

March 11, 2004

Sexuality: The Social Context I

I. Review:

- A. Biological sex
- B. Sexual orientation
- C. Gender identity
- D. Gender role
- E. Structural gender
- F. Gender symbolism

II. The social context of sexuality

- A. Sex: is what we understand to be biological, genetic sex—X chromosome, Y chromosome
 - 1. There is a lot more to say about this, but this is an anthropology course
 - 2. “Biological sex” most often refers to what we see—we can’t see chromosomes
 - 3. We see primary and secondary sex features, and we see the different roles in the reproductive process
 - 4. What we can conclude about such things as particular personality and behavior differences determined by sex is currently *very* contested
 - a. There’s a lot more agreement about anatomy and physiology than in brain science
- B. Gender: is what societies do with these biological givens
 - 1. And societies do quite a variety of things with biological sex

2. Some societies don't even categorize sex as consisting of 2 sexes (hand around Nanda book¹)
 - a. In India, a third sex is called the Hijiras and they are considered to be neither men nor women
 - b. We find this very difficult to conceive of; one of the most natural, unquestionable assumptions we all have is that you are either a boy or a girl
 - c. But "third sex" categories are found elsewhere, too, another well-known set of examples is found in Native American tribes
 - d. Also in Saudi Arabia, Tahiti, New Guinea, and the Dominican Republic
3. The rigid formula of "sex"="gender"="2 sexes, male and female" is loosening up in the West
 - a. I mentioned the workshop I attended in Baker House 4 years ago, one of the participants said that currently he/she felt 70% male and 30% female
 - 1) Our system cannot accommodate this
 - 2) He/she followed by saying his/her sexual orientation is unclear, of course, because it depends on a clear-cut gender identity for the person and that of his/her partner
 - 3) He/she was right
4. Because we see our system as so natural, finding out where sex leaves off and gender begins is difficult to study
 - a. Precisely why it's useful to have the cross-cultural record

¹ Serena Nanda, 1999. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

- 1) *If* we can get beyond our feeling that our way of thinking and doing is natural
- 2) And any other way is just weird, unnatural, immoral, irrational, sinful, etc.

III. What is social and cultural about sex and sexuality?

- A. First is that like all other kinds of feelings, these feelings and abilities develop only within a sociocultural system
 1. It is “normal” for humans to grow up within a cultural milieu; we are social, cultural animals
 - a. Feral children—children reared by mammals isolated from other human beings
 - 1) Wolves, even tigers nurturing human infants—several well-documented cases
 - b. They have nothing one could remotely call human sexual behavior (no language, of course, either)
 - c. They are not examples of “natural” humans; they are pathological
 2. We can speak of sexual energy, or drive, of a capacity to respond
 - a. But the **forms** these take are learned; in fact, for the most part they are taught, formally and informally
 - b. Sexual behavior and sexual feelings are learned
 - 1) What you *should* do
 - a) We think kissing is great—to express several kinds of feelings, to acknowledge several kinds of relationships

- b) Other cultures see kissing as disgusting; who's to say they're wrong and we're right because what we do is "natural"?
 - c) In cultures where men and women don't eat together, the idea of lovers going on a picnic is disgusting
- 2) Also learned is what you would *like* to do but must not
- a) Example: the post partum sex taboo of a year, 2 years; among the Dani of highland New Guinea for 5 years
 - b) We have one as well, but it's a matter of weeks
 - c) Ours post-partum sex taboo is medicalized, secularized: when the new mother's genitalia have assumed their pre-birth condition
- 3) Also learned is *who* you should be attracted to
- a) Obligatory heterosexuality: how you should feel, how you should behave
 - (1) Desire for same sex was seen as a pathology, needed treatment
 - b) How the West's attitude has changed toward homosexuality is also an indication of who is attracted to whom being a matter of cultural prescriptions and proscriptions
 - c) Samoans, prior to European contact, saw homosexual practices as simply not occurring (why would anyone do this when there were women around?)

