

1

The sociology of sex

Humans, unlike butterflies, have highly variable sexual behaviour which is not very tightly linked to (and in fact often frustrates) biological reproduction, at least at the individual level. What counts as sex, how it is socially regulated, and what people do in sex varies greatly between cultures and over historical time. The study of sex is thus largely a study of social behaviour.

However, sexology as it currently stands as a discipline has been developed largely by people with medical and/or psychological training rather than by sociologists (Morrow 1994; Brecher 1972). Pollis (1988) analysed the disciplinary background of editors and contributors to one of the leading sexology journals, the *Journal of Sex Research*, over the years 1980 to 1986 and concluded that most were from biomedicine or psychology. This contributed to the lack of a feminist or social view in the pages of the journal. As Pollis acknowledged, there are of course many kinds of influences at work here. Sociologists and women's studies researchers might prefer to publish elsewhere, even when their work concerns sex. If such authors do not read the medical and psychology journals, the result is a fragmentation of the discipline of sexuality studies.¹ Sociologists, at least those in cultural studies or of a postmodern persuasion, tend to dismiss much scientific research effort (not to mention clinical interventions) related to sexuality as positivist and reductionist.²

1. Sexuality is of course not the only field thus riven by what have been called the Science Wars. As in other fields, more noticeable than war is nonengagement between the parties. One way of dealing with the 'two cultures' in sex research is simply to join up with one of the camps and disregard the other. Many endocrinologists, urologists, venereologists and others regard themselves as sex experts without taking any notice whatsoever of sociological views on the topic.

2. The term 'reductionist' is often used in postmodern circles as a fashionable term expressing general disapproval. Reductionism is seen as passé, self-evidently false. A reductionist claims that in principle, any statements about social structures are reducible to statements about the interactions of individuals. This does not mean that s/he recommends an individualist focus as the only useful way of looking at social events, only that s/he denies that there are emergent properties of the social aggregates that are not *in theory* deducible from the individual events. Rather than being inconsistent with reductionism, social constructionism can be seen as enabling the preservation of physicalism while allowing for the analysis of complex social circumstances. The Foucauldian notion of power as

Such sociologists tend to see (sexual) science as part of a hegemonic discourse of power in Western capitalism, which ‘fetishises’ science. In their view, sexual ‘science’ operates with conceptual categories that serve only to further the interests of those in power and to control people rather than to liberate them. This may be an extreme view, and I may be caricaturing it. But even more moderate writers tend to dismiss scientific efforts in relation to sex. An example is the historian Jeffrey Weeks, who in an article in the second issue of the journal *Sexualities* said that researching

a biological or psychological propensity that distinguishes between those who are sexually attracted to people of the same gender, from those who are not ... can safely be left to those who want to cut up brains, explore DNA, or count angels on the point of a needle (Weeks 1998, p. 137).

By grouping these last three topics together Weeks risks suggesting that brain structures and DNA are theoretical entities as ill-supported and worthy of disregard as angels; that is, that nothing practical follows from discussing them or attempting to manipulate them. This is clearly not the case.

It is widely assumed, both in the popular mind and by the medically trained, that sex is ‘natural’: the human organism matures under hormonal influence at puberty, and sexual behaviour, which has evolved for the sake of reproduction, follows. Society’s role is simply to control and channel this to some degree. According to this view, discussion of sex belongs in biomedicine, and doctors are expected to be experts on sexual norms and on sexual dysfunctions, which are defined as failures to perform the sort of sex that could result in fertilisation (Morrow 1994). A slightly subtler view sees sexual interactions as a matter of personal mental make-up and relationships, and therefore as the proper subject matter of psychology.

However, many of the key concepts of the psychology of sex need explanation *through* the social. Purely intrapsychic, ahistorical explanations of psychological events and processes are unsatisfactory. Even the mini-social-systems approaches

created by and through social interactions emphasises that the concept ‘power’ is based on generalisations about a cluster of types of events and relationships. It is a generalisation we make about processes we observe in the world rather than an inherent quality of persons or organisations.

favoured by family therapists lack explanatory power unless placed in a wider social framework.

The history of using a sociological approach to study sexuality and sexual behaviour is much shorter than the biomedical and anthropological tradition. The writers of the medical texts of the late 19th and early 20th century, looking for a picture of sex in a state of nature, turned to anthropology for evidence about 'primitive' sexual behaviour. That tradition had an air of prurient fascination with the sexuality of savages (long preserved in the pages of *National Geographic*), which the writers were tempted to see as more natural than that of civilised Westerners.³ But the European scholars were foiled by the weirdness and decadence of what they found—not just bare breasts, but penis gourds, foreskin piercing, elongated labia, pederasty, masturbation, erotic biting and other curious customs which did not accord with a European vision of the Eden of the noble savage (as found in Krafft-Ebing 1965[1903], p. 7n.). This anthropological tradition, as recorded in medical texts such as those of Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, Kisch and Moll, cannot be regarded as part of modern sociology, because it lacked theoretical structure and integration with an overall view of social behaviour.

However, sociology has not taken sex under its wing until recently, and with a few exceptions it has done so incompletely (Turner 1996, p. 43; Plummer 1975, pp. 3–9).

Sociology's neglect of sex

Over the last 30 years it has become conventional to bewail the failure of sociology to study sex as social conduct (Gagnon and Simon 1974; Plummer 1975). It is not that there are no sociologists working on sex; many do, especially in health sociology and cultural studies. But it is still seen as a marginal, applied part of sociology, not among the major topics taught to students.

A look at some sociology textbooks demonstrates this marginalisation. Schaefer

3. It could be argued that a generation later, Margaret Mead's notoriously romanticised reading of Samoan teenagers' sexual debuts (Mead 1943) was motivated by the same commitment to the notion of the 'noble savage'.

and Lamm's text *Sociology* has five parts, of which the second is on 'Organizing social life'. The chapters are: Culture; Socialization; Social interaction and social structure; Groups and organizations; and Deviance and social control. 'Sex behavior' receives four single-page entries in the index. Najman and Western's book of readings, *A Sociology of Australian Society*, contains three parts, of which the second is 'Socially patterned behaviours'. Sex is not one of the six chapters, and is not mentioned in the index. Ken Browne's *Introduction to Sociology* (1998) has 18 chapters, including one on gender role socialisation and one on the family and marriage. There are no index entries on sex. Anthony Giddens's *Sociology* (1989) pays sex more attention, though Chapter 6, 'Gender and sexuality', concentrates on gender issues and 'problems' such as homosexuality, AIDS and prostitution; the short discussion of "normal" sexual behaviour is not integrated with Chapter 4 on social interaction and everyday life.

Why this neglect of an important area of social life? One reason was the public-private distinction. A common rule of thumb for the 'job demarcation' between traditional sociology and psychology was that sociology addressed itself to public life and left private life—that is, sexual and domestic relationships—to psychology. This demarcation is breaking down, and sociologists address themselves increasingly to 'private' concerns such as the division of income within families. Differences between psychologists and sociologists are based more on conceptual approach than on subject matter. The popularity of interdisciplinary studies and research units in universities, and the proliferation of interdisciplinary journals, indicate that the traditional discipline boundaries are undergoing evolutionary change.

In any case, the claim that sex is private behaviour is problematic. As Foucault reminds us (1990a), the details of people's supposedly private sexual acts have always been subject to public discussion and condemnation or approval, even if other people were not actually watching. Even without a requirement of hanging out a bloody sheet, there are clear social expectations of what is supposed to happen when marriages (or relationships, nowadays) are consummated (as in the films *The Family Way* and *Maria's Lovers*). The 'failed' husband suffers public social shame as well as personal disappointment. The behaviour may be supposed to be conducted in private, but the rules for it come from the society at large. If sex were really private, there would be no condemnation of nonstandard sexual acts unless they were

nonconsensual or performed in public. Rather, sexual rules and customs are like dietary rules in serving to identify ethnic and cultural groups; disgusting practices (sodomy, eating frogs) are attributed to the 'Other'.

Another reason for the neglect of sex by sociologists was the tradition, supported by Christianity, that saw sexual acts as essentially instinctive, spontaneous and unlearned, like breathing.

Sociologists could not successfully theorise an area of life that was out of bounds as a serious discussion topic in academic circles. Stevi Jackson, in *Heterosexuality in Question*, mentions that

mainstream sociology in the 1970s was not particularly receptive to new thinking on sexuality. When I expressed an interest in this area as a postgraduate, most established academics responded either with incomprehension or with ribald and sexist innuendo (1999, p. 8).

Sociologists, at least in Australia, can no longer get away with such sexism, which linked women, sex and the domestic sphere and placed them outside the domain of serious topics for study.⁴ But there is a tendency for a scholar's prestige to be related to the social status of his or her object of study. Just as, in medicine, neurologists and brain surgeons have higher status than proctologists and venereologists—though there is no evidence that their work is intellectually harder—sociologists have been reluctant to study the underbelly of society. Like criminal lawyers among their civil law colleagues, those that do so are tainted by the low status of their 'clients'. Sociology of crime and deviance, therefore, has a lower reputation than high social theory, or the sociology of more respectable areas of life such as citizenship, work, ethnicity, the family, education and even health. In short, to the extent that sex is taboo, studying it is taboo also.

Another possible reason for sociology's neglect of sex is that there was no social policy imperative for studying private marital practices. This is a curious claim, because sexual behaviour has always been a focus for public social concern, whether about the falling birth rate (Royal Commission 1977) or the frequent moral panics about teenage pregnancy, paedophilia, or 'vice' in its many forms (Ericksen 1999; Weeks 1989). Seidman (1996, pp. 4–5) makes the point that sociology in the first

4. Cf. the 'frank disbelief or patronizing jocularity' that greeted Ann Oakley in the late 1960s when she wanted to study housework for her PhD (Oakley 1986, p. 218).

half of the 20th century was strikingly, deliberately deaf to all sorts of social rows about divorce, abortion, pornography, obscenity, prostitution and so on. Only in the 1960s did a sociology of sex appear, but it was divided in two: a continuation of the mainstream sociology of social institutions such as marriage and the family (in which sexuality itself was naturalised and unexamined) and the sociology of deviance, which dealt with prostitution and homosexuality.

