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The Body and Sexuality

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will present a sociological perspective on human sexuality in relation to the body. This issue is not only salient but also engaging as it is closely tied to our experience and understanding. On the one hand, sexuality is intrinsically connected to the body and experienced through it. On the other hand, the accumulation of various social discourses and visual representations in media makes sexuality a pervasive issue, often in ways of which we are not fully aware. Within a cultural context, we make daily decisions about how to express our sexuality through the body. This applies equally to the practices related to appearance, behavior, or action in this sphere, in addition to the choices about whether or not to use the body for the purposes "naturally" attributed to it, such as reproduction. Most of us can probably define what sexuality means to us. We may know what we like, how, where, and with whom we wish to fulfill our desires or fantasies, what pleases us, what we consider typical in this area of life, and what not. Still, does this knowledge stem solely from our individual experience? If so, how do we know what and how to do, what to expect and anticipate or what terms like BDSM, kink, MILF, queer, stealthing or vanilla mean? As research in the social sciences shows, human sexuality, although undoubtedly linked to the body and its sensations, is also a socio-cultural phenomenon. Moreover, its meaning is so fluid that it resists a single, coherent definition that encompasses all scientific perspectives. As Steven Seidman (2003: 38) observed, "we are born with bodies, but it is society that determines which parts of the body and which pleasures and acts are sexual." His words have inspired the direction I will take in the following sections of this chapter, providing a sociological analysis of human sexuality in relation to the body.

> Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. [World Health Organization 2006: 5]

Norbert Elias (2011) noted that historical shifts in the perception of sexuality reflected the course of the "civilizing process." Based on the analysis of manuals from the 15th and 16th centuries in the elementary education of boys and from the 19th century for girls, Elias highlighted shifts in manners and customs. The intensification of the feeling of shame, particularly concerning the area of sexual relations (but also the body), led to the progressive removal of sexuality from the public sphere. This indicates how the perception of human sexuality was relativized to a specific socio-cultural framework. Indeed, everyday acting in a socio-cultural context, as well as within particular social institutions or interactional settings, shapes the way individuals assimilate and organize their understanding of sexuality and their experiences of it (Plummer 2002; Brickell 2015). As Jacek Kochanowski (2013: 129 [trans. Christine Frank-Es-Salhi]) noted,

> some of us live in a world where sexuality expresses the erotic attraction of women and men conditioned by reproduction, while other manifestations of sexuality are marginal and pathological; and others of us live in a world where sexuality is fluid, diverse, and plastic, and people know different ways to fulfill their needs or sexual fantasies.

Following Anthony Giddens (1992), it is worth emphasizing that his concept of "plastic sexuality" illustrates how this domain of life becomes freed from reproduction. This shift was influenced not only by changes in customs but also by the availability of contraceptives, most notably, the introduction of the birth control pill, which became available in 1960.

Although human sexuality seems to be significant in human life – including its social dimension – it initially attracted attention in the fields of medicine, criminology, and psychoanalysis. Even in the second half of the 20th century, it was most closely associated with the work of Sigmund Freud (the founder of psychoanalysis) or with anthropological research, where sexuality was approached as an element of the socio-cultural system. It is sufficient to recall the works of Bronisław Malinowski (1938), who – using the example of the Trobriand Islanders – demonstrated that coitus is not synonymous with procreation in all cultures, or Margaret Mead (1986), who wrote about "free love" in Samoa. Many individuals undoubtedly know (or have at least heard of) the groundbreaking studies on human sexuality focused on individual sexual practices, which contributed to the development of sexology[1] and also played a role in shifting societal perceptions of sexuality. These studies were conducted primarily in the second half of the 20th century by Alfred Kinsey (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin 1948; Kinsey et al. 1953), William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1966), and – natively – by Michalina Wisłocka (1978). The essence of these works was that by bringing knowledge about private and intimate sexual behaviors and practices into

1 Sexology explores broadly understood human sexuality, e.g., sexual needs (also concerning their absence or sexual dysfunctions). It addresses issues related to human development in biological, as well as social and psychological terms. The discipline investigates the mechanisms of sexuality throughout an individual's life cycle and examines the dynamics of sexological norms.

public discourse, they contributed to the detabooing of this sphere of everyday life, which had long been considered inappropriate for open discussion (Elias 2011). The effort to present sex as a "normal" matter was immortalized in popular culture in the form of films or TV series (*Kinsey* [2004], *Masters of Sex* [2013], and *Sztuka kochania. Historia Michaliny Wisłockiej* [*The Art of Loving. The Story of Michalina Wislocka*, 2017]). Nevertheless, in its pursuit of the general laws of sexuality, sexology has often focused on understanding the human being primarily through the lens of biology, striving to classify types of sexual behaviors on a conventional scale of their "normality" (Seidman 2011). Meanwhile, sociology emphasizes that the meaning we give to a particular situation or phenomenon depends on many contexts in which we operate daily (Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993). For instance, if we find out that someone witnessed their partner's sexual intercourse with another individual, not everyone will react the same way, and not in every context. In some cases, it may, for example, evoke a range of negative emotions, be considered inappropriate or trigger "moral panic" (Cohen 1972). For others, the first thought may be that the couple is in a polyamorous relationship or practicing cuckolding. Someone else might associate it with "sexual hospitality" (Hoft, Goldberg 2006). Another individual still – guided by the belief that in the sphere of sexuality, "anything that occurs between consenting adults that harms no one is acceptable," (Brame, Brame, Jacobs 1993: 4) – may consider it none of their business. Ultimately, the point of view depends on the meaning we give to the phenomenon.

Knowing that the perception of human sexuality and its entanglement in the body is not uniform, it is worth considering what social scientists do when examining this subject. Their research primarily focuses on sexual practices and behaviors, as well as the individual experiences associated with them (often viewed through the lens of the course of life). These studies cover issues related to sexual orientation and explore how specific identifications, identities, and actions in this area are shaped by socio-cultural influences. They also address topics related to health, education, and diverse forms and arrangements of family life. And, finally, they focus on issues of the body, intimacy, love, fantasy, the formation of interpersonal relationships, and eroticism as a certain form and space of human activity. These topics are inherently interconnected, and identifying the relationships and dependencies between them opens up countless analytical paths for researchers. Thus, it is worth noting that studies of sexuality are often interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from cultural anthropology, history, medicine, psychology, sexology, and sociology.

In this chapter, I will focus on sociological approaches to human sexuality in the context of the body and the related being in the world (Seidman 2003). To this end, I will present selected theoretical concepts that are often used to problematize the body as entangled in discourses on human sexuality. Subsequently, I will introduce key concepts that emerge in research on this area of human life and discuss significant studies in the field. I will conclude the chapter with a summary of the discussed issues and a set of review questions. Due to the complexity of the topic, it is necessary to clarify that the choices made in presenting the most influential contributions of

sociology (and the social sciences) to the study of sexuality and the body are not exhaustive. They rather aim to show the reader the possibilities that open up in this area for those who wish to explore the topic of human sexuality, through the lens of the sociology of the body/embodiment.

2. Major theoretical concepts

The interest of social sciences in human sexuality is not new, although it only began to enter the mainstream of academic research towards the end of the 20th century.[2] What could have been the reason for this? Citing Max Weber, Bryan S. Turner highlighted the "problematic nature" of sexuality as an object of reflection in social sciences. As he pointed out, "ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life are seriously threatened by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organization," (Turner 2008: 19). This quote illustrates the perceived "incompatibility" between Christian religious beliefs and practices and the notion of sexuality as going beyond the framework of procreating to ensure the continuation of the human species.[3] Thus, Turner pointed to the initial grounding of social thought on human sexuality in **essentialism** (Weeks 2023). This approach assumes the naturalness, inevitability, and universality of the phenomena related to human functioning. Grounded in biological determinism, it views sexuality in terms of a phenomenon related to the reproduction of the species. Thus, while sexuality is "naturally" connected to the body, as an idea subject to reflection, it paradoxically does not need to be embodied, that is, tied to individual experience and experiencing. Instead, it appears as disembodied, discursively "dissected" from entanglement in the individual body and the actions mediated by it in favor of focusing on its "utility" or meaning for society, which, however, does not stem from individual experience.

