

# Cultural Anthropology

A TOOLKIT FOR A GLOBAL AGE

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### “Birds Do It, Bees Do It”: The Intersection of Sexuality and Biology

The famous 1928 Broadway show tune by Cole Porter asserts, “Birds do it, bees do it. Even educated fleas do it. Let’s do it, let’s fall in love.” Is it really that simple? Clearly, biology plays a key role in shaping sexuality, for sexuality includes distinct physiological processes. But how much of human sexuality is shaped by our nature? As we will see, exactly how our genetic inheritance shapes our desires, attractions, identities, practices, and beliefs is quite complicated and subject to heated debate.

People sometimes think that sexuality is the most “natural” thing in the world. After all, every species must reproduce or face extinction, right? Therefore, many assume that the sexual instincts and behaviors of other animals provide an indication of the natural state of human sexuality unencumbered by the overlays of culture.

Yet research reveals that human sexuality is actually a distinct outlier in the animal kingdom. In his article “The Animal with the Weirdest Sex Life” (1997), scientist and author Jared Diamond suggested that human sexuality is completely abnormal by the standards of the world’s 30 million animal species and 4,300 mammal species. Diamond identified many ways in which humans differ from most other mammals, including the following examples:

- Most other mammals live individually, not in pairs, and meet only to have sex. They do not raise children together, and usually the males do not recognize their offspring or provide paternal care. In contrast, most humans engage in long-term sexual partnerships and often co-parent the couple’s joint offspring.
- Most mammals engage in public sex, whereas humans, as a rule, have sex in private.
- Most mammals have sex only when the females of the species ovulate, at which time they advertise their fertility through visual signals, smells, sounds, and other changes in their behavior. Human women, however, may be receptive to sex not only during ovulation but also at other times during their menstrual cycle.
- All human women go through menopause, in which their ability to conceive children ends, long before the end of the human life cycle. But other mammals are fertile throughout their adult life, perhaps with a gradual deterioration as they age.
- Possibly most intriguing, humans, dolphins, and bonobos — a variety of ape — are the only mammals that have sex for fun rather than exclusively for reproduction. In fact, in contemporary U.S. culture, humans seem to do it mostly for fun.



**FIGURE 9.1** Bonobos, dolphins, and humans are the only mammals that have sex for fun rather than exclusively for procreation.



By the standards of most mammals (including great apes, to whom we are most closely related), we humans are the sexual outliers. Despite the common belief that clues to the essentials of human sex drives and behaviors may be found in “nature,” Diamond makes clear that humans have developed a sex life that lies far outside the natural framework of that of our mammal relatives. If other animals’ sex lives do not provide clues to the roots of our sexuality, what can human biology tell us about the genetic and hormonal roots of sexual desire and sexual behavior?

One school of thought, which draws heavily on evolutionary biology, focuses on the ways in which human evolution has created biological drives that are embedded in the genes that shape the human brain and control the body's hormones. These drives work automatically—instantly—to ensure the reproduction of the species. Human sexuality is thought to rely heavily on the expression of these biological drives.

Physical anthropologist Helen Fisher explores the complex biological roots of human sexuality in her book *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (2004), in which she analyzes the relationship of body chemistry to human sensations of love. Fisher suggests that through evolution humans have developed a set of neurochemicals that drive an “evolutionary trajectory of loving” (93). These neurochemicals guide us through three distinct phases of falling in love: finding the right sexual partner, building a relationship, and forming an emotional attachment that will last long enough to raise a child. First, testosterone—found both in women and men—triggers the sense of excitement, desire, arousal, and craving for sexual gratification that we call lust. Then our bodies release the stimulant dopamine, and possibly norepinephrine and serotonin, to promote the feelings of romance that develop as relationships deepen. Eventually the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin generate the feelings of calm and security that are associated with a long-term partnership; Fisher calls these feelings attachment. These phases, she suggests, are built into our biological systems to ensure the reproduction of the human species, and they play key roles in shaping human sexuality.