The result was that even when sexuality did receive attention from sociologists, it was studied *as* taboo, and thus the more outré and nonstandard it was, the more it merited investigation. Hence, sociologists tended to problematise homosexual or otherwise marginal sexual practice, and give papers about it at conferences—fisting in San Francisco saunas, men having sex in toilets, or extramarital sex in Japan—but not to ask what straight people like themselves did. Mainstream heterosexual practice was seen as the norm from which other practices diverge. There are difficulties in theorising an area of life that is studied only when it is deviant.

The theoretical and empirical neglect of sexual behaviour extends beyond sociology: it has happened because governments spend money on things seen as needy of research. In the case of health sociology, money is spent on researching only the people who are seen as a ‘problem’, not necessarily by sociologists themselves but by those who provide funds. In developed countries, HIV has been predominantly transmitted by sex between men, so money has been spent on research on gay and other homosexually active men. More recently, considerable attention has been paid to injecting drug users, because of the cost to government of drug-related crime and the threat of hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS.

In countries where HIV is largely spread by heterosexual sex, authorities tend to concentrate on groups ‘at risk’—that is, heterosexual women and infants—rather than on the group that put them at risk, heterosexual men. As the ones largely making the decisions about the money, heterosexual men fail to problematise themselves. They can only see heterosexual men as a problem when they are marginalised—sex workers, injecting drug users, criminals, ethnic minorities, the poor. Hence the neglect during much of the 20th century of the clients of sex workers.

There has been a reluctance to subject sexual practice to the same analysis as other social acts, to see it as learned social behaviour, culturally defined, just as work, crime and illness are. Cultural studies interests itself in sexuality and sexual

identity, but focuses primarily on representations. Scholars of cultural studies generally do not do empirical research, either quantitative or ethnographic. Thus their work is not closely linked with that of the empirical sociologists, whatever school they are working in.

Sociology and the body

Sociology did not just neglect sex, it neglected the body; it took as its object a social organisation that is curiously immaterial.

For someone approaching sociology through 1970s feminism and social epidemiology rather than through standard training in theoretical sociology, sociology's neglect of the body, its ethereal way of treating persons as constructs with rights or duties but apparently no material existence, is very puzzling. Bryan Turner, in *The Body and Society* (1996[1984]), is illuminating on this point, as he devotes considerable attention to the religious reasons for disregarding the body in moral discourse. Turner discusses the Christian rejection of the world of the flesh and the division between a celibate monastic elite and a carnal laity (pp. 45ff.). One could see this division as perpetuated in secular Western culture in the tendency for 'official talk' (the discourse of government, administration, universities etc.) to operate as if its speakers were incorporeal and asexual themselves.

There is also a tradition of treating sexuality as if it were so special a part of life that it is intrinsically incapable of being incorporated into rational discourse, rather like mystical experience. Turner (1996, p. 46) quotes Weber in *The Sociology of Religion* as saying that 'ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life are seriously threatened by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organization'. Is 'the sexual act'—by which he appears in the context to mean sexual impulses, not just coitus—uniquely insusceptible to rational organisation? Is coitus any more or less susceptible to organisation than other bodily functions such as eating or defecation? Is sexual passion less susceptible to organisation than other passions such as fear, love, hatred or religious bigotry? Weber is part of the sociological tradition of treating humans almost as if they were immaterial: like a company of angels they communicate, have

relations of rank, but no material culture. So the project of accepting the body into sociology, including thereby sex and gender as well as diet, illness and so on, is part of a wider project of rematerialising human beings, of studying them embedded in a material world, and ultimately relinking the human or behavioural sciences with the biological and physical sciences.

Sociology's view of biology

Turner explains how

The epistemological foundations of modern sociology are rooted in a rejection of nineteenth-century positivism ... [and] sociology emerged as a discipline which took the social meaning of human interaction as its principal object of enquiry (pp. 60–70).

What becomes clear here—though Turner does not say it—is that sociology was rejecting biology deliberately. But 19th-century biology is not 20th-century biology, which became more systemic and less deterministic. Contemporary biology is environment-conscious and ecological in its approach. It is not focused solely on the mechanics of the individual organism, or on the structure of the individual cell, as was the biology of the mid-20th century. It does not seek physical laws that will predict the development either of a species or of an individual organism; biology is irrevocably contingent and historical (Gould *passim*, but especially the four essays in *Bully for Brontosaurus* (1991) grouped under the heading ‘History in evolution’). The criticism of biology within sociology has become artificial: sociology is deliberately distancing itself from an outdated individualistic-reductionist vision of biology rather than from biology as it is practised today.⁵

Many sociologists suspect that biology, particularly evolutionary theory, is inherently inimical to human striving for liberation or egalitarianism. Nature red in tooth and claw is hardly a suitable image on which to base an emancipatory sociology. Thus they tend to stress an intrinsic and unbridgeable difference between

5. It could be argued, however, that authorities generously funding the Human Genome Project in the hope that gene sequences will give us direct answers to social questions are continuing the earlier naive reductionist project.

humans and other animals, fearing that acknowledging our animal nature would invalidate such aims.

A common idea among social theorists is that if something (a behaviour pattern, say) is biological—that is, caused by genetics, hormones or physiology—it is therefore unavoidable and invariable. Thus any evidence of social or individual variation is taken as evidence that a phenomenon is entirely cultural. If pheromones were relevant to human sexual behaviour, they argue, we would be driven willy-nilly like moths to a hilltop to mate. If men's greater aggressiveness were hormonally based, there would be no cooperative men and no assertive women and no differences between cultures in the general level of men's aggression. This sounds like a caricature of a position that is usually stated more cautiously. However, Jackson (1999, p. 151) says bluntly 'If sexual orientation is biological in origin it cannot be a matter of choice.' This is not necessarily true. Breastfeeding is biological in origin but it is a matter of choice. We can choose not to do it. Peter van Sommers (1986) points out that this view of biology held by sociologists 'does not square with observations of innate factors in either human or animal behaviour.' Biological mechanisms are not obligatory: responses may be inhibited, behaviour is plastic and may be voluntarily elicited.

Sociology need not reject biology and regard it as irrelevant to humans. We can draw critically on biology's insights about the way human beings work. This need not prevent us from being critical of poor science used to justify blatantly political stories about men's promiscuity or women's investment in offspring as put forward by sociobiologists or evolutionary psychologists.

Gagnon and Simon's *Sexual Conduct*

The key work that placed sexuality firmly within sociology and proposed a thoroughgoing social constructionist position along the lines proposed by Berger and Luckmann in 1966 was Gagnon and Simon's *Sexual Conduct*, first published in 1973. Noting that sociology was somewhat underdeveloped—'the study of man [*sic*] and society is close to pre-paradigmatic' (1974, p. 2)—the authors set out their approach:

Our concern here is to understand sexual activities of all kinds (however defined, good or evil, deviant or conforming, normal or pathological, criminal or noncriminal) as the outcome of a complex psychosocial process of development, and it is only because they are embedded in social scripts that the physical acts themselves become possible (p. 9).

They went on to discuss sex education, male homosexuality, lesbianism, female prostitution and homosexuality in prisons within this framework. Most importantly, they introduced the powerful notion of scripts:

The term *script* might properly be invoked to describe virtually all human behavior ... there is very little that can ... be called spontaneous. ...

It is the result of our collective blindness or ineptitude in locating and defining these scripts that has allowed the prepotence of a biological mandate in the explanation of sexual behavior. ... Without the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior, nothing sexual is likely to happen (p. 19).

Read with a *fin de siècle* eye, much of what Gagnon and Simon said has a distinctly 1960s or 70s ring to it, but the overall impression is that the things they got wrong are the best evidence for their overall claim about the socially constructed nature of sexuality. One of the most striking confirmations of the claim that sexuality differs by time and place is how old-fashioned their grand generalisations sound, so firmly located in the United States of the 1960s. For example, the huge changes in consumption patterns since the development of home video make much of what they say about the use of pornography out of date, though in ways consistent with their overall analysis. They assume that all married couples have an implicit if not actual contract of sexual exclusiveness. It may be true that almost all do or did, but this needs explanation and description rather than being taken for granted. Like Freud, to whom they acknowledge a debt, they tend to universalise phenomena that must be very particular to time and place, for example the reaction of children to parental sexuality (p. 36).

Gagnon and Simon concede their greatest debt to Kinsey (1948), and it is striking that the only large-scale data available to them on many points of interest are Kinsey's. Nevertheless, they criticise Kinsey for counting acts without explaining social meaning. They also note that little research followed Kinsey's 'undigested lumps'. This phrase is justified even more today as it appears that Kinsey is already

being forgotten, languishing unread by many of the post-AIDS sex researchers. He is remembered more by the social conservatives (or, strictly speaking, reactionaries) who still find him shocking, especially now that his laboratory work on sexual physiology and his own homosexual activity have been disclosed (Reisman and Eichel 1990; Muir and Eichel 1993). In the 1960s and 1970s sexologists were still isolated from other disciplines and in the societal, academic and funding conditions of the United States there were few opportunities to continue work like Kinsey's.