- (1) But it was not condemned, not a sin
- (2) These views changed following contact
- d) Another example: institutionalized lesbian relationships in Muslim Mombasa
- 4) Also learned is *who* you do it *with* (not the same thing as #2)
 - a) In the South Sea island of Mangaia, adolescent boys spend a two-week period of formal instruction about the techniques of intercourse, which is followed by a culturally approved experience with a mature woman in the village
 - b) They're not considered a man until this happens
 - c) Compare the practice in some middle and upper class Latin American families of taking boys to houses of prostitution or expecting a domestic maid to provide the boy's first experiences
- 5) And you learn *when*—this is highly variable
 - a) Childhood sexual behavior: whether accepted, encouraged, discouraged is highly variable
 - (1) Example: Huxley's *Brave New World*, the encouraging attitude toward children's games like "Find the Zipper"
 - b) Among the Tikopia in Oceania, sexual activity before marriage is expected; having

several lovers is considered normal for the young

- c) The notion that older people do and should be active sexually has evolved a great deal in this country
 - d) Earlier in this century attitudes toward this idea were limited to “dirty old man”
 - e) Now we think it should happen and, if necessary, can help it along with Viagra
- 6) *What you do* to make yourself attractive is highly variable
- 7) And, in general, the importance a society gives to sex and expectations about frequency of sexual activity, vary tremendously
3. Hence, “doin’ what comes naturally” (from the musical “Annie Get Your Gun”) means doing what your culture has programmed you to think is natural
4. Understandings of such things as female orgasm, or homosexuality, for instance, vary enormously
5. We connect “natural” to “normal” to “moral, correct”
- a. Why we initially react with disgust at obligatory homosexuality in New Guinea cultures
 - b. We are not reacting neutrally
 - c. One lesson about culture:
 - 1) Its prescriptions and proscriptions are not given in the form of “it would be nice if you did/felt/believed this, but if you don’t, OK”

- 2) Rather, they are given in the context of “this is how humans behave”; “this is what the gods command you to do”; “do it this way or you will be considered very deviant, abnormal, sick”
- d. So we can better understand just how disturbing it is when what you think is natural, a trait of the species, is not, and you can’t find much evidence that that person is sick, a sinner in other ways, etc.
- 1) In the Anthropology Program we have a video titled “You Don’t Know Dick,” about female-to-male transsexuals
 - 2) One of these men is interviewed along with his friends
 - 3) One of the friends says a small part of her wanted his decision to result in a huge failure, demonstrating that he had been “out of his flippin’ mind” because then she wouldn’t have to rethink so much of what she’d come to believe
- B. Second, sexuality is always integrated into the entire sociocultural system; behaviors, feelings, etc. we consider sexual in some fashion will serve other purposes, do other kinds of “work” in the culture
1. Examples?
 2. Marriage and the family
 - a. These institutions do a great deal. We see sexual attraction, which is a major part of falling in love, as very instrumental in making people want to marry
 3. Sexuality and power: We talked last time about a woman using her sexuality for non-sexual ends
 4. Advertising using sexuality to get people to buy stuff

5. The New Guinea case of the Sambia: sexual activities seen as necessary to turn boys into men
6. Anthropologists have analyzed some kinds of expectations and prescriptions about sexuality as adaptive in contributing to population control
7. Sexuality, especially female, and social stratification
 - a. Degree of seclusion of women correlates with rank in the societies that emphasize the importance of virginity, modesty, chastity, etc.
 - b. In part because the lower classes can't afford to have half their adult labor power so confined
 - c. In part because women's bodies are seen as the repository of family honor and the upper classes have more honor to maintain
 - d. In a book we read about Morocco in another class I teach
 - 1) There is a graphic description of a wedding involving a staged struggle between the groom and the bride's kinswomen after which he forcibly penetrates her (but doesn't continue—it's very bad form to ejaculate)
 - 2) And the bloodstained sheet is immediately displayed in front of the wedding guests, cause of great celebration and ululation
 - 3) Students very frequently find this hard to take and hard to understand
 - 4) The values are stated, the logic is clear
 - a) It is a very different logic

- e. In the Middle East countries sometimes women are put in jail for their own protection because their father and brothers are trying to kill them
 - 1) Something they did besmirched the family honor
 - 2) Their mother and sisters agree this must be done
 - 3) Ostensibly such “honor killings” are against the law, but law is not enforced
 - 4) There are Pakistani men in British and Scandinavian jail who have killed their daughters or sisters and are not repentant at all
 - 5) Women’s groups in these countries work to help such women in danger of being killed find a safe place to live elsewhere in the country

- C. Third, because of culture, humans are freed from some of the biological controls over behavior characteristic of all other animals
 - 1. Advances in technology have produced reliable birth control
 - 2. Played an important role in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s

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