

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sexuality

Sexuality is generally taken to refer to the social experience and expression of physical bodily desires, real or imagined, by or for others or for oneself. It encompasses erotic desires, identities and practices. Seemingly one of the most private, intimate aspects of our lives, sociologists have argued that sexuality is fundamentally social and political. This is because sexuality is experienced and expressed within relations of power and exchange and what we think of as sexual varies historically and culturally as well as in different social contexts. Sociologists have therefore argued that no human sexual behaviour or practice can be divorced from the social and political circumstances in which it takes place, and the social relations within which it is embedded. This means that even individual sex acts (such as masturbation or other forms of auto-eroticism) are social acts because the way in which we think about and make sense of them is shaped by a range of social values, attitudes, norms and sanctions. Yet sexuality remains something of a neglected topic in sociology when compared to say social class or the mass media, brought onto the sociological agenda only relatively recently. Largely as a result of the contribution of feminist sociologists and political activists sexuality has now begun to emerge as a legitimate focus of sociological concern. Indeed, that New Right movements in many Western societies have mobilised considerable political energies through their emphasis on the sanctity of the family, hostility to gay and lesbian sexuality and to 'sexual deviance' of various kinds is, as Jeff Weeks (1991, p. 12) has noted, something of a 'back-handed compliment to the success of feminism'.

Sexuality has been one of the main concerns of feminist theory and politics not least because feminists regard men's control of women's sexuality as one of the key mechanisms through which patriarchy is maintained. Feminists have drawn attention to the social control of women's sexuality through religious, state and medical regulatory practices. In particular, feminists have emphasised the role of sexuality in reinforcing patriarchal power relations, highlighting issues such as pornography, sexual violence, clitoridectomy, prostitution and 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980) – the social compulsion to be heterosexual. Feminists have also made a significant contribution to theorising sexuality and the sexual body. They have also highlighted the relative neglect of issues of sexual identity in the social model of disability (Lloyd, 2001). Many have argued that the so-called 'sexual revolution' has merely been a means of increasing and legitimating a male right of sexual access to women. Others have highlighted, however, the ways in which sexuality can be a means of challenging

and resisting women's oppression. Feminist contributions have also drawn attention to the ways in which so-called scientific perspectives (including those developed by social scientists) have served to perpetuate women's sexual oppression.

Broadly speaking, social scientific approaches have tended to conceptualise sexuality in one of two ways: as either a biological or psychological essence and therefore as pre-social, or as a social construct – a product of the meanings attributed to certain forms of social and physical interaction. Both approaches are premised on the conviction that sexuality has a biological, psychological or social essence; that is, that sexuality constitutes a relatively stable aspect of our biology, psyche or social identity. More recently, and particularly since the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralist ideas, sexuality has come to be regarded as a 'performative' aspect of identity devoid of biological or social essence, but rather constantly enacted and negotiated within the context of power relations and language.

Essentialist perspectives on sexuality

Essentialist perspectives on sexuality are based on the view that sexuality is a biological or psychological essence. Until relatively recently, they have tended to dominate social scientific, as well as legal, moral, religious and medical, discourse on sexuality and sexual relations. A pre-social or essentialist theory of sexuality is grounded in four basic assumptions. These are that sexuality:

- is a basic human drive or force that exists prior to social life;
- is determined by the biological or psychological make-up of human beings;
- resides or exists within the human body; and
- functions throughout our lives essentially as a 'property' of the individual.

From this perspective, human beings are deemed to have a fixed, stable and biologically or psychologically determined sexual identity. It has subsequently become enshrined in five basic assumptions underpinning the legal definition of sexual intercourse in most Western societies:

- sex is natural;
- what is natural is heterosexual;
- genital sex is primary and determining;
- 'true' sexual intercourse is phallocentric; and
- sex is something that ideally takes place within marriage, or at least in a long-term relationship.

Such positivist approaches take for granted the social classification of certain kinds of behaviour as sexual, and within that category certain forms as natural and normal, while others are seen as unnatural or deviant. The concern has often been to explain why sexually deviant behaviour occurs. Anti-positivist or social constructionist approaches (that we consider below) are concerned by contrast to illuminate the socio-historical processes through which certain kinds of sexuality come to be constructed (as normal and natural) and to explore the power relations involved.

In the twentieth century, at least in Western societies, psychoanalytic theories of sexuality gradually became more influential than biological ones. Associated most notably with the work of Sigmund Freud, the conception of sexuality as a basic human drive came to underpin the development, in the early twentieth century, of sexology – the ‘science’ of sex. In a simplified form, psychoanalytic approaches emphasise that adult identity, including sexuality, is largely determined by childhood experience. Thus, what are seen as abnormal forms of sexual behaviour are thought to be the result of experiences in early childhood, or of arrested libidinal development. Thus, lesbianism is characterised in terms of ‘mother fixation’, and gay men are seen as coming from homes in which the mother was a strong influence whilst the father was a submissive or absent figure. Many aspects of these theories have a strong ‘common-sense’ appeal, and are reflected in political debates and social policies concerning, for instance, single parenthood or fostering and adoption by gay and lesbian couples.

Sociologists have made a number of critical points about biological and psychoanalytic theories of sexuality. First, the extent to which there is a biological basis to sexuality remains open to debate. Second, research by social psychologists has found no common factor in the upbringing of homosexuals different from that of heterosexuals, nor any consistent personality differences between the two groups. Third, positivist approaches tend to assume that adult sexuality is fixed and stable, and easily categorised: that people are either homosexual or heterosexual (or bisexual).

Sexology evolved as a body of specialist knowledge collated and disseminated by ‘experts’ such as Havelock Ellis and Alfred Kinsey, as well as William Masters and Virginia Johnson who proclaimed themselves to be devoted to establishing scientific proof of what is normal and natural in terms of sexual identity and behaviour. Though, on the one hand, it could be argued that sexology was potentially a radical social movement that freed sexuality from its close association with religious and moral doctrine, focusing instead on the ‘scientific’ study of sexuality (religious moralism and authoritarian codes were deemed to be dissolved in the light of scientific reason), on the other hand, sexology lent scientific credibility to essentialist and, feminists have argued, highly patriarchal, definitions of ‘normal’ sexuality. ‘Normal’ sexuality came to be defined as heterosexual (penetrative), monogamous and procreative (a development that had important legal implications). Sexology tended to be highly gendered, and defined women largely as sexually passive and men as naturally sexually active, with a high sex drive. Feminists have argued that this ‘scientific’ insight served to reinforce and perpetuate a sexual double standard between men and women.

During the decades after the First World War in Britain, sex and the nature of male and female sexual desire was being opened up to scientific scrutiny by doctors, sexologists, psychologists and members of other, relatively new professions, such as psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Their ideas were also being popularised through the publication of marriage manuals and advice literature by a number of authors, of whom perhaps the most influential was Marie Stopes. Her most famous book *Married Love* was first published in 1918 and by 1930 has been through eighteen editions (seven in its first year), sold 690,000 copies and had been translated into ten languages. The book’s successors included *Wise Parenthood*, *Radiant Motherhood* and *Enduring Passions*.

Stopes was unequivocal in her message that both men and women should marry as early as possible. She painted a highly idealised picture of lifelong sexually satisfying unions between loving partners – a goal which, she believed, was achievable by every ‘normal’ person. While the idealisation of marriage was not in itself new, Stopes’s emphasis on the importance of sexual satisfaction not only for men but also for women, and on mutual pleasure and marital harmony, was something of a revelation in the public imagination. It has been argued by feminists such as Susan Kingsley Kent (1993) that the advice given by Stopes and others in the inter-war years marks a shift in gender relations, towards an unprecedented emphasis on mutual sexual pleasure for men and women. Where her advice is particularly problematic in feminist terms is in Stopes’s insistence that sexual satisfaction was normal, beneficial and indeed essential for married men and women, while at the same time denying its benefits to single people. Yet it is also clear why she adopted this position. Given that her principal object was to promote birth control she had to protect herself against accusations (from members of the Church for instance) that her work was licensing immorality and vice. As June Rose (1992) notes, *Married Love* would surely have been banned if there had been any explicit suggestion that single people might benefit from its contents. That sex outside of marriage was so inherently problematic for Stopes illustrates both the hegemonic position marriage occupied in the early part of the twentieth century, as well as the strain this institution was under. However, it was not until the pill was made widely available and acts decriminalising abortion and homosexuality were passed in the late 1960s that the connections between sex and marriage began to lose their hegemonic grip (see Chapter 5). Yet even today, as the popularity of TV shows such as *Men Behaving Badly* in the UK, and the best-selling novel and film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* testify, the sexual relationships of single men and women are still seen as problematic set against an ever more illusory happily married norm.

Margaret Jackson (1987) has emphasised that the development of sexology meant that those aspects of female sexuality and heterosexuality that feminists viewed as social and political were reaffirmed as fundamentally natural, and by constructing a ‘scientific’ model on that basis, sexuality was effectively removed from the political arena. Hence, by consigning sexuality to the sphere of the natural, the exclusive preserve of the (largely male) scientist, sexologists ‘helped to protect it from feminist challenge’ (p. 56). Jackson argues that a scientific model of sexuality has the effect of universalising male sexual supremacy, so that:

Male sexuality has been universalized and now serves as the model of *human* sexuality. Furthermore, by equating human sexual desire with a coital imperative, i.e. a biological drive to copulate, ‘sex’ is ultimately reduced to a reproductive function, with the obvious implication that the only really ‘natural’ form of sexual relationship is heterosexual.

(Jackson, 1987, p. 73)

As she goes on to note, the word ‘impotent’ means powerless, and carries the implication that a man who is unable to penetrate a woman is also unable to exercise power over her; his penis is (or should be) a ‘tool’ of male power. The scientific model of sexuality constructed by sexologists is therefore one which

both reflects male supremacist values and promotes the interests of men by defining sex in male terms and thus facilitating the sexual-political control of women by men within the institution of heterosexuality and by means of specific heterosexual practices.

(Jackson, 1987, p. 74)

The increasing sexualisation of Western women since the nineteenth century, and other women before and subsequently, should not be seen as liberating, Jackson concludes, but rather as an attempt to eroticise women's oppression, one legitimated by discourses of science and modernity, and particularly by what has been described as 'modernist sexuality'.

