

ANTHROPOLOGY REDISCOVERS SEXUALITY: A THEORETICAL COMMENT

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Abstract—Despite its reputation for openness to research on sexuality, anthropology as a discipline has only reluctantly supported such work. Anthropological research and theory developed slowly, sharing a stable theoretical paradigm (the cultural influence model) from the 1920s to the 1990s. Moving beyond determinist and essentialist frameworks still common in biomedicine, anthropological work nevertheless viewed important aspects of sexuality as universal and transcultural.

Social construction theory has offered a challenge to traditional anthropological models and has been responsible for a recent burst of innovative work in sexuality, both in anthropology and in other disciplines, since 1975. The theoretical roots and implications of constructionist theory are explored.

The intensifying competition between cultural influence and constructionist paradigms has been altered by the appearance of AIDS and the subsequent increased support for research on sexuality. On the one hand, the expansion in funding threatens to strengthen essentialist models in biomedical contexts and cultural influence models in anthropology. On the other hand, the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the sexuality under study may both reveal the strengths of constructionist approaches and spur the development of research and theory in anthropology.

Key words—anthropology and sexuality, social construction theory, sex research, AIDS and sexuality

'In the Beginning was sex and sex will be in the end . . . I maintain—and this is my thesis—that sex as a feature of man and society was always central and remains such . . .' [1]

Alexander Goldenweiser (1929)

This opening sentence from Alexander Goldenweiser's essay, "Sex and Primitive Society", suggests that sexuality has been an important focus for anthropological investigation. Indeed, such is the reputation anthropologists have bestowed upon themselves: fearless investigators of sexual customs and mores throughout the world, breaking through the erotophobic intellectual taboos common in other, more timid disciplines.

In reality, anthropology's relationship to the study of sexuality is more complex and contradictory. Anthropology as a field has been far from courageous or even adequate in its investigation of sexuality [2, 3]. Rather, the discipline often appears to share the prevailing cultural view that sexuality is not an entirely legitimate area of study, and that such study necessarily casts doubt not only on the research but on the motives and character of the researcher. In this, we have been no worse but also no better than other social science disciplines.

Manifestations of this attitude abound in graduate training and in the reward structure of the profession. Few graduate departments provide training in the study of human sexuality. As a result, there are no structured channels to transmit anthropological knowledge concerning sexuality to the next generation of students. The absence of a scholarly community engaged with issues of sexuality effectively prevents the field from advancing; students interested in the topic perceive that they must rediscover

past generations' work on their own. Most advisors actively discourage graduate students from fieldwork or dissertations on sexuality for fear that the topic will prove a career liability. At best, students are advised to complete their doctoral degrees, build up reputations and credentials, and even obtain tenure, all of which are said to put one in a better position to embark on the study of sexuality. Rather than the collective effort needed to remedy a serious structural limitation in our discipline, this advice conveys the clear message that sexuality is so dangerous an intellectual terrain it can ruin the careers of otherwise competent graduate students and academics.

Nor is there any career track after graduate school for professional anthropologists interested in sexuality. Never attaining the status of an appropriate specialization, sexuality remains marginal. Funding is difficult, as agencies continue to be fearful of the subject's potential for public controversy. Colleagues often remain suspicious and hypercritical, as discomfort with the very subject of sexuality is cast instead in terms of scholarly adequacy or legitimacy [4]. Field projects rarely, if ever, focus fully or directly on sexuality; rather, field workers collect data as they can, some of which are never published for fear of harm to one's professional reputation. Some anthropologists retreat into sexology, more hospitable perhaps, yet seriously limited itself as an intellectual ghetto of disciplinary refugees [5, 6].

In light of these disincentives, it is perhaps not surprising that the recent development of a more cultural and non-essentialist discourse about sexuality has sprung not from the center of anthropology but from its periphery, from other disciplines (especially history), and from theorizing done by marginal groups. The explosion of exciting and chal-

lenging work in what has come to be called social construction theory during the past 15 years has yet to be felt fully in mainstream anthropology.

