Anthony

Giddens

Sociology

6th edition

Revised and Updated with Philip W. Sutton

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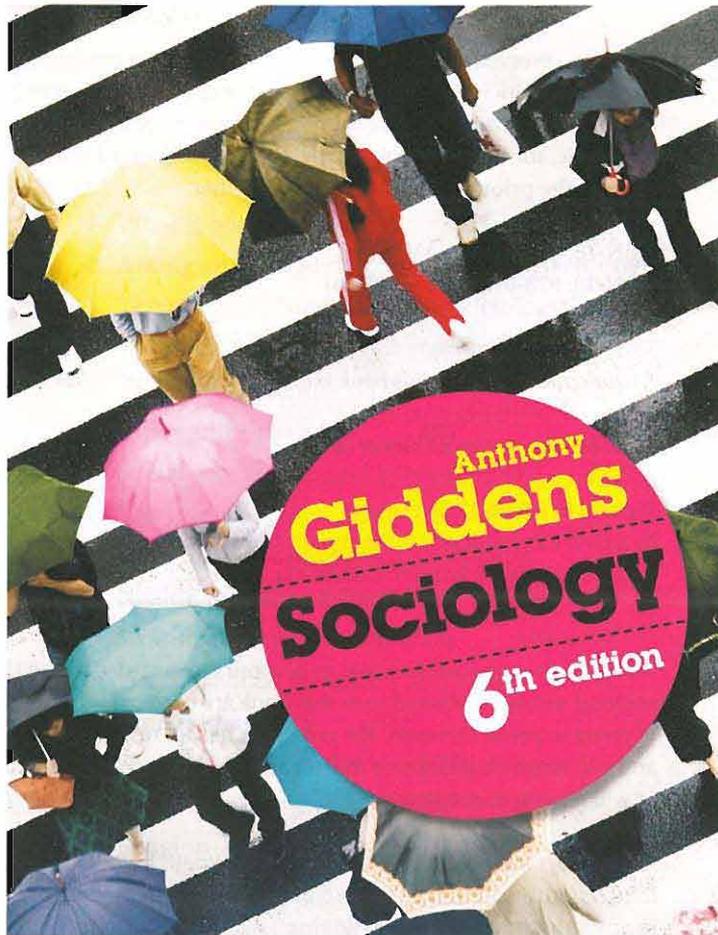
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CHAPTER 14

Sexuality and Gender

(opposite) Other high-profile individuals to be involved in same-sex civil partnerships include Lissy Groner, a German member of the European Parliament.

'By the power vested in me by the state of Massachusetts as a justice of the peace, and most of all by the power of your own love, I now pronounce you married under the laws of Massachusetts', intoned the city clerk, Margaret Drury, shortly after 9 a.m. on 17 May 2004. 'You may seal this marriage with a kiss.' The couple embraced. Marcia Kadish, who had married her partner of 18 years, was overjoyed: 'I feel all tingly and wonderful', she said. 'So much love. Can't you see it is just bursting out of me?' Her partner said it felt like 'winning the lottery'.

Yet the marriage caused great controversy in the United States. 'The documents being issued across Massachusetts may say "marriage licence" at the

top but they are really death certificates for the institution of marriage', said James Dobson, head of the Christian group 'Focus on the Family'. The reason for the controversy was that Marcia Kadish's long-term partner was another woman – Tanya McCloskey. The couple was amongst the first same-sex couples to be married under new laws in the US state of Massachusetts. Throughout the day, one gay couple after another filed out of the local town hall clutching the newly issued papers that would allow them to get married. Outside, thousands of people had gathered to applaud the couples, and to celebrate a right that many of them regarded as self-evident.

The state of Massachusetts has often been at the cusp of liberal reforms in the USA. In May 2004, after months of battles in and out of the state Supreme Court and legislature, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage. Although increasing numbers of people in the USA do accept that marriages between homosexuals should be recognized as valid by the law, the majority (55 per cent in May 2004) has consistently been against it (Gallup 2004) and an overwhelming majority of states has laws or constitutional amendments barring 'gay marriage'. Massachusetts joined the Netherlands, Belgium and large parts of Canada as one of the few places in the world where gay marriages *are* legally recognized.

The very possibility of legal gay marriage demonstrates how radically ideas about sexuality have changed in recent decades. After all, it was only in 1967 that male homosexuality was legalized in the UK. Gay marriage also raises questions about sexual orientation: to what extent is sexual orientation inborn and to what extent is it learned? Many of the themes that we examine in this chapter overlap with the questions raised in chapter 9, 'Families and Intimate Relationships'. Human sexuality is tied up with our ideas about love and the question of what makes a good relationship. Increasingly, people argue that a good relationship must be one between equals. Gay marriage has only become possible through a struggle against discrimination and inequality that is still continuing.

We begin this chapter by discussing human sexuality and examine how sexual behaviour is changing in Western society. We then look more specifically at sexual orientation, and particularly at issues surrounding homosexuality in the West. This leads us to the broader issue of gender, and raises questions of what it means to be a man or a woman in modern society. We close with a discussion of gender inequality and look at how women's equality is increasingly finding a global expression.

Human sexuality

Ideas about sexuality are undergoing dramatic changes. Over the last few decades in Western countries, important aspects of people's sexual lives have been altered in a fundamental way. In traditional societies, sexuality was tied tightly to the process of reproduction, but in our current age it has been separated from it. Sexuality has become a dimension of life for each individual to explore and shape. If sexuality once was 'defined' in terms of heterosexuality and monogamy in the context of marital relations, there is now a growing acceptance of diverse forms of sexual behaviour and orientations in a broad variety of contexts, as we saw in the discussion of gay marriage above.

In this section, we explore some of the issues surrounding human sexual behaviour: the importance of biological versus social influences, how society shapes sexual activity and the influence of reproductive technology. We then examine some of the recent trends in human sexual behaviour in Western society.

Biology and sexual behaviour

Sexuality has long been considered a highly personal subject. For this reason it is a

challenging area for sociologists to study. Until recently, much of what we have known about sexuality came from biologists, medical researchers and sexologists. Scholars have also looked to the animal world in an attempt to understand more about human sexual behaviour.

There is clearly a biological component to sexuality, because female anatomy differs from that of the male. There also exists a biological imperative to reproduce; otherwise, the human species would become extinct. Some sociobiologists, such as David Barash (1979), have argued that there is an evolutionary explanation for why men tend to be more sexually promiscuous than women. His argument is that men produce millions of sperm during a lifetime and therefore can be seen as biologically disposed to impregnate as many women as possible. However, women only produce a few hundred eggs in a lifetime and have to carry the foetus within their body for nine months, which, says Barash, explains why they focus more on emotional commitment and are not so sexually promiscuous. The biological core of males and females drives their sexual behaviour in society. Barash's argument finds some support in other studies of the sexual behaviour of animals, which claim to show that males are normally more promiscuous than females of the same species.

Many commentators are dismissive of such an evolutionary approach. Steven Rose, for example, argued that, unlike most animals, human behaviour is shaped more by the environment than it is determined by genetically programmed instincts: 'The human infant is born with relatively few of its neural pathways already committed' (Rose et al. 1984). Rose argues that humans have an exceptionally long infancy relative to other animals, which gives them far more time than other species to learn from their experiences.

The claims of sociobiologists such as Barash are fiercely contested, especially as regards any implications for human sexual behaviour. One thing clearly distinguishes humans from animals, however. Human sexual behaviour is meaningful – that is, humans use and express their sexuality in a variety of ways. For humans, sexual activity is much more than biological. It is symbolic, reflecting who we are and the emotions we are experiencing. As we shall see, sexuality is far too complicated to be wholly attributable to biological traits. It must be understood in terms of the social meanings which humans ascribe to it.

Forms of sexuality

Most people, in all societies, are heterosexual – they look to the other sex for emotional involvement and sexual pleasure. Heterosexuality in every society has historically been the basis of marriage and family. Yet there are many minority sexual tastes and inclinations too. Judith Lorber (1994) distinguishes as many as ten different sexual identities: straight (heterosexual) woman, straight man, lesbian woman, gay man, bisexual woman, bisexual man, transvestite woman (a woman who regularly dresses as a man), transvestite man (a man who regularly dresses as a woman), transsexual woman (a man who becomes a woman), and transsexual man (a woman who becomes a man). Sexual practices themselves are even more diverse.

There are a number of possible sexual practices. For example, a man or woman can have sexual relations with women, with men or with both. This can happen one at a time or with three or more participating. One can have sex with oneself (masturbation) or with no one (celibacy). One can have sexual relations with transsexuals or with people who erotically cross-dress, use pornography or sexual devices, practise sado-masochism (the erotic use of bondage and the inflicting of pain), have sex with animals, and so on (Lorber 1994).

In all societies there are sexual norms that approve of some practices while discouraging or condemning others. Members of a

society learn these norms through socialization. Over the last few decades, for example, sexual norms in Western cultures have been linked to ideas of romantic love and family relationships. Such norms, however, vary widely between different cultures. Homosexuality is a case in point. Some cultures have either tolerated or actively encouraged homosexuality in certain contexts. Among the ancient Greeks, for instance, the love of men for boys was idealized as the highest form of sexual love.

Accepted types of sexual behaviour also vary between cultures, which is one way we know that most sexual responses are learned rather than innate. The most extensive study was carried out nearly 60 years ago by Clellan Ford and Frank Beach (1951), who surveyed anthropological evidence from more than 200 societies. Striking variations were found in what is regarded as 'natural' sexual behaviour and in norms of sexual attractiveness. For example, in some cultures, extended foreplay, perhaps lasting hours, is thought desirable and even necessary prior to intercourse; in others, foreplay is virtually non-existent. In some societies, it is believed that overly frequent intercourse leads to physical debilitation or illness. Among the Seniang of the South Pacific, advice on the desirability of spacing out love-making is given by the elders of the village – who also believe that a person with white hair may legitimately copulate every night.

In most cultures, norms of sexual attractiveness (held by both females and males) focus more on physical looks for women than for men, a situation that seems to be gradually changing in the West as women increasingly become active in spheres outside the home. The traits seen as most important in female beauty, however, differ greatly. In the modern West, a slim, small body is admired, while in other cultures a much more generous shape is regarded as most attractive. Sometimes the breasts are not seen as a source of sexual stimulus, whereas in some societies great erotic signi-ficance is attached to them. Some societies place great store on the shape of the face, while others emphasize the shape and colour of the eyes or the size and form of the nose and lips.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation concerns the direction of one's sexual or romantic attraction. The term 'sexual preference', which is sometimes incorrectly used instead of sexual orientation, is misleading and is to be avoided, since it implies that one's sexual or romantic attraction is entirely a matter of personal choice. As you will see below, sexual orientation in all cultures results from a complex interplay of biological and social factors which are not yet fully understood.

The most commonly found sexual orientation in all cultures is heterosexuality, a sexual or romantic attraction for persons of the opposite sex ('hetero' comes from the Greek word meaning 'other' or 'different'). Homosexuality involves the sexual or romantic attraction for persons of one's own sex. Today, the term *gay* is used to refer to male homosexuals, lesbian for female homosexuals, and *bi* as shorthand for bisexuals, people who experience sexual or romantic attraction for persons of either sex.

Orientation of sexual activities or feelings towards others of the same sex exist in all cultures. In some non-Western cultures, homosexual relations are accepted or even encouraged among certain groups. The Batak people of northern Sumatra, for example, permit male homosexual relations before marriage. Boys leave the parental home at puberty and sleep in a dwelling with a dozen or so older males who initiate the newcomers into homosexual practices. In many societies, however, homosexuality is not so openly accepted or practised. In the Western world, for example, sexuality is linked to individual identity, and the prevailing idea of a homosexual (or

heterosexual) is of a person whose sexual orientation lies within themselves and is therefore a very personal matter, not something to be shared with many others.

In his studies of sexuality, Michel Foucault has shown that before the eighteenth century in Europe, the notion of a homosexual person seems barely to have existed (Foucault 1978). The act of sodomy was denounced by Church authorities and by the law; in England and several other European countries, it was punishable by death. However, sodomy was not defined specifically as a homosexual offence. It applied to relations between men and women, men and animals, as well as men among themselves. The term 'homosexuality' was coined in the 1860s, and from then on, homosexuals were increasingly regarded as being a separate type of people with a particular sexual aberration (Weeks 1986). Homosexuality became part of a 'medicalized' discourse; it was spoken of in clinical terms as a psychiatric disorder or a perversion, rather than a religious 'sin'. Homosexuals, along with other 'deviants' such as paedophiles and transvestites, were seen as suffering from a biological pathology that threatened the wholesomeness of mainstream society.

The death penalty for 'unnatural acts' was abolished in the United States after independence, and in European countries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Until just a few decades ago, however, homosexuality remained a criminal activity in virtually all Western countries. The shift of homosexuals from the margins of society to the mainstream is not yet complete, but rapid progress has been seen over recent years, as the discussion of gay marriage that opened this chapter shows.

Is sexual orientation inborn or learned?

Most sociologists today argue that sexual orientation of all kinds results from a complex interplay between biological factors and social learning. Since heterosex-
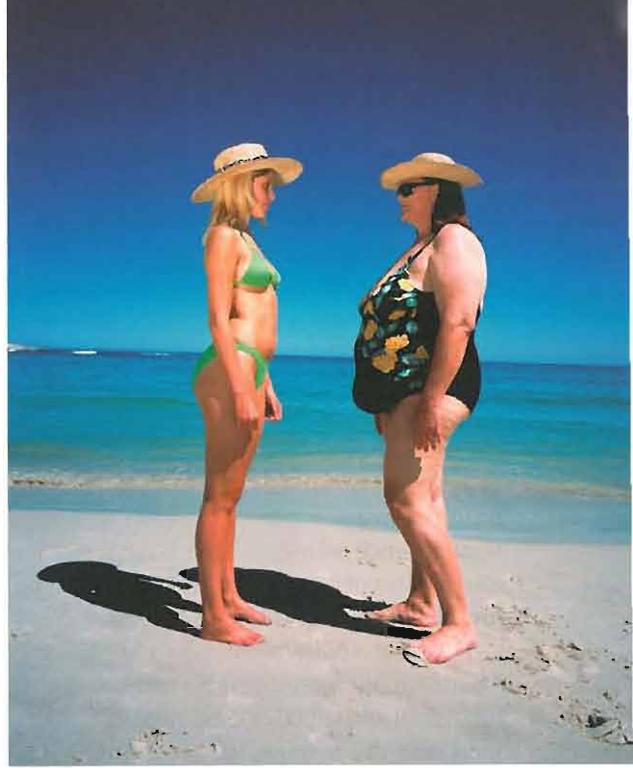
Which body shape is more appealing? The answer differs across cultures.

uality is the norm for most people, a great deal of research has focused on why some people become homosexual. Some scholars argue that biological influences are the most important, predisposing certain people to become homosexual from birth (Bell et al. 1981). Biological explanations for homosexuality have included differences in such things as brain characteristics of homosexuals (Maugh and Zamichow 1991) and the impact on foetal development of the mother's *in utero* hormone production during pregnancy (McFadden and Champlin 2000). Such studies, which are based on small numbers of cases, give highly inconclusive (and highly controversial) results (Healy 2001). It is virtually impossible to separate biological from early social influences in determining a person's sexual orientation.

