# Introduction

"Sex" is a simple, three letter word in English, but the emotions, interpretations, controversies, and differences of opinion associated with this short little word are anything but simple. Is sex about biology? Or is it about behaviors? Is it a private or public concern? Should it be a way of making a living? Is sex a way of classifying people and letting them know what they should and should not want to do? Moreover, should the State regulate it? And, if so, to what extent? Is it true that sex can be dangerous? If so, how, why, and when? These are the questions this book addresses.

Every human being is the product of sexual reproduction. The vast majority of people have sex at some time in their lives, but, when, where, why, with whom, and how vary considerably. Most people consider sex a highly individualized and private act; nevertheless, it also involves the public domain, as social structures and institutions strive to regulate and control sex. Social dynamics shape not only what we believe "counts" as sex but also how we think about, feel, and experience sexual acts and identities. There are benefits and drawbacks of sex, and a great deal of hype around it. Concerns arise such as:

- Is what I do normal?
- Am I wrong for desiring this or doing that?
- Is sex dangerous?
- What are the consequences of having sex in this way or with this person?
- How could someone do that to another person?

Many people conclude that certain kinds of sex are just outright wrong or dangerous and need to be avoided and controlled. The complex rela-

tionship between the harms and benefits of sex presents a puzzle: if sex is risky, why do it? Part of the answer, of course, is that sex is not solely dangerous: it is also pleasurable and beneficial. In addition, it is possible to mitigate danger by modifying social circumstances.

This book introduces you to scientific research on sex and sexuality, focusing primarily on social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. Social scientists study people and social life using scientific research methods, through which they systematically collect and analyze empirical evidence to answer research questions and propose explanations for their findings. Producing knowledge through scientific research methods is an ongoing process that involves corroborating, building upon, and revising the explanations of previous research findings. This process requires evaluation through peer review by other experts, as well as consensus-building and debate. The focus of research studies may be on individuals or on groups of people, such as families, communities, organizations, or societies. Some studies seek to understand social behavior and interactions, while others focus on systems, organizations, technologies, or environments. In addition to social science research, we will also review other scholarly work, by historians and philosophers for example, to provide a more holistic examination of the topic we are exploring.

The goal is to demonstrate that statements such as "sex of type A is always bad" or "only this kind of sex is natural and acceptable" oversimplify a complex reality. Such simplification, in which sex is thought of as inherently dangerous, is problematic because it can lead to discriminatory practices, ineffective or harmful policies, and moral panics that detract attention from remedying systemic inequalities and social problems. While this book takes seriously the harms that can result from sex, it also draws attention to how context and ideas about sex shape outcomes.

Before we can answer the question at the heart of this book—When is sex dangerous?—we need to clarify what we mean by the word sex. Although we are all the products of some form of sexual reproduction and each of us received a biological sex assignment at or before birth, sex can nevertheless be an uncomfortable topic.

## An Exciting and Uncomfortable Topic

I am standing in front of my students on the first day of a Sociology class about sexuality. They laugh nervously and shift in their seats: I have just

asked them, "What do we mean by 'sex'?" The students with fewer qualms about the topic offer suggestions: "Doing it!"; "Male/female!"; "Having sex!"; "Making love!" I have sometimes needed to clarify whether I am asking about sex categories or sexual activity, a confusion that arises, in part, because in English "sex" refers to both.

The students' simultaneous excitement, reticence, and lack of clarity indicate two things: first, they have been enculturated to regard sex as a subject that you do not discuss publicly or dispassionately as you would, say, chemistry. Second, **there is no universally accepted definition of sex, sexuality, or related terms like gender**. These terms are *contested concepts*—meaning that different people and different cultures disagree on what they mean or include. Therefore, we need to clarify terms—beginning with what social scientists mean by *sex*—before we can answer the central question of this book, "When is sex dangerous?" To do so, we begin with a brief explanation of the social construction of sex, gender, and sexuality.