The intellectual history of social construction theory is complex, and the moments offered here are for purposes of illustration, not comprehensive review (for basic texts, see Refs [7-18]). Social construction theory drew on developments in several disciplines: social interactionism, labeling theory, and deviance in sociology [19, 20]; social history, labor studies, women's history, and Marxist history [21]; and symbolic anthropology, cross-cultural work on sexuality, and gender studies in anthropology, to name only the most significant streams. In addition, theorists in many disciplines responded to new questions raised by feminist and lesbian/gay scholarship concerning gender and identity.

SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Feminist scholarship and activism undertook the project of rethinking gender, which had a revolutionary impact on notions of what is natural. Feminist efforts focused on a critical review of theories which used reproduction to link gender with sexuality, thereby explaining the inevitability and naturalness of women's subordination (for anthropology, see Refs [22-27]).

This theoretical re-examination led to a general critique of biological determinism, in particular of received knowledge about the biology of sex differences [28-33]. Historical and cross-cultural evidence undermined the notion that women's roles, which varied so widely, could be caused by a seemingly uniform human reproduction and sexuality. In light of the diversity of gender roles in human society, it seemed unlikely that they were inevitable or caused by sexuality. The ease with which such theories had become accepted suggested that science was conducted within and mediated by powerful beliefs about gender and in turn provided ideological support for current social relations. Moreover, this increased sensitivity to the ideological aspects of science led to a wide-ranging inquiry into the historical connection between male dominance, scientific ideology, and the development of Western science and biomedicine [34-41].

Feminist practice in grass-roots activism also fostered analyses which separated sexuality and gender. Popular struggles to advance women's access to abortion and birth control represented an attempt to separate sexuality from reproduction and women's gendered role as wives and mothers. Discussions in consciousness-raising groups made clear that what seemed to be a naturally gendered body was in fact a highly socially mediated product: femininity and sexual attractiveness were achieved through persistent socialization regarding standards of beauty, makeup, and body language. Finally, discussions between different generations of women made clear how variable their allegedly natural sexuality was, moving within our own century from marital duty to multiple orgasm, vaginal to clitoral eroticism, and Victorian passionlessness to a fittingly feminine enthusiasm. Sexuality and gender went together, it seemed, but in ways that were subject to change.

In 1975, anthropologist Gayle Rubin's influential essay, "The Traffic in Women", made a compelling argument against essentialist explanations that sexuality and reproduction caused gender difference in any simple or inevitable way [42]. Instead, she explored the shape of "a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products" [42, p. 158]. She proposed the term "sex/gender system" to describe "the set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" [42, p. 159].

In 1984, Rubin suggested a further deconstruction of the sex/gender system into two separate domains in which sexuality and gender were recognized as distinct systems [43]. Most prior feminist analyses considered sexuality a totally derivative category whose organization was determined by the structure of gender inequality. According to Rubin's formulation, sexuality and gender were analytically distinct phenomena which required separate explanatory frames, even though they were interrelated in specific historical circumstances. Theories of sexuality could not explain gender, and taking the argument to a new level, theories of gender could not explain sexuality.

This perspective suggested a novel framework: sexuality and gender are separate systems which are interwoven at many points. Although members of a culture experience this interweaving as natural, seamless, and organic, the points of connection vary historically and cross-culturally. For researchers in sexuality, the task is not only to study changes in the expression of sexual behavior and attitudes, but to examine the relationship of these changes to more deeply-based shifts in how gender and sexuality were organized and interrelated within larger social relations.

SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY

A second impetus for the development of social construction theory arose from issues that emerged in the examination of male homosexuality in nineteenth-century Europe and America [7, 8, 10, 12]. It is interesting to note that a significant portion of this early research was conducted by independent scholars, non-academics, and maverick academics usually working without funding or university support, since at this time the history of sexuality (particularly that of marginal groups) was scarcely a legitimate topic. As this research has recently achieved the barest modicum of academic acceptance, it is commonplace for properly-employed academics to gloss these developments by a reference to Foucault and *The History of Sexuality* [44]. Without denying his contribution, such a singular genealogy obscures an important origin of social construction theory, and inadvertently credits the university and scholarly disciplines with a development they never supported.