Studies of twins hold some promise for understanding if there is any genetic basis for homosexuality, since identical twins share identical genes. In two related studies, Bailey and Pillard (1991; Bailey 1993) examined 167 pairs of brothers and 143 pairs of sisters, with

each pair of siblings raised in the same family, in which at least one sibling defined him- or herself as homosexual. Some of these pairs were identical twins (who share all genes), some were fraternal twins (who share some genes) and some were adoptive brothers or sisters (who share no genes). The researchers reasoned that if sexual orientation is determined entirely by biology, then all the identical twins should be homosexual, since their genetic make-up is identical. Among the fraternal twins, some pairs would be homosexual, since some genes are shared. The lowest rates of homosexuality were predicted for the adoptive brothers and sisters.

The results of this study seem to show that homosexuality results from a combination of biological and social factors. Among both the men and the women studied, roughly one out of every two identical twins was homosexual, compared with one out of every five fraternal twins, and one out of every ten adoptive brothers and sisters. In other words, a woman or man is five times more likely to be lesbian or gay if her or his identical twin is lesbian or gay than if his or her sibling is lesbian or gay but related only through adoption. These results offer some support for the importance of biological factors, since the higher the percentage of shared genes, the greater the percentage of cases in which both siblings were homosexual. However, since approximately half the identical twin brothers and sisters of homosexuals were not themselves homosexual, a great deal of social learning must also be involved; otherwise one would expect *all* identical twin siblings of homosexuals to be homosexual as well.

It is clear that even studies of identical twins cannot fully isolate biological from social factors. It is often the case that, even in infancy, identical twins are treated more like one another by parents, peers and teachers than are fraternal twins, who in turn are treated more like one another than are adoptive siblings. Thus, identical twins may have more than genes in common: they may share a higher proportion of similar socializing experiences as well.

Sexuality, religion and morality

Attitudes towards sexual behaviour are not uniform across the world's societies, and even within a single country they undergo significant changes throughout history. For example, Western attitudes to sexuality were, for nearly 2,000 years, moulded primarily by Christianity. Although different Christian sects and denominations have held divergent views about the proper place of sexuality in life, the dominant view of the Christian Church has been that all sexual behaviour is suspect except what is needed for reproduction. At some periods, this view produced an extreme prudishness in society at large. But at other times, many people ignored or reacted against the teachings of the Church, commonly engaging in practices (such as adultery) forbidden by religious authorities. The idea that sexual fulfilment can and should be sought only through marriage was rare.

In the nineteenth century, religious presumptions about sexuality became partly replaced by medical ones. Most of the early writings by doctors about sexual behaviour, however, were as stern as the views of the Church. Some argued that any type of sexual activity unconnected with reproduction causes serious physical harm. Masturbation was said to bring on blindness, insanity, heart disease and other ailments, while oral sex was claimed to cause cancer. In Victorian times, sexual hypocrisy abounded. Virtuous women were believed to be indifferent to sexuality, accepting the attentions of their husbands only as a duty. Yet in the expanding towns and cities, where prostitution was rife and often openly tolerated, 'loose' women were seen in an entirely different category from their respectable sisters.

Many Victorian men who were, on the face of things, sober, well-behaved citizens, devoted to their wives, regularly visited prostitutes or kept mistresses. Such behaviour was treated leniently; whereas 'respectable' women who took lovers were

INTERIOR OF A WEST-END BROTHEL.

In Victorian England, a man could keep a mistress or visit prostitutes with impunity. But the sexuality of 'respectable' women was strictly contained within heterosexual marriage.

regarded as scandalous and were shunned in public society if their behaviour came to light. The different attitudes towards the sexual activities of men and women formed a double standard, which has long existed and whose residues still linger on today (Barret-Ducrocq 1992).

In current times, traditional attitudes exist alongside much more liberal attitudes towards sexuality, which developed particularly strongly in the 1960s. In films and plays, scenes are shown that previously would have been completely unacceptable, and pornographic material is readily available to most adults who want it. Some people, particularly those influenced by Christian teachings, believe that pre-marital sex is wrong, and generally frown on all forms of sexual behaviour except heterosexual activity within the confines of marriage – although it is now much more commonly accepted that sexual pleasure is a desirable and important feature. Others, by contrast,

condone or actively approve of pre-marital sex and hold tolerant attitudes towards different sexual practices.

Sexual attitudes have undoubtedly become more permissive over the past 30 years in most Western countries, though as the survey results given below in figure 14.4 demonstrate, there are some significant differences globally. For example, in the Republic of Ireland and the USA around one-third of the sample still thought sex

THINKING CRITICALLY

How are your attitudes towards sex and sexuality different from those of your parents and older relations? How do you think such attitudes are related to religious beliefs? Do the changing attitudes of younger generations provide evidence for secularization or are there other ways of explaining these changes?

*"We're not doing anything for Gay Pride this year.
We're here, we're queer, we're used to it."*

before marriage was 'always wrong' and in the Philippines 60 per cent did so. But in Sweden the figure was just 4 per cent and in the Czech Republic it was 5 per cent (Widmer et al. 1998). Such cultural differences show that religious beliefs and traditional norms relating to sexuality have not simply been swept aside in the modern age, but continue to exert an influence on people's attitudes and values.

Homosexuality

Kenneth Plummer (1975), in a classic study, distinguished four types of homosexuality within modern Western culture. *Casual homosexuality* is a passing encounter that does not substantially structure a person's overall sexual life. Schoolboy crushes and mutual masturbation are examples. *Situated activities* refer to circumstances in which homosexual acts are regularly carried out but do not become an individual's overriding preference. In settings such as prisons or military camps, where men live without women, homosexual behaviour of this kind is common, regarded as a substitute for heterosexual behaviour rather than as preferable.

Personalized homosexuality refers to individuals who have a preference for homosexual activities but who are isolated from groups in which this is easily accepted. Homosexuality here is a furtive activity, hidden away from friends and colleagues. *Homosexuality as a way of life* refers to individuals who have 'come out' and have made associations with others of similar sexual tastes a key part of their lives. Such people usually belong to gay subcultures, in which homosexual activities are integrated into a distinct lifestyle. Such communities often provide the possibility of collective political action to advance the rights and interests of homosexuals.

The proportion of the population (both male and female) who have had homosexual experiences or experienced strong inclinations towards homosexual sex is probably much larger than those who follow an openly *gay* lifestyle. The term 'gay' has been used primarily to refer to male homosexu-

als, as in the widely used phrase, 'gay and lesbian' people, though it is becoming increasingly used to describe lesbians.

Male homosexuality generally receives more attention than lesbianism – homosexual attachment or activities among women. Lesbian groups tend to be less highly organized than male gay subcultures and include a lower proportion of casual relationships. In campaigns for homosexual rights, lesbian activist groups are often treated as if their interests were identical to those of male organizations. But while there is sometimes close cooperation between male gays and lesbians, there are also differences, particularly where lesbians are actively involved in feminism. Some lesbian women came to feel that the gay liberation movement reflected the interests of men, while liberal and radical feminists were concerned exclusively with the concerns of middle-class, heterosexual women. Thus, a distinctive brand of lesbian feminism emerged which promoted the spread of 'female values' and challenged the established, dominant institution of male heterosexuality (Rich 1981). Many gay women view lesbianism less as a sexual orientation and more as a commitment to and form of solidarity with other women – politically, socially and personally (Seidman 1997).

Attitudes towards homosexuality

Attitudes of intolerance towards homosexuality have been so pronounced in the past that it is only during recent years that some of the myths surrounding the subject have been dispelled. Homosexuality has long been stigmatized in the United Kingdom and around the world. Homophobia, a term coined in the late 1960s, refers to an aversion or hatred of homosexuals and their lifestyles, along with behaviour based on such aversion. Homophobia is a form of prejudice that is reflected not only in overt acts of hostility and violence towards lesbians and gays, but also in various forms of verbal abuse. In Britain, for example, terms like 'fag' or 'queer' are used to insult a heterosexual male, as are

female-related offensive terms like 'sissy' or 'pansy'. Although homosexuality is becoming more accepted, homophobia remains ingrained in many realms of Western society; antagonism towards homosexuals persists in many people's emotional attitudes. Instances of violent assault and murder of homosexuals remain all too common.

> See also the issues raised in the section 'Crimes against homosexuals', in chapter 21, 'Crime and Deviance'.

Some kinds of male gay behaviour might be seen as attempts to alter the usual connections of masculinity and power – one reason, perhaps, why the heterosexual community so often finds them threatening. Gay men tend to reject the image of the effeminacy popularly associated with them, and they deviate from this in two ways. One is through cultivating outrageous effeminacy – a 'camp' masculinity that parodies the stereotype. The other is by developing a 'macho' image. This also is not conventionally masculine; men dressed as motorcyclists or cowboys are again parodying masculinity, by exaggerating it – think, for example, of the 1970s band the Village People and their globally recognized anthem *YMCA* (Bertelson 1986).

Some sociologists have investigated the effect of the AIDS epidemic on popular attitudes to homosexuality. They suggest that the epidemic has challenged some of the main ideological foundations of heterosexual masculinity. Sexuality and sexual behaviour, for example, have become topics of public discussion, from safe sex campaigns backed by government funds to media coverage of the spread of the epidemic. The epidemic has threatened the legitimacy of traditional ideas of morality by drawing public attention to the prevalence of premarital sex, extramarital affairs and non-heterosexual relations in society. But most of all, in increasing the visibility of homosexuals, the epidemic has called the 'universality' of heterosexuality into question and has demonstrated that alternatives exist to the

The Village People demonstrate a particularly extreme parody of 'macho' forms of masculinity.

traditional nuclear family (Redman 1996). The response has sometimes taken hysterical and paranoid forms, however. Homosexuals are depicted as a deviant threat to the moral well-being of 'normal society'. In order to preserve heterosexual masculinity as the 'norm', it becomes necessary to marginalize and vilify the perceived threat (Rutherford and Chapman 1988).

In many ways, homosexuality has become more normalized – more of an accepted part of everyday society, with many countries passing legislation to protect the rights of homosexuals. When South Africa adopted its new constitution in 1996, it became one of the only countries in the world, at that time, constitutionally to guarantee the rights of homosexuals. Many countries in Europe, including Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain, now permit homosexual partners to register with the state in a civil ceremony and to claim most of the prerogatives of marriage, including social security and pension benefits, tenancy rights, possible parental responsibility for a partner's children, full

recognition for life assurance, responsibility to provide reasonable maintenance for partners and children, the same tax treatment as married couples and visiting rights in hospitals. The opportunity to make such a public demonstration of personal commitment has been very popular. For example, in the 12 months following introduction of the UK's civil partnership legislation in 2005, 18,059 gay and lesbian couples became civil partners (figure 14.1)

Nevertheless, as we saw in this chapter's opening example, public attitudes towards equal marriage rights for lesbian and gay people differ widely within societies as well as across the world. Even within one geographical region such as Europe, a wide divergence of national opinion exists (see figure 14.2). A recent Eurobarometer survey (European Commission 2006) asked respondents if they agreed with the statement 'Homosexual marriages should be allowed throughout Europe'. In the Netherlands, 82 per cent agreed, along with 71 per cent of Swedes, 69 per cent of Danes and 62 per cent of Belgians. However, in most of Eastern Europe, only a minority of people

agreed; just 11 per cent in Romania, 15 per cent in Bulgaria and 17 per cent in Poland. In only 8 of the then 25 European Union countries surveyed did 50 per cent or more of those in the survey agree with the statement – an interesting finding in a period when more and more governments are moving in the direction of legally acknowledging homosexual unions. As 'public opinion' on sexuality is really quite diverse, with strong disagreements rooted in religious and political beliefs, legislative change and social policy do not always *follow* public opinion, but can also contribute to *changing* it.

More and more gay activists in Europe, the USA and elsewhere are pushing for homosexual marriage to be fully legalized. Why should they care? After all, as we discuss in chapter 9, marriage between heterosexual couples appears to be in decline. Activists care because they want the same status, rights and obligations as anyone else. Marriage in many societies today is, above all, an emotional commitment, but as recognized by the state it also has definite legal implications, conferring
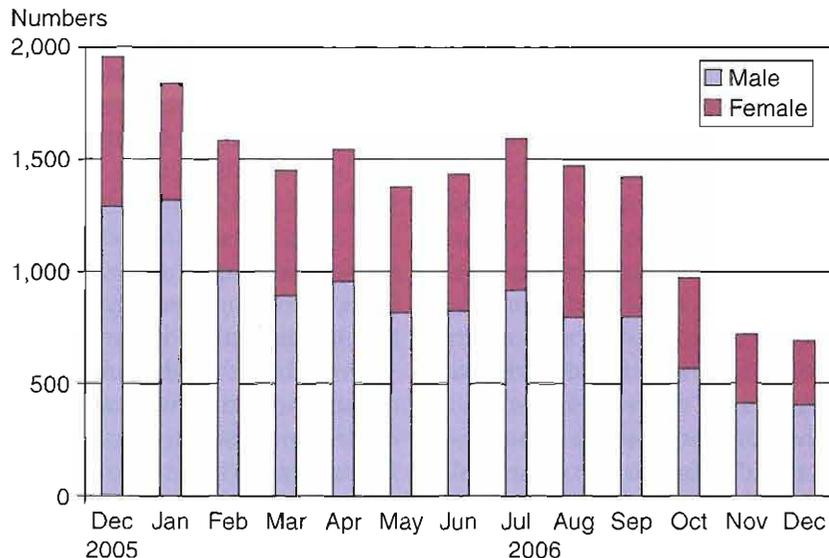
Figure 14.1 Number of UK civil partnerships, December 2005 – December 2006

Source: Office of National Statistics 2006b

Country results
The Netherlands	82%
Sweden	71%
Denmark	69%
Belgium	62%
Luxembourg	58%
Spain	56%
Germany	52%
Czech Republic	52%
Austria	49%
France	48%
United Kingdom	46%
Finland	45%
European Union (25)	44%
Ireland	41%
Italy	31%
Slovenia	31%
Portugal	29%
Estonia	21%
Slovakia	19%
Hungary	18%
Malta	18%
Lithuania	17%
Poland	17%
Greece	15%
Cyprus	14%
Latvia	12%
Other countries	
Bulgaria	15%
Romania	11%

Question: QA47_11. For each of the following propositions, tell me if you ....?

Option: Homosexual marriages should be allowed throughout Europe

Answers: Agree

71% – 100%   21% – 30%
51% – 70%   0% – 20%
31% – 50%

Figure 14.2   European attitudes to 'homosexual marriage', by country, 2006

Source: Eurobarometer 66, European Commission, 2006

upon partners important rights and responsibilities. 'Ceremonies of commitment' – non-legal marriages – have also become popular among both homosexuals and heterosexuals in America, but do not confer these rights and obligations. Conversely, of course, these legal rights and obligations are one reason why many heterosexual couples now decide either to defer marriage or not to get married at all.

Opponents of homosexual marriage condemn it as either frivolous or unnatural. They see it as legitimating a sexual orientation which the state should be doing its best to curb. For example, there are pressure groups in America dedicated to getting homosexuals to change their ways and marry people of the opposite sex. Some still

see homosexuality as a perversion and are violently opposed to any provisions that might normalize it. In other countries, homosexuality remains illegal and carries severe legal penalties including long terms of imprisonment and even execution. In 2005, two Iranian teenagers were convicted and hanged, allegedly for the rape of a 13-year-old boy, though human rights groups argued their crime was having gay sex, with confessions extracted under torture (BBC News, July 2005).

