: LGBTQ+ elderly people have less savings than their heterosexual counterparts; are more likely to live alone; and are less likely to have health insurance, yet are more likely to have medical conditions; and there are very few LGBTQ+ retirement communities (Beams 2023).

Like sexually active members of any age group, sexually active seniors are at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs; see Chapter 11). Research finds rising incidences of HIV/AIDS among this group according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016a). For most seniors, concern about sexually transmitted infections is new and not something they likely found themselves concerned with during earlier stages of their life when they were more likely to be in a monogamous marriage.

SEXUALIZING RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITIES

This text takes *intersectionality* into account whenever possible; this means we are attuned to intersecting forms of oppression such as the ways race, class, gender, and sexual orientation intersect, influence, and interact with one another, creating new and unique forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1989). As sociologist Joane Nagel states, “sex matters in ethnic relations, and . . . sexual matters insinuate themselves into all things racial, ethnic, and national” (2003:1). Scholar Jane Dailey (2020) argues that the foundation for white supremacy in the United States has been fear of Black sexuality.

Some research finds there are a larger percentage of racial/ethnic minorities who identify as LGBTQ+ than whites. Specifically, a 2012 Gallup Poll found that 4.6 percent of African Americans, 4.0 percent of Latinos, and 4.3 percent of Asian Americans identify as LGBTQ+, while only 3.2 percent of white Americans so identify (Gates and Newport 2012). Today, however, more people across racial/ethnic groups identify as LGBTQ+ than in 2012 when Gallup first started asking respondents about their sexual identity, with the most growth found among Hispanic adults. Specifically, in 2021, 11 percent of

Hispanic adults identified as LGBTQ+, while 6.6 percent of Black adults and 6.2 percent of white, non-Hispanic, adults identified as LGBTQ+ (Jones, J. 2022). The higher rates of Hispanics identifying as LGBTQ+ is related to the relative youth of the Hispanic population compared to African Americans and whites. According to Jeffrey M. Jones (2022), “the driving factor in increasing U.S. LGBT identification is the greater tendency for younger adults – millennials and, particularly, adult members of Generation Z – to identify as something other than heterosexual.” Between 2012 and 2016, the percentage of Asian and Asian Americans who identified as LGBTQ+ increased from 3.5 percent to 4.9 percent (Gates 2017).

Despite this, homosexuality is linked with whiteness. This is partially because LGBTQ+ people of color are less visible in the media than white sexual minorities. But it also has to do with the sexualized stereotypes associated with racial/ethnic minority groups in this country. Essentially, by stereotyping people of color as excessively heterosexual, it distances them from homosexuality in the minds of many (Meyer 2015).

There is some variation in sexual attitudes but not much variation in sexual behaviors between racial/ethnic groups. Some research finds that Black people are more sexually liberal on some measures and more conservative on others compared to white people, but not enough to make any clear distinctions (Staples 2006). Support for same-sex marriage is pretty consistent across racial groups, with 59 percent of whites, 60 percent of Hispanics, 69 percent of Asian and Asian Pacific Islanders, and 59 percent of multiracial Americans showing strong support in 2015. Support among Black Americans is lower, at 48 percent (Cox, Liensech, and Jones 2017). However, we do see some differences in sexual outcomes. For instance, African Americans suffer disproportionately from HIV/AIDS, and racial/ethnic minorities have higher rates of teen pregnancy than non-Hispanic whites (see Chapters 10 and 11). Asian Americans tend to be more reluctant to obtain sexual and reproductive health care (Okazaki 2002). So while sexual behaviors between racial/ethnic groups tend not to vary much, the outcomes of sexual behaviors often do.

“Sex is the sometimes silent message contained in racial slurs, ethnic stereotypes, national imaginings, and international relations. . . . [E]thnic and racial boundaries are also sexual boundaries” (Nagel 2003:23).

Racial/ethnic minority group members in the United States must negotiate their identities, particularly their sexual identities, through a maze of demeaning and sometimes contradictory sexual stereotypes. **Stereotypes** refer to “exaggerated and/or oversimplified portrayals of an entire group of people based upon misinformation and mischaracterizations” (Fitzgerald 2023:102). Stereotypes reflect the dominant group’s efforts at maintaining the subordination of minority groups. Stereotypes work to portray a racial/ethnic minority group as deviant, “other,” and as potentially threatening to the dominant group. Stereotypes can also negatively affect the identity of those being targeted. Racial/ethnic minority group members may believe dominant group stereotypes about them and, in some cases, even live up to such stereotypes. While these are only stereotypes, their repetition throughout popular culture provides them with legitimacy. Public policies can even reflect these mischaracterizations.