## What Counts as "Having Sex"?

In his examination of definitions of sex, Kaye provides a distinction between "intercourse" and "coitus." *Coitus*, from Western Christianity, refers to penetrative vaginal-penile interaction between a woman and a man that culminates in the man achieving orgasm (2011: 114). *Intercourse* is a more inclusive term that includes penetrative sex with or without orgasm, but which also includes other forms of penetrative sex such as anal sex or the use of sex toys for penetration. *Sex* is an even broader term, encapsulating contact that is sexual but not necessarily penetrative, such as oral sex (Kaye 2011).

In distinguishing between these terms, "the point is not to find the single 'correct' definition, but rather to see that the meanings associated with these terms shift over time and are inherently susceptible to social conflict" (Kaye 2011: 114). In other words, **what "counts" as sex varies historically and cross-culturally: it is a socially constructed concept**. To say that something is socially constructed is to say that the meaning ascribed to it is shared and produced through an ongoing social process of interpretation using language (Berger and Luckmann 1966). It does not mean that gender or sexuality are not "real" or related to actual bodies and lives, but rather that our ideas and interpretations powerfully connect to what we do. In fact, not only can concepts link ideas with tangible objects, but concepts can also have real effects. Social constructs become real be-

cause they have effects in the world. Consider the social construction of sex. Is "real" sex exclusively penetrative? Does the penetrative act involve only a penis and a vagina—or are anal penetration and use of other body parts or sex toys also included? Then there are the matters of masturbation, fondling body parts, and oral stimulation—are these also sex? If they are regarded as sex, are these sex acts treated equivalently to those that involve a penis and a vagina? How does the socially constructed definition of sex determine that of virginity? These are just a few of the questions about what sex is and how sex is undertaken.

Our notions of sex also color the way that we classify what is sexual. For example, consider the body. The parts of the body that contemporary Western cultures sexualize include breasts, buttocks, vaginas, and penises. Yet the erotic potential of these body parts, social ideas about modesty, and clothing practices differ immensely. Even social norms around public nudity and nakedness vary historically and cross-culturally (Berner et al. 2019).

Compare, for example, the full-length bathing dresses of Victorian England to the modern bikini. Contrast the thobe, a long robe worn by some Saudi Arabian men, to the traditional dress of Yanomani men: a string belt used to tie up their penises by the foreskin (Herzog-Shröder 2003). We filter forms of dress through our own cultural lenses, and identical body parts are constructed differently in different cultural contexts (see Figure 0.1). To understand how bodies are sexualized, we need to understand the cultural frameworks that inform this process.

Even within a culture that generally sexualizes a body part, **context matters**. Moreover, what "counts" as sex and as sexual also depends on factors such as when, where, and with whom (Gagnon and Simon 1973). For example, a parent kissing a child on the lips is not typically viewed as sexual, whereas a kiss on the lips shared by two adults who are romantically and/or sexually interested in each other would be seen as sexual. Of course, it's not just who the kiss involves but also what, as there is a wide variation of kisses: compare, for example, a quick goodbye peck on the cheek to a lingering, passionate kiss involving the tongue.

As another example, the insertion of an object into a vagina may be either sexual or nonsexual, depending on when, where, and with whom that action takes place. Contrast the insertion of a gynecological speculum by a gynecologist into the vagina of a patient in an exam room to the insertion of a dildo by a sexual partner into the vagina of another partner in a bedroom. We expect different reactions—in situationally dependent ways—to the naked breast or buttock in a physician's examining room than we do to those same body parts in the confines of a private space with an intimate partner. Context and the ascribed meaning matter.

**Figure 0.1.** The bikini and burkini represent different ideas about appropriate swimwear. Source: yellowj and hkhtt hj / shutterstock.com.

## Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

Scholars refer to the constellation of ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality as the *sex/gender/sexuality system* (Rubin 1993; Seidman 1995). Sex is connected to, yet distinct from, conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. This introduction reviews attempts to define these terms, then explains why scholars use concepts such as gender/sex and the sex/gender/sexuality system.