Gagnon and Simon do concede some biological substrate to sexuality, including an explanatory role for hormones. Their social constructionism is not totally disembodied and antiessentialist. However, they do not explain adequately how the sensations of the body are integrated into the social. Despite the practicality of their approach, there are areas where they seem to theorise sex as a source of bodily pleasure or sensation out of the field altogether. They assume (p. 86) that differences in coital position are entirely about symbolism (e.g. of dominance/submission), and they do not entertain the possibility that variations in position may be important for the actors to achieve adequate stimulation, or variety of stimulation. Although they discuss heterosexual anal intercourse, they do not mention that the sensations involved are different from those of vaginal intercourse, nor do they raise the possibility of anal stimulation of the male (p. 92). They consider various motivations for people having extramarital affairs, but desire for the physical sensations of sex is not one of them (p. 94). They give various reasons why men have sex with each other in prison, but again dismiss the desire for sexual pleasure or relief as a possible motivation, stressing the extrasexual rewards of such sexual relationships. They are right to point out that most people can tolerate sexual deprivation, but this does not mean that everyone can do so with ease (pp. 242–3). The perception of oneself as requiring regular sexual release may be socially constructed, part of a script for masculinity, but this does not make it any less real in its social effects. Once it is part of a man's sexual make-up it acts as a motivator and indeed provides a script enabling sexual practice with whatever or whomever is available.

However, Gagnon and Simon's point that sex—contra Freud—is not very important for most people (pp. 103–4) accords with the empirical facts. The claim that it is extremely important and irresistible is part of the myth of sex in our culture, and one that sociologists can fall into as easily as anyone else—focusing for example

on the highly sexually active while ignoring the much larger proportion of people who simply never have sex and rarely think about it (Laumann et al. 1994, pp. 135, 142–3; Johnson et al. 1994, p. 115). Sex may be pursued for nonsexual purposes, and symbols that are apparently sexual may signify nonsexual concerns—sometimes a penis is just a cigar. The huge importance which Freud and Krafft-Ebing attribute to sex makes sense only if libido is conceptualised as the source of all human energy and the civilising urge is seen as emanating from a desire to mate: ‘Sexual feeling is really the root of all ethics, and no doubt of aestheticism and religion’ (Krafft-Ebing 1965 [1903], p. 2).

Gagnon and Simon’s exposition is firmly in the British-American philosophical and stylistic tradition. It is more straightforward and less poetic than Foucault, and hence not so wildly popular. They could be accused of the same tendency to generalise without empirical evidence (except, one suspects at times, their own experience), but it is hard for writers to do otherwise when they are trying to set out a conceptual framework rather than detailing facts within a given paradigm or program of research. (One could argue that there is even less ‘evidence’ in Berger and Luckmann (1971).) Because Gagnon and Simon write clearly, their claims of empirical fact are easily testable. For example, their assumption that a male prostitute (for male customers) is paid for his appearance of heterosexuality and for his orgasm (as well as his erection) runs counter to what is known of male prostitution in Sydney.⁶ Nonetheless, as we can tell what they mean, it is clear that either they are wrong or the culture of male prostitution is different in key respects between Sydney in the 1990s and the United States in the 1960s.

The social construction of sexuality

Social constructionism rejects transhistorical and transcultural definitions of sex-

6. Male prostitutes are generally less detached from the social world of gay Sydney than female prostitutes are from the heterosexual dating game. Many male sex workers identify as gay. Even among those that do not, such as some homeless teenagers and injecting drug users, sex work may involve a performance of homosexuality. Workers whose clients wish to be anally penetrated often tactically avoid orgasm themselves so that they can service several customers in a short time (Perkins and Bennett 1985; unpublished interviews done as part of project reported in Richters et al. 1988; Minichiello et al. 1998).

uality and takes instead the position that sexuality is created by historical and cultural factors. But not all social constructionists exactly agree with each other. Many would not accept the realist framework within which I interpret the term.⁷

All social constructionists adopt the view that physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods (Vance 1991). For example, heterosexual coitus might be an acceptable recreational activity in one setting but an indication of lifelong commitment in another. At its weakest, this is a 'cultural influence model' that is accepted by most writers from biomedicine, psychology and conventional anthropology. Sexuality is seen as issuing primarily from the body under the influence of hormonal development, providing a universal basic material on which culture works, a kind of plasticine that is formed by society into different shapes. This view assumes a worldwide sex drive and reproductive drive that varies only in its superficial appearance, like national costumes.

A moderate claim for the role of culture is to say that the direction of erotic interest, for example gender of object choice (heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual attraction), is not intrinsic or inherent in the individual as such, not inborn and biologically determined, but constructed from more polymorphous possibilities. This does not deny that some human tendencies might have a biological base, but argues that categories such as 'homosexual' are socially constructed; the role of homosexual may not even exist in some cultures (Williams 1999). Vance sees Gagnon and Simon's script theory (1974), which stresses the availability of socially supplied

7. For many people 'social constructionism' is a buzzword, and the buzz is not a pleasant one. They assume that anyone who uses the word will go on to talk about the theory-dependence of observation and jump from there to a relativist or even anti-realist position that leaves the average scientist or public health person swimming bemused in a sea of half-translated phrases from French writers such as Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari.

That is not how I see social constructionism. Even a radical social constructionism can be an essential part of a physicalist world view. A physicalist world view assumes that mental events are simply the operation of the brain. Consciousness and the quality of experience are presumably due to the operation of multiple task-specific information-processing 'subroutines' or 'neural networks', combined with internal monitoring and feedback systems that produce awareness of some but not all of the networks' operations (Dennett 1993). But of course humans do not develop alone; we are a group-living species. All our mental development occurs in interaction with the environment, including the world of other humans and their language and behaviour. It may be that some mental categories are hardwired, and some of them shared with other primates and even other mammals. It is also clear that the fine-tuning of our ideas of the world, and all our ideas that are not based on direct personal experience, come from other people, in short from culture. Furthermore, even the ideas of things that are given to us most directly by our senses are influenced, even remade, by our culturally shared and transmitted understandings. This is what I mean by social construction.

‘scripts’ for sexual interactions as constraining and enabling what people do in sex, as a moderate form of social constructionism.

The most radical form of constructionist theory suggests that there is no essential undifferentiated sexual impulse, sex drive or lust that resides in the body due to physiological functions and sensation. According to this view, cultural expectations determine even how much arousal people feel. This view is usually drawn from Foucault’s arguments that society does not just repress sexual urges, it elicits them, talks them into being (Foucault 1990a). Writers taking this view, such as Rubin (1975), have argued that the whole sex–gender system, through which people come to have gender and sexual orientation as part of their identity, is socially constructed.

A social constructionist view of sex places sexual behaviour firmly within the realm of culture. As Vance (1991) puts it, ‘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.’ However, although physiology does not prescribe the content of sexual culture, it does pose limits.

Foucault

Michel Foucault has acquired a status that arguably has little to do with the actual originality or importance of what he said. Many students who have come of age since Foucault think that there was no social constructionism before him, a point made by Jackson (1999, pp. 1–2, 27n.) and by Epstein (1994, p. 146). So we need to distinguish between what Foucault actually said and the miracles that are attributed to him.

His popularity among scholars of sexuality and cultural studies in the 1990s was extreme. Part of this popularity may be attributed to his often vague and allusive way of writing.⁸ *The History of Sexuality* (1990) reads like the transcription of a rambling, arm-waving lecture, with highly abstract statements that could be read as historical generalisations but are often phrased so as grammatically speaking to attribute agency or intention to abstract processes such as certain sorts of historical change.

8. The oddness of Foucault’s style may be produced partly by the difficulties of translating the French declamatory mode into comparable English sentences.

Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf ... (p. 101)

It was a time when the most singular pleasures were called upon to pronounce a discourse of truth concerning themselves ... (p. 64).

Does this mean homosexuals spoke out? And that other deviants were called upon to speak about themselves? Called upon by whom? Or is it a more indirect claim about discourses of and about homosexuals and others, whoever is speaking? Either way, no evidence or examples are offered. This style is lively to read, but very hard to pin down. At times it becomes almost mystical:

Among its many emblems, our society wears that of the talking sex. The sex which one catches unawares and questions, and which, restrained and loquacious at the same time, endlessly replies (p. 77).

In so far as this means anything at all, it is a highly poetic way of saying it.⁹

Sometimes wordplay gets the better of the sense, as when the meaning of the word 'sex' is switched around between gender, sexual practice, sexual organs and sexuality, all of which can be expressed by the French word 'sexe'. To be fair, one source of appeal in his writing is that he can be quite witty:

Ours is, after all, the only civilization in which officials are paid to listen to all and sundry impart the secrets of their sex: as if the urge to talk about it, and the interest one hopes to arouse by doing so, have far surpassed the possibilities of being heard, so that some individuals have even offered their ears for hire (p. 7).

What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide ...? ... we must also ask why we burden ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin (p. 9).

Nonetheless, Foucault did have some things to say that are useful even to the resolutely earthbound Anglophone reader. As Gagnon and Simon did earlier, Foucault argues against the repressive hypothesis and the 'hydraulic' notion of sex as a

9. I suspect this produces a kind of devotional fervour in readers when they think they have got on top of what he means and successfully run with it for a few pages. Foucault's books have genre similarities to other holy books that contain internal contradictions, mysterious parables and passages that flatter the readers that they belong to a chosen few who understand as others do not.

natural force that must be repressed by society:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check (p. 105).

His insights on institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons (1973, 1979, 1991) ring true and are illuminating about how power is exercised and control is maintained. It could be argued that some of his views on discursive power, for example the power of disciplines to label and thus control people, are a rewriting of labelling theory, but he takes the idea further. The idea that power is most effectively exercised when its operation is concealed is also a telling one.¹⁰

However, Foucault's discussion of power is problematic. He switches between using 'power' to mean a process which happens in all interactions and using 'power' to refer to the holders of dominant power in an ideology or a political system. He does actually distinguish at times between the two, and calls the latter his theory of governmentality. In this second sense of 'power' we can coherently talk of people being on the side of resistance rather than power (the goodies, if we are committed to the unseating of despots), but in the first sense—which he frequently reminds us is the one he intends—such a claim would make no sense, as there is no single side that power is on (Morrow 1995, p. 25). Power is everywhere and inescapable.