Gay and lesbian civil rights

Until recently, most homosexuals hid their sexual orientation, for fear that 'coming out of the closet' would cost them their jobs, families and friends, and leave them open

to verbal and physical abuse. Yet, since the late 1960s, many homosexuals have acknowledged their homosexuality openly, and, as we saw in the discussion of gay marriage above, in some areas the lives of homosexual men and women have to a large extent been normalized (Seidman 1997). Manchester, New York, San Francisco, Sydney and many other large metropolitan areas around the world have thriving gay and lesbian communities. 'Coming out' may be important not only for the person who does so, but for others in the larger society; previously 'closeted' lesbians and gays come to realize they are not alone, while heterosexuals are forced to recognize that people whom they have admired and respected are homosexual.

The current global wave of gay and lesbian civil rights movements began partly as an outgrowth of the social movements of the 1960s, which emphasized pride in racial and ethnic identity. One pivotal event was the Stonewall Riots in June 1969 in the United States, when New York City's gay community – angered by continual police harassment – fought the New York Police Department for two days, a public action that for most people (gay or not) was practically unthinkable (Weeks 1977; D'Emilio 1983). The Stonewall Riots became a symbol of gay pride, heralding the 'coming out' of gays and lesbians, who insisted not only on equal treatment under the law, but also on a complete end to the stigmatization of their lifestyle. In 1994, on the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, 100,000 people attended the International March on the United Nations to Affirm the Human Rights of Lesbian and Gay People. It is clear that significant strides have been made, although discrimination and outright homophobia remain serious problems for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) people.

There are enormous differences between countries in the degree to which homosexuality is legally punishable (see figure 14.3). In Africa, for example, male homosexual acts have been legalized in only a handful of countries, while female homosexuality is seldom mentioned in the law at all. In South Africa, the official policy of the former white government was to regard homosexuality as a psychiatric problem that threatened national security. Once it took power, however, the black government legislated full equality. In Asia and the Middle East, the situation is similar: male homosexuality is banned in the vast majority of countries, including all those that are predominantly Islamic. Europe, meanwhile, has some of the most liberal laws in the world: homosexuality has been legalized in nearly all countries, and, as we saw above, several countries legally recognize same-sex marriages.

Today there is a growing movement around the world for the rights of homosexuals. The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), which was founded in 1978, today has more than 600 member organizations in some 90 countries on every continent (ILGA 2008). It holds international conferences, supports lesbian and gay social movements around the world, and lobbies international organizations. For example, it convinced the Council of Europe to require all its member nations to repeal laws banning homosexuality. In general, active lesbian and gay social movements tend to thrive in countries that emphasize individual rights and liberal state policies (Frank and McEneancy 1999).

The political campaigning of lesbian and gay movements in many parts of the world brought about new debates on gender identities and led to the problematizing of what previously appeared obvious: the gender differences and sexual differences are the same. Gayle Rubin (1975, 1984) argued that the typical Western gender difference is between men and women, while the key difference in sexuality is that between heterosexual and homosexual. However, sexuality is often expressed through *gender* distinctions rather than in its own terms. For example, it is common to talk about 'feminine' gay men or 'masculine' lesbians; the implication of this discourse is that gay men
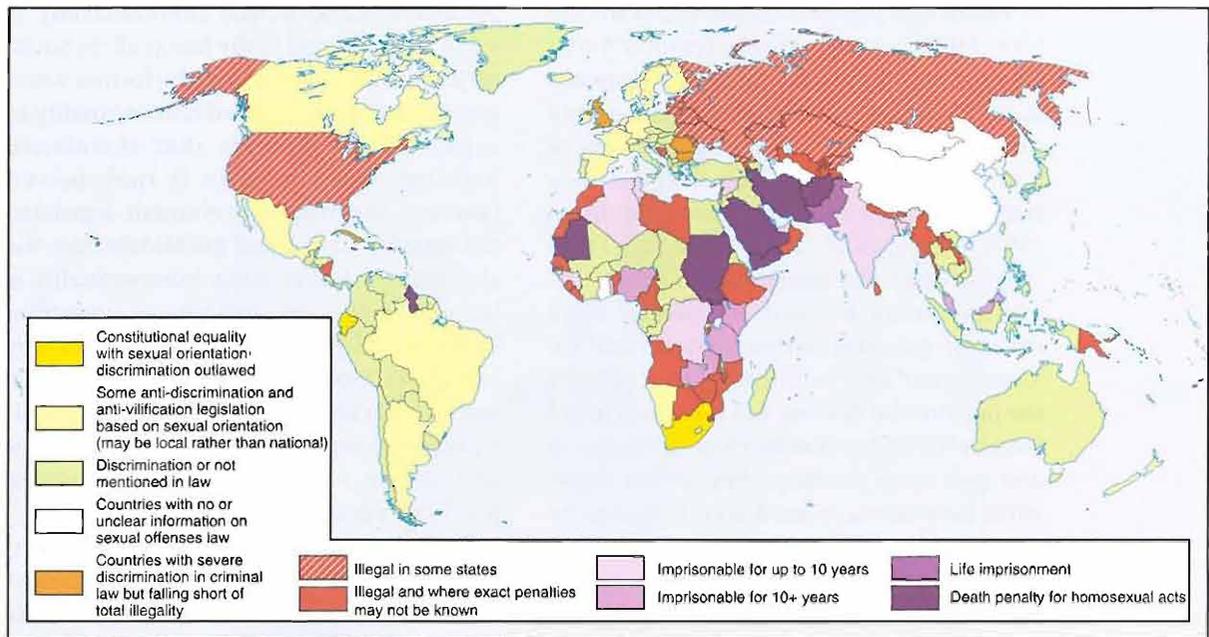
Figure 14.3 Sexual minorities and the law across the world

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and lesbians are deviant, because they break the norms of *gender*. Rubin was one of the first to argue that, theoretically, it is possible to separate gender from sexuality altogether. This theoretical move is the starting point for queer theory, which marks not only a break with conventional ideas but also from lesbian theory and gay theory, which deal with sexual difference as it relates to female and male gender respectively.

Queer theory builds upon the social constructionist approach to sexuality developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973), and has been heavily influenced by poststructuralist thought, particularly that associated with Judith Butler (1990), Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In particular, queer theorists challenge the very notion of 'identity' as something that is relatively fixed or assigned to people by socializing agents. Following Foucault, queer theorists argue that gender and sexuality, along with all of the other terms that come with these concepts, constitute a specific *discourse* of

sexuality, rather than referring to something objectively real or 'natural'. For example, in his work on the history of sexuality during the 1970s and '80s, Foucault argued that the male homosexual identity that today is associated with gay men, was not part of the dominant discourse on sexuality in the nineteenth century and before. Therefore, this form of identification just did not exist for people until it became part of, or was created within, the discourses of medicine and psychiatry. Identities can then be seen as pluralistic, quite unstable and subject to change over a lifetime.

Queer theorists are also interested in all forms of unconventional sexuality, including prostitution, bisexuality, transgender and so on, many of which are heterosexual rather than, or as well as, homosexual. In this way, queer theory can be viewed as a radical social constructionism that explores the process of *identity creation* and re-creation insofar as this relates to human sexuality and gender. Some queer theorists

also argue that every major sociological topic (religion, the body, globalization and so on), as well as other subjects, including literature and even lesbian and gay studies, should bring queer voices to the centre to challenge the heterosexual assumptions that underlie much contemporary thinking (Epstein 2002).

Critics argue that queer theory tends to study cultural texts (film, novels and so on) and currently lacks empirical support. It may well be that many, maybe most people, do not experience their identity as being as fluid and changing as the theory suggests, but, rather, as something quite firm and fixed (Edwards 1998). If so, it may be that the radical constructionism of queer theorists overestimates the degree to which identities are open to change. We can gain an insight into the empirical evidence by looking at how research into sexuality has been conducted and what particular problems can arise when studying this sensitive area of people's lives.

Researching sexuality

When Alfred Kinsey began his research in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, it was the first time a major investigation of actual sexual behaviour had been undertaken, and many people were shocked and surprised at the divergence between public norms and private sexual behaviour his team discovered (see 'Classic Studies 14.1'). We can speak much more confidently about public values concerning sexuality than we can about private practices, which, by their nature, go mostly undocumented. Still, many other areas of personal life, such as that within families and relationships, is similarly personal, yet has been the subject of many research studies. Why should sexuality be particularly difficult to research sociologically?

Surveys of sexual behaviour are fraught with difficulties. As we saw above, until quite recently sex was a taboo subject, not something to be discussed in either the public or the private realm. Perhaps more so than in any other areas of life, many, perhaps even most, people see sexual behaviour as a purely personal matter and are unwilling to discuss such an intimate subject with strangers. This may mean that those who *are* prepared to come forward to be interviewed are essentially a self-selected sample, which is therefore unrepresentative of the general population.

The social silence in relation to sexual matters has changed somewhat since the 1960s, a time when social movements associated with 'hippy' lifestyles and countercultural ideas of 'free love' challenged the existing order of things, including breaking with existing sexual norms. But we must be careful not to exaggerate their impact. Once the movements of the 1960s had become assimilated into mainstream society, it was clear that some of the older norms relating to sex continued to exert an influence. Some have even argued that a 'new fidelity' may be emerging (Laumann 1994), perhaps partly as a result of concerns about the risks associated with the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. For example, a 1998 survey of attitudes towards sexual relations in 24 countries (see figure 14.4) showed (with some exceptions) overwhelming majorities to be against extramarital sex, homosexual sex and sex before the age of 16. The survey also found that only a minority were against sex before marriage (Widmer et al. 1998), suggesting that the traditional linkage between marriage and sexual relations has been broken. In this context, sociological research into sexuality today faces the same problem as earlier studies; we simply do not know how far people tell the truth about their sexual lives when asked by a researcher whom they do not know and perhaps do not trust with their highly personal information. However, we must remember the lesson from Kinsey's studies here: such publicly stated attitudes may simply reflect people's understanding of prevailing public norms

Classic Studies 14.1 **Alfred Kinsey discovers the diversity of sexual behaviour**

The research problem

Do public norms of sexuality really govern people's sexual behaviour? Are sexually 'deviant' practices limited to a tiny minority of individuals? Is it possible that many more people engage in such practices in private, and that public norms fail to reflect this fact? To address these issues, Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) and his research team set out to collect evidence from the white population in 1940s America. They faced condemnation from religious organizations and their work was denounced as immoral in the newspapers and even in Congress. But they persisted and eventually obtained sexual life histories from 18,000 people, a reasonably representative sample of the white American population (Kinsey 1948, 1953).

Kinsey's findings

Kinsey's research findings were surprising to most people and shocking to many, because they did indeed reveal a large difference between the public expectations of sexual behaviour prevailing at that time and actual sexual conduct. The research team found that almost 70 per cent of men had visited a prostitute and 84 per cent had had pre-marital sexual experiences. Yet, following the sexual double standard, 40 per cent of men also expected their wives to be virgins at the time of marriage. More than 90 per cent of males had engaged in masturbation and nearly 60 per cent in some form of oral sexual activity. Among women, around 50 per cent had had pre-marital sexual experiences, although mostly with their prospective husbands. Some 60 per cent had masturbated and the same percentage had engaged in oral-genital contact. The study also showed much higher levels of male homosexuality than expected, revealing that many otherwise heterosexual men had experienced homosexual feelings.

The gap between publicly accepted attitudes and actual behaviour that Kinsey's findings demonstrated was especially great in that particular period, just after the Second World War. A phase of sexual liberalization had begun rather earlier, in the 1920s, when many younger people felt freed from the strict moral codes that had governed earlier generations. Sexual behaviour probably changed a good deal, but issues concerning sexuality were not openly discussed in the way that has now become familiar. People participating in sexual activities that were still strongly disapproved of on a public level concealed them, not realizing the full extent to which many others were engaging in similar practices.

Critical points

Kinsey's research was controversial in the USA and was attacked by conservative and religious organizations. For example, one aspect of the studies explored the sexuality of children under 16 years of age. Many critics objected to their involvement as research subjects. Religious leaders also argued that open discussion of sexual behaviour would undermine Christian moral values. Academic critics argued that Kinsey's **positivist** approach collected much raw data, but failed to grasp the complexity of sexual desire underpinning the diverse behaviour he uncovered, or the meanings people attach to their sexual relationships. Later surveys also found lower levels of homosexual experience than Kinsey, suggesting that his sample may have been less representative than the team first thought.

Contemporary significance

Kinsey is widely seen as a founder of the scientific study of human sexuality and his findings were instrumental in challenging the widespread view at the time, that homosexuality was a form of mental illness requiring treatment. It was only in the more permissive era of the 1960s, which brought openly declared attitudes more into line with the realities of behaviour, that the overall tenor of Kinsey's findings came to be seen as providing a realistic picture of sexual behaviour. Kinsey died in 1956, but the Institute for Sex Research, which he headed, continues its research today and has produced much valuable information about contemporary sexual behaviour. It was renamed the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction in 1981 to celebrate his contribution to scientific research in this field.

Sex before marriage is wrong?

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Australia	13	8	19		59	
Bulgaria	23	9	11		57	
Canada	12	5	15		69	
Czech Republic	5	6	20		68	
Great Britain	19	5	14		70	
Republic of Ireland	35	8	15		42	
Japan	19	21		44		15
New Zealand	19	6	14		62	
Northern Ireland	31	8	13		48	
Philippines		60		16	13	11
Russia	13	12	18		57	
Spain	20	8	9		63	
Sweden	4	5		89		
USA	29	12	18		41	

☐ Always   ■ Almost always   ☐ Only sometimes   ☐ Not wrong at all

Sex before age 16 is wrong?

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%
Australia		61		20	10	9
Bulgaria		71		14	7	8
Canada		55		20	16	9
Czech Republic		59		21	12	8
Great Britain		67		21	9	3
Republic of Ireland		84			9	6
Japan		60		30	7	3
New Zealand		71		18	8	4
Northern Ireland		81		12	5	2
Philippines		77		16	5	3
Russia		45		30	14	11
Spain		59		18	9	14
Sweden		32	28		22	17
USA		71		16	9	4

☐ Always   ■ Almost always   ☐ Only sometimes   ☐ Not wrong at all

Figure 14.4   Attitudes towards sexual relations, 1998 (selected countries)

Source: Widmer et al. 1998

Extra marital sex is wrong?

| | 0% | 20% | 40% | 60% | 80% | 100% |

Country	Always	Almost always	Only sometimes	Not wrong at all
Australia	59	24	10	7
Bulgaria	51	20	14	16
Canada	68	19	10	2
Czech Republic	43	26	21	9
Great Britain	67	23	8	2
Republic of Ireland	80	13	5	2
Japan	58	33	7	2
New Zealand	75	17	6	1
Northern Ireland	81	12	6	2
Philippines	88	10	1	1
Russia	36	26	21	17
Spain	76	13	7	5
Sweden	68	26	5	1
USA	80	14	4	2

☐ Always ■ Almost always ☐ Only sometimes ☐ Not wrong at all

Homosexual sex is wrong?

| | 0% | 20% | 40% | 60% | 80% | 100% |

Country	Always	Almost always	Only sometimes	Not wrong at all
Australia	55	8	10	27
Bulgaria	81	5	4	10
Canada	39	5	10	46
Czech Republic	29	12	21	39
Great Britain	58	6	10	26
Republic of Ireland	71	6	6	17
Japan	65	22	11	2
New Zealand	56	5	8	31
Northern Ireland	80	4	6	10
Philippines	84	9	3	3
Russia	57	17	7	19
Spain	45	7	6	42
Sweden	56	6	6	32
USA	70	4	7	19

☐ Always ■ Almost always ☐ Only sometimes ☐ Not wrong at all

Figure 14.4 (Continued)

rather than accurately describing their private beliefs and sexual behaviours.

