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Wendy Simonds • Elroi J. Windsor

SEX

Matters

The Sexuality & Society Reader

Fifth Edition

SEX MATTERS

THE SEXUALITY AND SOCIETY READER

FIFTH EDITION

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In honor of those resisting attacks on sex education, the rights of sexual minorities, evidence-based research on sexuality, procreative justice, and access to medical services, who strive for a sex-positive environment for us all.

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PREFACE

We live in a sex-saturated society. We hear of sex drive, sex toys, sex machines, sex slaves, sex scandals, sex gods, sex crimes, and sexaholics. Sex permeates every aspect of our lives from advertising to politics to our relationships with others. Yet we rarely consider the historical, legal, and sociocultural contexts of sexuality. Many people take the current state of sexual attitudes and practices in our society for granted, as if they are natural and thus unchangeable. Understanding contemporary sexual matters requires considering how sexuality varies across time and place and how it is modeled, molded, and even manipulated by those around us. Consider, for instance, the influence of social contexts as you read the following scenarios:

- Imagine that you've chosen to have sex for the first time. How would you know what to do? How would you plan on pleasing your partner? Yourself? Would you turn for guidance to books or magazines, pornography, websites on the internet, or the wall of the public bathroom? What makes you excited? Nervous? Would you practice safe sex?
- Imagine that you and your partner do things together that you've never heard about before but that make you feel transported, ecstatic, or orgasmic. Or imagine you feel nothing much during your encounters, or that you feel disgusted, or that you're not even sure if you have "had sex." Imagine that you want to stop but your partner won't. What would you do? Whom would you tell?
- Imagine that you and your partner are the same sex. Would you feel comfortable showing affection in public? Can you imagine a cultural context in which you wouldn't have

to worry about others' reactions? Can you imagine how dating someone of the same sex might be beneficial to you?

- Imagine that an evening of partying ends in an unplanned "one-night stand." You or your partner becomes pregnant. Would you see the pregnancy as something to celebrate? To ignore? To hide? To terminate? Would your family and friends share your feelings? Would their reaction be the same if you were 15 or you were 45? What if your partner were much older or younger than you? Or of a different race, ethnicity, or religion?
- Imagine that you've made a careful decision to refrain from sexual activity. Which circumstances might compel such a decision? Would it be hard to maintain your resolve? Or imagine, by contrast, that you've sought out as much sexual activity as you can find. Either way, who would support your decision to be celibate or sexually adventurous? Who might challenge it? How would these responses be different, depending on your age, gender, or social status?

SEXUALITY AND SOCIETY

If you vary the time, place, or cultural setting of the scenarios, you'll find that your feelings, the decisions you would make, and the reactions of those around you will probably change. These variations occur because the social norms governing sexual behavior are continually in flux. Other social factors, such as your religious beliefs, level of education, economic status, ethnicity, gender, and age, influence sexual activity and its meaning. All of the following are influenced by society: what counts as a sex

act, how often we have sex, what is considered erotic, where we have sex, the age when we begin having sex, with whom we have sex, what we do when we are having sex, how often we desire sex, our reasons for having or avoiding sex, whether we pay others or get paid for sex, and how we define consensual sex. Although often characterized as a purely biological and often uncontrollable phenomenon, sex is, in fact, social. The readings we have selected portray sex as a social issue influenced by culture, politics, economics, media, education, medicine, law, family, and friends.

SEX MATTERS

Our title reflects the content of the book in two ways. First, we have included research articles and essays on a variety of sexual matters. Second, the title supports our assertion that sex, and the study of sexuality, matters. There is much to learn about sexuality. Despite the prevalence of sexual matters in public life and the media, as well as their private significance, scholars researching sexuality often have difficulty getting institutional and financial support. Many funding agencies, politicians, and even academics do not take sexuality seriously.

Yet the study of sexuality is burgeoning, as evidenced by the proliferation of courses on sexuality in colleges and universities throughout the United States. This book applies social theory and methods to the study of sexuality. The Spotlight on Research feature, which profiles the work of sex researchers, enhances the empirical focus in each chapter. Each of these interviews echoes the fact that sex really does matter.

