



Selves, Symbols, and Sexualities

An Interactionist Anthology

Thomas S. Weinberg
Staci Newmahr

Editors



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Selves, Symbols, and Sexualities

PREFACE

This coedited volume was conceived as a supplemental reader for courses in the sociology and social psychology of human sexuality. Its consistent symbolic interactionist approach makes it unique among the few readers in the topic area. Our goal was to produce a highly readable book without sacrificing intellectual rigor. We therefore decided that instead of using previously published selections, written for a professional audience, we would only include new, fresh contributions that were designed for undergraduate students.

Since human sexuality is a complex phenomenon, the treatment in this book is expansive, in order to cover the diversity of relevant topics. The readings vary in terms of their conceptual or practical approaches. For example, there is a mixture of conceptual and research contributions as well as first-person accounts, which makes this volume unique.

Both editors bring a strong background in the sociology of sexuality to the project, spanning two generations of constructionist thought. Both of us have engaged in ethnographic research in sexuality and have published our work in leading refereed journals in the field. Both of us are also contributors to *The Routledge Handbook of Deviant Behavior*, edited by the late Clifton Bryant and published in 2012.

Dr. Thomas S. Weinberg is the author or editor of four books (two monographs and two edited volumes) on sexuality. His work in gay studies and the sociology of sadomasochism appears in sociological and interdisciplinary journals, such as the *Journal of Sex Research*, the *Journal of Homosexuality*, *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, *Annual Review of Sex Research*, *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, and *Social Analysis*. He is an associate editor of *Ethnographic Studies* and *Sexuality & Culture* and a referee for the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*.

Dr. Staci Newmahr is an ethnographer and the author of *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk and Intimacy* (Indiana University Press, 2011), an ethnography of an SM community that theorizes risk-taking and emotion from an interactionist perspective. She has published several papers in sociology and interdisciplinary journals, including *Symbolic Interaction*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and *Qualitative Sociology*. Dr. Newmahr is associate editor of *Symbolic Interaction* (Wiley-Blackwell). She is currently working toward a book on nonsexual erotic proliferations.

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Tom Weinberg: I would like to thank my wife, Bonnie, for her support in this project and her patience when working on the volume took time away from her and our domestic projects. Carolyn Englehardt went well beyond her duties at our library's help desk to figure out some of the formatting problems we had with the manuscript.

Staci Newmahr: I owe a warm and hearty thank-you to Tom Weinberg for approaching me with this idea, for his attention to detail, and for being nothing less than a wonderful collaboration partner. This collection was shaped in part by dozens of sessions and conversations with sexuality scholars and symbolic interactionists over the past few years. I am always inspired by those people, by their work, and by our conversations: Chuck Edgley, Clare Forstie, Kate Frank, Thaddeus Muller, Susie Scott, Allen Shelton, Nicolas Simon, Brandy Simula, J. Sumerau, Beverly Thompson, Dennis Waskul, and D J Williams. More broadly, and perhaps a tad sentimentally as I emerge from the process of editing a determinedly interactionist book, I am deeply appreciative of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI) and all of its members for being an intellectual home to many of us. Finally, as always, I am grateful to my family for weathering the storm of frazzled intensity that I bring home through every edit, revision, and new deadline.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas S. Weinberg

The readings for this book reflect a common theme: Sexualities are sociological realities. In fact, biological responses are initiated, structured, and understood through the meanings that people bring to sexual situations. As humans, we continually interpret our own situations, identities, motivations, and behaviors as well as that of others through those meanings that we learn in social interaction. These meanings are continually reinforced and validated by others. This is true of all social phenomena, including sexualities. For example, we learn who and what is sexy, and this, not hormones, triggers our responses. Americans have a consistent image of the sexy man and woman, as reflected in the occasional lead stories in popular supermarket publications on “The 100 Sexiest Men,” “The Sexiest Women,” and so on. *Sexy* in American culture means young, slim, and physically fit. But in other places, this is not the case. Among the Hima tribe in Uganda and the Annang and Efik of Nigeria (Malcolm 1925), young women enter a fattening hut to increase their marriage desirability. In Mauritania, girls are force-fed to make them gain weight. In these cultures, obesity is a sign of wealth and, ultimately, beauty and sexual attractiveness.

