

Sexuality: shaped by biology and society

Sociology



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Amanda Gardner 1/10 154: 130 SCA Queer Global Sexualities 9 May 2005

Sexuality: Shaped by Biology and Society The term sexuality, is described by The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology (Abercrombie et al. 2000: 313) as ' the mode by which sexual interests and sexual preferences are expressed'.

Sexuality is described by biologist David Buss, (Myers 2001) as the instinctive and innate behavioral tendencies that increase the likelihood of sending ones genes into future offspring. Sexuality is not one's sex, which is simply ones physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness or femaleness (Marieb 2001). Also, sexuality is not ones gender, which is the socially learned characteristics or roles of maleness or femaleness (Poole & Jureidini 2000). These terms, sex and gender, imply the differences between men and women physiologically and characteristically. Sexuality is not sex or gender, although sexuality is somewhat intertwined with the two. Sexuality is sexual behavior; the ' behavior related to copulation and similar activities' (Oakley, 1985 p. 99: as cited in Zajdow 2002: 63). Sexuality is the whole area of actions and thoughts surrounding ' achieving and having sexual relations' (Pinker 1997). The behaviors one exhibits when attracting a partner, the interactions with other humans in a sexual manner, and actual sexual activities, are all components of sexuality (Vida 1996). Theorists attempt to answer what causes sexual behavior, which factors have the power to influence one's sexual behavior, and what factors control or limit sexual behavior. Amanda Gardner 2/10 Traditional explanations of sexuality or sexual behavior have been derived and colored by evolutionary biological sciences. As noted earlier such theories have been criticized by sociology as being flawed by essentialism. This term, essentialism, refers to the way theorists, such as sociobiologists have reduced the complexity of sexuality <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-shaped-by-biology-and-society/>

right down to a single essence (Abercrombie et al. 2000: 122). The essence, in this case, explains sexual behavior as being exclusively controlled by one's biological make up. This essentialist explanation for sexuality emphasizes a simplistic approach, placing sole responsibility for sexual behavior upon one's genes (Zajdow 2002). Such theories rely on evolutionary imperatives such as the theory of Natural Selection by Charles Darwin (1809-82). The Darwinian Theory was proposed in 1859 and was evidenced by fossil records and studies conducted on comparative anatomy and embryology of humans and animals (Minidictionary of Biology, 1988: 102). The theory was later supported in 1920's through studies known as 'classical genetics' by a man named Mendel, who updated the theory to Neo-Darwinism (Minidictionary of Biology, 1988: 185). The theories explain that natural selection by the natural environment has shaped humans' universal behavioral tendencies and characteristics. Only the beings that carried optimal characteristics for survival and adapted most well to their natural environment, avoided death, and went on to breed and thus pass on their genes to their offspring. Therefore, these optimal behavioral tendencies and characteristics were inherited and passed along the generations over millions of years (Marieb 2001). The notion is, that the sexual characteristics and sexual behavioral tendencies present in humans today, have been selectively inherited genetically, as they have optimal capacity to ensure offspring and therefore species survival. These genes encompass drives for instinctive and innate behaviors, finely tuned or concentrated through the generations. (Marieb 2001). The theory likens human sexuality to that of primate animal sexuality, which is where the research has been documented (Vida 1996). This essentialist sociobiological

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approach insists that sexuality can not be controlled by an individual, as it is a primal urge, and that any observable change in human sexual behavioral tendencies could only come through a slow evolutionary process (Zajdow 2002). The Darwinian Theory has been widely accepted in westernized culture for well over a century. Affirmations of biological concepts by the medical association, give support to and encourage acceptance of essentialist explanations for human behavior (Jureidini & Poole 2000) . The recent development of the Human Genome project, evidencing links between some genes and characteristics (Zajdow 2002) has also strengthened these theories. The assumption that sexual behavior is an innate biological process is visibly reflected in sexuality among western cultures. Whether the sexual behavior actually is innate, or whether the essentialist behavior theories have become so socially accepted, that it is now ingrained as a social norm, is still to be proven. Either way, documentation of sexuality over the past century shows a definite link to the Darwinian Theory (Pinker 1997). Essentialist theorists believed traditional sexuality saw that men had strong primal urges, as do many primate animals. Men were expected to be overt in their sexuality and initiate sex and marriage (Vida 1996). In the 19th and 20th centuries, the division of labor (Durkhiem 1964: cited in Jureidini & Poole 2000: 35) saw men became stereotyped and expected to be bread winners and women were stereotyped as incubators and child caregivers. Patriarchy within the Amanda Gardner 4/10 family was accepted as the norm as men were believed to be naturally aggressive (according to sociobiology) and have a need to dominate the family, women were believed to be naturally passive, nurturing and even to have a need to be dominated (Jureidini & Poole 2001). Sociobiologists