The first attempt to grapple with questions of sexual identity in a way now recognizable as social construction appears in Mary McIntosh's 1968 essay on the homosexual role in England [45]. A landmark

article offering many suggestive insights about the historical construction of sexuality in England, her observations initially vanished like pebbles in a pond until the mid-1970s, when they were again taken up by writers involved in the questions of feminism and gay liberation. It is at this time that an identifiably constructionist approach first appears.

The earliest scholarship in lesbian and gay history attempted to retrieve and revive documents, narratives, and biographies which had been lost or made invisible due to historical neglect as well as active efforts to suppress the material by archivists, historians, and estates. These documents and the lives represented therein were first conceived of as "lesbian" or "gay", and the enterprise as a search for historical roots. To their credit, researchers who started this enterprise sharing the implicit cultural ideology of fixed sexual categories then began to consider other ways of looking at their material and to ask more expansive questions.

Jeffrey Weeks, English historian of sexuality, first articulated this theoretical transition [8]. Drawing on McIntosh's concept of the homosexual role, he distinguished between homosexual behavior, which he considered universal, and homosexual identity, which he viewed as historically and culturally specific and, in Britain, a comparatively recent development. His rich and provocative analysis of changing attitudes and identities also contextualized sexuality, examining its relationship to the reorganization of family, gender, and household in nineteenth century Britain.

Jonathan Katz's work also demonstrates this process. His first book, *Gay American History*, is in the tradition of a search for gay ancestors [7]. In the course of researching his second book, however, he began to consider that the acts of sodomy reported in American colonial documents from the 17th century might not be equivalent to contemporary homosexuality [12]. Colonial society did not seem to conceive of a unique type of person—a homosexual—who engaged in these acts. Nor was there any evidence of a homosexual subculture or individuals whose subjective sense of identity was organized around what we understand as sexual preference or identity. Katz's second book marks a sharp departure from the first, in that records or accounts that document same-sex emotional or sexual relations are not taken as evidence of "gay" or "lesbian" identity, but are treated as jumping off points for a whole series of questions about the meanings of these acts to the people who engaged in them and to the culture and time in which they lived.

These intellectual developments are also evident in early work on the formation of lesbian identity [46-49] and work considering the question of sexual behavior and identity in non-Western cultures, for example, Gilbert Herdt's work in New Guinea [50-52]. From this expanding body of work [18, 53-59] came an impressive willingness to imagine: had the categories "homosexual" and "lesbian" always existed? and if not, what were their points of origin and conditions for development? If identical physical acts had different subjective meanings, how was sexual meaning constructed? If sexual subcultures come into being, what leads to their formation?

And although these questions were initially phrased in terms of homosexual identity and history, it is clear that they are equally applicable to heterosexual identity and history, implications just now being explored [60-64].

SEXUALITY AS A CONTESTED DOMAIN

Continuing work on the history of the construction of sexuality in modern, state-level society shows that sexuality is an actively contested political and symbolic terrain in which groups struggle to implement sexual programs and alter sexual arrangements and ideologies. The growth of state interest in regulating sexuality (and the related decline of religious control) made legislative and public policy domains particularly attractive fields for political and intellectual struggles around sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mass movements mobilized around venereal disease, prostitution, masturbation, social purity, and the double standard, employing grass-roots political organizing, legislative lobbying, mass demonstrations, and cultural interventions utilizing complex symbols, rhetoric, and representations [10, 15, 65-70]. Because state intervention was increasingly formulated in a language of health, physicians and scientists became important participants in the newly developing regulatory discourses. They also actively participated in elaborating these discourses as a way to legitimize their newly professionalizing specialities.

