

Sexualities IN CONTEXT

A Social Perspective

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*For M, T, B and B,
with love*

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Designed by Deborah Gayle

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Plante, Rebecca F.

Sexualities in context : a social perspective / Rebecca F. Plante.

p. cm.

ISBN 10: 0-8133-4293-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-8133-4293-1 (pbk.)

1. Sex. 2. Sex—Social aspects. 3. Sexual-orientation. I. Title.

HQ21.P554 2006

306.76—dc22

06 07 08 / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

2005033651

Why Sex Matters

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEX/UALITY

It was 1895 in Victorian London, England. The city was captivated by a trial happening in its midst—the libel trial of the Marquess of Queensberry, John Sholto Douglas. Novelist and playwright Oscar Wilde, a married father of two, had befriended Douglas's son, Lord Alfred, a young aspiring poet. The marquess was eccentric and easily infuriated and had begun harassing Wilde, assuming that his relationship with Lord Alfred was “indecent.” He had told his son that “to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it,” revealing a concern with how the relationship between Wilde and Alfred *appeared* to others. With Lord Alfred's encouragement, Wilde sued the marquess, who had been publicly and loudly claiming that Wilde was a *sodomite*, someone who engaged in sex with a member of the same sex. The marquess was accused of libel, written or oral statements that convey unjustly unfavorable impressions; Wilde was confident that he would win.

The problem was that Wilde had apparently been sexually intimate with men. When the defense brought out some men who could attest to their relationships with him, testimony cemented with exhibits of love letters and gifts, Wilde was ultimately accused of “gross indecency.” In other trials, Wilde was the defendant, and a number of men testified that Wilde had paid them for sex. Following two trials, he was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to two years of hard labor in prison. After his release, Wilde's health suffered and he died in Paris, in his mid-forties, penniless, his work discredited.

This chapter on why sex matters starts with an event that had ripple effects far into the twentieth century. The events surrounding the trial highlight the role of culture, society, politics, and history in the formation of sexualities. The trial and the verdict ushered in a fear of homosexuality that replaced previous indifference and/or pity. People began conflating art and poetry with effeminacy and homosexuality. Suspicion of those with close, same-sex relationships spread. The trials also marked the beginning of a convention that persists today—the linking of sexual acts and desires with *identity* and the use of the term *homosexual* to describe a person. The significance of this shift in perceptions of identity will become clearer as you read this book, when we explore things like language, culture, history, and society.

The main purpose of this book is to invite you to think more critically and thoughtfully about what sexuality is. It is relatively easy—and it even seems to make sense—to assume that sex is fairly simple. It's about biology, anatomy, genes; uncontrollable drives, lust, and hormones. Sex is absolutely about all these things, but it's also about much, much more. Since I am confident that you can find plenty of information elsewhere about biology, anatomy, and sex drive, I will not spend a lot of time on these issues. But I am less confident and am somewhat skeptical that you can find a lot of information about the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which individuals develop their sexualities. In asking you to carefully examine sexuality more generally, I will be focusing specifically on the bigger picture.

SO WHAT IS THE BIGGER PICTURE?

Language. This is relatively simple to define. Merriam-Webster Online (<http://www.m-w.com>) reports that language is “words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community.” But language is more than the series of intelligible sounds one can verbalize. It is also a systematic process or method of communicating ideas (i.e., making common); language utilizes sound but also signs, gestures, and nonverbals. There is no way to really understand the broader context without spending a little time critically reflecting on the ways in which we discuss and describe all things sexual. Everything from English slang to Latin-derived medical terms is inflected with meaning, symbolism, and significance. What are we communicating—making common—and what assumptions pervade our interpretations?

Culture. From the Latin *cultura*, to cultivate. In the social sciences, culture and social structures are foundational concepts, hinting at things larger than any single individ-

ual in a specific time or era. Merriam-Webster Online defines culture as the “integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.” In the social sciences, we tend to add some nuances to this definition, to clarify that we are describing the “shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices” of particular groups or people. What role does culture play in controlling sexualities? How do we learn these attitudes, goals, and values?

Socialization. This is a process, dependent on social interactions, by which individuals learn (and internalize) the culture of particular societies, nations, and other social groups (such as subcultures). Socialization helps us become part of “the group”—whether that group is small and local, or larger and less defined. It is important to note that socialization, though most salient in childhood, is in fact a lifelong process. How do we teach new members of societies and groups, whether infants or immigrants? And importantly, *what* do we teach? What are our shared attitudes, goals, and values? How do we use socialization to attempt to control individual and social expressions of sexualities? What contradictions and conflicts can we identify? What kinds of *subcultures*, groups with characteristic patterns, norms, values, and behaviors somewhat distinct from the overarching culture or society, exist in terms of sexualities?

Demographics and Variables. When we think about subcultures, we have to consider some of the elements of human experience that we have made meaningful throughout history: race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, biological sex, social class, age, physical and/or mental ability, religion, geography, and sexual orientation. We classify ourselves and others on the basis of these characteristics; make judgments, laws, and policies; and develop subcultures, norms, sanctions, penalties, rewards, and rules with these things in mind.

So the perspective I will take in this book can be described in this way:

1. Everything that constitutes “sex” cannot and should not be boiled down or overly simplified. It is a mistake to assume that if we want to understand sex all we need to do is find a road map to our bodies and rely on our “sex drives” to guide us further. Acts of sex exist in all cultures and have existed throughout history, and these acts even involve the same basic set of body parts and hydraulic motion, in effect. But there is no universal, absolute, unchanging set of laws, attitudes, or perspectives about sex. We do not *just* “have sex,” “do it,” or “hook up.” There is so much more to it than just drives, hormones, or reproductive imperatives.

2. Instead, we must explore, evaluate, and examine the bigger picture of social, historical, political, and cultural context. Discourses (or the conversations, narratives, and stories) of broader cultures construct systems of sexuality and identity, wherein particular acts, feelings, and interactions are given particular meaning and significance. Each of us, especially in contemporary society, is subject to societal expectations, politics, and morality, among other things. In this light, we each *interpret* our behaviors, feelings, and attitudes. *Power*—the ability to influence, to make one's will dominant, to assert one's interests and perspectives—is an absolutely key concept. We cannot understand any of these things without frequently reminding ourselves about how power operates. We will focus on the American context, though ideas and information from other cultures will be touched on occasionally.

3. Demographics and variables interact with this bigger context (and biology) to form the foundation on which all things sexual are built. We will consider gender at every juncture and it will be the basic variable in every chapter. Race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation are other variables that we will also address.

4. Finally, a systematic approach to critical thinking is necessary to look deeply into sexualities. To really see what is in our culture and subcultures, and see how "sexuality" has developed inside each of us, we must develop the regular habit of mind (or mental discipline) of systematically questioning what we read, hear, think, feel, and are taught about sexualities, gender, and biological sex.

