

The Sociology of Human Sexuality

A Darwinian Alternative to Social Constructionism and Postmodernism

Stephen K. Sanderson

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ABSTRACT

Social constructionism and postmodernism have been the most prominent approaches to the sociological study of human sexuality in the last two decades. Although sexual behavior is undoubtedly socially influenced, since it varies in a number of ways from one society and one historical time period to another, there is such a regularity and consistency in some patterns of sexual behavior across space and time that it must be strongly rooted in our biological nature. Social constructionism greatly exaggerates the flexibility of human sexuality and suffers from an enormous underappreciation of the real facts of actual sexual behavior in human social life. Social constructionism's postmodernist version is also ideologically rather than scientifically driven and sees the search for truth as a political rather than an empirical process. This paper suggests the need to reorient the sociological study of sexuality and proposes Darwinian sexual selection theory as the best theoretical alternative to for doing so. It outlines a Darwinian perspective on sexuality and applies it to several dimensions of heterosexuality and to the two major forms of homosexuality in the world's societies.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

It seems reasonable to say that the sociological study of human sexuality has been dominated for the past twenty years by social constructionist and postmodernist perspectives. It is not clear whether thinkers working from such perspectives are in the numerical majority, but they certainly seem to speak the most forcefully and to be the subject of the greatest attention. Books and articles using these perspectives appear to be more influential than other works, and courses in the sociology of human sexuality seem invariably oriented in this way. There is no doubt that social constructionism and postmodernism dominate gay and lesbian studies, and that these approaches are extremely influential in the most elite universities in the United States. This paper argues that these perspectives are inadequate and that the sociological study of human sexuality needs to be completely reoriented theoretically. A Darwinian perspective is suggested as the most useful mode of departure.

Social constructionist and postmodernist thinking about sexual behavior is rooted in the ideas of the renowned French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978). Foucault saw societies as constructing “sexual regimes” – entire complexes of sexual attitudes, values, and practices – that were infused with politics. He urged us to deconstruct these regimes so that we could see them for what they are. Some of the most prominent recent social constructionist/postmodern theorists of human sexuality are Steven Seidman (1994a, 1994b, 1996), Jeffrey Weeks (1986), and Adrienne Rich (1980).¹ These thinkers are opposed to “essentialism,” or the notion that sexuality is part of our biological nature and that there are certain universal types of it. Seidman tells us that sex is social and that this inevitably makes it political. He says that “which sensations or acts are defined as sexual, what moral boundaries demarcate legitimate and illegitimate sex, and who stipulates this are political. Paralleling class or gender politics, sexual politics involve struggles around the formation of, and resistance to, a sexual social hierarchy” (1994a:166). Continuing, he describes the social constructionist approach to human sexuality as follows (1994a:171):

At the heart of a social constructionist perspective is the rejection of the antithesis of sex and society. Sex is viewed as fundamentally social; the categories of sex – especially heterosexuality and homosexuality, but also the whole regime of modern sexual types, classifications, and norms – are understood as social and historical facts. With respect to homosexuality, the chief theme was that “homosexuality” or (more appropriately) same-sex experiences were not a uniform, identical phenomenon, but that their meaning and social role varied historically. In particular, social constructionists argued that “the homosexual” cannot be assumed to be a transhistorical identity; instead the category of homosexuality operates as marking a distinct psychological and physical human type or identity only in modern Western societies.

Jeffrey Weeks (1986) holds that sexuality is not biologically given but is produced by society through webs of social interaction and definition. Sexual orientation and behavior are social rather than biological products. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are socially rather than biologically determined. The role of biology is mainly limited to providing potentialities and setting limits. Weeks implies that the

distribution of sexual orientations in a society is a matter of power; heterosexuals have historically had the power to define heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as deviant. Apparently Weeks means to say that most people are heterosexual because they are simply conforming to social norms. Adrienne Rich (1980) is more explicit. For her, heterosexuality is essentially a political institution, a matter of what she calls *compulsory heterosexuality*. Heterosexuality is imposed by the powerful on the less powerful or powerless. “For women,” Rich (1980:648) says, “heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propangandized, and maintained by force.”

