

NEXUS SEMINAR

SEXUAL SELECTIONS

"EXPLORATIONS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SEX"

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PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

The following selection of papers arose out of a half-year seminar course, The Anthropology of Sex, held at McMaster University in the winter of 1990. The course was originally conceived as a vehicle for scrutinizing the physical anthropological significance of current understandings of human sexuality and reproduction. As such, I imagined we would discuss human sexuality from the point of view of human and non-human primate biology, diversity, and evolution. I dutifully sketched out a fairly predictable range of topics, which included the origins and evolution of sexual reproduction, sex and sexuality in human evolution, factors affecting human fertility, the uniqueness (or not) of human sexual response and eroticism, variation in human sexual anatomy and physiology, sexual selection theory, sex differences between human and non-human primates, biological constructs of 'male' and 'female', sociobiological views of sex, the origins and evolution of sexually-transmitted diseases, and so on.

As is often the case, however, the course took on a life of its own and led us inexorably down other far more interesting paths. The students, it seemed, had concerns of greater immediacy and relevance, and I am grateful to them for widening the scope of theoretical and philosophical issues ultimately addressed. Basically, they wanted to know how they could possibly gain an understanding of biological aspects of human sexuality when the literature was so replete with bias. While they accepted the existence of biological differences between males and females, they felt impeded from meaningful exploration of them since much of what was held up as biological reality was simply social constructions of gender masquerading as science (see Fee 1983).

A major challenge involved sifting through the silt of sociobiological interpretation and rhetoric that muddies much of contemporary writing about sex. The sociobiological position asserts that gender and other social relations have intrinsic biological causes and are products of natural selection. Despite the well-known logical, methodological, and conceptual errors associated with this biologically reductionist approach (see Lewontin 1983), sociobiological assumptions are rife in current thinking about human sexuality (see Daly and Wilson 1983). A case in point is the assertion that rape is adaptive, a mating strategy by which males accrue evolutionary advantages by enhancing their reproductive success. As Hugh Clark points out (*The Sociobiology of Rape: A Critique*), the data in support of this idea are fatally flawed but have been distorted, nevertheless, to support the hypothesis, rather than revise or abandon it in light of the contradictory information.

Sue Jimenez wrestles with biologically-deterministic thinking in research on sex chromosome abnormalities (*Individuals with Sex Chromosomal Aneuploidies: Does the Phenotype Reflect the Genotype?*). She questions the basis for describing individuals with such anomalies as having distinct personality tendencies, depending on whether extra X or Y chromosomes are present, that coincide with culturally-based notions about passive females and active males. Thus, individuals with supernumerary X's are often characterized as dependent and those with extra Y's as aggressive. Ramsi Haddad's paper (*The Molecular Pursuit of Masculinity*) also speaks to the interleaving of gender constructs, biological determinism, and sex research. He also notes the pervasiveness in sex determination research of the idea that females are the passive, default sex while males result from the action of specific hormones. Consequently, research has been directed toward defining the biochemical factors that determine maleness, since femaleness is assumed to occur only in their absence. This androcentric focus persists, he argues, in the face of conflicting evidence. Clearly, we learn more about social relations between the sexes than we do about sex chromosomes or sex determination.

Colin Varley examines other cultural biases in the production of scientific knowledge about sex and, more specifically, at implicit narrative structures that guide interpretations of research into homosexuality (*Science Fiction and Fairy Tales: Narratives of Cure and Fulfilment in Homosexuality Research*). His paper highlights, moreover, the social consequences of the medicalization of human sexuality in the 19th century, the creation of sexual "diseases" when sexuality is subject to the

"clinical gaze", and the insidious power of biological mythologies which legitimize conventional views of social relations.

Penny Young explores another dimension of sex research, offering a feminist treatment of the relative weight accorded to female choice in sexual selection theory (*The Politics of Love: Sexual Selection Theory and the Role of the Female*). She notes the clear historical relationship between acceptance or rejection of the idea of female choice in mate selection to gender politics, concluding that changing scientific views of sexual selection theory are more closely tied to the gender politics of the time than to actual changes in that role.

Tracy Rogers is concerned with the perpetuation of dubious research on human sexuality, and the uncritical acceptance of such studies, because they fail to challenge socially-derived constructs of sexuality (*No Satisfaction: Research Incompetence in the Study of Human Sexuality*). She illustrates the difficulty this poses by examining the relationship between changing concepts of female sexuality between the 1950s and 1980s and the concomitant, vastly different, 'scientific' conclusions reached about masturbation among women. Many researchers, she asserts, are simply unaware of the power of cultural assumptions to haunt and distort their research and, until this is acknowledged and treated with the same skepticism with which science treats other sources of bias, bad research will continue to be promulgated and reproduced.

As these papers illustrate, the Anthropology of Sex proved not to be about human sexuality in its widest sense but, rather, about the narrow, androcentric, and constraining view of it currently offered by the biological sciences. Is that all there is?

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