Human sexuality is one of the few distinctive traits shared by all civilizations, although its cultural characteristics and nuances differ widely. Sexuality in its broadest sense is not easily definable, since it covers such a broad range of behaviors, interpretations, norms, and processes. Sexuality is a sociocultural and historical construct that involves more than the biological drive that enables the reproduction of the species. As a sensation process, human sexuality consists of the totality of socially, culturally, and politically embodied experiences and intimate behaviors (not necessarily sex acts) between human beings. These feelings are sustained and expressed through emotions, beliefs, values, and cultural norms that collectively regulate sexual behavior. The body, as a space, is a contested site of identity, where sexual norms are both exhibited and preserved, often through cultural constructions of masculinity, femininity, gender norms, and accompanying social roles.

Sigmund Freud is most credited with advancing the modern study of sexuality with the publication of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. These essays contributed to the notion of childhood sexuality and, perhaps more important, the development of sexuality in the unconscious. Recent research has explored the relation between lived experience, the lived body, and the institutional frameworks that prohibit and restrict this process. The private sphere, in which we may elect to exhibit sexuality, involves a space or capacity where a possibility develops to assume *states of sexuality*; however, these states are always inseparable from our bodies. Normative labels that accompany these states (behaviors), when attributed to particular sexualities, have resulted in the creation of previously nonexistent sexual “identities” understood through categorical distinctions like “homosexual” and “heterosexual”; social scientists recognize such categories as social constructions. Philosopher Michel Foucault best exemplifies this perspective in his seminal multivolume work on sexuality.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault analyzes broad historical shifts over the course of centuries in an effort to address the various ways to understand sexuality as a historical construct. Foucault suggests that political power is manifested in sexuality through discourse and discursive formations, all of which constrain sex through socially constructed taboos that are usually, but not always, consistent with a system of *norms*. According to Foucault, these norms serve to maintain *arbitrary binaries* between two *nonexistences* (e.g., homo/hetero). A recognizable shortcoming in *The History of Sexuality* concerns Foucault’s failure to systematically address the concept of a universal patriarchy and how a normative masculinity constrains subjective manifestations of sexuality. Emerging scholarship in philosophy, cultural studies, feminism, and gay and lesbian studies continues to offer new ideas and fresh insights into the realm of sexuality. It seems certain that this scholarship will direct our
future understandings of the subject.

See also

Body Image; Feminism; Gender Identity and Socialization; Homosexuality; Queer Theory; Transgender and Transsexuality

Further Readings


Christopher Schneider