

# Essentialism vs. Social Constructionism in the Study of Human Sexuality

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*According to classical essentialism, there are underlying true forms or essences, there is discontinuity between different forms rather than continuous variation, and these true forms are constant over time. Modern essentialism consists of a belief that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, and biologically determined. We consider sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, genetic research, brain research, and endocrine research as examples of essentialist approaches, focusing particularly on how these research approaches treat sexual orientation and sexual attraction. Social constructionism, in contrast, rests on the belief that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes language as an important means by which we interpret experience. We briefly review social constructionist research on sexual orientation and sexual attraction. Finally, we review examples of conjoint or interactionist research, uniting biological and social influences. We conclude that, although there may be theories and research that conjoin biological and social influences, there can be no true conjoining of essentialism and social constructionism.*

Among sex researchers today, few debates are more intense than the one between essentialism on the one hand and social constructionism on the other. Yet often these terms remain undefined or ill defined. In this article we carefully specify these theoretical positions. We focus our discussion on this debate in the social and biological sciences; a parallel debate exists in the humanities, but it is beyond the scope of this article. To illustrate the particular content of the debate, we consider two classic issues in sex research—sexual attraction and sexual orientation—and how they have been addressed by essentialist and social constructionist researchers. Finally, we consider the possibility of a conjoint essentialist/social constructionist approach in sex research.

## Essentialism

### *Defining Essentialism*

The concept of essentialism originated in the work of Plato (428–348 B.C.) (Mayr, 1982). He argued that, for example, a triangle, no matter what the length of the sides or the combination of angles, always had the *form* of a triangle and thus was discontinuously different from a circle or rectangle. For Plato, the phe-

nomena of the natural world were simply a reflection of a finite number of fixed and unchanging forms, or *eide*, as he called them. The *eide* were renamed *essences* by the Thomists of the Middle Ages. Constancy and discontinuity were the crucial properties of essences. That is, an essence does not change and is categorically different from another essence. The essentialists attributed continuous variation to the imperfect manifestation of the essences. Essentialism was the philosophical foundation for positivism in philosophy up to the twentieth century. Essentialism therefore dominated philosophical and scientific thought in the Western world. We will refer to this form of essentialism as classical essentialism.

Ironically for the purposes of the current discussion, Darwin was one of the first to reject essentialism, at least partially. His reward was rejection of his work by the philosophers of the time. His notion of change through evolution was fundamentally at odds with the notion of constancy in essentialism.

Popper (1962) brought essentialism back into modern discourse on the philosophy of science, while at the same time rejecting it soundly. According to Popper, essentialism is

defined by two doctrines. First, “the best, the truly scientific theories, describe the ‘essences’ or the ‘essential natures’ of things—the realities which lie behind the appearances.” Second, “the scientist can succeed in finally establishing the truth of such theories beyond all reasonable doubt” (Popper, 1962, pp. 103–104). For Popper, theories are never more than hypotheses. They are conjecture rather than true knowledge.

In the social sciences today, and specifically in sexology, essentialism seems to have become something of a fuzzy category, a term that many use but few stop to define. We doubt that those who use the term generally have in mind Plato’s notions of true, underlying essences. Today, essentialism implies a belief that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined (Irvine, 1990). We will refer to this form of essentialism as modern essentialism. The term is often used

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loosely to refer to research and theory presuming a biological basis—usually a biological determination—of sexual behavior, although as we will see in a later section, there are also cultural essentialist theories. Interestingly, the term *essentialism* is generally used by those who are opposed to it, not by those who practice it. In the sections that follow, we will review theories and research that fit into this broad category, while at the same time considering whether these theories and research also conform to some “essential” properties of classical essentialism: (a) a belief in underlying true forms or essences; (b) a discontinuity between different forms rather than continuous variation; and (c) constancy, that is, the absence of change over time. First, we review evolutionary theories and then a set of theories and research on proximal biological causes of sexual phenomena. Finally, we consider the possibility of cultural essentialism.