The most recent form of social constructionist/postmodernist thinking about sexuality is what is infelicitously known as *queer theory*, which has come to be extremely influential. It emerged in the late 1980s in several Ivy League universities and has taken particularly strong hold in these and other highly prestigious universities (Stein and Plummer, 1994). However, it has swept through the United States and can be found to influence thinking about sexuality in even the most ordinary institutions. It first came to my attention through the devotion of a special issue of the journal *Sociological Theory* to it. Stein and Plummer (1994:181-82) demarcate four principal characteristics of queer theory (I use their language in order to capture the jargon that infects social constructionism/postmodernism):

1. A conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power as being embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides.
2. The problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general, which are always on uncertain ground.
3. A rejection of civil rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody; these lead to deconstruction, decentering, and revisionist readings.
4. A willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the province of sexuality, and to conduct queer interpretations of apparently heterosexual or nonsexual texts.

Queer theorists see sexuality everywhere and everything as sexualized. Like the social constructionists and postmodernists in general, they are overtly political, but even more aggressively so. For them, sexual oppression based on sexual difference is omnipresent (Heasley and Crane, 2003). As Stein and Plummer (1994:182) remark, “Queer theorists turn their deconstructive zeal against heterosexuality with a particular vengeance.” Queer theory seeks to make homosexuality normal and redefine heterosexuality as deviant. Paraphrasing Marx, they see heterosexuality as containing the seeds of its own destruction (Stein and Plummer, 1994). They also seek to reread sociological theory from a queer perspective: “What happens to Giddens’s structuration theory,” Stein and Plummer (1994:185) ask, “if hetero/homo issues are brought into the foreground? How might *Street Corner Society* or *Learning to Labour* look if homo/hetero issues were placed at center stage? How would the work of a Smelser, a Habermas, or an Alexander look if they lost their heterosexual and heterosexist assumptions and placed “queer” concerns in their frame of analysis”? Queer theorists have also attempted, with great success, to reorient pedagogy along queer theoretical and political lines on the assumption that classrooms have always been “heterosexualized” (Bryson, 1992; Stein and Plummer, 1994).²

Queer theory apparently knows no limits. At a conference on globalization held

at the University of California at Santa Barbara in May of 2003, Peter Chua (2003) presented a paper entitled “Sexualities of globalization: Translocal hybridity and the specters of development studies.” Sexuality, Chua argued, as if everyone knew it and it was patently obvious, is not about sexuality at all, but really about power, and everything is sexualized. Even globalization is sexual in Chua’s mind, for he asks whether globalization is heterosexual or queer. He also claimed that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 was really a sexual act because it reproduced heterosexual domination.

What can we make of all of this? One major problem is that, with one or two possible exceptions (Harris, 1981; Herdt, 1984), heterosexuality is overwhelmingly the most common form of sexual activity in all known societies. This would seem to suggest that sexual orientation is rooted in our biological nature. Weeks (explicitly) and Rich (implicitly) argue, as we have seen, that heterosexuality is the most common form of human sexuality simply because of the political domination of heterosexuals over homosexuals. But this is an unusually extreme form of special pleading. It is also an argument that not only flies enormously in the face of the facts, but is completely illogical. Are we expected to believe that precisely the same kind of social construction occurs in all known societies, most of which are separated by enormous distances of space and time? Rich’s response to this implicit question is that such social constructions are rooted in male domination and men’s desires to use women for their own sexual pleasures; but this implies that most men themselves are already heterosexuals, and thus begs the very question Rich is attempting to answer. Even more problematic is the whole question of male and female anatomy. From the perspective of Darwinian evolutionary biology, anatomical structures arise because they are adaptive. Males have penises, women vaginas, and the one seems to fit into the other in a very smooth way. These structures must have evolved together, and as a result the brain must have evolved to give men and women the necessary drives to want to put them together. And imagine a species with complete indifference as to how it should behave sexually. It would quickly be driven to extinction by other species that would outreproduce it. It is thus impossible to imagine a species that is biologically indifferent to its sexual orientation because such a species could not exist more than a very short time.

Moreover, there are a number of striking similarities in nonheterosexual behavior throughout the world (Weinrich, 1992). Homosexuals in widely divergent societies and cultures typically display a great deal of gender-reversed behavior, which is usually evident very early in life. Especially damaging for social constructionists and postmodernists is the fact that homosexuals appear in most societies at about the same rate regardless of whether the society is accepting of homosexuality or hostile to it. If homosexuality is a socially constructed choice, why would some individuals make such a choice in a society that is intensely homophobic?