This essentialist view aligns with the approach to the issue from the perspective of **structural functionalism**, where sexuality is viewed through the lens of the family as a foundational social institution. Sexual activity, regulated by the family, was intended to maintain marital bonds and ensure that reproduction occurred within a stable family structure, thereby providing the offspring with optimal access to its resources and proper socialization (Parsons 1991). Identities and actions that

2 Although research on sexuality has long existed, addressing issues such as healthcare, sexual practices or the identities and everyday lives of gays and lesbians, it remained largely outside the mainstream of social sciences. These studies rarely addressed phenomena relevant to the general population and were often perceived as focusing on deviance, marginal circumstances or curiosities (Richters 2001).

3 This also indicates the role of religion as one of the institutions that controls human sexuality. This issue was addressed, among others, by Tomasz Szlendak (2008) in his book *Supermarketyzacja. Religia i obyczaje seksualne młodzieży w kulturze konsumpcyjnej* [*Supermarketization. Religion and Sexual Customs of Youth in Consumer Culture*].

went beyond the norm (heteronormativity [Herek 2004, 2007; Kochanowski 2004]) and were seen as "deviance" (e.g., homosexuality) were treated as a social taboo (and – in the context of its function – could not be considered an alternative to the traditional family model).

The emergence of sexuality as an independent subject of inquiry in the social sciences was influenced by several transformative developments in Western societies: (1) the feminist movement, (2) the struggle for the rights of sexual minorities, (3) the growing interest in reproductive health, and (4) the HIV and AIDS epidemic (Parker, Aggleton 2006). The "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s also played a significant role in shaping academic interest in human sexuality. This shift was shaped by scientific research, for example, the work of Alfred Kinsey, often referred to as the "father of the sexual revolution," as well as anthropological studies (e.g., those by Margaret Mead, who could be considered the "mother of the sexual revolution"). These changes contributed to the consolidation in social sciences of an alternative to the essentialist approach to human sexuality – **constructionism**. In this view, sexuality is shaped by specific socio-cultural influences and is thus inherently social (Weeks 2023). It is also viewed as a product of human agency, shaped by the internalization of certain norms and values, as well as the resulting cultural scripts (e.g., the "normal" course of a sexual act), through which people interpret a phenomenon or action. This perspective also highlights the social construction of what is considered "normal" or "deviant" in society – such as which sexual practices or identities are generally accepted or marginalized (Berger, Luckmann 1969; Prus, Grills 2003; Goffman 2007).

Because of its focus on discovering the meanings that individuals assign to specific phenomena, situations, events, and experiences, **symbolic interactionism** offers a valuable theoretical framework for studying sexuality and related embodied experiences. It posits that the understanding of sexuality, resulting practices or identities in relation to norms, customs or standards is not constant but created through interaction. The experience and how we give meaning to specific objects (including concepts or fantasies) are influenced by the mutual interaction of various types of contexts (e.g., interactional) and the social phenomena that shape them. This also applies to the language we use and our bodily experiences (also in the context of the meanings we attribute to the body). For example, how one interprets the action they experience through their body may depend on their attitude towards their body (e.g., liking or disliking it, believing in its agency in terms of using it according to one's will and fantasy or not). In this sense, an individual does not have a fixed perception of sex but constructs it through everyday interactions (e.g., What counts as sex? What is "good" sex? What is "normal" for a person?). By the same token, an individual does not *have* an identity but *constructs* it by *becoming* in a continuous meaning-making process.

Following the premises of symbolic interactionism in our research can sensitize us to the importance of discovering not only "what" happens in the everyday lives of people whose stories we want to learn from their perspective, but also "how" it happens.

In this sense, an analytical approach underpinned by the premises of symbolic interactionism seems to correspond to the situations of research participants whose actions have contributed to the ongoing social changes in the area of sexual norms, including the detabooization of sex.[4]

Among the theoretical perspectives that frequently frame phenomena related to human sexuality in its embodied form, **queer theory** is particularly significant. Emerging from the emancipatory queer movement, queer theory can be viewed as a historically and politically embedded intervention rooted in activism for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. It challenges conventional ways of thinking and talking about sexual orientation, identity or gender (a comprehensive discussion of the distinction between sex and gender is presented in the chapter *The Body and Gender*). Among other things, queer theory analyzes the rigid labeling of sexual experiences and identities, emphasizing the fluidity, heterogeneity, and ambiguity of human experiences, which are often obscured by binary and discursively imposed categories. Additionally, queer theory interrogates the oppressiveness of discourses that establish heteronormativity as the dominant societal framework, problematizing the marginalization of those who do not conform to these norms. These ideas resonate with Michel Foucault's (1978) analysis of how dominant discourses on human sexuality influence individuals to behave in certain ways or adopt a specific role or identity. Meanwhile, one of the key tenets of queer theory is the processual nature of sexual identities, which are constructed through individual experiences (Butler 1990).[5]

So far, in this section, I have outlined contrasting approaches to human sexuality (essentialism vs. constructionism) and highlighted the social changes that have influenced the study of sexuality within the social sciences. I have also outlined the general assumptions of selected theoretical orientations (symbolic interactionism, queer theory), the frameworks of which often guide studies on human sexuality in relation to the body, taking into account the diversity of individual experiences (human lived experience [Prus 1996]). In the following section, I will discuss concepts that draw from various theoretical traditions but share a common focus on selected issues in the area of human sexuality, which they problematize (and "thematize"), following specific analytical paths. First, I will present the work of John Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (1973), which fits into the constructionist approach. This publication contributed to establishing human sexuality as a recognized subject of inquiry within the social sciences (Kimmel 2007; Wiederman 2015).

4 Studies addressing issues related to sexuality that adopted the perspective of symbolic interactionism concerned, for example, the experience of the first visit to a brothel (Stewart 1972), sadomasochistic practices in the pansexual community (Newmahr 2011), working in an escort agency from the perspective of female escorts (Wojciechowska 2012; Ślęzak 2016), and experiencing non-heteronormative motherhood from the perspective of the biological and social mother (Wojciechowska 2020).

5 Examples of research grounded in queer theory can be found in the thematic issue of "Studia Socjologiczne" edited by Joanna Mizielińska and Agata Stasińska (2014), as well as in the collective monograph edited by Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (2022).

2.1. John Gagnon and William Simon – Sexual script theory

The sexual script theory posits that the meanings attributed to specific behaviors result from the internalization of "scripts" specific to a given reference group. These scripts determine whether a behavior is considered sexual and enable its interpretation in relation to the script's content. Due to their socio-cultural origins, sexual scripts influence how individuals, using a pool of "learned" meanings acquired in the first decades of their life, fulfill their needs and desires in the area of sexuality in a society. By learning the content of specific scripts, individuals come to understand, among others, the meaning of their experiences (including feelings), ways of expressing their sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual behaviors, and the course of sexual acts. They also learn how to connect meanings that extend beyond sexuality to experiences within this area of human experience (Gagnon, Simon 1973). In this sense, sexual scripts serve as a metaphor for organizing individual meanings.

The assumption that individual actions are relative to sexual scripts may raise questions about the spontaneity of human sexual interactions.

John Gagnon and William Simon identify three levels of sexual scripts: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts.

Cultural scenarios encompass social norms and values, the internalization of which provides an interpretative framework for individual actions. Social institutions play a significant role in transmitting these scenarios. Parents, teachers, religious leaders, the media, and legal systems may all serve as sources of information in this regard. Some sexual behaviors are criminalized, stigmatized or condemned, while others are legitimized and encouraged. Therefore, cultural scenarios delineate the general space for actions and meanings in human sexuality. However, they do not provide specific guidelines regarding the behaviors or roles that an individual may undertake within a specific situational or interactional context in the sexual sphere.

Interpersonal scripts emerge from the interaction between individual needs/desires and social norms, offering individuals a space to adapt to the specifics of a given situation. In this sense, they are shaped by accumulated personal experiences and depend on cooperation with sexual partners. Through shared or divergent scripts, individuals learn the roles and interactional orders in the area of sexuality that allow them to adapt to specific situations.

