

**SEXUAL INTERCOURSE AND SYSTEM MAINTENANCE
IN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual intercourse relates to the discriminant definition of male and female sexuality. These definitions buttress different expectations for the performance of male and female in economic and marital roles. Little attention has been given to sexual intercourse as an institution and its relation to other institutions. Although the significance of sex in marriage is recognized, it has not often been analyzed as a factor in maintaining traditional male-female relations and sexual scripts, nor as supportive of the broader economic system. Some feminist writers have analyzed sexual intercourse as an institution which supports and maintains a power differential between men and women which perpetuates a patriarchal system of subordination of women (Miller 1970, Greer 1971, Lydon 1970, Koldt 1973). Among sociologists, it is perhaps Parsons and Bales (1955) who have most closely scrutinized the social function of sexual intercourse. Their functional analysis of genital sexuality draws heavily on Freud's psychoanalytic model of personality development. They note the significance of sexual relations within the family as providing both partners a nurturing relation which has symbolic significance as a reenactment of the pre-Oedipal mother-infant relation. Sexual love, however, is viewed as contingent on the assumption by the husband of his "full place in the masculine world, above all, its occupational aspect, whereas the woman must be a full wife to him and mother to his children." (Parsons & Bales 1955, 21). This functional analysis provides sociological support for the continuation of sex-typed division of labor for the maintenance of the marriage, as an institution closely linked with other social institutions. They see an increased role differentiation within the modern family and an increase in the emphasis on the woman's attractiveness, with strong erotic overtones, as reflecting the increasingly significant role of the nuclear family in an industrialized society.

Ethnographers support the male in the

decision-making roles, and the female in the supportive care-taker role (Tiger 1969). Gilder has attacked the women's movement for eroding male strength and confidence, as leading to widespread impotence and increased homosexuality (Gilder 1973). He views the man's sexual performance as intricately linked with the survival of the system and cautions women that their demand for freedom and equality threatens the survival of a free society. Men who are not sexually potent and confident, according to this view, cannot perform adequately in the economic sphere. This appears to be a misinterpretation of the link between the economic system and sexuality.

An apparent function of sexual intercourse is to encourage young couples to enter the institution of marriage, which confers adult status, establishes sexual license, and provides for procreation and care of children. The procreative function was more significant when children were valued for the work they could perform on farms and other work places, although children still perform a vital consumer function, as do the other members of the nuclear family (Firestone 1970, Aries 1962). Marriage provides ready access to sexual relations for men, while the law requires sexual submission within marriage by women. The married state, especially when it incorporates dependent minor children, provides a dependable, stable, and readily manipulated work incentive. The husband/father's bargaining power is reduced by the demands for economic survival.

Sexual intercourse can be analyzed as an interaction which maintains a definition of males as independent, aggressive, and active, and women as submissive, dependent, and reactive. Various authors have questioned the definition of women as innately non-sexual or as sexually passive, and the relation between these definitions and the continued sexual and social discounting of women. Sherfey (1970) suggests that a woman's capacity for intense repetitive orgasmic experience is at the base of her subordination by men. Lydon (1970) reviews the debate of the va-

ginal orgasm versus the clitoral orgasm and recognizes the function of this view to categorize women as mature and normal and feminine, or as immature, neurotic, and masculine, depending on whether their orgasm is a "healthy" vaginal response or an "unhealthy clitoral" response. The insistence on the vaginal orgasm as the healthy, mature female response prescribes the sexual dependence of females on males, not only for sexual satisfaction, but for identity as a bona fide woman. Masters and Johnson (1966) established the priority of the clitoris in sexual excitement and enjoyment for women. The more recent Hite report (1976), based on a non-clinical sample, reinforces the findings of Masters and Johnson.

WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

Recognition that the human female is not penis dependent implies a need to redefine sexual activity and satisfaction and a need for a changed perception of women's sexuality. The traditional view of women's sexuality is grounded in the cultural definition of women as passive, dependent, and expressive persons, while men are defined as active, independent, and instrumental persons. These definitions are reflected in the socialization process, and are consistent with the positions in the social structure to be occupied by men and by women. The socialization processes of any culture both reflect and support its structures so that the roles that persons are prepared to fill, the self-definitions they are encouraged to accept, even their view of the world, reflects the meeting of conventional socialization and structural requirements.

Our cultural mythology establishes sex as a highly delineated category (Brown 1956). Gender identity is one of our most basic self-definitions (Walum 1977). Although human males and females are presented as being very different in essence, with different needs and abilities, most studies point to the insignificance of innate sex-linked differences, and to the preponderance of physiological similarities between men and women (Stoll 1974, Oakley 1972, Bem 1970, McCoby & Jackson 1974, Forisha 1978).

Socialization processes very clearly and strongly shape men and women into different kinds of persons who are then viewed as having unique qualities and capabilities which qualify them to occupy appropriate

positions in the social structure. Males in our society are generally socialized to fill instrumental task roles. Quite early, parents begin training their male offspring for power roles, while females are socialized to fill expressive social-emotional service roles (Mead 1935, Money 1965). As Parsons and Bales note, these roles are complementary and supportive, not only of the personality needs of marital partners, but of the role requirement each must meet in his or her separate sphere. Of course, the socialization is not always consistent and effective, as illustrated by the current women's movement and the existence of many androgynous males and females (Bem 1976, Weitzman 1979). Nevertheless, socialization practices stress differentiating children on the basis of sex, and these frequently subtle processes lead to differential expectations for healthy males to be aggressive, autonomous, strong, controlled, rational decision makers. Healthy females are expected to be dependent, passive, nurturant, emotional, intuitive, and weak. Our language, children's books, tests, television programs, and motion pictures all reinforce and lead to differential expectations of males and females. They encourage differential treatment and condemn those who engage in behavior which is conventionally inappropriate to their sex (Haskell 1974). Roles available to women are less valued, as are the qualities ascribed to women (Greer 1971, Forisha 1978).

Even when women engage in the more highly valued behavior or fill the high status positions of power, they do not gain the rewards that would be forthcoming to men. What would be assertive in men becomes abrasive in women. What would be insightful becomes castrating. Frequently, women who overcome, and succeed despite these labels, are set apart as different from other women, so as not to challenge the stereotypic view of the weak, dependent, conventional housewife.

SIMILARITIES OF MEN AND WOMEN

In spite of the sharp social distinction made between men and women, we should recognize that both males and females share some human needs that are not allowed general expression. We would surely have to minimize the strength of genetic information carried in 45 chromosomes to assume otherwise. The movement toward androgyny reflects a recogni-

tion of these shared qualities and needs, and it is an attempt to erase the culturally contrived masculine/feminine dichotomy.

We are presented with a cultural contradiction. Despite the fact that both men and women have shared needs for support, warmth, nurturance, and dependence, the differential sex socialization of males and females explicitly neglects these needs while implicitly assuring that males will have these needs met, and that females will meet them. This is accomplished by encouraging males to view sexual conquest as indicating their masculinity. Males are trained to recognize their sexual needs, and to be aggressive in satisfying these needs. In survey after survey, when compared to women, men are reported as thinking more about sex, liking sex more, and being more active sexually (Tavris & Offir 1977, 87). For example, rape has been defined as a cultural myth, and as an extension of natural extension of male sexual aggressiveness (Herman 1979).

