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social life. A conception of man as having relatively constant sexual needs is a necessary part of this point of view. As a contrast to this conservative view, we attempt to offer a description of sexual development as a variable sociocultural invention, an invention that in itself explains little and requires much explanation.

Notes

5. With our increased mental health commitment to the significance of sexual activity in old age, frequent tests of sexual competence are likely with concurrent increases in dissatisfaction.
6. Extravasal sexual activities should be included as well, ranging from physical activity (massage, yoga, biofeedback) to the creation of elaborate settings for sexual performances (water beds, vibrators, pillows, fireplaces).
7. This ease of transgression is probably most true for middle-class persons with a wider conception of the social and sexual capacities of a woman. Working-class men or even middle-class men with a highly restricted sense of the appropriateness of a woman's (Madonna's) sexual activity may find it more difficult to have intercourse with her on top than to have fellatio with a prostitute or even extramarital coitus. The activities and actors are differently valued in each script.

Ken Plummer

Symbolic Interactionism and Sexual Conduct: an emergent perspective

Three main traditions of sex research have dominated inquiries into human sexuality until very recently. The first – symbolized by Freud – is the clinical tradition which examines the emotional development of the individual person by means of intensive analytic work on childhood memories and the unconscious. The second – symbolized by Kinsey – is the social book-keeping approach which examines the frequency and social distribution of sexual behaviours by means of interviews, questionnaires and statistical computation. The third – symbolized by Masters and Johnson – is the experimental method which examines the physiology of sexual arousal by means of controlled laboratory observation. There are of course many interconnections between these traditions but their broad collective ‘control’ over the field is without dispute.¹

In contrast to the traditions mentioned above there is a fourth which has a long but undeveloped history in anthropology and a comparatively short one in sociology. Unlike the clinical, book-keeping and experimental traditions, it lacks a symbolic great name with which it can be clearly identified, as well as the generalized influence of these traditions. It consists of a growing number of disparate, small-scale, modest, often apparently trivial, primarily descriptive excursions into the minute world of contemporary contrasting varied sexual experiences. Its channels have led it firstly into exotic and simpler cultures, for example the Trobriand Islanders or the Melanesians, and latterly into the subcultures of urban life: the world of strippers, drag artists, transvestites, transsexuals, homosexuals, prostitutes, and nudists, as well as into pornographic bookstores, gynaecological examinations, massage parlours, lovers’ lanes, nude beaches, abortion clinics, public conveniences, sauna baths, brothels and university bathrooms.⁸ In each case, the researcher has brought back a limited focused account of life in a small realm of experience gathered through close conversation with and observation of these worlds. Now this tradition – widespread as it is slowly becoming in sociological circles – lacks a coherent, grand and systematic scheme such
as the other traditions possess. Its epistemology is one which generally eschews the search for universal truths about sexual matters and shuns abstract conceptualization and grand theorization. Instead its concern pushes it towards the multiple truths of limited contexts. Its task is the relaying — and hopeful comprehension — of focused patterns of sexual experience. In contrast to the clinicians, whose prime focus is the unconscious, the book-keepers, whose prime focus is behavioural frequency, and the experimentalists, whose prime focus is sexual physiology, the concern of this tradition is with sexual meaning and the way it is socially constructed and socially patterned.

But description without theorizing is empty, and it is only in the past decade that the broad affinity between ethnography and symbolic interactionism has been detected and elaborated. Interactionism, of course, is no new theory; developing out of the pragmatist and formalist strands of thought at Chicago University in the 1920s, it sees the central features of human life as residing in socially produced, interactionally negotiated and personally sustained symbolizations. Whilst humans invariably inhabit restraining material worlds (including organic ones), such worlds have to be interpreted and given sense through a dense web of negotiable symbols which are themselves historically produced. Likewise, humans come to give meaning to themselves, to the groups they identify with, to their own pasts and indeed to everything else they encounter in the world. Such meanings are never given and fixed; they are precarious and ambiguous and have to be constantly negotiated and worked at in the ceaseless stream of social interaction. Meaning thus arises in interaction, and the emergent meaning makes human life possible as we distinctively know it.