Modernist sexuality

Sociologist Gail Hawkes (1996) has argued that a 'modernist sexuality' underpinned sexology, and a much broader series of social processes involving the 'modernization' of sexuality. For Hawkes, modernist sexuality was shaped largely by three factors:

- 1 the association of sexuality with 'nature';
- 2 the 'scientific' classification of sexual subjectivities, or the emergence of 'sexual types'; and
- 3 the primacy of heterosexuality.

A persistent presence in the construction of healthy, moral and natural sexuality was (and remains, sociologists have argued), the privileging of heterosexuality. As a consequence of this 'modernization' process, Hawkes argues,

those manifestations of desire which were deemed to have negative consequences for the maintenance of the patriarchal bourgeois hegemony – women's sexual autonomy, same-sex desire, expressions of youthful sexuality and auto-eroticism – were marginalized and even outlawed.

(Hawkes, 1996, p. 3)

This effectively meant that the central position of heterosexuality was both retained and strengthened as 'what was once ordained by God was affirmed by the men of science' (p. 72). In this respect, sexological research also lent scientific credibility to pre-modern, largely religious or superstitious links between gender and sexuality, providing 'evidence' of women's innate sexual passivity and men's naturally higher sex drive. As Holland *et al.* have put it,

In medical and common-sense thought, men have uncontrollable sexual urges which are not shared by women, 'Normal sex' then entails active men satisfying passive women in the satisfaction of their own 'natural' desires. Women's sexuality is defined as finding fulfilment in meeting men's needs.

(Holland *et al.*, 1994, p. 29)

Feminists have argued that much of the sexological research carried out in the early to mid-twentieth century was far from scientific, but rather represented patriarchal interests in the production of 'evidence' that served to give credibility to the maintenance of a sexual double standard, to the sexual objectification of women and to the marginalisation of gay, lesbian and celibate sexualities (Jackson, 1987). Sheila Jeffreys (1985) has argued that the category 'lesbian' was introduced in the late nineteenth century in order to control and marginalise both sexual and social intimacy between women.

An essentialist perspective has also shaped our thinking about the relationship between sexuality, race and class. In lending 'scientific' credibility to the idea that working-class and Black people are sexually rampant and immoral, for instance, and less able to control their sexual 'urges'. The influence of racism adds another dimension to the way in which Black and Asian women's sexuality has been understood in essentialist terms. Black women, particularly African and African-Caribbean women have been seen in racist ideology as 'bursting' with an uncontrollable and insatiable sexuality, rendering them in need of 'civilization' by white men (hooks, 1992). Asian women have simultaneously been seen as passive victims, and as exotic and sexual beings. Black women's sexuality has often been constructed in terms of their 'nature' therefore, involving, as Jean Carabine (1992) has put it, normative values about sexuality that are also replicated and reasserted in social policies through ideologies of racism, heterosexuality, familialism and motherhood.

It has to be said then that most of our contemporary understanding of sexuality comes from the work of biologists, medical researchers and sexologists, rather than sociologists, who have tended to focus on hormones, brain structures, drives and instincts. Hence, most of the research on sexuality has been concerned with laying out the biological foundations of sexuality. As Macionis and Plummer (2002, p. 306) note, this is also true of our common-sense understanding, as most people tend to assume that sex is just 'natural'. But, recall from Chapter 1, sociologists tend to challenge common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted views of the social world, and focus instead on the ways in which what might appear to be natural and pre-social is actually socially constructed and shaped by power relations. Sociologists therefore link sexuality to broader patterns of social stratification and inequality (see Chapter 3).

Sociological perspectives on sexuality

More sociological approaches to sexuality began to develop in the 1960s and tended to shift away from the conceptualisation of sexuality as a biological or psychological essence, focusing instead on the ways in which sexuality is socially constructed (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Caplan, 1987; Weeks, 1991). William Simon and John Gagnon were arguably the founders of what has become known as the social constructionist approach to sexuality. Both worked at the Kinsey Institute for Sexual Behaviour in the 1960s, and both felt the need to turn to more sociological theories to explain the findings of their empirical research. Drawing on a drama metaphor, they developed the idea of a sexual script to understand the social rules, regulations

and roles that serve as a guide to sexual behaviour. They outline three major forms of sexual script:

- 1 *Personal scripts* are those in our heads – telling us, for instance, what turns us on.
- 2 *Interactive scripts* are those which emerge from sexual relations – between partners or groups, for instance, and which tell us what role to play.
- 3 *Historical-cultural scripts* are those which exist in culture and society, and which tell us what is expected of us sexually in any given society.

Jeff Weeks (1986) provides a historical account of the social construction of sexuality in Western societies, identifying three key moments in the evolution of the West's preoccupation with sexual orientation and, particularly, the stigmatisation of homosexuality. The first, he argues, occurred in the first century AD which witnessed a growing disapproval of the indulgence of sex purely for pleasure. The second was in the twelfth century, which saw the triumph of the specifically Christian tradition of sex and marriage, and the belief that the only morally acceptable form of sexual relations was intercourse between a married couple for purposes of reproduction. The third began in the eighteenth century, which produced the explicit construction of heterosexual sex as 'normal' and the consequent categorisation of other forms of sexuality as deviant or perverse (see also Hawkes, 1996).

Underpinning a social constructionist approach is the idea that sexuality is not a fixed entity but rather a complex, interactive aspect of identity and experience, one shaped largely by interaction between individuals and the wider social, economic, and political context. This social constructionist approach has been concerned primarily with the ways in which what we deem to be 'sexual' is not a pre-social, biological essence but rather an, albeit relatively stable, product of the shared meanings attributed to certain forms of behaviour. Professional norms governing the de-sexualisation of gynaecological examinations, for instance, are indicative of the ways in which sexuality is socially constructed through the meanings that come to be associated with particular modes of social interaction. This approach rejects then, the essentialist contention that sexuality is a pre-social given, emphasising instead its social construction. This perspective also highlights the extent to which 'we ... cannot think about sexuality without taking into account gender' (Weeks, 1986, p. 45).

What sociological perspectives also tend to emphasise is that all cultures have mechanisms to organise sexuality, and no society allows a total 'free for all'. As Macionis and Plummer (2002, p. 307) put it, 'human sexualities are patterned through law, religion and a range of social institutions such as kinship and family systems; and economic and social organisation'. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation in the nature and extent of these controls: some religions such as Islam, for instance, seek to regulate sexuality very strictly. According to the classical Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, for example, a wife may only be granted a divorce on grounds of her husband's impotence (Therborn, 2004).

In her account of women's sexuality and social policy, Jean Carabine (1992) emphasised the role of social policy in perpetuating a heterosexual norm. She argues that heterosexuality is a central ideological theme running through social policy in Western societies and intermeshing with ideologies of the family and motherhood

Other feminist and pro-feminist sociologists have linked heterosexual hegemony to the concept of citizenship, arguing that gay men and lesbian women and other sexual 'minorities' have historically been denied the citizenship status and rights accorded particularly to heterosexual men (Evans, 1993; Richardson, 1998).

Closely linked to the idea that sexuality is socially constructed according to a system of rules and regulations is the concept of a 'hierarchy of sex'. Developed by feminist sociologist Gayle Rubin (1984) the concept of a sexual hierarchy captures the extent to which societies come to classify sexuality according to a system of stratification so that some forms are valued (and hence, come to be located in what she calls our ideational 'comfort zones') while others are not. Rubin devised this hierarchy in the early 1980s and it is interesting to consider some of the ways in which it might have changed since then (see Table 8.1).

Table 8.1 Rubin's hierarchy of sex

'Good' sex	Areas of contest	'Bad' sex
Normal	Unmarried heterosexual couples	Abnormal
Natural	Promiscuous heterosexuals	Unnatural
Healthy	Masturbation	Sick
Holy	Long-term, stable lesbian and gay couples	Sinful
Heterosexual	Promiscuous gay men	'Way out'
Married		Transvestites
Monogamous		Transsexuals
Reproductive		Fetishists/SM
At home		Commercial sex
		Cross-generational

Source: Rubin, 1984.

What sociological approaches also emphasise is not only the social construction of sexuality, but the social context of its enactment. As Macionis and Plummer have put it,

We often tend to use sex for social ends, not just biological goals such as reproduction. Far from sex being just biological, we come to use it for many reasons: as an expression of love, as a means to establish bonding, as a way of being clear about our manliness or womanliness, or indeed our maturity. It can be used to show our aggression (as in rape) or to fill up our boredom or as a kind of hobby. It can be used as play, as performance, as power and as a form of work. (Macionis and Plummer, 2002, p. 309)

What both essentialist and sociological perspectives on sexuality share in common, nevertheless, is the conviction that sexuality is a relatively stable social identity, one maintained in a (biologically or socially) constant and continuous way throughout

our lives, through either a (biological/psychological) developmental process or a process of socialisation and stratification through which we are deemed to acquire a relatively stable, 'true' sexual identity. Both approaches, feminists have argued, also tend to give insufficient attention to power relations in shaping, respectively, the social expression or social construction of sexuality. A more specific concern with the relationship between the social context of sexuality and power relations underpins a third approach to sexuality that can be discerned in more recent sociological literature.

Postmodern sexualities

The contention that sexuality is merely a 'performance' devoid of biological or social essence has been influenced largely by poststructuralism, and particularly the work of Michel Foucault (1979) and its development in Judith Butler's (1990) writing on gender and sexuality. It has also been influenced by the empirical contention that we live in a post- or late modern era in which social identity has come to be shaped by a proliferation of lifestyle choices (Giddens, 1992). The idea that sexuality is performative is based on the view that sexuality is an aspect of identity – a mode of being – that exists only in the way it is presented and performed at any given moment; in other words, it is thought to have no stable biological or social essence outside of its performance.

Postmodern perspectives tend to see society and social identity (including sexuality) as the outcome of discourse. They emphasise that those with more power – heterosexuals, for instance – are able to define those with less power – homosexuals – as abnormal, unnatural, and so on. Discourses on homosexuality, for instance, have tended to define it as an illness (it was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychological disorders, and then only to relabel it as a 'disturbance' in sexual orientation). Similarly, gay men have often been constructed in homophobic discourse as effeminate, over-sexed, promiscuous, disease-spreading child molesters, while lesbian women have been labelled as butch, man-hating and aggressive. Many gay men and women do of course come to perceive themselves in accordance with such discourses, and so internalise the negative labels applied to them. Research conducted by the London Lesbian and Gay Research Project in 1984, based on a sample of 416 adults aged under 21 who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, found that one in five had attempted suicide.

