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The Gendered Nature of Sexuality

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Sexuality is a subject which tends to elicit feelings of awkwardness and discomfort. Although today less taboo of a subject than previously, open discussions of sexuality remain uncommon. By steering clear of the subject (at least publicly) we subsequently avoid acknowledging that sexuality is embedded in a highly gendered society. Thus, sexuality is inevitably gendered itself, in that male sexuality is positioned as the central experience. As this essay will present, most research also reflects this notion. Only with a second wave of feminism in the 1960's have we started to recognize the inequalities existing within our sexual realms. These feminists in particular brought awareness to the fact that female sexuality is too often relegated as a secondary component- seen only as the other half necessary for the achievement of male satisfaction and goals (Bohan 6).

Sexuality is frequently examined in light of two dominant perspectives- that of essentialism and of social constructionism. Essentialists promote a duality within gender by distributing specific traits as being inherently male, or inherently female. With this, essentialists avoid acknowledging overlapping characteristics of both genders (Philaretou and Allen 311). Overall, essentialists see the gender divide as “natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined” (DeLamater and Hyde 11). Within this divide, the masculine identity (and thus masculine sexuality) is seen as a superior experience in social hierarchies (Philaretou and Allen 302). In contrast, social constructionists believe in a socially constructed reality that has its roots in language as means of interpreting experience (DeLamater and Hyde 10). Social constructionists are comparatively more optimistic and do not see the imbalance of gender power within sexuality as a static entity. Social constructionists refer to sexuality in light of a script, and feel it is “created by culture, by the defining of some behaviours and some relationships as sexual, and the learning of these definitions or scripts by members of the society” (DeLamater and Hyde 14). The foremost difference between these perspectives lies in gender location- with essentialists locating it as resident within the individual, while constructionists consider it to be created through interaction (Bohan 7).

Gender differences are salient within all aspects of sexual scripts. To clarify, sexual scripts are “made up of a number of logical if-then statements that guide our expectations of what will or will not occur” (Lenton and Bryan 484). Four specific areas of sexuality and its scripts will be investigated as gendered within this essay: instigation, negotiation, the act of intercourse, and social repercussions of participation. A comparative analysis of these four categories within the two dominant perspectives will aid in highlighting the superiority of a constructionist view in explaining the gendered nature of sexuality. The narrow minded view of essentialism, with its failure to acknowledge the influences of social and cultural factors, posits the perspective as inadequate by comparison.

It is important to note that the focus here will be on casual sex encounters, wherein the gendered nature of sexuality is most salient. This is particularly true for areas of instigation and social repercussions, which may not be applicable in long-term committed relationships. Furthermore, when participants of a study were asked to describe a sexual script, 69% of respondents reported scripts for casual sex (Lenton and Bryan 487). Therefore, a focus on casual encounters is more relevant. The sexual scripts discussed are representative only of North American encounters, where all of the research has been conducted. Finally, it is important to note that this essay will make reference only to heterosexual encounters, as the gendered nature of sexuality is more salient when a member of each gender is actively present.

When it comes to instigating a sexual encounter, males are more likely to be the pursuers (Reid et al. 546). In accordance with essentialist thought, males are looking to mate with as many

females as possible in order to perpetuate their genes. This is seen as central to their resident masculinity (Philaretou and Allen 311). Essentialists posit women as natural seekers of long-term mates whom are able to provide adequate resources to raise offspring (DeLamater and Hyde 11). By this token, the selective nature of females inhibits them from instigating sexual contact with males. Social constructionists deny the idea of inherent masculinity, and prefer to regard it as an achieved state that is moulded within socialization processes (Philaretou and Allen 311).

Desired masculine values revolve around traits such as independence, rationality, goal orientation, physical fitness and strength, and a control over emotions. Masculinity is also equated with sexual supremacy (Philaretou and Allen 310). While being socialized into these dominant masculine roles, females are subsequently being socialized into a subservient position. Values of femininity reflect traits such as submissiveness, passivity, interdependence, and the expression of emotions (Philaretou and Allen 303). The expectations of overt masculinity by males often creates an “illusionary feeling of having privileged access to or ownership of women’s bodies” (Philaretou and Allen 310). This leads to a major discrepancy between genders in regards to their sexual scripts. Males feel pressure to pursue mates, while female scripts suggest “passively waiting to be chosen rather than actively seeking a partner” (Frith and Kitzinger 214).

Some serious issues may arise when males are privy to the sexual scripts constructed as appropriate for females. These males may dismiss the legitimacy of female rejection, and believe she simply needs to be persuaded (Frith and Kitzinger 214). This is a highly problematic misperception of male sexual power, such that in extreme cases it may lead to sexual harassment and rape (Philaretou and Allen 310). At a less extreme level, one study found that males often did not feel the need to ask permission when initiating contact with females on the dance floor. Although some males approached from the front, thus theoretically asking permission to instigate contact (albeit, this was usually nonverbal), most males approached from behind. This tactic places females in a position wherein they are unable to reject physical contact until after its initial occurrence (Ronen 368). By playing along with these instigation scripts, both men and women are reproducing the gendered system of sexuality. These typical interactions display the prohibition of “women’s access to heterosexual agency and pleasure, [which privileges] men’s pleasure and [confirms] their higher status” (Ronen 373). However, it is evident that this perceived higher status is constructed through interactions rather than inherent in the individuals.