There is little doubt that social definitions of appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior vary widely throughout societal time and space (Ford and Beach, 1951; Broude and Greene, 1976). But, as we have seen, there are definite limits, and even with respect to the variations it is by no means a certainty that different sexual attitudes and practices are arbitrary, uncaused constructions. That is a matter for empirical investigation.

The other problem with social constructionism/postmodernism is its aggressively political nature. It is clear not only that these thinkers have a political agenda – after all, they are extremely explicit in that regard – but that it is this agenda, rather than the search for truth, that is driving their whole approach. This agenda is so aggressive that it has led to absurd conclusions – sex is not about sex but about power, everything is sexualized, homosexuality should be the social norm, and so on. In his well-known work *Conflict Sociology*, Randall Collins (1975) makes note early in the book of three forces that have worked against the development of sociological theory and scientific sociology. One of these is politics. I do not buy the line that there is no such thing as objectivity and that social scientists cannot at least strive for value neutrality. Our understanding of human sexuality needs to be driven by the search for truth, not the desire to be sexually transgressive. In sociology, politics corrupts, and absolute politics corrupts absolutely. Therefore, let us turn to a perspective on human sexuality that is driven by this search for truth rather than by a new form of sexual domination.

A DARWINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

Sexual attitudes, emotions, and behaviors are much better understood, I argue, in terms of Darwinian inclusive fitness theory. This theory assumes that humans, like other species, have evolved to maximize their reproductive success, or what Robert Trivers (1972) has called their *inclusive fitness*. Inclusive fitness is the sum total of an individual's fitness that it has contained in the genes inside its own body and the copies of these genes contained in the bodies of all of its relatives. An individual's inclusive fitness can be maximized by natural selection, by sexual selection, or by both. Natural selection operates on the capacity of an organism to survive and by doing so to reproduce and propagate its genes. Natural selection is what we usually think of when we think of Darwinian theory. Sexual selection, by contrast, does not act directly upon an organism's capacity to survive, but rather upon its ability to find mates. It is sexual selection rather than natural selection that is the more useful concept in understanding human sexuality. One form of sexual selection is based on male combat. Males compete for access to females, with the winners getting the female(s), or at least a preponderance of them. This is what happens among deer and elk, for example, whose antlers have evolved as weapons to be used in combat, or among sea lions and walruses. Or females may choose males who have certain traits that they favor. Among peacocks, for example, elaborate coloration and plumage have evolved because they have been chosen by peahens as desirable qualities in their mates.

Trivers (1972) has argued that the key factor in determining how sexual selection works is parental investment – which sex invests more in the rearing of offspring. There is commonly a tradeoff between the relative parental investment of the sexes and the energy that is put into mating. Among highly monogamous species, the parental investment of the sexes is approximately equal, and males put as much energy into parental care as into mating effort. Among polygynous species, on the other hand, males contribute little to parental care and put their energies into mating effort. Among such species, males tend to compete vigorously among themselves for access to females. They also tend to control the sexual behavior of females by limiting or preventing their

access to other males. Most species are of this latter type. Humans fall into this category, although human males tend to invest more in their offspring than the males of other species.

Heterosexuality

In humans, sexual selection has been fully at work determining men's and women's sexual choices, emotions, and behaviors. Men have competed amongst one another for mates, and both men and women have evolved clear preferences in regard to the opposite sex. Donald Symons's *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (1979) brilliantly develops a Darwinian interpretation of human sexuality and shows how it is rooted in sexual selection. Symons first discusses sexual choice. Men everywhere appear to be much more naturally aroused than women by visual sexual stimuli. In Western societies the male market for pornography is huge, but the female market is virtually nonexistent. There is an extremely widespread, probably universal, desire on the part of men to be stimulated by the sight of female genitals. Symons interprets this dimension of male sexuality as an evolutionary adaptation that promotes the male's inclusive fitness. The greater the extent to which men are visually aroused the more they will tend to copulate with and impregnate women. However, there is no evolutionary advantage to a female to be visually aroused by the sight of naked males. Indeed, this would work against her inclusive fitness because it would compromise her tendency to be choosy and select only those partners she deems most suitable for herself and her future children.