In our own society, standards of female attractiveness and hence, beauty, have changed over the years. One hundred years ago, full figured women were desirable. By the 1920s, the era of the “flapper,” women were binding their breasts, as being flat chested was sexy. The actress Clara Bow, known as the “It Girl,” was seen as the epitome of sexiness during that time. In the 1940s, the curvy woman was back in vogue, as illustrated by the actress Betty Grable, the “pinup” of American servicemen. In the 1950s, screen sirens, such as Jane Russell, Marilyn Monroe, and Jayne Mansfield, all well-endowed women, were the fantasy objects of young men.¹ During that time period, Dagmar, a model, actress, and popular guest on television, was so well endowed that the bullet nosed bumper guards on Cadillacs, Packards, and Buicks of the day were called “Dagmars.” In the 1960s, thin was the new sexy, and an aptly named popular recording star, “Twiggy,” epitomized sexuality.

Even within our own contemporary society, there are subcultural variations in what is considered to be attractive and sexy. For example, Thio (2010) points

out that the meaning of weight as it relates to sexiness varies according to race. The African American community is much more accepting of fat² women and more likely to see them as sexy than is the white community. In fact, during the spring 2012 semester, one of the African American student organizations on our college campus sponsored a "PHAT" beauty contest. According to their poster advertising this event, PHAT stands for "Pretty, Hot and Thick." Contrast this with McLorg and Taub's (1987) finding that anorexia and bulimia are predominantly found among young middle-class white women.³

Men, as well as women, are seen as sex symbols. In the 1910s and 1920s, the actor Douglas Fairbanks, who played in what were called "swashbuckling" roles (i.e., in what we now call action films), was seen as the ideal man. In the 1920s, his status as a sex symbol was challenged by Rudolph Valentino, who was seen by women as the romantic ideal. Men, however, compared him negatively to Fairbanks, and there were those in the media who considered him effeminate because of his impeccable dress and slicked down hair (Ellenberger and Ballerini 2005).

In the 1930s, movie stars who were seen as sex symbols, such as Errol Flynn, who was another swashbuckler, Gary Cooper, and Clark Gable, were the epitome of masculinity. The 1940s found men with a more sophisticated persona like Cary Grant still masculine but more refined. The 1950s was the era of the "bad boy" image, personified by James Dean, who played a troubled teen in 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*, and Marlon Brando, who played a motorcycle gang leader in the 1953 film *The Wild Ones*.

Unlike the status of female sex symbols, historically, the sexiness of males has depended more on perceived personality and romantic presentation than on body type. In patriarchal systems built around gender binaries (that is, structures in which people are viewed as occupying one of two mutually exclusive gender categories), cultural capital is accorded to men based on their capacities for action, or what they can do. Men gain social status (and therefore desirability, or what we come to think of as sexiness) based on the skills they possess (e.g., intelligence, physical competence, or leadership skills) or the indicators of those skills (e.g., high-status jobs, expensive possessions). Women, in turn, become valued for the status they confer onto men. In other words, in a social system in which only men had access to economic and political resources, women came to symbolize men's success; the more attractive a woman, the more impressive a man appears for attracting her. Despite the profound changes in the world since women were denied access to political and economic power, women's desirability, or sexiness, continues to reside less in symbols of what they can *do* in the world than in their aesthetic value.

One interesting development does seem to have occurred by the 1960s, however. It has to do with chest hair, rather than physique. The early swashbucklers, when they appeared shirtless, were always shaved. By the 1960s, actors like Paul Newman, Robert Redford, and Sean Connery exposed themselves in hairy glory. This hirsute trend reached a new level when Burt Reynolds, the 1970s sex symbol, posed nude and hairy with only an arm discreetly covering his male parts. From the 1980s to the present, as gender roles have changed drastically, there seems to have developed a greater emphasis on the male body and fitness. Sharply defined abdominal muscles ("abs") are now seen as sexy. Pictures of celebrity abs are regularly found in supermarket fan magazines, and there are numerous television infomercials promising to enable one to define one's abdominals, if only a particular piece of exercise equipment, diet, or program is purchased. In 1989, the actor Patrick Swayze showed off his toned physique in the film *Roadhouse*, and in the 1990s, Brad Pitt also displayed his abs, as did Fabio, a male model, actor, romance novel author, and spokesman for a number of businesses and products, whose career as a sex symbol spanned two decades.