ANOTHER MOMENT IN HISTORY

One of the most often cited claims about sexual history is that ancient Greeks were gay. While it is possible to see artwork and vases depicting sexual acts between men, and we can find texts describing sex and love between men, it is not entirely accurate to say that these men were gay, in the same way that we would use the word. Classics expert David Halperin writes that the sexual acts men engaged in served very specific sociocultural purposes, chief among them to signify social status (1990).¹ Ancient Athens had a sexual conduct code that "position[ed] social actors in the places assigned to them (by virtue of their political standing) in the hierarchical structure of the Athenian polity" (p. 50). Sexuality was not conceptualized in the way that it is in the contemporary United States. Sexuality was dichotomized not in terms of acts performed between males and females, or between males, but in terms of *active and passive* (Karras, 2000).² The relevant features of a sexual object were not so much deter-

mined by a physical typology of genders as by the social articulation of power" (Halperin, 1990: 50). Sex was not merely about pleasure and the private exchange of feeling between two individuals; it was a way to cement public or social standing. As such, the most privileged form of sexual relations between men involved men of superior status solely engaging in penetrative activities (*active*). Interest in being penetrated (the misleading term *passive*) was akin to effeminacy or taking the female role, an inferior form of behavior. Relationships between men were seen as the highest form of love; women, and wives especially, were regarded as child bearers (Kauls, 1993).³

The Greek example shines a useful light on the argument that many aspects of sexualities are *socially constructed*. The best way to understand this concept is to start with a premise: some things are real (and true) independently of individual whims, decisions, or patterns. Gravity on Earth is one example. It is probably easy for you to accept that gravity on Earth is real. You may wish to challenge this proposition, but you would need to support your challenge with evidence or proof. The problem is that you would be unable to provide any single examples, let alone systematic patterns or trends, to challenge the existence of gravity. Accepting that some things are real, we can however move to the fundamental premise of *social construction(ism)*: there are things (ideas, propositions, and so forth) that appear to be "natural" and "obvious," that are, more accurately, specific inventions or artifacts of particular cultures or societies. These things require some collective, human practices to sustain their existence and have meaning, significance, and effects that are agreed upon by the majority of society. It is most likely harder for you to just accept this definition of social construction(ism) than it is to just accept that some things are real.

What kinds of things are we referring to? What significance or meaning? How do we know people agree on these things? I, for one, have never been formally surveyed or asked to contribute to an opinion poll on the meaning of things. Have you? Picture such a poll:

Interviewer: "Ma'am, we're calling to find out what you think about sex. Today's item to be socially constructed, by virtue of cultural consensus, is oral sex. Are you willing to agree that 'oral sex' shall be an act that is not quite as important as penile-vaginal intercourse, which has otherwise already become known as 'hitting a home run' or 'going all the way'? If we gain consensus on this point, then oral sex will be placed in a continuum of behaviors and called 'foreplay,' clearly denoting its insignificance compared to penile-vaginal intercourse. Your participation is very important to us."

Since this is clearly *not* how we come to consensus, how can we really understand what it means to say that many aspects of sexualities are socially constructed? We can use the ancient Greek example to see that although men engaged in same-sex behavior and had romantic relationships with other men, the relationships were not viewed in the same light as contemporary, similar relationships. Individuals were not identified as "gay" or "heterosexual"—sexual behaviors simply did *not* define people; that was unfathomable in ancient Greek culture. Through the intersections and influences of culture, socialization, and history, sexualities have been socially constructed. Therefore, in Greek culture, it was agreed—via convention, expectation, and social interpretation—that same-sex behavior was a way to communicate superior status. Sexualities are created by the various practices and consensus of societies (Karraas, 2000). So the meanings and interpretations of most of the things we call sexual are subject to changing consensus and belief systems.

Examples of change are abundant in modern culture. When Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, he told the tale of Hester Prynne's relationship with Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. The problem was that Hester was married to Roger Chillingworth, making her guilty of the crime of *adultery*, sexual acts between persons not married to each other (but married to others). For her crime, Hester was jailed and forced to wear a red "A" on her clothing upon her release, forever communicating to others her sin. Fast forward to 2005 and imagine every married person who has been sexually intimate with a nonspouse wearing a red "A." We could expect to see tens of thousands of letters, if not millions. Though American attitudes about adultery seem uniform, with 93 percent of Americans in a Gallup poll saying that "married men and women having an affair" is morally unacceptable (Carroll, 2005),⁴ the reality is that affairs are not generally punished in the same way they were in Hawthorne's time and earlier. In fact, it was newsworthy that in 2004, in a small Virginia town, the former town lawyer was prosecuted for adultery (Tutley, 2004).⁵ After 18 years of marriage, John Bushey had a relationship with Nellie Mae Hensley; when he ended it, she went to the police. Virginia is one of 23 states that retains laws regulating the sexual conduct of married citizens. After having initially pled guilty and then trying to fight the charge, Bushey ultimately decided to do 20 hours of community service for the misdemeanor offense.

We have seen changes in the social construction of other issues as well. A majority (more than 51 percent) of Americans now say that divorce, sex between unmarried men and women, and having a baby outside legal, heterosexual marriage is "morally acceptable" (Carroll, 2005). For example, in a 1969 Gallup poll of Americans, "only 21.4% of respondents said that premarital sex was 'not wrong'" (Pennington, 2003:

107).⁶ By 1973, 43 percent said that it was not wrong. The rapid shift in perceptions of the morality of premarital, heterosexual conduct is an excellent example of social constructionism at work, to the extent that 58 percent of Americans in a recent Gallup poll believe that premarital sex is *not* wrong (Carroll, 2005). Has the actual behavior changed? No—we're essentially talking about unmarried heterosexuals engaging in various sexual acts, and that's what the Gallup poll referred to in 1969, 1973, and 2005. The acts are the same; it is the sociocultural perceptions, interpretations, and meanings that have changed. (The fact that 54 percent of Americans in the 2005 Gallup poll think pregnancy outside marriage is "morally acceptable" represents a huge change in attitudes.) We will return to the concept of sexual attitudes throughout the book.

CONTRADICTIONS AND CONFUSION

When we begin turning over rocks, looking underneath them to critically examine sex and society, we begin noticing some troubling things. Americans believe that gays and lesbians should not be discriminated against, but the majority still believes that homosexuality is "morally wrong" (Loftus, 2001).⁷ A major element of the discourse on the American Dream is a belief in civil rights and equality for all, in spite of evidence to the contrary. This may explain Americans' attitude against discrimination, while a variety of complex factors may explain the majority's belief that homosexuality is "immoral." But if we simply focus on the findings themselves, it is rather confusing. With our adultery example, it is unequivocal that Americans' attitudes remain uniformly negative, despite societal changes in other respects. So it is confusing, troubling, and contradictory to note that nonetheless, Americans do step outside their partnerships regularly. It is almost impossible to tell how often this occurs, however, because the dominant, negative sociocultural attitude may prevent people from admitting infidelities. Barash and Lipson, in discussing the difficulty of maintaining monogamy, claim that studies average out to a 50 percent rate for heterosexual, married men, and perhaps a 30 percent rate for heterosexual, married women (2001).⁸ The National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS) of the 1990s reported lifetime infidelity incidence rates of about 25 percent for heterosexual men overall and 15 percent for heterosexual women overall (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels, 1994).⁹

There are many other examples of the gaps between what we think and how we reason and what we actually do. What might explain the obvious disjuncture between the attitudes and behaviors of millions of people? Maybe there are differ-

ences between people based on generation, age, or peer groups. Maybe the people who get surveyed or polled about attitudes are different from those whose behaviors are reported in other studies. We will further consider the methods underlying studies like these in chapter 2, but for now, let's consider another possible explanation. I warn you—it is unsatisfying, but I think part of the gap between attitudes and behavior is explained by the fact that culturally, our discussions of sex are marked by ambivalence, confusion, and contradictions. We could become embroiled in a chicken-and-egg scenario. Which came first? Our confused discussions about sex or our confused sexual activities? As you read, you will certainly learn more to help clarify this, but I think it is unlikely that we can definitively solve the mystery by the end of the book.

What's So Confusing Anyway?