Although socially powerful groups exercised more discursive power, they were not the only participants in sexual struggles. Minority reformers, progressives, suffragists, and sex radicals also put forward programs for change and introduced new ways of thinking about and organizing sexuality. The sexual subcultures that had grown up in urban areas were an especially fertile field for these experiments. Constructionist work shows how their attempt to carve out partially protected public spaces in which to elaborate and express new sexual forms, behaviors, and sensibilities is also part of a larger political struggle to define sexuality. Subcultures give rise not only to new ways of organizing behavior and identity but to new ways of symbolically resisting and engaging with the dominant order, some of which grow to have a profound impact beyond the small groups in which they are pioneered. In this respect, social construction work has been valuable in exploring human agency and creativity in sexuality, moving away from uni-directional models of social change to describe complex and dynamic relationships among the state, professional experts, and sexual subcultures. This attempt to historicize sexuality has produced an innovative body of work to which historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and others have contributed in an unusual interdisciplinary conversation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION MODELS, 1975-1990

The increasing popularity of the term "social construction" obscures the fact that constructionist writers have used this term in diverse ways. It is true that

all reject transhistorical and transcultural definitions of sexuality and suggest instead that sexuality is mediated by historical and cultural factors. But a close reading of constructionist texts shows that social constructionists differ in their views of what might be constructed, variously including sexual acts, sexual identities, sexual communities, the direction of erotic interest (object choice), and sexual desire itself. Despite these differences, all share the urge to problematize the terms and field of study.

At minimum, all social construction approaches adopt the view that physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods. Because a sexual act does not carry with it a universal social meaning, it follows that the relationship between sexual acts and sexual meanings is not fixed, and it is projected from the observer's time and place at great peril. Cultures provide widely different categories, schema, and labels for framing sexual and affective experiences. These constructions not only influence individual subjectivity and behavior, but they also organize and give meaning to collective sexual experience through, for example, the impact of sexual identities, definitions, ideologies, and regulations. The relationship of sexual acts and identities to organized sexual communities is equally variable and complex. These distinctions, then, between sexual acts, identities, and communities are widely employed by constructionist writers.

A further step in social construction theory posits that even the direction of erotic interest itself, for example, object choice (heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, as contemporary sexology would conceptualize it) is not intrinsic or inherent in the individual, but is constructed from more polymorphous possibilities. Not all constructionists take this step; and for those who do not, the direction of desire and erotic interest may be thought of as fixed, although the behavioral form this interest takes will be constructed by prevailing cultural frames, as will the subjective experience of individuals and the social significance attached to it by others.

The most radical form of constructionist theory [71] is willing to entertain the idea that there is no essential, undifferentiated sexual "impulse," "sex drive," or "lust," which resides in the body due to physiological functioning and sensation. Sexual desire, then, is itself constructed by culture and history from the energies and capacities of the body. In this case, an important constructionist question concerns the origin of these impulses, since they are no longer assumed to be intrinsic or perhaps even necessary. This position, of course, contrasts sharply with more middle-ground constructionist theory which implicitly accepts an inherent desire which is then constructed in terms of acts, identity, community, and object choice. The contrast between middle-ground and radical positions makes it evident that constructionists may well have arguments with each other, as well as with those working in essentialist and cultural influence traditions. Nevertheless, social construction literature, making its first appearance in the mid-1970s, demonstrates a gradual devel-

opment of the ability to imagine that sexuality is constructed.

CULTURAL INFLUENCE MODELS OF SEXUALITY, 1920-1990

By contrast, conventional anthropological approaches to sexuality from 1920-1990 remained remarkably consistent. Just as sexuality itself remained an unexamined construct, the theoretical foundations remained unexamined, unnamed, and implicit, as if they were so inevitable and natural that there could be little dispute or choice about this standard, almost generic, approach. For that reason I want to suggest the name "cultural influence model," to call attention to its distinctive features and promote greater recognition of this paradigm. In this model, sexuality is seen as the basic material—a kind of universal Play Doh—on which culture works, a naturalized category which remains closed to investigation and analysis.