Intrapsychic scripts, shaped by cultural scripts and personal sexual experiences, reflect the content of an individual's inner life and refer to fantasies, desires, and memories. These may include plans or aspirations for enacting interpersonal scripts within the broader context defined by cultural scenarios. In this sense, intrapsychic scripts reflect the uniqueness of an individual at the level of sexual life.

While sexual scripts conceptualize how behaviors are produced within social life, they exclude the universality or immutability of actions and meanings in the area

of human sexuality. It should also be noted that the assumptions on which they are based can be applied to other substantive areas of social life. For example, individuals may internalize scripts related to professional work or social interactions, which similarly operate at cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels.

2.2. Michel Foucault – Expert discourses on sex

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1978) has explored, among others, how human sexuality is regulated and controlled by power-knowledge, which takes the form of expert discourses. To this end, he distinguished between *ars erotica* – the art of making love, typical of ancient and Eastern civilizations, and *scientia sexualis* – the Western science of sexuality, "producing the truth of sex," (Foucault 1978: 68). The former refers to the social experience and pleasure, practiced rather than discussed. In this way, human experience subtly shaped individual patterns of acting, enabling "initiation into the meaning of socialization," (Czajkowski, Florkowski, Majka-Rostek 2017: 11 [trans. Christine Frank-Es-Salhi]). In contrast, *scientia sexualis* relegates sex to the background, making sexuality, which it observes from the outside, the subject of discourse. In this sense, it is a discursive practice aimed at acquiring knowledge while simultaneously encouraging individuals to talk about and problematize their sexuality.

> One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit […] one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. [Foucault 1978: 24]
>
> This quote illustrates how human sexuality is "managed" through the creation of a proper discourse about sex – one that defines what is "healthy" and "normal." Thus, understanding sex becomes a tool for constructing social order. In this vein, attempts at "normalizing" practices and identities prompt reflection on whether the discourse about sex reveals the "truth" about it or conceals it.

Through the omnipresent sex, Foucault has argued, a kind of (often medicalized) "truth" about sexuality and the body is produced via power-knowledge. In this way, expert discourses, by constantly analyzing, speaking about, and encouraging confessions about sex, have contributed to the production of "normal" sexual practices, the source of which is located in the individual.

By comparing personal experiences, sensations, desires, and fantasies with socially defined norms and having criteria of self-understanding based on (expert) knowledge, individuals become the subjects of social control and may begin to self-regulate. They do this by analyzing their actions for signs of (potential) deviation. Thus, the aim of power is not to repress human sexuality but to supervise and regulate it through discourse. Consequently, sex shifts from bodily experiences to desires (Tomanek 2012).

The perception of the "norm" as a certain distribution – a scale within which individuals can be recognized as more or less "normal" – enables the monitoring of human actions and serves as a mechanism of social control (Foucault 2019).

2.3. Pierre Bourdieu – Masculine domination

In *Masculine Domination* (2002), Pierre Bourdieu explored the issue of power in its symbolic dimension (symbolic violence) within the gender binary. He has reflected on how the female body internalizes male domination by subordinating itself to the male. Part of his analysis touches upon how beliefs and the resulting physical sexual practices in which women and men engage are culturally imposed. To this end, "natural" male domination is maintained, for example, through "the fundamental principle of division between the active male and the passive female," (Bourdieu 2002: 21) during coitus. Bourdieu's analysis, grounded in the Mediterranean Kabyle society, has revealed how male domination persists through unconscious practices and beliefs shared by women and men.

Internalized male domination is manifested in bodily *hexis*,[6] which refers to the inscription in women's bodies of the disposition to subordinate themselves to men. It is expressed, for example, through the "correct" practice of sexuality, shaped by the pre-existing gender binary. The division between the sexes appears to be a natural order of things due to the internalization of a series of mythico-ritual oppositions that maintain male superiority (e.g., top: masculinity, bottom: femininity; hot: masculinity, cold: femininity). For instance, in describing male and female genitalia and their complementarity during sexual intercourse, Bourdieu (2002: 18) noted: "of a man who desires it is said that «his *kanun* is red-hot,» «his pot is burning» [...]; women are said to have the capacity to «douse fire.»" The logic of what is deemed "proper" for men and women dictates specific body positions during sexual intercourse precisely because of gender. For example, a position in which a woman would lie on a man is not permissible in Kabyle society, as it would disrupt the order in which the man is dominant. Moreover, the man is seen as the one who conquers and gives pleasure, while the woman passively receives it. Thus, sexual intercourse reflects and reinforces patriarchal social relations.

6 The concept of bodily *hexis* refers to the difference in individuals' social positions that is "inscribed" and expressed through the body. In examining gendered bodily practices, Bourdieu has highlighted how women internalize the "correct" ways of using their bodies in public space. For example, "women, who, in Kabylia, keep away from public places, must in a sense renounce the public use of their gaze (they walk in public with eyes directed to the ground) and their speech (the only utterance that suits them is «I don't know,» the antithesis of the manly speech which is decisive, clear-cut affirmation, at the same time as being meditated and measured)," (Bourdieu 2002: 17). This illustrates how symbolic domination is embodied and perpetuated through everyday practices.

Bourdieu has noted that while reciprocity is possible in homosexual relations, the links between power and sexuality are even more pronounced. The penetration of a man is viewed as an expression of power – "one of the affirmations of the *libido dominandi*," (Bourdieu 2002: 21).

As Bourdieu (2002: 23) observed, "The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: *it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction*," (Bourdieu 2002: 23). He added: "If it is quite illusory to believe that symbolic violence can be overcome with the weapons of consciousness and will alone, this is because the effect and conditions of its efficacy are durably and deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions," (Bourdieu 2002: 39). This highlights the somatization of masculine domination and suggests that overcoming bodily *hexis* would require the transformation of social structures. A contemporary manifestation of the enduring masculine domination is seen in women faking orgasm (Bourdieu 2002; Dębska 2015). This is supported by a study showing that women may censor sexual communication when they perceive their partners' masculinity as threatened (Jordan et al. 2022).

2.4. Ariel Levy – Between subjectification and self-objectification

Ariel Levy (2005) offered a different perspective on the control of women's bodies and sexuality, focusing on contemporary (postfeminist) social changes and the emergence of "raunch culture," also referred to as "porno chic" or "striptease culture" (McNair 2002). In this context, female empowerment is closely tied to the freedom to express one's sexuality, which is, in turn, associated with bodily autonomy. Modern women are seen as having the freedom to experiment with and through their bodies (from plastic surgery to engaging in various physical or sexual practices [e.g., shibari[7]]). Experiencing sexual agency, often associated with these activities, is interpreted as a form of empowerment (Gill 2007), stemming from the belief that emancipated women can reclaim their bodies (Donaghue, Kurz, Whitehead 2011).

On the one hand, such actions within "raunch culture" seem to indicate a transgression of the Madonna/whore dichotomy. On the other hand, scholars argue that women's empowerment is illusory, as it is achieved through (self-)control of the body and sexuality (McRobbie 2009). It is claimed that the goal of these actions (e.g., aesthetic medicine treatments, exotic pole dancing, wearing shaping underwear) is often to gain potential power over men by arousing their desire. At the same time, women are portrayed "as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing

7 Shibari is an art of bondage originating from Japan, which is most often practiced to evoke specific sensations and emotions (often of an erotic nature) or for aesthetic and performative purposes, e.g., as a form of performance accompanying various events.

themselves, and, in so doing, they «just happen» to win men's admiration," (Gill 2008: 42 as cited in Donaghue, Whitehead, Kurz 2011: 445).

Is a discourse that evaluates social actors' actions in ways that are inconsistent with their assessment of the situation oppressive? Carol Rambo, Sara Presley, and Don Mynatt (2006) addressed this issue in their study of sex workers who reported satisfaction with their work but were labeled "victims of false consciousness" who had internalized their oppression.

Similarly, if a member of a cult claims to be happy and fulfilled, should we believe them? What is the purpose of scientific inquiry?

