CHAPTER 5

How Does Gender Matter for Who We Want and Desire?

The Gender of Sexuality

When was the first time you knew about something out there called sex? How did you figure out what sex was, and was that initial picture right? Can you answer the question for yourself now? What is sex? What’s the difference between having sex, doing sex, and being sexual? What kind of people were involved in your initial picture of sex? Women, men, young people, old people, attractive people, white people? Who are appropriate partners for sexual relationships, and how are they different from appropriate partners for friendship or romantic relationships? How are sex, love, and attraction all related to each other? What makes someone homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual? Does having sex with someone of the opposite sex make you heterosexual? Does having sex with someone of the same sex make you homosexual? Is being heterosexual something you do (have sex with people of the opposite sex) or something you are (a basis for identity)? Can you be straight at one point and then gay at another within the course of one lifetime? What are all the different possible ways in which we could create categories around sexuality, and would they all have to do with sex category or gender? How does sexuality overlap with other institutions, like marriage and the family? Are there differences in the ways you experience sex based on your gender? How would you draw a line around the parts of who you are that have to do with your sexuality and the parts that don’t? Or is it even possible to isolate sexuality in that way? And how would those parts of you connected to sexuality overlap with those parts of you that are connected to gender? What would any of these things—sex, sexuality, feeling sexual—mean in a world without gender? Can you answer any of the questions we’ve posed without referring in some way to gender? What are the ways in which gender and sexuality are related?

As we’ll explore in this chapter, it’s difficult to have much of a conversation about gender without also talking about issues of sexuality, even if we may not be quite sure about what we mean by sexuality. Sexuality is something that’s discussed throughout this book. In this chapter, we’ll take a more intentional and in-depth look at the specific topic of sexuality and
how it relates to gender and we’ll begin to look for the answers to some of the questions we’ve posed. Sexuality, as you may have begun to see in the previous list of questions, can include a broad range of behaviors, feelings, and identities, and almost all of them have some kind of gendered dimension in Anglo-European societies. As we will explore in this chapter, the way we feel sexually and the ways in which we are expected to act sexually are determined in important ways by our gender. In addition, the way we understand categories of sexuality in Anglo-European societies are also dependent upon the existence of categories of sex and gender; a society without sex categories or gender would be a society without homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals. A world without gender or sex categories would be a world in which the way we thought about sexuality would look very different from our current modes of thinking, and this begins to suggest the deep interconnections between these two concepts.

Before we dive into this complicated discussion, it might be useful to establish some working terminology. In the English language, the word sex is an especially confusing one. It can refer to the biological category to which you are purported to belong based on your anatomy, chromosomes, or hormones (male or female). It can also refer to any kind of act which is deemed to be sexual in nature, though usually when people talk about having sex, they are referring to heterosexual intercourse (a penis penetrating a vagina). As we discussed in Chapter 1, in this book when we’re referring to the first definition of sex (male and female), we generally use the term sex category. Sex then becomes any act that is defined as sexual—which has the potential to become much broader than just intercourse. We’ll use sexual identity to refer to the particular category into which people place themselves based on the current, Anglo-European division of the world into heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals. We use this term in part because it avoids the implications of more common terms like sexual orientation or sexual preference, the first of which often presumes something one was born with and the second, a choice one makes about whom to have sex with. As we’ll see in this chapter, for sociologists the question is less about why some people are gay or straight and more about why those questions seem so important to us in the first place—which often involves looking at where the categories gay and straight came from to begin with. As with other identities such as race and gender, the important question for sociologists is not why someone is African American or feminine, but where those particular set of options came from and what their implications are for our social lives.

Come up with your own definition of sex and sexuality. Does your definition emphasize feelings, identity, emotions, behaviors, or some combination of all of the above? Is gender or sex category a part of your definition?

Sexual identity, then, avoids a lot of complicating issues we’ll discuss in determining who is homosexual or heterosexual by defining sexuality based on how an individual identifies him- or herself. This leaves us with the last term to define: sexual desire. This term is perhaps the most difficult. What exactly does it mean to feel sexual desire? Is it the specific desire to be engaging in a sexual act, or is it more generally the way one feels in her
or his body? Does sexual desire have to be aimed at some particular person or thing, what Freud would call the love object? Is sexual desire best measured biologically (through pulse rate or blood flow to genitalia) or by asking someone whether or not they feel aroused? These are just a few of the questions that make it so difficult to define sexual desire, and we haven’t even touched on how the categories of sex category, gender, and sexual identity complicate these questions. Is the sexual desire experienced by males or females, men or women, or homosexuals or heterosexuals somehow different? For our purposes, we’ll define sexual desire as a combination of objective physical responses and subjective psychological or emotional responses to some internal or external stimulus. Sexual desire certainly has a physical component, but as we will discuss in more depth, it can also be deeply influenced by our culture, which can instruct us in when, where, and with whom it is appropriate to feel sexual desire.

DOES SEXUALITY HAVE A GENDER?

In his essay on the relationship between gender, sex, and sexuality, John Stoltenberg (2006) began by imagining a world without sex categories or gender. In this world, the inhabitants emphasized the way in which every person was unique—unique in their genitalia, their particular mix of hormones, their DNA, and their reproductive capability. When a baby was born in this imaginary world, there was no announcement of “It’s a boy” or “It’s a girl,” which emphasizes membership in a particular category of people who are presumed to be alike. Rather, they celebrated any newborn with an especially rare mix of chromosomes or genitalia or hormones as yet another indication of how unique every individual was. Though in this world, individuals were born with a wide range of different types of genital tissue, they emphasized the common origins of all these different organs in a prenatal nub of embryonic tissue called a genital tubercle. Thinking in this vein, these individuals were likely to focus on the fact that what someone else felt in their genital tubercle was probably very similar to what they felt in their own genital tubercle because their common origins meant that all these different types of organs were wired in fairly similar ways (p. 254).

In Stoltenberg’s (2006) imaginary world, then, there are no sex categories. There are no males with penises or females with vaginas or intersexed people who don’t seem to fit into either category. There are just highly unique people who are different each from the other in a broad variety of ways. What does sex itself look like in this world without sex categories? The individuals in this world have sex without having a sex category. They have “rolling and rollicking and robust sex, and sweaty and slippery and sticky sex, and trembling and quaking and tumultuous sex, and tender and tingling and transcendent sex” (p. 254). They have sex that involves their genital tubercles, but also sex that involves many other body parts. What is important in Stoltenberg’s imaginary world is that in their erotic lives, these people are not acting out their status in any particular category when they have sex. They are not required to act in feminine or masculine ways while they are having sex; they are free to simply be themselves as genuine individuals. This is how Stoltenberg imagines sex would be for people who were not males or females, masculine or feminine.

The trick in Stoltenberg’s (2006) description is that everything he describes about the biology and anatomy of his inhabitants is true for us in this world; the difference is in how
we make sense of those biological realities. As we read in Chapter 4, we all begin this world with genital tubercles in the womb, and the same basic material makes up the genitals everyone ends up with. There’s a great deal of variation in chromosomal sex (XX, XY, but also XXY and XO) and in the relative amount of different types of hormones in our bodies. Everyone on this planet is unable to reproduce for some period of their lives (for everyone before puberty; and for those of us lucky to live long enough, we will become infertile again as we age), and so the wide variations in who can and cannot reproduce are not an important basis for distinction. Onto the same biological reality, those of us in Anglo-European societies impose two distinct and discrete categories, and we make a whole host of assumptions about what it means to be in those categories, including what it means to be in those categories sexually. Stoltenberg attempts to explore what sex would be like in such a world, and in the process, implies what sex is like in our world with sex categories and gender.

Does the idea of sex in a world without sex category or gender sound appealing to you? How would sexual desire work in such a world? What kinds of things would we find attractive?

Namely, Stoltenberg and other gender scholars argue that having sex is one of the ways in which we create the idea that there is such a thing as sex categories and gender. We create the idea of gender in part through our expectations about what it means to be sexually as a woman or a man. This might seem like a strange way to think about sex at first, but Stoltenberg (2006) argued that because sex categories and gender are not actually real, we have to act in ways that make them feel like something real, and having sex is one way in which we accomplish that. This should sound familiar as a good example of a doing gender perspective. In this theoretical perspective, gender is omnirelevant, which means we’re performing gender all the time and even in the most intimate of settings. Having sex itself becomes a way in which to create an accountable performance of gender. To think about how this is true, it’s useful to explore some of the assumptions we make about the sexuality of the people whom we call women and the people whom we call men. Let’s begin with the sexuality of the people we call men and a brief sampling of stories that have to do with the sexuality of men.

Masculinity and Sexuality

One of the lesser known atrocities of World War II was the practice of the Japanese Imperial Army of enslaving scores of Asian women to service the sexual needs of their male soldiers (Nagel, 2003). These military comfort women (jugun Ianfu in Japanese) included some lower-class Japanese women, but most of the 200,000 women forced into sexual slavery were non-Japanese, drawn from Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Though we tend to think of war as a masculine endeavor, women have often had a part to play in armed conflict, including sexualized roles like those of the comfort women. The
sexual enslavement engaged in by the Japanese during World War II was unusual in its large scale, but the pairing of the military with various forms of prostitution is nothing unusual historically or across cultures. In places like South Korea, U.S. army bases almost always have a network of brothels, strip clubs, dance halls, and bars that exist to meet the sexual needs of primarily male soldiers; in South Korea in particular, U.S. authorities engage in inspections of such establishments, providing a kind of official sanctioning. Even U.N. peacekeepers in places like Cambodia have been accused of frequenting brothels, moving women into their quarters, and soliciting sex from younger and younger girls under the belief that these “virgins” were more likely to be free of AIDS (Nagel, 2003). The U.N.’s overall attitude toward such behavior was, for many years, characterized by a “boys will be boys” approach, and these behaviors on the part of peacekeeping soldiers were not viewed as a problem by the international community.

Back in the United States, much of popular culture focuses on adolescent boys’ obsession with sex. In American Pie, high school seniors make plans for how they will lose their virginity, while boys make bets about who can have sex with the ugliest girl in school in She’s All That. Among the real adolescent men in C. J. Pascoe’s (2007) study of masculinity and sexuality in an American high school, boys in the weight room brag in graphic detail about their sexual exploits and how to go after younger, and therefore more vulnerable, girls in order to get laid. In her study, Pascoe found that these high school boys’ use of terms like fag had less to do with their assumptions about sexual identity than with the presumed masculinity of the person involved. In fact, some high school boys told Pascoe that they would never call someone whom they actually knew was homosexual a “fag; rather, the term was reserved for identifying any male who was perceived as having an unmasculine, and therefore problematic, identity.

In her book on the male body, Susan Bordo (1999) drew attention to the language used to talk about the male body and, more specifically, sexual “dysfunctions.” In the old language of male sexual dysfunction, men were impotent. Bordo noted that this is different from having a cold, or a headache, or cancer in that saying someone is impotent implies that the disorder involves the whole person, rather than just one body part. In the case of impotency, the disorder implies that the man is literally without power, which is the dictionary definition of impotence. What does this language, as well as the many slang terms we use to describe the penis (big rig, blow torch, crowbar, dipstick, drill, power tool, rod, etc.) imply about how we think about male sexuality? Bordo noted that when drug companies began marketing drugs like Viagra to treat male sexual “disorders,” they quickly changed the language from impotence to erectile dysfunction to remove part of the stigma associated with the idea of being impotent (versus having an erectile dysfunction). What much of this language and discourse assume is the metaphor of a machine; whether it’s a power tool or the “hydraulics” of an erection that Viagra proposes to fix, men are supposed to be ready to respond and perform immediately in any sexual situation. The reality that having an erection is not an automatic for men but something that might be conditioned by age, emotional attachment, and social context is ignored in even identifying a phenomenon called erectile dysfunction or impotence. If reduced sexual function is a natural part of aging, should this natural process be seen as a disorder or a dysfunction? To not be able to respond sexually as a man to any and every situation without assistance (whether from Viagra or a partner) is seen as unmanly by men themselves, as well as by women.
Why is there no Viagra for women, or can you think of some female equivalent? What does this say about female sexuality, that there are no products marketed in the same way to improve women’s “performance”? What would the female equivalent of Viagra be?

What do these stories tell us about the assumptions we make about men’s sexuality? The first is that real men are heterosexual. We’ll untangle exactly what it might mean to be heterosexual later in the chapter, but even though some high school boys claim that fag has nothing to do with a boy’s sexual identity or sexual desire, we can hardly chalk it up to coincidence that the word used to label men as unmasculine is also a derogatory term for homosexual men. This aspect of men’s sexuality is evidence of the strong connection in contemporary Anglo-European society between sexuality and gender, as well as evidence of compulsory heterosexuality. **Compulsive heterosexuality** describes the way in which heterosexuality becomes institutionalized into the practices of daily life and therefore enforced as a way of regulating our behaviors and distributing power and privilege (Pascoe, 2007). The concept comes from an essay by Adrienne Rich (1986/1993), who used compulsive heterosexuality to explain the ways in which heterosexuality as an institution serves to ensure male physical, emotional, and economic access to women. In her essay, Rich identified the important role played by sexuality in reinforcing gender inequality. As we have already begun to explore, sexuality is deeply gendered, and therefore, heterosexuality as an institution does not serve the exact same purpose when enforced upon men as it does when enforced upon women. The important premise of compulsory heterosexuality is that sexuality is more than just individual dispositions or behaviors; rather, it is an institution. As an institution, heterosexuality has the power to dictate norms (to be masculine is to be heterosexual) and to distribute power and privilege (those who are heterosexual have powers and privileges that are not available to those who are not). Compulsive heterosexuality for women may be about men maintaining their power over women, but for men, compulsive heterosexuality is more about men maintaining access to their power as men. Being called a fag is dangerous because it is not just about a boy’s sexual identity or sexual desire, but about his masculinity.