For males, physical attractiveness plays a major role in sexual attraction, with males using such indicators of high female fecundity as health, complexion, cleanliness, condition of the skin, and signs of disease or disability (see also Symons, 1995). Physical attractiveness of the sexual partner is much more important to men than to women. Males everywhere also show an extremely strong desire for young females. As men get older, in a wide range of societies the age gap between them and their mates increases (Kenrick and Keefe, 1992; Kenrick, Trost, and Sheets, 1996). This preference for young females is an evolved strategy that promotes males' inclusive fitness. Younger females are much more likely to become pregnant and to produce strong, healthy offspring. They also have a longer reproductive period ahead of them than do older women, and thus men who mate with younger women can produce more offspring over time.

The preference of men for younger women is also indicated by studies of what biologists call *neoteny*, or the retention of juvenile characteristics in adults. Everyone has had the experience of perceiving the very young offspring of mammals as "cute," and also of perceiving human infants and children in the same way. The features that make babies and children cute are such things as relatively large eyes, a short distance from mouth to chin, a small nose, and full lips. Women often retain these characteristics to some extent as they mature into adulthood, and there seems to be a strong male attraction to such traits.

Devendra Singh and his colleagues (Singh, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Singh and Young, 1995; Singh and Luis, 1995; Barber, 1995; Furnham, Dias, and McClelland, 1998) have carried out a variety of fascinating studies in which they show that the most important dimension of female sexual attractiveness is a certain type of body shape. Singh found that men in all of his studies preferred a woman with a waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) of about .70, and as women's WHRs increased they were regarded as increasingly

unattractive. Studies involve different racial and ethnic groups in the same society, different contemporary societies, and sculptures and poetry depicting female attractiveness in ancient and medieval societies in Europe and Asia (Singh, Frohlich, and Haywood, 1999). Reports of disconfirming evidence (Wetsman and Marlow, 1999; Tassinari and Hansen, 1998) have been shown to be unreliable (Bronstad and Singh, 1999; Streeter and McBurney, 1999). Evidence is rapidly accumulating that a low WHR is an excellent indicator of female reproductive status and overall female health. Girls with lower WHRs show earlier pubertal endocrine activity, and married women with higher WHRs have more difficulty getting pregnant and give birth to their first child at a later age. As women age, their WHRs increase, and after menopause women's WHRs approximate those of males. Singh suggests that human males the world over are descended from ancestral males who maximized their inclusive fitness by mating with low-WHR females. As he has put it (1993a:303), "males who sought and were successful in mating with females with gynoidal fat distribution [low WHR] would leave more progeny than males who indiscriminately mated with females."

These findings do not suggest that there are no cultural differences in standards of attractiveness. Human behavior is always the product of the complex interaction between biological predispositions and the total physical and social environment. However, is it unlikely that cultural differences in standards of attractiveness will be found that directly undermine the unconscious goals of both males and females in maximizing their reproductive success. No one has yet discovered a society where men prefer older, unhealthy women who have low reproductive value.

Another widespread and probably universal dimension of human sexuality is men's tremendous desire for sexual variety. This is highly adaptive in terms of the male's inclusive fitness. The more sexual partners a man has, the more females he will impregnate and the larger his number of offspring. Although studies show that the number of married women who have affairs is not dramatically smaller than the number of men who do, Symons interprets this in terms of what men and women, respectively, are looking for in an extramarital affair. Men, it seems, desire mainly sex, whereas women value the extramarital relationship *as a relationship* and use sex as a means of establishing and cementing the relationship. Women often seek extramarital affairs because of a dissatisfaction with their marriages. At the risk of oversimplification, women are using sex to get love, but men are using love to get sex.