THEMES OF THIS BOOK

This book is designed to promote sex-positivity and to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on the ways that contexts affect sexual meanings. We believe that consensual sex, in

all its forms, regardless of actors, can be beneficial. We have selected pieces that historicize and thus challenge the cultural stigmatization and marginalization of some sexualities and the valorization of others. To us, part of sex-positivity means, for example, promoting the pursuit of sexual pleasure and not centering sex education around danger and disease. To be sex-positive is to recognize that sex can be enriching and to affirm that sex matters.

Each of our chapters highlights the dual themes of social construction and social control. In other words, society—composed of social institutions and the individuals within them—constructs our understanding of sexuality and influences our behaviors, attitudes, and sexual identities. The readings illustrate that some social institutions and some members of society have more power to control and define a society's sexual agenda than others. At the same time, social control is usually met with social resistance, and we offer readings that feature examples of successful individual and cultural resistance to societal expectations and oppression.

Chapter 1, "Categorizing Sex," explores how society constructs and socially controls sexual categories. We challenge readers to question what should count as having sex, a topic with wide-ranging legal and health implications. Readings on intersex and transgender sexualities encourage us to consider the viability of our current categories of "male" and "female," and "man" and "woman," and how these constructions affect sexual behaviors and sexual identities. Other readings question current methods of categorizing sexual orientation and sexual identity. What does it mean to be straight, gay, lesbian, queer, or bisexual? Is sexual identity a matter of behavior, erotic attraction, or self-definition, and do these categories always align with one another? What role does community or politics play in the construction of our sexual identities? In what ways are sex

and sexuality more fluid, and is this fluidity consistent across gender and other social categories? Although existing categories can be helpful for understanding commonalities, they also collapse a wide variety of experiences and feelings into inflexible and essentialized divisions. As the readings show, sexual categories vary across societies, cultures, and time.

Chapter 2, “Investigating Sexuality,” presents historical and contemporary sex research and considers ethical, political, and methodological issues involved in conducting sex research. The readings introduce the unique challenges and rewards of conducting sex research. The association of sex with privacy creates a level of anxiety and reluctance among would-be research participants that is unmatched in other areas of research. For example, the cultural unwillingness to see adolescents as sexual beings discourages parents from allowing minors to participate in sex research, yet adolescents report benefiting from participating in sex research. Chapter 2 also illustrates the effect of researcher bias and how, for example, racist ideologies guiding research have resulted, historically, in serious harm to minority populations. Differing religious teachings on sexuality add to the controversial nature of sex research. The protest efforts of fundamentalist religious groups have successfully limited governmental support of art, health, and research programs that involve sexuality.

Chapter 3, “Representing Sex,” presents a variety of interpretations of the ways that U.S. culture depicts sexualities and sexual activities. For example, media (books, songs, magazines, videos, internet imagery, etc.) both reflect and create ideas about sexuality. Cultural representations of sexuality affect viewers or readers in a variety of ways by telling powerful stories about appropriate sexual activity and what happens to individuals who deviate from cultural expectations. Cultural representations tell us about who we are, where we’ve been,

and where we’re going. Cultural texts document how racism, misogyny, and homophobia circulate in public discourses on sexuality. The critical perspectives presented in the readings demonstrate the varieties of possible interpretations of various representations.

Chapter 4, “Learning about Sex,” examines the messages about sexuality people receive and how they engage with the meanings of these messages. Youth (ranging from young children to older teenagers) confront a variety of sex information—and misinformation—that informs their sexual attitudes and behaviors. The readings in this chapter explore the different messages youth encounter in media, school, and family contexts. Across cultures, race groups, and genders, youth are taught rather differently about sex, based on assumptions about their capacities to act as autonomous sexual beings. Across the board, sex education in the United States, as reported by educators, parents, and students, has room for much improvement, lacking sex-positive messaging, failing to be inclusive of LGBTQ and disabled sexual needs and experiences. As active consumers of messages, youth make sense of sexuality meanings in ways that vary across gender, race, class, and sexual identity. And as lifelong learners, adults continue to learn from formal sex education and less formal contexts across the life course.

