

HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

Dr Angus M Slater

INTRODUCTION

This module functions as a module at levels 5 and 6 in order to deepen your understanding of the way in which aspects of gender, religion, and sexuality overlap, with a particular emphasis on equipping you with some familiarity with theories pertaining to each.

It aims to provide you with the core material and skills needed to excel in your studies this year as well as giving you a variety of theoretical options for your dissertation study.

INITIAL ADMIN

AIMS OF THE MODULE

This module aims to engage you in:

1. critically examining key texts in the study of Gender, Sex, and Sexuality
2. critically assessing a variety of theoretical approaches in studying gender, religion, and sex
3. exploring theories and debates about historical and contemporary forms of gender, performance, sex, and sexualities.



LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the module, you should be able to:

- Understand the different uses of terms relating to gender and sexuality, including their specific disciplinary meanings.
- To be able to read and comprehend key theorists linked to the study of gender and sexuality and apply their theoretical constructions to contemporary settings.
- Analyse both primary and secondary material relating to bodies, gender and sexuality.



STRUCTURE

In order to equip you with these skills, the module seeks to build on and expand the material you may have covered at level 4, in the Gender module.

While that module sought to provide you with an introductory account of the issues, this module aims to further engage with the cultural range of gender expression, the differing ways in which gender and sex relate, and the performance of sexualities.

This means we end up covering quite a lot of material, some of which may be of greater or lesser interest to you – but all of which is important!



STYLE

This module will discuss topics like sex, gender identity, sexuality, and other potentially emotive topics.

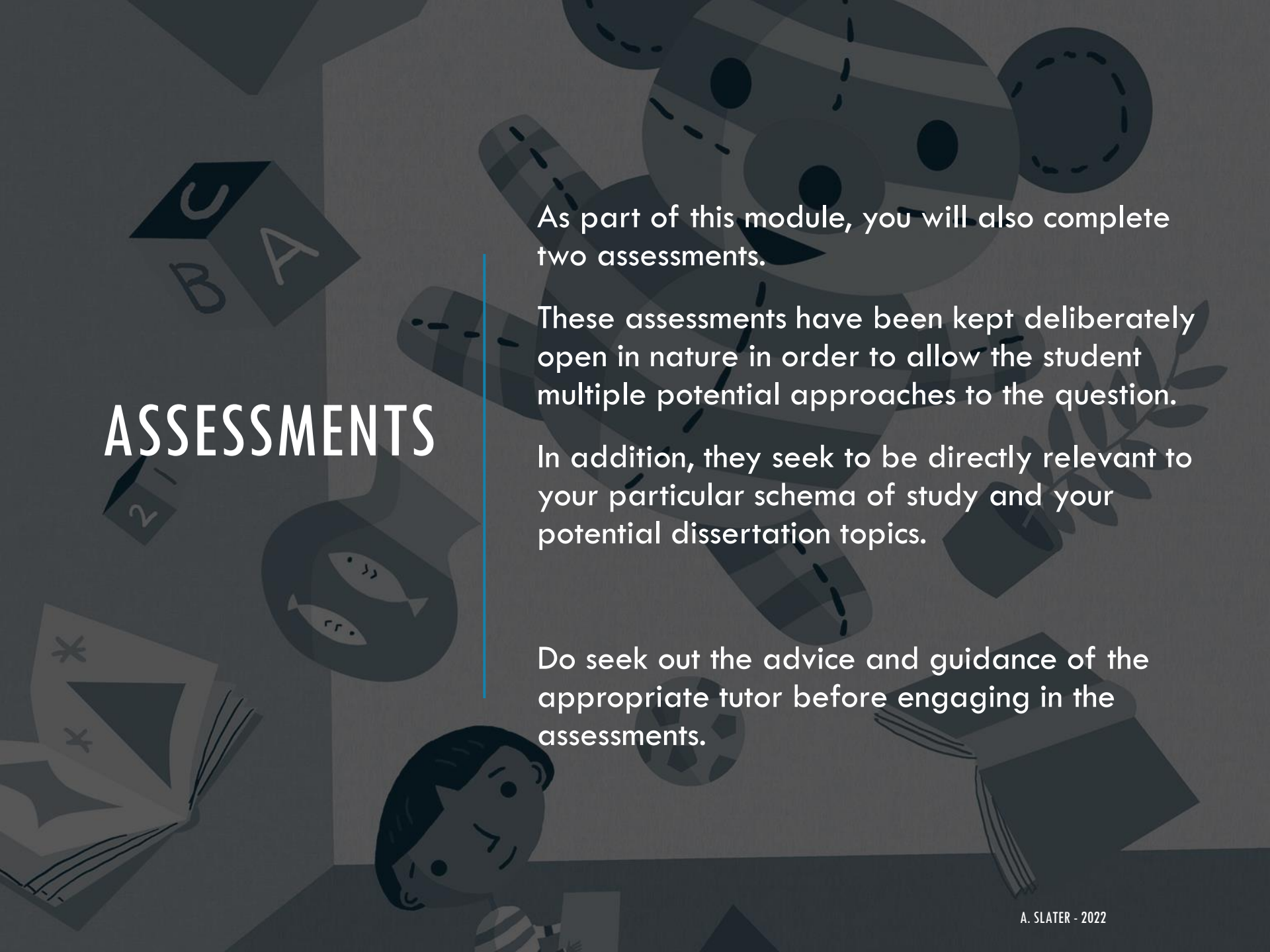
This means that students may find some of the discussion topics difficult to engage with and uncomfortable to discuss.