Sex, gender, and sexuality are culturally determined typologies (labels or categories) that describe distinctions and differentiate among individuals. Categories cluster individuals based on patterns of difference and sim-

ilarity, minimizing some variations while highlighting others (Zerubavel 1993). Social scientists pay careful attention to the variety of ways that different cultures socially construct—or bioculturally construct—categories. In other words, social scientists document the ways in which people make sense of each other's similarities and differences, study the effects of these classification systems, and examine how these vary among cultures and change over time.

### *Sex as a Category*

Defining *sex* as a category as opposed to a behavior typically relies on biological criteria, such as the presence or absence of specific chromosomes. Sex categorization systems that use these criteria often identify binary sex categories (male and female) and sometimes include a third sex category of individuals with intersex conditions. Intersex conditions encompass a wide range of variations in chromosomal patterns and sexual anatomy, such as ambiguous genitalia and differential sexual development (ISNA 2008).

The everyday sorting mechanism for sex category is sexual characteristics that we can observe or infer. For example, Wade and Ferree explain that we use "physical differences in primary sexual characteristics (the presence of organs directly involved in reproduction) and secondary sexual characteristics (such as patterns of hair growth, the amount of breast tissue, and distribution of body fat)" (2019: 5) to categorize individuals as male or female. Another sorting mechanism is genetic differences, such as chromosomal variation (XX, XY, XXX, XYY, etc.) and processes (the contribution of the SRY gene to sexual development, for example). As Sarah Richardson writes, "human biological 'sex' is not diagnosed by any single factor, but is the result of a choreography of genes, hormones, gonads, genitals, and secondary sex characters. Today, [it is typical to] distinguish between chromosomal sex, gonadal sex, hormonal sex, genital sex, and sexual identity. Some would add sexual preference, gender identity, morphological sex, fertility, and even brain sex to this list" (2013: 8). The size of gametes the individual produces, small (sperm) or large (eggs), is also a factor in sex determination (Lehtonen and Parker 2014).

A person's sex category or sexual anatomy becomes important in contexts such as reproduction, healthcare, and in whether or not they have access to particular resources or opportunities (Title IX, sports participation, etc.). While the ability to produce sperm or eggs matters in reproductive sex, in most everyday situations, gender matters more than a person's sex category.

### *Gender*

Gender refers to cultural ways of making sense of differences that assign categories (e.g., boy/girl) and attributes, characteristics, roles, and behaviors (e.g., feminine/masculine/androgynous). Gender is related to sex but is not determined by biology. Here again, it is useful to draw upon the work of social scientists whose research examines how people make sense of, categorize, and practice gender.

Rubin defines gender as a "socially imposed division" (1975: 179). Rubin is drawing attention not only to how people make sense of biological differences in socially meaningful ways but also to how people use gender to define who is a culturally appropriate sex partner. Gender includes but is not limited to individual identity or characteristics; it is a *social institution*. Lorber explains that gender "establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself" (1994: 1). Gender is a system of differentiation that "involves widely shared cultural beliefs and institutions at the macro-level of analysis, behaviors and expectations at the interactional level, and self-conceptions and attitudes at the individual level of analysis" (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 2006: 247). *Gender ideologies* are the set of ideas about gender "widely shared by members of a society that guides identities, behaviors, and institutions" (Wade and Ferree 2019: 23). Gender is thus a mutable concept, one that varies historically and cross-culturally.

Some cultures practice a *gender binary*, meaning that people fall into one of only two gender categories: man or woman. Usually, a gender binary ideology connects being a man with having been assigned male at birth and behaving in ways to be perceived as masculine. In parallel, applying this categorization system leads to the assumption that women were born female and look, act, and have social roles that the culture considers feminine. Other gender ideologies differ in the number of categories recognized and the characteristics, social roles, and expectations associated with each identity.