Some of the social and cultural aspects of sexualities do not necessarily clear up any mysteries and in fact, may only lead to more confusion and more contradictions. Let's explore. . . .

The Verbal and Nonverbal World. Conversations, language, and the terminology of sexuality are central to our ability to communicate, as suggested above. In chapter 4, you will read about adolescent confusion, inspired by discussions with uncomfortable patients and peers with their points of view. What do we *really* learn about sex when one of the first things we may learn is that we are not allowed to openly discuss the questions we have? What about when we learn that penises are referred to as “wee-wees,” “pee-pees” and “ding-dongs,” and female genitalia are referred to as “down there” or as “vaginas” (thereby ignoring the vulva, clitoris, and mons)? When we ask about “where babies come from” and we are told that “when Mommy and Daddy are in love. . .” what happens when we find ourselves sexually attracted to people for whom we have no such feelings? The ways in which we communicate about everything sexual can be carefully analyzed to reveal our cultural values.

Our language about gender, starting with the fact that we have two different terms (i.e., man and woman), is evidence that we value difference. When we name one class of people “men” and another class of people “women,” we are communicating the belief that the individuals in these groups are not the same—that they need to be classified with separate terminologies. Then we further describe men and women largely on the basis of divergent characteristics and attributes. Why is this confusing? Probably because most of us know people (maybe even ourselves) who do not wholly

embody the dominant cultural version of either masculinity or femininity. We know people who possess traits that we have assigned to the other gender. Although our language—terms like *man*, *woman*, *opposite sex*—does translate what society has “made common,” language does not and cannot capture *all* our experiences.

This is especially clear when we consider the language of and for sexuality. We tend to use euphemisms such as “privates” when referring to women’s genitalia, which require the listener to assume what is not said. The words we use may be morally and emotionally loaded. Men utilize a far more varied set of terms for genitalia and sexual acts (Cornog, 1986).¹⁰ The slang for penis alone runs the gamut from aggressive terms to food terms to war and weaponry terms: for example, *prick*, *worm*, *snake*, *bone*, *wiener*, *pole*, *flute*, *meat* (Richter, 1987).¹¹ Philosophers Ronald De Sousa and Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1988) expand on the specifics of slang: “For a second example, consider the terms used most often by men to refer to women. Such terms may represent women as various kinds or parts of animal (e.g. ‘babe,’ ‘doll’); as fetishised body parts (e.g. ‘cunt,’ ‘ass,’ ‘cow’); as playthings (e.g. ‘babe,’ ‘doll’); as fetishised body parts (e.g. ‘cunt,’ ‘puss,’ ‘piece’); as frivolous edible products (‘sugar,’ ‘honey,’ ‘cupcake,’ ‘cookie,’ ‘crumpet,’ ‘dish,’ ‘peach,’ ‘cherry,’ ‘tart’).”¹² We have complicated etiquette for sexual terms. Some are solely medical or clinical and probably do not have much use outside a doctor’s office—coitus, penile-vaginal intercourse (which would probably not be used outside this book), fellatio, premature ejaculation. Some could be offensive and insulting and are probably used mostly as insults—cunt, prick, dickhead. Some are relatively neutral but awkward, especially in an intimate setting—vagina, penis, testicles, labia. What terms do you and your friends use? Are the terms different depending on your audience and the setting? One confusing thing is that popular sex manuals and sex experts tell us to improve our sex lives via sexual communication. But they rarely address the discrepancies we have built into language—gender, race, and class differences in how we communicate about sex.

Add to this the confusion of slang like “suck my dick” as an insult, the practice of calling men “pussies,” and the use of “fuck” or “fucked (over)” as a synonym for “take(n) advantage of.” Consider the insult *suck my dick*. What does that really mean? Who normally “sucks dick”? Women, or men having sex with men. . . or men in the role of women. Telling someone to suck dick is, in effect, to suggest that they behave like a woman. The act, in this context, communicates, or makes common, the concept of inferiority for the person who “behaves like a woman.” What about using *pussy* as an insult for men? When a man (or woman) calls another man a pussy, he is, in effect, saying that the man is acting “like a woman.” He is apparently behaving in some way that indicates weakness, vulnerability, and/or emotionality.

Language is further confusing if we just consider *intercourse*, an apparently neutral term to be used in "polite" or medical company. De Sousa and Morgan write:

... it is not surprising that our most common euphemism for erotic sexual activity is also "gender-corrupted." "Intercourse" is a fine word on the road to swift degradation. Not because of its use in a sexual context, but because of its systematic and now all but unavoidable misuse in that context. Properly used, any erotic mode of relating—whether heterosexual, gay or lesbian, and including not only the genital but also the ocular, the oscular, and even the merely jocular—ought to count as "sexual intercourse." The literal meaning of the phrase fits it to be used as one of the widest and vaguest terms available to describe erotic interaction. But in current usage, "sexual intercourse" (or worse, unqualified "intercourse") is very precisely Penile Intromission into the Vagina with Male Orgasm (or PIVMO, as a logically correct sexual discourse might have it). We need to struggle to become aware of the moral and political implications of our sexual vocabulary.¹³

One of these implications is the use of *fuck* to imply "taken advantage of." It suggests something about how we see the roles and statuses of men and women, argues philosopher Robert Baker (1975/2000).¹⁴ Many of the common words for (heterosexual) intercourse—*fuck*, *screw*, *bang*, among others—imply the actors' socially expected roles—the initiator fucks, the recipient "is fucked." In this case, men are constructed as active and women are constructed as passive. This conception sheds new light on why it is significant for a man to say, "I got fucked [love]." Baker's examples include: Dick had Jane, Dick banged Jane, Dick screwed Jane; Jane was fucked by Dick, Jane was laid by Dick, Jane was humped by Dick. . . . "Male subjects play an active role in the language of screwing, fucking, having, doing it, and perhaps, laying [e.g., get laid], while female subjects play a passive role" (2000: 278). We know next to nothing about how language works for those with same-sex partners and orientations, by the way.

Baker argues that the gendered differences do not *just* reflect anatomical differences. "Thus one can easily imagine a society in which the female normally played the active role in intercourse, where . . . the standard metaphors were terms like 'engulfing'—that is, instead of saying 'he screwed her,' one would say 'she engulfed him'" (2000: 279). What does this suggest about heterosexually active women, who are normally referred to as having "gotten (or been) fucked"? Baker suggests that gender is inherent in the way that *fuck* is used when men say, "Yeah, I fucked her," and they mean a very different thing therefore when they say, "I got fucked." "The passive construction of verbs indicating coitus . . . can also be used to indicate that a person is

being harmed. . . . Thus the female sexual role must have something in common with being conned or being sold shoddy merchandise. The only common property is that of being harmed, deceived, or taken advantage of" (2000: 279).

What are the implications of conceptualizing (hetero) sex in this way? One is that it can enable us to see sexual exchanges between men with this same lens—the man who fucks (orally or anally) is "more of a man," while the man who is fucked is "more of a woman." Sociologist Celia Kitzinger (2005) studied the ways in which language and conversation produces heterosexuality.¹⁵ Routinely taking for granted that couples are heterosexual is evident in the use of sex-specific terms like *wife* and *husband*. Kitzinger's research, along with Baker's, reminds us that language is not merely a simple system of symbols and sounds. Uncritically and unreflectively using language—the ideas we have made common—that reflects power imbalances and gender differences dooms us to continue conceptualizing heterosexual sexual activities as something men "do to" women.