The validity of surveys of sexual behaviour has also been the focus of intense debate (Lewontin 1995). Critics have argued that they do not generate reliable information about sexual practices. In one American survey (Rubin 1990), researchers reported that 45 per cent of men aged between 80 and 85 say they have sex with their partner. Critics feel that this is so obviously untrue that it calls into doubt the findings of the whole survey. However, social gerontologists suggest that this criticism may itself be based on negative stereotypes of ageing rather than evidence. They point out that in one study of older men living outside institutions, 74 per cent were indeed sexually active, while others have found that most men even in their 90s sustained an interest in sex. When researching sexuality, sociologists need to be acutely aware of their own, sometimes unevidenced, assumptions.

THINKING CRITICALLY

The survey reported in figure 14.4 was carried out over a decade ago. Which countries appear to have the most 'liberal' attitudes towards sexual behaviour? Which seem to be more 'conservative'? Did any of the findings surprise you? Do you think that if the same questions were asked today, the results would be significantly different? If so, in what ways might they differ?

Gathering evidence on sexual behaviour

Many studies of sexual behaviour have taken the form of attitude and behaviour surveys using postal questionnaires or face-to-face interviews. But evidence in this area can also be collected through the analysis and interpretation of documentary materials such as personal diaries, oral history, magazines, newspapers and other published and unpublished historical materials. These research methods are not mutually exclusive of course, and can be combined to produce a richer account of changing forms of sexuality within societies.

An example of a large-scale survey is that of Lillian Rubin (1990), who interviewed 1,000 Americans between the ages of 13 and 48 to discover what changes had occurred in sexual behaviour and attitudes since the Kinsey studies. According to her findings, there had been some significant developments. Sexual activity was typically beginning at a younger age than was characteristic of the previous generation and the sexual practices of teenagers tended to be as varied and comprehensive as those of adults. There was still a double standard, but it was not as powerful as it once had been.

One of the most important changes was that women had come to expect, and actively pursue, sexual pleasure in relationships. They were expecting to receive, not only to provide, sexual satisfaction. Rubin found that women were more sexually liberated than previously, but most men in the survey found such female assertiveness difficult to accept, often saying they 'felt inadequate', were afraid they could 'never do anything right' and found it 'impossible to satisfy women these days' (Rubin 1990). This finding seems to contradict all that we have come to expect about gender relations. Men continue to dominate in most spheres and they are, in general, much more violent towards women than the other way round. Such violence is substantially aimed at the control and continuing subordination of women. Yet a number of authors have begun to argue that masculinity is a burden as well as a source of rewards, and if men were to stop using sexuality as a means of control, not only women, but men too would be beneficiaries.

The use of documentary materials to study changing forms of sexuality is well demonstrated in Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters's *Sex and Manners* (2004), a comparative study of shifting gender relations and sexuality in England, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA. Wouters studied books on 'good manners' from the

end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, particularly as these pertained to relationships between men and women and 'courting behaviour' – the opportunities for and limitations on meetings and 'dating' between men and women. Manners books provide advice on how such meetings should be conducted, providing codes of manners on how to meet and behave in relations with 'the opposite sex'.

For instance, in an English publication from 1902, *Etiquette for Women*, the advice given is: 'It is the man's place to pay for what refreshments are had, if the ladies do not insist on paying their share; and if he invited the ladies with him to go in somewhere and have some, then the case is simple enough.' But by the 1980s, the practice of 'going Dutch' – sharing the cost of a date – was well established. One manners book from 1989, reflecting on the old practice of the man always paying for the woman, noted that, 'some still do, but women can't dine endlessly without offering a crust in return' (Wouters 2004: 25–7). This example seems fairly trivial, but in fact it shows how shifting gender relations in the wider society, with more women moving into paid employment and the public sphere more generally (Walby 1990), were also leading to changing behavioural norms between men and women. Wouters's research provides many such examples in relation to sexual behaviour and courtship. By analysing manners books over the course of a century and relating the advice given in these to sociological theories of social change, Wouters argues that the four countries all exhibit a long-term trend away from very formal and rigid codes of manners, towards much more informal codes that allow for a wider range of acceptable courtship behaviour. Hence, those critics of the 'permissiveness' brought about since the 1960s fail to appreciate that such changes are part of a much longer and deeper process of social transformation.

The two studies reported here have many similarities. Both are concerned with changes in gender relations, norms of sexual behaviour alongside private and public attitudes towards sexuality. While Rubin's study tells us something of how people *today* feel about such changes and what impact they are having on contemporary lifestyles, Wouters's analysis of primary documents sets these contemporary findings into historical and comparative perspective. Bringing together the findings from studies using different methods, which also focus on different aspects of changing sexual behaviour, may give sociologists more confidence in their conclusions in this difficult to research area.

Prostitution and 'sex work'

Prostitution

Prostitution can be defined as the granting of sexual favours for monetary gain. The word 'prostitute' began to come into common usage in the late eighteenth century. In the ancient world, most purveyors of sexuality for economic reward were courtesans, concubines (kept mistresses) or slaves. Courtesans and concubines often had a high position in traditional societies. A key aspect of modern prostitution is that women and their clients are generally unknown to one another. Although men may become 'regular customers', the relationship is not initially established on the basis of personal acquaintance. This was not true of most forms of the dispensing of sexual favours for material gain in earlier times. Prostitution is directly connected to the break-up of small-scale communities, the development of large impersonal urban areas and the commercializing of social relations. In small-scale traditional communities, sexual relations were controlled by their very visibility. In newly developed urban areas, more anonymous social connections were easily established.

A United Nations resolution passed in 1951 condemns those who organize prostitution or profit from the activities of

Amsterdam's Red Light District contains many sex clubs, bars and 'prostitution windows' from which sex is sold. In 2006, city officials announced they were shutting down about one-third of the 'windows' in a crackdown on trafficking and pimping in the area.

prostitutes, but does not ban prostitution as such. A total of 53 member states have formally accepted the resolution, although their legislation on prostitution varies widely. In some countries, prostitution itself is illegal. Other countries prohibit only certain types, such as street soliciting or child prostitution. Some national or local governments license officially recognized brothels or sex parlours – such as the 'Eros centres' in Germany or the sex houses in Amsterdam. In October 1999 the Dutch Parliament turned prostitution into an official profession for the estimated 30,000 women who work in the sex industry. All venues where sex is sold can now be regulated, licensed and inspected by local authorities. However, only a few countries license male prostitutes.

Legislation against prostitution rarely punishes clients. Those who purchase sexual services are not arrested or prosecuted, and in court procedures their identities may be kept hidden. There are far fewer studies of clients than of those selling sex, and it is rare for anyone to suggest – as is often stated or implied about prostitutes – that the clients are psychologically disturbed. The imbalance in research surely expresses an uncritical acceptance of orthodox stereotypes of sexuality according to which it is 'normal' for men to actively seek a variety of sexual outlets, while those who cater for these needs are condemned.

Sex work

Today, prostitution is more widely seen by sociologists as just one form of **sex work**. Sex work can be defined as the provision of sexual services in a financial exchange

between consenting adults, though, of course, children (and adults) have historically been – and still are – forced into sex work in both developed and developing countries. Sex workers, like prostitutes, are mostly female, and sex work includes at least all of the following: actors in pornographic films, nude modelling, striptease and lap dancers, live sex show workers, providers of erotic massage, phone sex workers and home-based 'webcam sex' via the Internet, if this involves a financial exchange (Weitzer 2000).

The original 1970s concept of the sex worker aimed to destigmatize the working practices of prostitutes and other women working in the sex industry. Provided that sexual services were exchanged between freely consenting adults, it was argued that such work should be treated like any other type of work and prostitution, in particular, should be decriminalized. Prostitutes around the world today come mainly from poorer social backgrounds, as they did in the past, but they have now been joined by considerable numbers of middle-class women working across the range of sex work described above and many see their work as providing useful and respectable sexual services. As 'Rona', a sex worker with ten years' experience insists:

> Yes, it is a profession – I believe a perfectly respectable profession, and should be viewed as such in the same way as a teacher, accountant or anyone else. I believe that the first step is to obtain recognition for sex workers as legitimate workers in a legitimate industry and profession. . . . Why should the fact that I have chosen to work as a prostitute be considered any different from that of being a nurse, which I once was? There should be no social stigma attached. I work in clean comfortable surroundings, have regular medical check-ups and pay taxes like anyone else. ('Rona' 2000)

The idea of a trade union for sex workers may appear strange, but in the context of ensuring health and safety at work, legal support in disputes over pay and conditions

and access to training or retraining (for those who wish to leave the sex industry), these issues lie at the centre of mainstream trade union activity. Sex workers point out that union collectivization may help to root out exploitation and abuse within the sexual services industry. For example, formed in 2000, the International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW), based in London, sees unionization as the first step towards the professionalization of sex work and in 2002 it became affiliated to the GMB, a large general trade union in the UK. The IUSW campaigns for:

- the decriminalization of all aspects of sex work involving consenting adults;
- the right to form and join professional associations or unions;
- the right to work on the same basis as other independent contractors and employers and to receive the same benefits;
- no taxation without such rights and representation;
- zero tolerance of coercion, violence, sexual abuse, child labour, rape and racism;
- legal support for sex workers who want to sue those who exploit their labour;
- the right to travel across national boundaries;
- clean and safe places to work;
- the right to choose whether to work on our own or cooperatively
- the absolute right to say no;
- access to training – our jobs require very special skills and professional standards;
- access to health clinics where we do not feel stigmatized;
- retraining programmes for sex workers who want to leave the industry;
- an end to social attitudes which stigmatise those who are or have been sex workers. (IUSW: www.iusw.org/start/index.html)

Nevertheless, the concept of sex work remains controversial, as many feminists

actively campaign against the sex industry, seeing it as degrading to women, strongly linked to sexual abuse and drug addiction, and ultimately rooted in women's subordination to men. More recently, though, sex work has been reappraised by some feminists who argue that many, though by no means all, women sex workers earn a good living, enjoy their work and do not fit the stereotype of the poor, sexually abused drug addict forced into prostitution by their circumstances (O'Neill 2000). For these women, sex work provides worthwhile jobs that are relatively well paid. Many sex workers see themselves as independent women who have taken control of their lives, which makes them little different from successful women working in other employment sectors (Chapkis et al. 1997).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Why does prostitution continue to thrive into the twenty-first century? How might functionalist theorists explain its persistence over such a long time period? What would an explanation rooted in Marxism focus on? Could either perspective satisfactorily account for the strongly gendered character of prostitution and expansion of sex work? What would a feminist approach add to our understanding of sex work today?

Explaining prostitution and sex work

Why do prostitution and other forms of sex work still exist? Certainly, prostitution is an enduring phenomenon, which resists the attempts of governments to eliminate it. It is also almost always a matter of women selling sexual favours to men, rather than the reverse – although there are some instances, as in Hamburg, Germany, where 'houses of pleasure' exist to provide male sexual services to women. And of course, boys or men also sell sex to other men.

No single factor can explain the persist-

ence of prostitution or sex work. It might seem that men simply have stronger, or more persistent, sexual needs than women, and therefore require the outlets that the sex industry provides. But this explanation is implausible. Most women seem capable of developing their sexuality in a more intense fashion than men of comparable age. Moreover, if prostitution existed simply to serve sexual needs, there would surely be many male prostitutes catering for women.

One possible conclusion to be drawn is that sex work expresses, and to some extent helps perpetuate, the tendency of men to treat women as objects who can be 'used' for sexual purposes. Prostitution expresses in a particular context the inequalities of power between men and women. Of course, many other elements are also involved. Prostitution offers a means of obtaining sexual satisfaction for people who, because of their physical shortcomings or the existence of restrictive moral codes, cannot find other sexual partners. Prostitutes and sex workers often cater for men who are away from home, desire sexual encounters without commitment or have unusual sexual tastes that other women will not accept. Of course, such a 'negative' conclusion ignores the possibility that many female sex workers, like many of the men who also profit from the sex industry, are active social agents who are adept at selling sexual services to men who need and benefit from them. Certainly, that is the way that some sex workers describe themselves and the services they provide.

The global sex industry

'Sex tourism' exists in several areas of the world, including Thailand and the Philippines. Sex tourism in the Far East has its origins in the provision of prostitutes for American troops during the Korean and Vietnam wars. 'Rest and recreation' centres were built in Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan. Some still remain, particularly in the Philippines,

catering to regular shipments of tourists as well as to the military stationed in the region.

Today, package tours oriented towards prostitution draw men to these areas from Europe, the United States and Japan, often in search of sex with minors – although these tours are illegal in more than 30 countries including the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan and the USA, under laws dealing with the 'extraterritorial accountability' of their citizens. Enforcement is patchy though, and in 2004 a UN report noted that Japan had made no prosecutions under its legislation, whereas the USA had made at least 20 prosecutions for sex tourism (Svensson 2004).

A report published in 1998 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that prostitution and the sex industry in Southeast Asia have taken on the dimensions of a fully fledged commercial sector, having grown rapidly over recent decades. For example, it is estimated that there are up to 2 million female prostitutes in Thailand alone. Cheaper global travel and the large differential in the exchange rate between Asian and international currencies have made sex tourism more affordable and attractive to foreigners. Furthermore, the sex industry is linked to economic hardship. Some desperate families force their own children into prostitution; other young people are unwittingly lured into the sex trade by responding innocently to advertisements for 'entertainers' or 'dancers'. Migration patterns from rural to urban areas are an important factor in the growth of the sex industry, as many women eager to leave their traditional and constraining home towns grasp at any opportunity to do so. Sex tourism has serious implications for the spread of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases and is often associated with violence, criminality, the drug trade and violations of human rights (Lim 1998).

The trafficking of people, mostly women and girls, across the world has become a much more significant issue in recent years. For example, the trafficking of women into Western Europe to become prostitutes and sex workers is expanding rapidly. Although it is impossible to know exactly how many people become victims of human trafficking, the UN Refugee Agency's (2006) best estimate is that between 100,000 and 500,000 people are trafficked into Europe annually. As EU borders expand with the entry of new countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, more transit routes become available for entry into wealthy Western European countries or the new border countries become final destinations themselves for a growing sex industry.

Governments are moving to legislate against trafficking. In the UK, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 made trafficking for prostitution a criminal offence for the first time (extended to trafficking for domestic servitude and forced labour in 2004). Clearly, globalization enables the more rapid movement of people across national boundaries and new patterns of movement are emerging. In relation to sex tourism and trafficking for prostitution, these patterns are related to the huge disparities in wealth across the world's countries and to gendered power relations. Relatively rich Westerners make short trips into developing countries to buy sex from relatively poor people, while relatively powerless Eastern European women are being forced into 'sex work' in Western Europe by organized gangs of, mostly male, people traffickers. The lives of many victims of the global sex industry are very far removed from those of the liberated and empowered sex workers described by 'Rona' above.