Sexual jealousy also appears to be a human universal. In Darwinian terms, for males it is an emotion that has evolved as an anticuckoldry device (Daly, Wilson, and Weghorst, 1982), i.e., as a mechanism for preventing a man's mate from being impregnated by another man (which would promote the other man's inclusive fitness over his own). Daly, Wilson, and Weghorst (1982) argue that males have aggressively competed for women throughout hominid history. Throughout the world's societies there is remarkable consistency in the view that sexual intercourse between a married woman and someone who is not her husband is a violation; the victim is the husband, who is entitled to compensation. Many societies have punished adulterous women severely. A jealous rage is expected in many societies as the result of this offense against a husband. Adultery by a wife is perhaps the single most common reason for divorce throughout the world, and the main cause of male aggression against women. And men seek to control female sexuality in all societies, often by such means as claustration, footbinding, chastity devices, genital mutilation, and male chaperonage. The claims of

many authors (e.g., Whyte, 1978; Stephens, 1963; Ford and Beach, 1951; Leacock, 1980) that there are a number of societies in which jealousy is not displayed and where both sexes are allowed considerable sexual freedom outside marriage have been strongly challenged (Daly, Wilson, and Weghorst, 1982). Societies that permit adultery appear to do so only under very restrictive circumstances, and there are numerous examples of male aggression toward adulterous wives in some of the societies that have been classified as “permissive.” In all of eleven societies that have been identified as unusually permissive, men appear to restrict the sexual freedom of their wives and use violence or the threat of it in doing so.

What about female sexual jealousy? For David Buss (2000), female jealousy is just as much an evolutionary adaptation as male jealousy, because philandering men may impose high costs on their wives or lovers. A philandering man may leave his wife or lover for another woman, and thus the wife or lover loses the resources that man provides for her and her children. Moreover, there appear to be important, and highly predictable, sex differences in the nature of jealousy. Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth (1992) have carried out several relevant studies. In one study they found that 60 percent of the males reported more distress over sexual infidelity than to their mates’ emotional attachment to a rival. By contrast, 83 percent of the women indicated that they would be more distressed over their mates’ emotional attachment to a rival. In another study they measured men’s and women’s physiological arousal to imagined sexual infidelity compared to imagined emotional infidelity. Men showed much more arousal with respect to sexual infidelity, whereas women showed just the opposite, and this difference was very large. Although these results pertain to American subjects, very similar results have been reported from studies in China, Korea, Japan, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Buss, 2000). These findings are exactly what one would expect from sexual selection theory. Men are concerned with gaining and controlling mates and preventing other men from inseminating them. Women, on the other hand, are more bothered by emotional infidelity because to promote their inclusive fitness they seek to find mates who will be loyal providers for them and their offspring.

A much debated question is whether men have a stronger sex drive and desire for sex. It appears that they do. Copulation is, Symons argues, a service that females provide for males in all societies, and it is the males who woo and court females rather than the other way around. The behavior of homosexuals provides a good test of this conclusion. As Symons (1979) notes, pornography has a strong appeal to gay males, but lesbians show little interest in it. Lesbians also have little interest in extramarital affairs and tend to build long-lasting and faithful monogamous relationships. Gay males, by contrast, have a marked tendency toward promiscuity, even more so than heterosexual males. Bell and Weinberg (1978; reported in McKnight, 1997), using a sample of 685 gay men, found that over 90 percent reported having had more than 25 partners, almost half reported more than 500 partners, and nearly a quarter claimed to have had more than 1,000 partners. Symons interprets such high rates of promiscuity as the result of the lack of need of male homosexuals to compromise with women. In all-male relationships, men can give their desires free rein. Symons claims that the actual amount of extramarital activity heterosexual men have always stems from a compromise with their wives. With homosexual men, this necessity for compromise disappears.

In a massive study of over 10,000 individuals from 37 cultures, Buss (1992, 1994) has confirmed many of Symons’s findings and added several new wrinkles of his own.

Respondents were located on six different continents, came from both rural and urban areas, and were widely representative of different socioeconomic levels. Women were about twice as likely as men to give importance to a partner's economic resources, and women were more desirous of a high-status partner. As Buss notes, "social status is a universal cue to the control of resources. Along with status come better food, more abundant territory, and superior health care" (1994:26). Interestingly, women who themselves have high status and considerable economic resources do not relax their desire for high-status and resource-rich men; indeed, empirical evidence suggests that such women still prefer men who have more status and resources than they do (B. Ellis, 1992). Women generally prefer men who are older than they, on average men who are about three and a half years older. This makes sense in evolutionary terms because older men are more emotionally and economically stable and more likely to be good providers. Other qualities that women seek in men are ambitiousness, which turned out to be much more highly regarded by women than by men; intelligence, because more intelligent men are better providers of resources; and size, strength, and physical prowess, qualities that obviously relate closely to resource-providing abilities. Men, on the other hand, prefer younger mates, and take on increasingly younger ones to the extent that they can do so. Generally, the more male dominated the society, the greater the age gap between men and their wives or lovers, and the age gap between men and their mates increases as men divorce and remarry.