In this light, the broadly understood freedom of women within "raunch culture" may be deceptive. It often involves internalizing (and self-objectification through adaptation to) the male gaze – the dominant perspective on femininity and sexuality – thus perpetuating male domination (Levy 2005; Donaghue, Whitehead, Kurz 2011).

As Jacek Kochanowski (2013) has pointed out, just as there are socially constructed models of desired femininity, there are also models of masculinity, defined in opposition to femininity.

Femininity is expressed from the perspective of dominant masculinity, as a complement, a supplement to masculinity. A complement thanks to which the male body (and masculinity as well as male desire) is "elevated" and the female body (and femininity as well as female desire) is "humiliated," which has many significant social consequences, including the one concerning sexuality: male, "elevated" desire determines the entire sexual relationship – he desires the woman, the woman is merely the object of his desire. [Kochanowski 2013: 125 (trans. Christine Frank-Es-Salhi)]

In this framework, weak femininity defines strong masculinity. The narrative of gender norms materializes in actions, often leading individuals to simulate these patterns as an expression of their "true nature." Yet, Kochanowski (2013) warned that such conformity could result in the "killing" of a part of oneself. His insights align with Bourdieu's (2002) observations on the durability of masculine domination. Kochanowski sees danger in this phenomenon, especially in contexts that challenge heteronormativity and the related gender binary.

2.5. Jean Baudrillard – Seduction, production, and pornography

Social changes taking place in the mediatized world, which encompass the sphere of experiences and practices related to human sexuality, were also signaled by Jean Baudrillard. In his book *Seduction* (1990: 1), he reflected on the decline of seduction in the 20th century, noting that despite, or perhaps because of, the promotion of sexuality, "seduction has remained in the shadows – and even returned thereto permanently." The chapter *Stereo-Porno* is especially relevant, both to the topic at hand and to Baudrillard's (2005) concept of simulacra. He has argued that pornography makes sex hyperreal – more real than reality – thus giving it a grotesque and obscene dimension. This obscenity is not rooted in transgression, provocation or perversion, but in the consumption of the artificial. Pornography

neutralizes sex through tolerance and hyperreality, focusing on the closest possible presentation of human genitalia during sexual acts. This hyperrealism of sexual pleasure synthesizes sex but fails to celebrate it as a lived experience, paradoxically making it unreal.

The following quote explains the term "vaginal cyclorama." Baudrillard used it to portray a visceral obscenity that is not about sex but about performance. The penetration of the body becomes a visual spectacle, including exploring its interior, rather than an intimate act. Nudity, in this context, becomes a cultural sign that distances viewers from the body and its experiences.

Prostitutes, their thighs open, sitting on the edge of a platform, Japanese workers […] permitted to shove their noses up to the eyeballs within the woman's vagina in order to see, to see better – but what? […] The rest of the spectacle – the flagellations, the reciprocal masturbation and traditional strip-tease, pales before this moment of absolute obscenity, this moment of visual voracity that goes far beyond sexual possession. [Baudrillard 1990: 31–32]

By revealing the "microscopic truth" of sex, pornography incorporates it into the order of production. Baudrillard compared the Japanese vaginal cyclorama (the term is explained in the quote in the box) to working on the assembly line. He argued that: "To produce is to materialize by force what belongs to another order, that of the secret and seduction. Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view," (Baudrillard 1990: 34). Thus, sex becomes a product – its obscenity lies in the fact that nothing is left to chance.

Zygmunt Bauman (1997), drawing on Baudrillard, has observed that in postmodern culture, sex focuses on achieving orgasm. It becomes a pursuit of collecting sensations and seeking impressions rather than experiencing and engaging. The purpose of sex becomes providing increasingly intense, more varied, and new pleasures. Yet, compared to other areas of creativity, the scope for experimentation is quite limited here. This is because the "peak" sexual experience remains elusive. Other sexual acts are measured against this ideal, often through training and repetition, to realize the dream or come close to it.

In this way, Baudrillard has shown how pornography[8] annihilates seduction through sex, and simultaneously erases sex through the accumulation of its signs. He wrote: "pornography is true: it owes its truth to the system of sexual dissuasion

8 On the Polish publishing market, the issue of pornography is addressed by Lech Nijakowski in his book *Pornografia. Historia, znaczenie, gatunki* [Pornography: History, Meaning, and Genres, 2010] and recently by Mateusz Gola in his book *Gdy porno przestaje być sexy* [When Porn Stops Being Sexy, 2024].

by hallucination, dissuasion of the real by the hyperreal, and of the body by its forced materialization," (Baudrillard 1990: 35). Pornography becomes a lived reality that shapes the patterns of human action, detaching sexuality from bodily sensations, though not from the body itself (which is a common experience of sex workers in escort agencies [Wojciechowska 2012]).

2.6. Anthony Giddens – From plastic sexuality to pure relationship

Reflecting on the transformation of intimacy in contemporary societies, Anthony Giddens (1992) also addressed the issue of social control, particularly men's sexual power over women, the loss of which could lead to violence. He traced the ideological evolution of sexuality from the 19th-century concept of "romantic love" to the late 20th-century notion of "pure relationship."

Giddens (2001) views modern identity as a "reflexive project," emphasizing that areas of life perceived as controllable gain significance for individuals striving for self-improvement. Human sexuality is one such domain, increasingly shaped by individual choice in contemporary society. This is due to the development of "plastic sexuality," freed from reproduction and "the rule of the phallus" (Giddens 1992: 2) as a result of the spread of modern contraception. Such sexuality, bound up with the self, can be molded. Thus, individuals can now choose family structures and pursue egalitarian relationships, opening up new possibilities for intimacy. Rather than seeking a "special person," individuals may aim to build a "special relationship" – one centered on mutual satisfaction.

While "romantic love" historically reinforced gender inequality through custom and the dependence of women on men, "confluent love" fosters a "pure relationship," which is an autotelic goal for an individual, related to pleasure and satisfaction. Intimacy, understood as an emotional bond established on the terms of equal partners, becomes the foundation for trust and self-defined relational norms, where the desire to be together does not result from "external social factors." Trust in this context extends beyond the partner to the belief that the relationship will endure. Still, individuals do not feel compelled to remain in a "pure relationship." Its continuation depends on the persistence of emotional fulfillment, including satisfaction, and feelings towards the partner.

Although Giddens does not focus primarily on sexuality or bodily experience, his work in *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Giddens 1992) has been relevant for understanding sexuality not as a "problem" to be analyzed from the outside, but within the broader context of human life. Here, phenomena such as touch, intimacy, trust, and love are not merely analytical categories but deeply personal and diverse experiences that are unique to each and every one of us.[9]

9 In Poland, the topic of love has been explored scientifically by Julita Czernecka (2020; Czernecka, Kalinowska 2020). Emma Engdahl (2018, 2020) has examined the phenomenon of "depressive love," arguing that a common source of depression lies in intimate relationships

3. Key concepts

This section presents selected concepts and terms frequently encountered in sociological literature on sexuality in relation to the human body. While not exhaustive, this glossary – alongside the terms and concepts discussed earlier in the chapter – illustrates the diversity of the phenomena and areas explored in studies on sexuality. The entries are arranged alphabetically.

Asexuality – identifying as asexual is related to a lack of sexual attraction or engaging in sexual behaviors, or the co-occurrence of both of these factors (Siekierska, Kowalczyk, Merk 2016). Due to the fluid nature of sexual orientation – illustrated, for example, by the Kinsey Scale (described later in the glossary), some asexual individuals may engage in sexual activity under specific conditions (e.g., sexual attraction aroused by intellectual stimulation [sapiosexuality]; masturbation is part of the sexual repertoire of individuals who identify as asexual). **Gray-sexuality** (also known as **gray-asexuality** or **gray-A**) encompasses identities on the spectrum between asexuality and allosexuality, such as **demisexuality**, where sexual attraction depends on establishing an emotional bond.

BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism) – a broad concept encompassing various meanings and terms expressed in specific practices, involving, for example, power exchange, role-playing, pain infliction, restraint, etc. It is used both in academic literature and by individuals who engage in a range of consensual BDSM practices.

