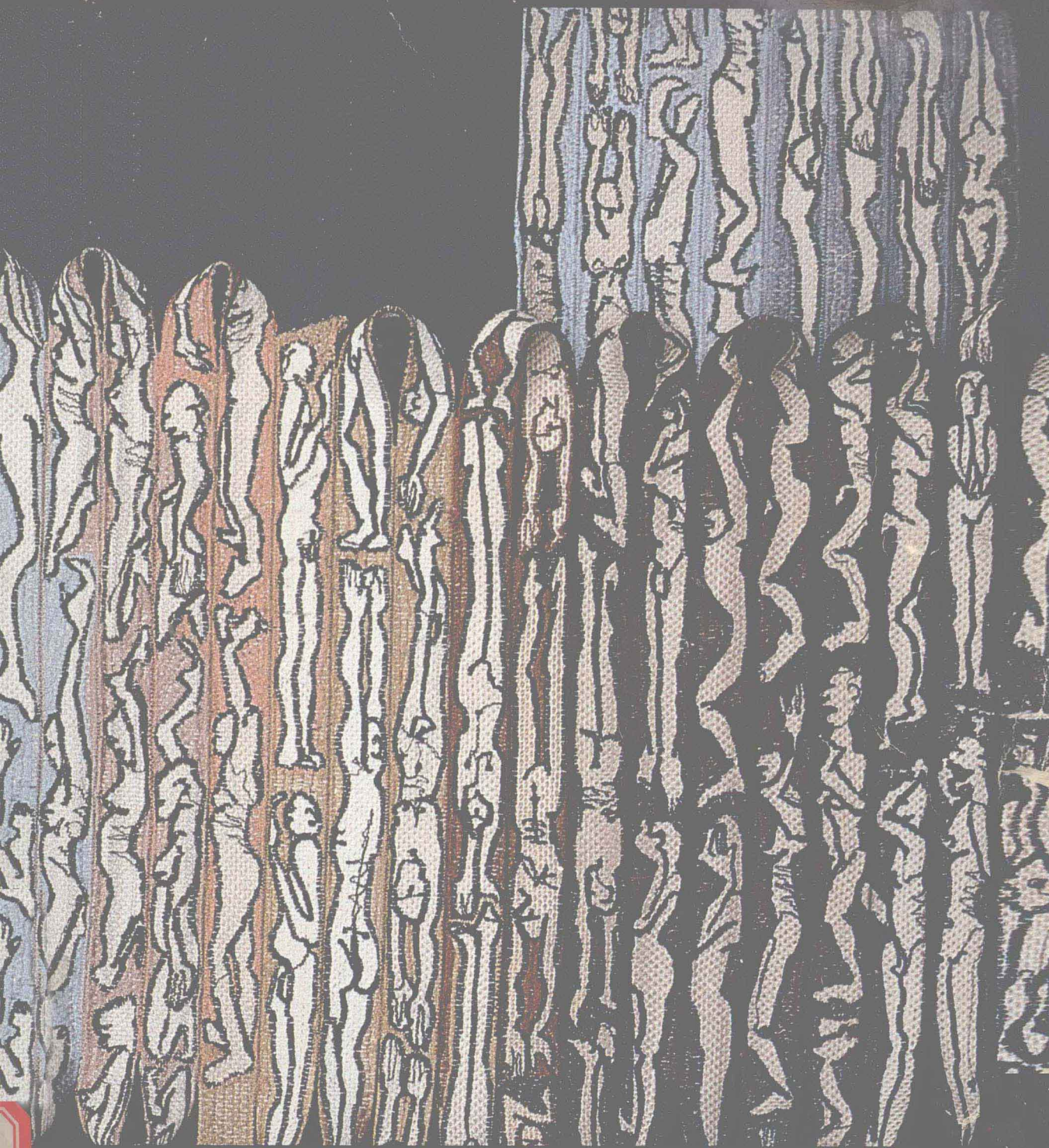


# CULTURE AND HUMAN SEXUALITY



DAVID N. SUGGS        ANDREW W. MIRACLE

# CULTURE AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

## *A READER*

EDITED BY

DAVID N. SUGGS

ANDREW W. MIRACLE



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# PREFACE

Some of the universal dimensions of human sexuality are readily apparent. *Homo sapiens* everywhere share common biological traits which in turn affect our sexual nature as individuals, and define the reproductive necessities and potentials of our species. Other universal dimensions of human sexuality are less easily recognized, and still others remain to be discovered and described.