Gender

'Sex' is an ambiguous term. It can mean, as in the previous sections, 'sexual activity'. However, it can also refer to the physical characteristics that separate men and women. You might think that being a man or a woman is simply associated with the sex of the physical body we are born with. But, like

many questions of interest to sociologists, the nature of maleness and femaleness is not so easily classified. This section examines the origins of the differences between men and women. Before we go on, though, we need to make an important distinction, between sex and gender.

In general, sociologists use the term 'sex' to refer to the anatomical and physiological differences that define male and female bodies. Gender, by contrast, concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females. Gender is linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity; it is not necessarily a direct product of an individual's biological sex. Some people, for example, feel that they have been born into the wrong bodies and seek to 'put things right' by switching gender part way through life, or following the lifestyles or dress of the other sex. The distinction between sex and gender is a fundamental one, since many differences between males and females are not biological in origin. Contrasting approaches have been taken to explain the formation of gender identities and the social roles based on those identities. The debate is really one about how much learning there is; some scholars allow more prominence than others to social influences in analysing gender differences.

Sociological interpretations of gender differences and inequalities have taken contrasting positions on this question of sex and gender. Three broad approaches will be explored below. First we will look at arguments for a biological basis to behavioural differences between men and women. Next, attention will turn to theories placing central importance on socialization and the learning of gender roles. Finally, we will consider the ideas of scholars who argue that neither gender nor sex have a biological basis, but are both entirely socially constructed.

Gender and biology: natural differences?

How far are differences in the behaviour of women and men the result of sex rather than gender? In other words, how much are they the result of biological differences? As we saw above, some authors hold that aspects of human biology – ranging from hormones to chromosomes to brain size to genetics – are responsible for innate differences in behaviour between men and women. These differences, they claim, can be seen in some form across all cultures, implying that natural factors are responsible for the inequalities between genders which characterize most societies. Such researchers are likely to draw attention to the fact, for example, that in almost all cultures, men rather than women take part in hunting and warfare. Surely, they argue, this indicates that men possess biologically based tendencies towards aggression that women lack?

Many researchers remain unconvinced by this argument. The level of aggressiveness of males, they say, varies widely between different cultures, and women are expected to be more passive or gentle in some cultures than in others (Elshtain 1987). Critics point out that theories of 'natural difference' are often grounded in data on animal behaviour rather than in anthropological or historical evidence about human behaviour, which reveal variation over time and place. Moreover, they add, because a trait is more or less universal, it does not follow that it is biological in origin; there may be cultural factors of a general kind that produce such characteristics. For instance, in the majority of cultures, most women spend a significant part of their lives caring for children and could not readily take part in hunting or war.

Although the hypothesis that biological factors determine behaviour patterns in men and women cannot be dismissed out of hand, nearly a century of research to identify the physiological origins of such an

influence has been unsuccessful. There is no evidence of the mechanisms which would link such biological forces with the complex social behaviour exhibited by human men and women (Connell 1987). Theories that see individuals as complying with some kind of innate predisposition neglect the vital role of social interaction in shaping human behaviour.

Gender socialization

Another route to take in understanding the origins of gender differences is the study of gender socialization, the learning of gender roles with the help of social agencies such as the family and the media. Such an approach makes a distinction between biological sex and social gender – an infant is born with the first and develops the second. Through contact with various agencies of socialization, both primary and secondary, children gradually internalize the social norms and expectations which are seen to correspond with their sex. Gender differences are not biologically determined, they are culturally produced. According to this view, gender inequalities result because men and women are socialized into different roles.

Theories of gender socialization have been favoured by functionalists who see boys and girls as learning 'sex roles' and the male and female identities – masculinity and femininity – which accompany them. They are guided in this process by positive and negative sanctions, socially applied forces which reward or restrain behaviour. For example, a small boy could be positively sanctioned in his behaviour ('What a brave boy you are!'), or be the recipient of negative sanction ('Boys don't play with dolls'). These positive and negative reinforcements aid boys and girls in learning and conforming to expected sex roles. If an individual develops gender practices which do not correspond to his or her biological sex – that is, they are deviant – the explanation is seen to reside in inadequate or irregular socialization. According to this functionalist view,

socializing agencies contribute to the maintenance of social order by overseeing the smooth gender socialization of new generations.

This rigid interpretation of sex roles and socialization has been criticized on a number of fronts. Many writers argue that gender socialization is not an inherently smooth process; different 'agencies' such as the family, schools and peer groups may be at odds with one another. Moreover, socialization theories ignore the ability of individuals to reject, or modify, the social expectations surrounding sex roles. As Connell has argued:

> 'Agencies of socialization' cannot produce mechanical effects in a growing person. What they do is invite the child to participate in social practice on given terms. The invitation may be, and often is, coercive – accompanied by heavy pressure to accept and no mention of an alternative. . . . Yet children do decline, or more exactly start making their own moves on the terrain of gender. They may refuse heterosexuality . . . they may set about blending masculine and feminine elements, for example girls insisting on competitive sport at school. They may start a split in their own lives, for example boys dressing in drag when by themselves. They may construct a fantasy life at odds with their actual practice, which is perhaps the commonest move of all. (1987)

It is important to remember that humans are not passive objects or unquestioning recipients of gender 'programming', as some sociologists have suggested. People are active agents who create and modify roles for themselves. While we should be sceptical of any wholesale adoption of the sex roles approach, many studies have shown that to some degree gender identities are a result of social influences.

Social influences on gender identity flow through many diverse channels; even parents committed to raising their children in a 'non-sexist' way find existing patterns of gender learning difficult to combat (Statham 1986). Studies of parent–child

Gendered learning does not take place simply through formal instruction but also occurs in many everyday activities.

interactions, for example, have shown distinct differences in the treatment of boys and girls even when the parents believe their reactions to both are the same. The toys, picture books and television programmes experienced by young children all tend to emphasize differences between male and female attributes. Although the situation is changing somewhat, male characters generally outnumber females in most children's books, television programmes and films. Male characters tend to play more active, adventurous roles, while females are portrayed as passive, expectant and domestically oriented (Weitzman 1972; Zammuner 1987; Davies 1991). Feminist researchers have demonstrated how cultural and media products marketed to young audiences embody traditional attitudes towards gender and towards the sorts of aims and ambitions girls and boys are expected to have.

Reproductive technologies

For hundreds of years, childbirth and child-rearing dominated the lives of most women. In traditional societies, contraception was ineffective or, in some societies, unknown. As late as the eighteenth century in Europe and the United States, it was common for women to experience as many as 20 pregnancies, often involving miscarriages and infant deaths. In many parts of the developing world today, it is still commonplace for women to have a large number of pregnancies over a lifetime. For example, the total fertility rate in sub-Saharan Africa is 5.6, which is double the global average. When researchers asked what was people's ideal number of children, the average was 4.1 in Kenya and 8.5 in Chad and

Contraceptive prevalence
(percentage)

	Less than 20
	20 – 39
	40 – 59
	60 or over
	no data
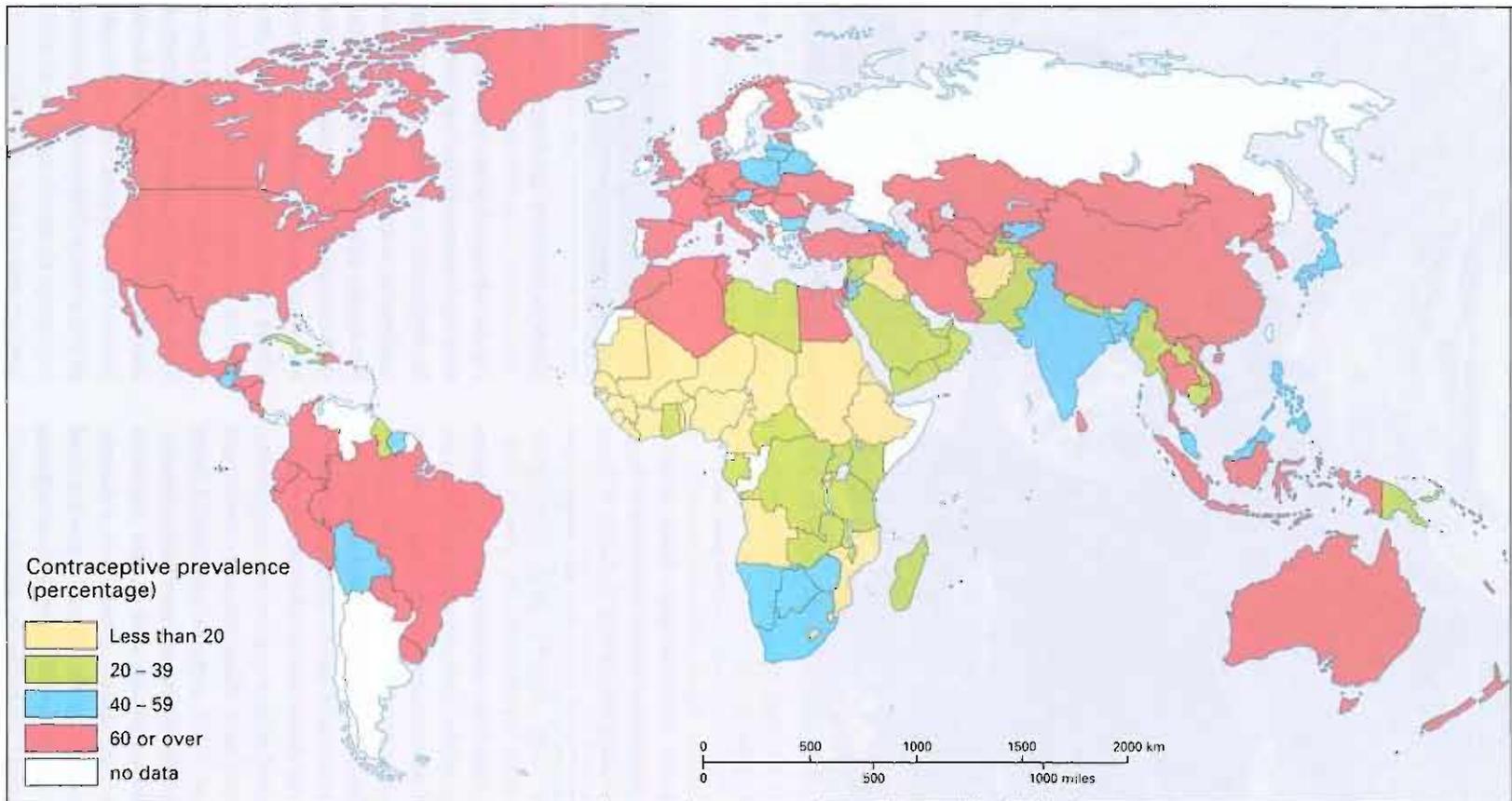
NB: 'Contraceptive prevalence' is the percentage of women of reproductive age (15–49), married or in partnerships, currently using contraception.

Figure 14.5   Global contraceptive prevalence, October 2005 estimates

Source: United Nations Population Division, 2005. Reprinted by permission of the United Nations Population Division.

Niger, with men reporting a higher 'ideal number' than women.

In many parts of the world, improved methods of contraception have changed this situation in a fundamental way. Far from any longer being natural, it is almost unknown in the industrial countries for women to undergo so many pregnancies. Advances in contraceptive technology enable most women and men around the world to control whether and when they choose to have children, though this also depends on social acceptance and whether they are made available. In many African countries, for example, contraceptive prevalence in 2003 (see figure 14.5) was below 20 per cent; a significant factor in the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic in those countries.

)) See chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability', for more discussion of HIV/AIDS as a global issue.

However, contraception is only one example of a reproductive technology. Some other examples of the social shaping of natural processes are described below.

Childbirth

Medical science has not always been involved with the major life transitions from birth to death. The medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth developed slowly, as local physicians and midwives were displaced by paediatric specialists. Today in the industrialized societies, most births occur in a hospital with the help of a specialized medical team, and infant mortality rates are historically low, more than ten times lower than rates in developing countries. However, childbirth is still fraught with danger in many parts of the developing world, where a combination of uneven provision of medical services, a high risk of infection – particularly HIV/AIDS – and very high teenage pregnancy rates make giving birth to new lives a major cause of death for young women as well. Globally, only 10 per cent of all births (13 million per year) are to women under the age of 20, but more than 90 per cent of these births are in the developing world. Hence, complications arising in pregnancy are the leading cause of death in young women aged between 15 and 19 in developing countries (Mayor 2004).

)) Medicalization of the body is discussed in chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability'.

In the past, new parents had to wait until the day of birth to learn the sex of their baby and whether it would be healthy. Today, prenatal tests such as the sonogram (an image of the foetus produced by using ultrasonic waves) and amniocentesis (which draws off some of the amniotic fluid from around the foetus) can be used to discover structural or chromosomal abnormalities before the baby's birth. Such new technology presents couples and modern societies with new ethical and legal decisions. When a disorder is detected, the couple are faced with the decision of whether or not to have the baby, knowing it may be seriously disabled throughout its life.