What else do our stories about masculinity and sexuality reveal about the ways in which sexuality is gendered? We see another way in which sexuality is institutionalized in what Joane Nagel (2003), in her book about the connections between race, ethnicity, and sexuality, called the **military-sexual complex**. As in the case of comfort women and other instances in which armies provided sex for their soldiers, Nagel argued that sex itself is militarized. Providing sex for soldiers is an essential part of how armies motivate men to fight, while rape committed during war is a way to create solidarity among troops through creating mutual guilt. What assumptions about masculine sexuality underlie phenomena like comfort women or the military-sexual complex? One assumption is that men have a need for sex so great that they can be motivated to do things like kill and die partly in exchange for ready access to sex. Certainly, the provision of women and prostitutes is not the only or the main reason soldiers fight and die, but the militarization of sex suggests a belief that the
sexual desire of men is a pressing need that must be met. In encouraging and sometimes sanctioning the network of sex work institutions that surround military bases, governments are treating the provision of sex as just one more basic need of their armies that they are obligated to provide. Armies, historically and still primarily composed of men, quite simply need sex. That U.N. peacekeepers would solicit young, female prostitutes is seen as just something that men do, and it is therefore excusable under the expression, “boys will be boys.” Within this particular cultural framework, the assumption is that the sexual desire of men is at the very least, greater than that of women, and at the most extreme, powerful, natural, and beyond control. Men are seen as sexual beings, although in a way very different from that of women. Men are seen as powerful sexual subjects, meaning they have a sense of power and agency in their own bodies that allows them to act in their bodies rather than being acted upon (Martin, 1996). In contemporary Anglo-European society, it is assumed that men will have strong sexual desires, whether they are soldiers in a foreign country or boys in middle school and high school.

As we will discuss later, women are also seen as sexual beings, but they are more likely to be sexualized and made into sexual objects. Being a sexual subject seems like a good thing because it becomes a source of power and agency for men. Rape as a weapon of war, though rarely discussed, is part of the way in which sexuality is used to gain or reinforce power. In this most extreme version of sexual subjectivity, men act on the bodies of women or other men and these bodies become like the physical territory over which battles are fought. But the last lesson about masculinity and sexuality to be learned from these stories is that the power of sexual subjectivity and sexual desire also comes with a price. The presumption of men’s strong sexual desires puts sometimes unrealistic expectations on men, and the connection between sex and power may deprive men of the ability to have different kinds of intimate connections. As explored by Bordo (1990), if a penis is really like a power tool, than it should also be expected to perform like one; it’s relatively easy to turn on and should function perfectly until someone turns it off. If it’s “broken,” it should easily be fixed. To admit that maybe your own sexual desire doesn’t work like that is to be seen as abnormal and defective, or even as literally powerless. If so much of masculinity is defined in current Anglo-European societies through sexual desire and sexual performance, this is bound to create some pressure on the actual men who live in those societies.

In addition, to describe masculine sexuality using machine metaphors implies a disconnect between sexuality and other aspects of what it means to be human. A machine does not require warmth, trust, affection, respect, love, or connection in order to function. And a machine exists only to serve a function or accomplish a task. What does it mean to think about having sex in these ways? Are we to believe that the act of sex for men is really so devoid of any connections to other emotions? Is sex for men really merely a performance,
perhaps to be judged good or bad, but existing outside of any larger context or relationship? In his essay on sexuality, Stoltenberg (2006) argued that men are deprived of the opportunity to experience sex as something more than just a performance of masculinity due to their need to have a sex through having sex. Sexual subjectivity may be a source of power for men, but many would argue that it can also create pressures and place limits on masculine sexuality.

**Femininity and Sexuality**

An exploration of stories about women and sexuality reveals a very different set of lessons than those about masculinity and sexuality. One of the legacies of the military-sexual complex outlined by Nagel (2003) in her book is a booming global business in sex tourism. The infrastructure developed to support military bases in many countries such as Thailand has been used to build an economy in sex tourism, including guidebooks that instruct tourists on how to negotiate for massages and buy bar dancers for the night. Some governments have even taken to advertising sex tourism, treating the availability of sex as a kind of natural resource to be developed. Unlike the military-sexual complex that involves mostly men, sex tourism appeals to women from the global North as sex tourists, as well. Nagel is interested in the ethnosexual nature of these encounters because sex tourism often involves white women from developed countries encountering men who are racially or ethnically Other in developing countries. Sex tourism for both women and men often satisfies sexual fantasies that are distinctly racialized, reflecting deeply held views about the sexuality of darker-skinned peoples. In Jamaica, Rasta men are particularly popular for female sex tourists because they are believed to be “more passionate, more emotional, more natural and sexually tempting” (Nagel, 2003, p. 207), presumably as compared to their counterparts in the global North.

This interest in exotic, racialized Others is shared by male and female sex tourists. What is distinct about women as sexual tourists is their interest in romance as well as sex, prompting Nagel and others to refer to women’s sex tourism as romance tourism. **Romance tourism** describes the ways in which many women as sex tourists are “looking more to be swept away by men than to assert their strong control over their paid male counterparts” (Nagel, 2003, p. 207). Women are interested in more than a quick sexual encounter on their vacations to exotic locales, and research demonstrates that these women are much more likely to establish relationships with the men they “date” on these vacations. Women as romance tourists often keep in contact with the men they meet on vacation after they have returned home, sometimes send money, and are likely to return year after year to spend their vacation with their offshore “boyfriends.” In addition, note in the previous description...
what makes Jamaican men appealing to romance tourists. They are seen as more sexual, which is similar to how many male sex tourists view exotic women. But they are also “more passionate, more emotional, more natural.” These suggest that romance tourists see these men as better at romance and as more sexual than their male counterparts at home.

In the same high school where C. J. Pascoe (2007) found high school boys bragging about their sexual exploits and using the term fag to highlight any unmasculine behavior, she found a distinctly unfeminine and lesbian young women being elected homecoming queen, an institution deeply characterized by traditional gender norms and heteronormativity. **Heteronormativity** is the way in which heterosexuality is viewed as the normal, natural way of being. The institution of the homecoming court is heteronormative because it assumes a king and a queen, a heterosexual pairing who are often required to dance together after they are crowned. The queen is usually wearing a formal dress with all the current feminine accessories (makeup, a stylish hairdo, jewelry, high heels, etc.), while the king wears a suit or a tuxedo. Jessie, the young woman who was elected homecoming queen in the high school Pascoe studied, typically wore boy’s clothes and was out in her high school as a lesbian. Another lesbian who played for the basketball team was also a popular student at the high school, along with a group of girl basketball players who wore baggy, hip hop style clothing and rarely dated boys. Boys at the high school responded to the sexuality of these girls with statements like, “Hey, that’s cool,” a far cry from their reactions to behavior among other boys that did not conform to the specific gender norms of the high school. Girls who identified themselves as straight had no problem with being touched by Jessie, the homecoming queen, or with jokes made by Jessie and the basketball girls about being a “pimp” or having the ability to turn straight girls gay (Pascoe, 2007). Though both of these girls did behave in ways that violated the norms of femininity at the high school, they did not seem to be punished for this behavior, and their sexuality seemed to be accepted by both boys and girls; in fact, they were two of the most popular girls in the high school. On the other hand, several girls in the high school who were out as lesbians and affiliated with the GSA (Gay/Straight Alliance club) were not popular and found their expressions of sexual identity suppressed and discouraged by the school administration. Pascoe’s research seems to indicate that the acceptance of lesbian sexuality in this high school was contingent upon the adoption, and the reaffirmation, of masculine identity.

In her own study of the experiences of boys and girls at puberty and with their first sexual encounter, Karin Martin (1996) found that many of the girls she interviewed saw sex as something that happened to them, rather than something they actively desired and pursued. Many of the girls in Martin’s study experienced pressure to have sex with their boyfriends in order to maintain the relationship. Martin described adolescent girls as experiencing ideal love with their first boyfriends. **Ideal love** is “submission to and adoration of an idealized other whom one would like to be like and from whom one wants confirmation and recognition” (Martin, 1996, p. 61). As you might imagine, being the object of ideal love gives these adolescent boys a great deal of control. Many adolescent boys in Martin’s study looked forward to having sex for the first time and saw this as an important accomplishment, especially among their male peers. These dynamics paired adolescent boys who were eager to have sex with adolescent girls who were often quite reluctant and anxious about having sex, but who idolized their boyfriends because of ideal love. When adolescent girls anticipated what their first sexual experiences would be like, the expectations of the
majority centered around potential pain and fear. In these relationships, boys who were eager and excited about having sex pressured their girlfriends, who were reluctant if not scared about having sex. Thus, when Martin asked her female teenage respondents why it was hard for some girls to say no when they didn’t really want to have sex, they gave answers like, “Cause the boys break up with you or something like that. Or they say, ‘You don’t love me’” (Martin, 1996, p. 73). Ideal love for their boyfriends leads many adolescent girls to have sex due to the fear of losing their boyfriends, and given these motives, it’s not surprising that the experience of first sex is often not pleasant for these girls. The girls in Martin’s study told stories about not just the physical discomfort of their first sexual experiences, but about the psychological and emotional confusion they experienced afterwards.

In part because of these dynamics, when the adolescent girls in Martin’s (2006) study described their first sexual encounter, they often described the event as something that happened to them rather than as something that they made an active decision to do. Several girls in Martin’s study used the exact same phrase when they described how they decided to have sex—“it just happened.” For example, here’s Elaine explaining how she decided to have sex with her boyfriend:

It just happened really. I mean, I didn’t want to ‘cause I couldn’t ever picture myself having sex, but umm, all my friends did, and umm, so it just happened and he was my first so ... I thought it was right cause we were going out for two years before we did. (Martin, 1996, p. 72)

In these descriptions, girls turned themselves into sexual objects rather than sexual subjects. Sex is something that happened to them, rather than something they made an active decision to engage in because of sexual desire or the anticipation of pleasure. To see oneself as a sexual object is just that—to see oneself as the passive recipient of sexual behavior and sexual desire, or to be the one who is sexually acted upon and sexually desired, rather than the one doing the sexual acting and sexual desiring. This is in line with what Martin (2006) found about adolescent girls’ attitudes toward their bodies in general. In their descriptions of their experiences of puberty and their general attitudes toward their bodies, girls felt their physical bodies were something separate from them and often outside of their own control. Rather than a source of pleasure, their bodies were often sources of pain, shame, embarrassment, and disappointment. These experiences combined to make girls much less likely than boys to act in their bodies and more likely to see their bodies as things that are acted upon.

What assumptions does this set of stories reveal about feminine sexuality? What gendered assumptions do we make about women’s sexuality? The first assumption is that sexual desire for women is not as easily divorced from other aspects of what it means to be human as it is for men. Romance tourists go to Jamaica not just because they see the men there as more sexual, but because they are also more romantic and emotional. When these female sex tourists seek ethnosexual encounters with those in other countries, they tend to establish relationships that are, at least on the surface, about more than sex. As one of my American students relayed she had been told growing up—women have sex to get love, while men give love to have sex. This truism implies a lot about the existing cultural
assumptions about sex and love, but also about how each gender prioritizes the two. For women, it is sex, not love, that is the important thing to gain, while for men the opposite is true. One of the cultural beliefs about feminine sexuality, then, is that it is more diffuse and more connected with other emotions like trust, intimacy, warmth, love, and affection.

Is feminine sexuality, like masculine sexuality, also assumed to be heterosexual? Are lesbians themselves and lesbian behavior seen as unfeminine? As with masculinity, there is certainly a connection that is perceived between sexual identity and gender identity for women. Some people might describe lesbians as women who really just want to be men. But the stigma associated with lesbianism in Anglo-European societies is different than that attached to homosexuality among men. One group of lesbian girls who were out in the high school studied by C. J. Pascoe (2007) seemed to suffer few negative consequences due to their sexuality, as long as they also adopted masculine behaviors. Same-sex activity between two women was seen by high school boys as hot, in large part due to the portrayal of same-sex sexual activity between women in much heterosexual pornography. But straight girls at the high school also seemed unthreatened by one particular group of lesbians and non-gender conforming women. The lesbian women at the high school who did seem threatening were those who made intentional efforts to challenge norms of both gender and sexuality. The GSA girls were not popular, and they found their efforts to be recognized in the high school blocked by the administration. This might suggest that for women, lesbian identity and behavior are seen as acceptable as long as they do not threaten the existing gender order as well.

Perhaps this can be explained in part through the third assumption we can gather from these stories. Sex, in the end, is something that belongs to men. Lesbian sex isn’t particularly threatening because it’s not real sex, and it’s not real sex because no men are involved. If sex is something that is done to someone, and only men can be the doers, then what two women do together by its very nature isn’t sex. In other words, perhaps women are always perceived as sexual objects, even when engaged in same-sex behavior with other women. This tendency to view women as sexual objects rather than sexual subjects is revealed in the stories told by adolescent girls in Martin’s (1996) study of first sexual encounters. Their stories reveal a common assumption about feminine sexuality: that women have less sexual desire than do men. Though some of the girls in Martin’s study did begin to experience pleasure in sex after their first experience with intercourse, none of them pursued their first sexual experience as something that was important because it would bring pleasure to them. Sex was something that would please their boyfriends, but largely not something that was seen as enjoyable for the girls themselves. Martin argues that these initial experiences with sex can have important effects on the way women view sexuality throughout their lives. In one large-scale study of sexual behavior conducted in the United States in the mid-1990s, 1 in 10 women reported lack of interest in sex, inability to achieve orgasm, finding sex not pleasurable, having difficulty lubricating, experiencing pain during intercourse, and anxiety about performance during the past year (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). In a less scientific survey by Ann Landers, 72% of women readers said they preferred “hugs and cuddles” as adequate forms of sexual expression (Martin, 1996). This evidence suggests that beginning in puberty and perhaps throughout their lives, women are seen as sexual beings, but sexual in the sense that they are the objects of sexual desire, rather than the people doing most of the desiring.
One of the important consequences of women as sexual objects rather than sexual subjects is what we call the double standard. The **double standard** is a cultural belief in Anglo-European society that the exact same sexual behaviors or feelings are OK for one gender (men) but not the other (women). This usually means that it’s seen as OK for men to think more about sex, have more sex, have more casual sex, and have more nonmarital sex than it is for women to do so. You can see how the double standard connects back to the idea of women as sexual objects and men as sexual subjects. The double standard both reflects this belief and helps to maintain it by making for fewer social sanctions for men than there are for women when they engage in sexual behavior. Thus, when adolescent girls have sex for the first time, the double standard tells them that they have done something wrong in a way that is not true for their male counterparts. Adolescent boys having sex is perfectly in line with gender expectations, but many girls must struggle with figuring out whether they have violated some important norm of what it means to be a girl, or at the very least a “good” girl. Martin noted that the double standard has been modified somewhat for these girls in that girls are not considered sluts merely for the act of having sex. Rather, a slut is a girl who has sex with someone she doesn’t love or who has sex when she is too young (generally seen as having sex at the age of 12 or 13) (Martin, 1996, p. 86). Nonetheless, the double standard is an important aspect of gendered sexuality in that it discourages women from expressing and acting on their sexual desires while expecting men to do so.