On the one hand, the cultural influence model emphasizes the role of culture and learning in shaping sexual behavior and attitudes. In this respect, it rejects obvious forms of essentialism and universalizing. Variation was a key finding in many studies, in cross-cultural surveys [72-76], in ethnographic accounts of single societies whose sexual customs stood in sharp contrast to those of the Euro-American reader [77-89], and in theoretical overviews [1, 90-93]. Culture is viewed as encouraging or discouraging the expression of generic sexual acts, attitudes, and relationships. Oral-genital contact, for example, might be a part of normal heterosexual expression in one group but taboo in another; male homosexuality might be severely punished in one tribe yet tolerated in another. Anthropological work from this period was characterized by a persistent emphasis on variability.

On the other hand, although culture is thought to shape sexual expression and customs, the bedrock of sexuality is assumed—and often quite explicitly stated—to be universal and biologically determined; in the literature, it appears as "sex drive" or "impulse" [94]. Although capable of being shaped, the drive is conceived of as powerful, moving toward expression after its awakening in puberty, sometimes exceeding social regulation, and taking a distinctively different form in men and women.

The core of sexuality is reproduction. Although most anthropological accounts by no means restrict themselves to analyzing reproductive behavior alone, reproductive sexuality (glossed as heterosexual intercourse) appears as the meat and potatoes in the sexual menu, with other forms, both heterosexual and homosexual, arranged as appetizers, vegetables, and desserts. (These metaphors are not unknown in anthropological narratives.) Ethnographic and survey accounts almost always follow a reporting format that deals first with "real sex" and then moves on to the "variations." Some accounts supposedly about sexuality are noticeably short on details about non-reproductive behavior; Margaret Mead's article about the cultural determinants of sexual behaviors (in a wonderfully titled volume called *Sex and Internal Secretions*) [95] travels a dizzying trail

which includes pregnancy, menstruation, menopause, and lactation but very little about non-reproductive sexuality or eroticism. Similarly, a more recent book, expansively titled *Varieties of Sexual Experience* (1985), devotes virtually all but a few pages to reproduction, marriage, and family organization [76].

Within the cultural influence model, the term "sexuality" covers a broad range of topics. Its meaning is often taken for granted, left implicit as a shared understanding between the reader and author. Tracking its use through various articles and books shows that sexuality includes many wildly different things: intercourse, orgasm, foreplay; erotic fantasies, stories, humor; sex differences and the organization of masculinity and femininity; and gender relations (often called sex roles in the earlier literature).

In this model, sexuality is not only related to gender but blends easily, and is often conflated, with it. Sexuality, gender arrangements, masculinity and femininity are assumed to be connected, even interchangeable. This assumption, however, never illuminates their culturally and historically-specific connections; it obscures them. The confusion springs from our own folk beliefs that (1) sex causes gender, that is, male-female reproductive differences and the process of reproduction (framed as and equated with "sexuality") give rise to gender differentiation, and (2) gender causes sex, that is, women as a marked gender group constitute the locus of sexuality, sexual desire, and motivation. Reproduction and its organization become the prime movers in all other male/female differentiation and in the flowering of the gender system. Gender and sexuality are seamlessly knit together.

Finally, the cultural influence model assumes that sexual acts carry stable and universal significance in terms of identity and subjective meaning. The literature routinely regards opposite gender sexual contact as "heterosexuality" and same gender contact as "homosexuality," as if the same phenomena were being observed in all societies in which these acts occurred. With hindsight, these assumptions are curiously ethnocentric, since the meanings attached to these sexual behaviors are those of the observers and 20th century complex, industrial society. Cross-cultural surveys could fairly chart the distribution of same or opposite gender sexual contact or the frequency of sexual contact before marriage. But when investigators report instead on the presence or absence of "homosexuality" or "sexual permissiveness," they engage in a spurious translation from sexual act or behavior to sexual meaning and identity, something later theoretical developments would come to reject.

To summarize, the cultural influence model recognizes variations in the occurrence of sexual behavior and in cultural attitudes which encourage or restrict behavior, but not in the meaning of the behavior itself. In addition, anthropologists working within this framework accept without question the existence of universal categories like heterosexual and homosexual, male and female sexuality, and sex drive.

