

Chapter 1 Studying Sexuality

What is Sexuality?

What do you think of when you hear the word *sex*? To members of our culture, the word typically conjures images of an activity, most likely involving a nude man, a nude woman, and a penis moving around inside a vagina. Although we may think about sex frequently, actually engaging in this activity takes up a very small proportion of most peoples' lives. So, if we use that definition of sex here, this book would be very short. However, many aspects of our lives are linked to sexual activity, directly or indirectly. For example, in the hypothetical male-female couple who are nude and moving a penis around inside a vagina, each person certainly has thoughts and feelings while engaged in the activity. Each also had motives, thoughts, and feelings related to the decision to engage in the activity in the first place. Related thoughts and feelings will probably occur afterwards. Each person probably also engaged in certain behaviors leading up to the sexual activity, including behaviors that made him or her attractive to the other person, and possibly resulted in each person maintaining an ongoing relationship with the other. All of these motives, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors could be considered part of sexuality.

In addition to the motives, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to this one sexual experience, each member of the hypothetical couple has had prior sexual experiences, has formed attitudes and beliefs regarding various sexual topics, and has certain emotional reactions to all of it. We consider all of this to be fair game when studying sexuality. Although we use a broad definition of sexuality which includes *motives, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors*, we do think it is important to draw distinctions between these aspects. One of these may or may not lead to the others, so it is important to keep motives, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors separate when trying to understand peoples' experience of sexuality.

What is Culture?

To understand sexuality we must often consider the cultural context. So, what do we mean by culture? The concept can be difficult to describe, particularly because it includes many things and is different from the concept of society. Societies are generally groups of people who share a set of organized behaviors. For example, societies have governments, institutions, and numerous roles that people fill. Each of these products of society help people to interact more smoothly and to accomplish certain necessary tasks (e.g., work).

Culture is certainly related to society, but culture refers more to the rich pattern of *meanings* people share about behavior and experience. Culture is that shared set of beliefs, ideas, and knowledge that help people make sense out of the world. These cultural meanings are what we use to interpret our personal experience, our own behavior, and the behavior of others. We learn cultural meanings by being part of the group and people who have been members of the culture longer than we have teach or pass on those meanings. Cultural beliefs and meanings do change over time, but there is always a tradition out of which new beliefs and meanings emerge.

So what kinds of groups might constitute their own culture or subculture? One answer is any group that shares a patterned set of meanings that are used to interpret experience, and these meanings are passed on to new members through tradition. When we have used the term "our culture" in this chapter

we were referring to the group of people who were raised in the United States, although when it comes to sexuality there are many similarities between this group and people who were raised in Canada and certain European countries. These similarities are due to the fact that these national cultures emerged from the same general culture at a previous point in history, so there have been some shared sexual beliefs and practices that were passed along through tradition. So, the term “our culture” could refer to Western culture or those of people of western European descent.

What about people who live in the United States but were raised elsewhere? They are now part of United States culture, yet they probably also consider themselves part of a different culture. People who were born and raised in the United States but whose parents are from a culture other than western European may also consider themselves of two (or more) cultures. We typically think of culture along lines of ethnicity or nationality. However, the definition of culture applies to many other groups that may exist within the ethnic or national culture. For example, distinct cultures or subcultures exist based on gender, region of the country, religion, college, neighborhood, or place of work. The key is whether people in any one of these groups share meanings attached to behaviors and a common way of interpreting experience.

Of what cultures and subcultures are you a member? Keep in mind that these could be based on ethnicity, gender, religion, college, fraternity or sorority, sports team, club, place of employment, and so forth. What shared meanings regarding sexuality are included in each of your cultures? Answering this question can be difficult because if we have been part of a culture our entire life we may not recognize the ways in which the culture has affected the way we see things. Our very sense of how to interpret our experience, what certain things mean, is a result of our culture. In trying to examine the influence of culture on ourselves, we may be like the fish who does not realize that his world is wet. It is only when we step outside our cultures that we can appreciate how they differ from other cultures. Throughout this book we will focus on sexuality, broadly defined, as it intersects with culture, again broadly defined. Specifically, we will examine sexuality and culture from behavioral science perspectives.

Social Scientific Approaches to Studying Sexuality

Social scientists generally tend to share two important beliefs that guide their work:

- 1) Empiricism, or relying on observation and experiment, is the appropriate way to gain knowledge.
- 2) By studying certain people or certain cultures, it is possible to learn things about peoples' experience of sexuality that would then generalize to other people or other cultures.

In other words, social scientists attempt to learn about human sexuality by objectively gathering data from a portion of the population, objectively examining those data, and logically drawing conclusions about the population based on what they find. This view, referred to as the *positivist* perspective, underlies scientific disciplines in general.

A positivist perspective may seem obvious or correct to us, probably because our culture emphasizes the view that science is based on objectivity. However, such a positivist view is not shared by all scholars who have focused on human sexuality. An alternative position is that scientists and the methods they use to examine human sexuality are influenced by the culture in which they are immersed. In other words, scientists cannot be entirely objective because they are part of the culture, which shaped and continues to shape the way they see the world. So, even when scientists attempt to

objectively gather and examine data, the data they gather and the interpretations they make are each influenced by the beliefs and values the scientists hold. These beliefs and values were shaped by the cultures of which the scientists are members. This view is referred to as a *postmodern* perspective.