DIFFERENTIAL SOCIALIZATION

By seeking sex, and engaging in sex on a continued basis with a safe, non-threatening lower status female, a male can fulfill emotional needs with no threat to his image of self as masculine. In a complementary fashion, the female is socialized to view her fulfillment as dependent on the services she offers in the family and the home, especially through helping her man become successful in providing economic support and physical security. In the upper-middle class family, the woman operates as a silent partner in her husband's career. "While boys are learning physical sex, girls are being trained in the language of love and the cosmetic values of sexual presentation through training in dress, dancing, and other display behavior. At no point is sexual expression valued in itself, independent of the formation of families." (Simon & Gagnon 1969) Sexual fulfillment is to be only of secondary importance to the female in an emotional interaction, while it is defined as of primary importance for males (Petras 1973). Thus, the legal assumption of the man's right to free sexual access when married can be understood in the light of the function which sexual access performs for the male in our culture.

Although both men and women have need for warmth, support, nurturance, and

expressiveness, just as both have needs for strength, autonomy, and control, such needs for women often go unrecognized and unrealized. The female's needs for warmth and nurturance may also be unrealized since role prescriptions require that she devote herself to meeting the needs of the other family members to whom she is supposed to devote herself selflessly, as long as they need or desire her. The warmth and expressive needs of men are allowed institutionalized fulfillment largely because it is economically beneficial. It is here that the institution of sexual intercourse is so vital to the survival of the system.

As a male-controlled act, sexual intercourse is conventionally defined as beginning with the coital insertion of the erect penis in the vaginal canal, and terminating with the orgasmic discharge of semen. Here, we do not assume that sexual intercourse is the only form of sexual interaction, nor that it need culminate in orgasm in order to be satisfying to both partners. It is a rather complex interaction filling emotional-closeness need along with overtly sexual needs. This definition of sexual intercourse stresses the male's requirement to meet this need, in a way which requires the participation of a woman who might easily meet her own need in other ways.

A man can be out of control during sexual intercourse more legitimately than in any other social situation. He can legitimately lose control without being responsible. Both men and women have been socialized to believe that males can maintain only limited control, and that the delicate male ejaculatory system can be triggered with no warning. A woman is responsible for a man's sexual arousal, not necessarily because of what she does or says, nor because of any action, but simply because she is available, or merely present. This is consistent with the definition of women as passive. The male has a semi-automatic response set which seems to be only minimally related to any particular female. This conforms to the scriptural view of woman as temptress and seductress by nature, and is reflected in the ideology of some religious communes which formally place blame on females for arousing males by the inadvertent display of a forearm or an ankle.

Not only are males presumed to be more

easily aroused, but arousal without sexual relief is presumed to cause extreme discomfort. Even if a woman is not directly responsible through her own deliberate action, she may be called on to provide the male sexual relief. Not to do so makes the woman liable to the pejorative name of *sex tease*, applied to women who do not follow through to the man's satisfaction. The woman's existence establishes her responsibility, and her very presence may arouse the male and make it incumbent on her to offer him relief.

This presumption epitomizes woman as server, sexual object, and receptacle. Although the female is responsible for the male's arousal, she is at the same time responsible for her own. The male is responsible for neither of them. One of the greatest inconsistencies of this relation is that sexual problems suffered by the female, such as frigidity, are thought to result from inexperience, inadequacy, or resistance, whereas the male's problems, such as impotence, are related to her non-responsiveness, repressed anger, and more generally to the women's movement. Gilder builds on the foundation of guilt and responsibility which American women are socialized to experience when he places the blame for potential destruction of the social system on women.

The differential socialization of males and females, and the contrasting definitions of male and female sexuality and needs are consistent with the organization of intercourse within the marital relation. Parsons and Bales (1955) suggest that an increase in role differentiation in the modern, isolated nuclear family, coupled with an increasing emphasis on a good marital sexual relation indicates the value of the family as a social subsystem to provide the nurturance needs of its members. They have defined successful genital sexuality as the expression and acting out of "motivational systems which are primarily infantile or regressive—expressions in genital erotic relationships which are a derivative of maternal 'care' via nurturance" and essential to a healthy balance of the adult personality (Parsons & Bales 1955, 150).