The development of *assisted reproductive technologies* since the late 1970s – particularly *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) techniques – have enabled many cases of human infertility to be overcome, though success rates decline rapidly for women over the age of 40 who use their own eggs. IVF involves egg cells from a woman being fertilized outside the womb in a fluid medium, before being returned to the womb where pregnancy occurs. The first successful IVF births were known as 'test-tube babies' because of this laboratory fertilization process. IVF, as with pre-natal tests, turns what was previously thought to be a natural fate into a social choice. An individual's biology is no longer the absolute determinant of whether they can have children. Instead, social factors such as income levels and the availability and accessibility of specialist IVF facilities determine whether biological infertility is such an obstacle.
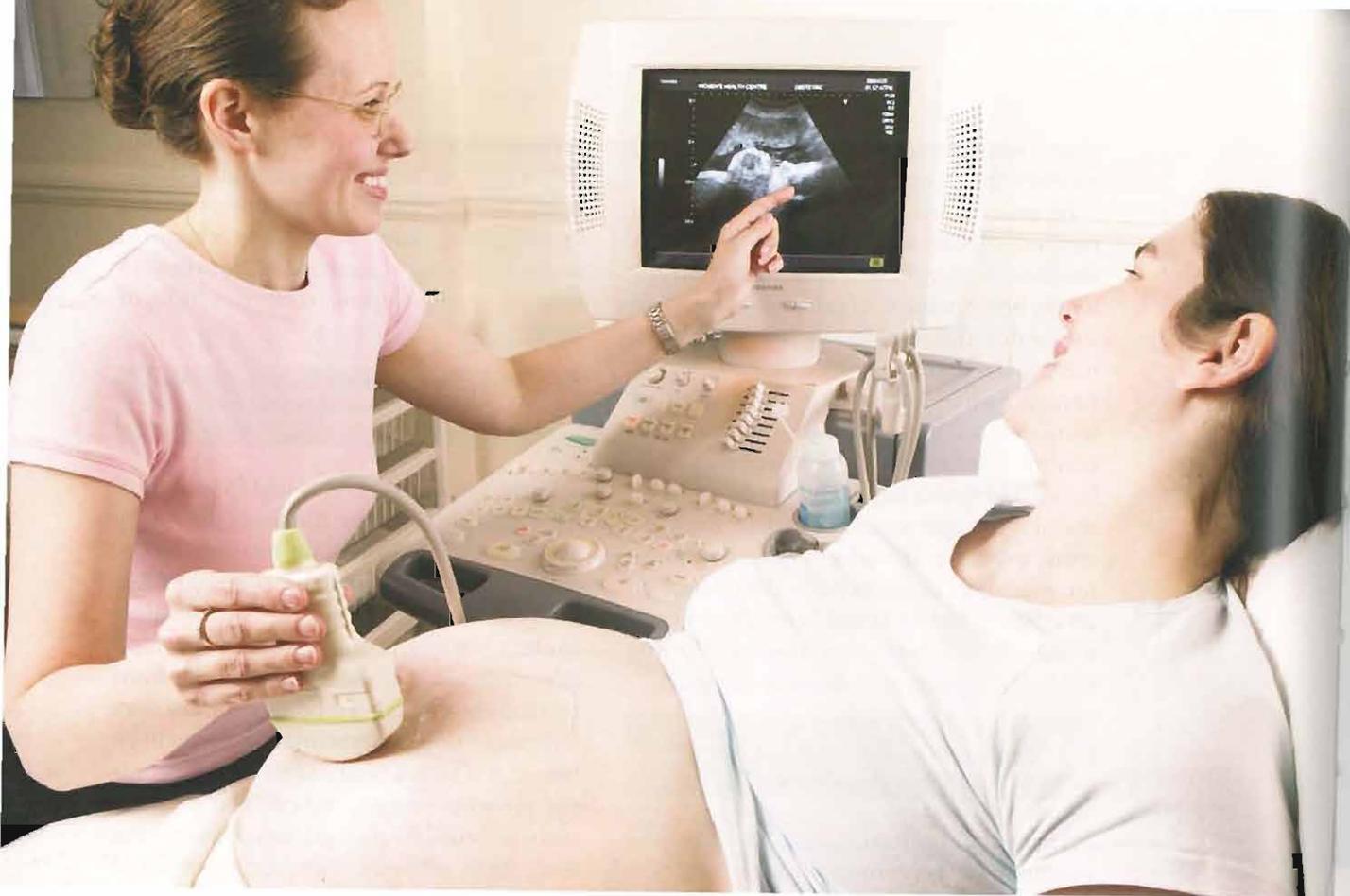
Modern medical technologies have helped to transform the experience of pregnancy and childbirth for women in the developed world.

Genetic engineering: designer babies?

A great deal of scientific endeavour these days is being devoted to the expansion of genetic engineering; that is, intervening in the genetic make-up of the foetus so as to influence its subsequent development. The likely social impact of genetic engineering is starting to provoke debates almost as intense as those that surround the issue of abortion. According to its supporters, genetic engineering will bring us many benefits. It is possible, for example, to identify the genetic factors that make some people vulnerable to certain diseases. Genetic reprogramming will ensure that these illnesses are no longer passed on from generation to generation. It will be possible to 'design' bodies before birth in terms of colour of skin, hair and eyes, weight and so on.

There could be no better example of the mixture of opportunities and problems that the increasing socialization of nature creates for us than genetic engineering. What choices will parents make if they can design their babies, and what limits should be placed on those choices? Genetic engineering is unlikely to be cheap. Will this mean that those who can afford to pay will be able to programme out from their children any traits they see as socially undesirable? What will happen to the children of more deprived groups, who will continue to be born naturally?

Some sociologists have argued that differential access to genetic engineering might lead to the emergence of a 'biological underclass'. Those who do not have the physical advantages that genetic engineering can bring might be subject to prejudice

and discrimination by those who do enjoy these advantages. They might have difficulty finding employment and life or health insurance (Duster 1990).

The abortion debate

Perhaps the most controversial ethical dilemma created by modern reproductive technologies in modern societies is this: under what conditions should abortion be available to women? The abortion debate has become so intense in many countries precisely because it centres on basic ethical issues to which there are no easy solutions. Those who are 'pro-life' believe that abortion is always wrong except in extreme circumstances, because it is equivalent to murder. For them, ethical issues are above all subject to the value that must be placed on human life. Those who are 'pro-choice' argue that the mother's control over her own body – her own right to live a rewarding life – must be the primary consideration.

The debate in the USA has led to numerous episodes of violence; for example, in 2003 an anti-abortion campaigner was executed in Florida following his conviction for the murder of two people, one of them a doctor who performed abortions. Can such an emotionally polarized issue ever be resolved? At least one prominent social and legal theorist, Ronald Dworkin (1993), has suggested that it can. The intense divisions between those who are pro-life and those who are pro-choice, he argues, hide deeper sources of agreement between the two sides, and in this there is a source of hope. At previous periods of history, life was often relatively cheap. In current times, however, we have come to place a high value on the sanctity of human life. Each side agrees with this value, but they interpret it differently, the one emphasizing the interests of the child, the other the interests of the mother. If the two sides can be persuaded that they share a common ethical value, Dworkin suggests, a more constructive dialogue may be possible.

This young Wodaabe man, from the Gerewol in Niger, is taking part in a formal dance. The kohl on his lips and eyes, and his eye-rolling and grinning are thought to give him extra sex appeal to the young women of the Wodaabe.

The social construction of gender and sex

In recent years, socialization and gender role theories have been criticized by a growing number of sociologists. Rather than seeing sex as biologically determined and gender as culturally learned, they argue that we should view both sex and gender as socially constructed products. Not only is gender a purely social creation that lacks a fixed 'essence', but the human body itself is subject to social forces which shape and alter it in various ways. We can give our bodies meanings which challenge what is usually thought of as 'natural'. Individuals can choose to construct and reconstruct their bodies as they please – ranging from exercise, dieting,

There is a gender dimension to everyday social interaction. Even the way people sit demonstrates gendered socialization. It can be quite disturbing, for example, when men and women break the rules.

piercing and personal fashion, to plastic surgery and sex-change operations.

Technology is blurring the boundaries of our physical bodies. Thus, the argument goes, the human body and biology are not 'givens', but are subject to human agency and personal choice within different social contexts.

> For a discussion of the social construction of bodies, see chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability'.

According to such a perspective, writers who focus on gender roles and role learning implicitly accept that there is a biological basis to gender differences. In the socialization approach, a biological distinction between the sexes provides a framework which becomes 'culturally elaborated' in society itself. In contrast to this, some strict social constructionist theorists reject any biological basis for gender differences.

Gender identities emerge, they argue, in relation to perceived sex differences in society and in turn help to shape those differences. For example, a society in which ideas of masculinity are characterized by physical strength and 'tough' attitudes will encourage men to cultivate a specific body image and set of mannerisms. In other words, gender identities and sex differences are inextricably linked within individual human bodies (Connell 1987; Scott and Morgan 1993; Butler 1990)

Masculinities and gender relations

Considering feminists' concern with women's subordination in society, it is perhaps not surprising that most early research on gender concerned itself almost exclusively with women and concepts of femininity. Men and masculinity were regarded as relatively straightforward and

unproblematic. Little effort was made to examine masculinity, the experience of being a man or the formation of male identities. Sociologists were more concerned with understanding men's oppression of women and their role in maintaining patriarchy.

Since the late 1980s, however, greater attention has been devoted to critical studies of men and masculinity. The fundamental changes affecting the role of women and family patterns in industrialized societies have raised questions about the nature of masculinity and its changing role in society. What does it mean to be a man in late modern society? How are the traditional expectations and pressures on men being transformed in a rapidly changing age? Is masculinity in crisis?

In recent years, sociologists have become increasingly interested in the positions and experience of men within the larger order that shapes them. This shift within the sociology of gender and sexuality has led to new emphasis on the study of men and masculinity within the overarching context of gender

relations, the societally patterned interactions between men and women. Sociologists are interested to grasp how male identities are constructed and what impact socially prescribed roles have on men's behaviour.

The gender order

In *Gender and Power* (1987), *The Men and the Boys* (2001) and *Masculinities* (2005), R. W. Connell sets forth one of the most complete theoretical accounts of gender, which has become something of a 'modern classic' (see 'Classic Studies 14.2'). Her approach has been particularly influential in sociology because she integrates the concepts of patriarchy and masculinity into an overarching theory of gender relations. According to Connell, masculinities are a critical part of the gender order and cannot be understood separate from it, or from the femininities which accompany them.

Connell is concerned with how the social power held by men creates and sustains

gender inequality. She stresses that empirical evidence on gender inequality is not simply a 'shapeless heap of data', but reveals the basis of an 'organized field of human practice and social relations' through which women are kept in subordinate positions to men (Connell 1987). In Western capitalist societies, gender relations are still defined by patriarchal power. From the individual to the institutional level, various types of masculinity and femininity are all arranged around a central premise: the dominance of men over women.

According to Connell, gender relations are the product of everyday interactions and practices. The actions and behaviour of average people in their personal lives are directly linked to collective social arrangements in society. These arrangements are continuously reproduced over lifetimes and generations, but are also subject to change.

Connell sets forth three aspects which interact to form a society's gender order – patterns of power relations between masculinities and femininities that are widespread throughout society – namely, labour, power and cathexis (personal/sexual relationships). These three realms are distinct but interrelated parts of society that work together and change in relation to one other. They represent the main sites in which gender relations are constituted and constrained. *Labour* refers to the sexual division of labour both within the home (such as domestic responsibilities and childcare) and in the labour market (issues like occupational segregation and unequal pay). *Power* operates through social relations such as authority, violence and ideology in institutions, the state, the military and domestic life. *Cathexis* concerns dynamics within intimate, emotional and personal relationships, including marriage, sexuality and childrearing.

Gender relations, as they are enacted in these three areas of society, are structured on a societal level in a particular gender order. Connell uses the term gender regime to refer to the play of gender relations in smaller settings, such as a specific institution. Thus, a family, a neighbourhood and a state all have their own gender regimes. (The formation of masculinities in one such gender regime is explored by Máirtín Mac an Ghaill in 'Using your sociological imagination 14.1' below.)

Change in the gender order: crisis tendencies

Although Connell has set forth a clearly organized gender hierarchy, she rejects the view that gender relations are fixed or static. On the contrary, she suggests that they are the outcome of an ongoing process and are therefore open to change and challenge. She sees the gender order in dynamic terms. If sex and gender *are* socially constructed, Connell argues, then people can change their gender orientations. By this she does not necessarily mean that people can switch their sexuality from homosexual to heterosexual and vice versa, although this does occur in some cases, but that people's gender identities and outlooks are constantly being adjusted. Women who once subscribed to 'emphasized femininity' might develop a feminist consciousness, for example. This constant possibility of change makes patterns of gender relations open to disruption and subject to the power of human agency.

While some sociologists suggest that Western society is undergoing a 'gender crisis', Connell suggests that we are simply in the presence of powerful tendencies towards crisis. These crisis tendencies take three forms. First, there is the *crisis of institutionalization*. By this, Connell means that institutions that have traditionally supported men's power – the family and the state – are gradually being undermined. The legitimacy of men's domination over women is being weakened through legislation on divorce, domestic violence and rape, and economic questions such as taxation and pensions. Second, there is a *crisis of sexuality*, in which hegemonic heterosexuality is less dominant than it once was. The growing strength of women's sexuality and gay sexuality put traditional hegemonic masculinity under

Classic Studies 14.2 R. W. Connell on the dynamics of the gender order

The research problem

Why do some people become male and female role models? What characteristics and actions do role models display and how do those characteristics and actions (and not others) come to be widely seen as desirable? R. W. Connell (1987, 2001, 2005) explored such questions in her studies of the 'gender order' in societies. In particular, she developed a theory of the *gender hierarchy*.

Connell's explanation

Connell argues that there are many different expressions of masculinity and femininity. At the level of society, these contrasting versions are ordered in a hierarchy which is oriented around one defining premise – the domination of men over women (figure 14.6). She uses stylized 'ideal types' of masculinities and femininities in her hierarchy.

At the top of the hierarchy is **hegemonic masculinity**, which is dominant over all other masculinities and femininities in society. 'Hegemonic' refers to the concept of hegemony – the social dominance of a certain group, exercised not through brute force, but through a cultural dynamic which extends into private life


and social realms. Thus, the media, education, ideology, even sports and music can all be channels through which hegemony is established. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is associated first and foremost with heterosexuality and marriage, but also with authority, paid work, strength and physical toughness. Examples of men who embody hegemonic masculinity include film stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, rappers like 50 Cent and the entrepreneur Donald Trump.

Although hegemonic masculinity is held up as an ideal form of masculinity, only a few men in society can live up to it. A large number of men, however, still gain advantage from hegemonic masculinity's dominant position in the patriarchal order. Connell refers to this as the 'patriarchal dividend' and to those who benefit from it as embodying **complicit masculinity**.

Existing in a subordinated relationship to hegemonic masculinity are a number of subordinated masculinities and femininities. Among subordinated masculinities, the most important is that of **homosexual masculinity**. In a gender order dominated by hegemonic masculinity, the homosexual is seen as the opposite of the 'real man'; he does not measure up to the hegemonic masculine ideal and often embodies many of the 'cast off' traits of hegemonic masculinity. Homosexual masculinity is stigmatized, and ranks at the bottom of the gender hierarchy for men.

Connell argues that femininities are all formed in positions of subordination to hegemonic masculinity. One form of femininity – **emphasized femininity** – is an important complement to hegemonic masculinity. It is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men and is characterized by 'compliance, nurturance and empathy'. Among young women it is associated with sexual receptivity, while among older women it implies motherhood. Connell refers to Marilyn Monroe as both 'archetype and satirist' of emphasized femininity and stresses that images of emphasized femininity remain highly prevalent in the media, advertising and marketing campaigns.
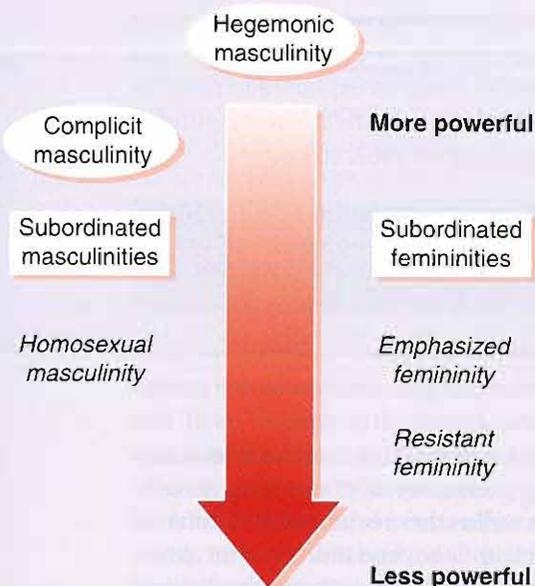
Figure 14.6 The gender hierarchy

Finally, there are subordinated femininities, which reject the version of emphasized femininity outlined above. But on the whole, the overwhelming attention devoted to maintaining emphasized femininity as the conventional norm in society means that other subordinated femininities which resist convention are not given voice. Women who have developed non-subordinated identities and lifestyles include feminists, lesbians, spinsters, midwives, witches, prostitutes and manual workers. The experiences of these resistant femininities, however, are largely 'hidden from history'.