Many sociological theories have broadly similar concerns (phenomenologists, with their focus on the description and constitution of consciousness; existentialists, with their concern to study ‘human experience-in-the-world’; ethnomethodologists, with their concern to investigate the procedures by which everyday life is composed) and there are affinities with other disciplines (‘construct theory’ and ‘cognitive theory’, for example, in psychology, and linguistic relativity in social linguistics), but it is the interactionists who seem to have focused their general theory most forcefully on human sexuality. Not that the early interactionists showed much concern: neither Mead nor Park paid much attention to it, and although one forerunner of Mead’s at Chicago — W. I. Thomas — did produce a number of papers on sex, as well as a book,

they are limited to idiosyncratic (and now greatly superseded) discussions on gender. A few of the Chicago ethnographers provided relatively crude thumbnail sketches of sexual conduct in selected areas, but such work made little contribution to theoretical advance. Likewise, the work of the Chicago ‘family sociologist’ Burgess (with Locke) was essentially eclectic (though acknowledging indebtedness to Cooley and Mead). Burgess also produced a short paper in 1949 — in the wake of the Kinsey turbulence — highlighting seven rather arbitrary contributions which sociology could make to the study of sex (sexual conduct, sexual roles, role inversion, change and values, extra-marital sex, change and society, research) but most importantly stressing the need to study sexuality as conduct:

The sex behaviour of animals is motivated by instinct, that of man by his attitudes and values which reflect those of his intimate groups and of the environment society ... The various forms of sexual outlet for man are not behaviour, they are conduct. Conduct is behaviour as prescribed or evaluated by the group. It is not simply external observable behaviour but behaviour which expresses a norm or violation.

A few years later — this time in the wake of the female Kinsey volume — Kuhn (Blumer’s major theoretical rival at Iowa) produced a critique that contained the clearest statement of interactionism and sexuality up to that time. For example, he wrote:

Sex acts, sexual objects, sexual partners (human or otherwise) like all other objects towards which human beings behave are social objects; that is they have meanings because meanings are assigned to them by groups of which human beings are members for there is nothing in the physiology of man which gives a dependable clue as to what pattern of activity will be followed toward them. The meanings of these social objects are mediated to the individual by means of language just as in the case of all other social objects. That the communicators which involve these definitions are frequently — at least in our society — surreptitious and characterized by a huge degree of innuendo does not in any wise diminish the truth of this assertion. In short, the sexual motives which human beings have are derived from the social roles they play; like all other motives these would not be possible were not the actions physiologically possible, but the physiology does not supply the motives, designate the partners, invest the objects, with performed passion, nor even dictate the objectives to be achieved.

Important as Kuhn’s statement was, it was never developed and it remains ‘lost’ in the pages of the first volume of Social Problems.

The most important contemporary exponents of this perspective are John Gagnon and William Simon; both trained in Chicago in the late
special importance for human sexuality that we have also needed to invent special theories to deal with it. Theorizing about sex has been shaped by the culture which generated it and this in turn has served to structure and fashion – indeed ‘construct’ – sexualities (a position arrived at more recently and from a different theoretical angle in the work of Foucault). The interactionist account of human sexuality is hence isomorphic with interactionist accounts of other everyday life phenomenon. Its central project is to unravel the social construction of meaning – in history, in interaction, and in biographies; its root metaphor for performing such a task is that of the drama; its key research tools are those which embrace ‘intimate familiarity’.12

In order to convey something of the novelty and differentiates of this approach to sexuality it is instructive to contrast it with an account of the more prevalent views. At many critical points, interactionism subverts the orthodox line, and I will briefly discuss six below.

**Changing Metaphors: ‘Drive’ or ‘Script’?**

Theories are usually guided (often only implicitly) by some metaphorical image enabling something to be seen from the ‘viewpoint of something else’.13 With sexuality, the prevailing imagery has been drawn from the worlds of biology and technology – portraying it respectively as either an animal-like ‘natural’ eruption or a machine-like activity: hydraulic flows, orgasm mapping, energy systems. The root image is that of a *powerful biological drive*.14 The powerful image suggests significance, importance, even centrality to life; the biological image suggests a universal essence – variability is possible only within finite organic limits; the drive image suggests driveness and determinism – sometimes, as in notions of sublimation and repression, closely linked to ideas of hydraulic pressure. This, then, is the metaphor that captures a great deal of thinking about sexuality – an imperious, insistent and often impious force that presses universally for release and satisfaction from within the human body. All shades of thought conspire to use this metaphor: from the libertarian left of Wilhelm Reich to the authoritarian right of ‘traditional’ Christianity, from the scientific thought of Freud and his followers to the contemporary legion of sex therapists, from the literature of Lawrence to the everyday thought of Everyperson. Variations on a theme abound; but who would challenge the ‘naturalness’, the significance, the bodily truth of sexuality? Even the sociologists – usually
the first to stampede towards a cultural account over a biological one—have traditionally maintained the biological bedrock while merely superimposing cultural variation upon it.

