

# Sociology in the Bedroom

Sex. You think it's the most personal, intimate act. The bedroom is surely the one place where the sociological imagination is the last thing you'll need. But just as we've untangled the terms *sex* and *gender*, we'll take a sociological look at sex, which can reveal some startling insights. Connections may be found between the sheets and history, desire and science, how we do it and how it in turn organizes what we do, as well as with whom and with what meanings. As expected, an excavation into the social construction of sexuality divulges a surprising amount of variation in what is considered normal bedroom behavior. By exposing different social patterns of sexuality, throughout history and across cultures, the sociologist can trace unequal gender relations and show how sexuality expresses, represses, and elucidates those relations.

## SEX: FROM PLATO TO NATO

Among the ancient Greeks, relationships between two men were accepted as normal. Engaging in same-sex acts did not confer a



## SEX: FROM PLATO TO NATO

Among the ancient Greeks, relationships between two men were accepted as normal. Engaging in same-sex acts did not confer a particular identity as the practice varied in frequency across the population among those who did and those who did not also participate in opposite-sex sexual relations. Rather, the socially important distinction revolved around active-passive dichotomy (although historians have shown that many exceptions existed). The active partner was supposed to be older or higher in status than the passive partner. To flip the rules was a violation, and it was considered shameful for a master or noble to be penetrated by a younger man. A more extreme and brutal example of sexual relations founded on power relations can be found today in the social orders in US prisons, where it is easy to see that rape is about power: who is in charge, who is being penetrated, and who is normal versus deviant. Prison rape, like any rape, may not be primarily about seeking sexual gratification; indeed, it is reported that few prison rapists climax during the act. In



↪ An ancient Greek image of two male lovers. How can comparing social patterns of sexuality across cultures and throughout history help sociologists understand modern sexuality?



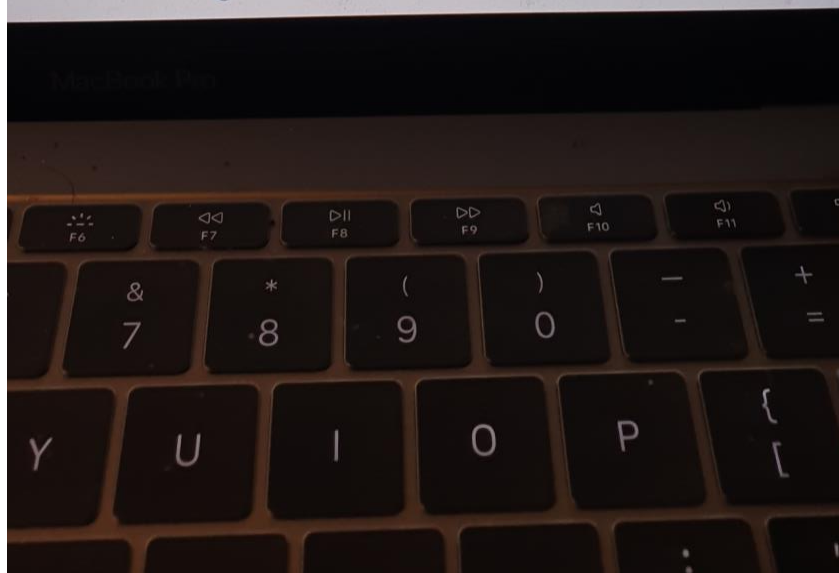
#### relations founded on power relations

can be found today in the social orders in US prisons, where it is easy to see that rape is about power: who is in charge, who is being penetrated, and who is normal versus deviant. Prison rape, like any rape, may not be primarily about seeking sexual gratification; indeed, it is reported that few prison rapists climax during the act. In prison, the same-sex sex act is often seen as something altogether distinct from gay identity.

Or, consider sexual normality among the Sambia, a mountain people in Papua New Guinea. Anthropologist Gilbert Herdt (1981) reported that fellatio played a significant role in a boy's transition into manhood. Young boys are initiated into manhood by a daily ritual of fellatio on older boys and men. By taking in the vital life liquid (semen) of older men, boys prepare themselves to be warriors and sexual partners with women. Fellatio, for Sambia boys, then, is the only way to become "real" men.

Other cultures' attitudes toward male homosexuality are on a whole different level. Both the Siwans of North Africa and the Keraki, also in New Guinea, prefer homosexuality to heterosexuality, for fairly straightforward, practical reasons (Kimmel, 2000). Because every male is homosexual during his adolescence and then **bisexual** after heterosexual marriage, limiting straight sex keeps down the birthrate. In these cultures with scant resources, homosexuality makes practical sense to limit the chances of teen pregnancy and overpopulation.

