Sex & Sexuality: Crash Course Sociology #31

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Kqt-_ILgv5c
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Let's talk about sex. It's totally if that makes you wanna cringe. After all, most people will tell you that sex is private, not something that people generally talk about. At least not in class.

Besides, sex is usually thought of as a deep, primeval part of ourselves. It's a matter of drives, of instincts, of biology and psychology. And if sex and sexuality are both primeval and private, can a social science tell us anything about them?

Of course it can! Because no matter how natural and private you think they are, sex and sexuality are still a part of every society. And, like I've been saying since this course started, society gets in everywhere.

===== Intro (0:36) =====

In order to talk about sex, we need to get a handle on some terms. Starting with sex! Not sex the act, but sex the category.

Sex is a biological category and it distinguishes between females and males. And, biologically speaking, the root cause of sex is a pair of chromosomes. XX for females and XY for males.

These chromosomes result in two kinds of physical differences. There are primary sex characteristics which show up as the sex organs involved with the reproductive process and which develop in utero. And then there are the secondary sex characteristics which develop at puberty and are not directly involved in reproduction, things like pubic hair, enlarged breasts, or facial hair.

Now, we tend to think of sex as a simple, fixed binary. You're either male or female. But that's not the case. A significant portion of the population is intersex. That is, people who are born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.

This can mean a lot of different things. Like it can mean having different combinations of sex chromosomes as in Klinfelter Syndrom, which creates chromosomes XX and Y. Or in Triple-X Syndrom which results in XXX.

An intersex condition can also mean that the body responds differently to hormones or that the genitals aren't fully developed.

This wide variety of intersex conditions makes population figures hard to pin down. If intersex is defined strictly in terms of having atypical genitalia, then one in every 1500-2000 births fits that description.

If defined more broadly, however, to include all of the conditions I just mentioned, intersex conditions appear in as much as 2% of the population. And, of course, different societies respond to intersex people differently.

In some societies, they're accepted as just a natural variation. But Western society and medicine have long understood sex as an immutable binary. So intersex people were not seen as an acceptable variation, but rather as a deviation in need of correction.

Some intersex conditions do require medical intervention for the sake of the patient's health, but many don't. And for years, doctors performed unnecessary operations on intersex children in order to make them acceptable according to cultural ideas about sex.

So society plays a role in the biological category of sex. But when it comes to gender, those distinctions are all about society. Gender is the set of social and psychological characteristics that a society considers proper for its males and females.

The sets of characteristics assigned to men are masculinities. And those assigned to women are femininities. A lot of people have a hard time understanding the difference between sex and gender.

But hopefully this definition makes it clearer. Gender is its own thing, separate from sex. Some people don't even want to accept that gender is anything but biological, but sociology is here to tell you that it really isn't. Instead, it's a matter of social construction.

To explore this idea some more, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (3:25) =====

Let's start with how we dress. A business suit is considered masculine, a skirt is feminine. And it should be obvious and uncontroversial that this is a purely social convention.

Because, for example, you'd be pretty hard pressed to explain the objective difference between a skirt and a kilt except to say that wearing one is feminine and wearing the other is masculine.

And this is also true of things that might seem to be more biologically determined. For example, physical labor like construction has typically been understand as masculine. And there might seem to be an underlying biological explanation for that, because, on average, men do tend to be bigger and have more muscle mass than women.

But even with an average difference between the sexes, there's a great deal of overlap too. Plenty of women are bigger and stronger than plenty of men. And minor differences in average size and strength can't explain why some occupations have been stratified by gender.

The reality is that minor, average biological differences are used as the justification for widespread gender stratification, funneling males and females into different jobs, hobbies, and identity constructions.

And society then points to this resulting stratification as proof of an underlying difference in biological reality, even though that reality doesn't actually exist.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

===== End Thought Bubble (4:35) =====

So, one way of thinking about gender is that it's a matter of a self-presentation. A performance that must be worked at constantly.

What we wear, how we walk and talk, even our personal characteristics like aggression or empathy are all ways of "doing" gender. They're ways of making claims to masculinity or femininity that people will see and, hopefully, respect.

And we can be sanctioned if we don't do gender right or well enough. This is precisely what's happening when a man is called a 'sissy' or when a woman is told that she she 'really outta smile more'.

The idea of gender as a performance is known as gender expression. But gender is more than that, it's also a matter of identity. Gender identity refers to a person's internal, deeply held sense of their gender.

Nobody really, perfectly fits the cultural ideal of masculinity or femininity. And lots of people construct their gender differently from these conventional ideas. In particular, transgender people are those whose gender identity doesn't match the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

By contrast, cisgender people's gender identity matches their biological sex. Still, both trans- and cis- people can express their identity in a variety of ways, conventional or otherwise. And this should make it clear that gender, like sex, is not binary. There are many ways of doing femininities and many ways in which a person can be masculine.