At the individual level, gender scholars differentiate between *gender identity* and *gender expression*. *Gender identities* are the labels available in our culture, such as man, woman, trans, genderfluid, nonbinary, and agender. *Gender expression* refers to how we "do" or enact gender to communicate to others, through our speech, clothing, and behavior, how we want to be perceived. For example, to express femininity a person might wear a dress and high heels. Whether or not we think a person is sexually attractive brings us to another related topic: sexuality.

### *Sexual Orientation/Sexual Identity/Sexuality*

Some social scientists differentiate between *sexuality* and *sexual orientation* (sexual identity). According to Fitzgerald and Grossman, *sexuality* "refers to one's sexual desires, erotic attractions, and sexual behaviors, or the potential for these; physical acts and emotional intimacies that are intended to be pleasurable, and that are embedded within larger, socially constructed, body of meanings" (2018: 5). *Sexual orientation* "refers to an individual's identity based on their enduring or continuing sexual attractions, and may include behaviors and membership in a community of others who share those attractions" (Fitzgerald and Grossman 2018: 4). Examples include heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, etc.

Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) depict sexual orientation as a Venn diagram that includes identity, attraction, and behavior (Figure 0.2). Acknowledging three separate but overlapping aspects of sexual orientation recognizes that people's sexual behavior does not necessarily reflect the assumptions built into any given sexual identity label. This conceptualization of sexual orientation has applications in both the social sciences and public health, as it helps researchers with precise measurements and health initiatives reach their intended audiences. For example, knowing that someone who has sex with a person of the same sex might not identify as gay has implications both for understanding the meaning

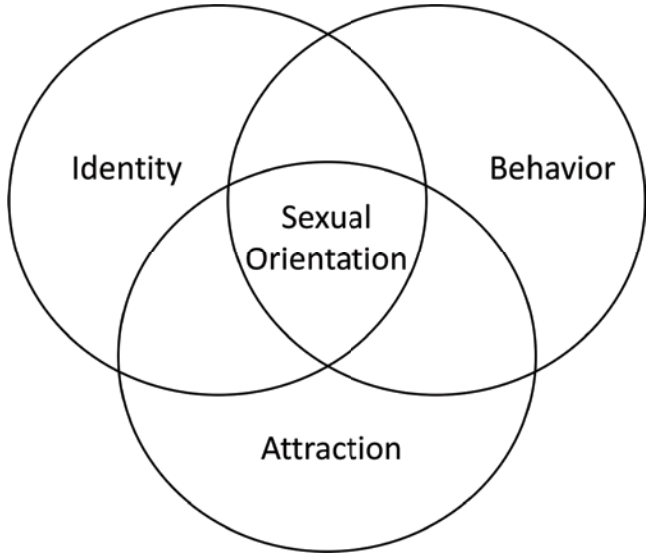


**Figure 0.2.** Identity, behavior, and attraction are distinct but overlapping aspects of sexual orientation (after Laumann et al. 1994). © Sarah H. Pollock.

of sexual identity as well as for safe sex public health interventions. This book will primarily use the term *sexuality* to encompass all three concepts: sexual orientation/identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior.

### *Sex/Gender/Sexuality System*

Thus far, we have reviewed definitions for sex (the act), sex (the category), gender (the identity and system), and sexuality (identity, attraction, and behavior). These social constructs are neither synonymous nor independent; they intersect and overlap. For example, Unger and Crawford argue that "sex is neither simply dichotomous nor necessarily internally consistent in most species" (1993: 124). Sex is not independent of gender (Figure 0.3); "biology-behavior interactions work in both directions" (Unger and Crawford 1993: 124). As Fausto-Sterling explains, "gendered structures change biological function and structure. At the same time, biological structure and function affect gender, gender identity, and gender role at both individual and cultural levels" (2019: 532).

