## KEY CONCEPT: SEXUALITY

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### *Concept origins*

Referring to a person's tendencies, preferences, habits and interests with respect to sexual activity, typically—though by no means exclusively—in an interpersonal context, sexuality is often closely associated with one's sexual orientation. As Meyer (2010, p.48) points out, however, it can 'refer to a wide variety of identities and behaviours as well' and she goes on to emphasise the inter-**relationships** between sexuality, sexual orientation (who/what one is sexually attracted to), sexual **behaviour** (the types of sexual activity one actually engages in), and sexual **identity** (how one chooses to describe one's self). As such, sexuality permeates, influences, and is inseparable from our gendered, religious, **class**, **ethnic** and other identities. Emerging as a term in the late eighteenth century, sexuality increasingly became an object of study through the following two centuries, with the work of Krafft-Ebing (1886; Oosterhuis, 2012), Hirschfeld (1910, 1935) and Havelock Ellis (1900–1928) being among the landmarks in the development of sexology (the scientific study of human sexuality). Subsequent work by Kinsey, and later, Masters and Johnson, built on these foundations, while **psychoanalysis** was more broadly influential. From an emphasis on practices, attention shifted during this period to sexuality as intertwined with identity. Such ideas influenced wider socio-political efforts towards sexual reform, the development of feminism, and a relative **liberal** change process in western **society** (Mottier, 2008).

### *Current status and usage*

Sexuality is both powerful and potentially disruptive, especially given its private and public nature. While **liberal** political **discourses** can marginalise sexuality as something essentially private, Foucault's (1978–1986; *cf.* Fischer and Seidman, 2016;

Weeks, 2016) ideas suggest otherwise. As with the closely related concept of **gender**, Butler (1990, 1993) builds on his work and further destabilises any naïve naturalisation of sexual identities. These, in her view, are substantially fictive social constructions and performative. In tandem with such hegemonic views that Butler critiques has been the mythologising of sexuality, artificially separating it from the lived lives of children and young people. Children continue to be ill-informed and mis-informed about sex and sexuality, both by parents, educators and wider **society** (UNESCO, 2009). Part of this has been rationalised with reference to a presumed sexual innocence of **childhood** (Renold, 2005), a romanticised idea that often perpetuates myths and religious **ideology**. Unsurprisingly, with **school**s as sites of struggle and cultural negotiation, their capacity to disseminate knowledge about sex and sexuality often continues to be very variable. In Britain, legislation on the topic has been late in coming (Blair and Monk, 2009) and pedagogic efforts have been often poor (Nelson and Martin, 2004; Hall, 2009). The establishment of specialist journals, such as *Sex Education*, which began in 2001, has opened an important on-going space to further academic discussion on the topic, and World Health Organization guidance (WHO, 2010; Frans, 2016) is beginning to influence educational practice. Nevertheless, education on sexuality, as Hall (2009) notes, continues to be predominantly situated within a damage limitation framework (concentrating on the dangers of sexually transmitted infections [STIs], teenage pregnancy, reputational and moral issues), rather than on a sex-positive discourse of potential pleasure and empowerment (Vernacchio, 2014; Ponzetti, 2016).

Children and (not-so-) young people's knowledge of sex and sexuality is predominantly self-taught (Reiss, 2016), through efforts to relate to others and through exploring texts, media and the internet. This quest for knowledge, driven by biological instinct, pleasure and **culture**, is, however, troubled, being beset with reticence, censorship and/or repression, and hypocrisy. Such issues make sexuality an interesting and important exemplar of sites of contest within **education studies**, as well as within wider culture. Sex and sexuality are a central part of most people's lives, an important source of pleasure, motivating action, and

supporting **relationships**, particularly when integrated into a person's psychological and emotional life (Russell, 1957; Scruton, 1986). Yet it is also often a significant source of anxiety, of awkwardness, embarrassment, pain and interpersonal conflict. Contemporary approaches to this often build on Foucault's (1978–1986) critique of so-called 'natural' sexuality, following which sexuality has been 'increasingly interpreted as a historically contingent practice closely connected to **power** relations and values' (Sauerteig and Davidson, 2009, p.1). In this context, Foucault highlights the close social and educational surveillance of children, particularly for manifestations of sex and sexuality; forms of biopower aimed at the subjugation of bodies and of sexual **diversity** (Renold, 2005). So far, education worldwide has failed to adequately disseminate clear, accurate and useful knowledge of human sexuality (UNESCO, 2009). Such failures are often ascribed to poor **teacher** training on the subject (Hall, 2009; Meyer, 2010; Allen and Rasmussen, 2016). However, clearly the discussion of stereotypically private matters in the more public space of education by teachers—who are not themselves exempt from anxieties in relation to sexuality—makes the pedagogic and human encounter a particularly problematic part of the **curriculum**, complicated as it is by socio-cultural and religious dimensions.