Genetic science, despite remarkable developments that include the ability to map the human genome (the whole human genetic structure), still has limitations as a predictor of individual human sexual behavior. Yes, the frequency of certain behaviors in the human population may suggest an underlying biological component. But it is extremely difficult to directly trace links between specific genes and specific behaviors. So, for instance, despite widespread popular discussion of the topic, geneticists have not been able to identify a “straight” gene or a “gay” gene or any cluster of genes that determines sexual orientation.

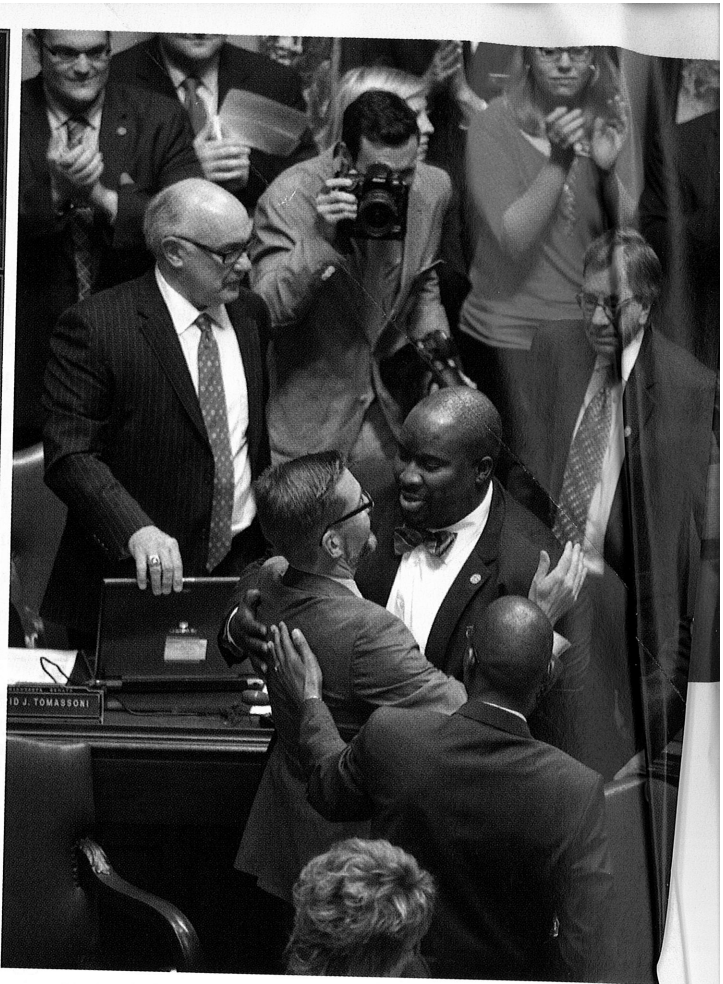
Furthermore, we know that genes do not work in isolation from the environment. Our bodies and minds, which are not fully formed at birth, bear the imprint of both gene and environment. Beginning in the womb, our genes interact with the environment—the nutrients, sounds, emotions, and diseases that surround and infuse us. The exact effects of the interaction of biology and environment are extremely difficult to measure. Even within the parameters of Fisher's study, we cannot predict a particular man's level of sexual desire for a particular partner by measuring his level of testosterone. Attraction, desire, and even disinterest are not only biologically driven but also triggered by a vast array of cultural factors; these may include responses to the potential partner's

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age, religion, class, race, education, and employment prospects. So, although biology clearly plays a role in human sexuality, exactly how it manifests itself in each individual and how it interacts with the environment and culture is not as clear as many popular descriptions of sexuality suggest.

**Sexuality and Culture**

A second school of thought, one we will consider in more detail throughout the rest of this chapter, focuses on the ways in which the people, events, and cultural environment around us shape—or construct—our sexual desires and behaviors. These feelings and actions may have roots in human evolution, but the constructionist perspective focuses on the process through which humans are enculturated from birth to channel these feelings and desires into a limited number of acceptable expressions. Culture shapes what people think is natural and normal. Parents, family, friends, doctors, religious communities, sex education classes, the media, and many other individual and institutional actors all play a role in shaping the

**FIGURE 9.2** How do people, events, and the cultural environment around us shape our sexual desires and behaviors? *Clockwise from top left:* advertisements featuring sex and love; lawmakers congratulate Minnesota state senator Scott Dibble (*front left*), lead sponsor of Minnesota’s gay marriage bill, after its passage, May 13, 2013; a sex education class at Kealing Junior High School, Austin, Texas.

way we express our sexuality and what those expressions mean to others. Thus, culture both guides and limits our sexual imaginations.