Approaches to Sex. Certainly, American cultural attitudes about sex have relaxed and become more liberal over time. We do not have much research about sexual conduct and attitudes in the United States before the 1950s, when Alfred Kinsey, a zoologist at Indiana University, released his research team's studies of the sexual behavior of thousands of adult Americans (1948, 1953).¹⁶ But we can briefly piece together some evidence, starting with the way in which the United States was colonized and resettled by Europeans. The settlers privileged reproductive, marital sexual expression with penile-vaginal intercourse seen as a duty each spouse owed the other (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988).¹⁷ Significant social and religious sanctions combined with community morals (like those described in *The Scarlet Letter*) to provide consistent, unitary messages about the impropriety of extramarital sex and childbirth without marriage. Thus the incidence of these events was low. Interest in maintaining strict social controls on individual sexual expression was furthered by the colonists' realization that Native peoples' sexual cultures differed. Native peoples did not tend to conceptualize sex in terms of sin or morality, shame or guilt. Practices of polygamy, nonmarital intercourse, same-sex sexuality, and broader conceptualizations of gender could be found, though certainly not in every Native group. Generally Native peoples seemed to have more individual freedoms, personal choice, and less negativity regarding sex (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988).

Gender began to have a certain kind of salience in the colonies in the 1600s to 1800s. Women literally bore the evidence of nonmarital sexuality. The proportion of births occurring within the first nine months of marriages rose steadily throughout the later 1600s and early 1700s (Godbeer, 2004).¹⁸ Though prosecutions of couples did

occur, it was parental concern for their daughters that dominated. What if the father of the child did not actually marry the mother before she gave birth? What if he refused to take responsibility? The practice of *bundling* may have begun in response to these worries. Bundling enabled parents to invite gentlemen to visit with their daughters, secure in the knowledge that though the couple would share a bed (if he had traveled a distance to call on her), physical intimacy would be inhibited because the couple would be fully clothed. Sometimes bundling included a board placed between him and her. The idea that women needed to be protected from men, along with the belief that men's sexuality was more animal-like and uncontrolled, was influential (Bloch, 2003).¹⁹ Women began to be seen as the gatekeepers of men's sexuality, which had far-reaching consequences that we will explore more fully in subsequent chapters.

The clear and consistent social and legal norms of the early colonies gradually gave way to greater inconsistency, reflecting shifts in popular perceptions and approaches to sex. In the last 50 years alone, we have seen abortion legalized, although popular opinion reflects the contentious nature of the issue. Anywhere from 40 percent to 55 percent of Americans disapprove of abortion; the figures vary depending on how pollsters pose questions (Misra and Hohman, 2000).²⁰ American attitudes about sex outside of legal heterosexual marriage are also inconsistent. Although age cohorts grew more and more liberal between the 1920s and the 1970s, most of that "liberalization" occurred between 1969 and 1973 (Harding and Jencks, 2003).²¹ It appears as if liberal attitudes are an effect of chronological age, with more conservative attitudes starting to settle in around age 30 and older. So we are *not*, with each generation, growing more liberal about heterosexual sex before marriage (Harding and Jencks, 2003).

Attitudes about equality for gays and lesbians are just as confusing. In the General Social Survey, a study of about 2,000 adult Americans done yearly since 1972, we can see a shift in the percentages of respondents saying that "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex . . . [are] not wrong at all." In the 1998 GSS, 28 percent agreed with this, while in the 1988 GSS only 13 percent agreed.²² Superficially, this seems like movement in a more socially accepting direction, but looking beneath the surface reveals further distinctions. In a national study of 1,335 heterosexuals' attitudes and impressions of gays and lesbians, Gregory Herek discovered significant differences between women and men (2002).²³ Heterosexual women supported gay and lesbian employment protection and adoption rights more than did heterosexual men and were less likely to hold stereotypical beliefs about gays and lesbians. Heterosexual men were more negative about recognition of same-sex relationships and adoption rights for gay men, more likely to believe that gay men are mentally ill and molest children, and were most negative in their feelings about gay men (Herek, 2002).

Another confusing aspect of the American approach to sexualities is the cluster of dominant attitudes, delineated in the NHSLS cited earlier. Researchers noticed certain attitudes and feelings that co-vary; people with a *procreational* approach, for example, believe that the primary purpose of sexual conduct is to reproduce and tend to disapprove of same-sex behavior (unsurprisingly, since same-sex conduct is not connected to reproduction). But those with a *procreational* approach have diverging opinions about pornography, abortion, and other matters. Those with *relational* approaches see sexual conduct as part of loving, committed relationships and generally approve of various behaviors in *that* context. Finally, those with *recreational* approaches tend to see any consenting sex act as acceptable, but do not necessarily have such broad acceptance of same-sex sexualities.

Sociocultural and Historical Variables

The apparently contradictory attitudes described above are indicative of broader social and historical changes that are at least somewhat confusing, if not wholly confusing! These conundrums would read like surreal newspaper headlines:

- 'Hot' Sex Saturates Media; Gov't Gives \$1 Billion for Abstinence-Only Education
- U.S. Tells World We're a 'Bastion of Freedom and Defender of Democracy'; Women's Reproductive Choice under Siege
- Women and Men Striding toward Equality; About 90 percent of Sexual Assaults Committed by Lovers, Friends, or Relatives
- U.S. Parents Overwhelmingly Support School Sex Ed; Say 'We Don't Want to Have to Talk about It!'
- Youth Say It's 'No Big Deal' to Be Gay; Support for Same-Sex Marriage Falters
- Reverend Fred Phelps Protests Murdered Teen's Funeral, Says Matthew Shepard Will 'Rot in Hell with Other Fags'; Spanish Legislature Approves Same-Sex Marriage Bill
- Women, Inspired by 'Sex and the City,' Have Sex and Hook-Ups on 'Own Terms'; Pharmacists Deny Women 'Morning-After' Pills, RU-486, and Condoms
- 'Hot' Sex Saturates Media; Gov't Gives \$1 Billion for Abstinence-Only Education and U.S. Parents Overwhelmingly Support School Sex Ed; Say 'We Don't Want to Have to Talk about It!'

Everything announced by these mock headlines is real, reported in studies or the popular press. As I write this, the television show *Desperate Housewives* is the hit of the entertainment media and late-night talk shows, captivating viewers with its depictions

of housewives' affairs and sexual escapades. Yet the U.S. government spends about \$1,000,000,000 a year on abstinence-only school "sex" education. Teachers are mandated to speak only about contraceptive failures, not the profound and regular success of most forms of contraception (Huberman, 2005).²⁴ Teachers must tell students of the damage that will surely befall them if they do not abstain from all sexual activity until legally, heterosexually married. Of the public school districts that actually have a policy about the teaching of sex ed, 86 percent require that abstinence be promoted (Landry, Kaeser, and Richards, 1999).²⁵ Fully 35 percent require that abstinence be taught as the *only option*; the other 51 percent teach that abstinence is the *preferred option* but allow discussion of contraception. Landry, Kaeser, and Richards clarify that more than 50 percent of the districts in the Southern United States "with a policy to teach sexuality education have an abstinence-only policy, compared with 20% of such districts in the Northeast."

This is all in spite of the persistent and well-documented fact that parents *want* sex education in the public schools, period. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) found that low-income parents support comprehensive sex education programs, along with middle-class parents and teens of all ethnicities and classes (2002).²⁶ The vast majority—81 percent—support education that goes beyond abstinence, though there were some racial differences, with African American parents (about 85 percent) supporting comprehensive education more so than Caucasian American and Latin American parents (about 80 percent each). Ready for the kicker? Less than half of all parents had actually discussed sex with their nine- and ten-year-old children. Maybe this is not so confusing after all—parents want schools to provide sex ed so that they don't have to!