Tooby and Cosmides (1989:37) summarize the enormous importance of all of these empirical findings for a Darwinian understanding of human sexual behavior:

Culture theory as it stands predicts the null hypothesis: that differences between cultures are random with respect to evolutionary hypotheses and therefore that, for example, sex differences should occur as frequently in one direction as the other. The assertion that "culture" explains human variation will be taken seriously when there are reports of women war parties raiding villages to capture men as husbands, or of parents cloistering their sons but not their daughters to protect their sons' "virtue," or when cultural distributions for preferences concerning physical attractiveness, earning power, relative age, and so on, show as many cultures with bias in one direction as in the other.

Homosexuality

Same-sex sexual relations have taken two principal forms in human societies. What can be called *situational homosexuality* occurs when individuals, most often men, engage in sexual relations with members of the same sex as a substitute for sexual relations with members of the opposite sex. In this case, individuals desire sexual relations with members of the opposite sex, but for one reason or another their access to such partners is curtailed. By contrast, *preferential homosexuality* occurs when individuals are totally, or almost totally, committed to same-sex relationships and do not find heterosexual relations gratifying. Let us discuss each of these in turn.

Situational Homosexuality

The ancient Greeks practiced an elaborate form of situational homosexuality (Cantarella, 1992; Percy, 1996). Within the framework of their educational system, male tutors would take their young boy pupils as lovers for a period of time, engaging in both anal and intercrural intercourse (intercrural intercourse involved the tutor's placing his penis between the legs of the boy and ejaculating). This homosexual relationship was highly idealized and regarded as beneficial to both parties. It was thought to make the boy more masculine and was linked with military courage and valor. In due time, however, the tutor abandoned the relationship, married, and took up a conventional heterosexual life.

In its early stages, Roman society looked negatively on Greek tutor-pupil homosexuality, although the Romans did consider it acceptable for a man to have sex with a male slave, and such relations were relatively common (Cantarella, 1992). "Passive homosexuals" on the other hand – men who took the receptive position in anal intercourse – were thought to be highly effeminate and were disdained. In due time, however, the Romans moved increasingly toward the Greek pattern, and by the second century BC Roman men were openly courting free-born boys (Cantarella, 1992). Love relationships between men and free-born boys became common, although they were not connected to the educational system. Even passive homosexuality became increasingly common, and male prostitutes emerged. As for female homosexuality, the Romans looked very negatively upon this, considering it morally depraved (Cantarella, 1992). The Chinese also had a form of man-boy homosexuality that resembled the Greek pattern, even in its linkage with the educational system and its disdain for exclusive homosexual relationships between men. Japan was another agrarian civilization with relative sexual openness and institutionalized man-boy homosexuality (Leupp, 1995).

Situational homosexuality has also been common in a number of band and tribal societies. The Azande of the Sudan, for example, exhibited a pattern of homosexuality very similar to the Greek pattern. Situational homosexuality is widespread throughout Melanesia (Herdt, 1984). Among the Etoro of New Guinea, all men marry but there are as many as 260 days per year in which they are forbidden to have heterosexual intercourse. The Etoro believe that every male possesses a finite amount of semen and that men acquire semen from other men in the form of a gift. This occurs primarily as a result of young boys fellating older men. Boys also engage in receptive anal intercourse with men. As in the case of the Greeks, the man-boy relationship is thought to contribute to the boy's masculinity (Harris, 1981).