African American men are portrayed as hypersexual, while Black women struggle with often contradictory stereotypes that are sexual in nature: mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and the Jezebel (Collins 1991). We can clearly see how social policies reflect sexual stereotypes of Black women. The Jezebel, for instance, is a long-standing stereotype

associated with Black women that has been with us since slavery. A jezebel is a whore, or a sexually aggressive woman. It functions to justify widespread sexual assaults of slave women by white men. While the law protected white women from rape, it did not protect Black women during slavery or the Jim Crow era, and they are not equally protected today (see Chapter 13). The welfare mother is portrayed as a woman with low morals and uncontrolled sexuality, which results in her poverty (Collins 1991). Welfare provisions in many states prohibit a woman receiving welfare from having another child while on welfare. Underlying such provisions are assumptions about the highly sexual nature and low moral character of poor women who need government assistance. These stereotypes have also justified efforts to control the fertility of Black women, through a history of involuntary sterilizations, among other efforts (Roberts 1997; see Chapter 10).

The image of Black men as hypersexual, animalistic, sexually immoral, and threatening is deeply rooted in American culture. After slavery ended, American literature and folklore were flooded with images of sexually promiscuous Black men as threats to white women (Staples 2006). These became justifications for lynching and the criminalization of Black men that remains with us today.

Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans also face sexual stereotypes. Latino men are stereotyped as hypersexual, aggressive, and “macho.” Another stereotype is that of the “Latino lover” who is seen as more sexually sophisticated and, thus, a threat to white women. Latina portrayals follow a virgin/whore dichotomy: Either she is a passive, submissive virgin or she is a sexually aggressive whore (Asencio and Acosta 2010).

Sociologist Rosalind Chou (2012) argues that Asian American sexuality is socially constructed to maintain white men’s dominance. Asian American women are stereotyped as exotic and eager to please men sexually, specifically white men, yet are also passive and subordinate. Other images of Asian women follow a “dragon lady” script: She is seductive and desirable, but untrustworthy. These stereotypes inform the earliest immigration restrictions in this country. In 1875, the Page Act was passed that excluded “undesirables” from immigrating here. This ban was directed mostly at Asian, and more specifically Chinese, women due to the assumption that they were all working in the sex trade. During this same era, Chinese men were assumed to be a sexual threat against white women, which justified the implementation of anti-miscegenation laws that made interracial marriage between Chinese and whites illegal. Instead of being stereotyped as hypersexual as African American and Latino men are today, Asian American men are portrayed as weak and effeminate, essentially; they are emasculated, seen as hyposexual, or even asexual (Chou 2012).

For both Latinos and Asian Americans, their immigrant status versus the extent of their assimilation can influence their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Since roughly 33 percent of Latinos are foreign born, this is significant (Funk and Lopez 2022). Research finds differences in attitudes toward sexuality between Asian American and non-Asian American adolescents. For instance, Asian American adolescents tend to hold more conservative attitudes and initiate first sexual activity at a later age than non-Asian American adolescents (Okazaki 2002). The more assimilated Asian Americans are, the more their behaviors start to mirror those of white Americans.

Sexual stereotypes of Native Americans are in many ways similar. For many decades, whites viewed Native Americans as savages and Native women as promiscuous and sexually available to white men. This later morphed into an image of Native women as promiscuous, who slept with married white men, thus threatening white women and their

families (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012). These were simply stereotypes that encouraged whites to discriminate against Native people.

SEXUAL MINORITIES BEYOND LGBTQ+

This text operates on the assumption that there is a *sexual hierarchy* where the dominant group, heterosexuals, have privileges while subordinate groups, whom we can think of broadly as nonheterosexuals, such as lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and queer people, face discrimination and inequality (see Chapter 5). The sexual hierarchy is more expansive than this, however. Feminist anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin argues that there is an imaginary line between “good” and “bad” sex and that certain behaviors are at the “top of the erotic pyramid” in that they are the most valued and approved sex acts, while other acts are at the bottom and are disapproved of and often legally sanctioned (1993:11). She uses the analogy of a “charmed circle,” in which sexual behaviors that are socially approved of, such as sex for reproduction between heterosexual married couples, are inside the circle and all other sexual behaviors fall outside the circle. In terms of a sexual hierarchy, below the most approved sexual behaviors are unmarried, monogamous, heterosexual couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Next on the hierarchy are major areas of contestation, or sex acts that are on the verge of respectability. Here, we find long-term, stable, lesbian and gay couples. Sexual activities that fall under the “bad” category include sadomasochism (S/M), fetishism, and cross-generational sex.