The heretical task of challenging this pervasive orthodoxy has been one of the prime accomplishments of interactionism. The imagery of drive is seen to fail to do justice to either human communication or human creativity: human beings harbour the potential to create a diverse array of sexualities through communication with each other. For such a constructive process, the metaphor of the theatre—especially that of the script—thus becomes a crucial building block.

This dramaturgical metaphor has a long history both in sociology and out of it. Despite many difficulties, it has been applied to a wide variety of phenomena: sexual scripts are merely a subset of these, 'formulated in the same ways and with the same purposes' (23). Following on from Burke's dramatism, the metaphor directs the researcher to ponder the processes by which people come to piece together activities which are identifiable as 'sexual': the scene, the act, the agency, the agent, the purpose. Human sexuality—as opposed to biological functioning—only comes to exist once it is enmeshed with partners (real or imagined), activities, times, places and reasons 

This general imagery of 'script' is a vivid one in highlighting the relativity of sexual meanings, their humanly constructed nature, and in correcting biological and mechanical imagery, while a number of fruitful studies have emerged within it. But it is only a general imagery, and many problems remain. In the hands of some researchers, it has become a wooden mechanical tool for identifying uniformities in sexual conduct: the script determines activity, rather than emerging through activity. What is actually required is research to show the nature of sexual scripts as they emerge in encounters. Such encounters may be seen as stumbling, fragile and ambiguous situations in which participants gropingly attempt (through such processes as role taking, role making, altercasting and self-presentation) to make 'sexual sense' of selves, situations and others. In assembling sexual meaning, there will always be elements of novelty, unpredictability and indeterminateness as actors piece together lines of action. But there will also be elements of regularity, loose 'scripts' which 'name the actors, describe their qualities, indicate the motives for the behaviour of the participants, set the sequence of appropriate activities—both verbal and non-verbal'. Regularities flow partly from personal commitments and self-lodging, partly from the existence of abstract sexual meanings, and partly from the routinization of perspectives with others. The study of the construction of the sexual is an enterprise which has only begun in recent years, and even then has primarily been restricted to areas of the unconventional. Thus there exist studies of the game manoeuvres employed in developing (often unpredictable) sexual roles in public conveniences; of the disembodied and 'work-like' properties of sexual encounters in whorehouses; of the rules employed by boy prostitutes in structuring their money-making sexual activities; of the strategies employed by nudists to render their potentially sexual conduct into non-sexual conduct; and of the emerging 'sexual' perspectives in sex-dominated occupations like striptease and taxi-cab driving. Such studies as the above need to be taken seriously and extended. But the point still remains that very little is known (except by implication) about the construction of more conventional ('non-deviant') sexual encounters. While there now exist clear behavioural accounts of the unfolding of sexual acts, such as that of Masters and Johnson, social description appears to remain taboo. How, for example, does one define and describe sexual encounters? How does an encounter come to be recognized as a 'romantic' one, or as a 'transient', 'commodity' one? How does a solitary individual build up a routine sexual fantasy, and how does she/his shape her/his masturbatory world?

One of the few discussions of these sorts of problems is by Gagnon. In a cursory and anecdotal manner, not using empirical materials, he evokes his central concept that sexuality can be viewed as 'scripted behaviour' and presents a simple, yet telling, account of a sexual encounter between a late-adolescent, fairly inexperienced couple. He describes the settings chosen, the preliminary talk, the confused expectations and effects on self-conceptions, the kisses, the problems in undressing, the merger of public worlds with private worlds, the distractions that intrude, the taking of another's roles and the presentation of appropriate self-images, the balance sought between gaining one's own pleasure and meeting the needs of other, the 'coital mess', the feeling of 'doneness', the re-entry into the non-sexual world, and the transformed relationship. Gagnon's analysis is elementary and verges on the literary; but through the notion of script rather than drive he has placed such work at the centre of sexual analysis.