FEMALE SUBORDINATION

Because males are defined as having a stronger sex drive, and females are defined as serving, nurturant, and self-sacrificing, they are expected to provide the appropri-

ate environment and personnel for the satisfaction of men (Money 1965). In the middle-class family, women become mamas while men become boys (Slater 1976). In bed with a woman, the strong macho man can lose control and be a child. The woman, by her socialization, and because of her economic dependence on the man's occupational success, sees sexual intercourse as her responsibility, and as a service which she must perform for her partner, perhaps gaining satisfaction only vicariously through his release. This is most likely in working-class and lower-class families where sex roles are more tightly prescribed, in which women and men live in separate spheres with relatively little communication or sharing (Florisha 1979).

The woman, who in public, must present herself as a desirable object in order to gain male approval and contact, will make a rather rapid transition to "Mom" in bed. The wife in this symbolic ritual is less powerful than the male and more expressive. Both qualities allow the male to be nurtured without status loss. Role theory would lead us to assume the interdependence of roles. If the male needs to have one interaction in which he can be a little boy, to be held, comforted, and given warmth and acceptance, then the female's sexual role must be defined to accommodate this need. Sex is defined in physiological terms, and responsibility for action is not seated in the person's conscious, rational mind. In this, the male need not perceive himself as childish or weak. He receives nurturance from the woman as comforter or as sexual animal, to whom he is drawn by involuntary internal mechanisms. Equally important is the fact that the woman needs to be lower in status, as child, or as the dependent other (de Beauvoir 1952).

CONCLUSION

During sexual intercourse, women can provide men with warmth, nurturance, acceptance, and support in an environment which allows the man to be expressive, emotional, childlike, and out of control. Only in this way can men express emotions which would otherwise be unacceptable and status damaging. Our economic system, which depends on aggressiveness, competition, and independence for men in primary roles can sustain these traits if it punishes conflicting traits and reinforces

these traits with the material rewards which indicate success and masculinity. The family, as a sexual unit, is responsible to gratify the emotional and dependency needs of its males. Sexual intercourse provides the mechanism for this gratification of males both before and during marriage. The differential socialization of males and females, the roles provided them in our culture, the cultural definitions of their sexuality, and the encouragement of sexual intercourse for men, all complement the economic structure and underlie its survival.

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TABLE 1: RACE CONCEPT IN ANTHROPOLOGY TEXTS 1932-1979
Textbook use of race as judged by Panel:

<u>Period</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Races Exists</u>	<u>Races Do Not Exist</u>	<u>Uncom- mitted</u>	<u>Omits Race</u>	<u>No Cons- ensus</u>
1932-44	2	2				
1945-49	5	4	1			
1950-54	3	2	1			
1955-59	1	1				
1960-64	6	4	2			
1965-69	8	5			2	1
1970-74	16	7	4	2	2	1
1975-79	23	7	11	3	1	1
Total	64	32	19	5	5	3

in the decade of the 1970s where 10 textbooks appeared to our panel to be noncommittal or not to mention race. Where a textbook was classed as noncommittal, it usually meant that the author presented both sides of the debate over race, but appeared to take no position. The decline of *race* and the development of the *no race* position is significant because the decade production rate for the 1970s was 39 compared to 6.8 or 25 texts in the 37 prior years from 1932 to 1969. Presumably they also reached a larger audience of college students.

From 1932 to 1969 only four texts held that races do not exist, and three were written by Ashley Montagu. From 1970 to 1979 the 15 texts written from the *lumping* perspective were written by 11 authors. This indicates a change of perspective and much wider support for the *no race* position among a younger generation of scholars.

Among well-qualified and authoritative physical anthropologists, we find contradictory statements. Buettner-Janusch writes, "*Race* is a perfectly useful and valid term, and I shall use it." (1973 490). But Weiss and Mann say: "*Race* is an arbitrary unrealistic corner from which to look at human variability." (1978 508). Perhaps Kelso is correct in presenting his material in a fashion which removes the "... comfortable feeling that most (white?) people in our society have when they use the term *race*." (1970 318).

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(White, from p 169)

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