1 Welcome to the new sexuality studies

Steven Seidman

In the last decades of the twentieth century, a revolution emerged in the study of sexuality. Sex is today understood as fundamentally social. The aspects of sex that scholars—and ordinary folks—are most interested in, such as issues of desire, pleasure, identity, norms of sexual behavior, and intimate arrangements, are today recognized by the leading scholars in the field as social phenomena. This deep sociology of sexualities is what we call the new sexuality studies.

It was not too long ago that most Americans and Europeans viewed sexuality as natural. In the United States and Europe, sexologists, psychologists, demographers, and medical researchers believed that human sexuality was biological, built into the body through genetics and hormones. Humans were, it was assumed, born sexual. Just as nature programs humans to eat and sleep, humans were wired for sex. Humans were thought to be driven by a sexual instinct, a procreative gene, or a maternal drive to reproduce and rear children. Although many people still believe this to be true, the new social studies of sexuality have challenged the idea of sex as natural.

Initially, this new social perspective on sexuality was advanced by activists. Feminists challenged a conventional wisdom that assumed a natural division between men and women that extended into their sexualities. It was widely assumed that men’s sexuality is naturally genital-centered, pleasure oriented, and aggressive in ways that express an innate masculine gender identity. By contrast, women’s sexuality was said to be oriented to intimacy and relationship building, diffusely erotic, and passive or other-directed in a way that reflected their “natural” feminine gender identity.

Against this conventional viewpoint, feminists argued that society, not nature, creates gender and sexual differences. In particular, feminists argued that women’s sexuality is socially shaped in ways that sustain men’s social and political dominance. For example, the view of women’s sexuality as oriented to pleasing men or driven by a maternal instinct reinforces the idea that women’s appropriate social role should be that of wife and mother.

The fight for gender justice challenges these norms and, as women have gained social and economic independence in the decades after the 1960s, they have claimed control over their own bodies and sexualities. Some women may still approach sexuality as a means to reproduction or as a way to gain intimacy, but other women look to sex for sensual pleasure or intimacy without marriage or children. In short, women’s sexuality, like men’s, is not fixed by nature but shaped by social forces such as economic independence, social values, peers, or family culture.

Alongside the women’s movement, there developed a lesbian and gay movement. Lesbian and gay activists challenged a society that declared heterosexuality and heterosexuals to be natural and normal while homosexuality and homosexuals were stigmatized as

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unnatural and abnormal. This belief has had powerful social consequences. It contributed to making heterosexuality into a social norm and ideal, while often criminalizing and stigmatizing homosexuality. Individuals who were labeled homosexual were subject to discrimination, harassment, and sometimes violence and imprisonment.

Gay and lesbian activists not only protested laws and practices of discrimination, but challenged the idea that nature produces two distinct human types or social identities: heterosexuals and homosexuals. Some activists argued that it is society that creates the idea of sexual identities or roles. How? By stigmatizing and criminalizing homosexuality, heterosexuality is made into the only right way to be sexual and to organize families. Furthermore, some activists argued that the norm of heterosexuality – now called heteronormativity – reinforces a gender order that not only emphasizes gender difference but privileges men.

Historians and other scholars have since documented that although there has always been heterosexual and homosexual behavior, there has not always been “heterosexual” and “homosexual” as sexual identities. For example, in nineteenth-century America, homosexuality was viewed as a behavior, typically a criminal behavior punishable as an act of “sodomy.” However, the category of sodomy included not only homosexual acts but a wide range of non-procreative, non-marital sexual acts such as fornication and oral-genital sex. Moreover, at the time it was believed that anyone could be tempted into the “sin” of sodomy and same-sex behavior. It was only in twentieth-century America that homosexuality was understood as indicating a social and sexual identity. Whereas before it was seen as a behavior anyone could engage in, now homosexuality was seen as marking a particular type of person. It was, of course, initially constructed as a dangerous and abnormal identity, in contrast to a “normal” heterosexual identity. The point I want to underscore is this: it was only in the early decades of the twentieth century in America that sexuality became the basis of a social identity. This fact underscores the historical and social character of sexuality.