Negotiations surrounding sexual activity entail decisions regarding how sexually far an encounter will go. Again, the avoidance of open discussion about sexuality often leaves actors relying on the interpretation of non-verbal cues of whether to proceed or to discontinue. In North America, the full sexual script typically involves a certain order- usually a progression from kissing to intercourse (Frith and Kitzinger 213). Males are much more likely to instigate actions that will lead to a full play-out of this script. One study in particular found females unable to say no to intercourse once they had participated in other acts (such as oral sex) which are deemed less significant (Reid et al. 550). In accordance with their socially constructed gender roles, males “make active choices and agentic initiations, and women deploy their powers as responses that indirectly express choice” (Ronen 369). To increase chances of intercourse, males may resort to tactics whereby they express notions of love as means of creating a more acceptable script for females – who are seen as more emotionally charged (Frith and Kitzinger 215).

A major decision made during sexual negotiations is whether or not a contraceptive will be used. Since we have already established males as having more power over sexual scripts, it is ironic then that the onus is commonly on females to make this important decision. It has been

found that females tend to have more knowledge regarding contraceptives and therefore they may feel more pressure to make the decision. This often leads to males regarding the decision as a “feminine task” (Gerrard et al. 452). This area of sexual conduct is likely the only time in a sexual script where responsibility is deferred to the female. Thus theoretically, females would be in a position of higher power here. However, the reality is that the female is ultimately more likely to accommodate what the male wants (Gerrard et al. 453). This begs the question of whether or not the female was ever really given the power to decide.

The essentialist view that portrays men as dominant simply states this process of negotiation to be a normal reflection of gender roles- with males in power and females as a secondary response unit (Bohan 6). In relation to contraceptives, essentialists posit that the female accommodation to male desires is a reflection of their inherent biological characteristics. When females engage in sex outside of a relationship, they are doing so in hopes of securing the partner as a long-term mate. Thus, the association of contraceptives with casual sex may hinder females from using them (Frith and Kitzinger 215).

Social constructionists however, feel this female accommodation is learned from “culturally available messages that define what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in sexual encounters” (Frith and Kitzinger 210). Females accommodate male contraceptive desires due to the construction of sexual scripts in a manner pertaining to male power. Constructionists also find sexual scripts to dictate intercourse as the only significant act, placing immense pressure on females to carry out sexual scripts in their entirety (Reid et al. 550). Therefore, although negotiations of sexual activity do take place, the reality is that male power overwhelms the arena of decision making.

With an overwhelming accommodation to male needs, it is unsurprising that female sexual satisfaction is given minimal attention. In fact, it is only very recently that North American culture has recognized the existence of female sexual desires (Kirkpatrick 444). Still, it remains that a high degree of importance is placed on male satisfaction, with little attention given to the female orgasm. A sexual encounter is unlikely to be considered complete following female orgasm, but is frequently deemed so if the male has ejaculated (Philaretou and Allen 303). This often leads to the female being passive during sexual encounters and simply allowing the male to proceed in ways considered pleasurable to him (Kirkpatrick 445). This relative acceptance of the superiority of male satisfaction is compounded by the discouragement of females from masturbating (Frith and Kitzinger 210). Without manually exploring one’s own pleasures, and with female sexual pleasure still being a relatively new subject, it is evident why many view female satisfaction as secondary, or completely irrelevant.

Essentialists view the superiority of male satisfaction as natural and normal. From this view, sexual scripts revolve around the male experience- with the beginning represented by an erection, and the end by ejaculation. This script reflects a “male sex drive discourse”, which is considered the linking factor between hegemonic masculinity, and sexual aptitude (Reid et al. 550). This essentialist position can be traced back to the works of Freud, who saw sexual satisfaction as an “exclusive interest of only one participant- the male” (Gagnon and Simon 55). Although Freudian theory is a thing of the past, this position is perpetuating in that the “idea of female interest in, or commitment to, sexual pleasure was, and possibly still is, threatening to many men and women” (Gagnon and Simon 55).

Constructionists feel the importance of male sexual satisfaction has been created over time, and through social interactions. They feel that socialization into gendered roles has created a female expectation for sex as an emotional experience, rather than a physically satisfying one

(Philaretou and Allen 304). The scripts of femininity provided for females do not leave room for fulfilling sexual experiences. In fact, constructionists find these scripts to “police girls’ and women’s sexuality” (Kirkpatrick 550). Under this notion of policing, females seeking casual sex encounters for their own sexual satisfaction are deemed deviant. They are seen as breaching the norms of femininity, and approaching masculine characterization (Kirkpatrick 445). Therefore, although we now know that women have a high sexual capacity, we are presented with a contradiction. This contradiction lies in that “the qualities necessary for femininity may be antithetical to the qualities necessary for sexual satisfaction” (Kirkpatrick 446). Therefore, the feminine role is to be sexually unsatisfied, while to be masculine is to be sexually satisfied.