Chapter 5, “Sexual Bodies,” addresses how we eroticize bodies, body parts, and bodily functions and explores how notions of the erotic can affect the way we feel about our bodies. Societal discourse both celebrates and stigmatizes the body and its functions. What is sexy about a person’s body? Most people can come up with distinct body types or features that are appealing or unappealing to them. Yet ideas about what is sexy and what is not are culturally constructed. For example, some people groom their genitals to craft “sexier” bodies using methods that are just recently becoming

popular. Others have surgeries to change their bodies, challenging norms about bodily function and sexuality. Cultural constructions of the sexual body also function as a form of social control—shaping how we feel about our own bodies, framing our interactions with others, and even forcing us to manipulate our bodies to meet cultural expectations. The articles in this chapter explore many traditional ideas about sexuality that emphasize the gendered nature of sexual bodies.

Chapter 6, “Sexual Practices,” examines how people behave sexually. As you read the articles in this section, think about how social norms, laws, religion, media, families, friends, and partners influence our sexuality and shape our behavior. From the absence of sexual desire to the interest in kink play, human sexuality is tremendously diverse. Although how we enact our sexuality varies immensely, these readings demonstrate what can happen when we vary from expected and accepted ways of acting sexually. Finally, these articles also remind us that the ways we enact sexual behaviors profoundly impact social relationships across the life course.

Chapter 7, “Sexual Health,” illustrates how society treats sexual health and sexually transmitted infections (STIs, also commonly called sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs) quite differently from other forms of health and disease. STIs are the only major group of diseases categorized by their method of transmission, rather than by their symptoms or the parts of the body they affect. People infected with STIs are stigmatized, creating a shield of secrecy in which some people deny to themselves that they have an STI, fail to tell their partners, and avoid seeking treatment. The stigma and perceptions of risk surrounding STIs affect the resources that the government and medical agencies opt to dedicate to public sexual health. For example, when AIDS was first discovered, it was seen as a “gay” or “African”

disease and received little attention. In spite of intense efforts by queer activists, AIDS was considered a national emergency in the United States only when it began infecting white, middle-class, heterosexual Americans. Regardless of the manageability of sexually transmitted infections (as with the vaccine against many strains of HPV or the prophylactic use of PrEP to avoid HIV infection), fears associated with them continue to be a powerful tool in the control of sexuality.

Chapter 8, “Social Control,” illustrates how sexuality is managed and directed by forces both internal and external to individuals. Whereas much research on sexuality emphasizes individual responsibility, in this section we explore the structural factors that influence sexual attitudes and behaviors. Social institutions such as family, law, and medicine control sexual behavior through systems of rewards and punishments. Interpersonal interactions further constrain sexual choices through means such as harassment and labeling. This chapter explores how the mechanisms of social control are often turned against certain groups and how the social control of sexuality is a powerful weapon of oppression. Some selections highlight how social control is a two-way street, with the forces of control and resistance in constant conflict.

Although people like to think of sex as an intimate—and ideally pleasant—activity, it can be used as a weapon of violence and control to humiliate, degrade, and hurt. The readings in Chapter 9, “Sexual Violence,” illustrate the complexities of defining rape and rape victimization. They deal with various types of sexual assault, rape of sex workers, date or acquaintance rape, the rape of men, rape on campus, rape during war, and nuances of giving consent to sexual activities. The articles presented in this section also illustrate the diversity of sexual violence and the sociocultural contexts that support this violence. Although women

are the primary targets of sexual violence, no group is exempt. Sexual violence cuts across all social categories. This chapter also questions assumptions about what counts as sexual violence when consent is not clearly defined. The articles presented here contain graphic and sometimes upsetting or shocking information; it is our hope that readers will not simply be overwhelmed, but will learn how sexual violence is prevalent in our culture as a form of social control and how it is “structured” into our society in a myriad of ways. With knowledge, we can work more effectively for change.

Chapter 10, “Commercial Sex,” explores the commodification of sexuality. Despite numerous laws regulating the sale of sexual services, commercial sex continues to be both a profitable business and a source of abuse. We address the tensions between the freedom to express sexuality through commercial avenues and the exploitation and control of sexuality through its sale. The readings examine who profits financially from the sex industry, who works in the sex industry and their working conditions, who consumes its products, and attempts to stem that consumption.

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staff has worked incredibly hard to publish this edition in record time with white-glove service. We love a publisher that works hard and plays hard (and we enjoy being included in both)!