Feminists and gay and lesbian activists developed the beginnings of a social view of sexuality as part of their politics, and this perspective was soon taken up by scholars. By the 1970s, sociologists began to view sex as social. Sociological researchers started studying the social patterns of heterosexuality, marriage, reproduction, and dating. Their findings revealed the role of social forces such as gender, religion, occupation, and the role of peers in shaping sexual behavior.

However, both activists and sociologists of the 1960s and 1970s had a limited view of the social character of sexuality. Although they highlighted the role of social forces in shaping norms and patterns of sexual behavior, their sociological analysis did not extend into the social making of sexual bodies, desires, acts, pleasures, and identities. These social researchers assumed an already sexualized body and a natural landscape of sexual acts and pleasures.

The paradigm of new sexuality studies raises questions that were not addressed, or even posed, earlier. For example, how is it that certain body parts become sexualized? What social forces explain why the clitoris was not viewed as a sexual organ until the 1960s, at least in the United States and in many European societies? What social changes help to explain the recent emergence of “anal sex” as a legitimate erotic pleasure? The new sexuality studies understands sexual behaviors as shaped by cultural contexts and sexual identities as historically emergent and unstable, displaying an immense variation, and changing. Homosexuality, as we have seen, was not always a sexual identity, and, even in societies where it serves as an identity, its meaning can vary and change. For example,
“lesbian” may indicate a sexual orientation or identity, or a political standpoint against men’s dominance. Today, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, “gay” may signal a master identity or a secondary identity or, as in many European cultures, a behavior but not an identity. And, new sexual identities may emerge, such as a bisexual, asexual, or polyamorous.

The new sexuality studies perspective does not deny the biological aspects of erotic life. There would be no sexuality without bodies. However, it is social forces that determine which organs and orifices become “sexual,” how such organs and orifices may be used or expressed, their social and moral meaning, which desires and acts become the basis of identities, and what social norms regulate behavior and intimacies. This deep view of sex as social is the new sexuality studies that is explored in the chapters of this edited volume.

Chapter review questions

1. What does the author mean by new sexuality studies? New in comparison to what other ways of understanding sex and sexuality?
2. How have activists, including feminists and gay and lesbian activists, influenced how sexualities are conceptualized?

Author biography

Steven Seidman is an emeritus professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Albany, USA. He is a world-renowned expert in the field of sexuality studies. He has authored many books, including Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830–1980 (Routledge, 1991); Embattled Eros: Sexual Politics and Ethics in Contemporary America (Routledge, 1992); Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life (Routledge, 2002); and The Social Construction of Sexuality (W. W. Norton, Third Edition, 2014). He is also co-editor of Intimacies: A New World of Relational Life (Routledge, 2013).
2 Construction as a social process

Lars D. Christiansen and Nancy L. Fischer

Picture an apartment building construction site in its early stages. There are many workers in hard hats operating cranes to hoist steel beams, and pile drivers pounding large steel pillars into the ground to support the building. Once the foundation is laid, concrete walls are poured, hiding the pillars. Carpenters frame the interior rooms with wood and sheetrock. Masons add brick to the exterior walls. Plumbing and electrical wiring are completed, and interior walls painted. After all this collective effort, the construction workers (heavy equipment operators, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, etc.) leave the site. Residents move into the building. They may not think about it, yet their lives are shaped by the building’s structure – where bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms are placed, how many elevators versus stairwells are allotted to a floor, whether there is a gym – all these aspects of the building’s original design and construction impact residents’ daily habits and routines, the people they are likely to run into, and even how often they go outside the building. The original design and construction process is now taken for granted, and people simply adapt to the built structure in which they live.

Now picture a laboratory in a research university where a team of scientists are searching for more effective means of birth control. There are many workers who contribute to the laboratory – student research assistants, custodial staff following protocols of cleaning in areas with potential biohazards, contractors who service the equipment, and potential donors who help financially support the research. Wearing white lab coats and goggles, scientists peer through microscopes into petri dishes, carefully observing the process of egg fertilization by sperm, and how potential chemical interventions can alter the process. They conduct experiments, and carefully record the steps of their research and results based on their observations. They publish their findings in peer-reviewed research journals, where other scientists read their work. Eventually, millions of people take birth control pills based on their findings.