The value of education is learning more about things that make us uncomfortable and learning about the reasons for our discomfort.

I hope this means that we can be respectful of each others difficulty with some subjects, respectful of other people's pain, and vulnerable about our own.

This module aims to be exploratory, loosely structured, and a place for personal reflection.

If there are areas of particular difficulty for you as an individual, please let me know so they can be suitably addressed.

The background is a dark grey collage of various educational and playful items. At the top left, there are alphabet blocks with letters 'C', 'B', and 'A'. Below them is a block with the number '2'. In the center, there's a large, stylized teddy bear with a striped body and a bow tie. To the right of the bear is a potted plant with leaves. At the bottom left, there's an open book with a star on its cover. In the bottom center, there's a cartoon illustration of a child's head looking up. At the bottom right, there's a stack of books. A thin blue vertical line is positioned to the left of the text blocks.

ASSESSMENTS

As part of this module, you will also complete two assessments.

These assessments have been kept deliberately open in nature in order to allow the student multiple potential approaches to the question.

In addition, they seek to be directly relevant to your particular schema of study and your potential dissertation topics.

Do seek out the advice and guidance of the appropriate tutor before engaging in the assessments.

ASSESSMENT 1 — PRESENTATION

Students will provide presentation material (15 slides / 2,500 words) as if for a presentation relevant to the study of gender / sex / sexuality and / or its reception in their subject of study.

This material should be presented as if the presentation will be delivered, including appropriate citation, use of relevant and appropriate academic material, and be directly related to their subject of study. The material should engage with topics and theories covered in this module, identify how they might apply to or be relevant to an aspect of the student's subject of study, and evaluate the ways in which engaging in this process brings to light new insights.

Students are encouraged to discuss their proposed area of focus with the module tutor.

Expected deadline: Monday, Week 3.