To capture the interdependence of sex and gender, social scientists suggest using a concept such as *gender/sex* (van Anders and Dunn 2009) or *sex/gender* (van Anders and Dunn 2009; Fausto-Sterling 2012; Pitts-Taylor 2016). More recently, Fausto-Sterling has proposed an approach that "considers sex, gender, gender/sex, and sexual orientation as interdependent, embodied dynamic systems" (2019: 529). In explaining embodied development, this theory integrates explanations for how "desires,

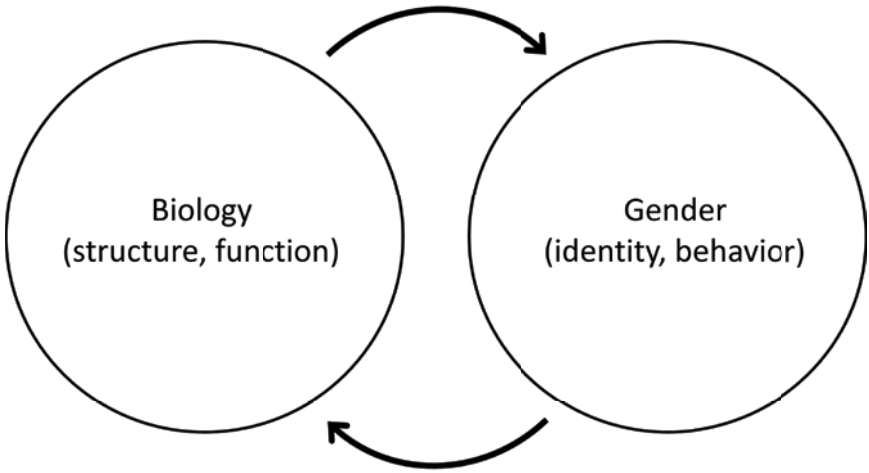


**Figure 0.3.** Biology and gender are mutually constitutive, not independent.

behavior, and choices emanate from our bodies"; how biological processes express themselves in the body; and how "nurture/culture directs, shapes, and limits these processes" (2019: 530). Thus, sex, gender, and sexuality are inextricable from one another in a person's lived experience, even though researchers differentiate between them conceptually.

To say that something is a *social system* refers to the idea that there are culturally specific schemas about how to organize social life. Alternative terms include *social order* and *social regime* (R. W. Connell 1987, 1990, 2006) as well as *social structure* (Risman, Froyum, and Scarborough 2018). Although scholars disagree about which term most accurately describes social reality, the shared aim is to acknowledge that social factors shape societies and the individuals who comprise them. These systemic factors include cultural norms and social institutions such as politics, economy, family, education, and healthcare. I will use the term *sex/gender/sexuality system* throughout this book (Seidman 1995; Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

Conceptualizing gender, sex, and sexuality as systems recognizes that these social constructs are embedded within our individual identities. They also shape how we interact with one another and how we organize society—such as the roles, responsibilities, expectations, resources, and opportunities that are associated with each category. Social structures and institutions are external to individuals and constrain or facilitate, although do not determine, individual action.

To illustrate how social systems work, we can use the example of gender as a structure—one that is as important to how we organize society as economic or political structures (Risman, Froyum, and Scarborough 2018). Gender operates to differentiate opportunities and constraints based on the individual's category (Risman 2004: 433). The consequences of this differentiation are observable in three dimensions: "(1) at the individual level, for the development of gendered selves; (2) during interactions as men and women face different cultural expectations even when they fill the identical structural positions; and (3) in institutional domains where explicit regulations regarding resource distribution and material goods are gender specific" (Risman 2004: 433).

In addition, the sex/gender/sexuality system concept draws attention to how sex, gender, and sexuality are co-emergent and co-productive—we are always simultaneously being and becoming our sex, gender, and sexuality through our development and social interactions. *Co-productive* means that cultural assumptions about one's sex category shape expectations for one's gender identity and expression, which entwine with expectations about one's sexuality (Figure 0.4).