#### *Evolutionary Theories*

Sociobiology has been defined as the application of evolutionary biology to understanding the social behavior of animals, including humans (Barash, 1977). This modern application of evolutionary theory was inaugurated with the publication of E. O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975). Donald Symons applied this approach to understanding sexuality in his book, *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (1979).

Evolutionary theory refers to the theory that all living things have acquired their present forms through gradual changes in their genetic endowment over successive generations. These gradual changes take place as a result of natural selection, a process resulting in the survival of only those animals that are well adapted to their environment. In addition to natural selection, Darwin posited a second process, sexual selection, that produced sex differences. Sexual selection includes two processes: (a) members of one gender (usually males) competing with each other for mating access to members

of the other gender and (b) preferential choice by members of one gender (usually females) for certain members of the other gender (Trivers, 1972).

David Buss articulated a more complex evolutionary theory of sexuality, sexual strategies theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This theory distinguishes between short-term mating strategies (e.g., casual sex) and long-term mating strategies (e.g., marriage). Men and women confront some similar but also some different adaptive problems in short-term and long-term mating strategies.

Space does not permit us to review thoroughly all the nuances of these theories, nor the data that have been amassed in support of them (for reviews, see Allgeier & Wiederman, 1994; Buss, 1994, 1997; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Rather, we will focus on two phenomena that have been addressed extensively by both essentialist and social constructionist theorists and therefore provide an ideal opportunity for comparing the two approaches. These two phenomena are sexual attraction and sexual orientation.

*Attraction.* Whom do we find attractive as a sexual partner; that is, what are our mate-selection preferences? According to evolutionary theorists, our mating preferences are the result of evolutionary forces; the preferences that evolved serve the function of maximizing the individual's reproductive success or fitness, i.e., the number of one's genes passed on successfully to succeeding generations through one's offspring. As noted previously, evolutionary psychologists distinguish between short-term and long-term mating strategies; furthermore, they argue that short-term mating strategies constitute a larger component of men's sexual strategy than women's (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Because most psychological research has been focused on attraction in short-term relationships, we will concentrate here on the findings for short-term mating strategies.

According to Buss and Schmitt (1993), men have an evolved preference for mates who are fertile, and the best cues to fertility are physical attractiveness. Cues to physical attractiveness include a clear skin, the absence of lesions, clear eyes, and lustrous hair. That is, women who are unhealthy and probably have reduced fertility generally manifest this in an unhealthy and unattractive appearance. Physically attractive women are presumably healthier and, by inference, more fertile (Symons, 1987). Youth is another cue to fertility and reproductive value, and men, according to the theory, also have an evolved preference for young women, regardless of the man's age.

Gangestad and Buss (1993) argued that this mechanism can also explain cross-cultural variations in mating preferences. Specifically, in cultures where more parasites are present, healthiness and pathogen resistance are even more important to assess in a mate than in cultures where there are few parasites. Therefore, physical appearance should be more important in selecting a mate in high-pathogen areas than in low-pathogen areas, and the cross-cultural data supported that prediction. This pattern was true for both men's and women's mating preferences.

Women are generally more interested in long-term than short-term mating strategies (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Short-term mating for women, however, may have some adaptive functions. Specifically, it can allow them to assess the merits of a man as a long-term mate. Women, according to the theory, want a long-term mate who is able and willing to provide resources (money, food, etc.) that can be used in the rearing of their offspring. Therefore, women value wealth, good financial prospects, and industriousness in a mate. Like men, they also value physical attractiveness as an indicator of health and fertility, but this may be a lesser factor than the man's command of resources.

In sum, then, physical attractiveness and youth should be key features that attract men to women. Women are attracted to men who can provide resources and, to a lesser extent, men who are healthy and attractive.