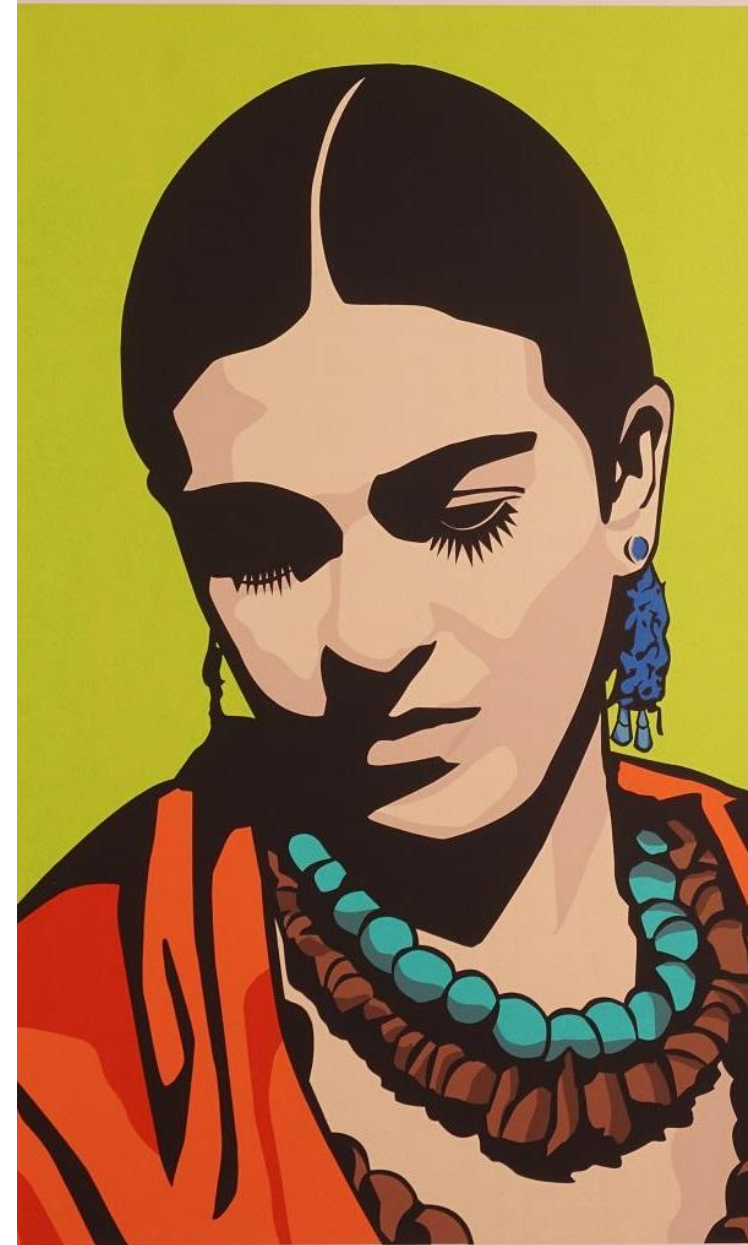


ASSESSMENT 2

“Using the work of one of the theorists discussed in class, examine a single cultural phenomenon using their analytical tools”.

This essay requires you to apply the theoretical work of one of the theorists we discuss in class (Butler, Foucault, Rubin, Connell, Halperin, Jagose, Larentis, etc etc) to a particular cultural phenomenon you are interested in. This phenomenon should be related to matters of sex, sexuality, or gender and can be anything you are interested in exploring.

Expected Deadline: Monday, Week 5



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QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

For the rest of this session, I would like us to revise some of the material you may have covered in the lvl4 Gender module.

Not all students will have had a chance to take this module, and some of the knowledge may have slipped from you, so I think this revision process is a good way to ease us back into thinking critically about gender, sex, and sexuality.

This will include discussion about biological determinism and the definition of some terms.