There are also two more fundamental problems that make Foucault's work unsuitable as a base for an empirical sociological approach to sexual conduct. One is that he suffers from acute gender-blindness (Jackson 1999, p. 20); he is simply not interested in women. This leads to an incapability to theorise homosexuality.

The other problem has been ably argued by Morrow (1995). Foucault is an explicit antirealist.¹¹ Morrow observes that he 'selectively applies relativism to the discourses of others but conveniently exempts his own discourse from any relativism' (p. 22). When dismissing or refuting views with which he does not agree, Foucault uses such words as 'errors', which implies the existence of an objective

10. Though not original. See Steven Lukes's *Power: A Radical View* (1974), which predates Foucault (1979).

11. It may be that many avowed antirealists are rejecting a naive realism that claims that we always see things as they really are, and that we can see everything about them, and that our words and concepts (or at least those of scientists) correspond unproblematically to things in the world. Most scientific realists do not make these claims.

reality about which one can be mistaken. An epistemological relativist has no grounds on which to convince people that his or her view on a matter of fact is correct.¹² Morrow argues that ‘Foucault at some level is aware of the danger of an anti-realist stance for his own views, as he does not hold to his position consistently ... he smuggles realist assumptions into his account in order [for it] to remain viable’ (p. 21). Morrow uses Woolgar and Pawluch’s (1985) term ‘ontological gerrymandering’ for this manoeuvre. However, he assumes that all social constructionism is antirealist and therefore vulnerable to this objection.

Symbolic interactionism

A symbolic interactionist takes the view that the key feature of social life is the fact that, as Plummer (1975, p. 13) puts it, ‘human beings act towards others and objects on the basis of the meanings that such things have for them’. To do this we put ourselves imaginatively in the other person’s position, seeing ourselves as they see us, which is necessary in order to play a social role, even a briefly held one like ‘person at a bus stop’. At a request stop you stand where the driver can see you and signal in the way you have learnt is appropriate, so that the driver will see that you want to board the bus. (Put this way, symbolic interactionism seems to attribute considerable reflexivity, self-awareness and sympathetic imagination to individuals as they go about their daily business. However, social interaction does not require people to be constantly and consciously thinking themselves into other people’s shoes. It is enough that we learn social behaviour—such as putting out our hand as the bus approaches—that in general has that effect.)¹³

12. The important distinction here is between cultural relativism on ethical and aesthetic issues and epistemological relativism, which argues that all concepts, even names for apparently concrete things, are as relative and cultural as the idea of ‘good’. In this view, because language is arbitrary and variable, we can never be sure that what one person means by a word is what we mean. All languages and all classificatory systems have equal right to describe the truth, whether the terms they employ are (say) the terms of Western anatomy or those of Chinese medicine, with its meridians and points on the skin that are symbolically connected to inner organs. Medieval analysis of the world into earth, air, fire and water is one system of description, the modern picture of atoms and elements is another. Both are just conceptual systems, metaphors. There is no ultimate truth of the matter because we can never know we have the whole picture.

13. Many social misunderstandings can indeed be explained as partial ‘failures’ of symbolic interaction. People know in general that the bus driver must see and interpret their signal, but that does not always prevent them from standing thoughtlessly where he cannot see them properly, if they want to keep out of the rain.

Symbolic interactionism is based on the role theory of social psychologist G. H. Mead. Different authors trace the origins of symbolic interactionism to different immediate sources. Looking further back, both Shott (1976) and Longmore (1998) independently argue for conceptual origins in the work of the Scottish moralists such as David Hume. According to Ken Plummer in his introduction to *Symbolic Interactionism* (1991), symbolic interactionist sociologies are infused with three interweaving themes:

1. The view that ‘distinctly human worlds are not only material and objective but also immensely symbolic’.¹⁴
2. The view that interpretation is a process. Identities, roles, meanings are always evolving, emerging and becoming. Society is constituted through interaction.
3. A focus on interaction, on ‘how people do things together’.

Symbolic interactionism exists to some extent as a position in opposition to structural-functionalism, which focuses on the systems and structures in society, recognising purposes that ritual practices may fulfil for a social system even though these may be unknown to the social actors carrying them out. The difference is partly one of focus—on the social system as a functioning whole, or on the activities and intentions of the actors within it. Longmore (1998), in her review of the use of symbolic interactionism in sexuality research, takes a broad view of the approach, identifying three subcategories: situational, structural and biographical-historical. Situational symbolic interactionists concentrate on face-to-face human interaction, employing concepts like game-playing, face work, management of stigma and loss of face, as especially in the work of Erving Goffman (1971[1959], 1972[1961], 1963, 1968[1963], 1967). Goffman’s focus on the conscious performance of roles, on self-presentation, has been called a dramaturgical approach to social life.

Longmore’s category of structural symbolic interactionism is more like traditional sociology, with its focus on broad-scale issues or explanatory concepts such as race, class, income and ethnicity, although carried out within an explicitly symbolic

14. Plummer’s firm use of the ‘not only but also’ construction indicates that he does not mean that there is a symbolic realm that is immaterial, or that the importance of the symbolic transcends or does away with the material. A symbolic interactionist view can work within an antirealist constructionist framework, but also in a materialist constructionist framework.

interactionist framework, recognising the fluid and emergent nature of social categories. The third category, biographical-historical research, includes poststructuralist approaches. Longmore thus implicitly counts most of cultural studies as a sub-category of symbolic interactionism, which may not be the way such researchers see themselves.

Longmore lists seven basic assumptions in symbolic interactionist research:

1. Human conduct is meaningful.
2. We become human through social contact.
3. Society is an ever-changing process as opposed to a static entity.
4. Human conduct has an intentional agentive component.
5. Human conduct is constructive and emergent.
6. The conception of mind is dialectical and reflexive.
7. Sympathetic introspection is necessary to understand reality from the perspective of another.

These assumptions are a fruitful base from which to approach sexual conduct. As Longmore says, people do not simply interpret physiological sexual sensation; the symbolic system also creates sexual experience. Symbols give rise to experience. The notions of role-taking and interpretation of the other person's behaviour in a face-to-face (or body-to-body) encounter are more useful than either grand generalisations about gender identity or the hegemony of heterosexuality in understanding what people do in sex. The symbolic interactionist focus on the specific situation suggests that the best way to know what is happening in natural settings is to be part of the action or at least to observe at close range. Despite the obvious difficulties for this in sex research, Longmore regards symbolic interactionist research as a good method for describing sexual subcultures.

Longmore also mentions several criticisms of symbolic interactionism (drawing on Stryker 1980). The key concepts are said to be confused, and difficult if not impossible to operationalise. This objection reflects the difference of approach between a symbolic interactionist and most psychologists and many sociologists. Because individual people become selves (or 'acquire self-concepts') through interaction, features of those selves will always be slippery and evanescent, changing

with the situation and the roles people play. Symbolic interactionists specifically deny that generalised models of behaviour across varying local circumstances will ever be more than very rough estimates. For example, when looking at condom use by homosexually active men, a symbolic interactionist is likely to suspect that local circumstances (condom availability, social and material context, the partners' real or imagined expectations and the men's own history of experiences) are likely to be more important influences on behaviour than supposed features of the men's personalities such as self-efficacy. Stressing the contingent and emergent nature of roles, symbolic interactionists do not see the need for operationalising social psychological concepts in order to construct predictive models.

Another objection cited by Longmore is that symbolic interactionism emphasises reflexive thought and underplays the importance of emotions and the unconscious in social life. This is a fair point about Mead's emphasis on the cognitive process of seeing yourself as others see you, though this failing is not logically necessary to the symbolic interactionist approach. As I acknowledged above (p. 22), a more nuanced reading of the notion of self-as-other is needed. People do not really go about being constantly alert to other people's points of view. Only a little reflection on the more notably unsympathetic people of one's acquaintance, or one's own less thoughtful moments of interaction, reveals that this is not reliably the case. Society depends on symbolic interaction, but we do not each perform the feat of imagination in each interaction. Rather we learn patterns of behaviour and propriety, and sometimes apply the patterns inappropriately. At times we get overcome by emotion and forget the other person's feelings, but in general the patterns of our behaviour make sense if analysed on the assumption that we are doing things with a view to what other people will think of us. It is through the learnt shared patterns of behaviour (i.e. scripts) that others can interpret our intentions.

Symbolic interactionism can also be accused of denying or minimising the facts of social structure and large-scale features of society. However, denying and minimising are not the same thing. Symbolic interactionists concentrate on the situations in which the facts of social structure are played out; this does not necessarily mean they deny the existence of social structure or injustice (though they may do so: liberal individualists notoriously focus on personal interaction so as to avoid the need to acknowledge or rectify structural injustice). As Foucault says, power is realised in

actual situations; power in the wider, more abstract, sense is just a generalisation, and any abstract structural analysis is itself a discursive structure that can serve a political purpose.

Longmore argues that situational symbolic interactionists are not interested in prediction; they regard behaviour as unpredictable 'because of the impulsive and unpredictable nature of the self'. She considers the structural approach 'useful for prediction as it generates hypotheses and tests them'. Although it may be true that in practice many situational symbolic interactionists are uninterested in prediction, their focus on specific situations and forms of interaction does not in itself make prediction impossible, but only restricts the domain to which the predictions can apply. To return to my example of men's condom use, a structural sociologist may appeal to factors such as social class and race to explain men's likelihood of using condoms. A psychologist might appeal to individual factors such as assertiveness or perception of risk. A situational symbolic interactionist might appeal to such factors as a particular actor's perceptions of his partner's HIV status, or his interpretation of the partner's expressed desire to use a condom (as evidence of infection, or rudeness, or interruption to an arousing interaction sequence).