BDSM is a broad term that refers to sexual practices that involve bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, or sadism and masochism, none of which are new sexual predilections. Sexologists during the late 1800s used the terms sadism and masochism to describe some of these behaviors, and Freud put the terms together under the label of sadomasochism (Langdridge 2011). *Sadomasochism* refers to sexual behaviors that involve bondage, humiliation, and infliction or receipt of pain. Historically, these behaviors were considered sick and, thus, required treatment. This medicalization is controversial since sadomasochism is consensual sexual behavior. Today, there is increasing acceptance of this activity. Sadomasochists form their own sexual subcultures of people who engage in similar practices. It is periodically portrayed in film, most recently in the popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015).

Rubin points out that “most of the discourses on sex be they religious, psychiatric, popular, or political, delimit a very small portion of human sexual capacity as sanctifiable, safe, healthy, mature, legal, or politically correct” (1993:14).

Within S/M activities, practitioners establish rules summarized in the phrase “safe, sane, and consensual.” Participants agree on a “safe word” before engaging. More than one “safe word” can be created as code words for “stop” or “slow down.” Consent is also continually negotiated throughout the sexual encounter, not just at the beginning. The commitment to consent goes so far as to sometimes include verbal or written contracts between participants (Langdridge and Butt 2004). Sometimes participants engage in long-term S/M relationships, and sometimes participants have never met before they encounter one another at S/M clubs (Langdridge 2011).

Fetishism refers to people who are sexually attracted to objects, situations, or body parts that are not generally viewed as sexual, such as the foot. There is nothing new about

this sexual predilection either; the term originated in the late 1800s. Similarly to S/M, fetishism has faced a long history of medicalization, where the behavior is defined as sick and in need of medical treatment. Some fetishes are considered problematic. For instance, if individuals cannot obtain sexual satisfaction without their fetish, it is considered pathological. If an individual fetishizes a physical disability or skin color of another person, that is potentially problematic due to differential power relations in our society between the able-bodied and the disabled and between people of color and whites (Gerschick 2011; Kong 2002). Interestingly, fetishists are almost always men.

CONCLUSION

Sociologists take a unique approach to the study of sexuality, beginning with the assumption that sexuality is a social construction rather than something that is biologically innate. Research has not found a “gay gene,” and even if a genetic link to sexuality were someday to be discovered, that would not negate the vast influence culture has on sexuality. Evidence of the social construction of sexuality includes the presence of bisexuals and their inability to fit into our binary system of heterosexual or homosexual, the emergence of homosexuality and heterosexuality as concepts, and the gendered nature of our sexual socialization. For sociologists, society influences who we are attracted to, what we view as sexually appropriate and desirable, and what sexual behaviors we ultimately engage in and with whom. We can look across time and see that in different eras, culture was either more permissive toward certain sexual behaviors and sexual variation or more restrictive. We refer to the more liberal eras as sexual revolutions if they have a long-term effect on human sexual behavior.

Sexual relationships in most Western societies tend to privilege heterosexual monogamous marriage; however, other sexual arrangements beyond monogamy exist. Sexuality changes as we move across the life course as well. Some of these changes are an outgrowth of physiological changes while others are social constructions. While sexual attitudes and behaviors do not vary to any significant degree between racial/ethnic groups in a society, it is important to acknowledge the ways stereotypes about racial/ethnic minorities are sexualized and the power of intersecting systems of oppression. Finally, we explore the cultural creation of a sexual hierarchy that divides sexual behaviors into “good” and “bad” categories.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Asexuality	Graysexual
Biological determinism	Heterocentric
Bisexual erasure	Heteroflexibility
Bisexuality	Heteronormativity
Compulsory heterosexuality	Heterosexuality
Demisexual	Homosexuality
Digisexual	Intersectionality
Essentialism	Mononormativity
Fetishism	Pansexuality
Gender	Polyamory