What do these two workplaces have in common with one another? They are both construction sites.

Construction, literally

The word “construction,” taken in isolation, might conjure images of people wearing hard hats, driving nails, carrying sheetrock, using cranes to hoist steel beams, and erecting a building using countless other materials and tools. But sexual concepts, beliefs, categories, and theories also undergo a construction process. Concepts (like heteronormativity), beliefs (like men are “inherently more sexual”), categories (like gay, straight, bisexual, and pansexual), and theories (like queer theory and feminism) are all social constructs.

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For understanding how concepts are made, buildings and other sites where construction happens is a useful metaphor.

A social construct refers to a phenomenon or category created and developed by society through its cultural and social practices. The processes of social construction describe the ongoing practices of building a concept or a theory through the collective actions of groups, organizations, and institutions (such as science, schools, government, or media). The fact that many people participate in a construction process is what makes it a social act. This is why constructions are usually called “social constructions,” though that phrase is redundant since all concepts and nearly all material objects require human social interactions and transactions. In this sense, we mean the term “construction” literally, not just metaphorically, in this chapter.

For every sexual concept, belief, category, or theory that we have today, some groups laid the initial foundations and others subsequently built upon them, elaborating, detailing, and reconfiguring, much like how housing is remodeled over time. For example, during the fifteenth century, religious scholars were key figures who first tried to answer sexual questions like “where do babies come from?” They assumed that only God could create life, not mere humans in conjugal relations. Therefore, they believed that every human who would ever live was already in existence, hidden inside sperm (Dolnick 2017). These religious beliefs formed the foundation of knowledge used by early scientists when they viewed sperm through microscopes. Some scientists hypothesized that the small wriggling sperm cells were animated because they contained tiny little humans (Dolnick 2017), waiting to be transferred and incubated by a woman (Martin 1991). This foundational belief of how conception took place prevailed from the 1600s into the 1800s.

Although religious scholars once were the ultimate authorities on sexual knowledge and god-ordained “Truth,” scientists gradually displaced religious authorities and claimed that science has the ability, through precise systematic observations of scientific method, to empirically reveal “the truth.” These are referred to as truth claims by Michel Foucault (a prominent French philosopher) because they describe assertions that a particular belief system holds to be true (Foucault 1990). Since the late nineteenth century, knowledge workers like scientists (including anthropologists, biologists, geneticists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists) have been particularly productive at laying the foundations of sexual knowledge. For example, using more powerful microscopes, biologists decided that sperm did not contain tiny humans, and instead theorized that reproduction involved strong feisty sperm thrusting and penetrating their way into a passive egg to fertilize it (Martin 1991). This new truth claim was based on scientists’ understandings of heterosexual sexual scripts – they were anthropomorphizing sperm and egg as if they were men and women in a conventional heterosexual relationship (Martin 1991). In any case, just like construction workers create a building, and how carpenters later remodel it, scientists invented the concepts of sperm and egg and then redrafted the theory to reflect their new observations and beliefs.

Are you thinking, “Did I read that right? Scientists invented the concept of sperm and egg?” The idea that all concepts and ideas are constructions, rather than notions that exist outside of the specific human activities, can be difficult to grasp. We might assume that sperm and egg are completely “natural” phenomenon and that they must have existed prior to the fifteenth century, whether people of that time knew about them or not, and that therefore they are not social constructs. But the concepts spermatozoa and egg are constructs (as are the theories about how they interact with one another) in the sense that
our knowledge about them is the product of human activities and is shaped by cultural beliefs. We look at the world through a cultural lens that shapes how we see it and the knowledge that we produce about it.

The idea that all that we see and know is in some way a human invention may be difficult to believe. There are at least two reasons why. First, we are taught otherwise by people and institutions throughout much of our lives; we are told that some things existed before humans had anything to do with them (philosophers call this *a priori*), and therefore those things (like sperm and egg) are not human constructions, but simply things that were “found” or “discovered.” Second, the idea of construction applied to seemingly universal concepts seems arrogantly anthropocentric; how dare we humans claim to have invented sperm and egg?