Despite these many deficiencies, it is important to recognize the strengths of this approach, particularly in its intellectual, historical, and political context.

Anthropology's commitment to cross-cultural comparison made it the most relativistic of social science disciplines in regard to the study of sexuality. Its finding of variation called into question prevailing notions about the inevitability or naturalness of sexual norms and behavior common in America and Europe, and the connection between sexual regulation and social or familial stability. The variability it reported suggested that human sexuality was malleable and capable of assuming different forms. Work in the cultural influence tradition undercut more mechanistic theories of sexual behavior, still common in medicine and psychiatry, that suggested sexuality was largely a function of physiological functioning or instinctual drives. It began to develop social and intellectual space in which it was possible to regard sexuality as something other than a simple function of biology.

Although work in the cultural influence model contributed to the development of social construction theory, there is a sharp break between them in many respects. This difference has not been recognized by many anthropologists still working within the cultural influence tradition. Indeed, many mistakenly seem to regard these new developments as theoretically compatible, even continuous with earlier work. Some have assimilated terms or phrases (like "social construction" or "cultural construction") in their work, yet their analytic frames still contain many unexamined essentialist elements [96]. It is not the case that the cultural influence model, because it recognizes cultural variation, is the same as social construction theory. The cultural influence model, then, no longer remains the only anthropological paradigm, although it still dominates contemporary work [76, 97].

It would seem that the development of anthropology in this century—a general movement away from biologized frameworks toward perspectives that are denaturalizing and anti-essentialist—would foster the application of social construction theory to the study of sexuality. Despite its challenge to the natural and universalized status of many domains, however, anthropology has largely excluded sexuality from this endeavor of suggesting that human actions have been and continue to be subject to historical and cultural forces and, thus, to change.

A social construction approach to sexuality would examine the range of behavior, ideology, and subjective meaning among and within human groups, and would view the body, its functions, and sensations as potentials (and limits) which are incorporated and mediated by culture. The physiology of orgasm and penile erection no more explains a culture's sexual schema than the auditory range of the human ear explains its music. Biology and physiological functioning are determinative only at the most extreme limits, and there to set the boundary of what is physically possible. The more interesting question for anthropological research on sexuality is to chart what is culturally possible—a far more expansive domain. Ecological adaptation and reproductive demands similarly explain only a small portion of sexual organization, since fertility adequate for replacement and even growth is relatively easy for most groups to achieve. More important, sexuality is not

coterminous with or equivalent to reproduction: reproductive sexuality constitutes a small portion of the larger sexual universe.

In addition, a social construction approach to sexuality must also problematize and question Euro-American folk and scientific beliefs about sexuality, rather than project them onto other groups in a manner which would be most unacceptably ethnocentric in any other subject area. Thus, statements about the universally compelling force of sexual impulse, the importance of sexuality in human life, the universally private status of sexual behavior, or its quintessentially reproductive nature need to be presented as hypotheses, not *a priori* assumptions. Anthropology seems especially well suited to problematize these most naturalized categories, yet sexuality has been the last domain (trailing even gender) to have its natural, biologized status called into question. For many of us, essentialism was our first way of thinking about sexuality and still remains hegemonic.

Social construction theory offers a radically different perspective in the study of sexuality, encouraging novel and fruitful research questions. Its influence has been increasing in anthropology [98–106], although cultural influence models still dominate [76, 107–111]. One might have predicted a gradually intensifying competition between paradigms, possibly even a paradigm shift. The appearance of AIDS, however, has altered this dynamic.