Plummer points out that though interactionists stress constant flux, the negotiation of situations, and the precarious and emergent nature of reality, there is order and routine.

[I]n most circumstances it is perfectly possible to routinely predict what other men are going to do. When I give my ticket to a ticket-collector I expect him to clip my ticket, not my nose. ... [S]ocial life is ... restrained by certain boundaries to interaction and the presence of certain recurrent and habitualized features of interaction (Plummer 1975, pp. 13–17).

He then goes on to review various authors' suggestions for understanding 'the routinization of the otherwise problematic and emergent world'.

Bourdieu and the notion of 'habitus'

An approach to the routine and habitualised features of interaction is offered by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), first published in

English in 1977. Bourdieu argues that we have to get from the regularities of observed behaviour to the rules that produce it, in other words from the summary of outcomes to the principles of their production. This is the theory of practice, or more precisely, the 'theory of the mode of generation of practices'. Bourdieu warns that the rules we come up with are only theoretical. Like Chomskyan sentence-generating rules they are not maps of the real way we function, but models to generate equivalent output:

The science of practice has to construct the principle which makes it possible to account for all the cases observed, and only those, without forgetting that this construction, and the generative operation of which it is the basis, are only the theoretical equivalent of the practical scheme which enables every correctly trained agent to produce all the practices and judgments ... called for by the challenges of existence (Bourdieu 1977, p. 11).

Bourdieu (1977, p. 73) rejects mechanistic theories of human action, theories which treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by antecedent conditions. Part of his reason for rejecting them is the unwieldiness of attempting to break down meaningful actions into itemised behaviours. The rejection of a mechanistic approach, however, does not mean that 'we should bestow on some creative free will the free and wilful power to constitute, on the instant, the meaning of the situation by projecting the ends aiming at its transformation, [or] that we should reduce the objective intentions and constituted significations of actions and works to the conscious and deliberate intentions of their authors.' If I understand correctly, Bourdieu is rejecting two possible ways of interpreting symbolic interactionism. Although we should see human actors as having the ability to behave unpredictably and creatively, rather than as automata responding to their immediate surroundings, this does not mean that people can instantly create any meaning they like for the situation. Nor are people, as they go about doing things and interpreting the behaviour of others, consciously aware of all their own interpretations and intentions. Much interpretation and action is habitualised, and we do not always know why we do what we do. At the same time everything we do is part of the world that creates what we and others do next. 'That part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers is the aspect by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself

the product' (p. 79). This is a confusing sentence, but an example may make it clearer. I finish eating and put my knife and fork together. I do this unconsciously, having been taught to do so as a child. Conversation on unrelated matters continues around the table. My host, equally unconsciously, clears my plate from the table, even if there is food still on it. Objectively, we can see that here is a conventional signalling system, though neither actor has at the time a conscious intention of using it. And this instance of successful conventional signalling is part of the process that perpetuates the convention.

Bourdieu is thus outlining a way of understanding the emergent patterns of social life, as emphasised by the symbolic interactionists, and also describing the way socialisation operates to create people with certain dispositions and tendencies to behave in certain ways. This is not the same as arguing that socialisation produces psychological structures that determine behaviour. Bourdieu calls the dispositions the *habitus*, 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations'. He sees the unconscious as 'the forgetting of history' (p. 78). Objectively, our surroundings and everything that happens to us result in the 'second natures of habitus'. We do not have conscious mastery of our actions, because they are the product of a *modus operandi* of which we are not the producers. 'It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know' (p. 79).

Bourdieu differs from most symbolic interactionists in stressing the role of material culture. The key locus for symbols and understanding is inhabited space, especially the house. The house is a 'book' from which children learn their vision of the world; this book is 'read' with the body. Bourdieu constantly emphasises the circular, reiterative process of enculturation and the relation between people and material culture. In living in a certain kind of space we become people who behave in certain ways; we make tools (and toys and clothes and everything else) to fit our bodies, but our bodies and psyches also grow to fit the things around us, whether artefacts or natural objects. It is 'a world in which each thing speaks metaphorically of all the others.' To continue my dining table example, a napkin ring 'speaks of' the table, of dining practices, of cutlery and table cloth. It is part of a symbolic system, each part of which helps to constitute and make meaningful the rest.

Developments in social constructionism

Turner's social constructionism in *The Body and Society* is in the Foucauldian tradition—*faute de mieux*, it appears, as he identifies a gap in the sociological literature about sex (1996, p. 43) and is apparently unaware of Gagnon and Simon's work. Turner offers

as an initial starting point that every [society] has a classificatory system of sexual desire—a discourse which designates appropriately sexed beings and organizes their relations. It is this social discourse which specifies eligible sexuality[,] not the dictates of human physiology (p. 47).

The British–American tradition in social constructionism also relegates physiology to a background role. Berger and Luckmann contrast humans with animals and say 'there is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum determining the variability of socio-cultural formations' (1966, p. 67). This point is echoed by Carole Vance writing specifically of sexuality in the quotation given above on p. 19.

Although Turner sets out from the position that desires are formed by discourse, he slips later into assuming desire as a given in humans and restriction of it as a role of society: 'Desires were regulated'; 'The passionate side of human personality ...' (p. 50, and also p. 52). This difficulty may be created partly by the fact that men of Turner's generation grew up when the hydraulic metaphor of sex was in the ascendant. The Freudian (and Reichian) notion that society controls and restricts the natural impulses of sex is not only familiar; it is a view to which people who experience themselves as passionate and feel hemmed in by society's rules are likely to be sympathetic.

Another difficulty is conceptual. Many social constructionists (though not Berger and Luckmann) do just as Turner says: they take 'as an initial starting point that every [society] has a classificatory system of sexual desire'. Jackson too begins 'from the premise that gender is fundamental, that as desiring subjects we are gendered, as are the objects of our desire' (p. 132). But the notion of 'desire' is multiply ambiguous, too complex to serve as a starting point. 'Desire' can mean a

prediscursive inchoate need or want in the body—if verbalised,¹⁵ something like ‘I’m feeling a bit restless’. In this sense desire is comparable to vague, possibly unnoticed hunger. At the other extreme it can mean a conscious desire for a particular object: ‘I know what I’d like to do with that blonde across the room’. This is more analogous to ‘I’d love a pizza with artichokes’ than to hunger in general. By presupposing an object (it is natural to ask ‘desire *for what?*’) the term moves the focus of discussion of sexual desire from a condition of the desirer to the relation between the desirer and a supposed object of desire. Yet this object is not necessarily the source or cause of the sensation of desire in the more general sense of the word. The intrinsic desire of the body could be called libido, but the term carries rather much Freudian baggage and consequently an exceedingly wide extension. Freud’s starting point, currently decried as essentialist, at least avoids the difficulties of starting with the notion of desire, an already complex socialised and gendered sense of the sexual:

It seems probable that the sexual instinct is in its first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object’s attractions (Freud 1962[1905], pp. 146–8).

Jeffrey Weeks admits that the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, like that of Lacan, is ‘deliberately complex and unconventional ... in pursuit of the real complexities and turmoil of the unconscious’. He explains that they attempt to get to this same notion of Freud’s, of unorganised, inchoate ‘desires’ of the body preceding socialised desires:

There is in this flux no given self, only the cacophony of ‘desiring machines’, desiring production. This flux is like the early stages of sexual development as described by Freud, with a child as a blob of partial drives seeking satisfaction through part objects (Weeks 1985, p. 173).

Desire for sex is not necessarily desire for a particular partner or even for a generalised partner with any particular features such as male or female. Sexual desire is often the desire to become aroused rather than existing arousal perceived as a need to be satisfied, a tension to be relieved. Much French psychoanalytic-style talk of ‘desire’ elides the differences between love, lust, arousal and aesthetic attraction.¹⁶

15. Which would of course make it discursive, but let us set that problem aside for a moment.

16. Jackson (1999, p. 90) suggests that the term is favoured precisely because of its ambiguity.

The wanting of sex is defined as the wanting of a specific object or at least a member of a specifiable category of objects. Such an approach fits into an analysis that insists on taking gender and object choice as the fundamental issues in sexuality.

Gay theory and sociology's view of homosexuality

The notion of social construction and the rejection of naturalistic (and implicitly heterosexist) explanations of sexuality paved the way for the field now variously called queer theory, gay theory or sexuality studies within cultural studies. Despite its conceptual debt to sociology it tends to see sociology as 'irrelevant or, at the very least, a bit stuffy' (Seidman 1994, p. 145). Developing with the rise of the lesbian and gay movement, 'the academic study of sexuality increasingly became the study of *homo*-sexuality' (p. 151).¹⁷

Namaste (1996) makes the point that mainstream sociology (e.g. labelling theory) and mainstream gay studies (e.g. Weeks) neglect 'the social reproduction of heterosexuality, choosing instead to focus on gay and lesbian communities' (p. 204). Such a focus risks studying all homosexual interaction (sex between same-gender partners) in terms of homosexuality (the institution and identity). It leaves no space for acknowledging that mainstream heterosexual culture has constructed the masculine identities which all homosexually active men take to their sexual activities. This is as true of men who have come out as gay as it is of the closeted but self-acknowledged homosexual or the straight man who represents his homosexual activity to himself as 'not real sex'.

