

*European Union, and Germany.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

## Sexuality

What does sexuality have to do with work? The answer to this question might seem simple at first glance because it is common to assume that sexuality and work are activities that (should) exist in separate social spheres. According to this logic, sexuality is intimate, private, naturally occurring, and generally a pleasant (but stigmatized) activity that takes place at home. In contrast, work is seen as public, social, and arduous; work is also seen as attached to social status and is associated with an exchange for money. Using this logic, it would make sense to argue that sexuality should have little to do with work. In other words, sexuality should neither be present in the workplace nor be something that should require work to achieve.

However, when comparing these common-sense definitions to contemporary social research, we find multiple alternative conceptualizations of both sexuality and work, as well as their relationship to one another. In contrast to this separate-spheres notion, research reveals that sexuality and work are highly interconnected on several dimensions and that their meanings are embedded within particular cultural and organizational contexts. This entry will describe some of the definitions that contemporary social theorists use to understand these terms and their interconnections.

### Key Concepts for Theorizing Sexuality

Most contemporary sexuality research is built upon a toolkit of concepts known as sex, gender, and sexuality. Many people, including academics, use all three of these terms in overlapping and at times erroneous ways, namely using the terms *sex* and *sexuality* interchangeably and conflating the term *sex* with *gender*. Before discussing the issue of sexuality at work, it is thus important to clarify how these terms will be used in this essay.

*Gender* was originally a term created by feminist social scientists to distinguish the social realm (what it means to be a man or a woman; e.g.,

masculinity and femininity) from the biological (or sex) aspects of living in female or male bodies (categories based on genitals, hormones, and chromosomes). Feminist, queer, and postmodern scholarship has pushed the concepts of gender and sex further by (1) emphasizing how gender is a performance enacted for various purposes in society (what Candace West and Don Zimmerman coined in 1987 as “doing gender”) and (2) documenting the ways that even biological sex is shaped by social processes (for example, through assigning intersex individuals—people born with both male and female sex characteristics—into restrictive “male” or “female” sex categories).

Although both *sex* and *gender* are complicated terms, for the purpose of this essay, the term *sex* will simply refer to biological sex category. It is critical to make this distinction, because just as the term *sex* is often erroneously exchanged with *gender*, so too is the term *sex* routinely used as shorthand for sexuality. Although “sex” is easier to say, this shorthand version also signals a narrow set of assumptions about what “sexuality” is. In contrast, the term *sexuality* in this essay refers to a much broader set of identities, activities, and concerns that are experienced at the individual and relational level and also defined, shaped, and socially monitored in institutional and political realms.

Sexuality was defined by U.S. sexologist Alfred Kinsey as encompassing a range of thoughts, emotions, fantasies, sensations, experiences, and practices that people engage in over the course of their lives. Since Kinsey’s groundbreaking and controversial research in the 1950s and 1960s, sexuality research has proliferated across multiple disciplines and on an international scale.

Some of this explosion of theorizing and researching about sexuality has reinforced stereotypical assumptions about men and women, in particular presuming that sexuality is something that exists primarily due to biological or evolutionary differences between men and women. One theoretical tradition commonly cited but also critiqued is evolutionary psychology. This practice of looking to biology or evolution to explain both sex and gender differences—though perhaps not intended by the researchers themselves—may reinforce empirically unfounded generalizations, such as that all women are submissive, that all

men are dominant, and that homosexuality exists due to a particular gene or even a biological error.

