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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon 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

Sex robots, or sexbots, have long inspired the imagination, appearing in films as early as 1924 and as a recurring theme in science fiction. Sex robots refer to “an artifact that is used for sexual stimulation and/or release with the following three properties: (1) a humanoid form; (2) the ability to move; and (3) some degree of artificial intelligence (i.e. some ability to sense, process and respond to signals in its surrounding environment)” (Danaher 2017:72). To put the matter humorously, sexbots are “exactly the kind of sexual partner that we always wanted, only much, much better” because they are “always available to serve all our sexual needs . . . [and do] so better and more reliably than any human lover could” (Hauskeller 2014:14, 18). While fully functioning sex robots are still a long way off, technological advancements in artificial intelligence, robotics, and biomechanics have resulted in potential technology that is much more advanced than the idea of a sex doll conveys, to a not-too-distant future where robots that are able to respond

to humans in appropriate ways introduce the prospect of human-robot relationships (Kubes 2019). Despite the limitations with current technology, sex robots sold online range from \$6,000 to \$11,299, with manufacturers promising a “life-like sexual companion” (Hauskeller 2014:12). This has led to a new sexuality, known as *digisexuals*, which refers to people whose primary sexual identity is tied to technology (McArthur and Twist 2017). Some polls have found that between 10 and 17 percent of the population claim to be willing to try sex with a robot (Danaher 2017).

Unsurprisingly, there are many social, cultural, ethical, and legal implications of current and emerging sexbot technologies being debated, leading to some organized opposition to sex robots, specifically in the form of the Campaign Against Sex Robots. For instance, almost all sex robots designed today are “female,” and inspired by pornography; specifically, “large-breasted Barbie dolls with glimpses of artificial intelligence” (Kubes 2019:3). This has led to fears that use of sexbots will result in the increasing objectification of women. However, the fact that sex robots are primarily designed by white, middle-aged, heterosexual men and, thus, reflect their perspective may not be a reason to discourage moving forward with this technology. Some have argued that improving gender diversity in research and development of sex technology can result in the creation of products with broader appeal (“AI Love You” 2017).

Other concerns related to sexbots involve questions of prostitution, rape, and child sexual abuse (Devlin 2018). Doll brothels already exist in Asia and some fear that similar markets likely exist for sex robots (“AI Love You” 2017). Some scholars note the similarity between the asymmetrical relationships between a prostitute and a client and a sex robot and a person, as well as the objectification inherent in prostitution, as causes for concern (K. Richardson 2015). Other scholars ask, what if sex robots are designed to allow rape or child abuse? Should rape and child sexual abuse involving sex robots be criminalized? Yes, says law professor John Danaher. The question of rape of a sexbot is tied to the question of consent, Danaher (2017) argues, and a sexbot is incapable of consent. The more human-like the appearance, movement, and intelligence such robots have, the more important it is to criminalize such behaviors (Danaher 2017). Robotic child sexual abuse is when someone performs sexual acts with a robot that looks and acts like a child, and that should also be criminalized, according to Danaher (2017).

If you find yourself uncomfortable at the thought of sex robots, and not just the ethical and potentially criminal questions of prostitution, rape, and robotic child sexual abuse, you may merely be reflecting the particular socio-historical moment in which you live. As David Levy says, “in the early years of the twenty-first century, the idea of sex with robots is regarded by many people as outlandish, outrageous, even perverted. But sexual ideas, attitudes, and mores evolve with time, making it interesting to speculate on just how much current thinking needs to change before sex with robots is accepted as one of the normal expressions of human sexuality” (2007:274).

You are taking this class during a period of unprecedented change for LGBTQ individuals. All state prohibitions on same-sex marriage 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, the election of President Donald Trump has put LGBTQ rights in jeopardy, both here and abroad. Some have labeled this the “Trump effect.”



Sergi Reborredo/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images

In the United States, it has meant a reversal of the right of transgender people to serve in the military and an expansion of discrimination against LGBTQ people in numerous arenas (see Chapter Five). Globally, it has meant that religious conservatives are emboldened, since the United States is a major influence on social issues and human rights. Also, the Trump effect is literally costing lives due to the administration’s decision to cut millions of dollars in funding designated for HIV prevention in the United States and abroad (Michaelson 2017; Rulz-Grossman 2018).

