



## LITERATURE AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

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**Abstract:** *Over the last thirty years, feminist, postcolonial and queer theorists have interrogated the ways in which sexuality is conceptualized and constructed, specifically with the intention of deconstructing essentialist notions of sexuality and identity formation. Let us presume that there is nothing natural or given about what it means to be a man or woman, nor does one's biological sex or gender identity predict one's sexual identity and desires. At the same time, gender and sexuality are strictly organized and regulated (even policed) by society and its institutions (governmental, legal, educational, medical, familial), and there are particular gender and sexual scripts that we experience pressure to follow. Literature offers us a way to understand how these scripts are constructed and enforced. It also provides us with alternatives—with models for resisting and rebelling against proscribed gender and sexual roles, and for imagining alternatives to them.*

**Key Words:** *Sexuality, Social Construction, Homosexual, Heterosexual, Heterosexism, Heteronormativity, Desires.*

The works of literature and films explore sometimes dangerous forms of difference and desire, investigate and offer insights into assumptions that define dominant understandings of romantic love, the nuclear family, “coupledom,” masculinity, femininity, and assumptions that biological sex determines gender identity. The texts also offer representations of what it means to be a gender and/or sexual outlaw—the pleasures and liberation that this can afford, and the societal censure and even violence that can result from expressing illicit forms of desire. They also provide insights into how thoroughly ideologies of gender and sexuality are connected to those of race, class, generation, region, religion, and nation.

Do we choose who we are sexually attracted to? Are we born with certain innate desires? Can we easily categorize people when it comes to things like sexuality and sexual desire? In this article, we will look into questions about whether sexuality is innate or socially constructed. But first, we should go over some definitions. When we say sex, we mean the anatomical and physiological differences between men and women. Gender is how we express this, including things like being feminine or masculine. Sexuality refers to our attractions or sexual preferences. Sexual orientation is how we identify ourselves in relation to sexuality. So, identifying as homosexual or heterosexual is an example of sexual orientation. And finally, when we say something is socially constructed, we mean that its meaning is assigned by our society and it can vary across different time periods or different cultures. So back to our question about whether sexuality is innate or socially constructed. This isn't necessarily an easy question to answer, but many sociologists believe that sexuality and sexual orientation, like sex and gender, are social constructs. That means that our sexuality might not simply be something we're born with.

Social constructs develop within a society or group. They don't represent objective reality but instead are meaningful only because people within the society or group accept that they have meaning. Simply put, social constructs do not have inherent meaning. The only meaning they have is the meaning given to them by people. The concept of certain behaviors being specific to a person's gender is a social construct. This applies to the idea that men should keep their emotions bottled up or the notion that women are overly emotional. It also applies to beliefs that boys should play with trucks and girls with dolls. There are also social constructs associated with gender roles, such as the formerly widely



held belief that women should stay home and men should work. This also relates to beliefs that certain types of jobs are women's work (nurses, teachers), while others represent men's work (doctors, construction work).

The social constructionist perspective on sexuality began to rise during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Thinkers such as McIntosh (1968), Gagnon and Simon (1973), and Foucault (1978) broke ground in the field by theorizing sexuality as an aspect of one's social life, social behaviour, and social role (Kitzinger, 1995). Within sexuality research, social constructionists look at how sexuality is continuously constructed and reconstructed through socio-cultural processes and practices. These processes and practices are said to shape our understandings of the sexual body, sexual behaviours, and sexual identities (Seidman, 2003). Overall, this perspective posits sexual phenomena "as external to the individual, defined by social understandings and discourse" (Delamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 13). Therefore, by researching the processes and practices used to construct sexuality, social constructionists can identify how they normalize and privilege certain sexual behaviours and identities.

In conducting research on sexuality, social constructionists note that differences in sexuality are "cultural, historical, and political, not natural or fixed" (Katz, 1995, p. 194). Here, social constructionists reject so-called "natural" divisions and categorizations. Rather, they attest to a level of fluidity within sexuality. Such researchers may investigate how social environments can lead to an adherence to a particular type of sexuality over another (Kitzinger, 1995). More specifically, Katz (1995) finds social constructionists look to the existence of reproductive, gender, and pleasure politics that privilege heterosexuality. Katz (1995) challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of heterosexuality, suggesting that heterosexuality is a social role which can be chosen. This is in opposition to essentialists, who tend to view sexualities as an inherent 'condition'. Social constructionists also point to the changes in sexual meanings over time and between cultures to highlight that sexuality is not static or inherent.