**Discourse and fact-making processes**

Nonetheless, sperm was “invented” in the sense that a scientist – specifically Antoine van Leeuwenhoek in 1677 – decided to look at his semen through a microscope and saw millions of swimming creatures within it (Poppick 2017). He concluded that he was seeing parasites, just as he had in pond water. He shared his observations, which eventually led others to develop theories of how babies are created through sperm–egg interactions. The original inventors of the microscope, the scientists who used them, their observations, and conclusions, how they shared them, and how other scientists reshaped that knowledge over centuries were all steps in the construction process of sperm and egg.

To go back to the building metaphor, after the initial foundations of the concept of sperm and egg were laid, other biologists continued to build upon that knowledge. Over time, scientists systematically observed egg fertilization, published scientific papers offering opposing theories which were discussed at professional conferences, and revised their theories. French sociologist Bruno Latour (1987) refers to this as a *fact-making process* where new scientific facts are built through scientists’ discussions, known as scientific discourse. *Discourse* describes systems of thought that are composed of ideas, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subject matter of which they speak (Foucault 1976). For example, in the scientific fact-making process of sperm and egg, biologists eventually argued over whether sperm were actually “active and powerful” and could penetrate a supposedly “passive” egg. Some instead concluded that sperm are small and weak, move side-to-side rather than forward, and cannot penetrate the much larger egg. In their revised theories, the egg now actively chose the sperm and seized it with its sticky coating, playing an active role in fertilization (Martin 1991). Rather than the image of the conventional heterosexual couple, their perceptions of the egg and the sperm now reflected the trope of the “femme fatale” and her hapless victims. The point here is that every theory of sperm meets egg has been influenced by dominant cultural beliefs and is part of a fact-making process, including presentations at academic conferences hosted by professional organizations, granting institutions that support the research, and scientific publications. The discoveries are then followed by news stories, books, and (in contemporary times) podcasts that broadcast the new construction and form the basis of expanding discourse. Notably, none of these shared scientific discoveries are perfect reflections of actual biology. Because they require human activity to be “discovered” and described, all of the knowledge about them are filtered through cultural beliefs.

The construction of discourse by all the people, organizations, and institutions just mentioned required techniques and tools to make the claims, just as construction workers
use various tools to build a skyscraper. Some use scientific method as a technique, meaning that their truth claims are based on systematic observations of measurable phenomena. All people who make any such knowledge claims use existing ideas (knowledge, concepts, plans), instruments (objects, computers, pens, paper, instruments of observation), means of communication (internet, journals), allies (peers, social networks), and even energies that humans need (sugars, calories) to do the construction work.

Sexual discourse describes the many ways in which sex and sexualities are discussed. Sexual discourse expands its construction through the actions of reporters in the news media, movies and television shows, bloggers, novelists, those posting their thoughts through social media, sex education classes, and people simply talking to friends about sex. In social scientific work on sexuality, researchers deploy many research methods to gather empirical data as part of their fact-making process. Gallup polls and Pew Research use large-scale surveys of the American population to gain knowledge about American sexual beliefs and practices. Sexuality researchers often interview people to learn how they interpret the meanings of their sexual lives like Ellen Lamont’s research on heterosexual and queer dating scripts (see Lamont in Chapter 6 in this volume). Still other sexuality researchers engage in ethnographies where they participate in the communities they want to study and write about their observations like Terrell Winder’s research with Black gay men at a Los Angeles community center (see Chapter 58 in this volume).

Inquiry about construction provides many points of entry. When studying sexuality through a constructionist lens, we are led to many important and fascinating questions. What concepts, objects, means of communication, and allies are marshaled to support one conception of sexuality over another? What actors (including nonhuman actors like computer algorithms) are assembling tools in such a way as to make claims? What are the tools for constructing sexual categories? What existing networks (social ties, associations) are involved in the process of maintaining or challenging theories? Whose ideas are included in the list of citations? What conferences witness the articulation of these ideas? Which organizations sponsor the conferences? Who is supplying the funding for the research and assembly of scholars? What communications networks are utilized for the distribution of ideas? What are tools for deconstruction – the process of analyzing and revealing the hidden assumptions, judgments, and values that underlie social arrangements and intellectual ideas? What is being built as alternatives to current theories, and how are they being built? What resources are being marshaled to make the alternatives?