AIDS AND RESEARCH ON SEXUALITY

The great concern about AIDS has dramatically increased the interest in conducting and funding sex research. Early in the epidemic, epidemiologists routinely began to include batteries of questions concerning the frequency and nature of their subjects' sexual behavior. Their problems in measurement and conceptualization, as well as their futile search for baseline data, highlighted the scientific neglect of sex research. Indeed, the fact that no large-scale study on American sexual habits has been conducted since the Kinsey volumes [112, 113] now stands as a major embarrassment, resulting in our inability to answer even the most basic questions. As scientific groups and policy makers recognized the need for this information, they strongly recommended drastic increases in funding and research efforts in affected countries [114–116]. Although in many ways a positive and necessary step, the rush to funding nevertheless raises the possibility that the inadequate essentialist and cultural influence models of sexuality will be revived and strengthened.

AIDS encourages the resurgence of biomedical approaches to sexuality through the repeated association of sexuality with disease. The medicalization of sexuality is intensifying, as the public turns to medical authorities for sexual information and advice. In addition, biomedical investigators in medical schools and schools of public health are conducting a significant portion of AIDS-related research in sexuality [117]. This signals a shift from a general trend developing after World War II, when research on sexuality increasingly moved out of medical arenas. Thus, medicine's interest in sexuality is expanding to new areas beyond the specialties to which it was

traditionally confined; sexually transmitted diseases, obstetrics and gynecology, and psychiatry.

This development poses several dangers. Biomedical approaches to sexuality often regard sexuality as derivative from physiology and a supposedly universal functioning of the body. Biomedical models tend to be the most unreflective about the influence of science and medical practice in constructing categories like "the body" and "health." Social construction approaches are virtually unknown, and the concept that sexuality varies with culture and history is expressed at best via primitive cultural influence models. There is limited recognition that sexuality has a history and that its definitions and meanings change over time and within populations. The reliance on survey instruments and easily quantified data in biomedically-based research increases the tendency to count acts rather than explore meaning. Such surveys have frequently equated sexual identities with sexual acts, for example, and treated "gay men" and "heterosexuals" as unproblematic categories. In addition, the high status of medical practitioners in the twentieth century and their recruitment from privileged class, gender, and racial groups has resulted historically in their close alliances with dominant ideologies, including the sexual. Should this pattern persist, they are as unlikely to be aware of marginal sexual subcultures and sensibilities as they are to be sensitive to them.

Framing sexual research within a biomedical model and the perspective of disease also threatens to re-pathologize sexuality. This promises to return sexuality to the position it occupied in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where its public discussion was largely motivated and circumscribed by the discourses of venereal disease, prostitution, and masturbation. These public discussions framed by medical experts, ostensibly about health and disease, were implicitly discussions about morality, gender, and social order. This danger is heightened by the respect accorded medicine and science and the widespread public belief that science contains no values. The expansion of a supposedly objective and value-free discourse about sexuality organized under the guise of health opens the door to vastly increased governmental and professional intervention.

The emphasis placed on gay men and their sexual behavior in the early stages of the epidemic constitutes a sharp departure from previous inattention to subordinate sexual groups. This attention, however, highlights their "otherness" in a manner reminiscent of 19th century pathology models of homosexuality, [118] emphasizing the naturalness of identity and reinforcing the sharp dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This otherness is expanding to involve additional stigmatized groups at risk for AIDS, such as IV drug users, their partners, and inner city minority women, drawing on historically and culturally resonant stereotypes [119].

The danger posed by increased funding for research on sexuality connected with AIDS is not restricted to biomedicine. Within anthropology, it is unlikely that essentialist models will make a comeback; however, the field may well experience the impact of increasingly biomedical approaches to

sexuality in interdisciplinary work conducted in medical settings. More important, increased funding and urgent calls for research are likely to strengthen cultural influence models of sexuality, as more and more anthropologists will be drawn into work on AIDS [120-124].

Most of these are likely to be medical anthropologists or specialists in affected geographic areas without specialized training in sexuality. As anthropologists, they can be relied on to bring with them an expectation of human diversity, sensitivity to ethnocentrism, and a respect for the role of culture in shaping behavior, sexuality included. But this is precisely the problem, as these perspectives will reinvent the cultural influence model as the common-sense, anthropological approach to sexuality. Anthropologists new to sex research may easily think that, because it allows for cultural variation, their own cultural influence approach is identical to social construction theory. Their own comparisons with work done from more biologized, biomedical approaches, particularly in non-Western cultures, will make cultural influence models seem advanced, even cause for self-congratulation.