Social constructionists note that "we are born with bodies, but it is society that determines which parts of the body and which pleasure and acts are sexual" (Seidman, 2003, p. 38). By investigating sexuality, desire, fantasy, and behaviour, social constructionists seek to uncover how social processes and practices perpetuate heterosexuality as normal. Some social constructionists also investigate how sexuality is mediated through constructions of the body. For instance, Braun and Kitzinger (2001), found that "women's experiences of the vagina, and their talk about those experiences, are constructed in relation to broader cultural systems of meaning" (p. 264). They further note that these systems of meaning have been constructed in extremely narrow terms regarding what the vagina should look and feel like. Braun and Kitzinger (2001) found that these females were relating their concerns to the male penis. These females were not worried about their own sexual pleasure, but were instead worried about being too loose or too tight for the pleasure of their male partner. Females' concerns over their own genitals in relation to male sexual pleasure reflects broader cultural systems of meaning. These cultural systems of meaning work to privilege heterosexuality. In their study, Braun and Kitzinger (2001) articulated an example of how constructions of the body are a site through which heterosexism is perpetuated. Social constructionists focus on heterosexism and heteronormativity over homophobia. They tend to view sexual discrimination as social processes and practices rather than an individual 'phobia' towards homosexuals. By identifying the ways heterosexism and heteronormativity arise in mundane instances of talk, social constructionists can speak to the larger systems of oppression that are maintained through collective heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Heterosexism has been defined by Braun (2000) as "[the] assumption of heterosexual normalcy, and discrimination based on sexual orientation" (p. 133). Braun (2000) notes that heterosexism occurs in talk through both commission and omission. Through focus groups with women talking about the vagina, Braun (2000) found heterosexism by commission to take shape in "the explicit articulation of heterosexist assumptions" (p. 134). Heterosexism by commission occurs through both portraying homosexuality in a negative manner, and in actively prescribing heterosexuality as normative. Through interviews with adults participating in gay and lesbian awareness training, Peel (2001) identified instances of heterosexism by commission through participants' positioning of homosexuality as comparable to an abnormality or deficit. This was typically identified in statements such as "[if my child was homosexual] I will always love [them], no matter what [they] are" (Peel, 2001, p. 547). By positioning their love as being somehow "in spite of", participants imply that being homosexual is an undesirable outcome. Braun (2000) also identified heterosexism by commission in women's assumptions that the generic woman is equated with the heterosexual women, and the generic man is equated with the heterosexual man. These women also assumed sexual practices to be equated with heterosexual practices. Through surveys, Martin (2009) found mothers committed heterosexism by commission by assuming their children were heterosexual. These mothers also privileged heterosexual love, relationships, and families for their children. Martin



(2009) notes that “such conversations play a role in constructing children’s understandings of themselves as ‘supposed to be’ heterosexual” (p. 199).

According to Braun (2000), heterosexism by omission refers to the “the lack of disagreement with, or challenge to, heterosexist talk” (p.136). Braun (2000) identified instances of heterosexism by omission in participants’ failure to challenge heterosexist talk, and in the researchers’ failure to follow up on lesbian (and LGBTQ) topics of talk. For example, Braun (2000) noted that participants failed to challenge the underlying heterosexist assumptions in discussions, thus failing to problematize what is perceived as the ‘norm’. Further, even when participants brought up same-sex attraction and arousal, the researcher failed to push the topic further, calling her failure “an immediate retreat to the ‘safe’ (heterosexual) ground of penises” (Braun, 2000, p. 137). By this, the researcher positions discussions around same-sex arousal as unsafe, feeling that the only ‘safe’ topics are those that are of a heterosexual nature. For Martin (2009), heterosexism by omission can be identified through a mother’s failure to provide examples of alternative sexualities to her children. For example, in discussing love, relationships, sexuality, and family with their children, these mothers centered all their discussions narrowly on heterosexuality.

Heteronormativity is similar to heterosexism in its privileging and normalization of heterosexuality. Heteronormativity, however, also speaks to the intersection of gender and heterosexuality. According to Seidman (2005), heteronormativity “not only establishes a heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy but also creates hierarchies among heterosexualities, resulting in hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality” (p. 40). Not only does society privilege heterosexuals, but society also privileges a particular type of heterosexual. Heteronormativity points to the behaviours that reflect society’s conception of the ‘appropriate’ male and ‘appropriate’ female. Heteronormativity contributes to the rigid social categorizations of the heterosexual masculine male, and heterosexual feminine female as ‘normal’ (Jackson, 2005). In sum, the existing social constructionist literature shows that heterosexism and heteronormativity are not always obvious or overt. It is clear from Braun (2000), Peel (2001), and Martin (2009), that heterosexism is frequently constructed within everyday conversations. Heterosexism is also frequently constructed alongside heteronormativity. Through a social constructionist focus on the processes and practices that construct heterosexism and heteronormativity, we are able to uncover its permeation among even those who are supposedly ‘tolerant’ and ‘liberal’.