GROUP WORK

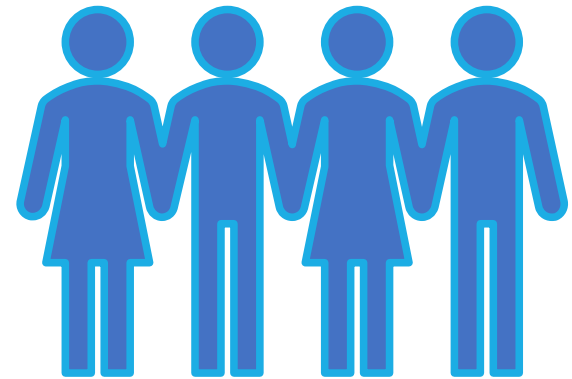
Divide into groups

1 - List differences between women and men and consider:

On what are these perceived differences based? (e.g. biological, social, cultural or religious beliefs)

2 - List similarities between women and men and consider:

On what are the perceived similarities based? (e.g. biological, social, cultural or religious beliefs)



DISCUSSION

All participants to consider together:

1 - What are the effects of highlighting differences rather than similarities between men and women?

2 - To what extent do assumptions about biologically determined sex differences between women and men influence popular culture, sayings or beliefs in our society?

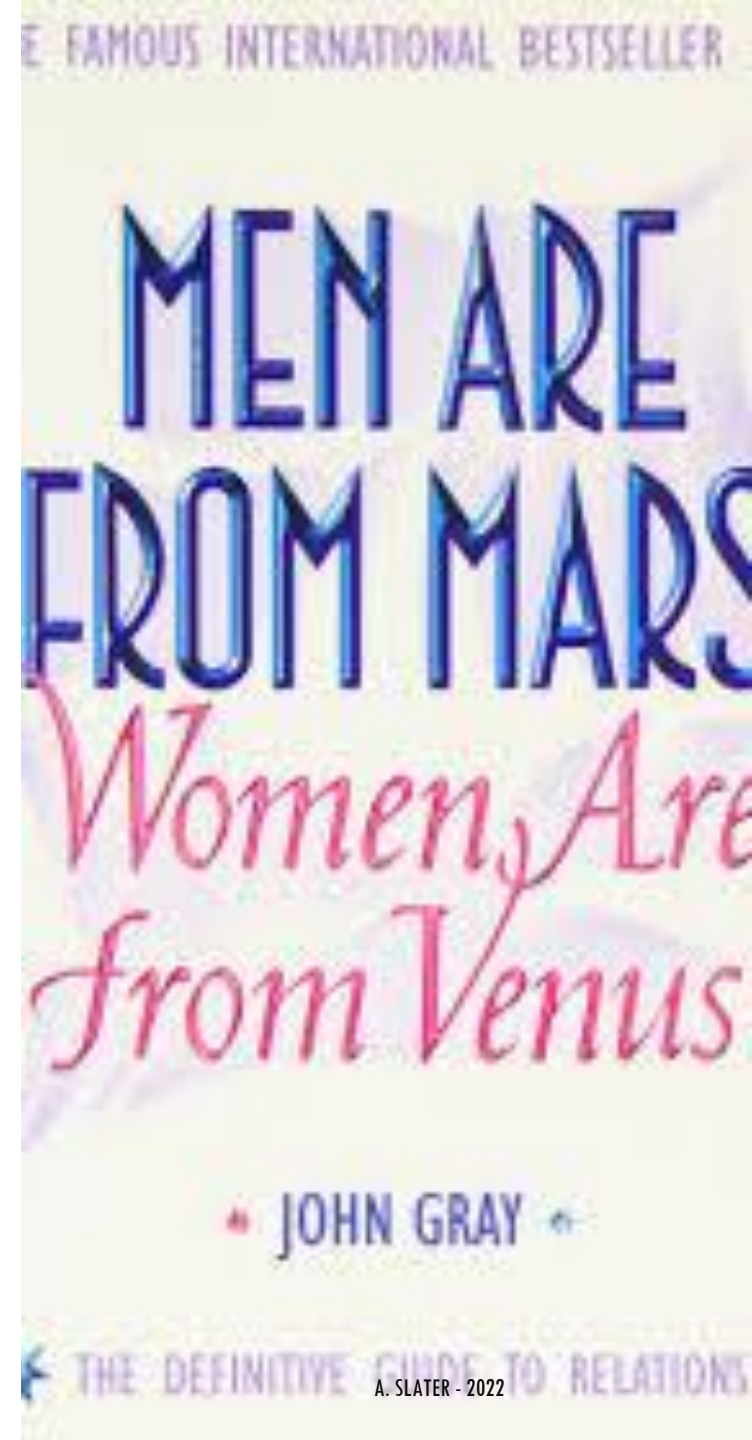


BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM, SEX AND SEXUALITY