There is enormous variation in how humans have



ion

Because every male is homosexual during his adolescence and then **bisexual** after heterosexual marriage, limiting straight sex keeps down the birthrate. In these cultures with scant resources, homosexuality makes practical sense to limit the chances of teen pregnancy and overpopulation.

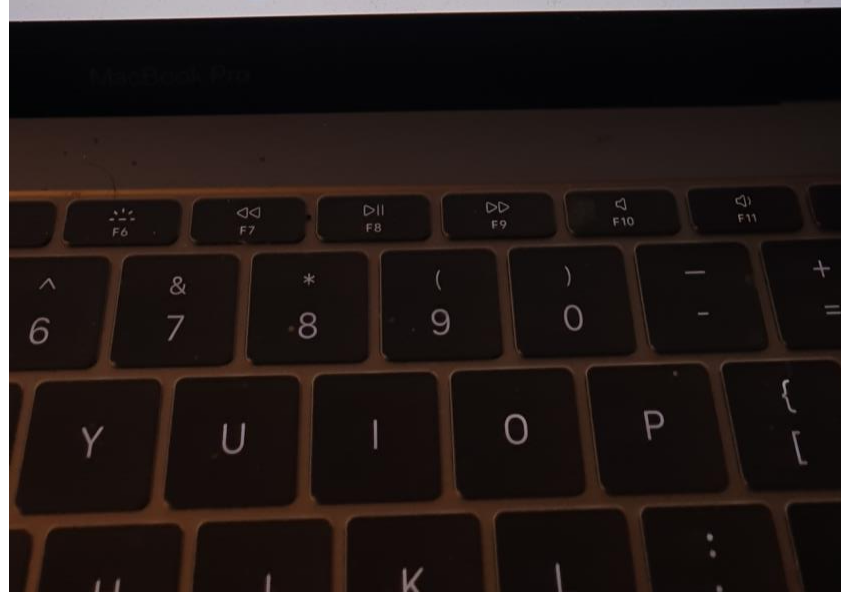
There is enormous variation in how humans have sex and what it means to them. Mouth-to-mouth kissing, common in Western cultures, is unthinkable among the Thonga and Sirono cultures: "But that's where you put food!" (Kimmel, 2000). American, heterosexual middle-class couples have sex a few nights a week for about 15 minutes a pop; the people of Yapese cultures near Guam engage in sex once a month. Marquesan men of French Polynesia are said to have anywhere from 10 to 30 orgasms a night! Which of these is "normal"?

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

By treating sexuality as a social construction—that is, as always shaped by social factors—the sociologist would argue that the notion of normal, especially pertaining to what happens behind closed bedroom (or bathroom or car) doors, is always contested. In other words, there is no natural way of doing it. If an essentially right way existed, we wouldn't be able to find such wild and woolly variation throughout history and across cultures. Starting from the view that sex itself is a social creation.



Chapter 8: Gender



## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

By treating sexuality as a social construction—that is, as always shaped by social factors—the sociologist would argue that the notion of normal, especially pertaining to what happens behind closed bedroom (or bathroom or car) doors, is always contested. In other words, there is no natural way of doing it. If an essentially right way existed, we wouldn't be able to find such wild and woolly variation throughout history and across cultures. Starting from the view that sex itself is a social creation, sociologists tend to argue that humans have sexual plumbing but no sexuality until they are located in a social environment. The range of normal and abnormal is itself a construction, a production of society. The study of this range can lead the willing sociologist into an exploration of the social relations on which sex is built.

**Sexuality and Power** Marxist feminists, for instance, argue that sexuality in America is an expression of the unequal power balance between men and women. Catharine MacKinnon (1983) argued that in male-dominated societies, sexuality is constructed as a gender binary, with men on top and women on the bottom (literally and figuratively). To MacKinnon, sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality, an expression of male control. Some feminists also argue that our experiences of what is titillating are shaped by the fetishization of