Equally, however, dominant discourses may be challenged and resisted. Indeed, a variety of gay and lesbian resistance movements have developed in the West since the late 1960s. In Britain, for instance, 'Stonewall' established in 1989, has pursued a policy of working through legitimate political channels to bring about social and legislative changes and to advocate the rights of gay and lesbian people, whilst 'Outrage', founded in 1990, has tended to favour direct action and a less conciliatory approach. The gay and lesbian rights movement has also helped to shift academic interest in homosexuality away from studying 'causes and cures' towards the study of homophobia. Narrowly defined, this term refers to a fear of homosexuality, but is now more commonly associated with hostility towards gay men and lesbian women.

As we noted in Chapter 2, Michel Foucault was interested in how specific ways of thinking, talking and writing about the world – what he called discourses – structure

our sense of self, our perception of the social world, and of other people. He argued that subjectivity is the outcome of dominant discourses circulating in society at any given time. These discourses shape the social meanings people attach to their own and others' identities and actions – what they 'know' to exist in the social world. Discourses aren't simply ways of knowing in Foucault's terms, though, but define how the world should be categorised and organised; in other words they do not merely describe to us how the world *is*, but also shape our thinking about how it *ought* to be. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1979) argued that measures to control populations introduced in Western societies since the eighteenth century (what he calls 'bio-power') meant that, inevitably, sexuality and sexual relations came under the influence of dominant social and political discourses of the time. The discourse that consequently developed around homosexuality, for instance, defined it as a perversion.

Although Foucault (1979) himself paid little attention to gender, and regarded the regulation of women's sexuality as only one aspect of its subjection to social control, feminists have found much in his work useful, particularly the contention that sexuality is socially constructed and reconstructed through discourse, and in complex and often contradictory ways. Indeed Foucault's rejection of a 'repressive hypothesis' – the contention that an essential sexuality has been contained and controlled by various religious, social, moral and medical forces – in favour of an analysis which focuses on the ways in which sexuality is constructed in and through power relations has been seen by some feminists as politically liberating, allowing as it does for sexuality to be reconstructed and negotiated on feminist rather than patriarchal terms.

For Butler (1990), far from constituting innate dispositions or relatively stable social categories, sexualities are created and lived through their performance. Butler (1990) illustrates this point with reference to the drag queen, deemed (by the audience) to have a 'true' gender and sexual identity underneath his 'act'. But she argues that what is assumed to be the drag queen's 'true' identity is as much of a performance as that enacted in drag and contends that, in effect, we are all 'on stage' because there is no true self beneath the various identities we perform in different contexts. This perspective emphasises that heterosexuality is not normal or natural, as many biological essentialists and social constructionists might argue, but is merely one performance amongst many possible alternatives. As Butler (1990, p. 31) put it, 'gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but as copy is to copy'. This contention poses two main challenges to heterosexual hegemony. First, it exposes the mechanisms through which heterosexuality is socially constructed as normal and natural, and second, it severs ascribed connections between sex, gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990) emphasising that heterosexuality is only naturalised as an 'original'. As Meyer (1994, pp. 2–3) puts it, 'queer does not serve to label a new kind of sexual subject but ... instead a concept of self which is performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processual, constituted by repetitive and stylized acts'.

What has come to be known as queer theory, based on a reappropriation of the derogatory term in homophobic discourse, has been particularly significant to the idea that sexuality is performative, emphasising that although Western societies have developed a range of crude categories to contain sexuality, these can never be all-encompassing because of the diverse range of sexual practices, desires and identities that exist. In a challenge to dominant classifications (of straight, gay, lesbian, and so

on), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) proposes a range of sexual configurations and categories, based on the following ideas:

- even identical genital acts can mean very different things to different people;
- some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little;
- some people like to have sex a lot, others little or not at all;
- many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or even that they don't *want* to do;
- for some people the possibility of bad sex is aversive enough to make them avoid sex all together, for others this isn't the case;
- some people like spontaneous, unstructured sex, others like sex to be highly scripted, others like sex to seem spontaneous when it is nonetheless totally predictable;
- some people's sexual orientation is shaped by auto-erotic pleasures, for others auto-eroticism is secondary or non-existent;
- some people's sexuality is firmly embedded within a sex-gender matrix, for others it is not.

Characteristic of queer theory, Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas about sexual identification suggest a mapping of sexuality that does not rely on established categories of homo/hetero/bisexual but instead draws attention to the ways in which these sexual identities are merely performances or roles.

This 'performative' perspective on sexuality, one inspired largely by post-structuralism, is characterised then by a rejection of what is viewed as the essentialism of those approaches considered above that conceptualise sexuality as either biologically determined or socially constructed. Instead, a more postmodern approach is premised on the view that the modernisation of sex (its so-called 'liberation' from the confines of religious and moral teaching, and its location within science) outlined by Gail Hawkes (1996) effectively equates to its 'naturalization' and categorisation in a way that is far from liberatory (Foucault, 1979). The postmodernisation of sex is understood, in William Simon's (1996, p. 30) work for instance, as 'the de-naturalization of sex' involving, in many societies, the dissolution of traditional social structures, the ascendance of secularism over religion, and the relatively recent separation of sexuality from procreation.

Sexuality in the post- or late modern era is understood in terms of a proliferation of lifestyle choices, which are no longer perceived as expressions of an essential or even relatively stable or consistent disposition. Developing the idea of a 'sexual script' (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), Simon (1996) suggests that contemporary sexualities are best understood as dramas, and that heterosexuality constitutes a particular sexual genre – a relatively formulaic performance. He argues that following the emergence of a post-modern society, sexuality has become more fluid, fragmented and diffuse than previously, largely due to the proliferation of lifestyle choices.

This approach involves a rejection of the credibility of so-called scientific studies of sexuality. This perspective also rejects the idea that acquiring a sexual identity is the result of successful completion of a developmental or socialisation process, one that moves through certain key stages. Rather, postmodernists such as Plummer (1996,

p. xv) have argued that in terms of contemporary experiences and identities, 'a supermarket of sexual possibilities pervades'. In this sense, one particular signifier of a possible shift towards a post-modern, performative sexuality that is often cited is that 'heterosexuality has ceased to be a fixed terrain'. Technological innovations in contraception of course greatly facilitated a disassociation of sexuality and procreation. As we noted in Chapter 7, the pill became available in the US in 1960, and in Europe in 1964, quickly followed by IUDs which became available in the late 1960s.

As Therborn (2004) notes, more than anything else, the sexual revolution has brought about a normalisation of long periods of pre-marital sex and a plurality of sexual partners over a lifetime, in a statistical as well as (to a lesser extent, perhaps), in a moral sense. Therborn's (2004) account also emphasises, however, that the effects of sexual revolution have been far from universal. The extreme rigidity and control in South Asia and in West and North Africa, for instance, seems on the whole to have loosened in recent decades, but changes in sexual norms as dramatic as those in northwestern Europe and the US are hard to detect in other parts of the world, he argues. Post-modern perspectives on sexuality are therefore influenced by the idea that fixed points of reference that determined sexual norms and ethics during the modern era – religious, scientific, heterosexual, monogamous (see Hawkes, 1996) – were radically challenged in many Western societies in the latter half of the twentieth century, giving way to a proliferation of sexual choices and identities (Giddens, 1992). Anthony Giddens in particular argues that late modernity has released sexuality from the confines of a single (heterosexual) hegemony and replaced it with 'sexual pluralism' – a sexual identity defined and structured by individual lifestyle choices and relative gender equality. This means, he contends, that behaviours previously thought to be 'perverse' have become an acceptable part of sexual diversity or what he calls 'plastic sexuality' – sexuality for pleasure rather than reproduction. The latter is closely linked to his idea of the 'pure relationship' – sexual relationships enhanced by more open communication and a greater degree of equality than previous generations have experienced, and hence a broader range of emotional and sexual experiences. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1998, p. 24, original emphasis) has put it 'in its postmodern rendition, sexual activity is focused narrowly on its orgasmic effect; for all practical intents and purposes, postmodern sex is about orgasm'.

However, as Plummer also notes, poststructuralist and post-modern approaches to sexuality can ultimately be politically disabling not only because they under-emphasise the material factors that constrain our sexual 'performances' or lifestyle choices, but also because (like postmodernism more generally – see Chapter 2) they tend to abandon the pursuit of progress towards sexual liberation or enlightenment entirely. They may also be misguided empirically; as the figures in Table 8.2 indicate, even in the UK many people still consider homosexual relations, sex outside of marriage and sexual relations under the age of consent to be socially unacceptable.

In its study of social attitudes towards sexual relations, *Social Trends* (1998) found, perhaps not unsurprisingly, that younger people are more likely than older ones to have tolerant attitudes towards same sex sexual relations. The survey found that almost two-thirds of people aged 65 and over thought sexual relations between two adults of

Table 8.2 Attitudes to sexual relations, 1998

	1 Always wrong	2 Mostly wrong	3 Sometimes wrong	4 Rarely wrong	5 Not at all wrong	Other	Total %
A man and a woman having sexual relations before marriage	8	8	12	10	58	5	100
A married person having sexual relations with someone other than their spouse	52	29	13	1	2	4	100
A boy and a girl having sexual relations aged under 16	56	24	11	3	3	3	100
Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex	39	12	11	8	23	8	100

Source: *Social Trends* 30, 1998

Note: People aged 18 and over were asked whether they thought different types of sexual relations were wrong, on a five-point scale: 1 = always wrong, 2 = mostly wrong, 3 = sometimes wrong, 4 = rarely wrong, 5 = not at all wrong. 'Other' includes those who did not reply, those who replied 'don't know', and those responding 'depends' or 'varies'.

the same sex were always wrong compared with less than a fifth of people aged 18–24. Overall, almost two in five people thought such relationships were always wrong, with about one in five thinking they were not wrong at all. Four in five people thought it always or mostly wrong for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than their spouse, and a similar proportion thought that sex between a boy and a girl aged under 16 was always or mostly wrong.