How these 'scripts' come about—historically, socially and personally—
is of prime concern to the interactionist. At once, the concept is made to bridge the most intimate human need and the boldest historical sweep. For historically it addresses matters such as the sources of our various cultural constructions of sexuality, and when and how we came to invest so much importance to sexuality in our general scripts. Socially it ponders how people came to use sexual scripts for social ends, and how they come to scan their past lives, current moments and anticipated futures in order to hook them on to the available but selected sexual scripts. More personally (and more classically) it investigates the psychic needs for individuals to gain excitement from some scripts but not others. All these concerns are interdependent.

Changing Meanings: Essence or Emergent?

The metaphor of ‘script’ immediately suggests a composed, orchestrated construction – as something unfolding through interaction – whereas the metaphor of ‘drive’ suggests an essence awaiting release. A core contrast of the two views, therefore, is the way in which for drive theorists sexual meaning is relatively unproblematic: it is a given, an absolute, an essence. For interactionists this is not so; indeed their central task is to describe and theorize the processes by which sexual meanings are constructed. At the outset, it invariably means that all the categorizations and meanings that are routinely taken for granted by scientists and lay-persons alike have to be rendered problematic: ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ – along with their myriad derivatives – become objects of investigation. The category ‘homosexual’, for example, cannot be simply used as a resource to gather a sample, devise a theory or impute a personality type – as it is with other theories; rather, here, the category itself becomes the research focus. When – and for what reasons – did the category emerge? What part does it play in the wider social order? How do people come to impute such a label – to others and to self? And why can so much experience potentially capable of being so labelled escape or defy such categorization? On an even grander scale, the divide between ‘men’ and ‘women’ has to be put through this analytic mill. And so too, of course, must the very notion of ‘sexuality’. What is this thing called ‘sexuality’, how do we construct it, why do we sometimes attach so much importance to it?

Of course to those who view sex as a given biological force such questions may seem absurd: we know what all these things are. Naively, perhaps, the interactionists do not. In a striking passage, Simon reveals the relativity of sexual meaning:

Imagine, if you will, a panel of matched penises entering an equal number of matched or randomized vaginas: the penises all thrust the identical number of thrusts, all simultaneously achieve orgasms of equal magnitude, and all withdraw at the same time, leaving all vaginas in an equal state of indifference. What can we possibly know about the character of any of these acts? Or any of the involved actors? Let me suggest, if I may, some reasonable candidates for this panel: (a) a lower-class male, having a mild sexual experience, though glowing with the anticipation of the homosocial acknowledgement he will receive as long as the vagina did not belong to his wife; (b) an upper-middle-class male crushed by his inability to bring his partner to orgasm; (c) a male achieving unusual orgasmic heights because his partner is a prostitute or someone else of equally degraded erotic status; (d) a stereotyped Victorian couple ‘doing their thing’ – or is it ‘his thing’? – or possibly, natives of contemporary rural Ireland; (e) a husband fulfilling his marital obligations while dreaming dreams of muscular young truck drivers; (f) a couple performing an act of sexual initiation in the back seat of a VW; and (g) a Belgian nun being raped by a Hun.

In a similar vein, I have remarked elsewhere:

When a child plays with its genitals, is this ‘sexual’? When a person excretes, is this sexual? When a man kisses another man publicly, is this sexual? When a couple are naked together, is this sexual? When a girl takes her clothes off in public, is this sexual? When a lavatory attendant wipes down a toilet seat, is this sexual? When a morgue attendant touches a dead body, is this sexual? When a social worker assists her client, is this sexual? When a man and woman copulate out of curiosity or out of duty, is this sexual? The list could be considerably extended; but the point I hope is made. Most of the situations above could be defined as sexual by members; they need not be. Sexual meanings are not universal absolutes, but ambiguous and problematic categories.

Society and Sex: Contest or Continuity?