Critical points

Several critics have argued that although hegemonic masculinity appears to be fairly obvious, Connell does not really present a satisfactory account of it. This is because she does not specify what would count as 'counter-hegemonic'. For example, with more men now involved in childcare and parenting, is this part of or a trend against hegemonic masculinity? Unless we know what actions would challenge hegemonic masculinity, how can we know what actions constitute it in the first place? Some social

psychologists also wonder *how* men come to 'embody' complicit masculinity; if they do not live up the hegemonic masculine ideal themselves, what does this failure mean for them psychologically and what do they actually do? In short, 'What is missing is more fine-grain work on what complicity and resistance look like in practice' (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 337). Finally, Connell did not theorize the gender order at the global level, though this was the subject of a later work.

Contemporary significance

Given that Connell's work is relatively recent, sociologists are still working through all of its implications. The early work is notable for its wider focus on men and masculinities as well as women in the field of gender studies. However, so far her ideas have been enormously influential in shaping gender studies and particularly in our understanding of how particular gender regimes are stabilized and, potentially, destabilized. As Connell's ideas show that the gender order is never fixed or static, they have influenced not just sociologists, but also political activists within LGBT social movements.

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pressure. Finally, there is a *crisis of interest formation.* Connell argues that there are new foundations for social interests that contradict the existing gender order. Married women's rights, gay movements and the growth of 'anti-sexist' attitudes among men all pose threats to the current order. Of course, threats to the gender order do not have to be negative for men. More men today are becoming fully involved in childrearing and a minority have enthusiastically embraced the relatively new social role of 'house-husband', as their wives and partners are able to establish careers and bring in a 'family wage'. Similarly, the idea of the 'new man', who self-consciously rejects the older forms of behaviour associated with hegemonic masculinity in favour of a more caring and emotionally open disposition, brings with it the possibility of new types of relationship. Connell argues that such positive

actions of individuals and groups can bring about change in the gender order. The crisis tendencies already in evidence within the existing order could be exploited in order to bring about the eradication of gender inequality (Connell 1987, 2005).

> See chapter 9, 'Families and Intimate Relationships', for a more detailed discussion of changes to gender roles within family life.

More recently, Connell has begun to examine the effects of globalization on the gender order. She argues that gender itself has become globalized. This involves interaction between previously distinct, local gender orders as well as the creation of new arenas of gender relations beyond individual localities.

Connell argues that there are several crucial new arenas of gender relations that play a part in the globalization of gender:

14.1 Education and the formation of masculinities and sexualities

In *The Making of Men* (1994), Máirtín Mac an Ghaill presented the findings from a piece of ethnographic research at a British state secondary school, which explored its 'gender regime' – the way gender relations play out within the confines of the school. Drawing on Connell's work, Mac an Ghaill was interested in how schools actively create a range of masculinities and femininities among students. Although he was particularly curious about the formation of heterosexual masculinities, he also investigated the experiences of a group of gay male students. His findings revealed that the school itself is an institution characterized by gendered and heterosexual patterns.

The prevailing 'regime' encourages the construction of gender relations among students which coincide with the larger gender order – that is, a hierarchy of dominant and subordinate masculinities and femininities could be detected within the confines of the school. Social influences and practices as diverse as disciplinary procedures, subject allocation, teacher–student and student–teacher interactions, and surveillance all contribute to the formation of heterosexual masculinities.

Mac an Ghaill notes four emergent types of masculinity in the school setting. The *macho lads* are a group of white, working-class boys who are defiant of school authority and disdainful of the learning process and student achievers. Mac an Ghaill concludes that the macho lads are undergoing a 'crisis of masculinity', as the manual and unskilled/semi-skilled jobs which they once saw as defining their future identities are no longer available. This leaves the lads in a psychological and practical dilemma about their futures which is difficult for them to comprehend and even harder to resolve.

The second group is made up of *academic achievers*, who see themselves as future professionals. These boys are stereotyped by the 'macho lads' (and teachers) as effeminate, 'dickhead achievers'. The most common route taken by the achievers in handling the vicious stereotyping, according to Mac an Ghaill, is to retain confidence that their hard work and academic credentials will grant them a secure future. This forms the basis of their masculine identities.

The third group, the *new enterprisers*, are boys who gravitate towards subjects in the new vocational curriculum, such as computer science and business studies. Mac an Ghaill sees them as children of the new 'enterprise culture' which was cultivated during the Thatcher years. For these boys, success in A-level exams is relatively useless for their emphasis on the market and their instrumental planning for the future.

The *real Englishmen* make up the final group. They are the most troublesome of the middle-class groups, as they maintain an ambivalent attitude towards academic learning, but see themselves as 'arbiters of culture', superior to anything their teachers can offer. Because they are oriented towards entry into a career, masculinity for the 'real Englishmen' involves the appearance of effortless academic achievement.

In his study of homosexual male students, Mac an Ghaill found that a distinctly heterosexual set of norms and values – based on traditional relationships and nuclear families – is taken for granted in all classroom discussions that touch on gender or sexuality. This leads to difficult 'confusions and contradictions' in the construction of gender and sexual identities for young gay men, who can simultaneously feel ignored and categorized by others.

transnational and multinational corporations, which tend to have a strong gendered division of labour and a masculine management culture; international non-governmental organizations, such as the UN agencies, which are also gendered and mainly run by men; the international media, which again has a strong gender division of labour and disseminates particular understandings of gender through its output; and, lastly, global markets (in capital, commodities, services and labour) which tend to be strongly gender-structured and can increasingly reach into local economies.

To Connell, the globalization of gender has resulted in interaction between local gender orders and the new arenas of gender relations discussed above, so that it is now possible to talk of a 'world gender order'. She argues that globalization provides the context in which we must now think about the lives of men and the construction and enactment of masculinities in the future.

Theories of gender inequality

We have seen that gender is a socially created concept which attributes differing social roles and identities to men and women. Yet gender differences are rarely neutral – in almost all societies, gender is a significant form of social stratification. Gender is a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances faced by individuals and groups, and strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions from the household to the state. Although the roles of men and women vary from culture to culture, there is no known instance of a society in which females are more powerful than males. Men's roles are generally more highly valued and rewarded than women's roles: in almost every culture, women bear the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, while men have traditionally borne responsibility for providing the family livelihood. The prevailing division of labour between the sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal positions in terms of power, prestige and wealth.

Despite the advances that women have made in countries around the world, gender differences continue to serve as the basis for social inequalities. Investigating and accounting for gender inequality has become a central concern of sociologists. Many theoretical perspectives have been advanced to explain men's enduring dominance over women – in the realm of economics, politics, the family and elsewhere. In this section we shall review the main theoretical approaches to explaining the nature of gender inequality at the level of society, leaving our discussion of gender inequality in specific settings and institutions to other chapters of the book.

> Evidence on gender inequality is introduced and discussed in chapter 11, 'Stratification and Social Class', and chapter 13, 'Global Inequality'.

Functionalist approaches

As we saw in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', the functionalist approach sees society as a system of interlinked parts which, when in balance, operate smoothly to produce social solidarity. Thus, functionalist and functionalist-inspired perspectives on gender seek to show that gender differences contribute to social stability and integration. While such views once commanded great support, they have been heavily criticized for neglecting social tensions at the expense of consensus and for promulgating a conservative view of the social world.

Writers who subscribe to the 'natural differences' school of thought tend to argue that the division of labour between men and women is biologically based. Women and men perform those tasks for which they are biologically best suited. Thus, the anthropologist George Murdock saw it as both practical and convenient that women should concentrate on domestic and family responsibilities while men work outside the home. On the

basis of a cross-cultural study of more than 200 societies, Murdock (1949) concluded that the sexual division of labour is present in all cultures. While this is not the result of biological 'programming', it is the most logical basis for the organization of society.

Talcott Parsons, a leading functionalist thinker, concerned himself with the role of the family in industrial societies (Parsons and Bales 1956). He was particularly interested in the socialization of children, and argued that stable, supportive families are the key to successful socialization. In Parsons's view, the family operates most efficiently with a clear-cut sexual division of labour in which females act in *expressive* roles, providing care and security to children and offering them emotional support. Men, on the other hand, should perform *instrumental* roles – namely, being the breadwinner in the family. Because of the stressful nature of this role, women's expressive and nurturing tendencies should also be used to stabilize and comfort men. This complementary division of labour, springing from a biological distinction between the sexes, would ensure the solidarity of the family.

Another functionalist perspective on childrearing was advanced by John Bowlby (1953), who argued that the mother is crucial to the primary socialization of children. If the mother is absent, or if a child is separated from the mother at a young age – a state referred to as maternal deprivation – the child runs a high risk of being inadequately socialized. This can lead to serious social and psychological difficulties later in life, including anti-social and psychopathic tendencies. Bowlby argued that a child's well-being and mental health can be best guaranteed through a close, personal and continuous relationship with its mother. He did concede that an absent mother can be replaced by a 'mother-substitute', but suggested that such a substitute should also be a woman – leaving little doubt about his view that the mothering role is a distinctly female one. Bowlby's maternal deprivation thesis has been used by some to argue that

working mothers are neglectful of their children.

Feminists have sharply criticized claims to a biological basis to the sexual division of labour, arguing that there is nothing natural or inevitable about the allocation of tasks in society. Women are not prevented from pursuing occupations on the basis of any biological features; rather, humans are socialized into roles that are culturally expected of them.

There is a steady stream of evidence to suggest that the maternal deprivation thesis is questionable – studies have shown that children's educational performance and personal development are in fact enhanced when both parents are employed at least part of the time outside the home. Parsons's view on the 'expressive' female has similarly been attacked by feminists and other sociologists who see such views as condoning the domination of women in the home. There is no basis to the belief that the 'expressive' female is necessary for the smooth operation of the family – rather, it is a role which is promoted largely for the convenience of men.

Feminist approaches

The feminist movement has given rise to a large body of theory which attempts to explain gender inequalities and set forth agendas for overcoming those inequalities. Feminist theories in relation to gender inequality contrast markedly with one another. Competing schools of feminism have sought to explain gender inequalities through a variety of deeply embedded social processes, such as sexism, patriarchy and capitalism. We begin by looking at the major strands of feminism in the West during the twentieth century: liberal, socialist (or Marxist) and radical feminism. The distinction between the different strands of feminism has never been clear-cut, although it provides a useful introduction. The tripartite categorization has become less useful in recent decades with the introduction of new forms of feminism that draw upon, and cut

across, the earlier strands (Barker 1997). We will conclude this section with a brief examination of two important newer theories: black and postmodern feminism.

Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism looks for explanations of gender inequalities in social and cultural attitudes. An important early contribution to liberal feminism came from the English philosopher John Stuart Mill in his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which called for legal and political equality between the sexes, including the right to vote. Unlike radical and socialist feminists, whose work we examine below, liberal feminists do not see women's subordination as part of a larger system or structure. Instead, they draw attention to many separate factors which contribute to inequalities between men and women. For example, in recent decades liberal feminists have campaigned against sexism and discrimination against women in the workplace, educational institutions and the media. They tend to focus their energies on establishing and protecting equal opportunities for women through legislation and other democratic means. In the UK, legal advances such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) were actively supported by liberal feminists, who argued that enshrining equality in law is important to eliminating discrimination against women. Liberal feminists seek to work through the existing system to bring about reforms in a gradual way. In this respect, they are more moderate in their aims and methods than many radical and socialist feminists, who call for an overthrow of the existing system.

While liberal feminists have contributed greatly to the advancement of women over the past century, critics charge that they are unsuccessful in dealing with the root causes of gender inequality and do not acknowledge the systemic nature of women's oppression in society. By focusing on the independent deprivations which women suffer – sexism, discrimination, the 'glass ceiling', unequal pay – liberal feminists draw only a partial picture of gender inequality. Radical feminists accuse liberal feminists of encouraging women to accept an unequal society and its competitive character.

Socialist and Marxist feminism

Socialist feminism developed from Marx's conflict theory, although Marx himself had little to say about gender inequality. It has been critical of liberal feminism for its perceived inability to see that there are powerful interests in society hostile to equality for women (Bryson 1993). Socialist feminists have sought to defeat both patriarchy and capitalism (Mitchell 1966). It was Marx's friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels who did more than Marx to provide an account of gender equality from a Marxist perspective.

Engels argued that under capitalism, material and economic factors underlay women's subservience to men, because patriarchy (like class oppression) has its roots in private property. Engels argued that capitalism intensifies patriarchy – men's domination over women – by concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a small number of men. Capitalism intensifies patriarchy more than earlier social systems because it creates enormous wealth compared to previous eras which confers power on men as wage-earners as well as possessors and inheritors of property. Second, for the capitalist economy to succeed, it must define people – in particular women – as consumers, persuading them that their needs will only be met through ever-increasing consumption of goods and products. Last, capitalism relies on women to labour for free in the home, caring and cleaning. To Engels, capitalism exploited men by paying low wages and women by paying no wages.

> Payment for housework is an important component of many feminists' belief, and is discussed further in chapter 20, 'Work and Economic Life'.

Socialist feminists have argued that the reformist goals of liberal feminism are inad-

equate. They have called for the restructuring of the family, the end of 'domestic slavery' and the introduction of some collective means of carrying out childrearing, caring and household maintenance. Following Marx, many argued that these ends would be achieved through a socialist revolution, which would produce true equality under a state-centred economy designed to meet the needs of all.

Radical feminism

At the heart of radical feminism is the belief that men are responsible for and benefit from the exploitation of women. The analysis of patriarchy – the systematic domination of females by males – is of central concern to this branch of feminism. Patriarchy is viewed as a universal phenomenon that has existed across time and cultures. Radical feminists often concentrate on the family as one of the primary sources of women's oppression in society. They argue that men exploit women by relying on the free domestic labour that women provide in the home. As a group, men also deny women access to positions of power and influence in society.

Radical feminists differ in their interpretations of the basis of patriarchy, but most agree that it involves the appropriation of women's bodies and sexuality in some form. Shulamith Firestone (1971), an early radical feminist writer, argues that men control women's roles in reproduction and childrearing. Because women are biologically able to give birth to children, they become dependent materially on men for protection and livelihood. This 'biological inequality' is socially organized in the nuclear family. Firestone speaks of a 'sex class' to describe women's social position and argues that women can be emancipated only through the abolition of the family and the power relations which characterize it.

Other radical feminists point to male violence against women as central to male supremacy. According to such a view, domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment are all part of the systematic oppression of women, rather than isolated cases with their own psychological or criminal roots. Even interactions in daily life – such as non-verbal communication, patterns of listening and interrupting, and women's sense of comfort in public – contribute to gender inequality. Moreover, the argument goes, popular conceptions of beauty and sexuality are imposed by men on women in order to produce a certain type of femininity. For example, social and cultural norms that emphasize a slim body and a caring, nurturing attitude towards men help to perpetuate women's subordination. The 'objectification' of women through the media, fashion and advertising turns women into sexual objects whose main role is to please and entertain men. Radical feminists do not see any strong evidence that women can be liberated from sexual oppression through reforms or gradual change. Because patriarchy is a systemic phenomenon, they argue, gender equality can only be attained by overthrowing the patriarchal order.

The use of patriarchy as a concept for explaining gender inequality has been popular with many feminist theorists. In asserting that 'the personal is political', radical feminists have drawn widespread attention to the many linked dimensions of women's oppression. Their emphasis on male violence and the objectification of women has brought these issues into the heart of mainstream debates about women's subordination.