U.S. Tells World We're a 'Bastion of Freedom and Defender of Democracy'; Women's Reproductive Choice under Siege

While the United States moves through the world attempting to gather allies for "the war on terrorism," we are told that this country is more free than any other in the world. As I write this, two Supreme Court justices are resigning, paving the way for appointments that may shift the balance of previous judicial interpretations of the Constitutional right to privacy. In 1973, the landmark federal case of *Roe v. Wade* extended that right, first argued in the 1965 Supreme Court case *Griswold v. Connecticut*. Estelle Griswold had opened a Planned Parenthood clinic precisely to test the state law prohibiting the dispensing of condoms to married heterosexuals. In ruling in

favor of Griswold, the Court enabled people such as unmarried college students to have access to condoms, the Pill, lubricants, and spermicidal foam. *Roe v. Wade* established federal protections for the right to privacy—clarifying that state laws restricting a woman's right to have an abortion violated her right to (sexual) privacy. Although many states have subsequently eroded some of that right, in the form of things like parental consent laws and second-trimester restrictions, the federal right still stands. The current threat is real and imminent, however. What is confusing is how Americans feel about abortion.

We are split, virtually down the middle, regardless of how the attitude or "approval" questions are worded (Saad, 2004).²⁷ About 48 percent are "pro-choice," while 45 percent are "pro-life" and another 7 percent have no opinion or a mixed opinion. When asked about whether laws should be made more strict, about 40 percent think laws should remain as they are. "The plurality—40%—wants the laws to remain as they are, while a smaller percentage (20%) thinks they should be less strict" (Saad, 2004). If we focused only on this social issue, we would surely be confounded by our attempts to spread democracy and freedom around the world while the rights of our female citizens are in jeopardy and the will of the people is completely polarized.

Women and Men Striding toward Equality: Average 72 percent of Known Sexual Assaults Committed by Lovers, Friends, or Relatives

Women and men believe that contemporary American women's lives are better in many ways than women's lives historically. "A June 2001 Gallup Poll found majority support for affirmative action for women—53 percent" (Robison, 2002).²⁸ Women in public opinion polls appear rather satisfied with the direction of their lives (Saad, 2001).²⁹ "Overall, a majority of women say they are at least somewhat satisfied with the way society treats women: 13% are very satisfied and 48% are somewhat satisfied. However, more than one in three women, 37%, say they are dissatisfied with society's treatment of women, including 15% who are very dissatisfied," Saad wrote. Women in the national random representative sample were satisfied with things like family, education, physical health, jobs, and opportunities for success. Men and women appear to feel similarly about most of these aspects of life. It is worth noting, however, that in a 1998 Time/CNN national poll, although 42 percent of self-described nonfeminists agreed that "feminism today is relevant to most women," 43 percent had an "unfavorable impression" of feminists (as cited in Kelly 2004: 145).³⁰ Women of all races and ethnic-

ities can vote, be employed, travel, hold their own property, have children as single parents; struggle, love, cry, rage, and die . . . just like men. Women and men are equal, right?

You know the answer by now. The contradiction inherent in this real-life possible headline is unsettling, to say the least. Women and men may be equal, except when it comes to sexual violence and predatory behavior. As children, boys and girls are subject to the assaults and violations of adults, usually men who are friends of the family, relatives, or trusted authority figures. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, of the children identified as survivors of "substantiated or indicated sexual abuse," 75 percent were girls (www.RAINN.net). RAINN cites the 1998 Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Boys finding that 3 percent of boys in grades five through eight and 5 percent of boys in grades nine through twelve reported that they had been sexually abused (as children, clearly). About 90 percent of adult survivors of sexual assault, rape, and related crimes are women, while 10 percent are men, although it is projected that two-thirds of all survivors never report crimes. Men are especially likely to keep assaults and rapes secret. U.S. Department of Justice statistics (2003) reveal that about 70 percent of female rape survivors and 74 percent of male rape survivors know their rapist—friend, acquaintance, "intimate" (lover or mate), or relative (less than 1 percent for male survivors).³¹ Most of those assaults occur at home or within one mile of the survivor's home. Women and men may have more apparent equality than ever before in the United States, but women around the world are disproportionately affected by all varieties of sex crimes, including rape as a war crime, sexual slavery, sex trafficking, and sex tourism. How can we argue that men and women are equal, sexually and in other ways, when the evidence contradicts this? And what are the implications of such a profound imbalance, especially for heterosexuals?

Youth Say It's 'No Big Deal' to Be Gay; Support for Same-Sex Marriage Falters and Reverend Fred Phelps Protests Murdered Teen's Funeral, Says Matthew Shepard Will 'Rot in Hell with Other Fags'; Spanish Legislature Approves Same-Sex Marriage Bill

Researchers like Steven Seidman (2004) and Rirch Savin-Williams (2005) have recently argued that the "closet"—as in "coming out of the closet" and disclosing being gay or lesbian—may be a metaphor of the past.³² Seidman cites a *New York* magazine poll of New Yorkers, who overwhelmingly would be comfortable with openly gay police officers, doctors, and elementary school teachers. Savin-Williams asserts

that gay and lesbian life for current teens and young adults is very different than it was even 10 years ago, and both scholars cite things like more open, diverse mass media portrayals, shifts in hegemonic heterosexualities, and liberalization of individual perceptions of homosexuality. Teens report feeling like being gay is "no big deal," that they are just "regular people," and that "true friends" accept them for who they are (Wloszczyna, 2003; www.sexetc.org).³³

But Seidman clarifies that "gay life today is defined by a contradiction: *many individuals can choose to live beyond the closet but they must still live and participate in a world where most institutions maintain heterosexual domination*" (italics original) (2004: 6). That domination is perhaps most visible in the fact that cultural support for same-sex marriage is not broadly supported by heterosexuals, but there is no chance for equal protections under the law *without* this support. In fact, the issue is controversial among those with same-sex partners. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) reported on opinion polls in 2005, by CNN/*USA Today*, CBS/*New York Times*, and NBC News/*Wall St. Journal* (www.glaad.org).³⁴ Such polls are implemented by polling agencies with expertise in sampling and posing questions, but results appear to be highly dependent on exactly how questions are worded. Although it *appears* that the majority of respondents support "legal recognition" for same-sex couples, the majority of positive attitudes relate to civil unions, not marriage. As a legal, emotional, financial, and sexual status traditionally reserved for heterosexually committed people, "marriage" is heavily symbolic. It has been invested with the dreams, hopes, and love of heterosexuals for at least the last 80 to 90 years (prior to that, marriage was a much less romanticized ideal). When Americans are asked about whether same-sex *marriage* should be "allowed" or legally recognized, fears about the future of heterosexual marriage are activated. In all three of the news agencies' polls, only 29 percent of respondents (on average) supported same-sex "marriage."

The other headline was plucked from the events surrounding one of the most infamous hate crimes of the last decade. Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old college student, was murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. Two young men left a bar with Matthew and after learning that he was gay, drove to a remote field, tied him to a fence, beat him, and left him for dead in near-freezing temperatures (taking his wallet and shoes with them). Reverend Fred Phelps, founder of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, targeted the funeral, having staged similar picket lines and protests at political and social events and funerals around the country. His Web site clarifies the extent of his belief in the "Primitive/Old School" interpretations of the

Bible. Phelps and his followers exemplify extremes of homophobic virulence, anger, hatred, and fear.