A final gendered aspect of sexuality is the social repercussions associated with participation in a sexual encounter. At the instigation level, it has been found that males generally prefer a female who simply looks inviting, and open to contact. A female who approaches a male in a very direct manner is labeled a deviant, and is accused of having loose morals unless her actions are explained away by reason of intoxication (Ronen 366). When females do engage in casual sex behaviours, they are often given the label of “slut”. Once this term is attached to her, it is difficult for a female to shed the label. Interestingly, male counterparts are given status enhancing titles of “players” or “studs” when engaging in the same behaviour. In example, a study on high school females found an inverse relationship between number of sexual partners, and popularity at school (Reid et al. 550). More generally, it is deemed inappropriate for females to engage in sex outside the realm of a relationship, while males are free to have sex within any context (Reid et al. 549). This double standard of sexual encounters is a pure representation of the gendered nature of sexuality, such that the same act warrants different responses towards each gender.

Due to the threat of social repercussions, females “do not have equal access to direct agency and unpunished sexuality” (Ronen 373). Females have been known to employ devices such as Goffman’s “saving face” in order to maintain an upstanding reputation (Reid et al. 550). This method of impression management was found to be used at a level four times greater than males when encountering a casual sex partner at a later date. These tactics included refusing sex upon subsequent meetings in to “moderate either the man’s potentially negative perception of her or to improve her own self-image in light of their earlier hookup” (Reid et al. 558). By feeling the pressure to save face, and to engage in impression management, females are denying their personal right to sexual desires, (Kirkpatrick 445).

Being that they view gender characteristics as inherent in individuals, essentialists would argue that the double standard is representative of a natural and proper social order. They see unequal access to sexual exploration as a manifestation of inherent male sexuality, with which they are given full range of exploration. The sexual desires discourse of males is often seen as pervasive, and even uncontrollable. Thus, male sexual exploration is socially justified and they are not subjected to the same repercussions as their female counterparts (Reid et al. 550). In fact, essentialists would suggest it an inconvenience for males to be subjected to repercussions, as nothing should stand in the way of their natural need to “plant their seed” (Philaretou and Allen 311). On the other hand, essentialists would view any repercussions targeted at females as sanctions necessary to deter females from breaching their inherent femininity through sexual misconduct (Kirkpatrick 550).

Constructionists feel that through interactions, we have developed a set of rules and regulations pertaining to the sexual conduct of each gender. These rules have been constructed to a much higher degree for females. In order to maintain the social order we have constructed,

social repercussions are used as a tool to sanction those who act outside set boundaries. If anything, these sanctions are simply a means for some people to deal with the foreign and uncomfortable notion of female sexual exploration. However, the reality is that female sexual exploration is an idea that is gradually gaining greater acceptance. For constructionists, this change in social response disproves the idea of inherent roles, and shows that reality is socially constructed (Bohan 13).

By examining the four areas of instigation, negotiation, the act of intercourse and social repercussions, it is without a doubt clear that sexuality is gendered. Through a comparative analysis of essentialism and constructionism, it is evident that notions of gender are better framed within the constructionist perspective. Essentialist perspectives are much too static, and fail to leave any room for social change. By deeming characteristics as inherent, essentialists blame individuals for the gendered nature of society, and do see responsibility as located within broader systems (Bohan 15). In comparison, the constructionist perspective allows us for the alteration of common ideas, and recognizes that gender is constantly shaped throughout interactions (Bohan13). A constructionist focuses on interactions, such that “agreement resides in social interchange...one does not have gender, one does gender” (Bohan 13). Constructionists provide the ability to delve much deeper into social issues through an openness towards change and development.

Focusing solely on constructionism, the gendered nature of sexuality is simply a reflection of larger gender issues in society. Although this essay seems to suggest an abuse of power by males, constructionists remind us that they are not to blame. In fact, by carrying out socially prescribed roles, both males and females are working to reproduce gendered sexuality. Therefore, we must focus our attention on broader structures, and how prescribed roles function within them. We must recognize the need to re-do and reconstruct these roles in a ways that promote gender equality. Since a complete social upheaval cannot happen overnight, a shift in attitudes must take place. Attitudes are shaped throughout interactions, and so we rely on people to open themselves to new ideas. In regards to sexuality, this means encouraging a common recognition of female sexual capacity, and desire. This is something that is likely to happen only with more time, and in accordance with the movement towards female equality in other areas. This ability to look towards a future of equal sexuality, and of overall gender equality, is a task captured only by a constructionist perspective.

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