Is it constructed or real? A trick question

To illustrate our point further, let us play a fill-in-the-blank game. Ready? Here we go.

Fill in the blank:

Gender is not (A)_____; it is (B)________.

Did you say “real” for A, and “socially constructed” for B? If so, then you are not alone. You are in the company of probably many of your peers, and perhaps even your professors. One of the challenges to understanding constructivism is the myth that if something is social – a social construct – then it is not actually real. This is especially true about concepts (as opposed to material objects), because we are often taught that concepts are not “real.”

The impossibility of establishing the existence of anything outside of (prior to and disconnected from) human production (Hazelrigg 1995) seems to assert the notion that life
is merely a state-of-mind, an illusion, and “not real.” However, this is mistaken. We tend to conflate “real” with “natural” and “constructed” with “fake” or “artificial.”

Given our culture’s entrapment in the dualism between real and artificial, the “realness” of the constructionist argument needs further explanation. According to Bruno Latour (2005: 88–89) in Reassembling the Social:

[T]o say that something is constructed means that it’s not a mystery that has popped out of nowhere. . . . (T)o say that something is constructed has always been associated with an appreciation of its robustness, quality, style, durability, worth, etc. . . . (N)o one would bother to say that a skyscraper . . . or an automobile is “constructed.” This is too obvious to be pointed out. The great questions are rather: How well designed is it? How solidly constructed is it?

At this point it may be useful to look at the etymology of the word “artificial.” The root of that word is “artifice,” meaning handcrafted or made. Something artificial is made. Again, this does not necessarily mean that what is made is unreal or untrue, even though there is a long-standing colloquial association between “artificial” and “fake.” Indeed, to claim that something handcrafted by humans is “unreal” is nonsensical. The question is not one of material or conceptual existence, but rather the qualities of construction and maintenance. If for some reason the idea that sperm is made up of tiny swimming humans became a matter of social consensus, then we would not question whether the theory exists, but instead evaluate the premises upon which this theory was made.

Constructionism is concerned with how everything—from concepts to objects—is real, not because things refer to some “natural” condition outside of human production, but because of that human production. Things (objects and events) and quasi-things (concepts) are real because they are made. Just as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argues that both/and frames are more useful than either/or, we can say that the construct of race, for example, is both real and an illusion because of how realness and illusion are produced by humans utilizing conceptual tools.

When we first learn about ways to categorize humans and human behaviors, we are encouraged to treat those categories as if they are fixed, stable, and permanent. This is no surprise, as the very meaning categorizing is the act of drawing a boundary between one thing and another. When we construct a category, it is as if we were taking a pen and drawing a line, allotting some characteristics to one side, and other characteristics to the other side (such as dividing sex into the dichotomous categories male/female even though actual bodies display more ambiguity and variety). Categories are islands of meaning, determinations of difference that distinguish between this and that which serve as tools for understanding the world around us (Zerubavel 1993). According to scholars spanning a wide range of disciplines, thinking categorically cannot be helped; categories are a necessity of human thought, reflection, and communication. So, we tend to think categorically in order to provide some order to a chaotic world. But that does not mean that those categories existed prior to human thought, nor does it mean that those categories are fixed and unchangeable.

The opposition between constructed and real is apparent in the way that many people make the distinction between sex and gender. Sex is often presented in essentialist terms, which means assuming that one’s “true” sex is rooted in biology, like chromosome patterns or genitalia. Essentialist claims about sex categories often use absolute, biologically based categories of male and female, whereas gender is presented as cultural constructions
of masculinity and femininity. For many, sex is viewed as the “fixed” category with two clear dimensions based on distinctive, patterned physical characteristics; they believe that female and male are thus “natural” categories. This is unlike how race is often perceived today, where mutually exclusive categories of Black, white, Asian, Native American, and so on, are difficult to defend on any “natural” (biological) basis.

What about sexuality? Sexuality categories seem to fall somewhere in the middle of how race and sex are often discussed. There are those who claim that sexual identities are something that one is “born with” — biological or “hard-wired” — and is therefore not a choice (an essentialist position). A social constructionist position instead makes the case that society has created the belief that there is something called sexual orientation, and that there are a relatively small number of identity categories into which all people are supposed to fit. Social structures and norms influence how we place ourselves within this sexual identity categorization system. For example, almost everyone is raised with the assumption that they are straight, and most people accept that orientation for themselves. Others have sexual desires that lead them to question the heterosexual label for themselves and so they explore — and construct — alternative sexual identities.