*Sexual orientation.* Sexual orientation is a difficult issue for evolutionary theorists. On the surface, if evolutionary forces are the key to human sexuality, exclusive homosexuality with no reproduction should not exist, and even bisexuality, with decreased heterosexual mating and reproduction, should not be favored. Natural selection would quickly weed out individuals and genes leading to these tendencies. Indeed, sociobiologist Helen Fisher opined, "I suspect that both hormones and environment have important effects on sexual preferences in humankind and other animals" (1992, p. 167), apparently implying that evolutionary selection was not an important force.

Evolutionary theorists have used a more complex concept, inclusive fitness, in explaining the maintenance of same-gender sexual behavior in the face of evolutionary pressures (Dickemann, 1995; Weinrich, 1995). Much evolutionary theorizing has been focused on individual fitness, i.e., the passing of one's genes to later generations through one's children. Inclusive fitness, in contrast, refers to the reproductive success of oneself and one's close relatives, i.e., the total of one's genes passed to the next generation through one's children, but also through one's siblings' children (who are also carrying some of one's genes) and other relatives' children. The notion, then, is that gay men and lesbians might contribute to the fitness of their siblings, nieces, and nephews, perhaps by helping in their rearing or contributing material resources, thereby maximizing their own inclusive fitness and the continued evolution of same-gender sexual orientations.

### *Biological Theories Emphasizing Proximate Causes*

Sociobiologists distinguish between proximate and ultimate causes of behavior (e.g., Symons, 1987). Proximate causes, e.g., hormones, have an immediate impact on behavior. Ultimate causes deal with evolution and the particular circumstances of ancestral populations that led to the evolution of a particular trait or tendency. In this section we shift the focus to another category of essentialist theories and research, biological influences that are proximate.

*Genetic influences on human sexuality.* There has been considerable theoretical and research interest in the genetics of one of our two key topics (sexual orientation) but not the other (attraction). Bailey and Pillard (1991) studied 56 gay men who had an identical twin brother. They found that 52% of the co-twins were also gay, i.e., there was a 52% concordance rate. There was a 22% concordance rate for gay men with nonidentical twin brothers and an 11% concordance rate for gay men and their adoptive brothers. Bailey, Pillard, Neale, and Agyei (1993) found a 48% concordance rate among lesbians with identical twin sisters, compared with a 16% concordance rate for nonidentical twin pairs and 6% for adoptive sister pairs. (See Whitam, Diamond, & Martin, 1993, for similar results.)

These studies seem to provide evidence of a genetic influence on sexual orientation in both men and women. They do not, however, provide evidence of complete genetic determination, which would require a concordance rate of 100% for identical twins.

Moving to the micro level of analysis, Dean Hamer and his colleagues reported that they have identified a particular gene on the X chromosome, named Xq28, that explains some cases of male homosexuality (Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu, & Pattatucci, 1993). Transmission is therefore from mothers to sons, and

there is an increased incidence of homosexual orientation in maternal uncles, but not in fathers or paternal relatives. This research is controversial, in part because of failures to replicate the findings (Marshall, 1995), but nonetheless intriguing.

*Brain factors.* Another hypothesis has been that there are neuro-anatomical differences between the brains of gays and straights. Often the attempt has been to link these differences to male-female brain differences. Much research has focused on the hypothalamus and two clusters of cells (nuclei) in it: the sexually dimorphic nucleus (SDN) and the interstitial nuclei of the anterior hypothalamus (INAH-1, INAH-2, and INAH-3) (Swaab, Gooren, & Hofman, 1995). Much of this research has been conducted with animals, and one might question the relevance to humans.

Perhaps the best known study investigating the hypothesis of hypothalamic differences in humans is LeVay's (1991) research. He found that INAH3 was larger in heterosexual women than heterosexual men and that INAH3 in homosexual men was similar in size to that of heterosexual women (no lesbians were included in the study). The study can be criticized on a number of grounds: (a) The sample size was very small; only 19 gay men, 16 straight men, and 6 straight women were included. (b) All gay men in the sample, but only six straight men and one straight woman, had died of AIDS. (c) The gay men were known to have been gay based on records at the time of death; the others, however, were just "presumed" to be heterosexual. Therefore, this study cannot be regarded as conclusive.