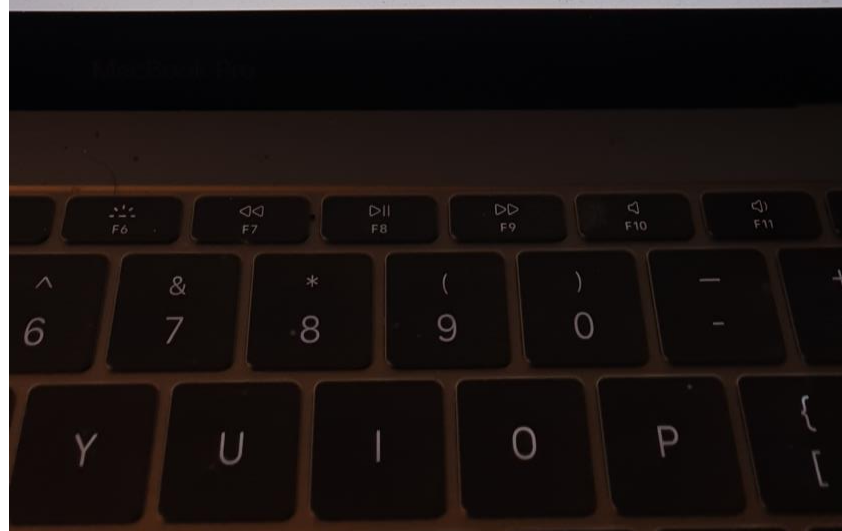


dition

binary, with men on top and women on the bottom (literally and figuratively). To MacKinnon, sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality, an expression of male control. Some feminists also argue that our experiences of what is titillating are shaped by the fetishization of male power. So being "taken" is exciting and pleasurable to women, revealing that even those things we think of as the most personal of experiences are shaped by social arrangements of power.

Adrienne Rich (1980) called sexuality in America a "compulsory heterosexuality." This "political institution," at least for some, is not a preference but something that has been imposed, managed, organized, and enforced to serve a male-dominated capitalist system in which women's unpaid domestic work is required to support men's paid work outside of the home. Because her work is unpaid, the woman in this situation is unable to leave a bad husband. According to Rich, people come to see heterosexuality as the norm, when it is, in fact, a mechanism integral to sustaining women's social subordination.

**Same-Sex Sexuality** The connections between sex and power are best exemplified in the social construction of the **homosexual** in the current West, the social identity of a person who has sexual attraction to and/or relations with people of the same sex. For most of the past century, the dominant view has been that individuals are born either homosexual or heterosexual, gay or straight, queer or normal. Sexual orientation was thought of as a



dition

**Same-Sex Sexuality** The connections between sex and power are best exemplified in the social construction of the **homosexual** in the current West, the social identity of a person who has sexual attraction to and/or relations with people of the same sex. For most of the past century, the dominant view has been that individuals are born either homosexual or heterosexual, gay or straight, queer or normal. Sexual orientation was thought of as a kind of personhood automatically acquired at birth or something carried in our genes (despite documented cases of identical twins in which one is straight and the other gay). But recall the ancient Greeks' homosexual love, the Sambian rites of manhood, or prison rape. Jane Ward (2015), for example, studied straight men who have sex with other men in the contemporary United States, including fraternity members or military personnel who engage in sex acts with their compatriots as part of hazing or men who answer ads to find other men to masturbate with. Men in these examples engage in homosexual acts without adopting a homosexual identity (Silva, 2017). When do acts, behaviors, or desires crystallize into identities?

Before 1850, there was no such thing as a homosexual. Sure, people engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors—but it was not yet an identity in the way we now know it. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) led the way to poststructuralist notions of the body and sexuality as historical productions. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault made the case that the body is “in the grip” of cultural practices. That is,



Chapter 8: Gender



dition

**Same-Sex Sexuality** The connections between sex and power are best exemplified in the social construction of the **homosexual** in the current West, the social identity of a person who has sexual attraction to and/or relations with people of the same sex. For most of the past century, the dominant view has been that individuals are born either homosexual or heterosexual, gay or straight, queer or normal. Sexual orientation was thought of as a kind of personhood automatically acquired at birth or something carried in our genes (despite documented cases of identical twins in which one is straight and the other gay). But recall the ancient Greeks' homosexual love, the Sambian rites of manhood, or prison rape. Jane Ward (2015), for example, studied straight men who have sex with other men in the contemporary United States, including fraternity members or military personnel who engage in sex acts with their compatriots as part of hazing or men who answer ads to find other men to masturbate with. Men in these examples engage in homosexual acts without adopting a homosexual identity (Silva, 2017). When do acts, behaviors, or desires crystallize into identities?

Before 1850, there was no such thing as a homosexual. Sure, people engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors—but it was not yet an identity in the way we now know it. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) led the way to poststructuralist notions of the body and sexuality as historical productions. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault made the case that the body is “in the grip” of cultural practices. That is,



Chapter 8: Gender