Even in the face of this most recent backlash against LGBTQ folks, high-profile gay, lesbian, and bisexual athletes are coming out of the closet regularly. School policies nationwide are being challenged by the needs and demands of transgender students. And finally, LGBTQ actors and characters are more prolific in the media than ever, including the first transgender character played by a transgender actor, Laverne Cox, on the hit series *Orange Is the New Black*. Daily headlines highlight the ongoing cultural changes surrounding sexuality-related issues, and yet, sexuality is still highly regulated. Prostitution is illegal in all 50 states, for instance (the state of Nevada does allow for prostitution in some of its counties, but it is not legal in the entire state). 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. 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. Progress is never a straight line.

While cultural understandings of sexuality are always evolving, what seemed like undeniable evidence of progress, particularly for sexual and gender minorities, can no longer be taken for granted, as LGBTQ people face ongoing inequality and even an unprecedented erosion of rights in the current era. Some examples of the contested nature of gender and sexuality include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- New research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRIs) finds that men’s and women’s brains respond similarly to erotic imagery, challenging decades of research claiming that men are aroused more easily by sexual imagery than women (Tingley 2019).
- In 2015, Tennessee state representatives voted to defund the University of Tennessee Knoxville’s diversity office for a year as a way to register

A Catalan scientist creates the first sex robot doll with artificial intelligence. While fully functioning sex robots are still a long way off, several companies currently make sex robots. These robots are more advanced than mere sex dolls, yet lack the artificial intelligence to respond to humans. Nevertheless, current sex robots are being sold online for anywhere from \$6,000.00 to \$12,000.00.

their hostility to a number of actions taken by the office to promote inclusion on campus, including issuing a guide on language transgender and gender-nonconforming people prefer, including pronoun usage (Jaschick 2016).

- In July 2014, President Obama signed legislation providing protection for gay, lesbian, and transgender federal workers and their contractors, a move that ultimately affected one-fifth of the U.S. workforce (Hudson 2014). In 2017, President Trump removed the requirement that companies prove they are in compliance with this federal law, essentially allowing companies who have contracts with the federal government to discriminate against LGBTQ people (Kutner 2017).
- In September of 2019, Merriam-Webster added a nonbinary 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 LGBT and two-spirit people (Wakefield 2019).
- As of September 18, 2019, Ja’leyah- Jamar became the 19th trans woman murdered in 2019; all but one of these were trans women of color (“Trans Woman Murdered . . .” 2019). Violence against transgender people in the United States, particularly transgender people of color, reached an all-time high in 2015, with 22 murders, which was surpassed in 2016, with 27 murders of transgender people.

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 are in 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 who 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 we 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, as the opening vignette’s discussion of sex robots makes clear. 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-related issues that feminists and LGBTQ activists have repeatedly brought to our attention. 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 importantly, 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—all of which will be 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.

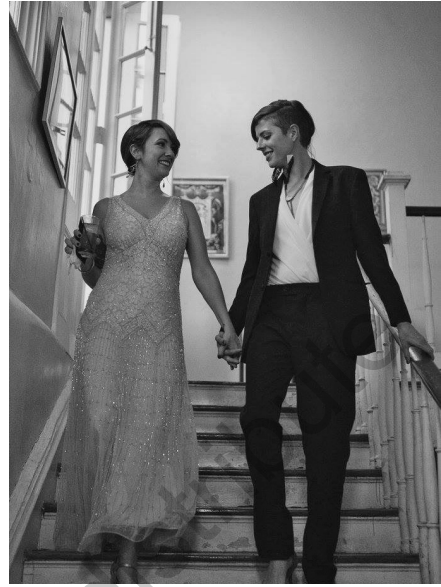


Photo courtesy of Jessica Taylor and Charlotte Jones; Bron Mo'yi, photographer

Jessica Taylor and Charlotte Jones married in the summer of 2016, something that was not legal in their state prior to the Supreme Court decision in June 2015 that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide.

Through this approach, we can explore how sexuality influences social institutions and how these same institutions influence sexuality.

The rest of the book will focus 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 known as heterosexuals or as a member of a sexual 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 the commodification of sexuality, pornography, prostitution, sex trafficking, prison sex, and sexual violence.

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.

In the current era, the term *pansexuality* has also gained some prominence. 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). *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 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. That being said, sociologists do not take an essentialist position on sexuality; instead, we take a social constructionist position, which will be introduced later in this chapter.

This text will rely on the acronym LGBTQ to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals and communities. However, that is simply an editorial decision, as 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 Three). *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 Six). This broad overview of terminology is evidence of the changing cultural understandings surrounding sexuality and thus, should not be understood as fixed.

EVIDENCE OF 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. Gagnon and Simon emphasize the “everydayness” of sexuality, rather than treating it as special or something separate from everyday life (Jackson and Scott 2015; see Chapter Two).