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ascertain that men have an innate attraction to fertile women, implying that men will look for healthy and loyal women of a childbearing nature. They also suggest that men have a need to be paternal, so they will inevitably display jealousy and rage when this paternity is threatened, perhaps from advances by other men towards his partner, or infidelity by his partner. Women on the other hand are instinctively attracted to a male that can provide for her and the children she will have, wealth and physical ability are attractive characteristics (Zajdow 2002). The sociobiological theory suggests that sexual behavior is for pro-creation purposes. As with animals, men are understood to have an innate urge to 'sow their seed' as far and as wide as possible in the name of ensuring species survival, which causes men to exhibit promiscuous sexuality (Myers 2001). Some even regarded men as sexual predators and to be harboring the sexual instincts of caveman ancestors (Wilson 1975; as cited in Zajdow 2002: 64). Thus rape and prostitution become necessary in order to satisfy the male desire to constantly procreate (Vida 1996). A female would not have a desire to be promiscuous; theoretically women don't harbor such innate urges in their genes. Women are theorized as having little or no sexuality, as sociobiology suggests species survival requires them to need only be the recipient of sperm and child bearers. Maternal instincts are theorized to cause women to naturally desire this course of action, as a instinctive desire to facilitate species survival (Myers 2001). Amanda Gardner 5/10 Social attitudes of the Darwinian Theory are reflected in Western culture. A 'double standard' on men's and women's sexuality has arisen by the social disapproval of the women's sexuality, a social expectation of men's sexuality. Taken from Llewellyn-Jones' (1982: 52) book titled 'Everywoman' an excerpt on 'cultural <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-shaped-by-biology-and-society/>

myths about sex' describes some consequences of Darwinism on social attitudes of sexuality. Llewellyn-Jones writes, ' nice girls don't have sex', also that ' she is unfeminine unless she marries and becomes a mother' and ' sex is a man's responsibility... women should make themselves available to their husbands when he requires a release of sexual tension'. Yet social expectations of men's sexuality are different, men are encouraged to ' get lucky, score, pick up and are inclined to compete with peers about sexual conquests' (Llewellyn-Jones 1982: 54). Such socially constructed norms correlate with the essentialist theories and demonstrate how an inequality between men and women's sexuality has emerged. In the 1960's, dissatisfaction with patriarchy, subordination of women, gender role stereotyping, social norms and expectations about sexuality led to the Women's Movement, the rise of Feminism and other sociologists to examine these issues (Poole & Jureidini 2001). Sexuality was examined by sociologists objectively, as a socially constructed phenomenon. Looking at sexual behavior from a Social Constructionist perspective shed a new light on sexuality. By addressing some of the problems that have arisen from the essentialist sociobiological theories, sociology considers that there are social and cultural influences on sexual behavior that need to be recognized and that sexuality not be solely a biological mechanism (Zajdow 2002). Amanda Gardner 6/10 Although sociology accepts that biology and evolution does play a role in sexual behavior in humans, it argues that social and cultural influences also play a large role, and that sexuality may be socially constructed, by social rules norms and expectations. Sociology insists that sexuality is a complex social behavior, not a simple innate behavior as proposed by biology. Sociology emphasizes that sexuality, entwined with sex <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-shaped-by-biology-and-society/>