Feminist perspectives on sexuality

Largely following Ann Oakley's (1972) distinction between sex, gender and sexuality, feminists have argued that although gender and sexuality are conceptually distinct, they are so closely interrelated in terms of our lived experience that we cannot understand one without reference to the other. Indeed, as Jackson and Scott (1996, p. 3) have put it, 'it is the relationship between the two which makes sexuality a crucial issue for feminists'. Furthermore, feminists have argued that sexuality is embedded within power relations shaped, at least in part, by gender as well as other aspects of identity such as social class, race and ethnicity, global power relations, age, disability, and so on, 'so that we each live our sexuality from different locations within society', as Jackson and Scott have put it (1996, p. 3). Feminists have criticised so-called scientific approaches to sexuality, arguing that they are largely contradictory in defining women as both asexual and saturated with sexuality (Poovey, 1989).

Radical feminists in particular have emphasised that, in the main, it is men who abuse, harass and rape women. It is men who buy and use pornography and it is men who buy commercial sex. It is men who become sex offenders and killers. For radical feminists women's subordination is perpetuated primarily through men's control of women's bodies and sexuality. One of the strongest theoretical elaborations of the role of sexuality in maintaining women's oppression was developed by Catharine MacKinnon (1982), who argued that just as the exploitation of labour is at the heart of class relations, so sexual exploitation is fundamental to what she calls the 'sex class system'. In particular, MacKinnon (1987) has argued that pornography is the foundation of male dominance because it portrays women in dehumanising ways – as the subservient playthings of men – and that this shapes how men (as a group) see women (as a group), and how women see themselves and each other. A related charge is that pornography promotes and incites sexual violence. Radical feminists argue that pornography, like many forms of male sexuality, degrades and abuses women, that it is primarily about the eroticisation of men's power over women, and that it is an ideology that promotes violence against women. As Rebecca Huntley has noted,

radical feminists reserve a special kind of hatred for . . . fetish pornography focused on physical deformity, for example involving amputees and the physically disabled, [which] is singled out and attacked as the worst kind of pornographic material. Possibly because pornography that features 'atypical' bodies emphasizes the fact that pornography is so clearly about 'the body' as a sexual object. In the same way, pornography that involves pregnant women is equally reviled.

(Huntley, 2000, p. 352)

More libertarian feminists argue that any form of censorship is socially undesirable and ultimately works against women's interests, and that censorship would also restrict the availability of feminist and lesbian erotica. Other feminists argue that the pornography debate, and the preoccupation with sexuality more generally, deflects attention from other important feminist issues.

It is not difficult therefore to understand why sexuality has been so central to feminist theory and politics, for as Jackson and Scott note,

Historically, enormous efforts, from chastity belts to property laws, have been made to control female sexuality and to tie women to individual men through monogamous heterosexual relationships. The double standard of morality has entitled men to sexual freedoms denied to women. It has also divided women themselves into two categories: the respectable Madonna and the rebarbative whore. Women's sexuality has been policed and regulated in a way which men's has not: it is the woman prostitute who is stigmatized and punished, not her male clients. Heterosexual activity has always been risky for women, associated as it is with loss of 'reputation', with unwanted pregnancy and with diseases which threaten fertility. Women have also been vulnerable to male sexual violence and coercion, yet held responsible for both their own and their assailants' behaviour.

(Jackson and Scott, 1996, p. 3)

All this provided the impetus for the feminist critique of the sexual objectification of women in beauty contests such as Miss World, in pornography, and through the commodification of women in prostitution, as well as the subjection of women to sexual violence since the 1970s. Indeed, feminists have sought to emphasise the relationship between women's sexual objectification and their vulnerability to sexual violence – some by arguing that there is a direct connection (that 'pornography is the theory, rape is the practice'), others by arguing that 'pornography contributes to the cultural construction of a particular form of masculinity and sexual desire which make rape possible and which script the possibilities for its enactment' (Jackson and Scott, 1996, p. 23). Much of this critique has contributed to a fundamental criticism of heterosexual practice and ultimately of the institution of heterosexuality itself.

Feminists such as Sheila Jeffreys (1990) have emphasised the co-option of women into heterosexuality as a manifestation of patriarchal power, along with a series of social assumptions about what it means to 'have sex' being defined largely in patriarchal, heterosexual terms. Jeffreys's critique of the assumption that the sexual revolution was a milestone in the struggle for women's sexual freedom emphasises that many aspects of so-called sexual liberation should actually be seen as directly opposed to feminism, involving, rather than an increase in sexual freedom for women, an eroticisation of women's oppression. Sexologists, she argues, 'have been the high priests who have organized the worship of male power' (p. 1) and in doing so have affirmed the institutional status of heterosexuality.

In her account of heterosexuality and lesbian existence, Adrienne Rich (1980) similarly focused on the institutionalisation of 'compulsory heterosexuality', arguing that what was assumed to be either a natural drive or a social choice was imposed on women. Sociologists have subsequently used this concept to describe the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia have been institutionalised in law, education, religion and language. There are more than 70 countries across the world that criminalise homosexual acts and some of these – Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, for instance – have the death penalty for gay sex (Amnesty International, 2001).

Feminists have seen heterosexuality as an institution through which men appropriate women's bodies and their labour. Some, particularly those who came to identify as 'political lesbians' in the 1970s, argued that romantic attachments with men led only to exploitation. The feminist critique of heterosexuality meant that for many feminists 'lesbianism began to be seen as both a viable alternative and a form of resistance to patriarchal domination' (Jackson and Scott, 1996, p. 12). It was tensions between these radical, 'separatist' women and other feminists which Jackson and Scott (1996) argue proved to be particularly disruptive for feminist politics at the end of the 1970s, and which in part 'made a unified women's movement increasingly difficult to sustain' (p. 14). Indeed, debates on heterosexuality and lesbianism have been a major source of tension within feminist theory and politics. Some, as Jackson and Scott outline, have been the destructive cause of major rifts within the women's movement, others have been more productive in forcing feminists to theorise women's diverse sexual experiences and attitudes more adequately.

Women's sexual experiences and attitudes

In her first and most well-known work, *Married Love* (1918), Marie Stopes emphasised the need for a woman to be aroused as a preliminary to sex, and for satisfactory orgasm for both parties. As Lesley Hall (2000) noted in her account of women's attitudes to sex throughout the course of the twentieth century, Stopes practically became a brand name for a new genre of woman-centred sexual advice, but she was not the only woman writing in this field. The female doctor Isabel Hutton also indicated the importance of female orgasm in her book *The Hygiene of Marriage* (published in 1923) as well as the need for preliminary arousal for women's enjoyment of sex (cited in Hall, 2000). Another doctor, Helena Wright (1930), produced a short guide to sex for women, *The Sex Factor in Marriage* in 1930, with a sequel *More About The Sex Factor in Marriage* in 1947. She too placed supreme importance on women's right to sexual arousal and satisfaction. Wright was adamant that a penile–vaginal model of sex was inadequate for many women, and strongly advocated women familiarising themselves with their genitalia and exploring ways of stimulating themselves. In her later work (Wright, 1947), she described how many women remained ignorant of the idea that they too could derive pleasure from sexual relations within marriage, reporting one female patient who, when asked about the happiness or otherwise of her sex life, asked 'Why doctor, what is there to enjoy?' This attitude was also reported by other writers on women and sexuality such as Slater and Woodside (1951, p. 5) who found that 'husbands are valued in an inverse relation to sexuality: "he's very good, he doesn't bother me much"'. Among the women Slater and Woodside interviewed, sex was seen as a duty to be undertaken with endurance, but from which they did not expect to derive any particular pleasure.

Later work, such as Chesser's *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the Englishwoman* published in 1956, found that when women did experience sexual pleasure they found it difficult to articulate. As he puts it, 'many women have difficulty in describing their sexual sensations, in defining the nature of their sexual pleasures, and are confused as to the definition of their genital experiences' (p. 421, quoted in Hall, 2000, p. 4). He also found that many women felt ashamed to admit that they did not experience orgasm. Clearly, the increased importance given to mutual sexual gratification in marriage brought about its own problems and pressures. In fact, this was the situation that had prompted Wright to expand upon her previous work, conceding that although a certain degree of improvement had resulted from the wider dissemination of sexual guidance to women, it ought to be conceded that ignorance had to an extent given way to performance anxiety. Hence, 'lacking direct information about sex and marriage, and with misleading ideas gleaned from romances, films and popular music', many women were embittered to discover that their own experiences of sexual relations within marriage were rather different from the ideal (Hall, 2000, p. 6).

Shere Hite's initial report in 1976 in many ways only substantiated the insights of these earlier writers – Hite actually cites Helena Wright's work on the need for women to familiarise themselves with their own bodies and sexual potential (Hite, 1976). In her recently updated report, Hite (2000) emphasises the continuing dominance of a penetrative model of 'real' sex, and the gap between women's own sexual feelings

and experiences of sexual pleasure within heterosexual relations, and media images of women as sexual beings that, she argues, are defined largely in terms of male sexual fantasies.

The kinds of issues explored in Hite's second report have also been considered by feminist researchers, particularly those focusing on young women and sexual health promotion. In *Ruling Passions*, Sue Lees (1997), for instance, argues that to speak of a woman's 'reputation' still invokes her sexual experiences, and this remains central to the way in which she is judged both in everyday life (in education, for example) and by courts, and welfare and law enforcement agencies. Her recent research on adolescent girls found that the fear of being labelled a 'slag' or a 'slut' (by both boys and other girls) is still a potent force that serves to contain and control young women's sexual self-presentation and behaviour (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of her earlier research – Lees, 1986, 1993). Within sex education, Lees points out, girls are not presented as desiring subjects or initiators of sexual encounters but rather as sexual victims, having to defend themselves against the threat of disease, pregnancy and being 'used'.

Similar conclusions were reached in *The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power*, based on interviews with young women in London and Manchester by the Women, Risk and Aids Project (Holland *et al.*, 1998). Here Holland and her colleagues comment on the continuing lack of sexual agency amongst young women, concluding from their findings that an active female sexual desire is almost inconceivable to the young men and women who took part in their research. Rather, they found that even girls who were conscious of their own sexual desires were under considerable pressures to contain these, and to focus instead on developing stable heterosexual relationships. Drawing on Foucault's (1979) analysis of sexuality as the outcome of discourse considered above, their account emphasises the extent to which

Adopting different languages of sex and love is a crucial mechanism in the constitution of gender within heterosexuality. The choices that young people make about the language they use and the discourses they invoke are shaped and constrained by existing power relations and have powerful effects. Although young people may be aware of and resist these processes as individuals, they are nevertheless complicit in collectivities that reproduce these divisions.