**PLAYING THE PART? SEXUAL SCRIPTS**

These assumptions we’ve laid out about masculine and feminine sexuality are, in the end, just that—assumptions. Maybe as you were reading them, you thought some of them seemed kind of true but others were way off base compared to your own particular experiences. Our list certainly doesn’t cover the extensive list we could develop for all the gendered assumptions we might make about sexuality, and some of them, as we’ll see, would directly contradict the ones we’ve just laid out. This is especially true as we begin to move across cultures and time periods; you might think of the particular list of assumptions we outlined as hegemonic for this particular time period—meaning they help define the ideal combinations of gender and sexuality in this specific time and place. But calling them hegemonic means that even in this very precise context, not everyone conforms to these particular ideals. Sexuality is a complex ideal, and just because some lesbian high school women in Pascoe’s (2007) study seemed to escape the kind of stigmatization directed at unmasculine high school boys doesn’t mean this is true for every setting or even every high school. Having set up some of these assumptions, let’s see how they hold up when we look at sexuality across cultures and historical periods.
One way in which to answer these questions about the gendered nature of sexuality is to look at sexual scripts. Sexual scripts answer this important question: What exactly are we supposed to do, sexually speaking? **Sexual scripts** are the learned guidelines for sexual expression that provide individuals with a sense of appropriate sexual behaviors and sexual desires for their particular culture (Galliano, 2003). Sexual scripts can tell us both who we should have sexual desire for or engage in sexual behavior with as well as what exactly we should do when we have sex. Sexual scripts are a concept firmly based in a social constructionist understanding of sexuality. The question is, when we get into the bedroom or whatever particular location is seen as the appropriate venue for sexual activity (which is another part of sexual scripts), what do we actually do? If you believe that our sexuality is mostly the result of biology, then this isn’t much of a question. Our sex drive or genes or hormones or anatomy tells us what to do, and there’s no need for sexual scripts. The wide range of sexual behaviors that people do engage in suggests that there is at the very least some social dimension telling us what exactly to do sexually. Where do these sexual scripts come from if they are not hardwired into our bodies? As our definition suggested, sexual scripts are derived from values and beliefs in the larger culture. Sexual scripts draw on beliefs about sexuality, but these intersect with beliefs about sex category, gender, and other hierarchical categories like age, class, and race.

We already discussed in relation to gendered sexuality that women are generally seen as sexual objects while men are sexual subjects. Another way to think of this same dynamic is that women are passive sexually, while men are active. Activity versus passivity can be an important part of sexual scripts, answering questions such as the following: Who is supposed to initiate sex? Who is supposed to have a stronger need for sex? Who is supposed to be in charge during sex (assuming that someone needs to be in charge)? Who gets to say what is and isn’t going to happen in a sexual encounter? All of these questions focus around issues of activity and passivity, and in many cultures, these line up pretty consistently with gender. Femininity is seen as passive and masculinity as active. In Anglo-European societies, the idea that women are sexually passive and men sexually active is reinforced through many different cultural institutions. Science has reinforced the idea of the passive female and the active male, down to the very level of what happens between egg and sperm in the process of human reproduction. As early as Freud in Western science, descriptions of fertilization viewed the female egg as passive and the male sperm as active, and this was believed to reflect a correspondence between sex cells and the larger organism. Freud thought the passive egg and the active sperm modeled the behavior of actual women and men during intercourse, where “the male pursues the female for the purpose of sexual union, seizes hold of her and penetrates into her” (Freud, 1965, p. 114).

Freud saw the passivity of women and aggressiveness of men as whole individuals as rooted in what went on at a microscopic level between the egg and the sperm. Just as the sperm pursues the egg, so the man pursues the woman. For Freud, this perspective reinforced the activity of men and passivity of women as rooted deeply in their biology and, therefore, as natural and largely unchangeable.

Freud was writing at the beginning of the 20th century, but these images of the passive egg and active sperm are still widespread in medical textbooks as well as books on human reproduction directed at a more general audience (Martin, 1991). In these texts, the egg is described as “large” and “passive,” drifting along the fallopian tube, while sperm are
“streamlined” and active, with “strong” tails that “propel” them at great “velocity” with a “whiplashlike motion” to “burrow” and “penetrate” into the awaiting egg (Martin, 1991, p. 487). These descriptions come not from texts written in the early 20th century, but from many during the 1980s—and the language is not that different from that used by Freud. More recent research on the process of fertilization suggests that in this case, gendered beliefs may have shaped the way in which scientists perceived and understood this basic biological process. Sperm do not so much penetrate the egg through the “whiplashlike motion” of their tails as they are trapped by the sticky surface of the egg. The motion of the sperm’s tail serves the purpose of helping it become more stuck in the surface of the egg, much like the African American, Southern folktale of Br’er Rabbit and the tar baby. The more the sperm struggles with the motion of its tail, the more stuck it gets in the sticky substance of the egg. Other research describes the process of sperm attaching to egg as an “interaction” in which the sex cells “recognize one another” (Martin, 1991).

Descriptions of the sperm and the egg are an interesting example of how claims about biological reality are used to justify cultural values and beliefs, but they also demonstrate how cultural values and beliefs influence what scientists see when they study the process of human fertilization. The behavior of the egg and sperm become a kind of sexual script for how individual women and men should behave. What happens in a different culture with a different set of sexual scripts and cultural values? Fatima Mernissi (2002) examined Muslim sexual scripts on the same topic of male activity and female passivity. In Muslim traditions, sexual instincts in and of themselves are neither good nor bad. They exist and are understood without the kind of division between flesh and spirit seen in Christianity, where the flesh is weak and sinful and the spirit closer to God and therefore perfection. Sexual desire in the Muslim tradition, when properly controlled by religious teachings, is good in that it can help to serve God’s purpose in three important ways. Sex leads to procreation, thereby ensuring the continuance of the human race. Sex also serves as a “foretaste of the delights secured for men in Paradise” (p. 297), thereby providing incentive for men to follow the religious dictates of Islam. Finally, sex helps to serve God’s purpose in allowing for intellectual effort. According to some Islamic teachings discussed by Mernissi, one of the most precious gifts given to humans by God is reason. In order for men to fully use this reason, they must reduce the tensions created by sexual desire both within and without their bodies and be able to avoid the distractions of indulging in earthly pleasures (Mernissi, 2002, p. 305). Releasing these tensions through sexual activity allows men to avoid distractions and engage their reason. In these three ways, sex from the Muslim perspective is seen as a part of God’s plan, rather than as the work of the devil, as it is often seen in Christian traditions.

This particular sexual script as explored by Mernissi (2002) says sex is a good thing. How does this sexual script vary for women and men? What does Islamic theology have to say about the sperm and the egg? In the writings of one second century Islamic scholar, the same word (‘azl) is used for the male and female cell. There is no sperm and egg, merely the man’s ‘azl and the woman’s ‘azl, and there is no sense in this scholarly description that the child is created from the male ‘azl alone. The ‘azl of the female is the “determinant factor” (p. 301) in the process of fertilization, according to this scholar (Mernissi, 2002). It is important that the language used by this scholar does not distinguish between male and female sex cells, therefore downplaying any differentiation between their roles. If you use the same word to identify two different things, it makes it more difficult to argue for
significant differences between those two things. To get a bit philosophical, if I call two things a chair, and then try to convince you that these two “chairs” are fundamentally different, you’re probably going to find my argument less convincing than if I called one of them a table. Mernissi (2002) pointed out that the interesting question is not why this Islamic scholar didn’t perceive any difference between sperm and egg, but why many in Europe for centuries believed the exact opposite of this Islamic scholar. Freud believed sperm were the active sex cell compared to the egg, but before Freud, many Europeans believed that the egg was largely unnecessary altogether. Babies were prefabricated in the sperm, and women’s bodies were just the location where they developed (Mernissi, 2002). This is hard for us, with our well-developed sense of genetics and biology, to fathom, but nonetheless, this was understood as common knowledge in Europe for many centuries.

How does the fact that Islamic scholars took a different view of the role of egg and sperm influence the particular sexual scripts that developed in Islamic cultures? In Muslim theology, women’s sexuality is not generally seen as passive. Ali, the husband of the Prophet Muhammad’s favorite daughter, Fatima, and the founder of Shiite Islam, said of sexuality and gender, “Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men” (as quoted in Brooks, 1995). In other words, this creation story tells us that women got most of the cosmic share of desire to be doled out, nine-tenths of it to men’s measly one-tenth. Women experience greater levels of sexual desire than men, and the writings of the Islamic scholar, Ghazali, studied by Mernissi (2002) confirm this view. In his instructions for husbands, Ghazali emphasized the important duty of a husband to satisfy his wife or wives’ sometimes overwhelming sexual desire. It is a husband’s duty to meet his wife’s sexual needs in order to preserve her virtue because a woman who is not sexually satisfied by her husband will seek sexual gratification elsewhere. Ghazali recommended for the husband with four wives that he rotate between them so that each wife has sex once every four nights, although this schedule might need to be adjusted should the particular needs of his wives dictate. If this isn’t exhausting enough, Ghazali and the Prophet Muhammad both instruct men to never rush toward the act of intercourse. Both Ghazali and Muhammad emphasized the importance of foreplay to marital relations, as in the following passage where Ghazali quotes Muhammad:

The Prophet said, “No one among you should throw himself on his wife like beasts do. There should be, prior to coitus, a messenger between you and her.” People asked him, “What sort of messenger?” The Prophet answered, “Kisses and words.” (as quoted in Mernissi, 2002, p. 303)

Muhammad was once quoted in a discussion of what constitutes cruelty as giving intercourse without foreplay as an example (Brooks, 1995). In these passages, female sexuality is clearly seen as active. Who wants sex more according to this particular formulation of Islamic thought? Women. Who gets to say what happens during sex? Islamic religious authorities seem to be instructing men to do what women want in order to satisfy them sexually.

In fact, the idea that women’s sexual desire greatly exceeds that of men is not at all unique to Islamic thought. In Greek mythology, the blind prophet Teiresias, who lived part of his life as a man and part as a woman, was asked to settle a dispute between the king of the gods, Zeus, and his wife, Hera, about who enjoyed the greater pleasure in sex or the
better orgasm, women or men. Teiresias answered, “If the parts of love-pleasure be counted as ten, Thrice three go to women, one only to men” (Blackledge, 2009, p. 281). The number is eerily similar to that given by Fatima’s husband in Islamic tradition, but the idea that women gain more pleasure from sex than men is also echoed in Hindu tradition. In the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, the powerful king Bhangasvana, like Teiresias, is turned into a woman by an angry god, Indra. Years later, Bhangasvana is forgiven by Indra and asked if he would like to become a man again or remain as a woman. Bhangasvana answers, “The woman has in union with man always greater joy, that is why . . . I choose to be a woman. I feel greater pleasure in love as a woman, that is the truth, best among the gods” (Blackledge, 2009, p. 281). Even the Old Testament in the Judeo-Christian tradition from the 3rd century B.C. recognizes the power of female sexual desire with the following lines: “There are three things that are never sated . . . Hell, the mouth of the vulva, and the earth” (Blackledge, 2009, p. 281).

In this broader cultural and historical perspective, the sexual script in current Anglo-European society that women are passive sexually is something of an anomaly. Sexual scripts in other cultural traditions, as well as cultural traditions (like the Bible) within Anglo-European society, see women’s sexuality as much more active than men’s. Why are our current ideas so different? Some feminists suggest that the idea of passive, feminine sexuality is an attempt to control women’s power in society. In her study of adolescent girls, Martin (1996) argues that girls’ first sexual experiences and their negative feelings about puberty explain the drop in self-esteem attributed to girls at around this age. Feeling like a sexual object and as if one’s body is something beyond one’s control has an effect on how girls’ think about themselves in general, not just sexually. Controlling a person’s sexuality is therefore a means to control their own sense of agency and efficacy in the world, and perhaps this explains the existence of this particular sexual script.

This exploration of sexual scripts also teaches us that if sexuality is based at least in part in biology, the case of the sperm and the egg teaches us that we should pay careful attention to the ways in which our gendered assumptions color how we understand underlying biology. In general, this brief exploration of sexual scripts provides strong support for the role of social life in influencing our sexuality. How might the experiences of the girls in Martin’s (1996) study have been different if they lived in a culture that saw women as sexually active rather than passive, as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects? As with gender itself, the exact ways in which we think about the sexuality of women and men depends a great deal upon the cultural context in which we find ourselves. This is true of the ways in which gender affects how we think about sexuality in general and also for the ways in which our categories of sexuality depend upon the existence of sex categories and gender. It is to this second question that we turn for the rest of this chapter, keeping in mind that this second question also has implications for the gendering of sexuality that we’ve already discussed.

**SEX AND SOCIETY**

The idea that sexuality is an object to be studied scientifically, whether biologically or socially, is a relatively new idea in Anglo-European history—which is not to say that sex
categories, gender, sexual desire, and sex haven’t always been around. But in exploring the
ways in which sexuality is gendered in current Anglo-European society, it helps to have
some perspective on the differing ways in which other cultures have conceived of sexuality.
This exploration reveals an important aspect of sexuality that may be harder for us to see
when we’re firmly planted in our own cultural context. The way in which any particular
society structures sexuality reveals something important about the working of that society
in general. Notice, this is a deeply social approach to sexuality. From this point of view,
sexuality is more than just an internal, psychological or biological aspect of our selves; it
is also a part of the structure of society, built into its institutions, statuses, and social roles.
Far from being something that is isolated from other aspects of our social lives, like family,
education, or work, sexuality is something that is inevitably linked to other institutions
within society. Most of us today probably believe that sexuality exists apart from these
other areas of life, and if we think about the relationships at all, we are probably inclined
to argue that our sexuality affects those other aspects of social life, but not the reverse. That
is, if we have a crappy sex life, we may believe that can cause us to be unhappy in our work
or family relationships. But we generally wouldn’t believe the opposite, that our work or
politics are reflected in the way we behave sexually. But when we take a broader perspec-
tive, by examining other cultures, we can begin to see the ways in which our sex lives tell
us a great deal about who we are as a culture in general.