A major aspect of the postmodern view is a belief in *social constructionism*. The idea here is that each individual and culture is utterly unique in the way sexuality is viewed and experienced. You may tend to think of “sex” as involving a penis moving around inside a vagina, but there is sure to be other individuals in your culture who do not share this view of what constitutes “sex.” Even if most members of your culture shared your view, there are certainly other cultures that would differ in their views. So, taking this perspective to the extreme, the best one can do is study an individual or a culture and realize that what one learns only applies to that particular individual or culture. The term social constructionism is based on this notion that all human experience is a construction of the particular social environment in which a person was raised and continues to live.

In this course, instead of an extreme postmodern view of sexual science, we will take a positivist view, tempered by a belief that sexuality, and the way it is studied, includes many aspects that are indeed socially constructed. From this view, we will be discussing behavioral science theories or explanations for sexuality, the research methods behavioral scientists use, and the results of behavioral science research on a variety of topics in sexuality.

Diversity in Human Sexuality

The term *diversity* refers to the variation that exists among individuals or cultures. The phrase *appreciating sexual diversity* does not mean one has to approve of every variation in sexual behavior, preference, or lifestyle. Rather, it means recognizing that there is a great deal of diversity, and that not everyone thinks, feels, and behaves like us. Perhaps there are other ways to experience sexuality than those with which we are familiar and comfortable.

Appreciating sexual diversity can be difficult, partly because some aspects of sexuality seem more natural or normal to us than do others. When this happens, it is easy to conclude that this is the way sexuality was meant to be, by God or nature or whatever. Because we have been immersed in our culture for so long, we cannot appreciate the subtle ways in which we have learned our culture’s beliefs and interpretations regarding sexuality. These beliefs and interpretations feel natural to us. When some aspect of sexuality seems natural, we tend to assume that other people have the same experience (that there is not much diversity). If others are like us, then they are normal, but people who have different beliefs and preferences must be abnormal.

This tendency to view and judge the world through our own experience is referred to as *egocentrism*, or egocentric bias. When we hear about someone having a certain sexual experience, we tend to imagine or recall our own response in such a situation, and then assume that the other person had a similar response. In general, we tend to automatically assume that most people, or the “typical” person, is a lot like us. The exceptions tend to be with regard to positive characteristics or experiences, in which case we tend to overestimate how we compare with others. This egocentrism hinders appreciation of diversity because we tend to make assumptions about other peoples’ experience, which leads us to believe that people in general are more similar or homogeneous than they actually are.

A related form of bias is referred to as *ethnocentrism*, or the tendency to compare other cultures to our own with the assumption that our culture’s ways are better, more advanced, or more reasonable. For

example, as white settlers migrated west across the United States, they encountered the Native American and Mexican peoples living in those areas. The white settlers interpreted the customs of the other groups through the settlers' own culture, and judged the Native American and Mexican peoples accordingly. When the white settlers encountered Native American tribes where one man might have several wives, the settlers were shocked and proclaimed the practice demeaning to women. However, the women in those tribes actually enjoyed relatively high status, and the marital arrangements were often the practical result of having few available men due to casualties of war. These same settlers encountered Mexican women who did not always cover their breasts and who danced freely at festivals. The white settlers interpreted these behaviors as indications of sexual promiscuity because they were not behaviors of proper women in their culture.

What was your reaction when you read of the way the white settlers viewed the Native American and Mexican groups they encountered? You might have thought, "Boy, those people sure were ignorant. I can't believe that is what they thought." But notice that ethnocentric bias also applies when we consider our own culture during previous periods in history. The settlers' reactions may seem ignorant or prudish to us because we are viewing them from the perspective of our own current culture and its beliefs. Our ethnocentric bias prevents us from seeing our own culture's ignorance and we fail to realize that at some future point people from our culture will look back out our period of history and think the same negative things about us.

An aspect of ethnocentrism is the tendency to see members of groups other than our own as more similar or homogeneous than actually is the case. Because we get to know members of our own group, we tend to get a better sense for how much heterogeneity exists among those people. However, because we have less experience with members of other groups, we tend to lump those people together and assume they are more similar than they are in reality. This *outgroup homogeneity bias* tends to operate whether the other group we are referring to are members of a different period in history, a different nation, a different ethnic group, a different religion, a different sexual orientation, or a different gender.

For example, we have a tendency to view people who lived in a different historical period to be more homogeneous than was the case. In the United States, we tend to view many of these past periods in history as "the good old days," and we assume that the individuals who lived during these periods were more wholesome (and naive) than people are today. With regard to sexuality, we may tend to think of people who lived in previous generations as relatively uninterested in sex, unlikely to engage in sexual activity prior to marriage, and so forth. However, because you are here, we have some evidence that your ancestors had at least an occasional interest in sexual activity. Also, consider that around the end of the 18th century (1700s) in the United States, 30% of all brides delivered a baby within 8-1/2 months of getting married, indicating that the couple had sexual intercourse prior to marriage. The percentage of people who had premarital sexual intercourse was probably higher than 30% because not everyone who had premarital sexual intercourse became pregnant. Also, some unmarried couples from that era intentionally became pregnancy to legitimize a marriage of which the extended family would not have approved otherwise.

Why should we care about appreciating diversity? One reason is to learn more about ourselves and to create more options for ourselves. By appreciating diversity we begin to see how our own sexuality must have been shaped by our culture, because people from other cultures experience their sexuality differently. Appreciating diversity involves resisting the effects of egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and outgroup homogeneity bias.