(Holland *et al.*, 1998, p. 89)

In particular, for instance, they note that 'metaphors of battle and conquest are central to the way young men talk about their experiences in the male peer group' (p. 87), whereas an emphasis on relationships and romance characterises young women's use of language in their discussions of sexual encounters. Similar research carried out in New Zealand by Jackson and Cram (2003) highlights that although young women's discussions of sexual relationships and experiences suggest various ways in which the double standard is disrupted, ultimately these are individual rather than collective acts of resistance, and so the sexual double standard remains relatively stable. They argue that despite significant changes in the social landscape over recent decades, young women's negotiations of heterosexuality remain dominated by the sexual

double standard according to which an active, desiring sexuality is positively regarded in men, but denigrated and regulated by negative labelling in women.

Hence, research on women's experiences of sexuality and their attitudes to sex has identified some obvious changes since the publication of Marie Stopes's *Married Love*. It is no longer assumed amongst most ethnic groups that a woman will be a virgin when she marries, or that her future husband will have been her only sexual partner. Many women cohabit in lesbian or heterosexual relationships rather than marry, or remain single. Birth control is more widely available and reliable than previously, as is abortion, though sexually transmitted diseases and sexual violence remain important issues, as do prostitution and pornography. Sexual reputation, and the fear of losing it, are still powerful constraints affecting not only social relationships but also encounters with judicial and welfare systems. This latter theme is emphasised by Gail Hawkes (1995) in her discussion of young women and 'family planning' in the UK, which emphasises the regulatory content of family planning practice, directed particularly at young women 'whose lifestyles are deemed "irresponsible", and who are, therefore, considered as illegitimate family planners' (p. 257).

Sexuality and power relations

As Therborn (2004, p. 1) has noted, sex and power are intimately related: 'sex may lead to power, through the conduit of seduction. Power is also a basis for obtaining sex, whether by force or lubricated with money and what it can buy.'

Sexuality and oppression

Many feminists have developed critical analyses of sexual violence, pornography and prostitution which have emphasised the ways in which the sexual appropriation of women serves as a mechanism of social control. One key theme that has emerged from much of this work is the link between heterosexual power relations and sexual violence, so much so that some feminists such as Liz Kelly (1988) have argued that sexual violence is best understood as a continuum, ranging from the myriad forms of sexism women encounter everyday, through to the murder of women and girls by men at the other extreme. She describes as 'pressurized sex' sexual relations that women are expected to have with men, even when they do not really want to. As Jackson and Scott (1996, pp. 17–18) have noted, 'within dominant cultural discourses, men are cast as the active initiators of sexual activity and women as passive recipients of male advances; men's desires are seen as uncontrollable urges which women are paradoxically expected both to satisfy and to restrain'.

Sexual violence has been a major concern of feminists, and a key site of feminist political activism. While sexual violence might appear to be an issue around which all feminists could unite, since all women regardless of sexual orientation, social class, race, disability or age can be subject to violence, the various intersections of oppression mean that women's actual experiences of violence and the threat of violence might vary considerably. As Jackson and Scott note with regard to the relationship between race and sexual violence, for instance,

Sexual violence has very specific meanings for black women, since routine sexual exploitation, coercion and brutality towards women have been very much a part of the history of slavery and colonialism. This renders it inseparable from racism: enslaved and colonized women have been subject to specific racialized forms of patriarchal oppression and sexualized forms of racial oppression. This is complicated by the ways in which black masculinity under colonial and slave regimes has been constructed as a threat to white women.

(Jackson and Scott, 1996, p. 18)

bell hooks (1982) has argued that white feminists have tended to see the rape of women slaves as merely an historical incidence of sexual violence, and hence have failed to acknowledge the extent to which the abuse of Black women continues to be framed by the legacy of colonial discourses and power relations, manifest, for example, in terms of exaggerated fears of the rape of white women by Black men, in overtly sexualised images of Black men and women, and in racist and sexist ideologies about inter-ethnic sexual relations, all of which, she argues, amount to a continued devaluation and sexualisation of Black womanhood.

Emphasising that rape should be understood in terms of power relations rather than sexual relations, feminists have focused on sexual violence as an enactment of male power. The regularity with which women are subject to male sexual violence has led some feminists to emphasise the eroticisation of women's oppression in popular and media culture, and to argue that rape and sexual violence are extreme manifestations of much broader cultural phenomena.

Pornography is another central issue for feminists in this respect, and one that is complicated by a range of perspectives. Some feminists see pornography as centrally implicated in women's oppression and campaign against it, others argue vehemently against feminism aligning itself with any form of censorship or moral conservatism, while others maintain that the production of feminist pornography potentially amounts to a politics of subversion (McIntosh, 1992). Others highlight the material aspects of pornography, emphasising that pornography entails more than just representations since it involves the employment of real women as models and actors and in a whole range of associated occupations such as stripping, dancing and hostessing. Indeed, from this latter perspective (one with which we, the authors, would agree), prostitution and pornography are both most appropriately understood as part of a 'sex industry' and with reference to the concept of commercial sex, or 'sex work'. These terms emphasise that commercial sex involves not just prostitution, but also the production and consumption of pornography, as well as other areas less commonly researched to date, such as telephone sex work, 'call girl' or escort services, as well as work in lap and pole dancing clubs (Weitzer, 2000). The increasing prevalence of these more peripheral forms of sex work, particularly given developments in communication technologies such as telephone call centres and the internet, has meant that what Karen Sharpe (1998) has described as the 'problem of prostitution' – namely, how to regulate it – remains a perpetual issue. Some feminists argue that only fundamental social reorganisation will address the demand for commercial sex, others adopt a more reformist approach and maintain that prostitution should be decriminalised. One of the most commonly proposed strategies in this respect is that prostitutes should

be put in state-registered brothels. However, as Sharpe notes, radical feminists in particular argue that such a strategy would simply 'signify the state's validation of the use of women's bodies as commodities' (p. 160). Others have argued that the decriminalisation of soliciting could create a 'sexual free for all' for men (Wilson, 1983, p. 224).

Feminist anti-prostitution activists and feminists such as Kathleen Barry (1995) have argued that prostitution has undergone a process of industrialisation in many parts of the world since the 1960s. Through this process prostituted men, women and children have come under the control of big business in the Western world, as prostitution has been legalised and normalised. The International Labour Organization report on prostitution in Southeast Asia entitled *The Sex Sector* (Lim, 1998) suggests that prostitution is so important economically to the countries of Southeast Asia that there is a strong argument for recognising and legitimising it:

The scale of prostitution has been enlarged to an extent where we can justifiably speak of a commercial sex sector that is integrated into the economic, social and political life of these countries. The sex business has assumed the dimensions of an industry and has directly or indirectly contributed in no small measure to employment, national income and economic growth.

(Lim, 1998, p. vi)

One of the most fundamental divisions between different groups of feminist theorists and activists concerned with prostitution has focused on the distinction between 'forced' and 'free' prostitution, and is based upon the notion that adult women may exercise the free will of an individual and 'choose' prostitution or 'consent' to it. Scambler and Scambler's (1997) *Rethinking Prostitution* is a collection of essays by academics, activists and members of the English Collective of Prostitutes that advocates thinking about prostitution as sex work and which considers some of these issues. Without wishing to assert that 'all engagement in sex work is a function of free and informed choice', the editors hold that the starting point for any feminist-oriented analysis of prostitution should be 'the respectful attribution of agency' (p. xv).

Anti-prostitution activists such as Sheila Jeffreys (1997, 1998) are critical of the concept of 'choice', however, pointing out that economic coercion makes a nonsense of any idea of free choice, as do other constraining circumstances that act upon women's lives, such as gender ideologies. Feminists such as Jeffreys argue that 'women are not free agents, operating on a level playing field upon which they rationally choose prostitution over other occupations for the advantages it offers' (Jeffreys, 1998, p. 69). Rather, women's choices are already shaped by established patterns of gender inequality – what Carole Pateman (1988) calls the 'sexual contract' – that restrict women's ability to exercise agency in this respect. Hence, anti-prostitution feminists opposed to the concept of free choice prostitution emphasise that women constitute an oppressed sex class whose subordination has historically been symbolised in their exchange as sexual and reproductive servants between men (Dworkin, 1981). In Sheila Jeffrey's words, 'the argument of "choice" is used by those determined studiously to ignore these facts of the material power difference between men and women, those committed to rampant individualism' (1998, p. 69).

For Jeffreys, 'men's prostitution behaviour' is the problem' (1998, p. 70), and particularly the idea that men's prostitution use is based on an inevitable and unstoppable male sexual desire, perhaps a biological necessity, which is best channelled into 'harmless' outlets. This ideology reflects the 'biological essences' model of sexuality considered above, and is one that feminists such as Jeffreys have been particularly critical of, arguing that

in fact, men's prostitution abuse is not 'natural' behaviour but the result of the idea that such sexual abuse of women and children is vital for health, enjoyed by women, a right of manhood. The idea of prostitution abusers that it is reasonable, or even their birthright, to insert their penises in the bodies of other less powerful human beings who can be paid to tolerate it, is a learnt idea.

(Jeffreys, 1998, p. 70)

Jeffreys points out that prostitution tourism depends upon pro-prostitution abuse attitudes formed in the West. As she puts it,

Affluent cultures in the west and in the east which teach boys and men that the sexual use of women and children, irrespective of their pleasure or personhood, is a natural right of their masculinity, produces sex tourists and prostitution abusers.