Social status and power are important components of sexual behavior in many cultures.
One example of how this social status and power flows along gendered lines is the premium
often placed upon female virginity prior to marriage in ways not generally true for
male virginity. In other words, it is more important for women than for men to be virgins
when they marry, and in fact, many people think of a young girl (and not a young boy)
when they think of the “typical” virgin. In some Polynesian societies, the daughter of the
chief is called a *taupo* or *sacred maid*, and her virginity is important not just to her family,
but to the tribal community as a whole. The sacred maid receives special honors and
privileges, but these are in return for a strict enforcement of her continuing virginal status,
and if she loses that virginity, it is a matter dealt with by the tribal council as a whole. In
some instances, the consummation of her marriage may be public, but even if it is not,
proof of her virginity in the form of a blood-stained mat is displayed to the whole com-
munity. There is no equivalent male role in these societies, and though sex before marriage
is fairly common among the general population of young women and men in these societ-
ies, a young man having sex with a young woman is perceived as having stolen from the
woman’s father and/or brothers (Ortner, 1981).

These specific cases demonstrate a status inequality in sexual relationships between
those of the opposite sex, which is common across many cultures. The sexuality of women
is controlled and dictated in ways that the sexuality of men is not. In the instance of the
sacred maid, the sexual behavior of these young women is literally the property and con-
cern of the entire community. In seeing other young women’s loss of virginity as a theft
from her father or brothers, her sexual decisions are still conceived of as something belong-
ing to the male members of her family. Norms surrounding what is and is not appropriate
in these cultures tell a story about gender inequality. Men, by and large, own and control
their own sexuality, while the sexuality of women is owned by their families or, in the case
of the sacred maid, the entire community.
Looking at ancient Greek society serves as another example of the connections between social structure on the whole and the structure of sexuality specifically. First, a little background on what Greek society was like is necessary. Society in classical Athens was divided on a strict hierarchy, with male citizens at the top and women, children, foreigners, and slaves all lacking full rights and therefore existing beneath male citizens in the hierarchy (Halperin, 1989). Sexual relations in Athens were structured very strictly in line with this hierarchy, so that the Athenians did not think of sex the way many of us do, as a joint and mutual enterprise. Rather, sex for the Athenians was understood as an action performed always by a social superior on a social inferior. Sex was a deeply asymmetrical act that divided the world into penetrator and penetrated, and these categories were in no way interchangeable. Those deemed socially superior (male citizens) were the penetrators, and those seen as socially inferior (women, children, foreigners, and slaves) were the penetrated. These were strict rules to be followed in terms of acceptable behavior, and so what people did sexually did not reflect any personal preferences or some unique aspect of their identity, as might be believed in current Anglo-European society. Sexual acts rather reinforced the hierarchical system in which the Greeks lived, and though real Athenians no doubt felt real sexual desire, their desire was inevitably shaped by the dominant principles of Athenian political life. Sex in this sense was neither a part of one’s personality nor something that existed in a sphere separate from the important stuff of Athenian social and political life.

To what extent do our contemporary concepts of sexuality reinforce existing hierarchies in our society? Do we have norms about what is proper and improper sexual behavior that seem to reflect who is seen as superior and inferior in our society?

The central hierarchy that was enacted and enforced in sexual scripts for the ancient Greeks was not focused primarily on sex category or gender. A man having sex with another man was only seen as “wrong” if the man doing the penetrating was below the man being penetrated in the social hierarchy. In contemporary Anglo-European society, sex category or gender is central to the ways in which we understand what is and is not “appropriate” sexual desire and sexual behavior. Sexuality is gendered in that to be masculine is also to be heterosexual, but being heterosexual to begin with makes no sense without the existence of sex categories or gender. Here it’s useful to ask another seemingly stupid sociological question: What exactly do we mean when we say that someone is heterosexual? How does someone know that they’re heterosexual, and why are some people heterosexual and some people not? Perhaps the simplest definition we could lay out at the outset is that a heterosexual is someone who experiences sexual desire for someone of a different sex category than their own. This answer works out pretty well if you assume a biosocial approach to the relationship between sex category and gender. If a type of person who is biologically male has sexual desire for the type of person who is biologically female, than that person is heterosexual. Under this definition, sexual desire is primarily about anatomy, hormones, and genetics. Heterosexuals are people with penises who sexually desire people...
with vaginas or people with vaginas who desire people with penises. It all seems very neat and tidy, if you leave aside the messy fact that most of us (who are not walking around naked or with our chromosomal sex tattooed across our heads) don’t have definitive evidence of whether the person we desire does, in fact, have a penis or vagina until further along in the relationship. To what exactly, then, are we attracted? Is it sex category (that the person has a penis or a vagina) or gender (that the person looks and acts in feminine or masculine ways)?

There’s some confusion under the assumptions of the biosocial approach, but sexuality gets even messier if you assume, like strong social constructionists, that sexual dimorphism is a claim rather than a fact. If there are not really two types of people, males and females, then what does it mean to be heterosexual? If sex categories are essentially imposed on a more complicated underlying biological reality, then why would it make sense to build any other categories (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) based on what is, in fact, a more complicated reality? Where would an intersexed individual fit into the categories of heterosexual or homosexual, given that they don’t necessarily fit into the categories of female and male to begin with? What are transsexual individuals? Is a person who lives as a woman and has sexual desire for other women but has a penis and XY chromosomes a lesbian or a straight man? If there are many different types of people, not just males and females, then how can we possibly describe their sexuality with such limited boxes as heterosexual, homosexual, or even bisexual?

CULTURAL ARTIFACT 1: GAY, STRAIGHT, OR TAKEN?

Among surely one of the strangest genres of reality television shows to develop in recent years is the gay or straight reality dating show. Many of us are familiar with dating shows like Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire, Beauty and the Geek, or Flavor of Love. Gay, Straight or Taken is a reality show airing on Lifetime Television, in which one female contestant goes on a group date with three men, usually at a spa or resort. In the show’s regular format, shortly after meeting the three men, the female contestant receives two phone calls. The first is from a woman who warns her that one of the men is her boyfriend. The second is from a man, who warns the female contestant that one of the men is his boyfriend, and therefore gay. The female contestant wins by successfully identifying which of the men is gay, which is straight, and which is taken. If she identifies the straight and single man, she and he win a vacation together. If she fails to pick the correct straight man, the man she misidentifies wins the vacation with his partner. In similar permutations airing on FOX and the BBC, one woman has to correctly identify the straight men from the gay men to win the cash prize, again at a resort location. It’s interesting to note that more accurate titles for Gay, Straight or Taken could be, Gay, Straight or Straight, or Taken, Single, or Taken. Both the gay man and one of the straight men have partners, and

(Continued)
are therefore “taken,” while both the single man and the man with a girlfriend are straight. What’s more interesting about these shows is watching how the female contestants go about trying to discover who is gay and straight. What kinds of things might you look for? In various episodes, contestants take dance lessons, examine the contents of the men’s luggage, ask men questions about their musical tastes, speculate on the meaning of their choice of swimwear, judge their sports ability, and evaluate how dominant each man is. Obviously, asking the men the obvious question, do you have sex with men or women, is off the table as the men themselves are motivated to deceive the female contestant (except for the straight, single man). On the website for the show, viewers are invited to test their intuition in figuring out who is gay, who is straight, and who is single, implying that this might be a useful skill for women to have in general. What does this show reveal about our assumptions about sexual identity? Or about the categories we use to describe sexuality? Could one of the men be both gay and straight? How is gender involved in the criteria the female contestants might use to guess who is gay or straight? What would this show be like with a male contestant and three women?

In the particular formulation of current Anglo-European society, the important categories for describing sexuality are deeply dependent upon the existence of sex categories or gender. This has not always been the case in Anglo-European history, as we discussed with ancient Greece, and it is certainly not always the case in other cultural traditions. Michel Foucault, a theorist whose views on sexuality have been influential in the areas of feminism, cultural studies, postmodernism, and queer theory, argued in his own history of sexuality that we must pay special attention to the ways in which discourses of sexuality are also discourses of power and control. A discourse for Foucault is “the means by which institutions wield their power through a process of definition and exclusion” (as quoted in Storey, 1988). Discourses on sexuality, then, define what is and is not acceptable in relation to sexual behavior, as well as what is and is not defined as sexual behavior. In ancient Greek society, discourses on sexuality reinforced the existing hierarchy in society and therefore were part of a larger mechanism used by one particular group in society to maintain control. Therefore, an exploration of sexuality in different historical time periods and across different cultures will tell us a great deal about that particular society’s means of categorizing sex and gender, as well as reveal a great deal about who is in power and how that power is used in a given society. We’ll begin with an exploration of sexuality in Anglo-European history.

A Brief History of Heterosexuality

It may seem strange to begin this exploration with a history of heterosexuality. Surely heterosexuality is as old as human society and therefore requires no explanation.
Heterosexuality is the given, the assumed, the norm, the natural state of being. A history of heterosexuality would be like a history of breathing—both are just something we naturally do as humans. This is, in fact, the approach many early social scientists took in their study of sexuality from a social perspective. The study of sex, or sexology, traditionally focused on heterosexuality, but not in any way that suggested heterosexuality was not the natural state of being (Nagel, 2003). Early sexology was divided into two main tasks: documenting the practices of heterosexuals, not in order to demonstrate how heterosexuality is socially constructed, but rather to establish the boundaries of “normal” and “abnormal” sexuality, and studying “deviant” sexualities, including homosexuality (Nagel, 2003). In this formulation, homosexuality is the phenomenon that needs to be explained, while heterosexuality is the taken-for-granted norm.

There are many problems with this particular approach to sexuality, including that it falls into the same trap we discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the sociological approach to gender in sociology before the influence of feminism. Time and again sociologists and other social scientists have realized that for any given social category (gender, race, class, sexual identity, etc.), they must “study up” as well as down. Studying up in sociological language refers to the need to study those at the top of any particular power structure (Messner, 2005). Sociologists have tended to study down first, focusing on racial minorities, the working class, the poor, women, and homosexuals instead of white people, the middle class, the upper class, the wealthy, men, and heterosexuals. Most recently in sociology, studying up focuses on the study of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality. This is one important reason to begin with a history of heterosexuality: It reminds us that there is a reason some categories are seen as normal, natural, and, therefore, unnecessary to explain.

Beginning with a history of heterosexuality is also important because there was no such thing as heterosexuality in Anglo-European society until the 19th century. Neither was there anything called homosexuality. You may find this hard to believe until you understand an important distinction many historians of sexuality make between the words heterosexual and homosexual and all they have come to represent as compared to the actual sexual behaviors in which people engage. People have probably always engaged in some kind of opposite-sex sexual behavior, but no one until about 1886 would have labeled this behavior an example of heterosexuality or the people engaged in such behavior as heterosexuals. Similarly, increasing evidence seems to suggest that same-sex sexual behavior is fairly common across historical time periods and different cultures, but no one would have labeled a person engaging in same-sex sexual behavior a homosexual until about 120 years ago. Heterosexuality comes into the English language at the same time as its counterpart, homosexuality, because the two terms make no sense without each other. The two terms were made popular by a sexologist, Richard Krafft-Ebing, who wrote about homosexuality as a personality disorder in his book, Psychopathia Sexualis, published in 1886.

In the early Victorian period in the United States that immediately preceded the introduction of the terms heterosexual and homosexual by Krafft-Ebbing in 1886, married women and men were expected to exhibit the idealized True Love in marriage (Katz, 2009). True Love, as it was represented in popular literary and religious texts, was certainly meant to exist between a man and a woman, and so we might be tempted to call it heterosexuality. But True Love was a state characterized by purity and freedom from sensuality. True Love did not include kisses, let alone actual sexual intercourse, and it was confined only to the proper institution of marriage. Can we call this particular perspective heterosexuality
when it is largely not about sexual behavior? Within the Victorian discourse on sexuality, the only purpose of sex was procreation between a married couple; proper sexual desire, then, was desire that led to procreation, and everything else was improper. Certainly this would have included same-sex sexual behavior, but it also included married couples having sex that was not exclusively directed toward procreation. The idea that having sex on a regular basis for non-procreative purposes among married couples was part of a healthy relationship was completely foreign to the Victorian ideology of True Love. The Victorians shared some current views on the general lustiness of men, but they did not think the sexual desire of either men or women were exclusively or naturally directed toward the other sex. A man who had sex with another man was merely failing to contain his roving lust, and it was this lack of control, rather than the sex category or gender of his partner, that made this behavior objectionable. From this perspective, same-sex sexual behavior among men and soliciting prostitutes were seen as similar offenses; they both resulted from a man’s inability to control his lust. The particular lines drawn by the early Victorians in the United States hardly seem similar to the way heterosexuality is defined in contemporary Anglo-European societies.

This distinction between the actual term *heterosexuality* versus sexual behavior between two people of the opposite sex (keeping in mind that from a strong social constructionist perspective, the notion of opposite sex itself is problematic) may seem a bit, well, nitpicky. They may not have given things the same names, but how important is the name we give to something after all? Would heterosexuality by any other name be the same, to paraphrase Shakespeare? It is important when we take a look at the ways that existed before the late 19th century for describing this range of sexual behaviors. Sexual behavior between two men of the same sex before 1886 would have been called *buggery* or *sodomy*, and one of the first laws in Anglo-European history to address same-sex behavior was passed by Henry VIII in 1533; it condemned all acts of buggery as being “against nature” (Weeks, 1996). The law was not designed to specifically address same-sex behavior, though; acts of buggery were defined as any acts that were “against nature,” regardless of whether they were between man and woman, man and beast, or man and man. This means that a man and a woman engaging in a sexual behavior that was seen as against nature (usually anal sex) was defined as buggery. If people engaging in a sexual act that we would now call heterosexual were seen as committing buggery, than buggery really does not mean the same thing as homosexuality at all. As with ancient Greek society, these buggery laws reflect a system for categorizing sexuality that is not based primarily on sex category or gender. What do same-sex sexual behaviors, bestiality, and anal sex all have in common that would warrant them being placed in the same category? They are all forms of non-procreative sex, meaning that they cannot lead to the birth of a child. For much of Anglo-European history, the division between procreative and non-procreative sex was one of the most important divisions, and it therefore makes sense that categories of importance (buggery versus legal and acceptable types of sex) reflected these divisions.