These socially approved and often idealized patterns of homosexuality would appear, on the surface, to confirm the social constructionist view and strongly challenge a Darwinian interpretation of human sexuality. But closer scrutiny of these patterns shows that a Darwinian interpretation remains intact. Note that all of the patterns of homosexuality described above are engaged in by men who are preferentially heterosexual. They either practiced heterosexuality along with homosexuality, or they experienced a brief period of homosexual relations followed by a much longer period of marriage and heterosexuality. As already noted, heterosexuality is the most common sexual practice in all societies, just as inclusive fitness theory tells us it must be. Homosexuality, if it is practiced, is always secondary to regular heterosexual relations,

and in most cases there are strict rules regarding what kind of homosexual relations may be practiced, with whom, and how often.

Two more features of situational homosexuality show that it fails to contradict a Darwinian interpretation. First, it is obvious that all of the patterns of homosexuality we have been describing are ones engaged in only by men. In fact, there is much less female situational homosexuality throughout the world than male situational homosexuality, with only a very few cases ever being reported (and I am not familiar with a single case) (Harris, 1989). The probable reason is that the male sex drive is much stronger than the female's, and thus is much more vigorous in seeking an outlet. Second, situational homosexuality seems to be most commonly man-boy homosexuality, and often the very societies that look favorably on man-boy sexual relations strongly disapprove of homosexual relations between adult men. Boys seem to be a target of men throughout the world because they most closely resemble males' ideal sex target, the adolescent or adult female. Take two 12-year old, prepubescent children, one boy and one girl, cut their hair the same length, and turn them facing away. In some cases it will be difficult to tell which is the boy and which the girl.

Preferential Homosexuality

What then of preferential homosexuality? This type of homosexuality, I argue, only makes sense within a Darwinian framework. Social constructionist theories of sexuality work no better for preferential than for situational homosexuality.

It is currently estimated that about 2-4 percent of the populations of Western industrial societies are preferentially homosexual, a figure that may hold for many other societies as well. A great deal of research has been done on the biological roots of homosexuality. In an early article, Lee Ellis and Ashley Ames (1987) reviewed much of this research and concluded that homosexuality develops when, during a critical period of fetal development, the brain receives an excess of the hormone(s) of the opposite sex. Male homosexuals thus have fetally "feminized" brains, whereas lesbians have fetally "masculinized" brains. On the basis of their theory, Ellis and Ames predicted that (1) homosexuality should be primarily a male phenomenon because all mammals are fundamentally female, and it is only by inserting the Y chromosome into the mammalian genome that masculinity develops; this leads to more sexual inversions in genetic males than in genetic females; (2) male homosexuals are more likely to be "effeminate" and to have "feminine" interests than male heterosexuals, and lesbians are more likely to have "masculine" characteristics and interests than female heterosexuals; (3) homosexuality should be highly heritable; and (4) attempts to alter sexual orientation after birth should be minimally effective or ineffective. All four of these predictions are strongly supported by empirical evidence.

Fred Whitam (1983; Whitam and Mathy, 1986) studied the childhood experiences of 375 homosexual men in Guatemala, Brazil, the Philippines, Thailand, Peru, and the United States. On the basis of his research, he concluded the following (cited in Burr, 1996):

1. Homosexuality is universal.
2. The percentage of homosexuals in all cultures is approximately the same (about 5%) and remains stable over time.

3. The emergence of homosexuality is not affected by social norms regarding it. Homosexuality is just as likely to appear in societies that are homophobic as in those that are much more tolerant of homosexuality.
4. Given a large enough population, homosexual subcultures will be found in all societies.
5. There are striking resemblances in behavioral interests and occupational choices between homosexuals in different societies.
6. In all societies homosexuals run the gamut from highly feminine to highly masculine.

Clearly these findings suggest that preferential homosexuality is innately given rather than some sort of social construction or personal choice.

In widely publicized research, Simon LeVay (1991, 1996) examined a small portion of the hypothalamus in the brains of homosexual men who had died from AIDS. He found that this region of the brain in the homosexual men was only about one-third to one-half the size of the region in the brains of heterosexual men. He also confirmed an earlier researcher's finding that this portion of the hypothalamus in heterosexual females was about the same size as it was in homosexual men.