For example, Westbrook and Schilt explain that "cultural beliefs about the sanctity of gender binarism naturalize a sex/gender/sexuality system in

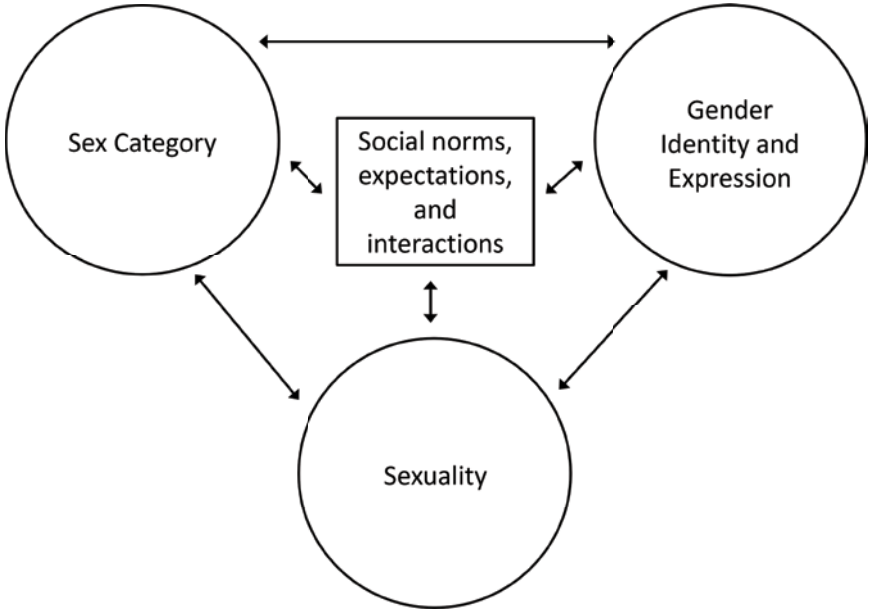


**Figure 0.4.** Sex, gender, and sexuality are co-productive. © Sarah H. Pollock.

which heterosexuality is positioned as the only natural and desirable sexual form" (2014: 27). This way of thinking about heterosexuality is called *heteronormativity* or *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich 1980): the social "rule" that men should only be masculine, be attracted to women, have sex with women, and identify as heterosexual. Similarly, women should only be feminine, be attracted to men, have sex with men, and identify as heterosexual. Notice that *heteronormativity* is based on the word normative (i.e., what ought to be) rather than normal (i.e., common). A way of "seeing" compulsory heterosexuality is to notice examples of the social dangers that still threaten people who are not (or are not perceived as) heterosexual. The gender binary is a key element of heteronormativity. Assumptions about the interrelatedness of sex, gender, and sexuality differentially shape how people "determine [the] gender" of others in both nonsexual gender-integrated spaces (where both men and women are expected to be, such as in a grocery store) as well as gender-segregated spaces (such as in a public bathroom). By "determining gender," Westbrook and Schilt (2014) refer to the social practice of placing others in gender categories. In nonsexual gender-integrated spaces, people are more likely to use identity-based criteria (using someone's expressed self-identity) to determine someone's gender. In contrast, people tend to use biology-based criteria (such as genitals) in gender-segregated spaces. This book uses the umbrella term

LGBTQ+ to refer to people whose sexuality and gender identities are marginalized by heteronormative and binary sex/gender/sexuality systems. This acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and includes other identities such as intersex, asexual, and pansexual. Over time, this acronym has changed—and will continue to change—alongside cultural shifts in the understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality.

### *Intersectionality*

Nagel (2000) examines how social norms and ideas about appropriate behaviors for (masculine) men and (feminine) women are interrelated to normative ideas about ethnicity and sexuality. She calls this system the *ethnosexual regime*. Nagel's (2000) work is exemplary of *intersectionality research*, in which scholars examine intersecting social systems such as racism and sexism. Intersectionality scholars such as Crenshaw (1991), Collins (2005, 2009), and hooks (2000, 2015) have drawn attention to the intersecting inequalities that shape outcomes for people depending on their location in the social hierarchies and access to power and resources. The focus of this work is on the "confluences of inequality" (Herrera 2019: 84) that are also evident in the sex/gender/sexuality system.