The notion of a powerful, ‘essential’ drive leads to the view that sexuality has an important role to play in the construction of social order – either as a key dynamic in the formation of stable personalities or because of its imperative claim for regulation. Unlike interactionists, who would argue that it is through social scripting that sexuality is channelled, drive theorists suggest that it is through sexuality that social order is channelled. There is both a ‘right-wing’ and a ‘left-wing’ version of this view. The former holds that the all-powerful demon of sex needs strong societal regulation for order to be maintained: any chink in the
armoury of control leads to rapid moral decay, sexual anarchy, disordered personalities, and the decline of civilization. In the academic literature, such a view is to be found in Freud, Unwin and Sorokin. It is also evidenced in the contemporary moral crusades in England of Whitehouse. The 'left-wing' view holds that the powerful drive could be a means of creative self-fulfilment if it was not twisted and repressed by an oppressive state for its own ends: the State regulates the powerful drive through the family in order to rigidify the personality structure and render it subservient to the needs of the rulers. In the academic literature, such a view is found in the writings of Marcuse, Reich, and Reiche, and more popularly in the contemporary ideologies of the Gay and Paedophile Liberation Movements. While the right-wing view sees sexuality as the demon within and the left-wing sees sexuality as the great liberator, both credit sexuality with enormous — almost mystical — powers in contributing to social order. Sex becomes the central force upon which civilizations are built up and empires crash down. Interactionists remain suspicious of the empirical validity of such a view, and suggest an alternative interpretation of powerful drives and social order: that social needs for survival and replacement have led many societies to attribute great power to sexuality — either by deification or by negation. In the latter case, a combination of sexual meanings which simultaneously encourage sexuality ('it's a powerful drive') and prohibit it ('it's sinful' etc.) lodges the sexual experience in a contradiction which may generate guilt and anxiety, and bestow an exaggerated importance on sexuality. In this view, therefore, there is a continuity between the cultural meanings and the personal experience of sexuality, and where conflicts exist in the culture they are mirrored in the person.

Sexuality as Determiner or Determined?

A further argument of drive theorists is that sexuality shapes our social conduct. Not only have we become adept at interpreting all manner of social artefacts — from chocolate flakes to motor cars — as sexual symbols; we also treat much social behaviour — collecting, neurosis, stealing, humanitarianism, artistic creation, drinking and eating — as expressions of masked sexuality. Sexual structures come to inhabit social worlds. Interactionists argue that instead of sexuality determining the social, it is the other way round: social meanings give shape to our sexuality.

Sexuality has no meaning other than that given to it in social situations. Thus the forms and the contents of sexual meanings are another cultural variable, and why certain meanings are learnt and not others is problematic. One important implication of this perspective is the need to analyse sexual activity in our culture for its social origins, the ways in which social experiences become translated into sexual ones. Much sexual behaviour may have 'non-sexual' sources: the health-food faddist may take sex at prescribed regular intervals in the same way as health foods and for the same purpose; the married couple may regularly have sexual activity, even when neither wants it, because each believes the other expects it; the prostitute employs sex as a means of earning a living as does the stripper; the man may seek a flow of regular sexual partners in the belief that this may sustain his public image of masculinity; and the student may masturbate out of habit or out of an association with tension-reduction. In each case, sexual experiences are constructed from social motives and settings. Gagnon and Simon in one discussion on homosexuality in the prison setting suggest that:

What is occurring in the prison situation for both males and females is not a problem of sexual release, but rather the use of sexual relationships in the service of creating a community of relationships for satisfying needs for which the prison community fails to provide in any other forms. For the male prisoner homosexuality serves as a source of affection, as a source of validation for masculinity, or a source of protection from the problems of institutional life.

Here, sex is not merely a release used to structure experience; rather, the sexual world is itself fashioned by the social needs of the individual. These needs may centre on many issues — and it is but a short step from here to Foucault's view that 'sexuality' is 'used' as a channel for the negotiation of power.

Sexuality: Necessary or Contingent?

A related argument of drive theorists is that sex is seen as an energy which needs release — very often located within a closed reservoir system subject to the laws of the conservation of energy. The argument, in its crudest terms, suggests that the sexual energy is an absolute force which if not allowed to manifest itself in its 'natural' state will break out into other areas of life. Two key concepts here are repression and sublimation. Thus, if 'absolute sexuality' does not develop 'naturally', the
energy may be repressed, in which case deviations and neurosis are likely to occur through the damming up of libidinal energy, or sublimation may arise, in which case libidinal energy may become the source of extra energy in work, especially in benevolent and artistic occupations. There are other mechanisms by which the energy may be diverted from its original sexual goal. Freud and others thereby encourage a search for the underlying sexual basis of much social behaviour; one becomes very sceptical of the apparently sexless person and imputes to him or her all manner of sublimation techniques.