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as the team's "dominatrix," and the constant mutual support among all team members, creating this book often felt more like fun than work. We hope you have as much fun reading this book as we had putting it together.

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CATEGORIZING SEX



AN INTERVIEW WITH

MARYSOL ASENCIO

*Marysol Asencio, MPH, DrPH, is a full professor at the University of Connecticut with a joint appointment in sociology and El Instituto: The Institute of Latina/o, Caribbean, and Latin American Studies. Dr. Asencio focuses on the intersections of Latina/o sexualities and sexual health with gender, race/racialization, socioeconomic status, and migration. Dr. Asencio has authored, edited, and coedited a number of books and special issues of journals on Latinas/os and their sexualities, in addition to peer-reviewed articles, chapters, and other publications. Her research and projects have been supported by both internal and external grants, such as the Ford Foundation. Her edited volume, *Latina/o Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), helped coalesce Latina/o sexualities research and scholarship as a field of study. She is currently working on a research project on Latina lesbian-queer visibility, which was funded through the UConn Collaborative to Advance Equity through Research on Women and Girls of Color.*

What led you to begin studying sexuality?

I entered graduate school with a research interest in women's reproductive health issues, which at the time ironically rarely dealt with issues of sexuality. It was mostly focused on family planning, contraceptive use, and maternal-child issues. However, this was also shortly after the medical community had identified AIDS when it was briefly referred to as GRID (Gay-Related Immune-Deficiency). It was a time when the lack of understanding of sexuality, as well as the biases about sexuality and certain racial/ethnic and sexual minorities, was exposed in a dramatic and deadly manner. The quickly advancing epidemic affected me personally as well, with the loss of several friends and colleagues. It was a frightening and frustrating time. It not only influenced me to enter sex research but it also awakened me to the need for community-based research and social justice advocacy for marginalized populations in order to promote evidence-based health and social policy.

How do people react when you tell them you study sexuality?

Over the course of my career, I have gotten the impression that for some colleagues who do not do this type of research, sex research is not viewed as serious or important. This is a big concern in terms of having an academic career in sexuality research. Will you be hired because the work is seen as being in the margins of a particular discipline or in academia as a whole? When you tell the average person that you teach human sexuality, there is usually some laughter and a perception that it is a course that provides sexual entertainment rather than a forum for serious, rigorous, and challenging research and scholarship.

What ethical dilemmas have you faced as you've studied sexuality?

Could you tell us about a particularly thorny dilemma and how you solved it?

I was working on a research project on gay men and prostate health with a couple of colleagues. Given that at the time there were no published studies on gay men with prostate cancer, we decided to conduct focus groups with diverse populations of gay men (racial/ethnic and socioeconomic) to see what concerns they had around prostate screening, diagnosis, treatment and its after-effects (many of them being sexual in nature). We used standard procedures that were established for recruiting men into the study, including a \$40 stipend for participation. Toward the end of the study, we were trying to move away from middle-class participants and reach out to poorer, marginalized, and in some cases homeless, gay men. What resulted was that our outreach efforts yielded potential participants who seemed as if they were claiming to be "gay" or "transgendered women" in order to receive the stipend. It was difficult to determine if someone was "gay" or "transgender" since we depend on reported self-identity.¹ If we accepted their assertions that they were gay men or

transgendered women when there were signs that they may not be, we would bias our results. Also, given that they said they “matched” the criteria, there was very little rationale for turning them away other than none of the researchers believing this was the case based on other arguably unreliable cues. There was no way to know for sure.

We addressed this ethical dilemma² by providing every participant with the stipend and then reiterating the fact that although they consented to participate, they could leave at any time without having to give back the stipend. We hoped that those who were questionable in terms of meeting the study criteria would not feel they needed to participate. We went from around 22 people who showed up for the focus group to seven who remained. All the participants we had serious questions about left. It cost us some funds, but we had few options given our approved human subjects protocol and the volatility of the situation. This incident allowed us to consider ways to minimize this problem in future studies. However, it also demonstrates that the use and/or amount of stipends for research participation as well as the self-identification of sexual orientation and gender can in some cases become problematic depending on the particular research population and research needs.