In their essay on queer theory and the 'missing sexual revolution in sociology', Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (1996) assess queer theory and the failure of sociology to take on queer criticism, arguing that the main issue is sociology's failure to theorise heterosexuality. They concede that queer theory mostly flourishes in the humanities, especially in elite American universities, and has a tendency to be very

17. 'Sexuality officers' in universities in the 1990s were and were understood to be occupied with the concerns of students who were not heterosexual or had 'gender issues'; in the early 1970s when I was an undergraduate such an officer (if one existed) would have published lists of abortion and venereal disease clinics and names of sympathetic doctors near campus willing to prescribe contraceptives to unmarried students.

text-based, even jargon-ridden, sometimes ignoring people's real lives. Importantly, however, queer theory reminds us that sociology should be 'problematizing the heterosexual centre'. Heterosexuality permeates all aspects of life and should be included along with the traditional categories of race, gender and class in structural analyses, not made invisible, naturalised and normalised.

Stein and Plummer also criticise feminists for their failure to theorise sexuality as distinct from issues of gender and power. However, they do not mention the tendency of queer theorists to forget gender power and treat heterosexism as the dominant problem, eliding the differences between its effects on men and women, though they do say that 'We need to challenge the assumption that sexuality is necessarily organized around a binary division between homosexuality and heterosexuality' (p. 139). This could be seen as the key point that distinguishes between gay theory, some of which is dependent on a 1970s politics of gay liberation, and queer studies, which seeks to disrupt the very categories of heterosexual and homosexual. (Namaste also raises (largely in footnotes) a difficulty with queer politics: that self-avowed queer politicians are often unwilling to relinquish the 'other' identity as gay or lesbian that their theory might seem to have rendered obsolete.)

Much gay theory fails to incorporate feminist critiques of gender, and thus cannot answer some of its own questions. An approach that fails to confront the hierarchical ordering of gender within patriarchy cannot make sense of the way in which male homosexuals lose masculine status, that is, are seen as less than male, rather than simply sinful. A rapist is sinful, but not less than male.

Many gay theorists also fail to deal with the origin of homosexual desire, because many are antirealist social constructionists and want to deal with sexuality entirely in terms of social meanings. As a result they push homosexual desire back into an untheorised area. To argue that there is a homosexual social role which developed at a certain historical time and place says nothing about what inner urges lead people to choose that role. This would not matter so much if it were not that the same theorists often see homosexual desire as the key issue on which sexual difference depends. As I argued above, desire is too complex, variable and contingent a phenomenon to be satisfactory as a concept on which to base an analysis of social organisation. An adequate sociological analysis of sexuality would include the empirical question of how people become heterosexual or homosexual—or indeed

foot fetishists or celibates. There are multiple ways in which people can experience their 'fitness' for the sexual identities and gender roles of their culture and thus be predisposed to join a particular group or adopt a certain sexual identity; some of the relevant differences between people may be biological (such as differences in galvanic skin response or olfactory sensitivity, say, or body shape), but this is not the same thing as saying that homosexuality is genetically determined.

A common misapprehension is to take the term 'socially constructed' as roughly equivalent to 'brought about by social conditioning'. Several of the essays in Stein (1992) do this. This reduces the debate to one about the aetiology—either genetic/physiological/constitutional or environmental—of certain states of affairs or conditions (in this case, homosexuality). This misapprehension leads to the mistaken reasoning that gay liberationists or activists are suffering from false consciousness if social constructionism is true, because they are 'unaware of the constructedness of their identities' (Epstein 1992, p. 258).¹⁸ All social identities are constructed, including those such as 'mother' that have clearly biological components.

The 'absent centre' in social constructionism

The strength of the statements with which social constructionists deny the primacy of biology in organising human sexual activity—or their tendency simply to ignore it, as McIntosh does in 'The homosexual role' (1968)—has led to a problem that Connell and Dowsett (1992, p. 64) called the 'absent centre' in social constructionism.

Stevi Jackson, for example, in *Heterosexuality in Question* (1999) insists that nothing is sexual before the subject (that is, a baby who becomes a person) enters language and culture and acquires a framework within which to understand or label anything, and hence experience it, as sexual. This makes sense as a definition of the social realm of the sexual, as long as the word is used to apply only to conscious sexuality, sexuality as socially organised and understood. But difficulties arise when we attempt to denote an event of sexual character which is not understood as such by

18. People further often assume that if a psychological characteristic is acquired by social conditioning from life experiences it will be easier to change later than one that is 'hard-wired' or genetically caused. This is not the case. Some genetically caused conditions are quite easy to change, but certain components of social identity acquired early in life are very difficult to change later (Seligman 1994).

someone, or to talk about the sexual when we do not know whether it is being understood by the relevant actors as sexual or not.

What do we call self-stimulation of the clitoris by a Victorian spinster who is unaware that ‘masturbation’ is what she is doing? She may have heard of ‘onanism’ or ‘self-abuse’, but is sure that she does not commit this terrible sin. Are we to say that her orgasm is a nonsexual event? In relation to her consciousness it is, but it is still sexual for someone else who knows what she is doing. Furthermore such a definition flies in the face of simple realist labelling of physiological events, in which masturbation is still sex even if the masturbator is unaware of it. Perhaps we need a different word for that class of physiological events regardless of subject consciousness.

Jackson’s position is clearer and more developed than Gagnon and Simon’s in 1973, and hugely strengthened by its feminist approach. Gagnon and Simon (1974), while not deliberately sexist, were astonishingly androcentric.¹⁹ They had no way of conceptualising women’s sexuality as different from men’s without seeing it as the same-but-less: they referred in several places to ‘limited female commitments to sexuality’ (p. 98). Their lack of a framework for analysing gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) was a major disadvantage and left them without a properly social account to replace a rejected essentialist account of sex differences.

Jackson’s purely discursive conceptualisation of the realm of the sexual, however, is open to the same criticism by Connell and Dowsett:

Gagnon and Simon’s framework provides no *social* account of what links the diverse scripts together, what makes them all ‘sexuality’. ... One eventually realizes that this self-consciously social account has a non-social centre. What defines a matter as ‘sexual’ is in fact the biology of arousal and reproduction (1992, p. 59).

Connell and Dowsett’s proposed solution to the problem of the absent centre in social constructionism is not to ‘retreat’ into biological essentialism or nativism, but

19. For example in their comment (p. 87) about most women not being ‘technically proficient’ at fellatio; men’s skills at cunnilingus are not questioned. There is nothing to indicate that the comment is based on evidence from—say—surveys of practitioners or recipients of fellatio.

to develop social analysis further.²⁰ They accept an analysis along the lines proposed by Gayle Rubin (1975) using her notion of the sex–gender system, where sex and gender are treated as deeply interwoven in practice in all cultures but conceptually distinct. They then outline three strands of approach that have been taken in social constructionist sexuality research.

The first is research into the political economy of sex, the ways in which sexuality (not just gender) permeates other institutions and public life, such as the workplace (for example Game and Pringle 1983). The second is work on the symbolic dimension of sexuality, mostly using psychoanalytic notions. (This is discussed below.) The third is anthropology, stressing the ‘genuine alienness’ of the sexual arrangements of other cultures (e.g. Herdt 1981).²¹

It is clear that all three strands focus on sociosexual relations in general rather than on the details of sexual interactions and practice, as I do in Chapters 5 to 7 (and as Dowsett’s own work does *par excellence*). It is unhelpful to theorise sexual practice in isolation from roles, symbols, power relations and material effects of the wider social world. Sex is not conceptually separate from nonsexual behaviour. We cannot select sex out as a topic remote from the rest of social life and expect it to make sense in and of itself—it doesn’t. A situational interactionist approach with a specific focus on practice avoids the danger of getting lost in sexual meanings and gender issues and ending up not talking about bodies doing sex at all.

Social constructionism and sexual politics

Connell and Dowsett’s overview points to several ways forward for the social study of sexuality, rather than arguing for a single one. They argue that ‘A fully social concept of sexuality ... would revive the concept of sexual liberation ... the demo-

20. It is hard not to sense a shudder of horror with which they contemplate such a ‘retreat’: that way madness (or unfashionability) lies.

21. I am sceptical of this notion of untranslatable otherness. Symons (1979, pp. 44–5) says: ‘Maurice Bloch (1977) criticizes the notion, which apparently originated with Durkheim and is accepted by most anthropologists, that society determines human cognition. Why this notion has gone largely unchallenged is not clear, but, according to Bloch, it is partly because most anthropologists believe that different cultures or societies have fundamentally different systems of thought, and he notes that it is a “professional malpractice of anthropologists to exaggerate the exotic character of other cultures”.’ Symons goes on to discuss the categories of thought shared between cultures and to mount a convincing argument that we can communicate and agree about most matters of fact in daily life.

critization of the social relationships constituted through sexuality' (p. 75). Liberation, however, is a moral aim, not an explanatory one. Sometimes an analysis resulting from political motives turns out to be a powerful descriptive tool; sometimes it may have polemical value while being analytically worthless. LeVay's (1993) claim that homosexuality is 'in the brain'—hard-wired, immutable and most importantly not an issue of moral choice—is an ambitious and empirically ill-supported hypothesis. Whatever its failings as neurology or as social analysis, it may yet be effective in some discursive settings in achieving social gains for homosexuals. Its effectiveness in political terms tells us nothing about its adequacy as an explanatory concept in sociology.

Jackson (p. 18) also conflates her moral position with her analytic one. She argues against sexual libertarians, criticising Rubin's discussion of sexual minorities. Jackson finds such analyses unworthy on moral grounds, because they do not distinguish between 'a street prostitute and a millionaire, or a man who has sex with a child and that child', treating them all as outlaw sexual minorities. Setting one's visceral clutch aside, it may be that the discursive process that outlaws such people may operate in a similar manner. Sociological analysis should distinguish between descriptive or explanatory analysis and moral commitments. A feminist has a moral commitment to the view that sexism is unfair to women. Whatever their views on that issue, sociologists can use concepts like patriarchy and heterosexuality as powerful explanatory concepts.