Now that we've got a basic understanding of sex and gender, we can finally get to sexuality. Sexuality is basically a shorthand for everything related to sexual behavior: sexual acts, desire, arousal, the entire experience that is deemed sexual.

One part of sexuality is sexual orientation or who you're sexually attracted to or not. Most people identify as heterosexual, meaning that they're attracted to people of the other gender. While this is the most common orientation, significant numbers of people are homosexual, attracted to people of their own gender.

But these are really only pulled from a continuum, with plenty of people being attracted to both their own and other genders as in pansexual or bisexual. And some people are asexual and don't experience sexual attraction at all.

Now, these definitions can vary from person to person just as they vary from society to society. This and the fact that social norms may make people wish to keep their orientation private makes estimates of the number of homosexual and bisexual people necessarily imprecise.

That said, based on the surveys we do have, around 4% of the American population identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. However, this increases to around 10% if we ask, instead, whether a person has ever experienced same-sex attraction or engaged in homosexual activity.

So, what can each of the three sociological paradigms tell us about sexuality?

We'll start with Symbolic-Interactionism because its insight is the most fundamental. And that is that sexuality, this intensely private and supposedly primeval thing, is socially constructed. You might think that this is a claim too far because sexuality is a matter of inbuilt urges. Some things just are sexual.

But if we actually start asking 'what is sexual?' then the constructed nature of sexuality gets pretty obvious pretty fast. We might think, for instance, that oral sex is just sexual. But that's not necessarily true in all societies.

For example, among the Sambia of the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea, young boys perform oral sex on and ingest the semen of older men as part of a rite of passage to adulthood. Oral sex is definitely happening, but it's not clear that this should be thought of as sexual in the way that we understand it.

And we might also be inclined to label this ritual as homosexual behavior, but it's still not quite the same thing as homosexuality as we understand it in the US. So physically identical acts can have radically different social and subjective meanings.

We can explain this, in part, with the concept of sexual scripts. These are cultural prescriptions that dictate the when, where, how, and with-whom of sex, and what that sex means when it happens.

The idea that sex happens at home between two willing partners, for example, is part of a generic sexual script in our society. Likewise, sex that happens between two people who met at a bar might come with a different script and therefore different shared expectations than sex between two people who've known each other for a long time.

This brings us to the Structural-Functionalist perspective. Since sexual reproduction is necessary for the reproduction of society, this view says that sex has to be organized in some way in order for society to function. And society organizes sexuality by using sexual scripts.

Before contraception was widespread, it was these norms that controlled how many people were born by determining when and how often people had sex. And by controlling who had sex with whom, they also, generally, made sure that those kids were born into families that could support them.

This is one function of the universal incest taboo: the prohibition of sex between close relatives. Reproduction between family members would ultimately break down kinship relations. It would be impossible to maintain a clear set of familial obligations if, for example, your brother could also be your father.

But as seen from the perspective Social Conflict Theory, regulating sexuality is also a matter of creating and reinforcing inequalities. In particularly, our society is traditionally built around heteronormativity.

This is the idea that there are only two genders, that gender corresponds to biological sex, and that the only natural and acceptable sexual attraction is between these two genders.

Heteronormativity makes heterosexuality seem like its directly linked to biological sex, but heterosexuality is just as much a social construction as any other sexuality. It's defined by dominant sexual scripts, privileged by law, and normalized by social practices like religious teachings. So it comes to be understood as natural in a way that other sexualities are not.

Queer Theory challenges this naturalness and especially shows how gender and heterosexuality are tied together. Heteronormativity is based on the idea of two opposite sexes that naturally fit together like pulls of a magnet. So by this logic, men pursue, women are pursued. Men are dominant, women are submissive.

But all of this is socially constructed. The sexes aren't opposites, there are just two of them at both ends of a spectrum along with a whole array of variations between them. But the idea of opposite sexes helps make heterosexuality seem natural to us.

And so you can see how sex, gender, and sexuality are all linked and all socially constructed. And you can see how society gets in everywhere! Even among these apparently private and primeval things.

And, in turn, these things help structure society, creating and sustaining inequalities and giving them the veneer of the natural. But sociology can help us pick them apart.

Today we learned about what sociology can tell us about sex and sexuality. We talked about the biological classification of sex and how it's more complicated than we tend to think. And we discussed the social construct of gender and a little bit about how it works. Finally, we talked about sexuality and sexual orientations and what the three paradigms of sociology can tell us about them.

===== Credits (10:52) =====

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