The cultural dimension of our sexuality, however, is seldom apparent. The enculturation and socialization processes which help to define our sense of sexuality tend to limit our ability to perceive the role of culture in shaping our sexual selves.

Articulating the dynamics between the biological and the cultural, always a challenging task, is especially difficult with regard to human sexuality. Lacking much definitive research, one is often forced to resort to speculation.

We believe that research on these matters should be encouraged to test basic assumptions and hypotheses related to existing models of culture and human behavior. The perspectives in this volume, some voiced in the early decades of the 20th century and some only recently, provide a foundation for initiating such an examination.

In order to make the knowledge in this volume more accessible, we have organized the discussions around pertinent topics: evolution, life course, gender, family, incest, religion, sexual orientation, sexual variations, and disease-related issues. Each section is preceded by a brief introduction to the subjects and issues covered by the readings that follow. However, these introductions are not intended to summarize the articles that need to be read in full to appreciate the quality of the data, the logic of the argument, or the elegance of the presentation.

We designed this book with two goals in mind. One has been to provide a variety of ethnographic data to illustrate the range of human sexual beliefs and behaviors, and underscore the role of culture in the patterning of sexual ideas and activities. The second goal has been to provide a balance of theoretical positions, demonstrating how social scientists continue to struggle with explanations of human sexuality.

We have tried to include articles that: 1) are readable and not overly technical; 2) provide descriptions or points of view that most readers will find inherently interesting and worthy of discussion; and 3) are challenging intellectually.

In all possible ways we have attempted to provide a balanced set of readings. The volume includes both ethnographic descriptions and theoretical essays. Some articles examine exotic sexual practices among peoples living in far-away places, others examine more familiar North American sexual mores. Several of the articles describe practices that may seem bizarre, unbelievable, even disgusting, because they are in opposition to normative North American beliefs. However, our purpose for including such articles is not merely to titillate, but to stimulate intellectual consideration of the reader's own cultural suppositions.

Our intended purpose is to guide the reader through the variety of cross-cultural sexual expressions and simultaneously provide an appreciation for the cultural logic underlying particular sexual behaviors and beliefs. We also wish to promote an understanding of that which is universal and generalizable with regard to human sexuality. We hope that this collection of articles works toward these ends.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to our many students and colleagues who

have helped bring this work to fruition. The quality of any text depends on the quality of the pre-publication reviews by experts around the country. The following individuals have assisted in the development of this book by providing extensive, constructive reviews and suggestions: Professor Ralph Bolton, Pomona College; Professor M. Michele Burnette, Western Michigan University; Professor Dona L. Davis, University of South Dakota; Professor Suzanne G. Frayser, University of Denver; Professor Robert Pollack, University of Georgia; Professor Lynn Stephen, Northeastern University; and Professor Linda D. Wolfe, East Carolina University. In addition, we wish to thank those who have provided com-

ments on and citations for particular parts of the book. These would include our colleagues in the departments of anthropology and sociology at Texas Christian University and Kenyon College, especially Rita Kipp and Howard Sacks; the clerical assistance of Sharon Duchesne and Stacy Smiar; and the assistance of Fred Hay of the Tozzer Library at Harvard University for assistance in locating manuscripts and reference materials. Finally, we wish to thank Managing Editor Vicki Knight, and the other professionals at Brooks/Cole for their patience, courtesy, knowledge, and attention to detail—without their considerable help and expertise this volume would not have become a reality.

*David N. Suggs*  
*Andrew W. Miracle*

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

# 1

## ON THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

ANDREW W. MIRACLE / DAVID N. SUGGS

Given its commitment to cross-cultural research from a holistic perspective, anthropology has a great deal to offer the multidisciplinary study of human sexuality. Cross-cultural studies can provide a means for examining sexuality and related phenomena outside of the restricted perspectives of Western-based culture. This is essential if we want to understand what it means to be human. If we are limited to the study of North American and western European perspectives, there is little hope of distinguishing between the culturally specific and the universals of human behavior. Of course, anthropologists are not the only social scientists to conduct cross-cultural studies, and works by psycholo-

gists and sociologists have been included and listed in the suggested readings in this volume.