Now the concepts of repression and sublimation (along with their recent counterpart ‘repressive desublimation’) are unproven assumptions, which have been absorbed into contemporary ‘taken-for-granted’ notions of sexuality. Two simple hypotheses may be deduced from the broad assumption of an energy system: (i) if people have little sexual outlet they must be repressing or sublimating their desires in some manner — and consequently, most likely, exhibiting some form of neurosis; (ii) if people have much sexual outlet their energy must be sapped away from other things — they are unlikely to be creative, active or productive. In the first case one wonders what such persons can be doing with their sexuality, where it is being sapped to; and in the second case one becomes concerned with the person’s ability to perform well in other spheres of life. For both hypotheses, there is little evidence. The work of Kinsey, however, does suggest that individuals with a high degree of sexual activity can be ‘of considerable significance socially’ — one of his most sexually active respondents was a ‘scholarly and skilled lawyer’ who ‘averaged over thirty [orgasms] a week for thirty years’ and others have suggested that ‘no genuine tissue or biological needs are generated by a lack of sexual activity’.

For the interactionist, then, sex per se is not an absolute necessity — unlike food, one can live without it, and some societies do — but neither is it ruinous if one enjoys it very often. One might of course learn to become addicted to it, and that could be damaging. But a great deal of sexual experience is not intrinsically harmful.

**Becoming Sexual: Orientation or Construct?**

Closely allied to this contrast is the way in which sexual development is viewed. For the ‘drive’ theorists the emphasis is placed upon the evolution of identities and orientations through fairly regular phases in the earlier years of life: sexuality is in a broad sense determined either by birth or by childhood. For the ‘script’ theorists, sexual development is a life-long learning process which is historically malleable; sexuality is in a broad sense assembled from the cultural categories currently available.

Again it is the drive view that is most common in both social science and common-sense. Biology, Freudianism and behaviourism lend support to it by tracing out the sequences of sexual development found in childhood and by suggesting the ultimate ‘fiedness’ of what happens there. John Money puts this view in its most flexible form:

Each person’s turn-on has rather fixed boundaries which are set before puberty. Whether the boundaries are orthodox or unorthodox, conventional or unconventional they were established in childhood as part of the differentiation of gender identity, by the coding of the schemers, and by any quirks or oddities that were incorporated into the schemers. Boundaries may first show themselves at puberty, but they are not set in puberty and they don’t change much at puberty or later. Their relative unchangeability helps to explain such phenomena as why second spouses so often resembles the first. Their persistence also explains why adult obligative homosexuals can be fond of and behave affectionately towards a member of the other sex especially if the other is older, but can never fall in love with him or her. Tales of sex degenerates who go from one form of depravity to another, sampling everything, are only fiction; even so-called sex degenerates stick to their particular preferences.

Side by side with this view of the development of sexual orientation is the view that identity emerges simultaneously. This means that either the identity emerges unproblematically, so that the child en route to becoming a heterosexual being also learns the heterosexual identity, or, alternatively, it means that there is a disjunction between the orientation that is built up in childhood and the identity that develops in adulthood. Thus, in this latter case, one may develop into a ‘latent homosexual’, where the orientation — that of ‘a homosexual’ — is set up in childhood, but the identity acquired — that of ‘a heterosexual’ — is inappropriate. This model assumes that the category of heterosexual identity is here inappropriate: the person’s actual identity is that of a homosexual. The task for some clinicians therefore would be to bring into the consciousness of that individual his or her real identity. It hence presumes there may be a real and essential identity — fixed in childhood — independent of members’ awareness of it.

In contrast, the interactionist suggests that such schemes generally impose taken-for-granted adult images of sexuality upon experiences...
that are generally incoherent, ill-formed and ill-defined while believing they are uncovering the true and essential nature of sexuality.

Thus, for example, studies of childhood sexuality generally fail to record shifts at the level of meaning. While there is now considerable evidence of children being involved in ‘adult-defined’ sexuality, these studies generally impose adult interpretations upon the behaviour rather than analysing the definitions which the child builds up. It is well documented that in other cultures children may become engaged in copulatory activities from early ages, and that in this culture children are capable of orgasms before even reaching the age of one. Likewise, it has been well established the children ‘do’ many ‘sexual things’, conjure up ‘sexual fantasies’ and have ‘sexual things’ done to them. But in all of these cases it is naive to assume that children automatically ‘feel’ and ‘recognize’ these experiences in the ways that adults do. Genital play and indecent assault may both be experienced by the child in a ‘non-sexual’ way, because the child has not yet developed competency in the motives and feelings that adults routinely come to associate with sexuality: thus the child is merely ‘playing’, ‘being attacked’ or ‘playing with an adult’. As one correspondent wrote to me:

At about the age of eight I was coerced by a stranger to masturbate him. My chief understanding at the time was that the stranger uninterested. That is, I did not understand either the ejaculation or the sexual meaning of the encounter. It struck me as bizarre, but the sexual meanings were retrospectively imposed when I learnt about orgasms.