Evidence that a behavior pattern widely found among humans is also prominently represented among nonhuman animals is usually taken to be good evidence for the role of biology. We do find homosexuality among many other animal species (studies reviewed in LeVay, 1996). In 1963 a Yale genetic researcher discovered a strain of fruitflies in which the males were "courting" other males. He was eventually able to track down the mutant gene responsible for this behavior. A group of researchers at Brigham Young University studied six male rats that refused to mount females. When their brains were examined, a portion of the hypothalamus was found to be only about half the size of the hypothalamus of other male rats, almost exactly what LeVay found for humans. At a sheep experimental station in Idaho, it was found that some rams refused to mount ewes but would mount and anally penetrate other rams. When the brains of these rams were studied, they were shown to differ significantly from the brains of the heterosexual rams.

Research establishes that preferential homosexuality has a clear genetic component (studies reviewed in LeVay, 1996). A study by Bailey and Pillard of male identical twins found that when one twin was gay, 52 percent of the time the other twin was also gay. The number was only 22 percent for fraternal twins. A study by Fred Whitam obtained corresponding numbers of 65 percent and 29 percent, and research by Bailey and colleagues of female twins obtained numbers of 48 percent and 16 percent. Dean Hamer (Hamer and Copeland, 1994) has tried to identify a "gay gene." He and his research team have found a region of the X chromosome known as Xq28 that they believe holds such a gene. This gene is passed only through women. (In order to understand the genetic foundations of behavior we have to realize the complexity and subtlety of genetics. Consider the observation that, in identical twins, if one twin is left-handed then the other twin has only a 12 percent chance of being left-handed. In gays, if one twin is gay then the other has about a 50 percent chance of being gay. But this does not mean that 12 percent of handedness is genetic, 88 percent being due to something environmental, or that 50 percent of homosexuality is genetic, the other 50 percent environmental. Handedness undoubtedly is entirely genetic, and sexual orientation may be as well. People may have the same gene, but the gene for some reason expresses

itself in one person but not in the other.) Actually, there is probably a whole set of gay genes, each of which regulates one aspect of neurological development. This is probably what explains some important differences among gays, e.g., that some gay men are effeminate but others are not.

The view taken here is obviously that preferential homosexuality is not an adaptation but rather the result of a biological mistake. However, some scholars have argued that homosexuality is an evolutionary adaptation. Some years ago E.O. Wilson (1978) presented what has been called the “nest helper” theory. Homosexual men would sacrifice their own reproduction in order to provide special assistance to their siblings’ children. In my view, this theory is highly unconvincing because Wilson fails to provide a compelling argument as to why such a phenomenon would evolve. Nor is there any evidence to show that gay men actually are more attentive to their siblings’ offspring than heterosexual men are to their nephews and nieces. Another adaptational theory has been presented by Jim McKnight (1997). This theory views male homosexuality as a balanced polymorphism akin to sickle-cell anemia. Homosexuality, he says, is adaptive in its heterozygous state but maladaptive when homozygous. However, this theory is highly speculative and there is no evidence to support it.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, a Darwinian alternative to social constructionism and postmodernism seems to hold a great deal of promise as a way to reorient the sociological study of human sexuality, which very badly needs reorienting. I have applied Darwinian sexual selection theory to a number of important dimensions of heterosexual behavior and to both situational and preferential homosexuality. This is merely a sampling of empirical evidence in several areas of sexual behavior. One can go further. For example, the huge question of the reasons for the universality of the incest taboo, and the extent to which cousin marriage is allowed or disallowed in human societies, only makes sense from a Darwinian perspective, particularly the theory developed by Edward Westermarck in the late nineteenth century.

If anything is not socially constructed, it is surely human sexuality, and this arena of human behavior cries out for a Darwinian perspective because Darwinism is grounded in the whole problem of reproduction and reproductive success, which, of course, is all about finding mates and having sex. Sociologists need to relax their rigid Durkheimian premise that social facts can only be explained in terms of other social facts. Human sexual behavior in its myriad forms is indeed a set of social facts, but these social facts find their origin in the nature of the human organism itself and its incredibly powerful drive to make more of those organisms.

NOTES

1. Other prominent social constructionist/postmodernist works are Smith-Rosenberg (1975), Katz (1976), Trumbach (1977), Plummer (1981), Faderman (1981), and D’Emilio (1983). See also Stein (1992).

2. Additional works in queer theory include Duggan (1992), Parker (1991), Warner (1991), Epstein (1994), Ingraham (1994), Namaste (1994), and Irvine (1994).

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