In all fields, the belated recognition of serious gaps in knowledge about sexual behavior may emphasize the importance of behavioral data, which appear more easily measured than fantasy, identity, and subjective meaning. Behavioral data lend themselves to easy quantification, fitting into the methodological biases of positivist social science. Amid an epidemic, researchers press for rapid results and reject the time, patience, and tolerance for uncertainty that ethnographic and deconstructive techniques seem to require.

Despite these tendencies which reinforce cultural influence and biologized approaches, the picture remains complex and contradictory. AIDS-inspired investigations into the realities of peoples' sexual worlds have already disclosed discrepancies between ideologies about sexuality and lived experience. Contradictions increase exponentially in other cultural contexts. These gaps exist in many areas, but are particularly insistent in regard to classificatory systems, identity, congruence between behavior and self-definition, the meaning of sexual acts, and the stability of sexual preference. These inconsistencies point to the usefulness of social construction theory and have spurred new work in anthropology [125-131]. Much as was the case with early gay history, researchers in sexuality and AIDS may confront the limitations of their models, generating provocative and imaginative work.

Moreover, the entire phenomenon of "safer sex" has emphasized the culturally malleable aspects of sexual behavior. The safer sex campaign mounted by the gay community, surely one of the most dramatic and effective public health campaign on record, made clear that sexual acts can only be understood within a cultural and subcultural context and that careful attention to meaning and symbolism allows the possibility of change, even for adults [132-135]. The self-conscious leadership and participation of gay men, as opposed to biomedical experts, in this endeavor suggests that individuals actively participate in creating and changing cultural and erotic meanings, particularly when they have a

stake in doing so. Safer sex campaigns reveal active sexual agents with an awareness of their symbolic universe and an ability to manipulate and re-create it, rather than passively receive a static sexual enculturation.

The political and symbolic mobilizations around the sexual dimensions and meanings of AIDS on the part of many different constituencies also belie the notion that sexuality and its meaning are derived simply from the body, unchanging or easily read. Yet various groups proffer their interpretations of AIDS and its sexual significance as lessons to be read from nature and the body [132, 133, 135-142]. The multiplicity of competing lessons and the ferocious struggle for whose interpretation will prevail suggest that sexual meaning is a hotly contested, even political terrain. That dominant sectors, particularly the state, religion, and the professional groups exercise a disproportionate influence on the sexual discourse does not mean that their views are hegemonic or unchallenged by other groups. Nor does it mean that marginal groups only respond reactively and do not create their own subcultures and worlds of meaning.

In the midst of the creation of new discourses about sexuality, it is crucial that we become conscious of how these discourses are created and our own role in creating them. Anthropologists have a great deal to contribute to research in sexuality. The new situation brought about by AIDS in regard to sex research is filled with possibilities: to build on the challenging questions social construction theory has raised, or to fall back onto cultural influence and essentialist models. The stakes are not low—for research in sexuality, for applied work in AIDS education and prevention, for sexual politics, for human lives. If this is a moment in which anthropology "rediscovers" sex, we need to consider two questions: who will do the looking? and more to the point, what will we be able to see? We need to be explicit about our theoretical models, mindful of their history, and self-conscious about our practice.

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In nature-nurture debates, researchers are proposing alternative biological or cultural mechanisms to explain phenomena they observe. At present, most observers agree that human behavior is produced by a complex interaction of biological and cultural factors; they differ on the relative weight they assign to each.

Although it might be appropriate to find some similarity between essentialists and the nature camp, to equate social construction to the nurture camp is mistaken. Social construction theory is not simply arguing for cultural causation. In addition and more important, it encourages us to deconstruct and examine the behavior or processes which both nature and nurture camps have reified and want to "explain." Social construction suggests that the object of study deserves at least as much analytic attention as the suspected causal mechanism.

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