*Hormones.* For decades researchers have speculated that some kind of hormone imbalance was responsible for homosexuality. Perhaps, the reasoning went, gay men are low on testosterone and lesbians are low on estrogen or perhaps high on testosterone. Recent studies fail to show any differences in testosterone levels

between male homosexuals and male heterosexuals (Banks & Gartrell, 1995; Gooren, Fliers, & Courtney, 1990). Fewer studies of hormonal differences between lesbians and heterosexual women have been conducted. These studies showed no differences between the two groups in testosterone levels (Banks & Gartrell, 1995; Dancy, 1990; Downey, Ehrhardt, Schiffman, Dyrenfurth, & Becker, 1987).

There has also been speculation that there might be differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals in other hormones such as the gonadotropins FSH and LH. Five of seven studies on LH levels in gay men compared with straight men showed no differences, and two showed higher LH levels in gay men (Banks & Gartrell, 1995), so there is not strong support for differences in LH levels.

#### *Are the Biological Theories Essentialist?*

As noted earlier, classical essentialism rests on three assumptions: (a) a belief in underlying true forms or essences; (b) a discontinuity between different forms; and (c) constancy, that is, the absence of change over time. Here we consider whether the biological theories just reviewed rest on these assumptions. The issue of sexual orientation provides the clearest issue for analysis.

All the biological theories—evolutionary, genetic, hormonal, and neuroanatomical—are based on the assumption, although it is rarely stated, that there are two underlying true forms, heterosexuals and homosexuals. Despite Kinsey's pioneering conceptualization of a continuum between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the theories rest on an assumption of discontinuity, i.e., that homosexuality and heterosexuality are two distinct and separate categories. In addition, these theories rest on an assumption of the constancy over time of the two categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. None of the theories include the possibility that the inci-

dence or nature of homosexuality may have changed over the centuries. Ironically, the evolutionary theories should follow the lead of Darwin and incorporate changes in patterns of adaptation and selection for homosexuality over many generations. As experts noted, however, sociobiology typically rests on an outmoded version of evolutionary theory that modern biologists consider naive (Gould, 1987). Thus, the very capacity for change over time (and with environmental conditions) that is so important in evolutionary theory has generally been ignored by modern sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists.

#### *Cultural Essentialism*

Although essentialism generally refers to views that are biologically deterministic, within gender studies there is also a cultural essentialist viewpoint. Indeed, one text defined essentialism as "the point of view that women and men do differ because of socialization and that women are at least equal to and possibly superior to men" (Rollins, 1996, p. 8). This definition is not sufficiently precise for our purposes, but it illustrates the existence of the cultural essentialist point of view.

A group of theorists, known as cultural feminists, have propounded the view that, because of universal early childhood experiences, women are inherently relational, whereas men are autonomous and independent. Chodorow (1978) articulated the theoretical basis for these views, arguing that the initial close and intense bond between mother and infant must be smashed by the male in order to form a separate, independent, masculine identity, whereas the female can continue in close relatedness to her mother, who provides her with a feminine identity. These qualities of separateness in men and relatedness in women persist throughout life and are a result of universal cultural experience. They are regarded as essential qualities. Gilligan (1982) based her no-

tion of women's different moral voice, with an emphasis on caring and relationships, on Chodorow's theorizing. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule's (1986) belief in "women's ways of knowing" represents yet another derivative of these ideas.

These theories all argue for cultural determinism of essential qualities in females and males, resulting from universal experiences in infancy and early childhood—namely, the early intense bond between mother and infant and the father's relative absence from these early relationships. These theories have been criticized for presuming universality and ignoring diversity in human experience (e.g., Lorber & Farrell, 1991).