What do you think is most challenging about studying sexuality?

While I think the field as a whole has become more accepted, the research is still “suspect.” It is assumed to be potentially harmful until proven not harmful, in particular when dealing with the sexuality of those under the age of 18. There are significant barriers to getting detailed sexual histories of participants; discussing sexual acts; and attending locations that are designated as sexual such as strip clubs, brothels, etc. Sex research often depends on non-sex researchers (institutional review boards [IRBs], funders, and communities) who may view this type of research as different from other forms of research or who believe that we ought not to ask about sex or that it is a voyeuristic enterprise.

Why is sex research important?

Sexuality is central to understanding a great deal about humanity and society. As someone who researches Latinas/os and sexuality, I was once asked why I “waste” my time as a researcher on sexuality when I could be studying more important issues for the Latina/o community, such as poverty and racism. First of all, studying sexuality involves understanding all its intersections and connections with issues such as poverty and racism. Second, if you look at political debates in this country, sexuality plays a major role (e.g., contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage, teen pregnancy, etc.). Moreover, the outcomes of those debates many times affect racial/ethnic and sexual minorities and low-income individuals and families in ways that disadvantage or minimize their experiences. Therefore, sex research furthers our understanding of power, marginalization, and other social issues.

Of the projects you've done over the course of your academic career, which was most interesting and why?

My first large independent qualitative research on adolescent sexuality was most interesting because I was still learning about sexuality research. It was eye-opening. I remember when I asked one of my female respondents about the first time she had sexual intercourse, she went on to explain how she was raped as a child by an uncle and she wanted to make it clear to me that she saw herself as a “virgin” and would like me to characterize her as such. She had still not had, at the age of 18, “consensual” first sexual intercourse. It was very important to her sense of dignity and control of her sexuality to be seen as a virgin. She also told me that what she did not like about questionnaires that asked her “if she had ever had sexual intercourse” was that they did not reflect her experience or her wish “not” to be characterized as a “sexually active” teen or not a “virgin.” I learned a great deal about the meanings attached to sexuality from those adolescents and I am very grateful that they shared their lives with me.

If you could teach people one thing about sexuality, what would it be?

I would say that sexuality is not just about identity and behaviors; it is a portal to understand society and issues of power.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

One thing that I would like to add is that I hope as the field continues to grow it will attract researchers from many different backgrounds and experiences. I believe, as with any subject matter, that the more diverse the researchers are, in terms of demographic backgrounds and life experiences, the more opportunity there is for various perspectives and insights to be brought into our understanding of sex and sexuality.

NOTES

1. It is important to note that many transgender women do maintain their prostate even if they have had hormonal and surgical alterations to their bodies.
2. For a full account, see Descartes, Lara, Marysol Asencio, and Thomas O. Blank. 2011. “Paying Project Participants: Dilemmas in Research with Poor, Marginalized Populations.” *Advances in Social Work* 12, no. 2: 218–25.

ARE WE HAVING SEX NOW OR WHAT?

GRETA CHRISTINA

When I first started having sex with other people, I used to like to count them. I wanted to keep track of how many there had been. It was a source of some kind of pride, or identity anyway, to know how many people I'd had sex with in my lifetime. So, in my mind, Len was number one, Chris was number two, that slimy awful little heavy metal barbiturate addict whose name I can't remember was number three, Alan was number four, and so on. It got to the point where, when I'd start having sex with a new person for the first time, when he first entered my body (I was only having sex with men at the time), what would flash through my head wouldn't be "Oh, baby, baby you feel so good inside me," or "What the hell am I doing with this creep," or "This is boring, I wonder what's on TV." What flashed through my head was "Seven!"

Doing this had some interesting results. I'd look for patterns in the numbers. I had a theory for a while that every fourth lover turned out to be really great in bed, and would ponder what the cosmic significance of the phenomenon might be. Sometimes I'd try to determine what kind of person I was by how many people I'd had sex with. At eighteen, I'd had sex with ten different people. Did that make me normal, repressed, a total slut, a free-spirited bohemian, or what? Not that I compared my numbers with anyone else's—I didn't. It was my own exclusive structure, a game I played in the privacy of my own head.