The key point here is that something — indeed anything — is real because it is constructed. That includes material objects and concepts. Sexual identities like lesbian, gay, straight, queer, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual are real because they are constructed. To construct something is to make it real.

Therefore, there is no need to draw a distinction between what is constructed and what is real. Both fictions and facts are realities of human production. A romantic comedy is as real as a documentary describing the history of romance, even if there may be some differences in accuracy. It is not a matter of whether something is real or artificial, but how that realness or artificiality are suggested, asserted, and proven using material and immaterial tools. Sperm and egg are real because they have been constructed. Even the theory that spermatozoa contained tiny little humans was “real” in its time because it was constructed by humans. The critical question becomes how are truth claims produced and reproduced, and what consequences flow from those claims? This is the task of the analyst, of the social scientist and the historian. So, we instead can ask, “what are the means by which something is made real?” And we can then focus on how well an argument, category, or idea is made, and the rules which guided its making.

How well is it constructed?

What is important as we think about concepts, beliefs, categories, or theories as socially constructed is that it supplies the opportunity to consider how they were constructed, as well as how well they were constructed, and the consequences of those constructions. For example, what if a sexologist believes that sexual identity is dichotomous (the idea that one must be either straight or gay). How would we evaluate their construction techniques for concluding that there are just dichotomous sexual categories? Are they based on systematic observation? Did the research include the experiences of people from different class backgrounds and racial and ethnic groups? Did the research include different gender identities (nonbinary people, cisgender men, transgender men, transgender women, cisgender women)? Do the research methods fit the type of claims that the authors want to make? For example, if knowledge workers are making claims about “Americans,” did they draw from a representative sample of Americans or a convenience sample of a college class (see Budnick, Chapter 8 in this volume)? Remembering the building metaphor helps us to
evaluate the quality of an idea not just as a finished product but in terms of how it was made in the first place.

Think about different sexual categories like straight and gay as social constructions. The building metaphor remains helpful for the point we are making. Just like residents who are housed in a building, everyday people can find themselves housed within sexuality categories in ways that shape how they think about themselves. For example, for some, gay and straight are categories that are a good fit for how they experience gender-based sexual attractions. However, just like you could move into an apartment that does not suit your needs but is the only apartment available, the same occurs with categories. Gay and straight may be inadequate for others – one may not exclusively be attracted to those of the same gender, or exclusively to those of a different gender. A new category – bisexual – needed to be invented to describe those experiences more adequately. Likewise, one could find themselves jailed in a room that one wants to escape. People who are disabled or elderly might find themselves assumed to be asexual when in fact they actively desire, seek, and find sexual connections with others. For some, the category asexual is chosen and experienced as liberating from society’s sexual expectations. For others, it is an unwanted label that does not capture the identity they feel internally or want to project to the world.

People can also ultimately resist the categories in which they are expected to place themselves. More recent sexual categories such as queer or pansexual were constructed because people found gay, straight, and bisexual inadequate. Such sexual identity innovators push sexual discourse in new directions by arguing that the binary categories gay and straight are not well constructed, and that such a two-category system needs to be challenged. Binary sexual categories are too limited for all who want to express sexualities in fluid and diverse ways. Those who deconstruct the intellectual foundation of categories and point out its flaws encourage us to build ideas that better serve the needs of today’s sexual subjects. However, it should be noted that even those innovators are building concepts on foundations that were constructed over a century ago: the belief that sexual desires and behaviors reflect a sexual identity (i.e., a type of person) and that everyone must have a sexual identity.

Conclusion

The chapters that make up this book can be read in a constructionist light as well – as constructs that make truth claims of knowledge about sexuality. A word of caution is warranted and brings our chapter to a conclusion: It would be very easy to slip into the notion that a constructionist account means that the social scientist or historian is simply reporting on the findings of construction processes in all their intricacies and dynamics and is no longer engaging in the construction process themselves. However, the acts of analyzing and writing are also constructions involving assemblages of actors and tools. The writer or scholar is never just a messenger or reporter but is also participating in the act of making the evidence, the argument, and the story – they too are construction workers. Thus, they are implicated in reconstructing that which they are studying and reporting.