#### *Summary: Essentialism*

We have considered three distinct schools of thought on essentialism: Plato's classical essentialism, modern essentialism characterized by biological determinism, and cultural essentialism. All have in common an assumption that phenomena—in particular, sexual phenomena such as sexual orientation or gender—reside within the individual (Bohan, 1993), in the form of hormones, personality traits, and so on. This view is in sharp contrast to social constructionism, whose proponents view these phenomena as external to the individual, defined by social understandings and discourse.

### **Social Constructionism**

#### *Defining Social Constructionism*

The term *social constructionism* has broad currency in the social sciences. It is often used loosely to refer to any social influence on individual experience. However, it is more appropriately used to refer to a specific theoretical paradigm. The fundamental assumption of this paradigm is that "reality is socially constructed" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 1). This paradigm has its roots in

the philosophy of human experience, in the writings of Mannheim and Schutz. In the social sciences, it draws on the work of Mead and Parsons. The most systematic presentation of the paradigm is found in Berger and Luckmann's book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). First, we present the constructionist paradigm, then describe its use to the study of human sexuality, and finally review its application to attraction and sexual orientation.

### *The Constructionist Paradigm*

This presentation draws heavily on Berger and Luckmann's treatise. The discussion is organized around five statements; we have extracted them from a far more lengthy and integrated discourse.

First, our experience of the world is ordered. We do not perceive a chaotic jumble of sights, sounds, smells, and touches. We perceive the world as comprised of discrete events and specific persons engaging in distinct actions in a particular order. We experience the world as an objective reality, as consisting of events and persons that exist independently of our perception of them.

Second, language provides the basis on which we make sense of the world. Language provides us with the categories, or typifications, that we use to classify events and persons and to order them. Language provides the means by which we interpret new experience. Language or discourse is "prior to and constitutive of the world" (Miller, in press, p. 32).

Third, the reality of everyday life is shared. Other persons perceive reality in much the same way, as consisting of similar events, persons, actions, and order. This shared, or intersubjective, character distinguishes the reality of everyday life from idiosyncratic realities, such as our dreams. Language enables us to share experience, to make our experience available to others. Thus, re-

ality is a product of social interaction (Gergen, 1985).

Fourth, shared typifications of reality become institutionalized. Shared typifications of people and events lead to habitualization: "While in theory there may be a hundred ways to go about the project of building a canoe out of matchsticks, habitualization narrows these down to one" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 53). Habitualization makes the behavior of others predictable, facilitating joint activity (Mead, 1934). Once a typification or practice becomes habitual, others come to expect it, and mechanisms of social control are developed to perpetuate it. Of particular significance are institutionalized roles, reciprocal typifications of conduct by types of actors in specific contexts.

Fifth, knowledge may be institutionalized at the level of society, or within subgroups. A subuniverse of meaning is a socially segregated store of knowledge "carried" by a specific group. There may be conflict between such groups.

Our discussion to this point has emphasized experience of the world external to the individual. What about the experience of internal sensations? The same theory applies. Language provides us with the categories that we use to interpret or make meaningful internal phenomena. There are strong and weak versions of constructionism in applications to internal sensation, such as emotion (Armon-Jones, 1986). The strong version asserts that all experience is a sociocultural product: "No emotion can be a natural state, . . . [or] regarded as cultural modifications of natural states" (p. 37). The weak version "concedes to the naturalist the existence of a limited range of natural emotional responses" (p. 38). However, "the naturalist's account is of limited scope since the salient aspects of an agent's emotional responses form part of a mental life, the interests, goals and general attitudes of which largely re-

flect the agent's membership of his/her cultural community" (p. 39).

### *The Social Construction of Sexuality*

Berger and Luckmann (1966) acknowledged that sexuality is "grounded in biological drives" (p. 181) and that these drives provide a generalized motivation. But biology does not dictate where, when, and with what object a person engages in sexual behavior; "sexuality . . . [is] channeled in specific directions socially rather than biologically, a channeling that not only imposes limits on these activities, but directly affects organismic functions" (p. 181).