What does this tell us about the sex category and gender system as well as the distribution of power in these historical societies? Many historians of gender and sexuality suggest that the fact that categories of sexuality were not based on sex category or gender reflect a different view of these phenomena. In fact, for much of Anglo-European society, the predominant view of women and men was a one-sex model, rather than our current
two-sex model. The one-sex model of sex categories comes from the ancient Greeks and views women, not as a completely different type of creature, but as an inferior version of men. The one-sex model is rooted in a view of society as a gradient hierarchy; at the top of this hierarchy for the Greeks were the gods, then men, then, below men, were women, slaves, and other “deviants” such as dwarves. From this perspective, women are not fundamentally different from men, but are merely inferior versions of men, just as men are inferior versions of the gods. If women are just inferior versions of men, rather than completely different types of beings, then making distinctions based on the sex category of who you have sex with makes little sense. In the current two-sex model, women and men are believed to be two completely different types of people, and sex is viewed as a bounded category (you’re either male or female, and there’s nothing in between). These differing perspectives have implications for the way people understand biological differences between men and women as well, as we’ll discuss in Chapter 7. The one-sex model helps to understand the way in which distinctions based on sexual behavior were made for much of Anglo-European history, as well as how power was distributed. In the one-sex model, women are still seen as at the bottom of the hierarchy, though the hierarchy itself may be differently shaped. For this reason, categories of sexuality focused almost exclusively on the behavior of men. This is not to say that same-sex sexual behavior didn’t happen between women, but that women’s sexual behavior with other women was seen as largely unimportant.

Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective

If we’ve already established that the idea of heterosexuality and homosexuality are relatively recent historical inventions of the Anglo-European world, then it probably follows that these concepts are culturally unique to the Anglo-European world as well. In the areas of gay and lesbian studies, feminist scholarship, and queer theory, much research has begun to investigate the ways in which other cultures conceive of sexuality and the particular categories they create to classify types of sexual behavior. Though initially these projects were often described as searching for examples of homosexuality or homosexual behavior in other cultures, more recent work focuses on same-sex sexual behavior instead. This acknowledges that given different cultures with their own unique systems for organizing sex categories, gender, and sexuality, the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality very well may not make sense. These terms presume a network of relationships and ways of understanding sex category, gender, and sexuality that, as we will see, are simply not true for many other cultures. Given the amazing variety in the types of cultures found around the world, it shouldn’t be surprising to also find a great deal of diversity in the particular forms of sexuality that exist.

Cross-cultural research on same-sex sexual behavior has found that social status in the form of age is often important in dictating appropriate and inappropriate forms of sexual behavior. A practice common among an entire grouping of cultures ranging from Papua New Guinea to some Australian Aborigine tribes to the Solomon Islands is a boy-inseminating ritual (Herdt, 1997). Among the Sambia of New Guinea, this ritual is an important part of boys’ transition from childhood to becoming an adult. The Sambia believe that semen is a crucial substance for fertility and reproduction. Not only is semen what obviously results in the conception of a baby, semen is also believed to have the magical power to transform
itself into mother’s milk. The Sambians also believe that though women are born with the important feminine reproductive fluids—breast milk and menstrual blood—men are not born with semen. For the Sambians, the male body does not naturally create semen, and therefore semen must be provided by an outside source. The boy-inseminating ritual serves this purpose, and it involves oral sex between younger and older boys (between the ages of 10 and 15). This same-sex sexual behavior is highly structured by strict ritual rules. Boys begin engaging in the behavior after undergoing an initial purification ritual to have their “feminine” traces removed. They are then ready to be initiated into masculinity by performing oral sex on older boys and thus becoming semen recipients. When they enter puberty, they switch from being semen recipients to becoming semen donors as the next group of younger boys performs oral sex on them. Young Sambian men engage in this behavior until they are married, and at that point, same-sex sexual behavior ends for most Sambian men. These rituals, which the Sambian believe are crucial to the very reproduction of themselves as a people, are kept secret from women, who may have little idea of the content of these behaviors. Undergoing these rituals is what allows Sambian men to become husbands and eventually fathers. Engaging in same-sex sexual behavior for Sambian boys is what allows them to become truly masculine.

Another interesting system for categorizing sexual behavior comes from many North American Native cultures. The berdache role, with some variations, exists across a wide range of Native American communities and cultures. The word itself, berdache, is from the French for male prostitute and reflects how early French explorers and settlers made sense of this particular aspect of the Native American communities they encountered. Within various Native American tribal groups, the exact term for the berdache varies, and the term more commonly involves men than it does women. A person becomes a berdache in different ways depending on the norms of the particular community, but the status usually followed from some expressed preference for cross-sex behavior. This could be expressed voluntarily on the part of a young boy or girl who showed more interest in learning the traditional activities of the other gender. Berdaches were also sometimes identified through tests of infants or small children, in which some characteristically male and female implements were set in front of the child. If the child chose the particular implement of a different gender, they became a berdache and were raised as the opposite gender. A male berdache would dress as a woman, perform all the tribal duties associated with women, and in some cases have sexual relations with or marry a man. A male berdache for all purposes became a social woman within the community, even though he was anatomically still male. Though some early anthropologists assumed that berdache must actually be intersexed individuals, this was not the case.

The status of berdache within Native American communities varied. Among the Navajo, Cheyenne, and Mojave, berdache were believed to have exceptional abilities as matchmakers, love magicians, or curers of venereal diseases (Whitehead, 1981). The berdache had special ritual functions among the Crow, Papago, and Cheyenne. Male berdaches were also sometimes stigmatized as being cowards or as less than a full male. Their role within the societies, regardless of its particular content, was a well established, taken-for-granted part of Native American culture. Berdaches were not seen as “freaks” or as existing outside the norms of Native American societies, but simply as filling one particular social niche in the fabric of their larger society. The most important part of their identity was their particular gender, and against this identity, their sexual behaviors were seen as unimportant.
By now, you should be getting one of the main points to be made in this chapter. Sexuality takes many unique forms across human history and across human cultures, including many distinct ways of thinking about same-sex sexual behavior. A more extensive survey would direct us to the *mahu* among native Hawaiian cultures in the United States (Matzner, 2001), the *bichas*, *viados*, or *travestis* of Brazil (Nanda, 2000), the Kathoey of Thailand (Nanda, 2000), the sworn virgins of the Balkans (Nanda, 2000), and the *hijra* of India (Nanda, 1998). In ancient Japan, samurai warriors took younger male lovers called *nenja* (Herdt, 1997). Among the Basotho people of Africa, women engaged in "mummy-baby" relationships, which involved a public ritual celebrating a bond between two women that might include emotional exclusivity, kissing, body rubbing, and genital contact (Gay, 1989). The only commonality among all these categories is some sexual behavior between individuals of the same sex. Beyond that, some of these relationships exist alongside heterosexual marriage, as in the mummy-baby relationships in Africa. Others, like the *hijra* of India, are isolated in communities of others like them and therefore do not participate in societal institutions such as marriage. In some instances, same-sex sexual behavior is seen as perfectly consistent with one's gender role, as in the case of the samurai and the Sambia. Engaging in these same-sex relationships for men reinforced rather than threatened their masculinity. In other cases, as in some instances of berdache, gender identity did come into question.

The important lesson to take away from all these different cases is that there is nothing given about the particular relationship between sex category, gender, and sexuality that is presumed in current Anglo-European society. Though many of the explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists who initially provided the accounts of these sexual behaviors and institutions tried to subsume them into their existing paradigm, they simply did not fit. Are the Sambian, berdache, *mahu, hijra,* or samurai all groups of "homosexuals"? To answer yes would be to engage in a classic act of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is seeing one's own culture as better, more correct, or right relative to another culture. Clearly, in the dominant Anglo-European view of sexuality, many of these same-sex sexual behaviors appear to be homosexual. But labeling them as such is ethnocentric because it views the Anglo-European way of understanding sexual behavior as the correct way. If we simply label these behaviors as homosexual, we ignore the ways in which these behaviors are firmly grounded in a cultural context very different from that of Anglo-European cultures, including different ways of conceiving of sex categories and gender.

For example, anthropologists studying Sambian culture initially labeled these rituals as examples of homosexual behavior. But in order to see the ways in which that specific label of homosexual might not apply to the Sambian, we must untangle exactly what is implied in Anglo-European cultures’ definition of homosexuality. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed how *masculine* sexuality is generally presumed to be *heterosexual* sexuality. This is in part the legacy of another 19th century term and idea—*sexual inversion*. As defined by early sexologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *sexual inversion* attributed homosexuality to an inborn inversion of gender traits. Male homosexuals were essentially women trapped in male bodies, and this explained their sexual desire for other men. This also explained their supposedly feminine characteristics, behaviors, and tendencies. Though few people today would conceive of homosexuality in these exact terms, the idea that homosexual men are less masculine and homosexual women less feminine is still very
much a part of Anglo-European definitions of homosexuality. How does this work for the Sambian? Sambian boys become masculine through engaging in same-sex sexual behavior; performing and receiving oral sex from other boys does not threaten their masculinity, but is actually essential to the creation of that masculinity. The same is true for Japanese samurai, for whom the taking of *nenja*, younger male lovers, enhanced their status as a samurai and therefore their masculinity. To call the people in either of these groups homosexual is to ignore the very complex relationships between these behaviors and their own, unique gender system—relationships that are very different from those presumed in the meaning of homosexuality in Anglo-European cultures.

Ethnocentrism poses the same problems when we turn to the case of the berdache among Native American groups. Early anthropologists who examined this phenomenon concluded that the berdache role could be understood as an institutionalized outlet for homosexual behavior among Native American groups. Homosexual behavior, the argument goes, was if not a common behavior among Native Americans, at least not unheard of. The role of the berdache provided a way for individuals with same-sex desire to satisfy those desires by taking on the particular institutionalized role of berdache. One of the problems with this explanation of berdache is that same-sex sexual desire or behavior was not what determined whether or not you became a berdache. Attraction to individuals of the same sex is never mentioned in the anthropological literature as an indication of berdache status. Cross-gender behavior, exhibiting some desire or predisposition to engage in the activities normally associated with the other gender, was seen as the main indicator of berdache status. In the Anglo-European conception of sexuality, these two behaviors would be seen as two sides of the same coin; if a little girl indicated that she liked doing masculine activities better than feminine activities, we would assume that tells us that she must also have some sexual desire for other women. But evidence suggests that Native Americans saw gender and sexuality as largely separate phenomena. The fact that a berdache preferred the activities of the opposite gender told them nothing about the form and content of their sexual desire. That this was true is evidenced in the different way many Native American groups dealt with same-sex sexual behavior, which did occur from time to time outside of the context of the berdache role. The ways in which various tribes and communities viewed same-sex sexual behavior varied, sanctioning it sometimes as evil or in other places merely as foolish (Whitehead, 1981). But same-sex sexual behavior was not seen as a sign of an enduring disposition among those who engaged in it and was seen as unrelated to their particular gender identity. Same-sex sexual behavior was a phenomenon quite distinct from the role of the berdache.

Though from our perspective the berdache were clearly engaging in same-sex sexual behavior, anthropologists argue that the cross-gender status of berdache caused Native Americans to interpret their sexual behavior very differently. By choosing to be or being designated as berdache, these individuals existed outside of the normal rules enforcing opposite-sex sexual behavior as the norm. The berdache had a special status in regard to his or her sexual behavior, and whether the berdache had sex with someone of the same sex or opposite sex was unimportant. In addition, the non-berdache person who was intimately involved with the berdache was not reclassified (thought of as berdache) or perceived of as deserving the stigma of having engaged in same-sex sexual behavior. In other words, a man who married and presumably had sex with a male berdache (a biological male living as a social woman) would not have been seen as engaging in same-sex sexual
behavior, while a male non-berdache having sex with another male non-berdache would be seen as engaging in same-sex sexual behavior. Anthropological research reveals no instances of a berdache having sex with another berdache.

What does all this reveal about the way Native Americans constructed their own system of sex category, gender, and sexuality? Though Native Americans certainly perceived links between sex category, gender, and sexual behavior, the linkage between these social phenomena was not quite as strong as it is for many in Anglo-European societies. For berdache, it was most important that their sexual behavior was consistent with their gender. We might say that in the case of two non-berdache men engaging in same-sex sexual behavior, the problem is not so much that two biological males (sex category) are having sex with each other as it is that two social men (gender) are having sex with each other. If one of the males were a berdache, the same-sex sexual behavior would be seen as a completely different category of behavior. To wrap our minds around this, we’d have to imagine in Anglo-European society that sex between a biological male and a biological male who lives as a woman would not be seen as homosexual. Gender would trump sex category and be the important criteria for establishing what is and isn’t appropriate sexual behavior.

Together, all these cases return us to the potential complexity of the relationship between gender and sexuality. The sexual categories that have developed in Anglo-European society and begun to spread around the world through the process of globalization reflect a specific way of thinking about the relationship between sex category, gender, and sexuality. But this is just one among many diverse ways of understanding these relationships and of forming categories around the complex constellation of sexuality. Gender has not always formed the most important basis for understanding categories of sexuality, as we saw in the case of classical antiquity. In some contemporary societies, gender can still be less important in the process of classifying sexual behaviors. The berdache role has largely disappeared from contemporary Native American cultures, but in some Latin American cultures categories of sexuality are still based on dominance more than gender. Among Costa Rican male prostitutes, the attribution of homosexuality is made on the basis of being active versus passive; a male prostitute who is penetrated is homosexual, while a male prostitute who always does the penetrating is seen as heterosexual, regardless of the sex of who he is penetrating (Nagel, 2003, p. 205). In Nicaragua, the word *cochon* has been translated as synonymous with homosexual, but it really refers to a man who is the passive recipient (the penetrated) in anal sex, and not to the man who is the active participant. Putting aside our tendency to view other cultures through an ethnocentric lens, we see the many different kinds of relationships between gender and sexuality.

**The Homosexual Role**

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed how, from a sociological point of view, questions about why some people are heterosexual or homosexual are generally not the main focus. This is largely true on an individual level. You would probably not find sociologists taking the biography of an individual person and trying to explain why, based on the particular details of that person’s life, she or he is homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. But if you asked the sociologist why Susie is heterosexual and Joe homosexual, one answer that we can now understand is that both Susie and Joe live in 21st century Anglo-European
society. Susie is heterosexual and Joe is homosexual in part because they live in a culture that organizes sexuality in those particular ways. Had Joe been born among the Sambia or Susie been born in Africa among the Basotho, who knows how they would understand their own sexuality, let alone how we would categorize it from the outside. In these other cultures, their sexuality might or might not have implications for their gender and sex category as well.