Then the numbers started getting a little larger, as numbers tend to do, and keeping track became more difficult. I'd remember that the last one was *seventeen* and so this one must be *eighteen*, but then I'd start hav-

ing doubts about whether I'd been keeping score accurately or not. I'd lie awake at night thinking to myself, well, there was Brad, and there was that guy on my birthday, and there was David and . . . no, wait, I forgot that guy I got drunk with at the social my first week at college . . . so that's seven, eight, nine . . . and by two in the morning I'd finally have it figured out. But there was always a nagging suspicion that maybe I'd missed someone, some dreadful tacky little scumball that I was trying to forget about having invited inside my body. And as much as I maybe wanted to forget about the sleazy little scumball, I wanted more to get that number right.

It kept getting harder, though. I began to question what counted as sex and what didn't. There was that time with Gene, for instance. I was pissed off at my boyfriend, David, for cheating on me. It was a major crisis, and Gene and I were friends and he'd been trying to get at me for weeks and I hadn't exactly been discouraging him. I went to see him that night to gripe about David. He was very sympathetic of course, and he gave me a back-rub, and we talked and touched and confided and hugged, and then we started kissing, and then we snuggled up a little closer, and then we started fondling each other, you know, and then all heck broke loose, and we rolled around on the bed groping and rubbing and grabbing and smooching and pushing and pressing and squeezing. He never did actually get it in. He

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wanted to, and I wanted to too, but I had this thing about being faithful to my boyfriend, so I kept saying, “No, you can’t do that, Yes, that feels so good, No, wait that’s too much. Yes, yes, don’t stop. No, stop that’s enough.” We never even got our clothes off. Jesus Christ, though, it was some night. One of the best, really. But for a long time I didn’t count it as one of the times I’d had sex. He never got inside, so it didn’t count.

Later, months and years later, when I lay awake putting my list together, I’d start to wonder: Why doesn’t Gene count? Does he not count because he never got inside? Or does he not count because I had to preserve my moral edge over David, my status as the patient, ever-faithful, cheated-on, martyred girlfriend, and if what I did with Gene counts then I don’t get to feel wounded and superior?

Years later, I did end up fucking Gene and I felt a profound relief because, at last, he definitely had a number, and I knew for sure that he did in fact count.

Then I started having sex with women, and, boy, howdy, did *that* ever shoot holes in the system. I’d always made my list of sex partners by defining sex as penile-vaginal intercourse—you know, screwing. It’s a pretty simple distinction, a straightforward binary system. Did it go in or didn’t it? Yes or no? One or zero? On or off? Granted, it’s a pretty arbitrary definition, but it’s the customary one, with an ancient and respected tradition behind it, and when I was just screwing men, there was no compelling reason to question it.

But with women, well, first of all there’s [generally] no penis, so right from the start the tracking system is defective. And then, there are so many ways women can have sex with each other, touching and licking and grinding and fingering and fisting—with dildoes or vibrators or vegetables or whatever happens to be lying around the house, or with nothing at

all except human bodies. Of course, that’s true for sex between women and men as well. But between women, no one method has a centuries-old tradition of being the one that counts. Even when [cisgender women] do fuck each other, there’s no dick, so you don’t get that feeling of *This Is What’s Important, We Are Now Having Sex*, objectively speaking, and all that other stuff is just foreplay or afterplay. So when I started having sex with women, the binary system had to go, in favor of a more inclusive definition.

Which meant, of course, that my list of how many people I’d had sex with was completely trashed. In order to maintain it I would have had to go back and reconstruct the whole thing and include all those people I’d necked with and gone down on and dry-humped and played touchy-feely games with. Even the question of who filled the all-important Number One slot, something I’d never had any doubts about before, would have to be re-evaluated.

By this time I’d kind of lost interest in the list anyway. Reconstructing it would be more trouble than it was worth. But the crucial question remained: What counts as having sex with someone?

It was important for me to know. You have to know what qualifies as sex because when you have sex with someone your relationship changes. Right? *Right?* It’s not that sex itself has to change things all that much. But knowing you’ve had sex, being conscious of a sexual connection, standing around making polite conversation with someone while thinking to yourself, “I’ve had sex with this person,” that’s what changes things. Or so I believed. And if having sex with a friend can confuse or change the friendship, think how bizarre things can get when you’re not sure whether you’ve had sex with them or not.