Gagnon and Simon's book, *Sexual Conduct* (1973), presented a theory of sexuality that is fundamentally social constructionist. They rejected an essentialist view, arguing that "sexuality is not . . . [a] universal phenomenon which is the same in all historical times and cultural spaces" (Gagnon, 1990, p. 3). Sexuality is created by culture, by the defining of some behaviors and some relationships as "sexual," and the learning of these definitions or *scripts* by members of the society.

Laws and Schwartz (1977) applied the constructionist paradigm to female sexuality in the contemporary United States. With regard to phenomena such as birth, sexual anatomy, menarche, sexual initiation, impotence, and frigidity, "the primary significance of these biological events is not that they occur, but that they are marked by others. They have social significance; terms exist to refer to them, and communication occurs about them" (p. 22). We note the emphasis on language and communication as the source of significance or meaning of biological phenomena.

Foucault (1978) systematically applied a social constructionist paradigm to human sexuality. He argued that sexuality is not an essence. It is not a biological quality or natural inner drive whose character is the

same across time and space. It is a cultural construct. Its meaning is derived from language or discourse; each institution in society has a discourse about sex, a way of thinking and talking about the broad array of behaviors and actors who are involved in sexual expression. Similarly, Gagnon (1990) argued that each institution in society has an "institutional system" about sexuality.

*Attraction.* According to social construction theorists, our mating preferences are the result of socialization, of learning the universe of meaning of our (sub)culture with regard to mate selection. Sociocultural standards of desirability will reflect cultural values, the economic and social structure, and the characteristic division of household labor in that culture. Some characteristics appear to be universally preferred, such as physical attractiveness, education, and intelligence. Other characteristics, such as age and virginity, are much more important in some societies than in others (Hatfield & Rapsin, 1996).

Essentialists have emphasized the universal preferences. Social constructionists argue that, although a preference for an attractive mate may be universal, there are no universal standards of attractiveness (Fausto-Sterling, 1986). In one society, men may consider a heavy woman sexually attractive, whereas in other societies, men may be sexually aroused by the sight of a thin woman.

Evolutionary theorists explain mate-selection preferences as serving reproductive purposes, maximizing the likelihood that a man or woman will select a fertile partner. A study by Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1987) challenges this view. Howard and colleagues studied the preferences of both partners in heterosexual ( $n = 4,314$ ), male homosexual ( $n = 969$ ), and lesbian ( $n = 788$ ) couples. Although some results were consistent with the evolutionary perspective, others were not. Most respondents reported strong

preferences for an expressive (affectionate, compassionate) partner, characteristics that are related to relationship satisfaction and relationship survival, traits that have no direct relationship to fertility.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that certainty of paternity is a major concern of men. This leads to preference for virgins in a long-term mating strategy (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Again, data deriving from social constructionist research call this view into question. Schlegel (1995) concluded, based on a survey of the anthropological literature, that the value placed on female virginity at marriage is related to the giving of property at the marriage by the bride's family. She argued that in such societies the bride's family is "buying" a son-in-law to maintain or enhance the family's social status. Thus, the bride's family, not the groom and his family, place great value on female virginity.

*Sexual orientation.* The biological theories of sexual orientation discussed earlier all include the assumption that there are two distinct types of people, heterosexual and homosexual, and that each person is one or the other. If a preference for partners of the same gender is genetic, or due to differences in hormone levels or brain anatomy, one would expect at least some similarities in gays or lesbians (not to mention heterosexual men and women) across cultures. Social constructionists, on the other hand, expect substantial variation across cultures in the behaviors associated with homosexuality and heterosexuality. Blackwood (1993) concluded, based on a review of the anthropological literature, that homosexuality varies greatly from one society to another:

Patterns of homosexual behavior reflect the value systems and social structure of the different societies in which they are found. The ideology regarding male and female roles, kinship and marriage regulations, and the sexual division of labor are all important in

the construction of homosexual behavior. (p. 331)