Biologically determinist theories of various kinds reduce social organisation and social complexity to an effect of biology or nature

Biological determinists include socio-biologists, some geneticists, psychologists and 'pop psychology' writers, as well as many examples on social media of "pick-up artists" or "dating experts".

Complex, socially embedded behaviors have all been explained as an effect of evolutionary reproductive strategies.



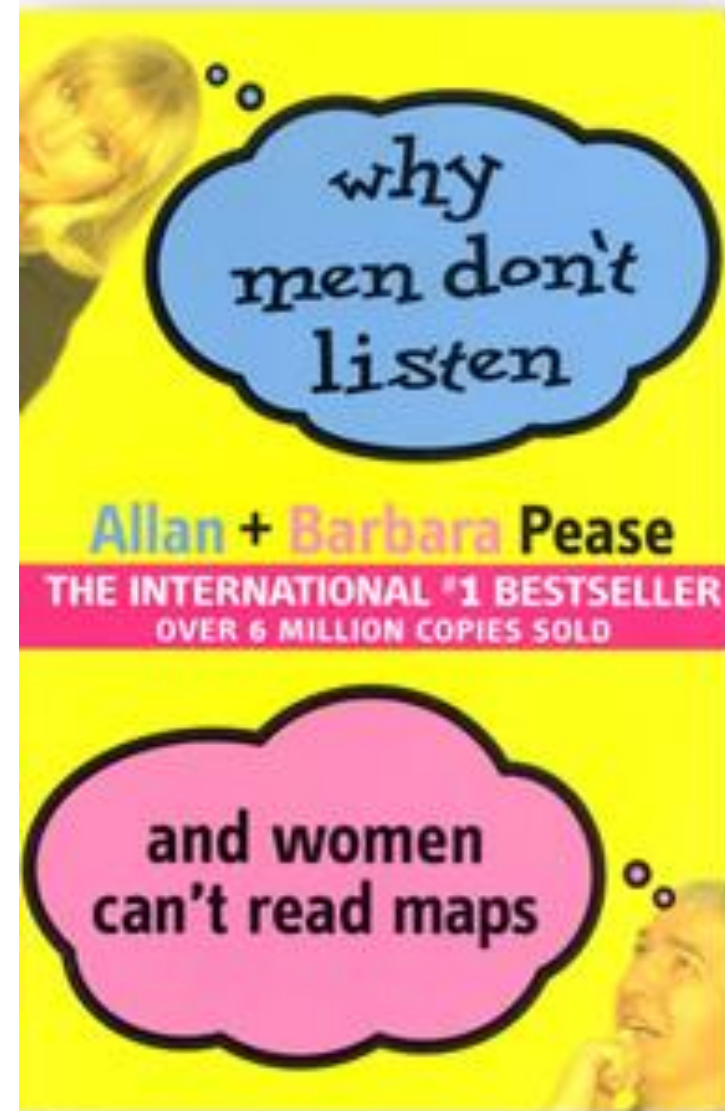
SEX AND SEXUALITY

In the biologically determinist school of thought:

Biological facts of sex are thought to constitute natural differences between men and women.

These natural differences produce differing social and cultural reactions that are defined by the biological reality.

For example, heterosexuality is considered a “natural” outcome of this sex difference due to the drive to reproduce the species.