and gender are intricately laced into every day social life (Jureidini & Poole 2002). In contrast to biological ideas that sexuality is simply a precondition of the actual act of copulation, sociology explains that sexual overtones affect every human interaction and behavior privately and publicly (Zajdow 2002). The complexity of sexuality, as social interactionist theorists state, becomes apparent just by observing normal human interaction. Basic human interaction between the sexes, sexual humor, media depiction of sex and sexuality, body language, styles of appearance and language all influence and construct one's sexuality. Everything one sees and everything one does is influencing and constructing one's sexual behaviors (Jureidini & Poole 2002). Symbolic interactionist theorists emphasize that as men and women interact and negotiate their daily lives, they are influenced by the sexual meanings they learn, from society (Jureidini & Poole 2002). The notion that sexuality is learned is a key difference to the sociobiology view. An example would relate to the way that the sociobiological theory of sexuality by Darwin was embraced by western cultures, and that this has actually influenced the actual formation of individual attitudes about sexuality. Much of western society's understanding about sexuality is based on the institutionalized rules, meanings, and understandings drawn from the Darwinian Theory, one looks to these socially constructed norms to create a reality about sexuality (Pinker Amanda Gardner 7/10 1997).. Sociologists do have notable evidence to suggest that sexuality is learned. Sociobiologists have maintained all sexuality is innate and instinctive, but sociology suggests otherwise. Studies among animal primates show that by isolating young apes from observing sexual behavior, they then fail to exhibit normal sexual behavior. If followed by remedial socialization (being able to observe other apes sexuality) the <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-shaped-by-biology-and-society/>

previously isolated ape will then develop his/her sexuality and sexual behavior to an almost normal level (Jureidini & Poole 2001: 367). Studies of other cultures too, have demonstrated that there is an element of sexuality learning from cultural norms. In some cultures, such as the 'Mehinaku' of the Amazon Basin, the 'men are actually fearful of sex, engaging in it as little as possible'. In Trobriand Islands, 'adolescent girls are expected to be sexually aggressive and men quite timid'. In Sorino society, 'very fat women are considered to be sexually satisfying and thin women are said to be repulsive'. Some cultures, such as Pacific societies 'young men are expected to have sexual relations with older men as an initiation'. (Jureidini and Poole 2001: 368). The list goes on, however the point is that sociology has pointed out a very valid fact; learning from others, cultural norms, and social expectations are all very powerful influences that do define and effect expression of sexuality. Sociologists have found what is considered attractive also differs from those suggested by the sociobiological theory, across cultures (Jureidini and Poole 2002). Even modern Western culture seems to have diverged from the Darwinian Theory that says men will instinctively be attracted to healthy women of a childbearing nature. Modern media representations of women currently depict extremely thin, and quite underdeveloped and unhealthy body types as attractive Amanda Gardner 8/10 (Vida 1996). Sociological data has suggested that the type of partner one is most likely to chose and come to desire sexually is one with a matched status, economic class, race, ethnicity, religion, background, education and generally within an age bracket no more and no less that five years of their own age (Michael et al. 1994). Sociological theorists Gagnon & Simon (1974, p. 76-7: cited in Zajdow 2002) have supported the notion that <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-shaped-by-biology-and-society/>

individuals do have control over their sexuality and that they actually cognitively develop 'sexual scripts'. A clearly defined cognitive plan of action and directive behavior guidelines for choosing whom one will choose to interact with sexually and what sort of behavior one plans to exhibit when having sexual interactions with that person. Gagnon and Simon (1974) state that without these organized planned sexual scripts than it would be unlikely that any sexual behavior would occur at all. Contradictable to the Darwinian Theory, sociology suggests sexuality is a planned and organized behavior, not an impulsive urge or animalistic reaction. As theorists from differing disciplines combine their ideas and research findings, the factors and influences responsible for human sexual behavior become evident. In a tireless pursuit to understand the mysteries of sexuality, it is important to gain insights from many perspectives. In the endeavor to understand the true foundations of sexuality or sexual behavior we become aware of the power of evolution, the complexity of social constructions, and the influences of one's environment. As Science and Sociology research, acknowledge, and debate knowledge, the realm of understanding sexuality is slowly unraveled. As hypotheses are tested and re-tested, and theories are continuously debated, refuted, and accepted, knowledge about sexuality becomes finely tuned. Although disciplines may emerge with distinctly different Amanda Gardner 9/10 theories about sexuality, a lot can be learned through the studies of science and sociology. Sexual behavior, a complex and intricate web of innate desires, and learned behaviors is an important part of every individual's life. It is a source of reproduction, pleasure, and self expression for men and women of every culture and every era. References Abercrombie, Nicholas., Hill, Stephen., and Turner, Bryan, S., (2000) The Penguin <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-shaped-by-biology-and-society/>

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