When we examine the context of variation in human sexual behavior, it becomes evident that it is largely coincident with the variation in cultures. Thus, it is important to look at human variety as expressed through culture. Too often, cross-cultural studies outside anthropology are based on comparison of “modern” and “traditional” societies (read “Western” versus “non-Western”). The articles in this volume demonstrate that such a distinction is no more useful than is a biological taxonomy of primates versus nonprimates, since there is greater variation within the second category than there is between the two.

By approaching the study of human sexuality holistically—that is, by integrating biological, cultural, historical, and psychological perspectives and methods of research—anthropologists hold forth the promise of gaining a fuller understanding of the subject than is possible through any one of these approaches alone. This seems especially important in the study of sexuality, where there are obvious interactions between genetic, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Recognizing this fact may be critical in our efforts to respond to contemporary social issues related to sexuality.

Most of the early cross-cultural reports on sexuality were ethnographic in nature and were usually incidental to the primary focus of study; that is, anthropologists who spent an extended period of time studying a particular culture would learn of the local customs and beliefs or would observe behaviors related to sexuality. These findings might then be reported in a section of a longer ethnographic account, or they might be published as a separate article. There were a few notable exceptions to this pattern, who deserve mention here.

Edward Westermarck (1891; 1917) devoted a great deal of attention to the cross-cultural study of issues of marriage and family. Today, he is perhaps best remembered for his study of the incest taboo—rules prohibiting an individual from marrying certain kinspeople. However, his writings covered a variety of related topics. His influence on many of the works included in this volume will be obvious to some readers.

After an extended period of participant observation, Bronislaw Malinowski (1927; 1929) reported on the sexual practices and mores of the Trobriand Islanders. Later, Margaret Mead (1930; 1932; 1935; 1949) gained considerable fame for her investigations of gender roles. Works such as those of Malinowski and Mead were controversial because they challenged basic cultural assumptions of Western societies. However, they were also widely read and discussed for decades, perhaps because they titillated, and perhaps because they were harbingers of chang-

ing attitudes in the West. The influence of these individuals also is plain in a number of readings in this volume, and we have included articles from each of them as well.

The single most important and provocative cross-cultural work on sexuality to date has been that of Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach. *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (1951) treated the subject with such detachment that it could juxtapose the study of human sexuality with that of other animals. This book appeared on the heels of the first Kinsey (1948) report on male sexuality in the United States, which may have affected its impact. It also provided the intellectual—if not the methodological—foundation for the subsequent work of Masters and Johnson (1966).

The cross-cultural study of human sexuality has become more serious and more legitimate during the past 15 years or so. Anthropologists are beginning to provide us with book-length ethnographic studies (see, for example, Gregor, 1985; Herdt, 1986) focused specifically on issues of sexuality. Moreover, there have been attempts to move beyond culture-specific descriptions and to focus more on theoretically-grounded universal models and explanations of human sexuality (see, for example, Reiss, 1986; Symons, 1979).

Given the increased scientific attention to sexuality and the marked increase in anthropological and cross-cultural studies of human sexuality, we may be witnessing the beginnings of a broad-based quest for such knowledge. If this is so, it undoubtedly has been fueled by the many changes in Western societies that have taken place since the 1960s: the pill; the women's movement; the gay and lesbian movement; baby boomers entering middle age; increased knowledge about genetics; new technology for affecting fertility; incidents of herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS (or HIV). And, related to all of this, is a change in values and beliefs surrounding sexuality held by the majority of citizens in Western societies.

Anthropologists always have tended to respond to such societal concerns. Indeed, it would

be naive to assume they have studied human sexuality without any cultural restraints or biases affecting their research. As members of a particular society, anthropologists are responsive to social pressures from within that society. Davis and Whitten (1987) noted this in their extensive review of the anthropological literature on human sexuality. "The specific nature of cross-cultural sex research has typically been a function of how the West views sexuality at a given time" (p. 70).

The research questions and concerns that anthropologists carry into their fieldwork usually have been a reflection of issues in vogue at home. Citing Rubin (1984), Davis and Whitten (1987) state, "Current popular Western concerns with such phenomena as premarital sex, prostitution, child molestation, or homosexuality influence the specific customs that become the focus of research" (p. 70). Even their own work reflects this. Davis and Whitten divide the entire scope of the literature on human sexuality into "Heterosexual Behavior" and "Homosexual Behavior," with the section on homosexual behavior receiving slightly more space in the text than the section on heterosexual behavior. Given that questions about homosexuality are currently a dominant concern in our society, such extensive coverage may seem reasonable.