(Jeffreys, 1998, p. 70)

Also focusing on sex tourism in Latin America, the Caribbean, India, Thailand and South Africa, Julia O'Connell Davidson (1998) describes three types of sex tourist:

- 1 'Macho lads in pornutopia' who are socialised to believe that 'true' masculinity involves exercising control over other men, over women and over their bodies: 'this is partly because sexual access to prostitutes is extremely cheap, partly because there is an extensive array of commoditised sex on offer and partly because their racism allows them to reduce "Other" women and children to nothing more than their sex' (p. 25).
- 2 'Women-haters' who are socialised to believe that the human male has a natural, biological need to penetrate women, so that 'some men imagine themselves as victims of a biological compulsion to have sex' (p. 26). Such men therefore think of women as controlling a resource (their female bodies) that is vital to men's physical and psychological well-being. Again, racism plays a key role in disinhibiting such men.
- 3 'Situational prostitute users' who are not prostitute users in their home countries, but become sex tourists 'partly because they don't recognize informal sector prostitution as prostitution, and partly because they too buy into highly sexualized forms of racism' (p. 29).

Crucially, in sex tourism gender ideologies are compounded by racism routinely used by the travel industry, which often conflates the 'exotic' and the 'erotic' in its advertising.

Anti-pornography campaigners tend to focus largely on the degradation and exploitation of women involved in all aspects of the sex industry. Others are wary of seeing women only as victims of commercial sex, and are more concerned with recognising and reforming the working conditions of sex workers (Alexander, 1988). These are clearly complex issues given the wide variety of forms that sex work takes in different social, economic and geographical contexts as well as across a variety of media forms. The increasing prevalence of live sex shows broadcast on websites for instance problematises the traditional distinction between pornography and prostitution (one that feminists have tended to be critical of). Taking account of these various complexities, Jackson and Scott (1996, p. 24) argue that 'a feminist perspective should encompass both the economic relations which shape women's position within the sex industry and the patriarchal relations which make this particular form of exploitation possible'. Of course, the economics of prostitution are shaped not only by local labour markets but also by the global division of labour and by post-colonial power relations. Hence, within sex tourism post-colonial women are constructed as exotically docile and hospitable. In the local context in which women are recruited, research suggests that poverty is a major motivating factor for entry into sex work.

Feminist anti-pornography campaigner Andrea Dworkin (1981) has also drawn attention to the etymological connections between pornography and prostitution, reminding us that the term 'pornography' refers to the 'graphic depiction of women as vile whores', who exist only to serve men's sexual needs. She argues that the whore can only figure in male imagination under patriarchal domination, according to which women are reduced to the status of sex objects.

Of course, both prostitution and pornography provide employment for women and raise general questions about the relative position of women in the labour market, as well as the circumstances in which these particular groups of women work. Women's involvement in the sex industry is directly related to their lack of economic opportunities elsewhere, and to their vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion. What makes these issues particularly problematic for feminists is that their objection to pornography and prostitution has often placed feminist activists in an alliance with the moral Right, and particularly with defenders of the patriarchal family and of women's sexual passivity. Judith Walkowitz (1980) has shown, for instance, that feminist campaigners since the nineteenth century have often found their arguments hijacked by moral conservatives who have sought to 'protect' women rather than promote women's sexual rights. In contrast, a feminist critique of commercial sex has been concerned primarily with the sexual objectification of women's bodies and with the working conditions of women employed in the sex industry.

Though prostitution is an economic exchange, feminists have argued that it differs from other forms of employment in significant ways. Although the sex industry is a thriving economy in many countries across the world, it is not a 'mainstream' sector of the labour market and, in general, governments and other funding agencies have been interested in prostitution only as a problem of social control or public health. In sociology, this has often meant that prostitution has been studied not as a form of economic exchange, but as a public health risk, with the empirical focus being primarily on street prostitution (its most visible and seemingly uncontrollable form). As a result, the available body of empirical evidence on prostitution has tended to reflect a concern

with the characteristics and practices of individual prostitutes (their health, psyche, sexual history, criminality and drug use, for instance), and a relative neglect of the social and organisational aspects of prostitution, power relations within the sex industry as a whole, and within client–prostitute relations, as well as a neglect of questions about the demand for prostitution. As Julia O'Connell Davidson (1997, p. 777) has put it, 'this represents a very real problem for all those who are engaged in theoretical, political or policy debate on prostitution'. Feminist research has begun to address this, however, and several ethnographic studies have been undertaken in recent years that have focused on various forms of prostitution, looking at the work experiences of prostitutes themselves.

This research has highlighted that prostitutes often work in dangerous and degrading conditions, with little or no protection from the state or their employer, or from the medical profession. Although much criticised on grounds of its unproblematic association of prostitution with HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and public health issues (Adkins, 1997; O'Connell Davidson, 1997), in their account of street prostitution, based on three years' research involving interviews with prostitutes and their clients, as well as observational research in a red light area, McKeganey and Barnard (1996, p. 70), for instance, document the risks to women as they negotiate with clients and also their vulnerability to violence. As one of the contributors to their research put it, 'if you lose your wits about you in this business you're done for'. Whittaker and Hart (1996) have also carried out research highlighting the extent to which sex workers operating in flats have to employ protective strategies such as co-working with 'maids' to protect themselves against the threat of violence from clients.

Research also suggests a strong degree of mutual support amongst prostitutes themselves. Downe (1999), for instance, highlights how sex workers in Costa Rica use humour as a way of resisting and coping with pain, humiliation and the fear of violence by re-framing traumatic experiences. Sanders (2004) identified a similar culture of coping through professional banter in her study of prostitution in the UK. Crucial to the discourse and identity of the prostitutes in Sanders's study was a sense of themselves as professional sex workers:

They adopt the stereotypical image of the 'happy hooker' and the aesthetic characteristics of 'the prostitute', conforming to culturally prescribed norms of femininity as a strategy to attract and maintain a regular client base. Usually this entails adapting physical appearance, dress code, make-up and hairstyle as well as observable personality traits to conform to male expectations. A small number of interviewees considered cosmetic facial surgery and breast implants as capital investments for the role of sex provider.

(Sanders, 2004, p. 282)

Sanders emphasises in particular the importance of solidarity amongst women working in the sex industry:

Debbie and Louise have been working for 20 years, much of that together. During the 12 visits I made to their premises they would be laughing, joking and fooling around. They explained their behaviour was not a reflection of how they enjoy sex

work but out of necessity: 'If we didn't laugh so much we would just cry' (Louise). They were adamant that the only reason they survived prostitution is their friendship, solidarity and strength in coping together. 'We learned to laugh a long time ago, to make it less real and to stop us from hating to have to come here' (Debbie).

(Sanders, 2004, p. 284)

On a more global level, feminist groups have highlighted the vulnerability of women and children to sex trafficking, particularly in Central and Eastern European states (Therborn, 2004). The fact that trafficking is not only illegal, however, but also often connected to organised networks of violence and corruption means that access to research evidence is limited, if not impossible. The UN estimates that trafficked individuals are the commodities of a multi-billion dollar global industry dominated by highly organised (male-dominated) criminal networks, and that economic hardship, obstacles to migration and armed conflict in many of the world's developing and transitional countries have resulted in a considerable rise in the number of cases involving trafficking (www.unece.org). While trafficking routes vary over time, the direction remains relatively constant, namely from poorer countries to relatively wealthy ones. Doezenia (2002) has argued in her critique of the UN Trafficking Protocol that current notions of 'consent', reflected in the ambiguity of the Protocol, are inadequate to serve as the basis for political strategies to protect the rights of sex workers and migrants because they purport views of female sexuality as 'both more virtuous and more dangerous than men's' (p. 20) and because they fail to take account of the material circumstances within which women may provide 'consent'.

Sex trafficking and tourism have become a particular problem for women and girls in Southeast Asia. Macionis and Plummer (2002, p. 297) report for instance that Bangkok is emerging as the sex-tourism capital of the world, and that almost half of the estimated 800,000 prostitutes in Thailand are under 18. In some cases, they note, parents sell female infants into the sex trade who are then raised by agents until they are able to work as prostitutes, to solicit in sex bars or to work in live sex shows. Agents provide girls with clothes and housing but (much like the old Geisha system of debt bondage) at a price that far exceeds their earnings, so that women are effectively sex slaves. Drawing on research by Kempadoo and Doezenia (1998) and O'Connell Davidson (1998), Macionis and Plummer estimate that the number of girls and women involved is rapidly increasing: some 8 per cent of the female population of Thailand are thought to be employed in the sex industry, about 40 per cent of whom are estimated to be HIV positive. In addition, concubinage is still thought to be a widespread social phenomenon amongst the upper-middle classes of Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand.

Much of the Western research on prostitution in Southeast Asia, however, tends to replicate many of the earlier problems associated with defining prostitutes themselves as the problem. As Siriporn Skrobaneck (of the Foundation for Women in Bangkok) puts it,

Women in Thailand are viewed as 'the other women', whose status is perceived as lower than that of women in the West. . . . But since there are two sides in a

commercial transaction between foreign visitors and Thai women, why is only one party to the deal (Thai women and their society) the target of investigation, while the other party (the sex tourists) goes unexamined?

(quoted in Seabrook, 1996, p. vii)

Sexuality, pleasure and resistance

As well as sexuality as a site of oppression and exploitation for women, feminists have also emphasised the extent to which sexuality can be a cultural resource through which gender oppression can be challenged and resisted. Holland *et al.* (1994, p. 34) for instance have argued that sexuality constitutes an intimate yet social space within which men's power can be subverted and resisted and that 'if women can recognize and capture this space, they can negotiate relationships with men which upset the gender hierarchy and so are potentially socially destabilizing'. From this perspective, which emphasises not power *over* sexuality but rather the power *of* sexuality, sexuality is viewed as a site of hegemonic struggle on which gender relations can be contested. It is also viewed as the site of pleasure, and feminists such as Anne Koedt (1972), in her influential discussion of sexuality from a radical feminist perspective, have emphasised women's right to derive pleasure from sexuality. Amber Hollibaugh (1989) has similarly argued that feminists must give equal attention to sexual danger and sexual pleasure, suggesting that there is a need to develop a feminist language of sexual pleasure that recognises that power in sex can be a source of both pleasure and resistance to gender oppression.

Research has highlighted several ways in which sexuality can be used as a way of challenging and resisting patriarchal oppression and heterosexual hegemony. We consider three examples here:

- 1 *female promiscuity* as a challenge to dominant ideas about women's sexual passivity and to patriarchal control of women's sexuality;
- 2 *camp* as a potential way of resisting and parodying hegemonic masculinity and what Judith Butler (1990) describes as 'the heterosexual matrix' – the idea that 'normal' men are masculine and sexually dominant and that 'normal' women are feminine and sexually servile, and that a particular configuration of the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is natural – and the gender order; and finally,
- 3 the emergence of so-called *gay villages* – distinct social (and commercial) spaces in urban areas that potentially represent a challenge to the marginalisation and exclusion of gay and lesbian people, and the social dominance of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980).