But if Susie and Joe are living in 21st century Anglo-European culture, there are certain implications to being labeled or labeling themselves as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual. The implications of these labels are important in and of themselves, but for our particular concern, they are also related to gender. The concepts of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are based on underlying assumptions about sex category and gender, but also on some assumptions about what are appropriate ways of relating within existing gender categories. In order to explore some of these assumptions, we need to outline in more detail the precise set of beliefs that cluster around concepts like homosexuality. In other words, we need to describe the homosexual role and the heterosexual role. The concept of a homosexual role was first outlined by sociologist Mary McIntosh (1996) in an essay that brought the theoretical tools of symbolic interactionism to the study of sexuality—a fairly revolutionary idea at the time given the tendency to see sexuality as the purview of biologists rather than sociologists.

McIntosh’s (1996) concept of a homosexual role points us to a distinction we have already laid out between same-sex sexual behavior as something a person does, as opposed to homosexuality as something that a person is. To say that homosexuality can be a social role is to point out just this distinction. In Anglo-European society, to be homosexual is a social status, a position in society that has important implications, including a set of norms attached to that status. Those norms compromise a social role, the homosexual role. The homosexual role, then, is the set of expectations we have for how people who occupy the social status of homosexual should behave. When same-sex sexual behavior was seen as buggery or sodomy, there was no homosexual role. Historians of sexuality provide evidence for this fact in the court records of buggery or sodomy trials. During the historical period during which the concept of homosexuality (and heterosexuality) was developing, lawyers and judges tried to identify qualities of a person prone to engage in acts of sodomy or buggery. But they had no clear sense of exactly what type of person might engage in these acts, only the beginning of a sense that these behaviors might be attributed to some type of person.

What expectations exist in Anglo-European society for someone who is homosexual? We assume they have sexual desire for a person of the same gender, and we probably also assume they have engaged in sexual behavior with someone of the same gender. This seems straightforward enough until you consider that sexual desire and sexual behavior are two very different things, and they do not always line up perfectly. For a broad swath of human history, marriage had little to do with love, let alone sexual desire, and so countless presumably heterosexual couples engaged in sexual behavior in their marriage beds; whether they experienced sexual desire for each other is hard to know, but they probably did not in many cases. Were they heterosexual? Many gay men and lesbians have had some opposite-sex sexual encounters at some point in their lives, with one study demonstrating that lesbian teens generally have sex with a boy before having sex with a girl.
Does one sexual encounter with someone of the opposite-sex trump multiple sexual encounters with someone of the same sex? How many sexual experiences with someone of the same sex does it take before you officially become homosexual, and vice versa? Male and female prisoners often engage in same-sex sexual behavior while they are incarcerated, but return to being “heterosexual” when they are released, and they are generally not seen as homosexuals. The U.S. military policy toward same-sex sexual behavior that existed before the implementation of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 1993 deemed it OK for male soldiers to have sex with other men as long as they could claim that the behavior was a one-time occurrence, rather than a sign of underlying homosexuality. In fact, as recently as the 1980s, one U.S. Marine’s account of his tour of duty overseas includes the gossip and bragging among male Marines about their sexual exploits with “benny boys,” male sex workers solicited by male Marines during shore leave (Nagel, 2003). Male Marines claimed that benny boys were better than female prostitutes because of their insider knowledge of male sexuality, and they largely did not see sex with these exotic Other men as homosexual. When, then, is same-sex sexual behavior seen as homosexual, and when is it seen as something else entirely?

The homosexual role as articulated in current Anglo-European society may be seen as consisting of five basic expectations. It’s important to note at the outset that these are expectations, and not the “truth” about what it means to be homosexual. If we’ve established anything so far, hopefully we’ve realized that determining exactly what it means to be homosexual or heterosexual is a complicated business. But for many of us, when we identify someone as homosexual, we may first assume that this tells us something about their gender identity as well. Lesbian women may be presumed to be more masculine, and more masculine women may be presumed to be lesbians. This is the legacy of sexual inversion, and even though we could name many cases of lesbian women who are feminine as well as straight women who are masculine, this is a general expectation that still exists. The homosexual role presumes that someone who is homosexual has same-sex sexual desire and engages in same-sex sexual behavior. This is not always a true expectation, but it exists as an expectation nonetheless. The fourth expectation is that homosexual individuals have something we might call a homosexual career. The concept of a homosexual career presumes some basic trajectory or series of life events that homosexual individuals share in common. The expectation attempts to address the questions we raised above about how many same-sex sexual encounters or how much same-sex sexual desire makes someone homosexual. With the idea of a homosexual career, gay men or lesbian woman having sex with the opposite sex is one part of a larger narrative about how someone is homosexual, rather than proof of an underlying heterosexuality. In this narrative, a young boy may have sex with a girl or experience desire for girls before he realizes his true nature as a homosexual. This expectation, too, is based more on myth than fact. The experiences of homosexual people are as different from each other as are the experiences of heterosexual people, and there is no one narrative or template that can possibly describe the diversity of their sexual lives. The fifth and final expectation of the homosexual role is that homosexual individuals also have a homosexual identity, which is to say that they consider their particular sexual identity to be an important part of their own self-concept. If someone is, in fact, homosexual, then they think of themselves as homosexual and label themselves as such.
As emphasized throughout, the homosexual role is made up of expectations, and expectations are just that. They are what many people might expect of someone in that role, but they are certainly not social facts and, therefore, not at all true for all cases. If you’re a fan of daytime talk shows, you may have seen discussions about pornography actors and actresses who are “gay for pay.” These individuals, often men, engage in same-sex sexual behavior for gay male pornography but do not consider themselves to be homosexual. Many of these men argue that though they may engage in same-sex sexual behavior, they feel no same-sex desire and, therefore, are not homosexual. In one *Seinfeld* episode, which we often discuss in class, Jerry’s friend George experiences “movement” of his penis while receiving a massage from a male masseuse. For the remainder of the episode, George worries about what exactly this movement means. Is it a sign of same-sex sexual desire? Is it same-sex sexual behavior? Does it make him homosexual? In classic *Seinfeld* style, this episode highlights the complexity of this particular way of defining what is contained in the homosexual role.

What’s missing from this particular articulation of what it means to be homosexual? The early Victorian ideology of True Love included only romance and excluded sexuality altogether, but in this particular formulation of what it means to be homosexual, we had nothing to say about love, trust, affection, common interests, or passion. Do terms like homosexual and heterosexual describe only our sexual feelings and behaviors? Are our sexual feelings separable from other emotions like love and affection? Should we add another expectation to our description of the homosexual role—that homosexual individuals also feel more affection, love, and trust for those of the same sex? Would the reverse be true for heterosexuals as well? Current discussions in the United States of gay marriage bring some of these questions to the fore. In its current incarnation, heterosexual marriage is about much more than sex or procreation. It is also about all the emotions we’ve listed and more. Do the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality also describe the particular lines along which our love and affection tend to run? If you are a woman and you love another woman, does that make you a lesbian?

As a way of exploring this particular question, check out the following quote from a letter, written from one man to another:

> Cold in my professions, warm in [my] friendships, I wish, my Dear Laurens, it m[ight] be in my power, by action rather than words, [to] convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that ‘till you bade us Adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you. (Hansen, 1991, p. 95)

The language may be something of a give away, but if you knew this letter were written today from one man to another, what assumption would you make about that man? Would you assume he was homosexual? You have no evidence of his particular gender identity, sexual desire, sexual behavior, sexual career, or sexual identity. Would the affection he expresses for another man be enough to make him gay? This letter was, in fact, written in 1779 by Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury in the United States and one of the founding fathers of the new nation, to his close friend and fellow soldier, John Laurens (Roy, 2001). From our contemporary perspective, Hamilton’s letter would probably at least cause us to raise our eyebrows about his sexual identity. But to make such a
connection in Hamilton’s time would have been absurd. As he wrote this letter in the 18th century, there was still no concept or word for homosexuality. But more importantly, passionate friendships between men were nothing remarkable; letters like this would have been expected and normal between two close, male friends, and the existence of such a letter tells us nothing about Hamilton’s sexual desire or sexual behavior. Abraham Lincoln slept in the same bed with one of his close friends well into his 30s, but as with Hamilton’s letter, this was fairly common behavior for men in the time period, and it would not have been seen as outside the bounds of acceptable sexual behavior, nor even as having anything to do with sexuality.

In a similar vein are the Boston marriages or romantic friendships of 18th and 19th century middle- and upper-class white women in Anglo-European societies (Rupp, 2004). **Boston marriages** describe passionate attachments between women in this time period, which often lasted through marriages and, as relationships, were generally not looked upon with disapproval. In the early 1870s, Molly Hallock Foote wrote to her friend Helena, “I wanted so to put my arms around my girl of all the girls in the world and tell her . . . I love her as wives do love their husbands, as friends who have taken each other for life” (Rupp, 2004, p. 303). The expression of this kind of passionate love, a love comparable to that which a wife would feel for her husband, was also common during this time period. Rose Elizabeth Cleveland, the sister of United States president Grover Cleveland, shared a long and passionate correspondence with her friend, Evangeline Simpson Whipple, describing how she was “heavy with emotion” for her friend, trembling at the thought of being in her arms. Though Whipple married briefly (to a 74-year-old Episcopalian bishop), the two women eventually settled together in Italy after the death of Whipple’s husband (Roy, 2001). It’s clear from many of these letters that women in these romantic friendships would kiss, caress, and sleep with each other (in the same bed), but it is impossible to tell whether or not they actually engaged in same-sex sexual behavior. Were these women lesbians? How do we make sense of these behaviors?

Both of these examples reveal a historical world in which passionate friendships between people of the same sex were the norm. As we will explore in Chapter 6 and Chapter 8, for much of its history, and still in many places today, marriage had very little to do with passionate love, let alone sexual desire. In Anglo-European history, the highest form of love was for many years believed to be that which existed between two men. This made sense in a very gender-segregated world where men spent most of their lives in the company of other men and women in the company of other women. How could such very different experiences form the basis for a strong and passionate attachment in marriage? That we look at passages from these historical letters and make presumptions about the sexuality of the authors tells us a great deal about how different our concept of homosocial relationships is today than it was in the past. The term **homosocial** refers merely to social relationships between those of the same sex. The relationships between men in a fraternity, mothers and daughters, or all male soldiers in a platoon are all homosocial relationships. Many historians argue that in Anglo-European history, with the invention of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as the rise of the companionate marriage (marriage based on compatibility rather than financial or political criteria), a shift developed in the way people thought about homosocial relationships. Much of the passion that had once been channeled into friendships with those of the same sex was diverted into the institution of
marriage; the companionate marriage assumes that your husband or wife is also your close, if not best, friend. At the same time, the idea of homosexuality, that sexual behavior marked a kind of person rather than a set of behaviors, changed the ways in which people viewed homosocial relationships. To express passionate love for someone of the same sex became associated with sexual behaviors under the new system of sexuality.

**CULTURAL ARTIFACT 2: TOP GUN—QUEERING THE MOVIES**

How do you draw the thin line between behavior that is hypermasculine and behavior that is homosexual? When does the homosociality of the buddy movie become potentially homosexual? Are the only movies that deal with homosexuality the ones in which there's actually a gay or lesbian character? Or is homosexuality lurking at the margins of almost every movie, regardless of whether the “romance” is between a man and a woman or two men? You may have never considered that the movie *Top Gun* had anything to do with homosexuality. Is there anything more masculine than a group of men flying fighter planes for the Navy? Is there anything more masculine than men hanging out in locker rooms scantily clad in towels? Is there anything more masculine than dialogue like the first exchange between Iceman (Val Kilmer) and his buddy, Slider, while receiving instruction on flying techniques? Iceman says to Slider, “This gives me a hard-on,” to which Slider replies, “Don’t tease me” (Burston, 1995, p. 128). In the first locker room scene, a senior officer is heard yelling, “I want someone’s butt and I want it now!” while the flight scenes are filled with potential double entendres: “This guy’s hot on my tail,” “This boy’s all over me,” and “My dick, my ass” (Burston, 1995, p. 128). Read in one context, these examples are all nothing more than the over-sexualized posturing that takes place among straight men. But a queer reading of *Top Gun* and other buddy movies suggests that these movies also create potential sexual tension between the two male buddies, the “wingmen” in the specific case of *Top Gun*. Queer theory as applied to film criticism suggests that movies like *Top Gun* have multiple meanings, and among them, one in which the real romance in the film is not between Tom Cruise’s character, Maverick, and Charlie (Kelly McGillis), but rather between Maverick and his fellow pilot, Iceman. The movie ends not with an image of the heterosexual couple, Maverick and Charlie, but with two fighter planes flying into the distance. From this perspective, many presumably masculine action movies can also be read as movies about the potential attraction between men. What do you think of this reading of *Top Gun* and other action movies? How does this connect to the distinction between homosociality and homosexuality? Can you think of other movies with potentially queer readings?
This historical tale again points us to the important links between gender and sexuality. Sexuality as an institution is affected by the ways in which we draw the lines between those of different genders and how we understand what are and are not appropriate types of relationships. In some time periods, passionate, romantic love between women is viewed as just one particular manifestation of homosocial relationships. Today, we still expect that women’s friendships are closer than those of men, as we will discuss in the next chapter, but the letter from Molly Hallock Foote would still probably be seen as excessive. The degree to which we connect romantic love and attachment to our notions of sexuality is also influenced by how we understand gender in a particular time and place.

**Bisexuality: Somewhere in Between**

Though heterosexuality and homosexuality as terms date back to the late 19th century, bisexuality is an even more recent concept in social life. In one of its early uses by an American doctor, *heterosexual* was used to describe someone with “inclinations to both sexes,” which is how we currently understand what it means to be bisexual and demonstrates how initially the meaning of terms like heterosexual and homosexual were unclear (Katz, 2009). Freud believed that all of us as humans are potentially bisexual, capable, in Freud’s language, of having same-sex and opposite-sex love objects. It is the civilizing force of society that channels this original flexibility into an object choice that is determined by sex. Dividing the world into heterosexuals and homosexuals for Freud is like a fall from grace from our original, and more flexible, underlying nature. But Freud’s view of bisexuality is one among many competing ways of thinking about the complex formulation of sexual desire. In contemporary Anglo-European society, bisexuality is increasingly recognized as a category of sexual identity alongside heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexuality does not come without its own continuing stigmas, though. Bisexuals can receive negative reactions from both homosexuals and heterosexuals. In her study of the way in which lesbian feminists conceive of bisexual women, Amber Ault (1996) identified four techniques of neutralization through which some lesbian feminists express their hostility toward bisexual women. Through suppression, lesbians insist that there is no such thing as bisexuality. Bisexuals are either confused lesbians or heterosexuals who are experimenting. This is connected to the second technique: incorporation. Bisexual women are lesbians who are not yet aware of their lesbian identity or are “on a bi now gay later plan” (Ault, 1996, p. 314). Marginalization acknowledges that bisexual women exist, but sees them as unimportant to lesbian politics and lesbian communities; bisexuals are on the fence and therefore not to be counted. Deligitimation, the final technique of neutralization, casts aspersions upon the characters of bisexual women as promiscuous, disloyal bed-hoppers. The animosity felt by some lesbian women toward bisexuals leads them to describe bi women as “sexually promiscuous, personally deceived, immature, in denial, perverted and unable to form stable familial bonds” (Ault, 1996, p. 314). These descriptions are all labels that heterosexual culture also directs at lesbians, and Ault points to the ways in which bisexuals are stigmatized by a group (lesbians) that are themselves already stigmatized.