It should be somewhat confusing, then, to see how religion intersects with homosexuality in another context. In Spain, a country with a long history of Catholicism, there is now no legal distinction between same-sex and other-sex pairings (McLennan, 2005).³⁵ The very liberally worded bill passed in the Spanish parliament with a vote of 187 to 147 and gives same-sex couples the right to marry and adopt children. The Netherlands, Canada, and Belgium have similar laws, though not quite as widely applicable and equalizing as Spain's. As has been true in the United States regarding similar proposed legislation, some prominent global religious leaders, including Vatican City officials, worked to prevent passage, claiming that it would threaten the social status quo and moral order. Although more than 80 percent of Spaniards identify themselves as Catholic, religion apparently does not color point of view the way it does in the United States, and in Phelps's case; opinion polls show that between 55 and 65 percent of Spaniards support same-sex marriage.

Carlos Barutín and Emilio Menéndez, as the first Spanish couple married under the new equalizing legislation, now have a union that recognizes their 30-year relationship. Their lives will be immeasurably different, compared to U.S. same-sex couples, because they were able to choose to sanctify it legally. Marriage is definitely not for everyone, but the choice should be available to all citizens. It is confusing that while other countries have honored civil and equal rights in this context—even nations with long-held religious traditions—the United States is unable to disconnect Christian traditions from our policies.

Women, Inspired by 'Sex and the City,' Have Sex and Hook-Ups on 'Own Terms'; Pharmacists Deny Women 'Morning-After' Pills, RU-486, and Condoms

It seems as if we can easily find evidence of "the revolution in heterosexual dating," proof that "dating is dead," that women are "happily" hooking-up instead of committing to dead-end relationships that may require compromise, change, and heartache. Everywhere we turn we see that things seem to be different, the 1950s notion of "going steady" is obsolete, and women are "having sex like men" (Kamen, 2002).³⁶ There are at least *three* guides to teach women how to have better hook-ups—regardless of how hook-up is defined, by the way. (If we asked 20 people to define the term, we might get 17 different interpretations.) Journalist Vanessa Grigoriadis explored the intersection of Internet "dating" and "casual sex" in New York City (2003).³⁷ One of

her interviewees, "Jessica," may exemplify the (white, middle-class) heterosexual woman of the new millennium. She explains, "Look, I would like to make babies, but this is primo genetic material we're dealing with here [meaning, herself]—quality control is a big issue. As much as I hope there's some lurking jewel out there, right now, I'm just lonely, curious, and horny." Another woman posted an Internet personals ad reading: "I have declared December 2002 a morals-free zone, where I do what I want, when I want, with whom I want. I want to fuck you. Offer expires 12/31/02." Grigoriadis describes the results:

She received responses from 70 men and met 10 of them. "Most of them have been quite surprised that I have a personality and a brain—I guess only dull, stupid women are supposed to be sexual? Whatever. I had the best sex of my life with one of them—he discovered my G spot, which I didn't even know I had, I swear. I was like, 'This is what they're talking about in *Cosmo*'" (2003).

Speaking of *Cosmopolitan*, the magazine might be the most preferred source of information for the newly sexual, no-strings-attached woman looking to hook up. And what would we learn about this kind of sex? It is "morals free," stereotyped ("only dull, stupid women are . . . sexual"), connected to loneliness in some way, and is not about hard and fast commitments. It appears to be a way for heterosexual women to have sex "like men," and for heterosexual men to finally have sex the way they have always wanted to. We will explore these ideas further in chapter 5, because I do not believe that this simplification of either gender is accurate. But for the moment, let's assume this is an accurate description of some single young people's sex lives.

So why, then, are some women being denied the chance to *really* have sex "on their terms" (Kamen, 2002)? There are numerous reports of pharmacists and other medical professionals interfering with women's sexual and reproductive freedoms on the grounds of religion. Pharmacists opposed to the rights protected by *Roe v. Wade* have refused to fill legal prescriptions for the "morning after pill," unfortunate slang for *emergency contraception* (EC), a regimen of several elevated-dose birth control pills, taken within three days after unprotected intercourse. Global retail giant Wal-Mart, with pharmacies in all but 22 of its several thousand North American stores, refused to sell emergency contraception, starting in 1999 (Robinson, 2005).³⁸ In many small towns in the United States and Canada, having "out competed" locally owned stores, Wal-Mart is the only pharmacy for tens or hundreds of miles,

therefore rendering a prescription for emergency contraception useless. As I write, this news report is circulating:

New York Catholic Leaders Urge Gov. Pataki to Veto Legislation Making EC Available without Doctor's Prescription

[Jul 13, 2005]

Catholic leaders in New York are encouraging state Gov. George Pataki (R) to veto legislation (SB 3661) that would make emergency contraception available to all women in the state without a doctor's prescription, the *Albany Times Union* reports (Benjamin, Albany Times Union, 7/12). The bill—which was approved in January by the state Assembly and last month by the state Senate—would allow pharmacists and nurses to dispense EC to women without a doctor's prescription by using blanket prescriptions issued by physicians, certified nurse midwives or certified nurse practitioners that do not name a specific patient. The measure would allow the pills to be dispensed to patients of any age without parental consent (*Kaiser Daily Reproductive Health Report*, 6/23). In a July 6 letter to the governor, the state's eight Catholic bishops said EC is equivalent to abortion and urged Pataki to veto the measure to return "common sense and time-tested values to the public square." The bishops also expressed concern over the lack of an age restriction or parental consent requirement in the measure, saying in the letter, "It is difficult to imagine why anyone would support restricting parental rights and potentially exposing young girls to harmful and powerful medications on a repeated basis in this way." Pataki spokesperson Andrew Rush said the governor has received the letter and will review it when he receives the legislation in question. The state Assembly has until the end of the first week in August to send the bill to Pataki, but Charles Carrier—spokesperson for Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D)—on Monday said the Assembly has not yet decided when it will do so. Once Pataki receives the legislation, he will have about 10 days to decide whether to sign it, veto it or allow the measure to become law without his signature (*Albany Times Union*, 7/12).³⁹

Indeed, "it is difficult to imagine why anyone" would think that the new hook-up culture has uncomplicated and uncontroversial sociocultural effects. Realistically, hooking up may include some occasional "oops, the condom broke" encounters, along with some, "Contra-what? Oh no!" follies. But if Wal-Mart is your pharmacy or you live in New York (and Pataki gives in to religious entreaties to "return common sense

and time-tested values to the public square"), heterosexual hook-ups will need an extra dose of care.

I recently heard the story of a 25-year-old woman in Washington, D.C., trying to buy condoms in a CVS pharmacy. The educated, professional woman was Asian American, the pharmacist had a similar ethnic background, and he simply refused to sell them to her (Huberman, 2005).⁴⁰ He pushed the package back across the counter, shaking his head and saying "No." He then turned away and refused to speak to her about it. The other circumstances surrounding the event are worth noting. The woman was a radio reporter who had been interviewing an expert on teen sexuality. The reporter had expressed her chagrin and consternation about adolescents—"why can't they just use condoms? Why risk pregnancy and diseases?" In response, the expert asked the reporter to go buy condoms; after about an hour, the reporter summoned her courage and walked to the CVS, where her effort was thwarted. What did she learn? Just because it is now legal for anyone to purchase condoms in the United States (see *Griswold v. Connecticut*) does not mean it is *psychologically* easy, nor is it a morally neutral act, similar to buying aspirin.