In fact, there is tremendous variability within a single culture in sexual behavior and lifestyles. One can compare samples of gay and heterosexual men on quantitative measures such as number of sexual partners and find significant mean differences. Such gross comparisons encourage us to ignore or overlook the celibate and faithful gay men and the extremely promiscuous married heterosexual men. Such complexity is inconsistent with sociobiological and evolutionary models (Fausto-Sterling, 1986).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, proponents of biological theories of orientation assume constancy over (historical) time. They also assume constancy over the life of the individual. One is heterosexual or homosexual for life. There are societies in which sexual orientation seems fixed and is associated with institutionalized roles that one occupies across the life span. There are other societies, however, in which the boundaries between sexual orientations are fluid, and persons move back and forth during the course of their lives. One notable case is the Sambia, as reported by Herdt (1984). In this culture, male youth are initiated into a stage of exclusively homosexual behavior. Following marriage, there is a period during which they have sexual contact with men/youth and their wives. Following the birth of children, they become exclusively heterosexual. The Sambia have no concept of homosexuality as a lifelong trait or lifestyle.

### *The Social Construction of Gender*

One of the topics of greatest interest to social constructionists has been gender and its social construction (e.g., Bohan, 1993; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Unger, 1989). A common misunderstanding is that the social construction of gender means that gender-typed attributes are simply the result of socialization

(Bohan, 1993). The social constructionist position, however, as articulated earlier in this article, is considerably more complex than that. Social constructionists see gender not as a trait of the individual—as essentialists do—but rather as a process external to the individual. Gender is defined by interactions between people, by language, and by the discourse of a culture.

#### *Summary: Social Constructionism*

Social constructionist analyses have several strengths (Miller, in press). First, the central role given language provides a concrete mechanism by which culture influences individual thought and behavior. In so doing, several writers follow the lead of George Herbert Mead (1934). Second, social constructionism can represent the complexity within a single culture; it does not assume uniformity. Third, it is consistent with variation across societies and over time.

#### **Conclusion**

In this article we defined the basic features of essentialism and social constructionism and then examined their applications to two topics in sex research, sexual orientation and attraction. Essentialist approaches to research on sexual orientation—whether they be evolutionary approaches or approaches that rely on hormones, genetics, or brain factors—rest on assumptions that (a) there are underlying true essences (homosexuality and heterosexuality), (b) there is a discontinuity between forms (homosexuality and heterosexuality are two distinct, separate categories, rather than points on a continuum), and (c) there is constancy of these true essences over time and across cultures (homosexuality and heterosexuality have the same form today in American culture as they have had for centuries and as they have in other cultures today). Modern essentialism is usually equated with biological determinism, although a strain of cultural essentialism also exists. In contrast,

social constructionists argue that there are no true essences, but rather that reality is socially constructed, and therefore that phenomena such as homosexuality are social constructions, the product of a particular culture, its language, and institutions.

In regard to attraction, essentialist researchers (particularly evolutionary theorists) look for cross-cultural universals in patterns of attraction. They see these universal patterns—such as a preference for physically attractive persons, signaling healthiness—as the product of evolution and as having the function of maximizing the individual's fitness. Social constructionists focus not on the universal preference for an attractive mate, but on cultural variations in what is considered attractive, such as the preference, a century ago, for women with voluptuous bodies such as those sculpted by Rubens, which contrasts sharply with the preference today for lean or athletic bodies for women. In the sections that follow, we review criticisms of essentialism and social constructionism and then consider the possibility of a conjoint approach that integrates both essentialism and social constructionism.

#### *Criticisms of Essentialism and Social Constructionism*

Two basic assumptions of evolutionary psychology have been heavily criticized. The first is the assumption of constancy across time in mating preferences and practices. Several analyses have documented the changes that have occurred historically in mate selection, marriage, and the expression of sexuality outside marriage (Aries, 1993; Foucault, 1978).