It thus becomes clear what the thrust of the interactionist research programme on becoming sexual is.

The focus turns to the way in which individuals throughout their life cycle come to be defined by themselves and others as sexual beings, how they come to hook themselves on to the wider cultural meanings, and how these are renegotiated or stabilized. Gone is the view that socialization is concerned with the management of some inner pre-existing sexual ‘condition’ or ‘motive’; gone is the view of ‘latent’ sexual conditions; gone is the view of people ‘essentially being’ that of which they are unaware. In its place comes a concern with the way ‘sexual motives’ are fashioned out of existing ‘motivational ideologies’; with the ways in which individuals’ self-conceptions as sexual beings shift and change through the life cycle; with the ways in which the past is constantly recast through the present. Blumstein and Schwartz have been the most ardent advocates of this view and pose the major research question as: ‘What is the formula by which an actor arranges information in order to construct a sexual essence for him or herself?’

Perversion or Variation?

A final significant point of contrast concerns the issue of perversion and deviance. It is the drive theorists who have primarily been responsible for establishing a new rogues’ gallery of sexual perverts since – roughly – the middle of the nineteenth century: homosexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, sadomasochists, urolagnics, paedophiles, fetishists and the rest. In each case the ‘type’ has largely been discovered by clinicians, their characterization laid out, their aetiologies designated, and suggestions for remedies proposed. At the core of all this endeavour ultimately is a strong – indeed absolute – conception of what sexuality really means: coital recreation in the service of families. To the extent that sexuality has strayed a little from this purpose, it becomes worrying; to the extent that it has strayed far from it, it becomes downright perverted. In any event, most drive theorists do not merely study the pervert – they also attempt to control him.

The interactionist, yet again, moves off in a full-blown alternative direction. Given that sexuality is relative and used for different social purposes, given that it is historically constructed and bound up with specific times and places, and given that society plays an important formative role in all sexualities, then ‘the pervert’ loses its universal character and becomes a curious invention of our contemporary culture. It becomes, indeed, a specific category to be investigated in itself – but it cannot be clearly taken to reflect a real phenomenon. The general argument thus highlights the view that all humans are initially open to enormous sexual variations; that cultures – through their categorization systems – may restrict and narrow the seeming options to one major route and a number of minor ones; that such categorizations belie the reality of experiences which are in effect much more complex (the term ‘homosexual’ – like the term ‘heterosexual’ – hurls together an assortment of people with so little in common that it becomes perniciously misleading); and that finally through stigmatizing some of these diverse experiences, the foundation is laid for elevating their importance and centrality in individual lives. In this last idea there is clearly a strong affinity between interactionism and the ideas of labelling theorists who
have highlighted the way in which stigma has the power to transform 'ordinary' experiences.46

Conclusion

Much of what has been said of the interactionist image in this article should have raised minor alarms in many readers. For its starting point in the study of human sexuality challenges much of our contemporary wisdom about sex; whereas many presume to know what sex is, interactionists do not; whereas it is commonly sensed as something special, interactionists put it on a par with everything else; whereas it is commonly sensed as being either in need or repression or as a potential source of liberation, interactionists see it as merely reflecting cultural expectations; whereas it is commonly seen as being the motive force for much human behaviour, interactionists invert this wisdom and suggest that sex is engaged in far wider social reasons; whereas 'too much' or 'too little': sex are frequently seen as problems, interactionists see no reason for this; whereas sexual development is usually seen to be determined by childhood experience, interactionists see it as much more fluid and changing; whereas certain patterns of sexual development can be assumed as 'perversions', the interactionists see these critically as social constructions. The interactionist is a stranger to contemporary cultural meanings and concocts a heretical view.46

My presentation and argument has been clearly overstated. I have lumped together many disparate views under the rubric of 'drive theorists', have performed a great injustice to the subtleties and complexities of their views; and I have polarized the differences of 'drive' and 'construct' too sharply. All of this I acknowledge. There are, I am sure, ways in which the two views can be bridged and elsewhere I have started to suggest these.47 But before an adequate synthesis - or didactical revision, if you like - can be made, the logic of the counterposed position of interactionism needs to be much more thoroughly explored, empirically and theoretically. As an approach to sexuality, it is markedly different from most that have dominated thinking in the past century; it is itself scarcely a decade old in its developed form, and its more extreme arguments need careful scrutiny before it is watered down into the reigning orthodoxies.