Cross-Cultural, Global Differences and Similarities in Sexualities

It should make sense that global differences in sex would be confusing. But why would global *similarities* be confusing? Given that I am taking a perspective that challenges the idea that sexualities are reducible to universal absolutes, how can we explain similarities that transcend culture and history? It might be confusing to consider the handful of things that appear to be similar. Linguistic psychologist Steven Pinker (2002) lists a handful of apparent cross-cultural similarities: attraction, jealousy, sexual modesty, and sexual regulation (i.e., the social control of sexuality, including incest prevention).⁴¹ Evolutionary psychologist David Buss studied 37 cultures in 33 countries, gathering data from 10,047 subjects (1994).⁴² With the help of 50 unpaid collaborators, Buss aimed to explore which Darwinian hypotheses of evolution could be applied to "human mating." He found that some elements of "mate selection" appear to be universal (although his focus was therefore solely on heterosexual behavior): men seek younger, fit-for-motherhood women, while women seek older, resource-heavy (whether monetary resources or other) men; men seek and desire more partners than do women, both men and women experience jealousy, though men are more jealous about female partners' sexual infidelities and women are more jealous about male partners' emotional infidelities. Buss and other evolutionary psychologists argue that in

order to really understand human sexuality, we must account for these "fundamental differences" in (heterosexual) men's and women's sexual psychologies. We will return to evolutionary psychology momentarily, and later in the book.

So it may be confusing to consider the perspective in this book—the social construction of sexualities—alongside the arguments of evolutionary psychology, especially because these arguments make sense to most people. Most of us know some women who focus on only men with financial and material resources; there are even several Internet dating services solely for meeting "millionaire" men. Most of us know what jealousy feels like, and we may even have experienced it in the gendered/sexed way that sexual selection strategies predict. Because men's and women's differences are highlighted in our culture while similarities tend to be glossed over, it is easy to accept arguments and evidence that extend our perceptions of difference.

Given that evolutionary psychology posits several sexual universals, it may then be confusing to note that there are numerous contemporary cross-cultural differences. What Americans probably think of as homosexuality is not necessarily found in all cultures, although anthropologists can document instances of men engaging in "sexual" contact with other men (Herd, 1999).⁴³ I say "sexual" because although the behavior may include, for example, genital-mouth contact, it is not necessarily experienced as "sexual." Premarital heterosexual intercourse rates vary widely among teens. Studies report that perhaps 11 percent of women in Asia have had intercourse by age 18, and anywhere from 45 to 52 percent of sub-Saharan African women have had intercourse by age 19 (www.WHO.int, 2001).⁴⁴ In Western countries, by age 20 most young women have had intercourse: 67 percent in France, 79 percent in Great Britain, and 71 percent in the United States (Darroch, Singh, and Frost, 2001).⁴⁵ For 60 percent of the heterosexually married couples in the world, marriage is arranged, suggesting that the importance placed on love, lust, and chemistry in Western countries is certainly not universal (Mackay, 2001).⁴⁶ In the United Kingdom, of the 42,000 babies born to women aged 15–19, 87 percent are born to young women who are not married. In Japan, only 10 percent of babies born to 15–19-year-olds are born to young women who are not married ("Into a New World," 1998).⁴⁷

So what do these and many other differences mean? What is their significance? It is beyond our scope to really delve into the meanings and interpretations global citizens give to their sexualities, but we can explore some of the implications of these differences. For now, we can note that global differences seem to support the argument that culture, society, and subcultural influences shape individuals' sexualities.

Academic and Scholarly Perspectives on Sexualities

There is no doubt that academic and scholarly perspectives promote enormous confusion. Among the major disciplines—including psychology, sociology, biology, anthropology, and history—there is little consensus about most aspects of sex. Are all things sexual attributable to genes, hormones, and evolution? How do sexual orientations develop? What does it mean to say that sexualities come from "nature" or "nurture"? Why do human animals engage in oral, anal, and other forms of nonreproductive sex? Why do all the disciplines seem to have such different ways of asking questions and seeking answers?

The most facile answer to all these questions, and to the question of why the major disciplines discuss sex differently, is that sexualities are far from simple. No one perspective or approach can possibly suffice for such a complex, multifaceted aspect of humanity. The attempt to unify the perspectives and honor the multidisciplinary nature of sex resulted in a hybrid field, *sexology*. Sexology, the systematic study of sexuality patterns and generalizations, combined with theorizing about human sexualities as a way to bridge the gaps in each individual field (Bland and Doan, 1998).⁴⁸ In the early 1900s, a German dermatologist, Iwan Bloch, proposed that in order to fully understand human love, we needed to combine the knowledge and perspectives of the natural and social sciences with the humanities.

Due to its interdisciplinary nature, sexology is not recognizable at universities and colleges. You cannot earn a "sexology" bachelor's degree in a regular degree program (and even so, it would not be as fun or naughty as it sounds), although there are several U.S. graduate programs with a focus on human sexuality (and several U.S. undergraduate minors do exist). The graduate programs often focus on anatomy, physiology, and counseling skills, presuming that graduates will use their knowledge to offer sex or marital therapy. This hints at some of the problems with academic and scholarly perspectives. We tend to see relatively disconnected arguments, theories, and empirical methods across the disciplines. Sexology, as Bloch conceived it, has not unified or revolutionized our knowledge. In fact, our thinking about sexualities may be more fragmented than ever, now that women's studies, cultural studies, humanities disciplines, and other epistemologies are contributing to the discourse about sex. You may be taking this course having already taken several other college classes that include sex. But rather than clarifying sex, due to disciplinary contradictions and debates, your academic knowledge and individual experiences may only serve to muddy the waters.

Nature and Nurture

Within the specific context of academic and scholarly perspectives, we find perhaps the most well known debate. People who know little about specific sexuality research may nonetheless know about what is commonly called "nature versus nurture." The word *versus* is meant to connote opposition, the idea that one thing is against the other, and of course, that there is no common ground between the two. When stated this way, it is of course less confusing: sexualities are attributable to either nature (i.e., genes, hormones, the brain) OR nurture (i.e., family of origin, individual psychology, sociocultural factors). But it is misleading to argue that sexualities are the result of either what is natural or innate or how and where we are raised. Everything about sex is simply far too complex to argue for only one influence or contribution. Because humans are constantly and actively shaping the world around us, it may never be possible to know which elements of nature and nurture contribute to which specific aspects of our sexualities. For example, we know that sex hormones, such as testosterone, are highest at dawn and first thing in the morning, yet the most popular time for sex is in the evening, before bed (Margolis, 2004).⁴⁹ If nature were solely responsible, we would probably just respond to those hormonal cues. Indeed, there must be some intervening variables of culture or nurture that inspire us to instead be sexual later in the evening. We will address nature and nurture, along with corollary concepts of essentialism and social constructionism, in chapter 2.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE

What does it mean to be a critical thinker? Does it simply mean that we have to incessantly find fault with everything? Critical thinking is actually deeper than simply criticizing and nipping. It is probably relatively easy for most people to just criticize. Instead, let me argue that true critical thinking is both a process and a disciplined cognitive habit. The quality of our lives is directly connected to the quality of our thinking. Scriven and Paul (undated) write that "Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action."⁵⁰ In describing this as a process, I mean to convey that critical thinking is something you can begin doing. Through trial and error, you will develop facility and skills, and gradually, you will feel more confident about your abilities, but you will probably never stop refining the *process* of reasoned critique. In describing this as a disciplined

cognitive habit, I mean to convey that critical thinking involves some mental retraining. Paul and Elder note that "everyone thinks. . . . But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced" (2001: 1).⁵¹