Simply put, social constructs do not have inherent meaning. The only meaning they have is the meaning given to them by people. For example, the idea that pink is for girls and blue is for boys is an example of a social construct related to gender and the color of items. Literature, as a mirror on the human condition, therefore must address the subject of sex and sexuality, but there are great variations on how and to what extent. The human need to procreate is one obvious reason why sex is so important to human beings, but it is by no means the only reason, or even the primary one. Sexual desire—even merely feeling it, not necessarily acting upon it—has been seen as inspiring as well as impure, as a generator of creativity but also as an initiator of debilitating guilt, as the source of life’s greatest pleasures, and as the cause of life’s greatest pain. From the beginnings of Western civilization, discussing and writing about sex has been controversial. In *Desire: A History of European Sexuality*, Ann Clark explains that Western thought regarding sex has traditionally been divided into two competing threads: one that sees sexual desire as “polluting and dangerous,” and one that sees it as “creative, transcendent, and transformative” (1). Some ancient Greeks worried that reason and sexual desire were incompatible, but in general the Greeks did “not see sex itself as shameful or honorable” and believed that “aggressive sexual energy could be a force for fertility, culture, and spirituality” (15). They even used “the language of erotic love to describe the ascent from earthly love to spiritual love” (1). In fact, sex for the ancient Greeks only became a “problem” when it transgressed the boundaries of the social order, as when a man had sex with another man’s wife (i.e., his property) or if a man of the upper class took a submissive role in sex with a man of the lower classes. The early church, however, had a largely negative attitude toward sex and sexual desire, seeing celibacy as a better, more pure way of life. In Jewish life, sexual desire was not seen as inherently evil, and sex within marriage was a definite good.

However, early Christians, such as the apostle Paul in the first century, saw sex, even sex within marriage, as a dangerous corruption that would lead believers away from God (39). Saint Augustine, for example, writing in the fourth century, greatly admired celibates and felt much guilt about his early pagan life. This attitude, that sex is polluting, corrupting, and dirty, is present even today. In literature, we see this attitude in many works. In William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, for instance, men who pursue their sexual desires are clearly painted as fools, doomed to eventual ruin. In Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, Sue Bridehead sees the act of sex as the road to disaster, avoids it whenever she can, and blames her sexual relationship with Jude for their tragic end. Other works of literature hold the opposite view, however, treating sex as a positive force, even sometimes as a useful metaphor for things such as ambition, transcendence, and



crossing difficult boundaries. In *Lysistrata*, for example, the women know that they can use sex as a weapon for peace. Thus, sex is seen as wholly positive. The men want sex because it delivers pleasure, and the women know that its power is so great that it can end the wars they so despise. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows the reader that while a surrender to lust can be destructive, as when Oberon tricks Titania into sleeping with Bottom, sexual union within marriage brings about great things: fertility, spirituality, and creativity. Similarly, the relationship between Rupert and Ursula in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* is portrayed as an ideal sexual relationship, transcendent and mystical, that unites the two lovers while still leaving them as individual beings. *Women in Love* is only one of the many Lawrence novels that treat sex and sexuality so frankly. *The Rainbow*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *Sons and Lovers* all contain plots that emphasize the important role of sex and sexuality in the lives of human beings. Lawrence was heavily influenced by the psychosexual development theories of the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud.

Freud's theories on how we develop as sexual beings are so important to the way in which we think about sex and the brain that they cannot be ignored. He argues that all adult neurosis is borne from childhood sexuality. According to his theories, we have instinctive sexual appetites, even as infants, and these appetites mature in a series of changes, with the object of our affection being the primary change. Freud believed that getting "stuck" in one phase was the source of psychological problems in adults. He even used a work of literature, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, to name the complex in which an adult remains fixated on his mother as the object of affection. Freud's theories on psychosexual development received an enormous amount of attention throughout most of the 20th century. However, other scientists have criticized his theories for being focused on sex to the exclusion of other elements that influence our personalities, and feminists have pointed out that his theories focus heavily on male sexuality. Nevertheless, his attention to sexual desire as an important part of our personalities was an invaluable step in terms of transforming the ways in which we talk about sex and sexuality.

Sexuality is often perceived as shameful, for the dangers it potentially precipitates—rape, incest, exploitation, cruelty, and humiliation—often outweigh its pleasures. Essentialist arguments surrounding sexuality have historically cast the subject as taboo, and even within relationships where sex is sanctioned—namely heterosexual marital relationships—it is often a difficult subject to navigate and negotiate.

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