Cuckolding (controlled betrayal) – "engaging in sexual activity with another man by a woman in a relatively stable relationship with her current partner. The condition […] is the consent or often even the initiative of the current partner to engage in sexual activity outside the relationship, and sometimes the co-presence of the partner during the woman's sexual behavior with another man," (Buczkowski 2017: 147 [trans. Christine Frank-Es-Salhi]).

DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) – published by the American Psychiatric Association, provides a classification of mental disorders. The current edition is DSM-5. Homosexuality was removed from the manual in 1973, and in 1991, the World Health Organization (WHO) removed it from the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD).

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where individuals do not feel they are treated as "worthy" of love. Engdahl has analyzed the coexistence of seemingly contradictory experiences – love and depression – within the context of transformations in contemporary Western societies.

Harassment (sexual) – in the Polish Labour Code, harassment is recognized as a form of discrimination. It "occurs when unwanted conduct takes place with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of an employee and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment against that person," (Act of 26 June 1974, Labour Code [retrieved 16 August 2025: https://www.gov.pl/web/family/definitions-in-the-labour-code]). A special type of discrimination is discrimination based on sex – **sexual harassment**. It is "unwanted conduct of a sexual nature or relating to the sex of an employee. This behaviour can consist of physical, verbal or non-verbal elements," (Act of 26 June 1974, Labour Code [retrieved 16 August 2025: https://www.gov.pl/web/family/definitions-in-the-labour-code]).

Kink – a colloquial term used (also in academic literature) to describe sexual practices considered "unusual" or "non-normative" that individuals undertake for sexual pleasure. They may include, for example, the use of props, breath play, role play, dirty talk, and so on.

LGBTQIA+ – an acronym representing individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/ally. Each letter represents a gender or sexual identity, symbolizing different facets of the community. Adding a "+" to it signifies the identities that are not included in the acronym (e.g., two-spirit), thereby highlighting the community's inclusivity. It also reflects a commitment to inclusive language (e.g., "gender affirmation" rather than "gender change").

Pansexuality – sexual or emotional attraction to an individual regardless of their sex/gender. Unlike bisexuality, pansexuality does not rely on a binary understanding of gender.

Polyamory – a form of ethical non-monogamy involving multiple intimate relationships of emotional and sexual nature. Unlike **swinging**, which focuses on sexual variety (emotional involvement is often reserved for the partner with whom the relationship is formed), polyamory emphasizes long-term emotional bonds. Polyamory is not kept secret from the partner(s), which is different from cheating (Sheff 2015).

Sexual assistant/Surrogate partner – a professionally trained individual who supports adults, often with disabilities and/or experiencing challenges with physical intimacy, in overcoming intimacy/sexual issues through experiential learning in the whole spectrum of their sexuality, including engaging in sexual acts. The legal framework, training, selection criteria, and scope of involvement, among other factors, vary by country (Gammino, Faccio, Cipolletta 2016). In the US, such professionals are most often referred to as surrogate partners. In Europe, sexual

assistants operate in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, among others.[10]

Sexual education – instruction on topics related to human sexuality, including anatomy, reproduction, as well as health (e.g., sexual abstinence, contraception, and STIs). It also covers legal rights (e.g., the age of consent, which is 15 in Poland) and emotional aspects of sexuality. Sex education programs are implemented, for example, in schools or through public health campaigns. In Poland, attending them is not mandatory.

Sexual orientation – a concept defining to whom an individual feels sexual attraction. **The Kinsey Scale** places individuals on a continuum from exclusively heterosexual (0) to exclusively homosexual (6), classifying their sexual preferences in relation to their score on the scale. Research conducted by Kinsey's team has shown that most individuals do not fall at the extremes of the scale.

Sexual violence – any behavior that results in non-consensual sexual contact. Such behavior may manifest through verbal actions (e.g., sexually explicit comments), non-verbal actions (e.g., coercing someone to engage with sexual content [sending unsolicited images of genitalia]), or physical actions (e.g., violating an individual's bodily autonomy). Sexual violence frequently takes place in the context of power imbalances, wherein one individual holds an advantage over another – be it physical, economic, or relational (e.g., hierarchical relationships such as parent-child or employer-employee). The perpetrators of sexual violence often disregard the expressed opposition or boundaries of another individual, thereby infringing upon their rights to bodily autonomy, freedom, and self-determination. The harm caused by such acts may be visible or invisible, immediate or long-term. The prevailing stereotypes about sexual violence include the belief that rape cannot occur within marriage or that the absence of resistance implies consent. The *MeToo* movement has played a significant role in bringing the issue of sexual violence into the public sphere. The *#MeToo* slogan was coined and first used by Tarana Burke in 2006 (Burke 2018), and later gained global prominence.

4. Selected key research areas

Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized the fluidity, ambiguity, and contextual entanglement of meanings in the experience of sexuality. Accordingly, when proposing a general overview of thematic areas related to the body and sexuality, I have chosen to foreground this conceptual thread. This approach underscores

10 A fictional portrayal of the role of a surrogate partner can be found in the 2012 movie *The Sessions*.

that the recognition of what is considered "normal" (or not) – in both sexuality and broader life domains – is not constant but processual. Consequently, it is essential to remember that the role of the researcher is not to evaluate the phenomena under study, but to describe and analyze them.[11] The distinguished areas are not based on thematic divisions (e.g., comparing the dating practices of heteronormative versus non-heteronormative individuals[12]). Rather, they represent general analytical frameworks through which specific topics related to human sexuality may be explored (e.g., the construction of interactional order during a date). These proposed areas are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. For instance, topics such as domination (e.g., gender-based), violence, internalized norms or the interactional and situational understanding of the body may be examined through the experiences of individuals engaged in sex work.

I hope that readers interested in human sexuality – and perhaps inspired by this chapter – will identify the literature most relevant to their inquiries. These issues can be traced across the human life cycle and within various social institutions (e.g., medical, educational, familial, etc.). The references provided at the end of the chapter may serve as a useful guide in this respect.

4.1. Norms and values as frameworks for public conduct

The decriminalization of homosexual acts across all US states occurred in 2003, 30 years after homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders. In this context, two key issues merit attention. First, the entanglement of individual sexual behaviors within internalized legal and cultural norms. Second, the strategies employed by individuals who transgress these norms and navigate the potential consequences of public involvement in activities deemed "deviant." These questions were notably addressed by, among others, Laud Humphreys (1970) in his book *Tearoom Trade. Impersonal Sex in Public Places*.

In the late 1960s, Humphreys researched men engaging in anonymous sexual encounters in public restrooms (in parks). To collect data, he often assumed the role of a "watch queen" – a non-participating gay observer taking pleasure in the act of others, who also ensured the participants were not caught by law enforcement. His study explored the roles adopted during encounters, the interactional rules (e.g., signaling methods to initiate the encounter), but also the "true" identities of the men involved in anonymous sex with random strangers.

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11 The language we use is also significant (e.g., the distinction between the terms "prostitute" and "sex worker"). During research conducted among women employed in escort agencies, I observed that they did not refer to themselves as "prostitutes" or talk about "prostitution," but rather used terms such as "work," "performance," and "providing services."

12 Such categorization, however, may be problematic due to the potential preconceptualization embedded in the predefined thematic labels.

While Humphreys' research was groundbreaking in its sociological insights, it has been widely criticized for ethical violations, including the lack of informed consent and the use of deceptive methods. Thus, how he conducted the study not only raised ethical doubts but also prompted reflection on how far a researcher could go to gain insight.

Humphreys sometimes disclosed his research intentions and conducted interviews, but more often he recorded license plate numbers to identify the men he researched and later approached them under the guise of a health survey.

Humphreys' findings challenged the prevailing stereotypes of dangerous sexual "deviants." Most of the men he observed led conventional ("normal") lives as husbands and fathers, adhering to social and legal norms in other domains. This highlighted the oppressive nature of social control over sexuality, enacted through the internalization and externalization of heteronormative frames (a concept discussed in the chapter *The Body and Gender*). Fearing legal and symbolic consequences (e.g., social exclusion), individuals often conceal their desires behind socially accepted facades. This raises salient questions about the personal and communal implications of such concealment.