Constructionists also trace the ways in which, through culture, human groups arrange the diversity of human sexuality into a limited number of categories that are imagined to be discrete (such as homosexual and heterosexual, gay and straight), thereby masking the actual diversity of human expressions of sexuality. Where an individual is assigned within these categories has direct consequences for his or her life chances. Depending on the particular cultural construction of meaning surrounding human sexuality, not all sexual desires and behaviors may be considered equally acceptable. The meaning they acquire in a particular culture has the potential to affect access to social networks, social benefits, jobs, health care, and other resources (Harding 1998; Ore 2010).

It is important to note that the perspectives of evolutionary biology and cultural constructionism discussed in this section need not be mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect different research emphases into the roots and contemporary expressions of human sexuality.

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## What Does a Global Perspective Tell Us about Human Sexuality?

A look at human sexuality over time and across cultures reveals significant diversity in (1) how, where, when, and with whom humans have sex, and (2) what certain sexual behaviors mean. This diversity challenges Western culture-bound notions and suggests alternative options for reinterpreting assumed cultural categories of sexuality. The discussions that follow offer examples of alternative constructions of sexuality in Suriname, Nicaragua, and Papua New Guinea.

### Same-Gender “*Mati Work*” in Suriname

In the *Politics of Passion* (2006), cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker explores the lives of black, working-class Creole women in the port city of Paramaribo, Suriname, a former Dutch colony on the northern coast of South America. Writing about the sexual choices Surinamese women make, Wekker (like Roger Lancaster and Gil Herdt in the studies described below) challenges the dominant thinking about sexual identity in Western scholarship and social movements by describing a much more flexible and inclusive approach specific to the local Paramaribo context.

Wekker’s study focuses on *mati*—women who form intimate spiritual, emotional, and sexual relationships with other women. Wekker estimates that three out of four working-class black women in Paramaribo engage in “*mati work*” at some point in their lives, establishing relationships of mutual support, obligation,



MAP 9.1  
Suriname



**FIGURE 9.3** Women join a parade in the port city of Paramaribo, Suriname, on the northern coast of South America.

and responsibility with other women—sometimes living in the same household, sometimes separately, and often sharing in child rearing. In contrast to Western notions of fixed, “either/or” sexual identities, *mati* may engage in sexual relationships with both women and men—sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively. Their relationships with men may center on having children or receiving economic support, but frequently *mati* choose a “visiting” relationship with men rather than marriage in order to maintain their independence.

Born in Suriname and trained as an anthropologist in the United States and the Netherlands, Wekker also writes about the transfer of *mati* work to the Netherlands. In recent decades, young Surinamese women have emigrated from the former colony to its former colonizer in search of economic opportunities. There, *mati* work has often developed in relationships between young immigrants and older black women of Surinamese parentage who have established Dutch citizenship. Wekker describes these relationships as often fraught with complicated power dynamics involving differential age, class, and citizenship status. Yet she notes that this *mati* work does not parallel European ideas of lesbianism.

Wekker pursues this distinction between conceptualizations of sexuality in Suriname and Europe in greater detail as she develops her analysis of *mati* work in Paramaribo. What steps, she asks, must anthropologists take to understand sexual relationships between people of the same gender cross-culturally without distorting what these relationships mean in their actual lives? Wekker argues that Western scholarship mistakenly links all sexual acts between individuals

of the same gender to a notion of “homosexual identity”—a permanent, stable, fixed sexual core or essence, whether inborn or learned, that is counterposed to an equally fixed and opposite heterosexual identity. In the Western framework, a person is “either/or.” The *mati* of Paramaribo, Wekker argues, approach their sexual choices very differently, regarding sexuality as flexible behavior rather than fixed identity. Their behavior is dynamic, malleable, and inclusive—“both/and”—rather than exclusive.