Most of the examples cited above come from the media: magazines, movies, and television. There is no denying the power of the media in modern American society as an arbiter of cultural tastes and trends. Idealized images of sexual attractiveness, however, both contemporary and historical, are also found elsewhere in, for example, literature (Singh, Renn, and Singh 2007) and art (Haughton 2004). Haughton notes that Renaissance painters depicted an idealized woman with symmetrical features, "alabaster skin," a small waist, and large breasts and broad hips. He describes Venus in Botticelli's painting, *Venus and Mars*, painted between 1480 and 1490, as follows: "Note the high forehead, the sharply defined chin, pale skin, strawberry blond hair, high delicate eyebrows, strong nose, narrow mouth and full lips . . . a full figure with an ample bosom, rounded abdomen and wide hips" (Haughton 2004:231). A contemporary artist, Anna Utopia Giordano, has Photoshopped paintings of Renaissance masters, such as Bouguereau, Cabanel, Botticelli, Bronzino, Hayez, Ingres, and Velazquez, bringing them, tongue in cheek, up to modern standards of beauty.⁴ Like the Renaissance paintings, modern romance novels present idealized images of both men and women. The description of the heroine in the following excerpt is startlingly like that described by Haughton above:

. . . no man worth his salt would have missed the surprisingly lush curves of breasts and hips, guaranteed to stop traffic and haunt dreams. . . . Her hair was that rare, striking color between red and gold, and it hung thick

and shining to the middle of her back . . . and that silky, burnished hair framed a face that was almost too delicately perfect to be real. She was like a painting: every feature was finely drawn with artistic excellence, from her straight nose to the sweet curve of her lips. And in that strikingly perfect face, her eyes were simply incredible: a clear, pale green; huge and shadowed by long, thick lashes. (Hooper 2012:12–13)

Here is how the author describes the central male character:

[H]e was over six feet tall and powerfully built. He was dressed casually . . . but the informal attire did nothing to conceal the physical strength of broad shoulders and powerful limbs, or the honed grace of his movements. . . . He was dark, black-haired, and black-eyed, his lean face handsome. (Hooper 2012:18)

Few people, whether living in the 15th or 21st centuries, can measure up to these idealized images. We learn from our culture or subculture not only who is sexy, but also what is sexy. For example, American males' preoccupation with female breasts as erotic objects is not shared by men in many other cultures in which women usually are bare breasted. In these cultures, breasts are viewed simply as sources of milk for babies. Our culture also teaches us who are appropriate sexual partners and the situations in which sexual behaviors are appropriate. Even more fundamentally, the very concept of "sexual" is culturally constructed. We learn what "counts" as sex and what does not. We learn the connections between our ideas about sex and our ideas about relationships, feelings, monogamy, and gender. We learn, and teach each other, what should turn us on and what should not. We learn to understand and define ourselves in relation to our sexual behavior and sexual desires, and these understandings underpin the way we present ourselves to the world. All of these sexual meanings are created through our social interactions, and what comes to be defined as erotic, and decidedly unerotic, can be traced back to the level of everyday life.

Standards of sexuality are not fixed, but they are constantly changing through a process of interaction. We humans are not in any sense captives of our culture; rather, cultures are continually in flux as new norms and values are created in response to societal changes. The discussion of the first section of the book, "Theorizing Sex," succinctly makes this point.

Our definitions of sexiness extend beyond our judgments of others to our self-appraisals. Through a process of interpreting other people's responses to us, which early social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley (1902:183–184) termed the looking glass self, we form opinions of our own attractiveness. We

are able to do this because we humans, unlike animals, have the ability to use symbols and thus are able to treat ourselves as objects, to stand outside ourselves and see ourselves as we might see others.