Bibliographical Notes

1. For a good general introduction to the field of 'sex research', see P. Robinson, The Modernisation of Sex (Elek, 1976); E. Brecher, The Sex Researchers (André Deutsch, 1969); M. S. Weinberg (ed.), Studies from the Kinsey Institute (Oxford University Press, 1976). An overview of the current state of the art is to be found in 'Sex Research: Future Directions', Archives of Sexual Behaviour, Vol. 4, No. 4 (July 1975).
3. The nature and origins of symbolic interactionism are now widely discussed, but two contrasting statements of great value are Blumer's 'Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method' (Prentice Hall, 1969) and Rock's The Making of Symbolic Interactionism (Macmillan, 1979).
5. Mead does write of the 'sexual impulse', and describes it as the impulse 'which is most important in the case of human social behaviour, and which most decisively or determinately expresses itself in the whole general form of human social organization': see G. H. Mead, Mind, Self, and Society (University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 228.
7. For example, see N. Anderson, The Hobo (University of Chicago Press, 1923), Ch. 10.
10. Their work can be found in many papers, but their key books are J. Gagnon and W. Simon, Sexual Conduct (Aldine, 1973), and J. Gagnon, Human Sexualities (Scott, Foresman and Co., 1977). Other writing in this field includes I. Reiss, The Family System in America (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); J. Henslin, Studies in the Sociology of Sex (Appleton Century Croft, 1971); K. Plummer, Sexual Stigma (Routledge, 1975); J. DeLora and C. A. B. Warren, Understanding Sexual Interaction (Houghton-Mifflin,
12. The term ‘intimate familiarity’ is derived from John LeFland’s Doing Social Life (Wiley, 1976). It leads to an advocacy of rigorous field work and qualitative research. For a recent overview of this see Howard Schwartz and Jerry Jacob, Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness (Free Press, 1979).
14. Gagnon and Simon refer to this as ‘the drive reduction model’.
18. For a recent set of appraisals see J. Ditton (ed.), The View from Goffman (Macmillan, 1980); for an earlier one, see D. Brissett and C. Edgeley, Life as Theatre: A Dramatizatious Source Book (Aldine, 1974).
20. For a clarification of such terms, see G. McCall and J. Simmons, Identities and Interactions (Free Press, 1966).
24. For an introduction to historical research on sexuality, see Radical History Review, 20, Spring/Summer 1979. The (now classic) statement of a history of sexuality is to be found in Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 (Allen Lane, 1978).
25. On this, see R. Stoller, Sexual Excitement (Pantheon, 1979).
28. See Foucault, op. cit.; and also his Introduction to Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite (Pantheon, 1980).
30. See Plummer (1975), op. cit.
31. e.g. S. Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents (Hogarth Press, 1975).
33. e.g. H. Reisch, Sexuality and Class Struggle (New Left Books, 1970).
34. e.g. Tom O’Carroll, Paedophilia: The Radical Case (Peter Owen, 1980); Dennis Altman, Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation (Autterbridge and Dienfiet, 1971).
36. See Gagnon and Simon (1973), op. cit., p. 258.
42. The literature on child sexuality is now considerable. A recent overview — though certainly polemical — is O’Carroll, op. cit. See also F. M. Martinson, ‘Eroticism in Infancy and Childhood’, Journal of Sex Research, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1976), pp. 251–62.
43. Although Blumstein and Schwartz have published several papers on bisexuality, at present their two most significant papers remain unpublished. These are ‘The Acquisition of Sexual Identity’ (American Sociological Association Annual Conference, 1976) and ‘The Elements of a Sexual Identity’ (American Sociological Association Annual Conference, 1980).
44. See Foucault again, op. cit.
45. See Plummer (1975), op. cit.
47. See Plummer in Richardson and Hart, op. cit., and Plummer (1981), op. cit.