The problem was, as I kept doing more kinds of sexual things, the line between *sex* and

not-sex kept getting more hazy and indistinct. As I brought more into my sexual experience, things were showing up on the dividing line demanding my attention. It wasn't just that the territory I labeled *sex* was expanding. The line itself had swollen, dilated, been transformed into a vast gray region. It had become less like a border and more like a demilitarized zone.

Which is a strange place to live. Not a bad place, just strange. It's like juggling, or watch-making, or playing the piano—anything that demands complete concentrated awareness and attention. It feels like cognitive dissonance, only pleasant. It feels like waking up from a compelling and realistic bad dream. It feels like the way you feel when you realize that everything you know is wrong, and a bloody good thing too, because it was painful and stupid and it really screwed you up.

But, for me, living in a question naturally leads to searching for an answer. I can't simply shrug, throw up my hands, and say, "Damned if I know." I have to explore the unknown frontiers, even if I don't bring back any secret treasure. So even if it's incomplete or provisional, I do want to find some sort of definition of what is and isn't sex.

I know when I'm *feeling* sexual. I'm feeling sexual if my pussy's wet, my nipples are hard, my palms are clammy, my brain is fogged, my skin is tingly and super-sensitive, my butt muscles clench, my heartbeat speeds up, I have an orgasm (that's the real giveaway), and so on. But feeling sexual with someone isn't the same as having sex with them. Good Lord, if I called it sex every time I was attracted to someone who returned the favor I'd be even more bewildered than I am now. Even *being* sexual with someone isn't the same as *having* sex with them. I've danced and flirted with too many people, given and received too many sexy, would-be-seductive backrubs, to believe otherwise.

I have friends who say, if you thought of it as sex when you were doing it, then it was. That's an interesting idea. It's certainly helped me construct a coherent sexual history without being a revisionist swine: redefining my past according to current definitions. But it really just begs the question. It's fine to say that sex is whatever I think it is; but then what do I think it *is*? What if, when I was doing it, I was *wondering* whether it counted?

Perhaps having sex with someone is the conscious, consenting, mutually acknowledged pursuit of shared sexual pleasure. Not a bad definition. If you are turning each other on and you say so and you keep doing it, then it's sex. It's broad enough to encompass a lot of sexual behavior beyond genital contact/orgasm; it's distinct enough *not* to include every instance of sexual awareness or arousal; and it contains the elements I feel are vital—acknowledgment, consent, reciprocity, and the pursuit of pleasure. But what about the situation where one person consents to sex without really enjoying it? Lots of people (myself included) have had sexual interactions that we didn't find satisfying or didn't really want and, unless they were actually forced on us against our will, I think most of us would still classify them as sex.

Maybe if *both* of you (or all of you) think of it as sex, then it's sex whether you're having fun or not. That clears up the problem of sex that's consented to but not wished-for or enjoyed. Unfortunately, it begs the question again, only worse: now you have to mesh different people's vague and inarticulate notions of what is and isn't sex and find the place where they overlap. Too messy.

How about sex as the conscious, consenting, mutually acknowledged pursuit of sexual pleasure of *at least one* of the people involved. That's better. It has all the key components, and it includes the situation where one person is doing it for a reason other than

sexual pleasure—status, reassurance, money, the satisfaction and pleasure of someone they love, etc. But what if *neither* of you is enjoying it, if you're both doing it because you think the other one wants to? Ugh.

I'm having trouble here. Even the conventional standby—sex equals intercourse—has a serious flaw: it includes rape, which is something I emphatically refuse to accept. As far as I'm concerned, if there's no consent, it ain't sex. But I feel that's about the only place in this whole quagmire where I have a grip. The longer I think about the subject, the more questions I come up with. At what point in an encounter does it *become* sexual? If an interaction that begins nonsexually turns into sex, was it sex all along? What about sex with someone who's asleep? Can you have a situation where one person is having sex and the other isn't? It seems that no matter what definition I come up with, I can think of some real-life experience that calls it into question.