Culturally biased concerns, however, may blind us to alternative conceptualizations. For example, dividing human sexual behavior into dichotomous realms of heterosexuality and homosexuality may prevent students of human sexuality from appreciating the full variety of sexual behaviors exhibited cross-culturally. Alfred Kinsey (1948) noted that dichotomizing heterosexuality and homosexuality provided an inadequate paradigm for dealing with white, middle-class, collegiate Americans. Thus, surely, it is inadequate for cross-cultural studies.

Our goal in selecting articles for this volume has been to provide a wide coverage of the cultural patterning of sexuality, utilizing early ethnographic studies as well as contemporary theoretical arguments. Although limited by pragmatic considerations, we have attempted to

utilize articles that focus on an array of topics related to human sexuality. In addition, we have sought a broad cultural representation, with descriptions of sexual beliefs and practices from around the world (such as Africa, Asia, India, New Guinea, Melanesia, and North America). Finally, although we have a definite perspective to communicate in the concluding chapter, we have tried to provide articles from a variety of theoretical positions. We hope to stimulate discussion, not to stifle it.

We begin this volume with articles that attempt to define sexuality within the context of human nature. For instance, the articles of Part II focus on the evolution of human sexual behavior with the aim of establishing the common biological parameters of human sexual interaction. The authors raise such issues as the sociocultural significance of continuous receptivity among human females (Hrdy), the role of sexual interaction in generalized social bonding (Fox; Hrdy), the myth of female sexual passivity and male sexual aggressivity as biologically based determinants in the evolution of human social organization (Fausto-Sterling), and the evolutionary (that is, adaptive) role of human sexual response (Symons).

Each of the articles in Part III examines some aspect of sexual behavior relative to one's position in the life cycle. Topics covered are the extent to which children's sexual expression is allowed or encouraged (Malinowski), the cultural use of sexuality in distinguishing between child and adult status (Marshall), and the extent to which reproduction is tied to the status of adulthood (Suggs).

The articles in Part IV explore the nature of gender; that is, the extent to which particular and differential sexual behaviors are normatively defined in gender roles. Included are discussions of the differential socialization of men and women in matters sexual, and differential control over sexual access (Shostak; Mead; Margolis & Arnold).

Part V provides discussions on the nature of sexuality within the context of the family. Spe-

cifically, sexual behaviors and beliefs as they relate to marriage and family are examined: the impact of economic necessity and ideal family size on population growth and control (Freed & Freed); the relationship between beliefs about procreation and practices of contraception (Schapera); cultural variation in the concept of marriage (Gough); and factors affecting polygyny (White & Burton).

Few questions have engaged anthropologists as thoroughly as has that of the origins of the incest taboo. Why do all cultures define some kin (however these kin may be variously defined) as inappropriate marriage partners? Part VI includes readings that cover both biosocial (Fox) and cultural (Wolf; Lévi-Strauss) explanations for this universality.

The articles in Part VII examine some of the ways in which magico-religious beliefs control and/or promote sexual interaction. Ethnographic studies reveal a continuum of beliefs from cultures that hold only limited marital sexual interaction as valid (Messenger), to those that use sexuality—including intercourse—as a form of worship (Kehoe; Tuck; Nanda).

Part VIII examines the question of how cultures define appropriate sexual partners and sexual identities. All of the articles center on the extent to which homosexual interactions are defined as normative and demonstrate the extent of the need to distinguish homosexual and heterosexual behaviors from identities. The articles included in this section describe: a society in which all males are expected to participate in fellatio for a period in their lives prior to marriage and the subsequent development of sexual relationships with their wives (Herdt); societies in which lesbian relationships are neither devi-

ant nor taboo (Blackwood; Gay); and the history of homosexuality in the West (Ariès).

The articles in Part IX explore the range of what is considered cross-culturally to be “normal” sexual behavior. In other words, behaviors normatively labeled unacceptable, weird, or perverted in one society may be tolerated or even positively valued in another. Included are discussions of transvestism and cross-gender behaviors (Callender & Kochems), and the cultural definition of what is considered erotic (Brown).

