



Module Outline for Course Participants

The Social Construction of Sexual Identities

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This module was created by Dr Paul Boyce and Dr Clare Hemmings and adapted by the Advancing Sexuality Studies short course team at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Abstract

This module introduces participants to critical perspectives on sexual identity from a social constructionist perspective. In particular, these approaches critique common assumptions about ‘natural’, trans-historical or universal sexuality and identify a range of factors at work in the constitution of sexual subjectivities in social and cultural context. The module encourages participants to analyse these factors particularly in relation to processes associated with globalisation. The effects of globalisation mean that the character and limits of ‘local cultural contexts’ are increasingly open and uncertain. This has implications for how we think about sexual identity and sexuality more broadly.

Module aims:

- To introduce participants to social constructionist understandings of sexual identity from anthropology, history and contemporary sociology
- To explore contemporary work on sexual cultures and identity in transnational contexts
- To bring together perspectives on culture and sexuality by exploring the ways in which sexuality is symbolised and objectified

Participants will:

- Develop a critical understanding of sexual identity as socially constructed in relations of discourse and power
- Be able to assess the strengths and limitations of cultural perspectives on sexuality, especially in transnational contexts
- Examine connections between culture and sexuality through material culture, exploring symbols through which ideas about sexuality are represented and scripted

Pre-reading

Gagnon, J. H. & Parker, R. G. (1995) *Conceiving Sexuality*. In Parker, R. G. & Gagnon, J. H. (Eds.) *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World*. New York, Routledge.

Mahdavi, P. (2007) Passionate uprisings: young people, sexuality and politics in post-revolutionary Iran. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 9, 445-457.

Optional pre-reading (in suggested order)

Vance, C. S. (1991) Anthropology rediscovers sexuality: a theoretical comment. *Social Science and Medicine*, 33, 875-884.

Grewal, I. & Kaplan, C. (2001) Global identities: theorizing transnational studies of sexuality. *GLQ*, 7, 663-679.

Rofel, L. (2007) *Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities. Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Material required

In preparation for the course, participants should identify an object that they believe represents cultural influence on, or expression of, sexual identity. They should bring this object with them to the module. Objects could include magazines, newspapers, books, computers, phones, pharmaceuticals, fertility symbols, family photographs, state documents, toys, transport, etc.

Overview of module

Session 1. Sexual identities and social constructionism

This session asks participants to identify the social basis to sexual identities in their own social contexts. It includes a lecture providing an introduction to anthropological, historical and contemporary sociological approaches to sexual identity as a regulatory feature of modern social life and the implications of this for sexual experience and subjectivity.

Session 2. Sexualities in transnational perspective

This session discusses some of the key ideas from the pre-reading and asks participants to reflect upon the transnational influences on sexuality in their own social contexts.

Session 3. How is your sexuality culturally constructed?

In groups, participants will evaluate how sexuality in their societies or communities is socially constructed with reference to three different analytical trajectories: (1) over time, (2) in different contexts, and (3) in relation to power and other social factors.

Session 4. Sexual identity and cultural objects

In this session participants will analyse the manner in which sexuality can be understood as socially produced through material and symbolic culture.

Conclusion

The conclusion provides a summary of the key ideas and learning outputs from the module.

Further reading

(includes lecture bibliography)

- Altman, D. (2001) *Global Sex*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
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- Lancaster, R. (2002) Subject Honour, Object Shame. In Adams, R. & Savran, D. (Eds.) *The Masculinity Studies Reader*. Malden, Blackwell Publishers.
- Moore, H. L. (2006) Global Anxieties: Concept-metaphors and Pre-theoretical Commitments in Anthropology. In Moore, H. L. & Sanders, T. (Eds.) *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology*. Malden, Blackwell Publishers.
- Nelson, L. (1999) Bodies (and spaces) do matter: the limits of performativity, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 6, 331-353.
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- Nguyen, V. K. (2005) Uses and pleasures: sexual modernity, HIV/AIDS, and confessional technologies in a West African metropolis. In Adams, V. & Pigg, S.

- L. (Eds.) *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality and Morality in Global Perspective*. Durham, Duke University Press.
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- Seidman, S. (Ed.) (1996) *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers.
- Setel, P. W. (1999) *A Plague of Paradoxes: AIDS, Culture and Demography in Northern Tanzania*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- Srivastava, S. (2007) *Passionate Modernity: Sexuality, Class, and Consumption in India*. New Delhi, Routledge.
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