The bisexual women in Ault’s (1996) study point out that on the other hand, they are often subject to the exact same discrimination and hostility as their lesbian counterparts from the
straight world. A bisexual woman walking down the street with her female lover is harassed as a lesbian, and her harassers are unlikely to stop and ask her if she’s bisexual before they do so. Courts and legal institutions also often lump bisexuals together with gays and lesbians. Colorado’s Amendment 2 prohibited any laws in the state that would have given protection to homosexuals, lesbians, or those with bisexual orientations. In other words, this law ensured that these groups would not be protected from discrimination based on sexual orientation as individuals are ensured protection based on their gender, race, nationality, and religion. In the eyes of these lawmakers, bisexuals are not seen as distinct from gays and lesbians. Like homosexuality, bisexuality is placed clearly outside the boundaries of what makes “normal” sexuality and treated by our heteronormative culture as similar to homosexuality.

The tension between those within gay and lesbian communities and bisexuals is something that has faded somewhat recently, partly because of the influence of queer theory and queer activism. Increasingly, activist organizations on college campuses and in other places use the GLBT label, which includes gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals. This demonstrates an inclusiveness that was not as evident in Ault’s (1996) research with lesbians. Why does the category of bisexual have the potential to evoke such hostility on the parts of both gay and straight people? What essential notion of sexuality does the existence of people who call themselves bisexual call into question? Some bisexuals suggest an answer to this question when they create their own categories for labeling sexuality that put bisexuality at the center and all other types of sexual orientation at the margins. In Ault’s (1996) study, some bisexual women referred to straights as well as gays and lesbians as monosexuals. In this new dichotomy, bisexuals, who do not limit themselves to only one sex in their choice of romantic partners, are juxtaposed with monosexuals, who have sex or romantic relationships with only one sex. Because this particular system originates with bisexuals, there is a disparaging quality to the new label of monosexual, and both straight people as well as gays and lesbians are seen as the Other to the category of bisexual. These new categories can be viewed as an attempt by bisexuals as a community to marginalize those other groups, heterosexuals and homosexuals, who have already marginalized them.

**SEXUALITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

This consideration of the position of bisexuals as an identity and a community points us to an especially important point about categories of sexuality. We have thoroughly explored many different possible ways of forming categories of sexuality. As sociologists, we can understand that categories of sexuality like heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are all socially constructed, but this doesn’t mean the categories don’t have an important impact on our lives. The attempt by bisexual individuals to redefine the world along the lines of bisexuals and monosexuals matters only if they can convince the rest of society to believe in this particular system of categorization. In the meantime, bisexuals are often still seen as fence sitters, and their status relative to the existing system of sexuality has consequences for how they are viewed and treated in society. Understanding that there is nothing given about the particular system of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual in contemporary Anglo-European societies does not negate the important consequences these categories have for people living in those societies.
When Did You Know You Were Straight?  
Heterosexism and Heteronormativity

We can begin thinking about the consequences of these categories with the question posed in this subsection’s title: When did you know you were straight? It’s a hypothetical question, as we aren’t actually assuming that everyone reading this chapter right now is, in fact, straight. It might sound like a strange question, or like one of the words is wrong. Shouldn’t the question be, “When did you know you were gay?” This is a question that many gay or lesbian people might get asked, sometimes with some frequency. What happens when you change the question in this way? How does someone come to know that they’re heterosexual?

If you’re like many of the straight students in my classes, this question is something of a stumper. If you do consider yourself heterosexual, you probably haven’t had to ever think much about the answer to that question. The privilege of not being called upon to explain your sexual desires and behavior is a part of heteronormativity, as we discussed above. A privilege is an (not necessarily) earned right that is attached to a social status. You can think of it as the goodies or bonus that comes with occupying a certain kind of status in society. As a professor, you get to tell your students what to do, and that’s a privilege. Privileges are also attached to statuses like race, social class, gender, and sexual identity. Hetero-privilege is the set of unearned rights that are given to heterosexuals in many societies. One privilege received by heterosexuals in Anglo-European society is to never (or rarely) have to explain their sexuality to other people; it’s a privilege to not have to explain to someone why you have sexual desire for someone of the opposite sex. Institutions, norms, and values in heteronormative societies reinforce the perceived normality of heterosexuality. The obvious institution in many places in the United States that currently reinforces heteronormativity is marriage because in most states marriage between two people of the same sex is illegal. But in a heteronormative society, all institutions privilege heterosexuals and assume heterosexuality as the norm.

Take a minute to think about some of the ways in which heterosexuality may be built into the structure of your particular college or university. Are men and women allowed to live together in one dorm room? At a few colleges and universities, the answer may be yes, but generally even in coed (mixed sex) dorms, women live with women in individual dorm rooms. Why do many colleges and universities prevent men and women from living together in the same dorm room, and what assumptions are they making about the sexuality of their students? This practice is heteronormative in that it assumes that to prevent romantic or sexually involved couples from living together on college campuses, women and men must be prevented from living in the same room, but not men with men or women with women.

Can you think of other examples of heteronormativity on your college or university campus, or other ways in which practices and values reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is normal and right?
Other researchers have documented the ways in which middle schools and high schools as educational institutions control sexuality and enforce heterosexuality on their students (Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995; Miceli, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). Heterosexuality is part of the **hegemonic curriculum** in these schools, in that the practices in these institutions both legitimize the dominant culture and marginalize or reject other cultures and forms of knowledge (Miceli, 2009, p. 344). This is to say that schools teach the centrality of heterosexuality, not just or primarily through the formal curriculum (textbooks, exams, lectures, assignments, etc.) but through the informal practices of the institutions. Perhaps the simplest example of this heteronormativity is the institution of prom. Melinda S. Miceli (2009) argued that prom represents the culmination of the *hetero-romantic* norm that dominates high schools and middle schools. These **hetero-romantic norms** prescribe specific behavioral norms for males and females that are important to proving their masculinity or femininity, as well as gaining acceptance in the peer culture of high school (Miceli, 2009, p. 345). Prom, exemplifying the complex relationship between gender and sexuality, reinforces heterosexuality and prevailing gender norms in one neat little package. Prom is heteronormative most obviously in that, until recently, and still for many high schools, a prom date consists of a young man and a young woman; though the two most popular individuals in any given high school may be two young men or two young women, the prom court always consists of a king and a queen rather than a queen and queen. Prom is an opportunity for high school women and men to fully demonstrate their gender identities, as young women focus on their appearance, their dress, and a date who will treat them well. For young men, prom is about securing an attractive date and, often, ending the evening with sex. A whole genre of popular films is dedicated to enshrining these norms surrounding prom as the culminating event in a young person’s life up to that point.

Prom is just one small example of the hegemonic curriculum in schools enforcing heterosexuality. Beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school, students are constantly divided into groups of boys and girls for various activities. Academic awards are often distributed to one young man and one young woman. Heterosexual expressions of public affection are often tolerated by fellow students and school officials in ways that homosexual expressions of affection would not be. Sex education in schools generally assumes heterosexuality as the norm and does not explore the possibility of other sexual ways of being, let alone addressing the many issues gay and lesbian teenagers may face. Any attempts to include models of sexuality that differ from the heterosexual norm in sex education are generally met with fierce resistance by parents and other community members. On top of all these institutional practices, heterosexuality is enforced in schools by ongoing harassment of gay and lesbian students. In one survey, 84% of GLBT students reported that they had been verbally harassed, while 82.9% added that teachers and administrators rarely, if ever, intervened when they heard homophobic comments (Miceli, 2009, p. 348). Sixty-four percent of GLBT students reported that they felt unsafe at their school because of their sexual orientation.

Negotiating what it means to live outside the established norms of a heteronormative society becomes even more complicated when issues of race, ethnicity, and nationalism enter into the picture. In our globalized world, the Anglo-European categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are increasingly becoming the dominant way of thinking about sexuality. It’s no surprise, then, that many people in the global South associate homosexual
behavior and homosexuality with the West and often with Western imperialism. Though same-sex sexual behavior may have existed in these societies, the particular formulation of homosexuality and heterosexuality is a new concept to many cultures. In areas of the world where nationalism is strong, homosexuality poses a particular problem to the project of nation building. Nationalism is “a genre of claims, understandings, and grounds for recognizing, promoting, and legitimizing peoplehood, identity, and sovereignty” (LiPuma, 1997, p. 36). Nationalism is similar to ethnicity in that it involves a group of people who make a claim to some common sense of peoplehood, but unlike ethnicity, nationalism includes some political claim—to land or sovereignty. Nationalism in most of its manifestations is both gendered and sexualized. Nationalism is inherently masculine, as nationalist scripts are generally written primarily for men, about men, and by men (Nagel, 2003, p. 159). The nation-state is a masculine institution, with its strictly hierarchical structure and male dominance of decision-making positions. In addition, the culture of nationalism emphasizes and resonates with masculine themes such as honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty (Nagel, 2003, p. 160). It is men’s job to form, define, and defend the nation, and because of this masculine formulation, both feminists and homosexuals constitute a threat to the cause of nationalism.

Women’s role in nationalism is largely reproductive and symbolic. Women’s bodies can come to symbolically represent a nation, and therefore, the sexual purity of women becomes important to nationalist causes. A woman who has sex with someone outside the national group is seen as a traitor, defiling the honor of the nation as a whole, in a way that a man violating those boundaries is not. This partly explains the use of rape as a weapon of war and ethnic/national conflict; women’s bodies become symbolic of the actual territory of the nation, and so to violate (through rape) a woman’s body is to gain a kind of military victory. Women’s reproductive role is to increase the population of the nation itself. In nationalist settings like Fascist Italy and the ethnic dictatorship of the former Yugoslavia, governments curtailed women’s control of their reproduction in hopes of increasing their national population. Feminist claims for the interests of women are perceived as competing with the agenda of the nation as a whole, and such women face challenges to their loyalty to the nationalist cause and their sexuality; they may be labeled as lesbians or as in league with colonialist oppressors and acting under the influence of Western feminism (Nagel, 2003, p. 161). Obviously, to the extent that feminists also argue for women’s control of their own reproduction, they also come into conflict with the nationalist agenda.

Homosexuality is seen as problematic to nationalist goals for a variety of reasons. First, nationalism is an inherently backward-looking vision of the world, often advocating a return to some real or imagined, precolonial past, before outside oppressors polluted the “true” culture of the people. This backward-looking orientation is at odds with the generally forward-looking orientation of both feminism and gay rights movements, for whom this idealized past is probably not so ideal (Nagel, 2003, p. 163). Homosexuality among men also threatens the masculinity of nationalist movements, sometimes leading to “homosexual panics” as exemplified in the Nazi persecution of homosexuals during World War II (who were branded with a pink triangle much like the gold star for Jews in Germany), or the Cold War practice of expunging supposed homosexuals from the United States and British government. Senator Joseph McCarthy of the United States is famous for his relentless search for Communists during the 1950s, but McCarthy was also interested in homosexuals in the government, presumably because these individuals posed a blackmail threat
Homosexuality is also a threat to nationalism because, like feminism, it is often seen as a product of the West and colonialism and, therefore, as incompatible with the return to a precolonial utopia.

All these complex interconnections between nationalism, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are lived out in the experiences of many gays and lesbians living in or emigrating from parts of the global South. In her study of Arab American femininities, Nadine Naher (2009) used oral histories of Arab American women living in the United States to examine these intersections of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality. In the oral history of Lulu, a Syrian-American Muslim woman living in San Francisco, she described how, among Muslims in her parents’ native Syria, cultural beliefs dictated that women should be virgins when they marry, and though Arab men may have sex before they marry, they are having sex with “Christian women” in Syria, and not with Arab women. Lulu identified that in her family narrative, “whores” are either Christian women or American women. When Lulu came out as a lesbian to her Syrian family, her sexuality was framed within a perspective that views homosexuality as American. Lulu’s uncles told her, “This (lesbianism) doesn’t happen in our culture. You’ve been brainwashed by Americans. You’ve taken too many feminist classes, you joined NOW (National Organization for Women), you hate men, you have a backlash against men. . . .” Lulu said, “It was like . . . ‘This is what American society has done to our daughter’” (Naher, 2009, p. 189). In this particular blending of nationalism, gender, and sexuality, lesbianism is something that is seen as nonexistent in Arab cultures, and Lulu’s new identity must therefore be a product of her enculturation into American society and her exposure to feminism.

In these types of encounters, gay men and lesbians receive messages that they cannot be both Arab and homosexual. Lulu’s family tells her that lesbianism is something that doesn’t exist in Arab culture, and it’s not surprising that Lulu herself felt that she could not be both Arab and gay. As she explains in her oral history, “When that was the reaction, I totally disassociated myself from Arabs. I felt I couldn’t be gay and Arab. I felt that either I have to go home and be straight or totally out and pass as white” (Naher, 2009, p. 189). Lulu eventually found a network of other Arab lesbians and came to realize that she did not have to give up either parts of her identity, being lesbian and being Arab. But her family, who once told Lulu she was “the only gay Arab in the world,” explained the existence of other lesbian Arab women by explaining that these other women must be American or Christian (Naher, 2009, pp. 189–190). In this nationalist perspective, both lesbianism and feminism are associated with American nationality, and not Syrian or Arab nationality, as well as with Christianity, rather than Islamic faith.