SEX AND SEXUALITY

Key assumption driving biological determinism:

The primary function and goal of all human sexual activity is the reproduction of the species – because this is the biological reason for sex differentiation.

Humans have sex because we must reproduce, and all of our social behaviour can be explained by this feature.

Homosexuality becomes explained as an “unnatural” genetic deviation, for example.





'THE GAY GENE' — AN EXAMPLE

An example of the impact of a biologically determinist frame is that geneticists search for a 'gay gene' to prove there is a biological basis for, and explanation of, male homosexuality

Some examples of this include:

- Small differences found between the post-mortem brains of heterosexual and homosexual young men (LeVay, 1991)
- Research on pairs of homosexual brothers found that some had similar markers on the X chromosome, indicating a genetic basis for sexuality (Hamer et al. 1993)

Yet, LeVay's work proved difficult to replicate and Hamer et al.'s work has been refuted.

Recent work (Ganna, 2019) on 500,000 genomes, suggests genetic markers may only have an impact on around 25% of human sexual behaviour.

DISCUSSION

All participants to consider together:

1 - What are the effects of highlighting differences rather than similarities in the biologically determinist frame?

2 – Take an example of “biologically determined” sex differences (e.g. women are naturally maternal). What **social** impact does this assumption have?



BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

The research evidence for many biologically determinist claims simply does not hold up

- Sex “difference” research may be popular, but it masks a great deal of evidence for sex *similarities*
- Differences are often context-specific
- Most sex is not reproductive
- Human sexuality more complicated than ‘survival of the species’ or of one’s gene pool
- ‘Biological drive’ arguments are political
- Often used to resist social change and legitimate an unequal, gendered and sexualised social order
- Institutionalised power relations affect understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality

DISCUSSION

1 - If reproductive differences between the sexes “naturally” drive individual behaviour, why do we need social institutions that police and set moral guidelines for sexual behaviour?

2 - What institutions in our societies play this role of policing sexual behaviour?

3 - How do they do this? What are the repercussions for breaking this policing?



DEFINING SEX AND GENDER



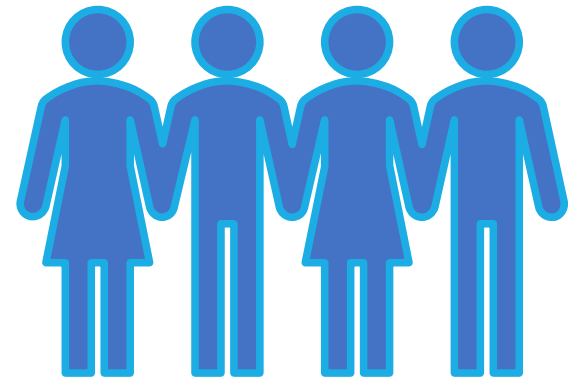
GROUP WORK

Divide into two groups.

Individually, write down your own definitions of the terms sex, sexuality, and gender