Our understandings of particular 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 Nine). 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 will explore other research into the genetic links to homosexuality in Chapter Two.

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 a result of 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).

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

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“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).

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 challenges this idea explicitly. Rooted in the seventeenth-century philosophies of Rene Descartes, also known as Cartesian dualities, the Western world-view 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. Specifically, 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 Two). 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. A more current 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). These examples show that we live in a culture that fails to take bisexuality seriously (Meem et al. 2010).

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. In terms of sexuality, heterosexuals are

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“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” (Jonathan Katz 1995:10).

privileged and sexual minorities face discrimination and inequality (see Chapter Five). 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 will discuss in Chapter Five (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 Seven). 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" (Rich 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 upon 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 Two.

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 Five). The emergence of the heterosexual and the homosexual also contribute 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 will explore in more detail in Chapter Two.

The Gendered Construction of Sexuality

One of the most obvious ways sexuality is socially constructed is through gender. While gender will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter Three, 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 Three).

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 highlights the importance of culture and refers to the "publically available and partially internalized understandings from which individuals draw sexual meanings" and that inform potential courses of action (2017:10).

SEXUAL REVOLUTIONS

Studying sexuality sociologically requires we 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 a prostitute (Mann 2012).

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 felt increasingly free 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 rede-

signed to avoid scare and fear tactics and instead to approach the subject matter from a rational standpoint (Allyn 2000).

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,



Jbrandt/Wikimedia Commons

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.

“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

BOX 1.1 GLOBAL/TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALITY

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was considered to be one of the most radical revolutions in world history. It sought to abolish all inequality and to transform human nature, specifically by creating a “socialist personality—rational, collectivist, disciplined, and socially oriented” (Kon 1995:2). Sexuality was perceived as an obstacle to such a personality, as it is irrational, individualistic, and undisciplined. By the 1930s, such total control over the personality of citizens involved attempts at desexualizing public and private life, creating a regime of severe sexual repression and even a climate of *sexophobia*, where all sexual activity was considered indecent and unmentionable (Kon 1995). Sex education in schools was nonexistent as was academic sex research. A conspiracy of silence surrounded birth control, promiscuity, homosexuality, infidelity, and sexually transmitted diseases. Criminal penalties for homosexuality were implemented. Erotic art and literature were eradicated. Vladimir Lenin, Marxist leader of the Russian Revolution, described sex and revolution as incompatible: “In the age of revolution, that [sex] is bad, very bad. . . . The revolution demands concentration . . . It cannot tolerate orgiastic conditions. . . . Dissoluteness in sexual life is bourgeois, is a phenomenon of decay” (Mann 2012:122). Essentially, Soviet society attempted to be asexual from the early 1930s until the

beginning of the end of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s (Kon 1995). In fact, “to call the Soviet government puritanical was a gross misstatement; it was afflicted by a paralyzing fear of love and eroticism” (Carleton 2005:1).

Unsurprisingly, sexual freedom became one of the most significant symbols of social liberation (Kon 1995). However, this liberalization came about as a “burst of licentiousness” in a society that lacked an erotic culture, which resulted in many dysfunctional developments (Schwartz 2010). In Russia, there was an abundance of pornography and increasing numbers of sex shops, yet no sex education in schools. The most common form of birth control was abortion, sexually transmitted diseases were rising rapidly, sexual violence was increasing, and prostitution was one of the most prestigious occupations for women (Kon 1995). While the post-Soviet climate was a dramatically different sexual culture than the Soviet era, some argue that there had been no real sexual revolution in Russia. A sexual shame still lingered from the sexophobic Soviet era. In fact, Russian sexologist Sergei Agarkov described the changes as a sexual evolution rather than a sexual revolution, with people in post-Soviet Russia slowly becoming more comfortable with sex and sexuality (Schwartz 2010).

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 prostitutes, 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.

During this same era, a 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; female prostitution was decriminalized; the field of sexology thrived; and the law against male homosexuality known as Paragraph 175 was nearly repealed (see Chapter Five). 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 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. Abortion is still legal (albeit, under considerable attack by opponents). 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 actual 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 in order 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 will be discussed in Chapter Two, in this section, we discuss 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 the emotional bonds, and can involve one or both members of a couple (Adam 2006; Barker and Langdridge 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 (M. Barker 2005; Mint 2004; Schippers 2016).

SEXUAL INVISIBILITY

For most of the twentieth century, homosexuals were invisible. While today their visibility is less of an issue, there are still aspects of sexuality that our culture deems unacceptable and thus tend toward invisibility. We have already discussed the invisibility of bisexuality in our culture. In this section, we discuss another example of sexual invisibility: asexuality. Despite our cultural progress on sexuality issues, we still have “blindness on” when it comes to certain aspects of human sexuality.