So the new habit is based on things like clarity, relevance, sound evidence, and good reasoning. The process of learning how to think critically is characterized by noting the difference between thinking and memorizing and simply gaining a skill and using that skill repeatedly. Paul and Elder's model of critical thinking (2001) encompasses eight *elements of thought* that they argue are universally applicable (though some would argue that they only apply to Western, contemporary thinking and ideas):

1. *purpose of the thinking*: the goal or objective; the writer's aim or intention
2. *question at issue*: the key or most important question(s); not always stated in the interrogative form
3. *point of view*: the writer's frame of reference or perspective relative to the issue; writer's orientation or stance
4. *key concepts*: theories, ideas, principles; broad, vague abstractions; disciplinary axioms
5. *information and/or evidence*: observations and experiences; data and things taken to be facts
6. *assumptions*: presuppositions, ideas taken for granted
7. *interpretation and inference*: examining the evidence and beginning to draw conclusions; exploring leaps of logic or mind
8. *implications and consequences*: potential conclusions; something necessarily following from a set of conditions or from the evidence

These elements of thought are foundational to developing a good, new habit of mind. To understand any creator's ideas, including our own—whether the ideas are in a song, a film, a scholarly article, or a *Cosmopolitan* magazine article—we must apply the elements of thought. We could ask questions about every source we run across, and then we could ask these questions of our work as well (adapted from Paul and Elder, 2001):

1. What is the main purpose of this [article, paper, chapter, film, poem, and so on]? Is it clearly stated or do you need to infer to figure it out?
2. What is the key question or problem at issue in the [article, paper, chapter, film, poem, and so on]? Is the key question directly related to the purpose?

3. What is the author's point of view? What is his or her stance relative to the issue? How does it affect the arguments the author makes? Does s/he consider any alternate points of view?
4. What are the key concepts? What main axioms, principles, abstractions, and so on would the reader need to understand in order to understand the author's reasoning?
5. What is the most important information [e.g., observations and experiences]? What is the most important evidence [e.g., data and facts]? Is the author's information/evidence persuasive and purposive?
6. What assumptions is the author making? What is being taken for granted or as "a given"?
7. What are the main inferences—what leaps of logic does the author make? Are all conclusions well supported by the information and evidence?
8. What are the implications and/or consequences of the author's argument? What might follow from the author's logic? What is the possible significance of the ideas the author presents?

The most vital starting point might be *point of view*. What is yours? Where do you stand relative to any issue? You may be tempted to answer that you don't take a position or develop an opinion until you have all the facts. Or that you don't offer your opinion because you think people should be free to just be themselves. You may say that your point of view is "don't bother me, I won't bother you." In any case, each of these constitutes a stance, and each affects the way that you read, listen, hear, respond, perceive, and think. The fact is that you will read this text with a point of view pretty firmly entrenched and developed; you walk into your classroom with it, and that cannot be overlooked. Your *assumptions* and *inferences*—leaps of logic, maybe unsupported by evidence—also form and contribute to your point of view (or *perspective*). If you acknowledge and examine your point of view, your critical thinking skills will begin to blossom.

Another important element of critical thinking, especially regarding sexualities, is clarification of evidence, data, and facts, compared to personal opinion. What is the difference and why is it important? Personal opinion is naturally subjective, which is not necessarily problematic. But opinion can be limited and limiting, confined only to the experiences and observations of any individual. Evidence, data, and facts afford the critical thinker the chance to assess the method of data collection, to generalize from outside oneself, and to plot patterns of behavior. Like your point of view, you will have opinions—probably developed from your life experiences. But you may be

missing data or evidence with which to explore, strengthen, and/or challenge those opinions. Working with data—and making arguments with evidence—enables us to really transcend the basic opinions we may take for granted.

Paul and Elder also caution us to become aware of our *egocentrism*. Egocentric points of view are basically self-centered and certainly uncritical and unreflective. Egocentrism gives rise to conclusions with unreflective logic at the core, propositions about the world that are wholly unquestioned because there is some benefit to maintaining the status quo. These justifications for beliefs and ideas can be characterized as: "it is true because I have been told it is"; "it is true because my family or friends believe it"; "it is true because my religion, state, and so on have told me so"; "it is true because it is in my best interests to believe it and I will lose something if I disbelieve it"; and "it is true because I directly stand to benefit if I maintain this belief." Here are some examples of egocentric thinking:

- it is true because my family or friends believe it
- EX: *Adults who choose to be celibate and not engage in sex, or who are not particularly interested in sex, have something wrong with them.*
- it is true because my religion and state have told me so
- EX: *Homosexuality is wrong. Why? Because my religion argues this.*
- it is true because I directly stand to benefit if I maintain this belief

EX: *People who are poor are simply too lazy to work hard and get ahead, and only the smart, hard-working, attractive people get ahead in this world (i.e., people like me).*

In this book, you will see many of the elements of thought utilized in discussions of research and theorizing about sexualities, especially point of view, assumptions, and implications. It is important to think in a concerted way about these and the other elements in order to truly understand the social construction of sex, gender, and all things sexual. Throughout this book, we will explore context, contradictions, variables, and critiques. You are invited to embark on a brief journey into the heart of one of the most intimate things about us, if not *the* most intimate. My hope is that by the time you finish reading this book, your critical and social imagination will be finely tuned, and that you will never forget, as Leonore Tiefer says, that sex is *not* a natural act (2004).⁵²

Questions to Ponder

1. What issues besides adultery have been socially constructed? How would you know if some aspect of sexualities had indeed been socially constructed?

2. Which terms do you use to talk about sexualities? Do you favor slang, and if so, a wider or smaller variety? Do you know anyone who uses more clinical, medical, or academic terminologies?
3. What are some of *your* egocentric beliefs, assumptions, and/or points of view about sexualities?

Suggested Projects

1. Find your own newspaper (printed or online version) headlines. Focus on headlines that can be juxtaposed to reveal the confusing, contradictory, or ambivalent aspects of human sexualities. What else can you learn about the issues presented in the accompanying articles? What analysis can you develop?
2. Practice critical thinking by finding an article (magazine, newspaper, or scholarly journal) and work with the elements of thought to discern the author's purpose, key questions, assumptions, and so forth. Use the elements of thoughts to clearly and concisely present your analysis, making your own purpose clear.

2

Studying the Sexual

CLASSIFYING AND THEORIZING

You are standing in a small room. The room is filled with machines tabulating, recording, and beeping. You are looking into a larger, connected room; using a one-way mirror, you can see clearly, as if looking through glass. The man and woman in the other room can only see themselves, reflected in the mirror. The couple knows that you and others are watching and listening, but you think they may be more comfortable if they cannot see the faces and reactions of you and your colleagues. The couple is on an elevated platform—not quite a bed, but similar. They each have electrodes affixed to their temples, the base of their skull, their chests. They have blood pressure cuffs around their arms and pulse meters on a finger. The beeps in your room correspond to heart rate; the machines are recording this and respiration, blood flow, and brain activity. The man in the observation room has an additional device on his penis, a plethysmograph, measuring blood flow and engorgement. The woman has a small probe in her vagina, measuring lubrication and blood flow. The couple is kissing and touching each other. You are keeping track of the couple's body language and movements, the noises they are making, and the monitors beeping in your room. Is this science fiction or a real way to study human sexualities?

Believe it or not, one of the most well known studies of the twentieth century, William Masters and Virginia Johnson's 1950s research into "human sexual response" (orgasm,