Female promiscuity

One interesting example of hegemonic struggle over gender relations often cited by feminists is female promiscuity. Because of the sexual double standard, reinforced by 'scientific' perspectives on sexuality as a biological essence, outlined above, women have traditionally been thought of as naturally sexually passive, whereas men have

tended to be regarded as naturally sexually active. Female promiscuity – taking part in multiple and frequent sexual relationships – has tended to be regarded, particularly in medical and moral discourse, as a psychiatric disorder amongst young women. Promiscuity amongst young girls has often been cited as an argument against widespread sex education in schools; and in social work and protective social welfare discourse promiscuous women have often been described as being in moral danger, or as being 'out of control'. Medical practitioners frequently cite female promiscuity as a cause of the spread of herpes, cervical cancer and also (to a lesser extent) HIV.

In this sense, some feminists have argued that promiscuity might be regarded as a liberatory strategy used against the restriction and prescriptions of 'normal' femininity. In her book *Promiscuities*, for instance, Naomi Wolf (1997) argues that promiscuity can be 'a source of pleasure and strength, not of shame and vulnerability'. Other feminists, however, have argued that this perspective is a relatively narrow ethnocentric one that fails to take account of the experiences of Black and Asian women who have tended to be sexualised, racialised and gendered simultaneously within colonial ideologies and power relations (hooks, 1992). Others have argued further, that cultural representations of women as primarily sexual merely reinforce rather than subvert established patriarchal perceptions of women as sex objects, perceptions that are often used to justify sexual harassment and violence against women. Others have argued that a cultural focus on women as sex objects – in advertising or pop music videos, for instance – merely serves to perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes about both male and female sexuality.

Camp

In every culture, sexual relations are bound by formal and informal social rules concerning both with whom a person may have sexual relations, and how those relationships should be conducted. Homosexuality, in most Western cultures, as Jeff Weeks (1986) has pointed out, 'carries a heavy legacy of taboo'. But this is not the case in every culture, nor has it been true of all historical periods. In ancient Greece, for instance, love between two males was thought to be a 'higher' form of intimacy than that between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, as we have already noted, in many contemporary societies, homosexuality is not only stigmatised but criminalised (in many African countries, for instance). Many countries' legal codes do not make provision for lesbianism, but in some countries (such as Pakistan) it too is illegal. Some countries – such as China – have only relatively recently officially acknowledged the existence of gay and lesbian sexualities. The law in most European societies is more tolerant, however, with recent legislation in the UK equalising the age of consent and introducing legal protection against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. That said, many gay men and lesbian women still conceal their sexuality for fear of hostility, particularly in the workplace, for instance (Hall, 1989; Adkins, 2000). Some feminists, such as Judith Butler (1990), have argued that one of the ways in which homophobia and heterosexual hegemony is undermined is by parodying it in an ironic way: by making what she calls 'gender trouble', invoking, for instance, a 'camp' performance of gender.

In her 'Notes on Camp', Susan Sontag (1984, p. 275) argued that 'the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of the artifice and exaggeration'. Of the many themes she identifies as definitive of camp – often associated with the culture of gay masculinity – Sontag emphasises that camp is 'a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous' (1984, p. 276). Camp, then, is playful and anti-serious and suggests a 'spilling over' of an irrepressible, uncontrolled sensibility that contemporary feminists such as Butler (1990) have argued represents a form of cultural resistance to gender and sexual power relations. This view echoes Sontag's earlier claim that camp can be understood as a kind of cultural defence mechanism, one that celebrates rather than berates exclusion from the cultural and sexual mainstream. Seen from this angle, camp has a radical and transgressive potential, Butler argues. As cultural theorist Richard Dyer (1992, p. 136) has put it: 'Identity and togetherness, fun and wit, self-protection and thorns in the flesh of straight society – these are the pluses of camp.' Camp also denies any essential sex, gender or sexuality. Rather, like postmodernist approaches to sexuality (and feminism – see Chapter 2), and particularly queer theory, it emphasises that all three are performances and not essences.

As a cultural phenomenon, camp has been criticised, however, particularly by gay rights activists for its politics, or rather lack thereof. Dyer (1992) comments that camp finds sexual politics in the form of the CHE (campaign for homosexual equality) and GLF (gay liberation front) simply 'too dull'. As Melly (1984, cited in Meyer, 1994, p. 22) has also noted, for many gay activists, camp tends to be viewed largely as an artefact of the 'closet' – the idea that homosexuality should be concealed; as an anachronistic embarrassment that fuels gay stereotypes and affirms heteronormative cultural perceptions of the gay community. Camp has therefore been interpreted as a sign of both oppression, and of the acceptance of cultural repression, but also as a cultural style that represents a mode of resistance to that oppression.

Gay spaces and villages

Another example of possible resistance to sexual oppression can be identified in the existence of virtual sexual communities on the internet (Hanmer, 2003), as well as gay 'villages' in major towns and cities across the world – New York, Sydney and Manchester being some of the most notable examples, that have been interpreted by sociologists as an attempt to claim a 'space' for resistance. While these spaces are geographical and social they are also of course largely commercial, and property developers, retailers and leisure industry entrepreneurs have certainly not been slow in the past decade or so to attract what has come to be known as the 'pink pound' or dollar. As feminist writer Susan Bordo (1993, p. 196) puts it, 'consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty, of fresh images to stimulate desire, and it frequently drops into marginalized neighbourhoods in order to find them'. Heterosexual attraction to so-called gay villages might therefore be thought of as a form of what Suzanne Moore (1988) has described as 'gender tourism', as straight 'tourists' are able to take 'package trips' into gay culture and social spaces, but crucially, as she notes, not necessarily into gay sex or politics. The effect, therefore, is more commercial and cultural than political.

Manchester's gay village is an interesting case in point, in this respect, because its development in recent years illustrates some of the ways in which sexuality is shaped by what feminists and other sociologists following Foucault have argued is an interplay of power and resistance. As feminist writer Beatrix Campbell recently noted,

When Greater Manchester's former chief constable, James Anderton, accused the city's gay population in 1987 of 'swirling around in a human cesspit of their own making', little did he know he would come to be regarded as one of the instigators of Britain's gayest city, and perhaps the most successful gay village in Europe. The roll call would also have to include Margaret Thatcher, whose notorious Section 28 [a clause in the Local Government Act passed in Britain in 1988] ... galvanized a spectacular coalition, ranging from theatre impresarios to librarians, to defend the right to a gay life. Neither could have anticipated how their crusades would conjure up a queer constituency.

(Campbell, 2004, p. 30)

In the 1980s, the area around Canal Street in Manchester was still a heavily policed red-light district, in which raids on gay nightclubs were commonplace. The effect, as Campbell notes in her article 'Village People', was to activate the gay community in Manchester, which forged an alliance with the city council which, in turn, gave support to gay businesses. 'The ghost of Anderton was finally laid to rest', she notes, when the current chief constable led his gay colleagues' contingent at EuroPride in 2003, a 10-day Mardi Gras in the thriving gay village. 'Now the place is so successful that it simultaneously welcomes and dreads hordes of straight invaders' (p. 30).

One of the main problems has in many ways been shaped by gender politics. Manchester's gay village quickly began to attract large groups of straight women (many of them on hen nights) who felt safe and free from harassment there. However, these groups of women were predictably followed in quick succession by large groups of heterosexual 'lads' and corporate breweries, resulting in what Campbell describes as a 'straightening of the village' in commercial and cultural terms. Conscious of exploitation of the Village rather than investment in it, however, the established gay community began to withdraw its custom from the straight, corporate bars and this appears to have resulted in their withdrawal from the area and, as Campbell concludes, quoting one of its main supporters, 'the village is going gayer again'.

Each of these examples emphasises the complex and often contradictory power relations that shape the relationship between gender and sexuality, one shaped by power and resistance, as well as structure and agency. This is also the case with regard to the ways in which sexuality is shaped by race and ethnicity.

Race, ethnicity and sexuality

Many Black feminists have argued that feminist debates on sexuality have often proceeded without reference to divisions amongst women not related to sexual orientation. Black feminists have been critical of white feminist tendencies to homogenise women as a category, and also for their failure to challenge stereotypical social

constructions of Black and Asian women's sexuality. Feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have argued that paying attention to the intersections between gender, sexuality and race reveals that sexual relationships with men may have different meanings for Black and for white women.

Black and Asian women are often perceived as sexually exotic by white men. This imagery is frequently mobilised in advertising for a whole range of products and services from ice cream (Nayak, 1997) to airlines. Post-colonial women are often seen as more submissive, obedient and hyper-feminine than Western women. Thus for racialised women, their sexuality is often shaped by racist assumptions. Hence, 'the racism which is often a feature of pornography is not accidental, but is the product of the double objectification of black women as objects to be used by their white masters' (Jackson and Scott, 1996, p. 22). Feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have therefore argued that an analysis of racism is central to a feminist understanding of pornography and prostitution because racism does not simply compound sexism but rather makes certain forms of sexual objectification possible. In particular, she argues, biological theories of race and colonial ideologies underpin the depiction of Black women in terms of an animalistic sexuality.

Anoop Nayak (1997) has recently explored some of these stereotypes in his analysis of images of race and sexuality in advertisements for Häagen-Dazs ice cream. He argues that in the body images that dominate these advertisements, Black bodies are seen as a source of sexual desire and satisfaction – as 'the exotic promise of an extra-intense experience' (p. 52). Here, and elsewhere in media and popular culture he argues, 'black sexuality is constructed as threatening, dangerous and in need of control' (p. 52). Not only do the ads he considers mark out visible, racial binary oppositions between black and white, they then seek to 'blend' these through implications of inter-racial sex. Here, sexualised Black female bodies function as what bell hooks (1990, p. 57) describes as 'playing fields where racism and sexuality converge'. In her paper entitled 'Selling Hot Pussy', hooks has argued that media cultural portrayals of Black women's sexuality are no longer premised on the white supremacist assertion that 'blondes have more fun' but rather on equally racist and sexist contentions that, as she puts it,

The 'real fun' is to be had by bringing to the surface all those 'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (but not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy.