Compare your definitions with those of the rest of the group

Feedback



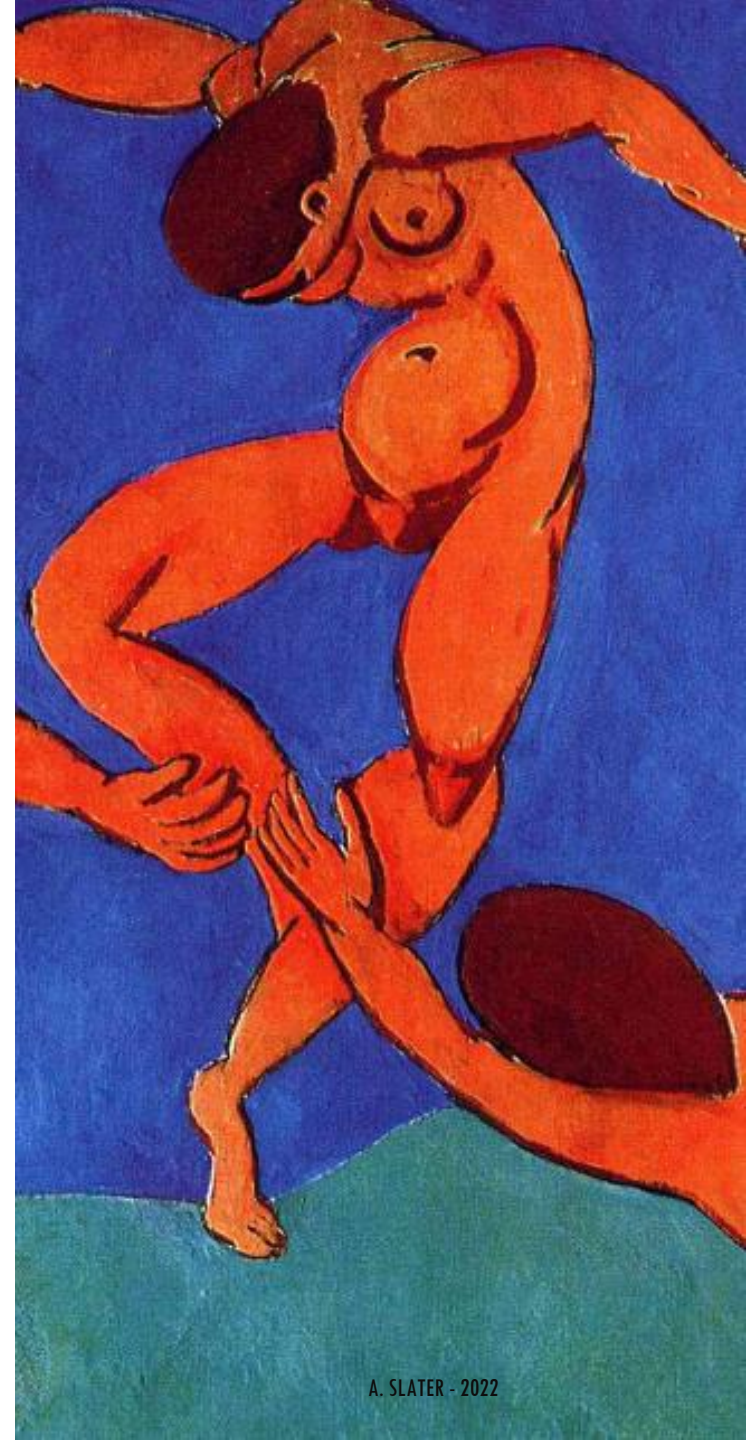
COMPLEXITIES OF SEX & GENDER

Is there a difference? Yes, on one level

Sex is biological – male, female, also intersex (reproductive differences based on genitalia, chromosomes, hormones) - also refers to sexual acts, as in 'having sex'!

Gender is 'the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions into social processes' (Connell 2002: 10)

Gender underlies assumptions regarding 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviour



COMPLEXITIES OF SEX & GENDER

There is undoubtedly a temptation to make an absolute distinction between sex and gender:

‘Nature vs nurture’

‘essentialism vs social constructionism’