Other research and scholarship traditions involving the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities—in particular those influenced by feminist, queer, and postcolonial theoretical frameworks—have asserted to debunk claims of universal differences between men and women. These research fields underscore that although average differences between male and female sexual expressions can be observed, there are greater overlaps among women and men than differences between them. A number of factors are at play here, including how social power and social norms shape how people “are” and how these same factors shape how individuals “do” sexuality. For instance, research in sexual health on same-sex and different-sex couples shows that when individuals are seen as members of a valued category (e.g., based on social hierarchies of race, class, and sex), they are more likely to initiate sexual contact, feel they have a right to sexual access, and feel they have a right to multiple partners without stigma. Additionally, social movements and other social, cultural, and historical processes impact how people take on sexual identities such as “gay,” “queer,” “straight,” or “pansexual.” In summary, this second cluster of research and scholarship focuses on how sexual actions, experiences, meanings, privileges, oppressions, and identities are always situated within particular social, cultural, interpersonal, political, and institutional factors. The bulk of this essay utilizes this latter, broader set of approaches for analyzing the role of “sexuality” at work.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Sexuality at Work**

If the term *sexuality* can be established as constituted by a suite of factors (rather than a static object that can be studied with universal comparisons between men/women or heterosexuals/homosexuals), then scholarly examinations of sexuality can be considered within the context of work and occupations. Early social theories about work, including the 19th-century assertions of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, contain sparse reference to sexuality. Two important exceptions can be located within Marxist literature. First, social theorists Karl Marx and Frederick Engels theorized about the

relationship between patriarchy, family lineage, and the production of private property; they argued that the rise of patriarchal control over women’s sexuality originated with the development of private property, and specifically male property owners’ concerns about paternity and passing along inheritance to their offspring. A second reference to sexuality in Marxist literature can be found in Marx’s use of the metaphor of prostitution to refer to extreme forms of labor alienation and exploitation.

For the next century of social theorizing about work (at least by recognized theorists in the global north and west), there remained a relative absence of reference to sexuality. However, by the 1970s, a trickle of scholarship gesturing toward sexuality (as a component of sex, gender, race, and class analyses) had begun, including James Spradley and Brenda Mann’s 1975 study of cocktail waitresses. This was also a time when more women were entering academia and feminist theories were beginning to intervene into scholarship that assumed that all “legitimate” work was conducted by men.

By 1993, in his *Annual Review of Sociology* article, Andrew Abbott summarized that there were now two schools within the sociology of work—one focusing on “gender, inequality, and career/life cycle issues” and the other on “unions, industrial, and labor relations.” Although Abbott’s dichotomous framing of work scholarship in some ways reconstituted notions of dual spheres concerning “women’s” and “men’s” work, it was also clear that by the early 1990s, social scientific scholarship had asserted that (1) “legitimate” work was not performed solely by men, in public, for pay, but also included activities performed by women, in private, for “free”; (2) “women’s” work was infused with gendered (and often sexualized) expectations; and (3) these gendered expectations contributed to the social and economic oppression of women.

The following section summarizes scholarship on sexuality and work from the mid-1990s to the present. The section begins with a discussion of sexuality as an identity, in particular sexual identities as they relate to workplace concerns. This is followed by a discussion of sexuality as a process and specifically as an integrated component of contemporary postindustrial service work.

### Sexuality Identity at Work

Although sexual identities are culturally and historically constituted (e.g., labels such as gay, lesbian, and straight continue to evolve over time and place), and although there are an infinite number of possible sexual identities, academic and political discussions of sexual identity within the context of work have tended to focus on discrimination against gay men and lesbian women. More recently, transgender identity has been included in discussions of workplace discrimination, but transgender is a gender identity, not a sexual identity.

Movements for lesbian and gay workplace rights started to gain support and visibility in the United States in the early 1980s, during a time when more gay men and lesbian women were coming out to friends, families, and co-workers. By the 1990s, researchers had begun to systematically collect data about jobs, housing, family, and other institutions where lesbian women and gay men faced discrimination. Economist Lee Badgett's work has been particularly influential in both advocacy/political and academic spheres; Badgett's 2001 book *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* described the "economic penalty for being gay"—a discovery that contradicted the stereotype that gays and lesbians had an economic advantage over their heterosexual counterparts due to not having children. Badgett found that in fact there was an economic penalty for being gay and that this penalty was particularly prominent for gay men in comparison to heterosexual men with the same occupation, education, race, and location. Lesbian women, in contrast, earned slightly more than heterosexual women, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Although there may be many reasons for these differences, one factor that scholars have established is that it often still remains highly stigmatizing to be "out" as gay—especially for gay men who exhibit any feminine gender characteristics. Since antidiscrimination policies and laws are still not universal in many places and a stigma of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) identities has persisted (especially if coupled with non-normative gender expressions), LGBTQ individuals are disproportionately excluded from mainstream institutions and funneled into more marginalized work. In other words, work that