Connell and Dowsett suggest the same solutions to the political tasks facing homosexuals—'the political dilemma of deconstruction in the face of the enemy' (p. 64)—as for the conceptual problem they identify in social constructionism. It may be that the polemically effective rhetorical position for fighting for social improvements for gay men and lesbians would be a simplification of their true theoretical position, or even quite different from it. However, we may be led into error if we choose our analytical frameworks on the grounds of their potential political value.²²

22. Sometimes polemically it is necessary to take a position other than the one you really hold because it would be too hard to argue something from your real philosophical position. If I told the average person in the street that I am an atheist and that I find bestiality no more immoral than usual farming practice, I would be seen as evil and not listened to. So if I were arguing publicly for better sex education in schools or against censorship, I would stress the parts of my own ethical system that were likely to chime with those of my audience, and adopt the role of a reasonable middle-class mother-of-a-teenager. There is no need to constrain sociological theory in the same way.

Making room in sociology for biology: filling the absent centre

Although human anatomy and physiology do not organise human sexual behaviour, there are ways in which they are linked to it. It is possible to take cognisance of this without plunging into the abyss of biological essentialism from the brink of which Connell and Dowsett recoiled. Sociosexual arrangements are not completely arbitrary: there are some limits and influences that flow from physiology. Even in cyber sex the acts and images proposed by the participants have discursive links to acts and conditions of the R/L (real-life) body. If at least some of the participants did not experience physiological arousal, cyber sex would not be sex but only sexual allusion or discussion. To state that there is no relation between the discursive construction of sexuality and the body—or that the body itself has no reality beyond that of a discursive construction—is to plunge into antirealism.

Another link between sexuality and the body is the set of discourses or beliefs held by people in general that their sociosexual relations *are* determined by human physiology. An example is the common folk acceptance of a version of Kinsey's 'hydraulic' view of sexuality, which people use to explain their own sense of a need for sex when they are not getting any (see Chapter 7).

If people can perceive themselves as feeling randy in the absence of appropriate sexual situations or social cues, or on the other hand as failing to feel randy in the presence of cues that are usually effective in generating arousal, it may be that the source of sexual arousability is not entirely of social origin.²³ Biologists use the term 'sex drive' as if it refers to a real entity. A test of the adequacy of the biological notion of sex drive as a concept is whether it works predictively in investigations of pharmacologically induced hormonal changes in relation to people's reported sex drive.

Jackson argues that 'To think of sexuality in terms of drives is to see it as something we are impelled towards by inner urges beyond our control and beyond the reach of social forces ... [and to] imply that sexuality is unchanging and unchangeable' (1999, p. 89). But we are not involuntarily impelled by our physiological sex drive; we can perceive it rising and falling independently of our acting (or not acting) upon it. The fact of the development of pharmacological interventions

23. It is also possible that they are quite wrong.

into sex drive and coital performance (such as testosterone or oestrogen supplementation or prescription of sildenafil) illustrates that even our chemically produced inner urges are not beyond the reach of social forces.

Jackson's refusal to use the word sexual, or the concept of a sexual 'instinct', as referring to a thing in the (physiological) world makes it very difficult to talk about the feelings and biochemical processes in the human body that, when they are pressed into the service of certain social activities and experiences, we call sexual. Berger and Luckmann concede that 'there are always elements of subjective reality that have not originated in socialization, such as the awareness of one's own body prior to and apart from any socially learned apprehension of it' (p. 154). This concession is not without its problems. The only people who could reasonably be said to be aware of their own bodies 'prior to and apart from any socially learned apprehension' of them are newborn babies, who lack a clear sense of where those bodies begin and end and indeed lack an integrated self that is aware of and can report on inner sensation. Yet they obviously have physical sensations.

The error of biological essentialism, or nativism as Connell and Dowsett term it, is not simply the global one of realism. It is to assume that the categories of the social realm of the sexual are the same as those of the biological processes. It is to assume, for example, that because we have a social category 'gay man', we can find something about gay men that is consistently biologically different from other men. Or that sexual arousal experienced by a person in a social situation is equivalent to a single measurable physiological response such as penile erection. These assumptions are false, but we do not need to deny either the existence or the importance of physiological processes. Because the social analysis of sexuality is concerned with meanings and interactions, it deals with symbols and conduct that are connected socially to the sexual but only very distantly connected with sexual acts or processes at the biological level. Putting on lipstick, for example, is gender-coded and sexual in a social sense but only distantly and symbolically connected with actually having sex. The sexual realm in physiology concerns itself with bundles of simple mechanisms that do not have meaning in themselves. We are unconscious of many of them. Only with cortical reworkings and interpretations do they become connected with sex in the social sense.

Freud uses the term 'sexual' to refer to arousal, erection and other sensual feelings related to those we call sexual when experienced by an adult. When changing her baby after a feed and finding that he has an erection, the (socialised) mother may prefer to desexualise the experience and not label the erection as sexual arousal. Thus she can avoid the conclusion that she has just had a sexual and therefore incestuous interaction with her son. Freud reminds us that rather than being asexual, babies are pansexual. The delicious sensations of breastfeeding for both mother and child are part of the same set of biochemical processes that are involved in what is conventionally called having sex.

However, if we delimit the category 'sexual' as only that which society wants to label sexual, we end up with a category that is hard to analyse empirically, as it has no coherence as an objective correlative. Although it is a useful insight to observe that what is sexual to one person may not be to another, or what is sexual in one culture at a certain point in history is not sexual at another, we still need some way of labelling the act or event (such as masturbation or pelvic engorgement) so that we can describe it as *regarded* as sexual in one context and not the other.

One way of dealing with this problem might be use the word 'sexual' only to apply to a set of social arrangements, and use less loaded and more specific terms such as erection, arousal, etc. for the acts or related phenomena considered as physical processes. However, as we may for brevity and convenience want a term that unites the physical states of affairs under a heading, we still need the term sexual or some equivalent in the biological sense. We need to be very clear about which sense of the term we are employing at any one time.

Biologists and sociologists sometimes talk past each other on such matters because they are using the word 'sexual' to refer to different categories. One solution for sociologists is to damn biologists as essentialists and ignore them. But they are addressing important and real questions.²⁴ Rather than marking them wrong we need to tease out the confusions and work towards some clearer vocabulary.

24. Most of them. LeVay (1993) is an exception.

Scripts

Jackson (1999, p. 9) notes that Gagnon and Simon's notion of scripts has not been taken up by many other writers, in particular by feminists. But it was taken up by Judith Long Laws and Pepper Schwartz in *Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Female Sexuality* (1977) and by a few other people working in social psychology, generally in a rather restricted sense. In an excellent synthesis of 1970s feminist work on sexuality, Laws and Schwartz use the term 'script' rather like 'ideology' or 'norm'. Rather than discussing how individual scripts can allow resistance or negotiation of traditional heterosexual roles, they talk of personal preferences 'departing from' the script (p. 57) and even 'scriptfree sexuality' (p. 56).

In doing so they express a common idea that sex is or ought to be instinctive, spontaneous and unlearned, or learned only within an established couple, as they come to know each other's individual bodily responses, tastes and preferences. This notion persists in feminist analyses even among those whose commitment to social constructionism should make them more receptive to the notion of sex as scripted behaviour. An example is Waldby et al., whose 1993 analysis is somewhat condemnatory of young men's idea that one can have 'technique' that is portable from one woman to another.

Jackson expresses a similar view. She applauds the demystification of good sex as something that happens automatically when people fall in love, but remarks 'However, this has its down side, in that the idea that sex has to be "worked at" produces its own anxieties and is itself a form of social regulation' (1999, p. 144–5). This reveals remnants of feminist romanticism, the idea that sex should be somehow outside the social, not a learned and commandable performance like everything else in social life.²⁵ It is ironic that second-wave feminists, who famously argued that the personal was political, seem often to wish for a special private, somehow nonsocial and nonpolitical, space for sexual practice.

The concept of scripts for sexual interactions, including courtship, is taken up productively by Naomi McCormick in 'Sexual scripts: social and therapeutic implications' (1987). McCormick's approach is atypical for a therapist. She focuses

25. Is food less enjoyable because we have to learn how to cook well? Because gastronomic culture is socially regulated? Because we can employ people to cook for us?

on people who are not in a relationship as having a cognitive and skill problem. Sexual and relationship problems are treated as stemming from differences in the scripts that the actors bring into the relationship, rather than either to individual psychopathology or to communication failure within the relationship. In the classical relationship counselling model, the couple tend to be seen as a free-floating social system of two people with their own culture created by their discourse. Outside social structures such as assumptions about masculine power are ignored or downplayed. The individuals' pre-existing preferences and tastes are regarded as natural, and the task of counselling is seen as enabling the couple to communicate these desires to each other. ('If you enjoy this kind of stimulation, how are you going to tell him that's what you want him to do?')

McCormick concentrates on social generalisations, not on individual pathology or relationship communication problems. She acknowledges that when people get along successfully it is because they have a similar socially derived understanding of what the right thing to do is; in other words their scripts coincide. She outlines some common scripts for nonmarital sex which she calls universal, though that kind of terminology is unsatisfactory for something that is obviously completely culture-bound. These scripts are outlined in three categories of permissiveness. The least permissive are traditional-religious, utilitarian-predatory, and tragic; the moderately permissive are romantic and intimacy-justified (i.e. meeting of sexual or affectional needs), and the most permissive are friendly and recreational. McCormick also distinguishes between premarital and extramarital scripts, but no need to do so is clear from her categories. A nonpermissive script can be tragic without being extramarital, such as that of Romeo and Juliet. Circumstantial differences will of course affect the way the scripts are acted out. McCormick gives the example of a man who had casual sex with a divorced neighbour, then found she pushed for commitment: 'his script for friendly sex was incompatible with her romantic script'. By requiring love or 'meeting of emotional needs' to justify sex, the moderately permissive scripts tend to move people towards serial monogamy, whether they are married or not.