For instance, a couple of years ago I attended (well, hosted) an all-girl sex party. Out of the twelve other women there, there were only a few with whom I got seriously physically nasty. The rest I kissed or hugged or talked dirty with or just smiled at, or watched while they did seriously physically nasty things with each other. If we'd been alone, I'd probably say that what I'd done with most of the women there didn't count as having sex. But the experience, which was hot and sweet and silly and very, very special, had been created by all of us, and although I only really got down with a few, I felt that I'd been sexual with all of the women there. Now, when I meet one of the women from that party, I always ask myself: Have we had sex?

For instance, when I was first experimenting with sadomasochism, I got together with a really hot woman. We were negotiat-

ing about what we were going to do, what would and wouldn't be okay, and she said she wasn't sure she wanted to have sex. Now we'd been explicitly planning all kinds of fun and games—spanking, bondage, obedience—which I strongly identified as sexual activity. In her mind, though, *sex* meant direct genital contact, and she didn't necessarily want to do that with me. Playing with her turned out to be a tremendously erotic experience, arousing and stimulating and almost unbearably satisfying. But we spent the whole evening without even touching each other's genitals. And the fact that our definitions were so different made me wonder: Was it sex?

For instance, I worked for a few months as a nude dancer at a peep show. In case you've never been to a peep show, it works like this: the customer goes into a tiny, dingy black box, kind of like a phone booth, puts in quarters, and a metal plate goes up; the customer looks through a window at a little room/stage where naked women are dancing. One time, a guy came into one of the booths and started watching me and masturbating. I came over and squatted in front of him and started masturbating too, and we grinned at each other and watched each other and masturbated, and we both had a fabulous time. (I couldn't believe I was being paid to masturbate—tough job, but somebody has to do it) After he left I thought to myself: Did we just have sex? I mean, if it had been someone I knew, and if there had been no glass and no quarters, there'd be no question in my mind. Sitting two feet apart from someone, watching each other masturbate? Yup, I'd call that sex all right. But this was different, because it was a stranger, and because of the glass and the quarters. Was it sex?

I still don't have an answer.

How Do Heterosexual Undergraduate Students Define Having Sex?

Kelsey K. Sewell and Donald S. Strassberg

A number of studies have examined which physically intimate behaviors individuals consider to be “having sex” (e.g., Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). . . . Though there has been some disagreement among these studies regarding how often some behaviors were considered sex (e.g., for oral stimulation, 24% to 40% across studies), the list of behaviors from most to least likely to be considered sex has proven to be very consistent, being replicated both within (Gute, Eshbaugh, & Wiersma, 2008) and outside (e.g., Pitts & Rahman, 2001) the United States, as well as across time (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Horowitz & Spicer, 2013). Nearly all of these studies have been limited (or nearly so) to exclusively heterosexual participants, the sole exception being a study on gay men in the United States and United Kingdom (Hill et al., 2010). . . .

Several recent studies have explored the idea that definitions of sex may be flexible or ambiguous. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) suggested that underlying many studies is the implicit assumption that individuals have clear definitions of what behaviors do and do not constitute having sex. In contrast to this assumption, however, they found that almost everyone they surveyed could describe previously experiencing an ambiguous sexual situation (e.g., “not quite sex” or “unsure”). Further, they found that participants’ definitions of sex sometimes seemed to be motivated. That is, their decisions about whether to label an

ambiguous sexual encounter as “having sex” seemed to be influenced by their perception of the consequences of labeling it as such (e.g., negative self-evaluation). These authors called those circumstances in which participants considered the possible consequences of the label when choosing their definition “motivated definitions” (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007, p. 257). They suggested these motivated definitions may serve to protect an individual’s self-image but could also have the negative consequence of justifying sexually risky behaviors. . . .

THE PRESENT STUDY

. . . Utilizing a mixed-method design, participants rated their degree of confidence that each of a variety of behaviors constituted “having sex,” assuming (a) they and (b) their significant other (with someone else) were engaging in the behavior, with the order in which these judgments were made (i.e., for self or significant other first) systematically manipulated so that possible order effects could be evaluated. . . . [T]he final sample consisted of 594 individuals, 267 men and 327 women. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 ($M = 23.3$, $SD = 6.55$). . . . None of the demographic variables (e.g., age, race, religious importance) was significantly related to the variables of interest.