The assumption of discontinuity of forms has also been challenged. Critics point to the variation both across cultures and within a single culture in the form that a single phenomenon takes. Homosexuality encompasses several different lifestyles in the contemporary United States. At the same time, the meaning of a single

behavior varies greatly from one culture to another. In White Anglo-American culture, two men who engage in anal intercourse would be considered homosexual. In Mexican culture, the man who takes the active role is labeled masculine and is not stigmatized; the man who takes the receptive role is considered homosexual (Magana & Carrier, 1991).

A limitation of one version of constructionist thought is that it assigns a passive role to the individual. With its emphasis on primary socialization and the learning of language by new members, it leaves little room for individual initiative and creativity. The result is what Wrong (1961) characterized as an oversocialized conception of the person; ironically, he criticized such conceptions for their failure to recognize the impact of biology on thought and behavior. The relegation of the individual to a passive role may be less true of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) formulation. Another weakness is the limited explanatory and predictive power of constructionist theories, given their emphasis on variability.

#### *Conjoint Approaches*

Typically, attempts to synthesize biological influences and social influences in a single theory are termed interactionist theories, despite the fact that these theories rarely specify a true interaction between the two sets of influences, but rather specify additive influences. For this reason, we avoid the term *interactionist approaches* here and refer to these approaches simply as conjoint, meaning a theoretical and an empirical joining of the essentialist and social constructionist approaches. Here we consider two examples of such conjoint approaches.

Berscheid and Walster's (1974) two-component theory of love and attraction is one example. According to the theory, passionate love occurs when two conditions exist simultaneously: (a) The person is in a state of intense physiological arousal and (b)

the situation is such that the person applies a particular cognitive label—"love"—to the sensations being experienced. A number of researchers have provided evidence consistent with this theory (e.g., White, Fishbein, & Rutstein, 1981). Is the theory an example of a conjoining of essentialism and social constructionism? Part (a) is certainly a biological component, but does it rest on essentialist notions? Perhaps it does, if one considers it to be based on an underlying assumption that there is a true essence of sex drive or arousal and that it must be activated for the experience of passionate love to occur. Part (b) is clearly social constructionist. Given a certain internal state of physiological arousal, love is socially constructed, based on the situation (presence of an attractive member of the other gender) and other factors. Other labels, such as fear or anger, might have been given to this internal state if the situation were different.

As a second example, the anthropologist Donald Tuzin (1995) advocated a biocultural approach to understanding sexuality. According to his analysis, sexual desire is an essential product of evolution. Sexual desire is such a strong force that, as he pointed out, people have risked life, tranquility, family, and reputation in their quest to express sexual desire. But the expression of sexual desire is channeled and constrained by memories, situational factors, and cultural understandings, which tell us who the appropriate partners are, which partners may be dangerous, and so on. Thus, although sexual desire may be biologically driven, its expression is socially constructed. Here again we seem to see a joining of an essentialist view of sexual desire with a social constructionist view of the way it is expressed.

#### *Can There Be True Conjoint Theories?*

These two examples surely represent conjoint theories that rely on a combination of biological and cultur-

al factors as influences on sexuality. But, as we noted earlier, biological influence cannot be simply equated with essentialism, nor can social influence be equated with social constructionism. In our view, the basic definitions of essentialism and social constructionism may well prohibit efforts to frame conjoint theories. Essentialism relies on a notion of true essences, with an implication (found in positivism) that we can know these true essences directly and objectively. Social constructionists argue the opposite, that we cannot know anything about true essences or reality directly, but rather that humans always engage in socially constructing reality. There is no happy detente between these approaches. Similarly, the essentialist emphasis on separate and distinct categories or essences is at odds with the social constructionist view of the startling diversity of human sexual expression across time and culture, and even within the individual. Therefore, although one may frame interactionist or conjoint theories of biological and cultural influence, it seems to us unlikely that there can be a true conjoining of essentialist and social constructionist approaches.

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Manuscript accepted March 24, 1997