As we shall see throughout this book, situating ideas about sex within their cultural and historical contexts provides insights into the variation in and effects of people's ideas about sex. These ideas powerfully shape our assumptions, expectations, and behaviors. How we define sex and how we define the meaning of sex fundamentally shapes what sex is "normal" or "abnormal" and what sex is "safe" or "dangerous."

## The Question: When Is Sex Dangerous?

Therefore, to answer the question at the heart of this book—When is sex dangerous?—we must examine why this question arises, how this question is used for support or control, and what is meant by "dangerous" in regard to sex. The association of social fears and anxieties about sex are common, but neither are they inevitable nor universal. In other words, danger is simultaneously real and socially constructed. Cultural norms underlie concerns about normal or abnormal sex; cultural norms circumscribe what forms of sex are socially aberrant, impermissible, or undesirable. These norms are culturally bounded—in other words, they differ across cultures.

**Social norms are also dynamic.** The perceived danger of masturbation, for instance, has changed with time. Warnings about the harms of masturbation arose during the nineteenth century in Europe and persisted

well into the twentieth century (Hodges 2005). Perceptions began to shift after research by Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) revealed that masturbation is very common. Although perceptions of masturbation remain mixed (Coleman 2003; Kaestle and Allen 2011), it is generally considered medically innocuous.

A desire to align with culturally prescribed identities and behaviors motivates the question, "Am I normal?" Questions about abnormality overlap with questions about danger; engaging in sex deemed "abnormal" is dangerous to a person's well-being if it is illegal or stigmatized. Even normalized ("approved") sex acts may be dangerous if they are consequential to health or well-being. The desire to reduce harm is one of the motivations to regulate and discourage dangerous sex, but there is disagreement about what constitutes harm and acceptable risk. Defining the dangers of sex raises questions about consent, the emotional and physical consequences of engaging in sex acts, and the sharing of knowledge about sex—such as in sexuality education in schools. Fear of danger can be used to justify controlling sexuality.

How societies answer the question about sex's danger determines how the gender/sex/sexuality order is maintained legally, scientifically/medically, and ideologically. In other words, **what we assume about sex, what we know about sex, and how we know what we know matters**. The question of what we know is an epistemological question. The word *epistemology* refers to the study of knowledge and knowledge production (Steup and Neta 2020). In other words, it is how we know what we know. One of the great insights of epistemology is that the set of assumptions we work with, our positionality, training, and framework generates different conclusions to the same question. Thus, questions about sex are perennial and contested because preexisting beliefs, standpoints, expertise, and conceptual systems vary interpersonally, culturally, and historically.

Over time, shifts in knowledge and assumptions have produced different conceptualizations and social control of sexual behaviors. For example, Christian theology historically framed sexual desire (especially women's—starting with Eve) as sinful and presumed that women experienced less sexual desire than men. These assumptions led to expectations that women would control their husbands' sexual desire. However, context creates meaning and Christian conceptualizations of women's and men's sexual desires shifted over time (Clark 2019; Frank, Moreton, and White 2018). The results of activism, social science research, and medical research have also contributed to a rethinking of norms and standards that have put assumptions about men's and women's sexual desire on more equal footing. Social movements such those led by LGBTQ+ activists and disability rights activists have pushed doctors and scientists to reframe

medical treatment and to redesign sexuality research studies (Addlakha, Price, and Heidari 2017; Epstein 1995, 2022).

Epistemological questions about the locus of knowledge are important because the State—a political institution exercising centralized sovereign rule over a territory (M. Weber 1946)—acts to regulate sexuality based on contemporary knowledge and beliefs. The State controls sexuality by defining the legality or illegality of certain sex acts and through persecution or protection. Examples of how State power shapes sexual landscapes include the use of pink triangles to identity gay men in Nazi concentration camps in the 1930s and 1940s, the criminalization of identifying as LGBTQ+ in Uganda in 2023, and the withdrawal of marital rape exemption laws in the US by 1993. State positions are changeable, as illustrated by the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision regarding same-sex marriage.