Many objections can be raised, however, to radical feminist views. The main one, perhaps, is that the concept of patriarchy as it has been used is inadequate as a general explanation for women's oppression. Radical feminists have tended to claim that patriarchy has existed throughout history and across cultures – that it is a universal phenomenon. Critics argue, however, that such a conception of patriarchy does not leave room for historical or cultural variations. It also ignores the important influence that race, class or ethnicity may have on the nature of women's subordination. In other words, it is not possible to see patriarchy as a

14.2 Theorizing patriarchy

The idea of patriarchy has been central to many feminist interpretations of gender inequality. But as an analytical tool, it has also been criticized for failing to explain the changes to and diversity in gender inequalities. Surely, critics argue, we cannot speak of one uniform and unchanging system of oppression for all of history? Sylvia Walby is one theorist who believes that the concept of patriarchy is essential to any analysis of gender inequality. But she agrees that many criticisms of it are valid. In *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), Walby presents a way of understanding patriarchy that is more flexible than its predecessors. It allows room for change over historical time, and for consideration of ethnic and class differences.

For Walby, patriarchy is 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (1990: 20). She sees patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems which interact in different ways – sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in tension – depending on historical conditions. Capitalism, she argues, has generally benefited from patriarchy through the *sexual division of labour*. But at other times, capitalism and patriarchy have been at odds with one another. For example, in wartime, when women have entered the labour market in great numbers, the interests of capitalism and patriarchy have not been aligned.

Walby identifies six structures through which patriarchy operates. She recognizes that a weakness of early feminist theory was the tendency to focus on one 'essential' cause of women's oppression, such as male violence or women's role in reproduction. Because Walby is concerned with the depth and interconnectedness of gender inequality; she sees patriarchy as composed of six structures that are independent, but interact with one another.

1 *Production relations in the household.* Women's unpaid domestic labour, such as housework and childcare, is expropriated by her husband (or cohabitee).
2 *Paid work.* Women in the labour market are excluded from certain types of work,

receive lower pay, and are segregated in less skilled jobs.
3 *The patriarchal state.* In its policies and priorities, the state has a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests.
4 *Male violence.* Although male violence is often seen as composed of individualistic acts, it is patterned and systematic. Women routinely experience this violence, and are affected by it in standard ways. The state effectively condones the violence with its refusal to intervene, except in exceptional cases.
5 *Patriarchal relations in sexuality.* This is manifested in 'compulsory heterosexuality' and in the sexual double standard between men and women, in which different 'rules' for sexual behaviour apply.
6 *Patriarchal cultural institutions.* A variety of institutions and practices – including media, religion and education – produce representations of women 'within a patriarchal gaze'. These representations influence women's identities and prescribe acceptable standards of behaviour and action.

Walby distinguishes two distinct forms of patriarchy. *Private patriarchy* is domination of women which occurs within the household at the hands of an individual patriarch. It is an exclusionary strategy, because women are essentially prevented from taking part in public life. *Public patriarchy*, on the other hand, is more collective in form. Women are involved in public realms, such as politics and the labour market, but remain segregated from wealth, power and status.

Walby contends that, at least in Britain, there has been a shift in patriarchy – both in degree and form – from the Victorian era to the present day. She notes that the narrowing of the wage gap and the gains in women's education demonstrate a shift in the degree of patriarchy, but do not signal its defeat. If at one time women's oppression was found chiefly in the home, it is now located throughout society as a whole – women are now segregated and subordinated in all areas of the public realm. In other words, patriarchy has shifted in form from the private to the public realm. As Walby quips: 'Liberated from the home, women now have the whole of society in which to be exploited.'

universal phenomenon; doing so risks biological reductionism – attributing all the complexities of gender inequality to a simple distinction between men and women.

Sylvia Walby has advanced an important reconceptualization of patriarchy (see 'Using your sociological imagination 14.2'). She argues that the notion of patriarchy remains a valuable and useful explanatory tool, providing that it is used in certain ways.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Taking each of Walby's six 'structures of patriarchy' in turn ('Using your sociological imagination 14.2'), what evidence is there of a shift towards public forms of patriarchy? Has this shift intensified the subordination of women within society? What evidence is there that the movement of women into the public sphere has actually been largely *beneficial* for the majority of women?

Black feminism

Do the versions of feminism outlined above apply equally to the experiences of both white and non-white women? Many black feminists, and feminists from developing countries, claim they do not. They argue that ethnic divisions among women are not considered by the main feminist schools of thought, which are oriented to the dilemmas of white, predominantly middle-class women living in industrialized societies. It is not valid, they claim, to generalize theories about women's subordination as a whole from the experience of a specific group of women. Moreover, the very idea that there is a 'unified' form of gender oppression that is experienced equally by all women is problematic.

Dissatisfaction with existing forms of feminism has led to the emergence of a strand of thought which concentrates on the particular problems facing black women. In the foreword to her personal memoirs, American black feminist bell hooks (1997; her name is always written in lower-case letters) argues:

Many feminist thinkers writing and talking about girlhood right now like to suggest that black girls have better self-esteem than their white counterparts. The measurement of this difference is often that black girls are more assertive, speak more, appear more confident. Yet in traditional southern-based black life, it was and is expected of girls to be articulate, to hold ourselves with dignity. Our parents and teachers were always urging us to stand up right and speak clearly. These traits were meant to uplift the race. They were not necessarily traits associated with building female self-esteem. An outspoken girl might still feel that she was worthless because her skin was not light enough or her hair the right texture. These are the variables that white researchers often do not consider when they measure the self-esteem of black females with a yardstick that was designed based on values emerging from white experience.

Black feminist writings tend to emphasize history – aspects of the past which inform the current problems facing black women. The writings of American black feminists emphasize the influence of the powerful legacy of slavery, segregation and the civil rights movement on gender inequalities in the black community. They point out that early black suffragettes supported the campaign for women's rights, but realized that the question of race could not be ignored: black women were discriminated against on the basis of their race and gender. In recent years, black women have not been central to the women's liberation movement in part because 'womanhood' dominated their identities much less than concepts of race did.

hooks has argued that explanatory frameworks favoured by white feminists – for example, the view of the family as a mainstay of patriarchy – may not be applicable in black communities, where the family represents a main point of solidarity against racism. In other words, the oppression of black women may be found in different locations compared with that of white women.

Black feminists contend, therefore, that any theory of gender equality which does

Can the concept of patriarchy adequately explain the diverse experiences of women across social classes and ethnic groups, for instance in the work environment?

not take racism into account cannot be expected to explain black women's oppression adequately. Class dimensions form another factor that cannot be neglected in the case of many black women. Some black feminists have held that the strength of black feminist theory is its focus on the interplay between race, class and gender concerns. Black women are multiply disadvantaged, they argue, on the basis of their colour, their sex and their class position. When these three factors interact, they reinforce and intensify one another (Brewer 1993).

Postmodern feminism

Like black feminism, postmodern feminism challenges the idea that there is a unitary basis of identity and experience shared by all women. This strand of feminism draws on the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism

in the arts, architecture, philosophy and economics. Some of the roots of postmodern feminism are found in the work of Continental theorists like Derrida (1978, 1981), Lacan (1995) and de Beauvoir (1949). Postmodern feminists reject the claim that there is a grand theory that can explain the position of women in society, or that there is any single, universal essence or category of 'woman'. Consequently, these feminists reject the accounts given by others to explain gender inequality – such as patriarchy, race or class – as 'essentialist' (Beasley 1999).

> Postmodernist approaches in sociology were introduced in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives in Sociology'.

Instead, postmodernism encourages the acceptances of many different standpoints as equally valid. Rather than there existing

an essential core to womanhood, there are many individuals and groups, all of whom have very different experiences (heterosexuals, lesbians, black women, working-class women, etc.). The 'otherness' of different groups and individuals is celebrated in all its diverse forms. Emphasis on the positive side of 'otherness' is a major theme in postmodern feminism, and symbolizes plurality, diversity, difference and openness: there are many truths, roles and constructions of reality. Hence, the recognition of difference (of sexuality, age and race, for example) is central to postmodern feminism.

As well as the recognition of difference between groups and individuals, postmodern feminists have stressed the importance of 'deconstruction'. In particular, they have sought to deconstruct male language and a masculine view of the world. In its place, postmodern feminists have attempted to create fluid, open terms and language which more closely reflect women's experiences. For many postmodern feminists, men see the world in terms of pairs or binary distinctions ('good versus bad', 'right versus wrong', 'beautiful versus ugly', for example). Men, they argue, have cast the male as normal, and female as a deviation from it. The founder of modern psychiatry Sigmund Freud, for example, saw women as men who lacked a penis and argued that they envied males for possessing one. In this masculine worldview, the female is always cast in the role of the 'other'. Deconstruction involves attacking binary concepts and recasting their opposites in a new and positive manner.

> Women's movements are discussed in chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Postmodern feminism is said to have the most difficult relationship with the previous strands of feminism discussed above (Carrington 1995, 1998). This is largely because of its belief that many feminists may be misled in assuming that it is possible to provide overarching explanations for

women's oppression and to find steps towards its resolution.

Women's movements

The influence of feminist ideas and women's movements has been profound in Western societies, but increasingly, such movements are challenging gender inequality in other areas of the world. Feminism is not merely an academic exercise, nor is it restricted to Western Europe and North America. In today's increasingly globalized world, there is a good chance that those who become active in the British women's movement will come into contact with women pursuing other feminist struggles overseas.

> Freud's views on gender socialization are debated in chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'.

Although participants in women's movements have, for many years, cultivated ties to activists in other countries, the number and importance of such contacts has increased with globalization. A prime forum for the establishment of cross-national contacts has been the United Nation's Conference on Women, held four times since 1975 with a fifth conference to be held before 2010. Approximately 50,000 people – of whom more than two-thirds were women – attended the most recent conference, held in Beijing, China, in 1995. Delegates from 181 nations attended, along with representatives from thousands of non-governmental organizations. One attendee, Mallika Dutt, wrote in the journal *Feminist Studies*: 'For most women from the United States, Beijing was an eye-opening, humbling, and transformative experience. US women were startled by the sophisticated analysis and well-organized and powerful voices of women from other parts of the world' (Dutt 1996).

The Platform for Action finally agreed to by the conference participants called on the

countries of the world to address such issues as:

- the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women;
- violence against women;
- the effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women;
- inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making;
- stereotyping of women;
- gender inequalities in the management of natural resources;
- persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

The 1995 conference heard that in China, for example, women are working to secure equal rights, employment, a role in production and participation in politics; and that South African women played a major role in the fight against apartheid and are now working to improve conditions for the poorest groups of people in the country. Peruvian activists told delegates that they have been working for decades to create more opportunities for women to participate in public life; and in Russia, women's protest was responsible for blocking the passage of legislation that encouraged women to stay home and perform 'socially necessary labour' (Basu 1995). According to Dutt, having heard of many such campaigns across the world, conference participants left Beijing with a 'sense of global solidarity, pride, and affirmation' (1996).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? What does such a label mean in the twenty-first century? Given the very different social situations of women in the developed and developing countries, how realistic is the idea of a global feminism?

Gender and globalization

In this chapter, most of our discussion has focused on notions of gender within Western industrialized societies. We have seen how the women's movement has given rise to a powerful body of sociological theory to make sense of persistent gender inequalities and to advance agendas for overcoming them. We have also seen how the changing gender order is beginning to transform the dominant form of masculinity, bringing with it new men's organizations and campaigning groups.

In a global age, women's movements are forging international networks and a more global orientation in order to remain effective, though an obstacle to this lies in the different material interests of women in very different national situations. What feminism means to people differs across the world. In parts of the developing world, feminism means working to alleviate absolute poverty and to change traditional male attitudes, which favour large families and dislike contraception, while in the developed countries, feminism means continuing campaigns for equality in employment, adequate childcare provision and the ending of male violence towards women. Bringing together such diverse interests will be a key issue for a twenty-first century global feminism.

Summary points

1. While there is a biological component in human sexuality, most sexual *behaviour* seems to be learned rather than innate. Sexual practices vary widely between and within cultures. In the West, Christianity has been important in shaping sexual attitudes. In societies with rigid sexual codes, the gulf between norms and actual practice can be large, as studies of sexual behaviour have shown. In the West, repressive attitudes to sexuality gave way to a more permissive outlook in the 1960s, the effects of which are still obvious today.

2. Most people in the world are heterosexual, but there are many minority sexual tastes and inclinations. Homosexuality seems to exist in all cultures and in recent years attitudes towards homosexuals have become more relaxed. In some countries, laws have been passed which recognize homosexual unions and grant gay couples the same rights as married people.

3. Sociologists distinguish between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female bodies, while gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between men and women. There is no conclusive evidence to suggest a biological basis to gender differences.

4. Gender socialization refers to the learning of gender roles with the help of agencies such as the family, schools and the media. Gender socialization begins as soon as an infant is born; children learn and internalize the norms and expectations that correspond to their biological sex. They therefore adopt 'sex roles' and the male and female identities (masculinity and femininity) that accompany them.

5. Some sociologists argue that sex and gender are *both* socially constructed, and can be shaped and altered in various ways. Not only does gender lack a fixed 'essence', but the human body can also be changed through social influences and technological interventions.

6. Gender inequality refers to the differences in status, power and prestige enjoyed by women and men in various contexts. In explaining gender inequality, functionalists emphasized that gender differences and the sexual division of labour contribute to social stability and integration. Feminist approaches reject the idea that gender inequality is somehow 'natural'. Liberal feminists have explained gender inequality in terms of social and cultural attitudes, such as sexism and discrimination. Radical feminists argue that men are responsible for the exploitation of women through patriarchy – the systematic domination of females by males. Black feminists have seen factors such as class and ethnicity, in addition to gender, as essential for understanding the oppression experienced by non-white women.

7. Gender relations refer to societally patterned interactions between men and women in society. Some sociologists have argued that a gender order exists in which expressions of masculinity and femininity are organized in a hierarchy that promotes the domination of men over women.

8. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the nature of masculinity. Some argue that wide economic and social transformations are provoking a crisis of masculinity in which men's traditional roles are being eroded.

Further reading

A good introduction to the issues around sexualities is Joe Bristow's *Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2006), the second edition of which brings debates right up to date. A similarly reliable introduction to the study of gender in sociology is R. W. Connell's *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

If you decide to pursue these themes further, then two more challenging books are Jeffrey Weeks, Janet Holland and Matthew Waites's edited volume, *Sexualities and Society: A Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), which contains many interesting chapters, and Chris Beasley's *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London: Sage, 2005), which provides a good overview of some challenging theories.

Amy S. Wharton's *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) looks at gender through individual, interactional and institutional perspectives. A very good review of the masculinities field is Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill's *Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research and Social Practice* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2007).

Finally, anyone looking for a reference work in these areas could consult Jane Pilcher and Amanda Whelehan's *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), which contains exactly what it says.

Internet links

Intute: UK academic social science gateway for gender and sexuality:
www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/
cgi-bin/browse.pl?id=120918&gateway=%

The Women's Library – has lots of electronic and other resources:
www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary/

Queer Resource Directory – a gateway to many resources:
www.qrd.org/qrd/

Eldis – gender issues in developing countries:
www.eldis.org/gender/

Voice of the Shuttle – many gender and sexuality studies resources:
http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2711

A BBC debate on same-sex marriage:
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/ethics/
samesexmarriage/

ILGA –International Lesbian and Gay Association:
www.ilga.org/