CONTROLLING SEXUALITIES

People's sexualities and their expression are controlled in two ways. The first of these is through socialization. Children learn the norms, attitudes, values, and perspectives of their group through their parents and other significant figures in their lives. This process illustrates what George Herbert Mead (1934), an important founder of the perspective, which later became known as "symbolic interaction" theory, termed the "generalized other." Through this process, children come to internalize certain views of the world, including those of sexuality. Not so very long ago, in the days of your grandparents' or great grandparents' youth, romance and sexuality between members of different nationalities (e.g., Italian Americans and Irish Americans) and religious groups (e.g., Catholics and Protestants) were strongly opposed by each group. The focusing of romance and eroticism only on members of one's own group was facilitated in many communities by de facto segregation by nationality. For example, in the authors' city of Buffalo, New York, South Buffalo has traditionally been Irish, the upper West side was predominantly Italian, the lower West side was mainly Hispanic, the near East side was populated by African Americans, and the far East side was the Polish section. Jews were found mostly in North Buffalo, but there were small communities on the East side along with small Italian populations. Old timers have told us that men who attempted to date a young woman from another group were sometimes met with violence by men in her neighborhood. While there have been population shifts over the last 40 years or so, large segments of the original populations remain in the old areas.

A more restrictive way in which groups focus their members' sexualities is through arranged marriages, often made at very young ages. For example, in colonial India in the early 20th century, girls as young as 8 years old were often betrothed to an older man (Southgate 1938). My great grandparents had their marriage arranged for them when they were 16 and 19. They, in turn, were so angry that their 17-year-old daughter (my maternal grandmother) had married a man from outside their religious group that they sent her, along with her younger brother, to America. Even today, the practice of arranged marriages continues. In fact, during the fall 2012 semester, I was approached by a male student, whose immigrant family had arranged a marriage for him with a young woman whom he had never seen, who lived on another continent

thousands of miles away. He was also being pressured by the woman's father, who kept sending him e-mails, asking when he was coming to see his daughter.

The second way in which sexualities are structured is through formal laws, which may prescribe not only with whom one may have sex but also what kind of sex one may have. In the southern United States, before civil rights, for example, some jurisdictions passed miscegenation laws, which prohibited the "mixing" of the races. All states have age of consent laws, which make it illegal to have sex with someone under a certain age. This age varies from state to state. Many states had sodomy laws, prohibiting specific sex acts (or contact between certain body parts), which were periodically enforced. While theoretically applying to both heterosexuals and homosexuals, in the past, they were usually only enforced against gay men.⁵

Although prostitution is illegal in the United States in all jurisdictions other than a few counties in Nevada, a number of European countries have decriminalized it and restrict sex workers to "red light" districts. In Amsterdam, the chamber of commerce provides maps of these areas and instructions about how to deal with prostitutes.

In addition to laws specifically aimed at controlling sexuality, such as sodomy, age of consent, and miscegenation laws, there are other laws, not originally developed for that purpose, which, nevertheless, are used to regulate sexual behavior. For example, state or municipal ordinances pertaining to nudity, disorderly conduct, suspicion, trespassing, loitering, parking, and liquor laws have been selectively used to limit sexualities. Police in some cities are known to ticket cars parked near gay bars. State liquor authorities can control the spread of gay bars by revoking liquor licenses. One gay man I interviewed (Weinberg 1994a) claimed that he had been arrested for "drunken parking," while sitting in his car and talking with another man outside a gay bar. He was asked, the man said, whether he wanted to be put in the regular drunk tank or the gay drunk tank. Loitering and trespassing laws are often invoked in an attempt to prevent gay men from "cruising" (i.e., looking for sexual partners) in parks and other settings. Public health laws have similarly been used to close gay bathhouses and heterosexual "swingers" clubs. Men acting "suspiciously" in areas where children play may be picked up for loitering or suspicion pending an investigation.

In summary, sexualities are not merely reflections of biological imperatives. They are controlled through socialization and formal mechanisms. Most important to remember is that the meanings that are conveyed through these processes play the major role in how people perceive, define, and act out sexuality.

THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTION PERSPECTIVE

While there are other ways of understanding human sexualities (see Weinberg 1994b, for examples), we have chosen symbolic interaction as the sociological framework to use in this book because we see the production of meaning as central to all human activity, including sexuality. Symbolic interactionism focuses on individuals and how they understand themselves and others. It is an example of a *microsociological* theory in sociology.

For the symbolic interactionist, roles, relationships, and meanings are socially constructed. That is, they are negotiated during a process of social interaction rather than being fixed and predetermined (Hewitt and Shulman 2011; Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010). From this point of view, the individual has considerable control over his or her identity and behavior. He or she is seen as possessing a self, which is developed through a continuing process of interaction and interpretation. That is, who and what we think we are is at least partly a reflection of how we believe we are viewed by others, as Cooley (1902), cited above, tells us. Thus, at the core of symbolic interaction theory is the idea that people are sense-making creatures. Humans have the capacity to interpret situations, which we do in terms of significant symbols. We continually construct, apply, and act in terms of the *meanings* we place on ourselves, others, and situations. This is succinctly summed up by William I. Thomas's statement in the early 20th century: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928:571–572). People, and the world around us, are seen as dynamic processes, rather than as the static structures assumed by *macrosociological* level theories, such as structural functionalism. We humans are in a continual state of becoming. Identities, for example, can be created, tried on, and discarded by the individual. We are not simply passive recipients of labels; we do interpretive work to figure out who and what we are. Nor are meanings immutable. At any given time, we can reinterpret a situation or behavior and choose from among a number of alternative meanings. For example, an adolescent male who has sex with another boy may see this behavior as "meaning" that he is gay, or that he is bisexual, or that he is going through "an adolescent stage," just "experimenting," or having no meaning at all, "just what guys do" when they get together. He may define and redefine his behavior several times, taking into account new knowledge and new circumstances (Weinberg 1983).

Erving Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967) notes that we attempt to control the way we appear to others by taking into account their probable responses to us. To do this, we have to be able to identify with them, to put ourselves in their

position, and attempt to see things from their perspective. This ability to take the role of the other is a uniquely human trait. Engaging in reciprocity thinking by putting ourselves in other people's situations is dependent upon our capacity to create and use symbols. This type of thinking is developmental. It, too, is learned through a process of interacting with others. While young children have only the rudiments of this ability, it becomes much more critical during adolescence. Adolescents develop this capacity through identifying with groups of their peers. These people of their own age serve as what we call "reference groups." Reference groups are used by the individual as a guide for his or her feelings and behavior. They become "significant others" with whom we compare ourselves. How these others think and feel, especially about us, become critical for our feelings about ourselves.

Symbolic interaction is not a single unified perspective, but one that contains a number of variations and developments. There are, however, some unifying concepts upon which all symbolic interactionists agree. According to Herbert Blumer, who was the first to use the term "symbolic interaction" (Blumer 1937),

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. . . . The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer 1969:2).

Blumer's fundamental concepts are reflected in the variety of chapters in this volume. Although they take different approaches to study a wide range of sexualities, these premises form a unifying theme in all of them.

NOTES

1. For a contemporary account of Ms. Monroe's ample hips and derrière, as described by show business manager Milton Ebbins, who was struggling to help her get into a dress she was wearing for president John F. Kennedy's 45th birthday celebration in Madison Square Garden (in which she sang the now famous, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President"), see Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Kennedy, the End of Camelot*. 2012. New York: Henry Holt and Company, page 82.

2. I am not using the word *fat* pejoratively, but rather following its usage in both the fat-activist and contemporary scholarly literature (Gullage 2010; Murray 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Scott-Dixon 2008). As I point out in this chapter, “fatness” is socially constructed.
3. This is becoming an increasing problem for boys and young men, as well. “[T]he latest data, from 2011, showed that Los Angeles boys were nearly as likely as girls to purge through vomiting or laxatives. They were also as likely as girls to use diet pills, powders, or liquids without the advice of a doctor” (Alpert, 2013:F3).
4. For examples of her work, especially her Venus Project, go to <http://annautopia.giordano.it/>.
5. This was generally true until June 26, 2003, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), decided 6–3 that the state’s sodomy laws were invalid, thus nullifying a previous decision and making sexual acts between consenting adults no longer illegal throughout the country.

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