Another manifestation of State influence over sexuality is through sex education programs, currently a source of contestation in the US known as the "culture wars." The sexuality culture wars emerged from the opposition between conservative and liberal interests over the content of sexuality education curricula (C. Connell and Elliott 2009; Fields 2012; Luker 2007; Irvine 2004). Animating the culture wars are attempts to mitigate unwanted outcomes by characterizing sex primarily as a source of potential social stigma and harm. Disagreements abound about who should be taught what about sex and when in order to mitigate danger. Despite knowledge from scientific research about what works to promote sexual health and safety, arguments persist from the 1990s about abstinence-only education—and its funding continues.

Some scholars argue that we are overemphasizing fear-based rhetoric, resulting in a denial of sexual agency to young people (Angelides 2004; Fields 2008; Martin 1996) and perpetuating inequalities along the lines of race, class, and gender (C. Connell and Elliott 2009). Others argue that we are at the beginning of a much-needed cultural reckoning with harms that have been silenced and erased; movements such as #MeToo call for addressing the gendered violence of sexual assault. Although these positions are not mutually exclusive, taking them both into account demands a nuanced approach to the question of when sex is dangerous, informed by objective research.

If we get the answer wrong to the question about what sex is abnormal and dangerous, there are significant consequences for agency, health and well-being, human rights, and sexual violence. Perpetuating fear, shame, and stigma around sex impedes sexual agency and pleasure and increases the likelihood of an unwanted pregnancy or the transmission of an STI. The consequences also include pervasive high rates of gendered violence,

nonconsensual sex and other forms of sexual violence, as well as violence against LGBTQ+ people.

## Outline of the Book

The goal of this book is to answer the question "When is sex dangerous?" using the social sciences. Each chapter evaluates claims regarding the dangers of sex and highlights the role of social context in exacerbating or minimizing the risks involved. Chapter 1 reviews ways that sex has been popularly defined as dangerous in both academic as well as popular discourse. Namely, when it is: (1) unhealthy; (2) nonconsensual; (3) illegal; (4) immoral; or (5) unnatural. In this initial examination, this chapter provides an overview of historical, legal, medical/psychoanalytical, and religious points of view used to justify sex as good or bad and as dangerous or safe.

Chapter 2 poses the question: are we using the wrong framework to think about sex? In other words, an evaluation of sex is more complicated than simply deciding "this or that type of sex is bad." More precisely, the chapter demonstrates that there is not a universally applicable typology of sex and that it is dangerous to assume one. This chapter presents an overview of philosophies of danger, risk, and harm, as well as sociological and anthropological theories and studies that illustrate the social construction of "normative" sex and sexuality, and sociohistorical comparisons to examine how people understand and regulate sex in different cultural and historical contexts. The chapter concludes with three contexts in which sex can become dangerous: (1) when it threatens bodily autonomy and integrity; (2) when it threatens the sex/gender/sexuality system; and (3) when it threatens a political structure or is weaponized as a form of political power.

Chapter 3 illustrates how assumptions underlying the question "When is sex dangerous?" can lead to untenable conclusions, using sex education in Texas schools as an example. This examination highlights why questions about sex and sexuality are key issues in our everyday lives, how they are politically contentious, and why implementing explanations from the social sciences is crucial. It also reveals a need to draw upon theory and research findings from the social sciences to create nuanced, situationally specific applications in policy.

The Conclusion shows how adopting a social scientific perspective enables us to identify assumptions underlying our beliefs and practices, to correct misunderstandings, and to facilitate productive dialogue about how to improve sexual health and well-being within and across communities.

## Key Points

As you read, keep in mind three guiding principles:

- Our beliefs about what is dangerous and abnormal tell us more about ourselves (our ideologies and how we have structured society) than about what is inherently dangerous or abnormal (if anything is).
- We should cautiously evaluate claims to universal truths about sex and sexuality, especially in light of the consequences of these claims.
- Social sciences are key to assessing knowledge about sex and to creating effective social change.