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

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“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).

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 actually 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, despite the fact that 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 we 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 Two).

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 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 (Leitenberg, Detzer, and Srebnick 1993). 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 Eleven). 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 has been 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.

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



“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).

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).

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, a problem straight youth do not have. 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, all of this 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 highly 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, despite the fact that 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 the Aged

Media images 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. Even sex research has historically neglected aging (J. Levy 1994).

Despite such cultural and academic neglect, sexuality can be enjoyed throughout the life course. Pharmaceutical companies trafficking in drugs like Viagra and Addyi (known as the “female Viagra”) send a mixed message (see Chapter Eleven). 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 fifties until the seventies (Gullette 2011).



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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 in order “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 et al. 2008).

Some physiological changes do occur as we age that can influence, and potentially interrupt, a healthy sex life (see Chapter Eleven). 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; J. Levy 1994).

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). One issue sexually active seniors, like sexually active members of any age group, are confronted with are sexually transmitted infections (STIs; see Chapter Eleven).

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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).

Research finds rising incidences of HIV/AIDS among this group according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“HIV Among People Aged . . .” 2016). For most seniors, being concerned 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. It is essential for social scientists who study sexuality not to ignore sexuality among the aged, as this is a growing population. Additionally, the first cohort of the Baby Boom generation (1946–1964) is currently entering their retirement years. This is the cohort that lived through the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and thus, they are likely to alter our understandings of sexuality and aging in the same way they altered every stage of the life course.

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).

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; L. Meyer 2015). Despite this, homosexuality is linked with whiteness. This is 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 (L. Meyer 2015).

We do not see much variation in sexual attitudes and behaviors between racial/ethnic groups in the current era. In fact, research finds that blacks are more sexually liberal on some measures and more conservative on others compared to whites, but not enough to make any clear distinctions (Staples 2006). 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 Ten and Eleven). 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, the outcomes of sexual behaviors often do.

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



“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).

oversimplified portrayals of an entire group of people based upon misinformation and mischaracterizations” (Fitzgerald 2014:114). 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 also often 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. 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 this provision 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 Ten).

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. These kinds of arguments continue to find resonance with some audiences. Scholar J. Philippe Rushton (1988), for instance, makes the extremely dubious claim that black promiscuity is genetically programmed. However, most scholars do not accept this argument—human behaviors are a complex interaction between genetics and the environment. As we discussed earlier, no genetic link to sexuality has been discovered.

Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and Native Americans face similar sexual stereotypes as African Americans. 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 prostitutes. During this same era, Chinese men were assumed to be a sexual threat against white women, which justified the implementation of

antimiscegenation 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, 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 34.4 percent of Latinos are foreign born, this is significant (Flores 2017). Research finds differences in attitudes toward sexuality between Asian American and non-Asian 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 “dirty little squaws” 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, transgender, and queer people face discrimination and inequality (see Chapter Five). 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,



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).

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).

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 (Langdrige 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 (Langdrige 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, as 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 6	Intersectionality 22	Sexual scripts 13
Biological determinism 7	Mononormativity 16	Sexual orientation 6
Bisexuality 6	Pansexuality 6	Sexual revolution 14
Compulsory heterosexuality 12	Polyamory 17	Sexual socialization 13
Digisexuals 2	Queer 7	Sexuality 6
Essentialism 6	Reliability 9	Social construction 7
Fetishism 25	Sadomasochism 24	Sociology 4
Gender 13	Sexophobia 15	Stereotype 22
Heterocentric 8	Sexual binary 9	Strategic essentialism 9
Heteroflexibility 5	Sexual double standard 13	Stigma 16
Heteronormativity 11	Sexual hierarchy 24	Transgender 7
Heterosexuality 6	Sexual identities 12	
Homosexuality 6	Sexual schemas 13	

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 revolution. Now make the counterargument: provide evidence that shows that we are probably NOT currently in a sexual revolution.

Activities

1. Survey 10 people who are part of your social circle—classmates, roommates, coworkers, family members—as to whether they perceive sexual orientation to be socially constructed or biologically innate (they may need you to define what it means to say that sexuality is socially constructed). Ask them to support their answer. Write a two- to three-page paper answering the following questions: What answers did you get? Are there any patterns to the responses? If so, what are they? Where do these people seem to get their understanding of sexual orientation? 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.
- 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. Retrieved from <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/teachers/sexuality-and-childhood-development>