McCormick's analysis attends only to heterosexual encounters and relationships, but much of what she says can equally be applied to male-to-male sex. One might expect that all men who have sex with other men in casual contexts would adhere to

a purely recreational script for their encounters, but it is fact not as simple as that. These ideas are taken up again in Chapter 6.

McCormick's view of scripts is close to that of Gagnon and Simon, whom she acknowledges frequently; unlike Laws and Schwartz she does not use the term just to mean the traditional scripts, but recognises that everyone has scripts, although personal scripts might not conform to expected norms (p. 22). McCormick's description of the differences between typical male and female scripts leaves space for ways in which men and women might employ non-gender-typical variants, in particular how women who make initiatory moves can find ways of concealing or making ambiguous the fact that they are doing so. Rather than locking people into a hegemonic script and leaving them floating free, scriptless, if they reject it, this approach acknowledges that there is always contestation, negotiation and variation between people employing existing scripts which they bring with them to the encounter or into an ongoing relationship. They may not be conscious of their own scripts, and may have no words for discussing them; therapy is thus a way of making conscious—and thus negotiable—a process that was previously done unreflexively.

McCormick's discussion of scripts and arousal addresses the 'absent centre' in the social constructionist view that something only becomes sexual by being labelled thus, by having a place in a script. She invokes the concept of physiological arousal but is not essentialist in the sense of assuming an automatic relationship between a physiological state and the actions or even desires in the sexual contexts in which it is relevant. 'Physiological arousal may be undifferentiated until cues from the environment help the individual label his or her inner state and thereby reduce the ambiguity'.²⁶ This process involves imagery or fantasy, which provides a picture or story of what is or may be happening. As a typical masculine script for a sexual encounter requires the man to push for a certain outcome, he has a story in his head, the anticipation of which is arousing in itself, and it allows him to interpret what does happen in terms of what he hopes for.

Physiological sexual arousal and sensation can be liked or disliked, noticed or overlooked or denied, comprehended as 'sex' in a socially constructed sense or experienced as something else—maternal feeling, aesthetic pleasure or appreciation, nonsexual tactile pleasure, restlessness, anger, disgust, fear, vengeance, heroic self-

26. A point she references to Tesser and Reardon (1981).

satisfaction, pain. There is thus the same problem of defining what counts as sex in the physiological realm as in the social realm. The same physiological response may be part of a sexual encounter in one setting and part of eating or terror in another.

McCormick proposes that because 'sexual arousal is associated with very intense and enduring affect', environmental cues associated with arousal become significant in the future. (There are various psychological theories for how this happens.) Such stimuli may then be 'sought ... as prerequisites for script enactment'. These notions can be profitably used as part of the explanation of the development of a homosexual career without invoking either a crude form of behaviourist stimulus-reward theory or positing a pre-existing untheorised 'homosexual desire'. This point is important for the interpretation of the data presented in Chapters 5 to 7.

Subjectivity and psychoanalysis

Social constructionism, symbolic interactionism and the anthropology of Bourdieu can all be seen as offering a broad framework for a theory of how the material and social world works on and interacts with human individuals to produce representations of that world (including themselves) in people's minds, in short to bring about subjectivity. However, social psychology appears to be at too primitive a level of development to provide a detailed model of how this happens. Situational symbolic interactionists might also argue that the local details, the differences between cultures and between individuals' experiences within those cultures, will overwhelm the similarities and make theories of such patterns impractical, if not impossible. Many scholars therefore appeal to psychoanalytical theory for an account of how subjectivity comes into being.

Freud and Krafft-Ebing (1965[1903], p. vi) believed that all psychology should in theory be explicable in terms of anatomy and physiology. Freud argued that as neurology was not sufficiently advanced, a psychological theory was necessary, and he set about developing one.²⁷ Krafft-Ebing, defeated by the prospect of such a task in the field of sexual deviance, fell back on the role of cataloguer. Chomsky argued

27. It is therefore not in the spirit of Freud's approach, at least when he was young, to treat his hypothetical psychology as revealed truth.

that there must be inborn mental structures for language learning, but as our understanding of the brain did not allow us to identify them physically, we should build a model (that is, a language-generating program) that produces the same outcomes, though without imagining it to be a literal model or map of the way in which the brain produces sentences. The danger of such enterprises is that we get carried away and forget that the theoretical terms in such models are deliberate fictions which should be replaced with more realistic formulations as soon as they are available.

Evans (1993) makes the point that psychodynamic analyses

address important links in the social construction chain but, despite exhaustive (and exhausting) attempts to prove otherwise, they can be no more than hypothetical in their detailed exposition of precisely how we learn cultural standards in general, and sexual standards in particular (p. 34).

He also criticises them for addressing only the family as an institution constructing subjects, ignoring economics and the state.

Jackson (1999) has further misgivings about psychoanalytic approaches as a social answer to the gap in social construction theory:

The performance of gender which [Judith] Butler describes, not to mention the complex process of recognizing embodied others as intelligibly gendered, assumes a process by which we somehow learn to enact and decode such performances. No such process is addressed by psychoanalytic thinking: indeed, the materiality of gender as it is continually acted out and acted upon in the social world is absent from psychoanalysis.

When we consider the specifics of everyday sexuality, it is not simply a matter of desire and identity, but of managing bodily practices and making sense of sexual situations (p. 25).

Many queer theorists analyse sexuality exclusively through the notion of performance of gender and heterosexual or homosexual identity. This ignores how much our 'making sense' of sexual situations is based on other more general patterns of social interaction that have nothing to do with sexual or gender identity. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Like Jackson, I do not deny the existence of the subconscious, only that the unconscious mind is 'knowable in the systematic fashion claimed by psychoanalysis

and that everyone's unconscious is subject to similar processes and contains similar repressed wishes or drives' (Jackson 1999, pp. 84–5; Dennett 1993; Searle 1984, 1995). Jackson also points out that 'much of poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking is premised on the assumption that it is possible to draw simultaneously on both Foucault and Lacan, despite Foucault's contention that psychoanalysis is just another discursive formation producing its own disciplinary regime of truth' (pp. 21–2).

An empirical sociologist seeks patterns in observed human behaviour *en masse* and rejects approaches to explanation of behaviour that are post hoc and individual; such explanations can only be hypotheses. It may or may not be the case that a certain woman has vaginismus because she was sexually abused by her uncle in childhood. It is to be hoped that anyone treating her clinically can make her happier, whether or not they take that view of the aetiology of her problem—if indeed she has a problem; it may be her partner who has a problem. Vaginismus may be an adequate solution for the woman rather than a problem in itself. But the empirically important claim is that, in general, women who have been sexually abused—a concept that needs a clearer definition than it is generally given—are more likely than others to suffer vaginismus. This is a testable hypothesis that can be examined by the same methods as any other aetiological question about a disorder that can be measured or counted in humans. Even a high correlation would not prove a causal relation; other evidence would be needed.

As Jackson (1999) says, psychoanalysis is seen as 'the only way of accounting for the varying forms which our sexual and gendered desires and identities take' (p. 22). Psychoanalysis has generated some hypotheses, but their proponents seem reluctant to test them. It attends to the right problem but does not propose answers in a form that would allow them to be explored empirically. Jackson observes that Judith Butler, among others, never considers alternatives to psychoanalysis as a way of conceptualising subjectivity. Jackson goes on to say:

It is not that there are no other viable frameworks, but that they remain fragmentary and underdeveloped. ... we still have no satisfactory way of approaching the very basic question of how desiring, gendered heterosexual subjects come into being—or how and why some escape the bonds of compulsory heterosexuality (p. 23).

Remarkably little progress has been made on this problem over the last three decades. It is a major gap in feminist and sociological theory.

What kind of social research do we need?

At the level of research practice, the gap between psychoanalytic concepts of subjectivity and empirical approaches to behaviour will remain until some preparation of the ground is done. We need a much more empirical approach among social constructionists along the lines of the more imaginative kinds of exploratory epidemiology. Researchers will need to deal with operative definitions for proxy measures of social abstractions and generalisations (such as ‘sexual abuse’, or categories of family structure), while remembering at all times that they are only proxy measures. This is not easy. Epidemiologists are constantly and rightly criticised for reifying generalising constructs such as ‘stress’ when they add them to risk factor models in studies of outcomes such as cancer.

We also need to develop sociopsychological concepts that are rigorous enough to use in conjunction with findings from neurology so that we can propose social generalisations that are biologically plausible. Biological plausibility is a common criterion for aetiology in epidemiological studies demonstrating a correlation, such as that between smoking and cervical cancer. According to Paul Griffiths (1997), for example, the folk concept of ‘emotion’ covers a range of quite different sorts of phenomena, some closely linked to physiological responses shared by other species, and others explicable only in terms of cognition and social arrangements. A useful sociology of the emotions will need to have a more robust notion of the nature of its topic than we have at present. Psychologists and sociologists will need to make some common theoretical ground and then work together on these questions.

Many problems will prove intractable at a practical level to this sort of approach simply because of the huge amount of data that would need to be fed into an integrated physicalist social model to make it work. At times it will be necessary simply to acknowledge that a very simplified model is being used and proceed despite this, rather as traffic engineers successfully model traffic flow as a flow of particles, without considering the behaviour of the drivers as social action, allowing for their

beliefs and intentions. The only criterion on which the value of such simplified models can be measured is their ability to make accurate predictions. Nonsocial traffic modelling works well enough to keep Sydney's traffic flowing on a good day, but naive models of social behaviour used by health promotion researchers have not been able to demonstrate the same success when used to evaluate the effects (or lack of effects) of risk prevention interventions such as anti-smoking campaigns (Chapman 1993; Kippax and Crawford 1993).