Religious **culture**s, while attempting to offer a level of explanation for many existential issues, have often obscured understanding of sexuality. The myth of the Garden of Eden is useful to consider in this context, given both its foundational significance and its occurrence in several of the great monotheistic religions. The myth depicts an omniscient and omnipotent god (a moral system), which appears hostile to the human search for knowledge. Reading the myth psychologically, the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents human curiosity and transgression: it is an important developmental step, **learning** to distinguish between good and evil. Yet the consequences of curiosity and its realisation in knowledge highlight how painful learning and development can be (Bion, 1963; Bodin, 2010; George and George, 2014). In this way Bion (1963; Bléandonu, 1994) uses such myths to offer a psychoanalytic insight into the problem of learning, especially when it is associated with a primary emotional experience such as sexuality. Knowledge of sexuality is particularly troubling in the Eden myth, leading as it does to embarrassment and punishment, but so too is concomitant curiosity. With education enmeshed with such culturally ingrained attitudes, which are repressive of sexuality (as well as antipathetic to curiosity), it is unsurprising

that figures as diverse as Freud (1907) and Foucault were deeply critical of traditional education. **Psychoanalysis** thus radically challenged popular views about the supposed sexual innocence of **childhood**, for example, with Freud (1905; *cf.* Sandfort and Rademakers, 2000) emphasising and normalising its sexual **diversity**, and Ferenczi (1933) pointing to qualitative differences between its childhood and adult expressions and the damage of childhood sexual abuse. The cultural challenge in the **social science**s was extended by Foucault (1978–1986), critiquing **essentialist** views of sexuality, which he argued were part of hegemonic regulatory **discourses**.

Butler's (1990, 1993) work offers a degree of (albeit unstable) integration of psychoanalytic and Foucauldian ideas. Her emphasis on sexuality and **gender** as socially constructed fictions, their multiplicity (as opposed to any simple binary classification), their disruptive potential (as distinct from their traditional incorporation into hegemonic heteronormative narratives), and the ways in which sexuality is also restricted through iterative doing (thus making it performative) are particularly useful ideas in critical educational contexts. Despite increasing efforts to acknowledge the sexual **diversity** in **school**s, with the variegated sexualities and identities of students and staff (Meyer, 2010), cultural narratives continue to impact on both **curriculum** and practice. UNFPA and UNESCO (2009) initiatives to promote sexuality education are substantially intertwined with HIV and AIDS strategies. In developing nations, particularly with colonial histories (themselves often sexualised through the subjugation and othering of bodies), the intersectional issues form vital sites for debate. By contrast, the WHO (2010) guidance on sexuality education for Europe offers a far more **holistic** conception, emphasising positive human potential, views which are gaining increasing acceptance in the Netherlands, Austria, Belgium and other countries (see Frans, 2016 for a review). In the British context, past efforts at sex education have typically been couched in unhelpful euphemisms (Hall, 2009; Jones and Astley, 2009), oscillating between the imperative to promote knowledge and counter misinformation on the one hand, and protect a supposed **childhood** innocence on the other (Renold, 2005). Despite improvements (Allen, 2005; Hall, 2009; Allen and Rasmussen, 2016), the content and implicit values too often tends towards deficit models, continuing expressions of biopower that seek to inhibit sexuality, particularly through prioritising risks over pleasure and a sex-positive stance.

***Questions to consider***

1. Considering the sources of your own knowledge of sex and sexuality, which have been the most helpful?
2. To what extent should **school**s be involved in offering **teaching** on sex and sexuality?
3. How are sexuality and **colonialism** related to each other?
4. Should sexuality education challenge cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM)?

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