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Research involving LGBTQ+ individuals frequently reveals the marginalizing effects of heteronormativity. Studies in Poland have examined how internalized norms and values shape family life, such as in the experiences of lesbian (biological and social) mothers raising children conceived within their relationship (Wojciechowska 2014, 2015a, 2020). Anticipating discrimination, these women often managed the visibility of their families[13] to avoid revealing the nature of their relationship in certain contexts. The project *Rodziny z wyboru w Polsce* ([Families of Choice in Poland], Mizielińska, Abramowicz, Stasińska 2014; Mizielińska, Struzik, Król 2017) further explored LGBTQ+ family life within a heteronormative society, emphasizing the persistent social hierarchies based on sexual orientation. Drawing on the subordinate position of homosexual individuals within a heteronormative social space, Mariola Bieńko (2021) referred to Gayle Rubin's concept of the "erotic pyramid" based on "sexual value."

> Marital reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid. Clamouring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. […] Stable, long-term lesbian and gay men couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries. [Rubin 2007: 151]

13 The term "family" was not imposed during the data analysis but emerged from the field as rooted in the language of the participants (Wojciechowska 2020).

Anna Zawadzka's *Ten pierwszy raz. Konstruowanie heteroseksualności* [This First Time. Constructing Heterosexuality, 2015] examined virginity and defloration in relation to the social production of the experience of being a woman in the context of the female body and sexuality. She has demonstrated how social discourses regulate women's sexuality and experiences in this area by promoting specific norms, values, and cultural beliefs, thereby shaping the socio-cultural image of (embodied) femininity and gendered sexual norms regarding acceptable sexual practices.

Kamrul Hasan's article *Researching Masculinity and Men's Sexual Health in Bangladesh: Methodological Reflections* (2021) offers another perspective, highlighting how cultural and religious norms and values in Muslin societies render sexuality a taboo subject. This framing has significant implications for sexual health and the lived experiences of men in such contexts.

4.2. The meaning-making of bodily experiences (and sex) in the course of interaction

Laud Humphreys' research highlights the importance of values and social as well as legal norms in shaping individual perceptions of human sexuality. These norms serve as reference points, informing individuals about what is considered "normal" and delineating the potential consequences of going beyond the heteronormative frameworks (e.g., legal sanctions). In this section, I turn to situations in which individuals lack ready-made role scripts and where meanings attributed to bodily experiences are constructed through interaction. This perspective highlights the contextual and fluid nature of sexual meaning-making.

Over a decade ago, I studied the experiences of sex workers whose narratives frequently centered on their bodily experiences in the context of client interactions.[14] My work was inspired by George Lee Stewart's 1972 article *On First Being a John*, which explored the production of interactional order in a brothel from the perspective of a client.

At the outset of his ethnographic study, Stewart was unfamiliar with the norms and practices governing the environment he was entering. This lack of a point of reference rendered his account particularly valuable for social researchers, especially those adopting interpretive or constructionist approaches. His inexperience has enabled him to capture the process through which sexual meanings are constructed. Stewart described how, through interaction, he gradually learned to assign meaning to specific practices, such as verbal stimulation and the act of praising a partner during sexual intercourse. Before acquiring this understanding, he was left alone

14 The issue of sex work was discussed in the chapter *The Body and Work*. In Poland, this topic has been addressed by scholars such as Magdalena Wojciechowska (2012) and Izabela Ślęzak (2016), who analyzed the experiences of women working in escort agencies. Adrianna Surmiak (2010), through her work as a street worker, researched women working on the street. Agata Dziuban and Anna Ratecka (2012, 2017) have contributed to reconstructing knowledge about sex workers and their social representations.

with a female sex worker who – through her interactional competence – imposed a particular definition of the situation. Lacking ready-made interpersonal or individual scripts, Stewart experienced a sense of "unreality," which shaped how he made sense of the situation, experiencing his body and the world through his body.

Stewart recounted the feelings of nervousness and anxiety, manifested physically as tension, stomach pain, joint discomfort (in the knees, elbows, and wrists), and chest tightness. These sensations, uncommon in "typical" sexual encounters, could have heightened his susceptibility to accepting the imposed definition of the situation. As the interaction progressed, Stewart revisited this sense of "unreality," emphasizing the entanglement of understanding and experiencing one's sexuality in specific situational or interactional contexts.

> Colette told me it would be necessary for her to inspect me for venereal disease. She did so, manipulating me in a manner reminiscent of someone milking a cow. Under familiar circumstances, I might have found this procedure degrading, or odd, or sexually stimulating, depending on the manipulator and the situation. However, here and now I felt nothing, as if I were not an active participant. [Stewart 1972: 266]
>
> This excerpt illustrates how both familiar and unfamiliar contexts shape not only the interpretation but also the embodied experience of sexuality. It suggests that bodily experiences are not solely driven by "natural" impulses or external stimuli, but are instead mediated by the meanings assigned within specific contexts. For instance, physical touch in a medical setting is likely to be interpreted differently than similar contact during a date – an observation that has implications for how bodily sensations are experienced (Brickell 2015).

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Continuing with the theme of sex work, it is instructive to examine how individuals engaged in this profession conceptualize their bodies and bodily experiences. Studies available on the Polish publishing market that explore how sex workers providing services in escort agencies construct the understandings of their bodies in relation to client interactions include: *Agencja towarzyska – (nie)zwykłe miejsce pracy* [The Escort Agency. An (Extra)Ordinary Workplace, Wojciechowska 2012] and *Praca kobiet świadczących usługi seksualne w agencjach towarzyskich* [The Work of Female Sex Workers in Escort Agencies, Ślęzak 2016]. In these contexts, the body is often perceived as a tool – an interactional partner that facilitates the performance of work, rather than a medium for personal experiences. A particularly compelling theme emerging from these observations is the notion of "betrayal" by the body. Some participants described experiencing physical pleasure (orgasm) during professional interactions, which they believed should be "reserved" for private, intimate contexts. This phenomenon underscores the tension between professional detachment and involuntary bodily responses, revealing the complexity of meaning-making in sexual interactions. It also points to a perceived loss of control when the body as a partner fails to conform to the expected professional script. Consequently,

meanings (concerning sexuality) are not only assigned but also negotiated during interactions, also with the body itself as an interactional partner.

Jeffrey E. Nash further explored the relativity of meanings given to bodily experiences in the area of sexuality in his article *A Penile Implant: Embodying Medical Technology* (2021). Drawing on his personal experience of receiving a penile implant, Nash reflected on the process of re-embodying sexuality in relation to the restored functionality of his body. He discussed how medical interactions shaped his understanding of bodily experiences and the role his body could occupy in these contexts.

Another example of meaning-making in the area of human sexuality, particularly in digital environments, was provided by Alecea Standlee in her article *Sex, Romance, and Technology: Efficiency, Predictability, and Standardization in College Dating Cultures* (2023). Standlee examined how communication technologies influenced the formation and interpretation of romantic and sexual relationships. She argued that the emphasis on speed, efficiency, and clarity (e.g., quickly determining what the other party is looking for) in digital interactions – echoing Zygmunt Bauman's (1997) observations on collecting experiences – has transformed the way individuals pursue intimacy. Communication technologies facilitate the rapid accumulation of experiences, but also contribute to the standardization and commodification of relational dynamics.

4.3. "Typical" and "atypical" sexual practices

The categories of "typical" or "atypical" sexual practices reflect the subjective nature of meaning-making in the area of human sexuality. These classifications engage with the broader sociological issue of how deviance is socially constructed (Prus, Grills 2003), and shaped by the prevailing norms and values of a culture. At the same time, they underscore the fluidity of meanings associated with concepts such as "normality" and "deviance," which are often contingent upon familiarity and cultural proximity. For this reason, this section presents research on (everyday) sexual behaviors and practices across diverse social groups. These studies focus on consensual activities undertaken by individuals to fulfill various needs, including those of a sexual nature.