is temporary, reliant on tips, without benefits, and often associated with service and "women's work." As discussed below, these same jobs also often involve sexualized labor.

### Sexuality as a Work Process

A second genre of contemporary scholarship about sexuality at work focuses not on sexuality as an identity but on sexuality as a process—in other words, sexualized interactions that are folded into day-to-day work routines.

The majority of scholarship in this area has focused on the negative aspects of sexualized interactions at work. Foremost in this tradition is the legal and social scientific scholarship on sexual harassment, as a criminal offense that feminist scholars have observed as hostile, sexualized work encounter that creates and/or maintains dominance of one person or group over another and often reinforces traditional social hierarchies that privilege (heterosexual) men and masculinity over women and femininity. In addition to the now nearly ubiquitous agreement that workplaces should be free of sexual harassment, a second genre of scholarship about negative sexual interactions at work can be found in management and business literature. This literature commonly points to consensual flirting or dating at work as detracting from productive business environments. A third and substantial field of research in the genre of critiquing sexualized work encounters can be found in scholarship on "women's work" and service work. As James Spradley and Brenda Mann found in their study of cocktail waitresses, service-industry labor often entails gendered expectations for women workers to flirt with male co-workers and customers.

A less prevalent but intellectually important addition to research on sexual interactions at work is that which investigates how particular social, cultural, and organizational contexts impact the meaning of sexual encounters at work. Ethnographic research such as Kari Lerum's comparative study of waitressing in a lesbian-owned restaurant and a strip club has found that in some instances, sexualized interactions (e.g., flirting, sexual banter) have been found to increase camaraderie between women workers. Finally, a wide range of ethnographic and qualitative research on sexual commerce and sex work has contributed to creating a complex empirical understanding

of the ways that sexuality can be formally recognized and remunerated as part of “legitimate” work as well as being seen as part of a larger effort to strengthen workers’ rights within occupations focused on intimate labor (including child-care workers, manicurists, domestic workers, sex workers, and home care workers).

### Conclusion

With the recognition that sexuality—as both an identity and a process—is part of all human experiences, including work, the question may become not one of how to exclude or downplay sexuality at work but rather of how to recognize and make room for sexual identities and expressions in ways that enhance the rights of workers within the context of power differentials, without detracting from the larger work issues at hand.

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**See Also:** Care Work; “Doing Gender”; Gender Gap; Gendered Organizations; Gendered Work Identities; Intimate Labor; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Workers; Occupational Segregation by Gender and Race; Service Work; Sex Work; Sexual Harassment; Tipping; Women in Men’s Jobs.

### Further Readings

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## Singapore

Singapore is an economically developed society, one of the four Asian Tigers, along with Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Unlike many other developmental states, the Singapore state has eradicated poverty, granted social welfare, and created a racially harmonious society, though at the cost of certain political freedoms. Singapore’s labor force has a history of migration.

Singapore’s early migrants were mostly from China and India, coming during the British colonial rule as traders and laborers. These ethnic groups, along with the Malay, constitute 97 percent of the total population. The standardization of collective consumption goods such as public housing, education, health, transportation, and social welfare has created a middle class that is around 63 percent of the population, according to the government census. Because of the demands of export oriented industrialization that started after 1965, Singapore has been a destination of foreign workers, both skilled and unskilled. Currently, there is a huge population of guest workers and domestic workers from other Asian countries who work under stringent labor control. A strict labor regime has been a key ingredient in Singapore’s economic success.