(hooks, 1992, pp. 21–22)

Sexuality and HIV/AIDS

Many of the debates considered here have taken place against a backdrop of increasing concern about HIV and AIDS and therefore about the potential dangers attached to certain sexual practices, and often also attributed to particular sexual identities and desires. As Sara Delamont (2003, p. 55) notes, 'the HIV/AIDS panic produced another impetus propelling sexuality into the sociological mainstream'. Fear of the risk of HIV transmission might seem to close down the potential for sexual pleasure, but some

feminists have argued that safer sex could be better sex, especially in a heterosexual context. While 'safe sex' in health promotion discourse has tended to mean penetrative sex with a condom, feminists such as Ros Coward (1987) have sought to promote a broader range of sexual practices arguing, for instance, that for heterosexual women safer sex (which de-privileges penetrative sex) possibly enhances rather than restricts the potential for sexual pleasure and more egalitarian sexual relations. However, as Jackson and Scott (1996, p. 19) note, the balance of power in (hetero)-sexual relationships, 'along with wider cultural discourses and the sexual scripts which men and women draw on, militate against women negotiating safer sex'. Research highlights, for example, the extent to which young women continue to experience problems in negotiating condom use when they have sex with men, and the ways in which their efforts to practise safe sex are often undermined by gender power relations which reaffirm male sexual 'needs' at the expense of women's pleasure and safety, relating largely to the difficulties women have in articulating their own sexual needs and desires within heterosexual encounters (Holland *et al.*, 1990). Jackie West (1999) has argued, for instance, that young women remain inhibited in their exploration of sexuality not only by heterosexual morality and their transitional status, but also by gendered power relations that limit social acceptance of their sexual needs and desires.

Other feminists, however, such as Fiona Stewart (1999) have argued that a possible shift in definitions and practices of heterosexuality is currently taking place, suggesting that modes of feminine heterosexuality that position young women as relatively passive and helpless may be changing. Her research, carried out in Australia, highlights several factors as indicative of this shift, including: young women's initiation of sex, their planned loss of virginity, the stating of conditional terms of relationships, their participation in casual sex, their efforts to ensure their own sexual pleasure is catered for, their refusal of unwanted sex and their insistence of condom use. She argues that 'in each of these areas, the conventional gendered imperatives are challenged and the gendering of masculine and feminine behaviour becomes less certain' (1999, p. 277). Her research reveals, she concludes 'a clear rejection of passive, traditional femininity' and a capacity to renegotiate 'the status quo of hegemonic or institutional heterosexuality'.

Empowering women, especially in post-colonial and developing countries, is clearly crucial in HIV/AIDS prevention, and vice versa, and has been cited as one of the most important strategies in slowing down the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan and West Africa (Therborn, 2004). However, the different contexts in which young women are exhorted to embark on HIV/AIDS risk reduction behaviours and the difficulties involved have been relatively neglected in research and policy terms. Augustine Ankomah (1999) has highlighted the relative powerlessness of young women in premarital sexual exchange relationships in urban Ghana for instance, where many sexual encounters are contracted for material purposes. Ankomah argues that women often engage in ad hoc 'sexual exchange' – where sexual services are performed for economic purposes – for financial reasons, and that it is only by improving women's economic status and addressing contemporary societal norms which support sexual exchange that women's vulnerability can be alleviated.

Conclusions

Sexuality has been a central political and theoretical issue for feminists, and also a source of major divisions. The question of whether heterosexual sex is oppressive to women, and whether heterosexuality is a tenable practice for feminists remains a source of contention. Feminists have emphasised that heterosexuality does not have the same meaning for all men and women, and this raises a number of questions about the pleasures and powers of sexuality.

In this chapter, we have looked at three broad ways of conceptualising the relationship between sexuality and the social. Generally speaking, these three perspectives themselves represent something of a sociological history of sexuality, although it is important to note that although a social constructionist and then post-structuralist approach have largely superseded a biological essences model in terms of the development of sociological ideas, the contention that sexuality is a pre-social, biological entity remains relatively dominant not only in the social sciences, but more generally in medical, religious, moral, legal and media discourse on sexuality. In this respect, one of the points that feminists have highlighted is that the distinction between the biological and the social is far from unproblematic.

The idea of the family as the natural and normal site where sexual relations take place has tended to privilege heterosexual relationships and to render deviant any sexual relations that take place outside of this context. Although more people now accept premarital sexual relations as normal, this also means that courting has become sexualised and the 'norm' of sex between a man and a woman, sanctified by romantic love, has been reinforced. In Victorian England women were not supposed to enjoy sex at all and it was only men who were thought to have an uncontrollable sex drive which impelled them to visit the many prostitutes who patrolled the streets. From the 1920s 'sexologists' started to argue that sexual satisfaction was important for both partners, and this became incorporated into ideas of what an ideal marriage should be – a satisfying sexual partnership. However, this companionate sexuality was defined according to masculine norms: women should enjoy penetrative sex with men; if they did not then they were 'frigid'. Furthermore, this whole discourse reinforced the idea that heterosexuality was the natural, biologically determined human relationship.

Sexuality more generally, however, continues to be defined in male terms. Women's bodies, conveying sexual promise, are presented as desirable and are used to sell anything from cigarettes to spare parts for cars. We are constantly presented with the idea of woman as sexually passive. Men are presented as sexually active and predatory, at the mercy of their 'uncontrollable lust' which can be satisfied only by penetrating women, whether the women are willing or not. Radical feminists have argued that unwanted sexual advances by men could be construed as a form of rape and that our society condones and indeed institutionalises rape. The sexual abuse of women and girls in the home is likewise a product of the presentation of men as having uncontrollable sexual appetites and women as victims of this, since most of the abusers are men and most of the victims are female.

Also, as Jackson and Scott note, feminist debates on sexuality have been framed largely by the 'special' status accorded to sexual relations in Western societies:

Sexuality is conventionally singled out as a 'special' area of life: it has been variously romanticized and tabooed, seen as a threat to civilization or the route to social revolution, as a source of degradation and a means to personal growth. ... Sexuality may be feared as a source of dirt, disease and degradation, but it is equally revered as a gateway to ecstasy, enlightenment and emancipation.

(Jackson and Scott, 1996, p. 26)

We would agree with their conclusion, in this respect and argue that feminism needs to reflect critically on this 'cultural obsession' with sex, including the ways in which it shapes feminist perspectives on sexuality, not least in terms of their essentialism and ethnocentrism.

SUMMARY

- 1 Sociologists have argued that although sexuality is perhaps one of the most intimate aspects of our lives, it is also social and political (embedded within power relations), and that what we think of as sexual varies historically, socially and culturally.
- 2 Three broad perspectives on sexuality can be identified in the social sciences: essentialist, sociological and postmodernist.
- 3 Feminists have argued that sexuality is one of the key sites on which patriarchal power relations are maintained; they have also argued that sexuality can be a source of power for men and women to challenge and resist patriarchal ideology and compulsory heterosexuality. Three examples of 'sexuality as resistance' were considered: female promiscuity, camp and the evolution of gay villages.
- 4 Black and post-colonial feminists have argued that white, Western feminists have neglected racial and ethnic difference among women, and have failed to challenge racist stereotypes regarding Black and Asian women's sexuality.

FURTHER READING

Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity. This controversial text attempts to reflect on the meaning and impact of the so-called 'sexual revolution' in Western societies, and considers connections between sexuality and other aspects of social identity such as gender. Giddens argues that the transformation of intimacy, in which he contends women have played a major part, holds out the possibility of a radical democratisation of the personal sphere.

Hawkes, G. (1996) *A Sociology of Sex and Sexuality*. Buckingham: Open University Press. This book offers a historical and sociological analysis of ideas about the expressions of sexual desire, incorporating both primary and secondary historical and theoretical material. The major focus of the book is on sexuality and modernity.

Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (eds) (1996) *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. This reader is a comprehensive and engaging selection of feminist contributions to sexual theory and politics. It begins with an excellent overview of feminist debates and tensions, and then considers feminist perspectives on essentialism and social constructionism, sexual identities and categories, issues of power and pleasure and commercial sex. It contains a range of classic and contemporary readings from a broad spectrum of feminist perspectives.

Weeks, J. (1986) *Sexuality*. London: Routledge. This book is an excellent starting point as it is a short guide to the concept of sexuality, and to the political and theoretical debates that have shaped its academic study particularly within sociology. It also considers the contribution of feminist theory and politics.

CHAPTER NINE

Work and organisation

Sociologists tend to divide people's lives into 'work' (paid employment), 'leisure' (the time when people choose what they want to do) and 'obligation time' (periods of sleep, eating and other necessary activities). Feminists have pointed out that this model reflects a male view of the world and does not necessarily fit the experiences of the majority of women. This is partly because unremunerated domestic labour is not recognised as work – it is 'hidden' labour – and partly because many women participate in few leisure activities outside of the home. This is because, as we noted in Chapter 6, women and girls have the major responsibility for domestic labour. Whilst men do more paid work than women, they also have more leisure time. It is not only the organisation of work that is gendered but also the cultural values with which paid work and domestic labour are associated; paid work and the workplace are largely seen as men's domain, the household as women's. Rosemary Pringle sums up some of these issues when she points out that,

Though home and private life may be romanticized, they are generally held to represent the 'feminine' world of the personal and the emotional, the concrete and the particular, of the domestic and the sexual. The public world of work sets itself up as the opposite of all these things: it is rational, abstract, ordered, concerned with general principles, and of course, masculine. . . . For men, home and work are both opposite and complementary. . . . [For women] home is not a respite from work but another workplace. For some women work is actually a respite from home!

(Pringle, 1989, pp. 214–215)

Most of the classical sociological studies of paid work were of men – of coal miners, affluent assembly line workers, male clerks, or salesmen for instance – and, until relatively recently, the findings of these studies formed the empirical data on which sociological theories about all workers' attitudes and experiences were based. Even when women were included in samples, it was (and sometimes still is) assumed that their attitudes and behaviours differed little from men's. or married women were seen as working for 'pin money'; paid employment being seen as relatively secondary to their domestic roles.

A growing body of feminist and pro-feminist research has challenged these assumptions, however, and has provided sociologists with a more detailed understanding of the relationship between gender, work and organisation, and particularly