Roy F. Baumeister (1988), in his article *Masochism as Escape from Self*, interpreted masochistic practices as a means of anchoring the self in the here and now through bodily experiences. In this context, physical pain serves as a mechanism for reconnecting with the body, allowing individuals to temporarily disengage from the multitude of roles and responsibilities they typically monitor (and try to control). The experience of physical pain thus becomes a pathway to embodied awareness.

Staci Newmahr (2011), in her ethnographic study *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*, explored sadomasochistic (SM) practices within the pansexual community in San Francisco. Newmahr based her conclusions on data collected during four years of research, which involved her transition from an outsider (researcher-observer) to an insider (researcher-participant). It is worth

noting that the research period coincided with a time of increased public interest[15] in BDSM practices (Simula 2015).

In the book, Newmahr emphasized the role of reference groups in shaping the meanings attributed to specific practices or actions. What may appear provocative to outsiders was often perceived as routine within the community. She also challenged the tendency to reduce SM practices to mere kinks, arguing that such interpretations obscured the nuanced perspectives of participants, for whom the sexual dimension of these might not be central.

The participants in Newmahr's study did not view their SM activities as role-playing but as enacting fantasies. These practices, while involving controlled risk, were framed as intimate "serious leisure." As Newmahr has noted, engaging in SM offers satisfaction and a sense that individuals are (become) experts in this field.

The community's emphasis on experience, trust, and expertise challenged the dominant narratives that pathologized or sensationalized BDSM. Still, Newmahr observed that due to the common belief that they deviated from the "norm," BDSM practices were often viewed as a "curiosity" that could arouse many, often contradictory, emotions. This could also be explained by the medicalization of such practices and their portrayal as "dangerous" in medical discourse. In this context, it is worth realizing that the stereotypical association of the sphere of sexuality with, for example, physical attractiveness, health or youth may contribute to the (stigmatizing) labeling of individuals who deviate from normative ideals in this regard as "atypical."

Joanna K. Wawrzyniak (2011), in her article *Seksualność osób 50 plus. Wybrane konteksty analizy zjawiska* [Intimacy and Sexuality of People 50+. Selected Contexts of Analysis], examined the sexuality of older adults, highlighting the impact of social myths and taboos that rendered this topic difficult to accept. She attributed this social discomfort to customs and deficiencies in sexual education. Citing Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, Wawrzyniak underscored the influence of the sexual model in which individuals were socialized, shaped by moral rigorism and religious teachings, particularly those of the Catholic Church, which historically have discouraged positive attitudes toward sexuality. "Specific morality, resulting from philosophy and the ethical system, the existing false moral rigorism, and the teachings of the Catholic Church have resulted in practically no positive attitude toward sex," (Wawrzyniak 2011: 68 [trans. Christine Frank-Es-Salhi]). She advocates for educational initiatives that promote understanding of sexuality across the human life cycle, emphasizing that sexual activity among older adults is vital to their well-being, quality of life, and meeting their needs (e.g., social or health-related).

15 Public interest in this topic could have been intensified by the mainstream popularity of books or movies such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* (book premiere in 2011; film premiere in 2015), which – by satisfying curiosity – could have also "normalized" certain sexual practices associated with BDSM.

Milena Trojanowska (2020), in her article *Komu wolno pójść na randkę? O seksualności osób z niepełnosprawnościami* [Who is Allowed to Go on a Date? About the Sexuality of People with Disabilities], has explored how myths and stereotypes, producing "atypicality" labels, contribute to the sexual "segregation" of individuals whose behaviors deviate from normative expectations. People with disabilities, like older adults, are often perceived as asexual. Of course, the visibility of some disabilities also plays a role in shaping these perceptions (Goffman 2007). Lynn Schlesinger (1996), in *Chronic Pain, Intimacy, and Sexuality: A Qualitative Study of Women Who Live with Pain*, investigated how the invisibility of chronic pain affected the sexual lives of women struggling with the disease. Her study focused on how these women coped with pain by adapting and modifying available scenarios, as well as communicating about pain with their sexual partners. This research highlights the importance of acknowledging diverse bodily experiences in the context of sexual relationships.

Zbigniew Izdebski (2012) noted that, according to existing studies, while sexuality remained a taboo subject in public discourse, Polish women and men exhibited a high degree of self-awareness and openness regarding their sexual behaviors and needs.

Despite prevailing social myths – as well as the fears and uncertainties often associated with them – research on sexuality within a society tends to emphasize diverse contextual factors and the human life cycle. This focus is exemplified by numerous studies conducted by Zbigniew Izdebski (2012) on the sexuality of Polish individuals.

In *Seksualność Polaków na początku XXI wieku* [Sexuality of Poles in the Early 21st Century, Izdebski 2012], he examined sexuality across different phases of life (sexuality at the threshold of adulthood, the sexuality of adults, and the sexuality of people over 50 years old). The topics concerned sexual initiation and activity, including, for example, the frequency, form of activity, experiencing orgasm, contraceptive methods, sexual drive, and contacts with individuals of the same sex, in addition to the number of sexual partners or sexual contacts beyond regular relationships. The assessment of the role of sex in adult life, performance in this area, and quality of sexual life, as well as fears and difficulties related to sexual activity also proved vital. The study also addressed health-related issues such as the frequency of preventive examinations, using hormonal agents (e.g., therapy to alleviate the symptoms of climacterium), evaluation of sexual skillfulness with reference to age or sexual activity in a sanatorium. Analyzing the "various shades of sexuality," Izdebski took into account homosexuality, sex on the internet, paid sexual services, and sexuality in the era of the threat of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He was also interested in the views of Polish women and men on specific issues related to the area of human sexuality, including sex education. Izdebski's research sheds light on a wide range of issues that are part of human sexuality. His results have provided valuable insights into the everyday sexual lives of Polish individuals

and enabled us to embrace specific ways of conceptualizing sex, present in both public and academic discourses.

A salient theme in sexuality research is desire. Kristen P. Mark and Julie A. Lasslo (2018), in *Maintaining Sexual Desire in Long-Term Relationships: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Model*, synthesized findings from 64 studies to explore how sexual desire is sustained over time in long-term relationships. Their work has contributed to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of desire and its role in long-term intimacy.

The collective monograph, *The Gayborhood. From Liberation to Cosmopolitan Spectacle,* edited by Christopher T. Conner and Daniel Okamura (2021), presents a multifaceted view of LGBTQ+ sexuality, emphasizing its integration into everyday life.[16] The contributors examined, for example, how LGBTQ+ individuals navigated social norms, constructed social capital (e.g., through the bodies of go-go dancers), managed impressions via dating apps such as *Grindr*, established and entered into relationships, started families, and experienced motherhood. Finally, they analyzed the potential of queer activism. The value of this study lies in challenging the notion of sexuality as a "construct" separated from human life, instead portraying it as an integral aspect of daily life, typical for some, atypical for others.

4.4. Domination, marginalization, (sexual) violence

Throughout this chapter, I have repeatedly addressed the issue of marginalization and social stigmatization of individuals or actions that deviate from socially constructed norms. As previously discussed, the concept of "deviance" is not inherent but socially produced through the internalization of dominant normative frameworks and cultural values. Building on this foundation, this section examines the issue of gendered domination, particularly in the area of sexuality, as highlighted by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (2002). This perspective invites not only reflection on how the assumed dominance of particular groups shapes interactional dynamics, but also how it may pose challenges for those very groups.

An example of the "subtle" dominance of male sexuality over female sexuality, which is stereotyped and controlled differently, is presented in the article *Sexual Double Standard: A Review of the Literature Between 2001 and 2010* by Gabriela Sagebin Bordini and Tania Mara Sperb (2012). Reviewing 26 studies on gendered sexual norms, the authors have demonstrated that although societal perceptions of female sexuality are evolving (e.g., premarital sexual activity is increasingly accepted for both genders), women's sexual behavior continues to be judged by

16 The book by Vanessa R. Panfil, the author of one of the chapters in the collective monograph discussed here, served as inspiration for an HBO series. Her book, *The Gang Is All Queer: The Lives of Gay Gang Members* (Panfil 2017), explores, among other topics, how gang members negotiate masculinity and homosexual identity.

different standards than men's. This observation was echoed by Peggy Orenstein (2016), who, in her TED Talk *What Young Women Believe About Their Own Sexual Pleasure*, noted that young women often associated sexual satisfaction with, among others, the absence of pain, whereas men equated it with the attainment of physical pleasure. This contrast reflects the marginalization of female sexuality and the implicit domination of male sexual norms.