Queer	Sexual revolution
Reliability	Sexual socialization
Sadomasochism	Sexuality
Sexual binary	Social construction
Sexual double standard	Sociology
Sexual hierarchy	Stereotype
Sexual identities	Strategic essentialism
Sexual schemas	Stigma
Sexual scripts	Transgender
Sexual orientation	Virtual intimacies

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to say that sexuality is socially constructed? Provide three pieces of evidence that support the argument that sexuality is a social construction. How does understanding sexuality as a social construct alter our dominant cultural understanding of sexuality?
2. Describe sexuality across the life course, identifying sexual changes over the life course that are socially constructed and those that are biological.
3. What is a sexual revolution? Describe key characteristics of past sexual revolutions. Make an argument that we are currently in a historical era that later generations will look back on and describe as a sexual and/or gender revolution. Now make the counterargument: Provide evidence that shows that we are probably NOT currently in a sexual and/or gender revolution. Describe the role of technology in the current sexual and gender revolution.

ACTIVITIES

1. Read over the terminology section in this chapter, identifying which terms you were familiar with and which ones you were unfamiliar with prior to reading this chapter. Then survey 100 members of your campus community anonymously using social media to find out how they identify sexually. Write a two- to three-page paper answering the following questions: How varied were the responses to your survey? What do such variations tell us about sexuality, if anything? Are there any patterns to the responses? If so, what are they? Were there any answers that surprised you? If so, why?
2. Check out a gay publication online (such as *The Advocate*, *Curve*, *Out*, *The Official New York City Pride Guide*, *Pink*). Look over at least three issues. Write a two-page reflection paper addressing the following questions: What are the main issues facing the gay community, according to your survey of the publications at that particular time? Were these issues you could have identified as being important to members of the LGBTQ+ community prior to reading these publications? If not, why do you think that is?

ESSENTIAL READINGS

Angelides, Steven. 2019. *The Fear of Child Sexuality: Young People, Sex, and Agency*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Devlin, Kate. 2018. *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Sigma.

Foucault, Michel. 1976. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. I*. New York: Random House.

Hayfield, Nikki. 2021. *Bisexual and Pansexual Identities: Exploring and Challenging Invisibility and Invalidation*. New York: Routledge.

Nagel, Joane. 2003. *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Orenstein, Peggy. 2016. *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*. New York: HarperCollins.

Orenstein, Peggy. 2020. *Boys and Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity*. New York: HarperCollins.

Ward, Jane. 2015. *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*. New York: New York University Press.

Weeks, Jeffrey. 1986. *Sexuality*. London, UK: Routledge.

RECOMMENDED FILMS

How to Lose Your Virginity (2013). Therese Schechter, Director. The documentary takes an in-depth look at the myths, dogmas, and misconceptions surrounding women's virginity in U.S. culture.

Inside Bountiful: Polygamy Investigation (2012). Peter Joseph, Director. This documentary provides an inside look into a community of Canadian polygamists. They are under investigation by authorities, despite being a religious community; yet questions remain about the constitutionality and legality of this practice.

Sex in '69: Sexual Revolution in America (2011). Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, Directors. This film explores America's second sexual revolution—with a look at the pivotal year 1969. The concept of "free love" was born, "the pill" was becoming more available, *Playboy* magazine exploded onto the cultural landscape, the modern gay rights movement emerged with the Stonewall riots, and San Francisco's hippie culture burst into mainstream America.

Still Doing It: The Intimate Life of Women Over 60 (2008). Deirdre Fishel and Diana Holtzberg, Producers and Directors. This film challenges cultural messages that associate sexuality with youth by focusing on the lives of nine diverse women: Black, white, single, straight, and lesbian between the ages of 67 and 87. These women discuss their relationships, sex lives, and how they feel about themselves, shattering cultural stereotypes about aging and sexuality.

SUGGESTED MULTIMEDIA

Sexuality and U is a Canadian consumer health website providing information on birth control, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), and sexual health. The website includes an overview of sexuality and child development useful for teachers, parents, and anyone working with children. <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/teachers/sexuality-and-childhood-development>.

Dating While Gray is an NPR podcast offering advice for single, older people navigating the dating scene. Hosted by Laura Stassi who sought dating advice after her 30-year marriage ended, Stassi warns, “love doesn’t get easier as you get older.” <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/dating-while-gray/id1497374383>.

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