Lulu’s story, and the stories of other people who face a complex constellation of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality, demonstrate the ways in which sexuality itself can be used to reinforce and draw other boundaries. Americans as a nation are different from Syrians and Arabs, in part because of their sexual practices. In Naher’s larger study, she revealed a dichotomy used by Arab families to police their daughters’ behavior in which “good Arab girls” were opposed to “bad American(ized) girls,” or “Arab virgin” opposed to “American(ized) whore” (Naher, 2009, p. 187). In addition, homosexuality is American or Christian, and therefore not part of authentic Arab culture or true Islamic tradition.

Using sexuality to draw these kinds of boundaries is hardly unique to Arab cultures, and it is a central, but largely unexamined, facet of American history. Early explorers and settlers used sexuality to draw boundaries between themselves and other groups like Native
Americans and Africans. Native American women were described as beast-like and eager to copulate, defile, and prostitute themselves with early explorers. African women were similarly described as lecherous and beastly, while some peoples were described as having men among them who lived as women and married men (Nagel, 2003, p. 93). Some accounts by male European explorers focused on the unusually large size of African men’s genitalia and, not surprisingly, concluded this was yet another indication of their bestiality and moral inferiority. The supposedly more primitive sexual practices and lax morality of Native Americans and Africans became part of the ideology that justified their virtual destruction as a people and enslavement, respectively. During the period of American enslavement of African Americans, beliefs about the sexuality of slaves helped to justify the systematic rape of black women by their white male owners.

These examples point to the ways in which sexuality, like gender, can be an important tool of power. With hindsight, we know that many of the differences “observed” by European explorers and settlers were differences they imposed because of their own particular viewpoint. Explorers and settlers wanted, to some extent, to believe that these groups were different from and inferior to them, and it’s therefore no surprise that this is what they found. Their beliefs about the sexuality of Africans and Native Americans were socially constructed, but those social constructions had devastating effects. Under the system of slavery, a black woman could not legally be raped by anyone, her master or another slave; as legal property, she had no rights to dictate whom she did and did not have sex with, and historical court records as well as slave narratives demonstrate that under today’s definitions, the rape of female slaves was a common practice.

**SEX AND POWER**

Perhaps this is something of a depressing conclusion to come to in an examination of sexuality. Though it has certainly not always been the case, contemporary perspectives on sexuality in Anglo-European societies tend to emphasize sexuality as a positive aspect of our lives. Countless magazines, books, television shows, and websites exist to instruct us in how to have good and pleasurable sex, and these cultural sources increasingly include a wide range of sexualities. Many gender scholars argue that one legacy of the feminist movement, intended or not, has been an increased sense of sexual liberation for women in many parts of the global North. The double standard, though it has not disappeared, has certainly changed its particular form. Though many people would still view the sex-loving, sexually prolific, generally commitment-phobic character Samantha on *Sex and the City* as a slut, many other people would not. Shows like *Sex and the City* that depict women as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects, as well as the influence of feminism, may have made sexuality something that is positive for women and men. These are good signs, but there is also no denying that sexuality has been and continues to be a means for controlling the lives and behaviors of people. Acts that many would like to see as the most intimate and private are not beyond the reach of societal influence. Sociology is important in the bedroom, as well. Power and sexuality are inevitably linked.

We began this chapter with one vision of what sexuality might look like in a world without gender. John Stoltenberg’s (2006) vision of having sex without having a sex is also a
world where the solidity of the links between sexuality and gender become a little more fluid. A queer theory approach gives us another vision of what a sexuality might look like that was unhooked from sex category and gender. Kate Bornstein (1994) is a male to female transsexual who, in her book *Gender Outlaw*, suggested what desire might look like uncoupled from these other categories. Instead of basing our sexual choices on the particular genitalia someone does or does not possess, which is assumed under the categories of homosexual and heterosexual, what if we chose based on the particular type of sexual activity people preferred? Bornstein proposed a set of colored bracelets that could be worn to indicate the type of sexual activity preferred by individuals as well as their preferred position of dominance or passivity. An orange bracelet would indicate “anything goes,” while a light blue bracelet would indicate a preference for oral sex. Surely the kind of things one likes to do sexually is an important component of sexual compatibility, and it is perhaps as, if not more, important than someone’s sex category or gender. Someone’s sex category or gender doesn’t necessarily tell us anything about what they do and don’t like to do sexually.

Bornstein’s (1994) proposed system is consistent with queer theory in its attempt to expose the problems with many of our existing categories. Knowing someone is genitally female or a woman does not tell you what particular kind of sexual act she might like to engage in or whether she likes to engage in sexual acts at all. We use sex category and gender to organize our sexual desire and attraction because we believe these categories do tell us something true and important about another person that will make them compatible with us in some way. Gay men believe there is some quality in other men that makes them more compatible than they are with women. This is placing a great deal of faith in these categories, as well as assuming that there is something that is consistently true enough about all the people we call men that makes them all potential romantic or sexual partners. Queer theory reminds us to question whether this is true. Is there anything that is consistently true about all the people in the world who are labeled men? This is queer theory questioning gender categories. Queer theory also proposes treating categories as open and fluid, and Bornstein’s bracelet system is a good example of this. Bracelets can easily be put on and taken off, depending on the particular type of mood you’re in. This means that power in sexuality does not necessarily disappear. If you wear a bracelet that indicates you like to dominate in sexual activities, you’re likely to have the power in that encounter. But it would mean that individuals could choose whether they wanted to be the one with or without the power in any given situation, rather than being assumed to be passive or submissive based on something that’s largely out of their control (their sex category or gender). Under this system, power doesn’t disappear altogether, but it becomes more free-floating, a matter of individual choice rather than institutional prerogative. Unlike gender or sex category, which we’re generally stuck with and about which we have little choice, in Bornstein’s system your particular position of power in sexual encounters could change from day to day. And power (who’s submissive and who’s passive) would be just one small way of describing the full complexity of our sexual desires. Sexuality again becomes about acts (what you like to do) rather than types of people (males/females, men/women, heterosexuals/homosexuals, etc.).

Both Bornstein (1994) and Stoltenberg’s (2006) ideas about different systems of sexuality may seem fairly strange, though we’ve seen that different ways of linking sex category, gender, and sexuality have existed historically and still exist in other cultures today. Outside of
utopian visions, do we have any examples of what sex would be like without sex category and gender? Gay male and lesbian relationships certainly do not exist outside the world of gender; two men or two women in a relationship are still gendered beings, even if their relationship is not a heterosexual one. We should not be so naïve as to think that gender’s influence on sexuality somehow disappears in the sexual lives of gay men and lesbians, given its pervasiveness in all societies. But what might sex look like where the dynamics of masculine activity and feminine passivity that are taken for granted in heterosexuality aren’t as readily available? We discussed the gendered nature of sexual scripts earlier in this chapter. Do the same sexual scripts apply to homosexual and heterosexual relationships? Does the double standard work only if a woman is having sex with a man, or can “too much” same-sex sexual behavior among women qualify as “slutty”? Is it more okay for gay men to have a lot of casual sex than it is for lesbian women? How do these sexual scripts matter among gays and lesbians?

As we discussed in our examination of the history of the category of homosexuality, common notions of what it means to be homosexual that have come down to us from early ideas of inversion presume that gay men and lesbians will not conform to gender expectations. Remember, inversion assumes that a gay man is a female soul in a male body, so that a gay man is expected to act in feminine ways. Presumably, that would include following feminine, rather than masculine, sexual scripts. Do gay men worry about a double standard then? Do lesbian women have a more active and therefore masculine sexuality? Not really. Research on the actual sexual practices of everyone—heterosexual or homosexual—are hard to come by for the simple fact that it is difficult to gather a large, random survey about people’s sexual practices. This is, not surprisingly, because most people would not feel comfortable being asked questions about their sex lives by a complete stranger, social scientist or not. Some of the most comprehensive data come from the National Health and Social Life Survey and suggests that there are some differences between the sexual lives of gay men and lesbians. Men who have had some same-gender partners since the age of 18 (one way of measuring sexual identity in the survey, given the confusions we already talked about in this chapter) had 44 partners on average since the age of 18, while women who have had some same-gender partners since the age of 18 had on average 20 partners since the age of 18 (Laumann et al., 1994). This suggests that, like their heterosexual counterparts, gay men do have more sexual partners on average than lesbians. However, the frequency of sex does not vary significantly between gay men and lesbians; gay men have sex about 5.7 times per month on average, while lesbians have sex about 6.1 times per month.

Moving outside the bounds of heterosexuality, then, does not seem to necessarily include a movement outside of the bounds of gender expectations. Are homosexuality and heterosexuality really that different in their sexual scripts? There is one area in which sexual behavior differs between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Homosexual relationships tend to be more egalitarian, and this extends into sexual relationships. A relationship that is more egalitarian is one that is embedded in a belief in equality among all people. In heterosexual relationships, men are far more likely to initiate sex. But in relationships among lesbians and gay men, there is no division of labor in terms of who initiates sex; each partner is equally likely to initiate sex. In addition, gay men and lesbians generally have more variation in their sexual activities than do heterosexual couples. This is especially true in regard to
nonpenetrative sex. Lesbian and gay couples, in other words, have different sexual scripts in terms of defining exactly what sex is, and these definitions are broader than for heterosexual couples. Perhaps because of these broader definitions, some research suggests that gay couples have longer lovemaking sessions than do heterosexual couples (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1978).

In this sense, the gender of partners does seem to have at least a partial effect on sexual behaviors. Though we have laid out many examples to choose from in this chapter, it is still impossible for us to say for sure what sexuality would look like in a world without gender and sex categories. What would our sexual scripts be? Would our sex lives be better for it? Would sexuality continue to be a way to maintain power and draw boundaries between different groups? These questions are difficult to answer. What we can say is that though sexuality is an aspect of our lives that we might like to think of as the truest expression of ourselves, it is still deeply influenced by our social world and, therefore, our ideas about gender. Whether sexuality is the driving force creating our ideas about gender or gender is what gives us our concepts of sexuality, it is impossible to deny the ways in which these two concepts are deeply and inextricably intertwined.

**BIG QUESTIONS**

- In this chapter, we explored what it means to say that sexuality is socially constructed, even though social scientists have only recently begun to explore these ideas. Why do you think the social construction of sexuality is something that has just recently begun to be explored? Why might it be more difficult to think of sexuality as socially constructed?
- How is the construction of feminine sexuality as passive and masculine sexuality as active important to larger issues of gender inequality? Some gender scholars argue that sexuality is the key to understanding gender inequality. How might you make this argument, that the ability to control someone’s sexuality is an important aspect of power?
- How are both women and men harmed by gendered beliefs about sexuality? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being seen as a sexual object or a sexual subject?
- In this chapter, we discussed contradictory ideologies about women’s sexuality. While women are often seen as sexually passive, other traditions suggest that women have more sexual desire than men. How might you explain these contradictions? What are the gendered implications of these two different perspectives on feminine sexuality?
- We suggested in this chapter that homosexuality is not at all the same as same-sex sexual behavior and that the names we use to identity social behaviors and values matter. Do you agree that terms like homosexuality and heterosexuality should only apply to certain cultural contexts and that to attempt to describe behaviors outside of that context using these terms confuses the different meanings of these behaviors in different cultural contexts?
- Given what you now know about the social construction of sexuality, what might be problems with research that attempts to explain why some people are homosexual and some people are heterosexual from a biosocial perspective? For example, if you were doing such a study, how would you define the criteria for what makes someone heterosexual and what makes someone homosexual?
GENDER EXERCISES

1. In this chapter, we discussed the double standard regarding masculine and feminine sexuality. The double standard has a linguistic component in the form of language asymmetry, as we discussed in Chapter 4. Test this out by generating a list for yourself of all the terms (slang and otherwise) used to describe promiscuity or immoral sexual behavior for women, and then make a similar list for men. Ask other people to generate similar lists, and then compare. Is there an asymmetry in the number of words available to describe promiscuous or immoral sexual behavior in women as compared to men? How does this relate to the double standard?

2. How are our ideas about appropriate sexual behavior for women and appropriate sexual behavior for men different? Conduct your own informal surveys or interviews on this topic by devising a list of questions on how people would view certain behaviors in women and men. For example, you might ask people what an acceptable number of sexual partners is for women as compared to men—or how they would view a man cheating on his partner as compared to a woman. Interview or survey people from different backgrounds to compare how they think about these issues.

3. In this chapter, we attempted to describe a homosexual role, or the basic expectations that go along with being homosexual in current Anglo-European society, as well as the difficulty in establishing what it means to be homosexual or heterosexual. Ask a group of people what they believe makes someone heterosexual or homosexual. Is it sexual behavior, sexual desire, or sexual identity? Be specific. Is someone who has one opposite-sex sexual experience automatically heterosexual? How many opposite-sex sexual experiences are required to make someone “officially” heterosexual?

4. Pick an institution or group to which you belong. This could be a formal group, like a club, or an informal group, like your friends or family. Write an essay reflecting on ways in which this group or institution is heteronormative. You might think about how someone who is not heterosexual would experience belonging to this group or institution. Try to uncover the taken-for-granted ways in which this institution or group assumes that its members are heterosexual or that heterosexuality is the norm (this exercise will probably be easier if you are not heterosexual and have had these experiences yourself). How could this group or institution change in ways that made it no longer heteronormative?

5. Gender and sexuality are connected in that many homosexuals are assumed to have a different gender identity than heterosexuals. Gay men are assumed to be less masculine and lesbian women less feminine. Pick some films, television shows, magazines, or books that depict gay and lesbian people. Do a content analysis of these cultural artifacts, identifying how often gay and lesbian characters are depicted as acting in ways that are gender-consistent as opposed to gender-inconsistent. What does this content analysis tell you about our views on gender and sexuality?

6. There are increasing numbers of media outlets that cater specifically to gay and lesbian communities. Magazines include The Advocate, Out, Curve, and Gay Life. On television, LOGO is a channel that caters to gay and lesbian communities. Do a content analysis of some of these cultural artifacts, examining the ways in which gender is depicted in these magazines. For example, you might compare the articles about women and men in The Advocate to articles in “straight” men’s and women’s magazines such as GQ and Cosmo. Are there differences in gender depictions in these gay and straight media outlets?
7. Interview someone from a cultural background different from your own about their culture’s perspectives on sexuality, as well as their own views. You might ask them questions about their views on the differences between men and women’s sexuality, how they think about what is appropriate and inappropriate sexually, and how they think about homosexuality and heterosexuality.

**TERMS**

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**SUGGESTED READINGS**

**Sexuality in general**


CHAPTER 5  How Does Gender Matter for Who We Want and Desire?  213

Sociological theory and sexuality


Cross-cultural and historical perspectives on sexuality