A more overt manifestation of gendered domination is presented in the article *Men Who Like Using and Abusing Women: The Perspective of Clients on Escort Agency Workers* (Wojciechowska 2015b). This study investigated sexual violence perpetrated by clients against sex workers in escort agency settings, where such behavior was often legitimized by other men (e.g., security personnel), unless the woman was visibly harmed, at which point her "utility value" was perceived to diminish. The article illustrates how men construct narratives around women providing sexual services, using these narratives to justify acts of humiliation and to assert dominance within the interaction. The women were frequently held responsible for the clients' sexual satisfaction, and failure to meet these expectations could result in symbolic or physical punishment. The phenomenon of "violence coaching" (Athens 1992) also emerged, wherein men, often in groups, visited escort agencies to demonstrate to others, particularly younger or less experienced men, how to interact with sex workers. A key finding was that such behavior was often rooted in a perceived threat posed by "normal" women, whose "disciplining" would not be socially sanctioned. This underscores how gendered dominance is not only enacted but also socially reinforced through peer dynamics.

Extensive research has been conducted on sexual violence, encompassing gender-based violence and violence related to sexual identity or orientation. One notable study was presented in Heather R. Hlavka's (2017) article *Speaking of Stigma and the Silence of Shame: Young Men and Sexual Victimization*, which analyzed forensic interviews with boys and young men who were suspected victims of sexual abuse. Hlavka explored how sexual violence against males was interpreted and understood, revealing a central tension between the concept of (dominant) masculinity and the experience of victimization. For many, being a victim of sexual violence threatened their sense of masculinity, contributing to their reluctance to disclose abuse or report it to authorities. Given the age of the respondents, the issues of vulnerability and the dependency of a minor must also be considered. At this point, however, it is worth reflecting on how internalized ideals of strong, dominant masculinity can exacerbate the stigma faced by male victims of sexual violence. This underscores the need for comprehensive sexual education that addresses gender norms, vulnerability, and consent.

Male victims of sexual violence may experience dual stigmatization. First, through the perceived undermining of their masculinity. Second, through the questioning of their heteronormative identity, particularly in cases involving male perpetrators. Conversely, when the perpetrator is female, the situation may be equally problematic, as it challenges the normative assumption that femininity should not dominate masculinity.

4.5. Sexual socialization and the essence of sex education

The article *Mother-Daughter Communication on Intimate Relationships: Voices from a Township in Bloemfontein, South Africa* by Ntombizonke A. Gumede, Amanda M. Young-Hauser, and Jan K. Coetzee (2017) does not focus on sexuality as enacted behavior, but rather invites reflection on the role and nature of sex education. It explores the sexual socialization of young women within a culture where sexuality is seen as a taboo subject and discussions about it are framed as problematic. The study has revealed that conversations centered on the negative consequences of intimate relationships, whether sexual or not, can foster distrust between mothers and daughters, thereby reinforcing the taboo surrounding sexuality.

The research was conducted in a resource-poor township, where mothers bear the primary responsibility for educating their daughters about sexuality. In light of the high prevalence of sexual violence against young women, HIV/AIDS, and teenage pregnancies, maternal guidance tends to emphasize the risks associated with sexual activity. These include, for example, the potential need to drop out of school due to an unplanned pregnancy or the risk of contracting HIV. Within this community, sex is not considered an appropriate topic for casual conversation and is often associated with shame. Consequently, mothers often rely on personal experience rather than formal knowledge, which can result in ineffective communication. For example, some of the study participants reported becoming pregnant unintentionally, partly due to misunderstandings stemming from vague or euphemistic language. For instance, mothers would advise their daughters not to "sleep with a boy," intending to discourage sexual activity. However, daughters interpreted this literally – avoiding sharing a bed with men – while still engaging in sexual intercourse.

"When I was young, they used to say to us: «When you meet a boy, or when you sleep with a boy,» instead of saying: «When you have sex.» This left us confused as we thought by sleep it means just sharing a bed. We conceived children and nobody told us about these things," (Gumede, Young-Hauser, Coetzee 2017: 241). This quote highlights the consequences of unclear communication in contexts where direct discussion of sexuality is deemed inappropriate. It underscores the importance of comprehensive and non-judgmental sex education in promoting the health and well-being of young women (and men).

These findings align with the perspective of Peggy Orenstein (2016), who advocates for sexual education that moves beyond a focus on risks and dangers. She emphasizes the salience of discussing responsibility, mutual trust, and the potential for pleasure in sexual relationships. Such an approach encourages individuals to articulate their needs and respect those of their partners, rather than conforming to the "proper," "normative" scenarios of sexual behavior in the area of human sexuality, which is far from unambiguous.

In the Polish context, the research project *Gender w podręcznikach* [Gender in Textbooks] aimed to assess the state of gender equality in education through the analysis of the content of school textbooks. It resulted in a three-volume report, edited by Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska, Maciej Duda, Marta Mazurek, and Aleksandra Sołtysiak-Łuczak (2016). This issue was also addressed by Joanna Dec-Pietrowska and Emilia Paprzycka in their article *Społeczne konstruowanie cielesności i seksualności. Analiza wybranego kontekstu edukacji seksualnej* [Social Constructing of Physicality and Sexuality. Analysis of Selected Context of Sexual Education, 2016]. The results of the study revealed that textbooks for the subject of education for family life were largely based on traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity. Agnieszka Kościańska's book *Zobaczyć łosia. Historia polskiej edukacji seksualnej od pierwszej lekcji do Internetu* [To See a Moose. The History of Polish Sex Education, 2017] offers a comprehensive historical account of sexual education in Poland. Her work provides valuable insights into the cultural and institutional factors that have shaped public discourse on sexuality.

5. Summary

The aim of this chapter has been to introduce readers to the complex and multifaceted perspectives on human sexuality in relation to the body. While the connection between sexuality and corporeality is undeniable, the wide range of sensations and experiences associated with this relationship, the interpretation of which is not always obvious, warrants closer attention.

Beginning with theoretical concepts that serve as analytical reference points, I have sought to demonstrate how meanings related to sexuality and the body are produced and reproduced through everyday interactions. Their context can be constituted by various discourses – some explanatory, others regulatory – that seek to define, problematize or control human sexuality and embodiment. Through the internalization of specific norms and values, individuals incorporate these frameworks into their bodies, which, in turn, mediate and perpetuate the ongoing production of meanings. These meanings serve as symbolic representations of reality, shaping cultural memory. Nonetheless, their intensification can lead to new interpretations and meanings, which inform expectations, fantasies, and lived experiences. Shifts in the understanding of sexuality and the body also influence the nature and content of interpersonal relationships, as individuals pursue diverse forms of fulfillment. At times, achieving such fulfillment requires actively challenging imposed norms and values that fail to reflect one's personal experiences. These acts of resistance can serve as a foundation for further engagement, both personally and academically. It is this scholarly reflection that has enabled the presentation of research focused on the significance of human experience, addressing sexuality in its various dimensions and contexts, as well as in relation to embodied realities.

6. Review questions

1. How does an individual acquire sexual scripts, and do these scripts remain constant throughout the course of one's life?
2. What does it mean that dominance can be unconsciously reproduced? How can this be illustrated through examples that operationalize the concept of bodily *hexis*?
3. To what extent can a "pure relationship" be considered unaffected by prevailing social norms and cultural values?
4. What does it mean to assert that the perception of sex is constructed through interaction? Can this claim be supported with empirical or theoretical examples?
5. Watch the documentary *There Is No "I" in Threesome* (2021) and consider which theoretical frameworks could be applied in its analysis.

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