Wekker urges students of sexuality to not impose Western views about sexuality—what she considers “Western folk knowledge”—on the rest of the world but to understand sexuality in its local reality with the goal of rethinking same-gender behavior in cross-cultural perspective. Rather than thinking of one uniform expression of same-gender sexual behavior, she recommends focusing attention on the variation of people’s behaviors. Furthermore, thinking cross-culturally, she argues that research and analysis of same-gender sexuality must recognize that the identical physical sexual acts between same-gendered people may be understood in multiple ways and have vastly different social significance in different cultures and historical periods (Wekker 2006, 1999; Brown 2007; Stone 2007). This point is also taken up by the following study of male sexuality in Nicaragua.

### Machismo and Sexuality in Nicaragua

Cultural anthropologist Roger Lancaster explores similar themes in *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (1994), in which he considers expressions of sexuality in a working-class neighborhood in Managua, Nicaragua, during the 1980s. In particular, he examined the concept of machismo—which can be defined as a strong, sometimes exaggerated performance of masculinity. This concept, which Lancaster sees as central to the Nicaraguan national imagination, shapes relationships not only between men and women but also between men and other men. Machismo creates a strong contrast between aggression and passivity. “Real” men—masculine men—are aggressive. But a real man’s macho status is always at risk. Machismo must be constantly performed to retain one’s social status.

Lancaster was particularly intrigued by the way machismo affects the sexual relations between men. Generally, in U.S. culture, any man who engages in a same-gender sexual behavior is considered gay. But in the Nicaraguan community that Lancaster studied, only the men who passively receive anal intercourse are pejoratively called *cochon*—“queer, faggot, gay.” The *machista*, the penetrator, is still considered a manly man—an *hombre-hombres*—under the rules of machismo. For it is the *machista’s* role to achieve sexual conquest whenever possible with whoever is available. The active partner acts out machismo, enhancing his status by dominating a weaker person. Among Nicaraguan men, the intersection of sexuality



MAP 9.2  
Nicaragua

and power creates a culturally constructed system of arbitrary and unequal value for male bodies in which machismo privileges the aggressive, assertive *machista* penetrator over the passive, receptive, penetrated *cochon*.

Lancaster points out that in Nicaragua the same acts that in the United States would be seen to reveal one's "essential" homosexuality—desire for and sexual activity with someone of the same sex—are interpreted differently. In fact, active, aggressive men enhance their masculinity and macho status, even if they engage in same-gender sexual activity (Lewin 1995; Rouse 1994; Perez-Aleman 1994).

### Boy-Inseminating Ritual Practices in Papua New Guinea

Like Lancaster's work in Nicaragua, cultural anthropologist Gil Herdt's fieldwork among the Sambia (a pseudonym for a small group of people in the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea) raises another challenge to Western assumptions that same-gender sexual activity undermines gender identity, making gay men effeminate and lesbians masculinized. According to Herdt (1981, 1987, 1993), the Sambia believed that adult men needed to supply boys with semen to ensure their development into manhood. This belief served as the foundation for a ritual practice of boy-insemination that was fully accepted throughout the culture.

Over several years of ceremonies conducted in men's ritual lodges, boys performed fellatio on older men in order to receive their semen. This ritual exchange, Herdt's informants explained, created masculinity, made young men into warriors, and prepared them for marriage to women. Studies conducted by anthropologists in other areas of New Guinea showed similar concerns with the power of liquids—semen, mother's milk, coconut milk—to carry meaning (Herdt 1999). However, the means of transferring the semen (including anal intercourse or direct application to the skin) and its power varied by group.

Herdt's study revealed that the exchange of semen between older and younger men, an act that would be associated with homosexuality in the United States, actually strengthened the young Sambia men's masculine identity. The same-sex initiation did not threaten their heterosexual identity and desire or make other members of the culture consider them effeminate. In fact, performing fellatio with older men was considered to be an essential act that strengthened younger men and prepared them to transition out of a feminized childhood dominated by mothers and other women (Brewis 2000; Flanagan 1986; Knauft 1987).



MAP 9.3  
Papua New Guinea