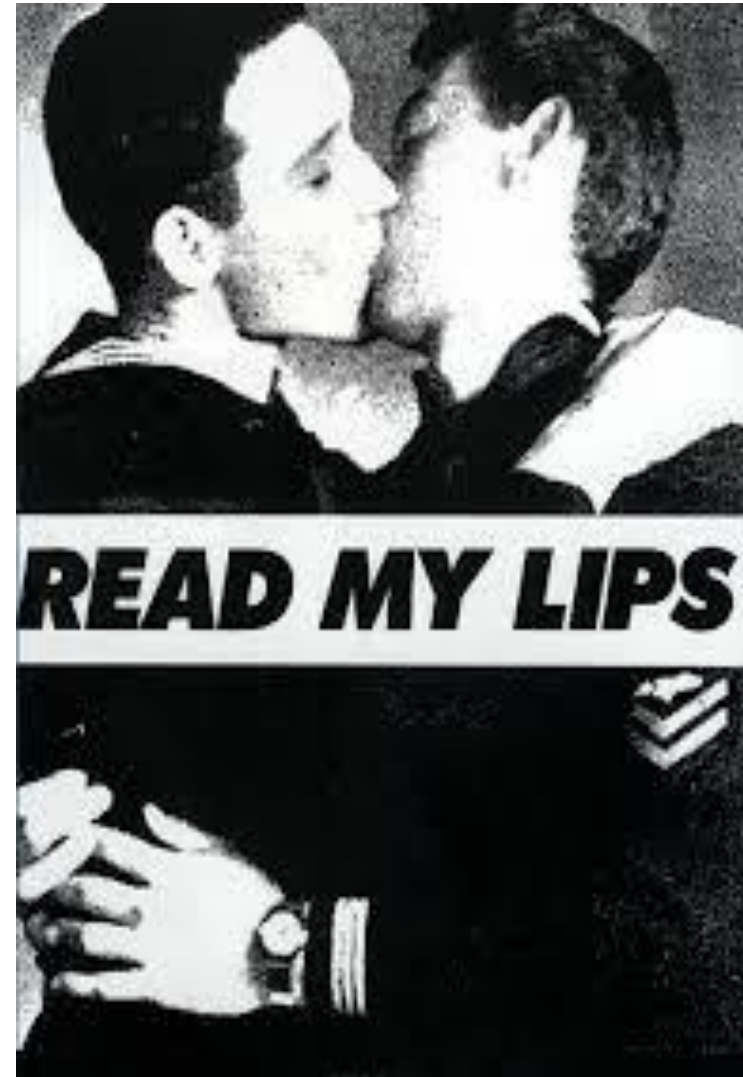


COMPLEXITIES OF SEX & GENDER

We cannot neatly separate the sexed body from the gendered body, as they are mutually constituted by socio-political processes – this means it is difficult to talk **only** of sex, or **only** of gender.

As you will come to see throughout this module, the 'natural' body is intensely political – who is it that gets to define and police the naturalness of human behaviour?

Even our systems of knowledge, whether scientific or sociological, struggle to escape the gendered and value-laden expressions of our language.



DEFINING SEXUALITY



DEFINING SEXUALITY

The term 'sexuality' is one that is both relatively recent in usage and complicated in its application to many various things.

The term emerges towards the end of the 18th century in English / French / German, largely through usages in a medical context and in line with the emergence of a focus on homo-sexuality as an identity.

But what does it mean?

That depends on who you ask and the context given – a dictionary might state “the quality of being sexual” for example, but there are many different ways we use the word to describe identity, behaviour, attraction, and experience



Sexual desire or attraction

To whom (or in some cases what) someone is attracted (physically and emotionally)

Sexual activity or behaviour

What a person does or likes to do sexually (intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, sexual fetishes)

Sexuality

Sexual identity

How someone describes their sense of self as a sexual being (e.g. heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, homosexual)

Sexual experience

Observations of others' sexualities; education or training related to sexuality; experiences that may not have been consensual

DISCUSSION

1 – How do we commonly use and define “sexuality” as a term?

2 – What does this definition depend on – is it physical, cultural, social?

3 – How do each of the four types identified interact with each other? Must they act in concert? Can they ‘contradict’?



SUMMARY & READING

Today, we have explored notions of biological determinism, the definitions of sex and gender, and begun to examine the nature of sexuality.

Over the course, you will explore these key debates through the lens of a number of different theorists, expanding your knowledge of the kaleidoscopic variety of sex, sexuality, and gender.

Your reading for this session is 'Questions of Knowledge' and 'Discourses and Institutions' in "Understanding Foucault".

A permalink to this book is included on the Moodle page.