Part X looks at how cultures define some diseases as sexual, and also looks at how culture and the epidemiology of sexually transmitted diseases are interactive. The articles consider: the origins of syphilis (Baker & Armelagos), culture-bound syndromes and the construction of gender (Levine; Yap), and cultural factors affecting the conceptualization and transmission of AIDS (Ingstad).

We conclude with an attempt to initiate discussions and investigations of a nomothetic anthropology of sexuality. Situated within existing theories of culture, anthropological studies of sexuality primarily have been descriptive. There have been few attempts to explain the nature of human sexuality and its relationship to culture. As Davis and Whitten (1987) noted, “There is need for further open discussions of human sexuality and for the development of uniquely anthropological theories of the relevant phenomena” (p. 88). Part XI echoes this appeal. This concluding chapter is a review of anthropological theories and their implications for the study of sexuality and a call for an explanatory or nomothetic approach to the study of culture and human sexuality.

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# II

## SEX AND THE NATURE OF HUMANITY

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### INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons for students of human behavior to begin their studies with an evolutionary perspective. Human beings are unique in a number of ways. For example, only humans utilize symbolic thought and complex language, and it behooves us to know something about how we acquired such obviously advantageous features that allow for the development of culture. Just as important as understanding our uniqueness, however, is the realization that we are not *wholly* or absolutely unique. Molecular biologists tell us that we share roughly 98% of our genetic material with chimpanzees. Those

who doubt whether we can learn anything about humans via the study of our primate relatives would do well to keep that figure in mind.

Furthermore, the general question of the relationship between biology and culture begs an evolutionary analysis. For many years, the academic community has been arguing over whether human behavior is predominantly biological or cultural in origin. The nature versus nurture debate, as it has come to be called, has found fertile ground in studies of human sexuality.

For the most part, anthropology has straddled the fence in this debate, even if the discipline has leaned somewhat toward the nurture side. Clearly, anthropological studies have shown us that biology predisposes us to behave in certain

ways. Yet, our cultural heritage in turn limits our potential for physical expression in some ways while expanding it in others. For example, consider crying and smiling. Universally, crying is a sign of unhappiness. Yet, the Tapirapé of Brazil learn to express happiness over the return of long-absent friends by crying; thus, Charles Wagley's title for his excellent ethnography of the Tapirapé is *Welcome of Tears*. Smiling is a universal sign of happiness. Yet, a man approaching you with a smile on his face and a knife in his hand may mean many things other than happiness. So, although all peoples associate crying with sadness and smiling with happiness, each population constructs layers of cultural meaning on these biological predispositions of emotional expression.

Sexual interaction is no different. There are certainly some biological constants—those imposed on us by the anatomy and physiology of our evolutionary heritage—and these are not trivial. The physical aspects of the sexual response cycle are presumably universal. Such constants form the foundation upon which we build meaningful acts of sexuality. The readings in this section, then, consider the relationship between biology and culture, between physical evolution and behavioral expression in human sexuality.

Robin Fox suggests that, in any primate social order, there are three competing groups: (1) established, older breeding males; (2) females and dependent young; and (3) young adult, aspiring mates. He argues that male hunting has been central to the evolution of humanity, as has the

competition between males for control of the other groups. He further suggests that socially engineered changes to this basic evolutionary pattern may be quite dangerous, even genocidal.

Sarah Hrdy's chapter is an argument that suggests that it is culture, rather than sexual dimorphism, that is primarily responsible for the exploitation of women in human societies. Hrdy's data suggest that female primates are not, in fact, simply passive pawns in the power struggles of males. On the contrary, commonly females are socially competitive and sexually assertive. Hrdy then considers the connections between primate heritage and cultural heritage as they relate to female sexuality among humans.

Anne Fausto-Sterling examines the theoretical problems she finds associated with sociobiological arguments. She considers the theory in general, as well as applying it specifically to sexual studies. Of particular interest are her analyses of sociobiological studies of rape and of reproductive strategies. She argues that sociobiology is implicitly a political science that supports the status quo and an "inherently" nonprovable strategy in the realm of human sexuality research.

Donald Symons explores the relationship between biological evolution and cultural patterning in a discussion of such issues as differential socialization of men and women, women's sexual potential, and individual sexual self-interest. His argument leads to interesting questions about the relationship between data and theory, as well as between the "natural" and the "potential" in human behavior.

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