For example, when anthropologists and sociologists study how sperm and egg have been anthropomorphized by biologists, they are breathing life into, upholding, and reproducing the persons, institutions, and situations they have observed (we have inadvertently breathed a little life into the idea that spermatozoa contain tiny humans by writing about it here!). To write or study is not a neutral act, it is a decision to contribute to the ongoing realization of the object of inquiry. In other words, it is a decision to contribute to
its ongoing social construction. As Latour points out in *Science in Action* (1987) the most profound way to destroy knowledge claims (especially young claims) is to ignore them altogether, to never read them nor ever cite them. Judith Butler talks about a refusal to cite or recite a norm as *disidentification*. To ignore an idea is ultimately to deconstruct it – never mentioning something, never thinking about something, contributes to the atrophy or decay of any thing or quasi-thing. Erasure is best achieved by disappearance from discourse. In contrast, to reference an idea like a heterosexual dating script or the femme fatale trope for how sperm meets egg is to remake and reinforce it. Moreover, to cite it is to support it in some way (even as critique); to publish it is to objectify it, to fasten or stabilize it, through a broader communication.

So, this book is constructed by all the authors, the publisher, the companies responsible for felling the trees that produced the paper on which this print is placed (as well as the print makers), who are all collectively contributing to the making of the ideas expressed in this volume. It is up to you as reader to determine if the floor and foundation of this building is made well enough to stand upon, and possibly build upon these ideas.

**Chapter review questions**

1. How is building a sexual concept, idea, theory, or category like constructing a building, according to the authors?
2. Why is it inaccurate to say that “natural” phenomenon like sperm and egg are “real” whereas theories about them are “constructed”?
3. What does the *fact-making process* describe? Provide an example from the chapter.

**Author biographies**

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**References**


3 The shifting lines of sexual morality

Nancy L. Fischer

On a summer day a few years ago, a neighborhood acquaintance passed by with his two sons (aged 10 and 12) and stopped to talk. He discussed his television-viewing habits, exclaiming that he was disgusted by how much sexually explicit content there was on TV. Glancing at his sons, in an angry tone he said that when sex scenes appeared onscreen, he changed the channel or turned off the TV because he was not going to let his sons see that “smut,” adding “they push that stuff in our faces!” I was a bit puzzled by his strong reaction to television sex scenes because as I looked over at his sons, they were role-playing stalking and killing one another with toy machine guns, arguing over who had murdered whom first. Apparently, violent programming did not elicit the same moral reaction of needing to protect his sons, even though one would hope his sons would have far more sexual than violent encounters over the course of their lives. Sexuality was where he drew the line of his moral boundary. What was it about sex that offended this father’s sense of morals, particularly in reaction to his sons?

*Morality describes a cultural system for determining what is “right” and “wrong,” with *morals representing community standards for acceptable behavior. Thus, *sexual morality entails rules that guide “appropriate” and “inappropriate” sexual behaviors. Morality relates to our beliefs about what is best for the greater good of our communities – what rules we think all should follow for the sake of living in a good society. Making a moral line of what counts as “too far” in terms of sexual expression is an example of drawing moral boundaries. *Moral boundaries are a type of symbolic boundary used to create distinctions between oneself and others on the basis of morals or character (Lamont 1992). These concepts provide analytical tools for understanding the father’s strong reaction to sex scenes. He was communicating what he saw as a morally upstanding image of his parenting based on a belief system that sex is private and implying that parents who allow children to watch sex scenes are less moral. By criticizing the media, he was also inferring that sexually explicit content is harmful and that “they” are offending community’s standards of morality. His laxer attitude toward violence shows a different standard of morality and may also reflect his beliefs about masculinity.

This chapter explores sexual morality and the moral boundaries we draw around sexual matters and how those moral lines vary and shift, as they are used to reinforce or challenge the social order and its power relations and inequalities. I discuss how what is considered right and wrong, sexually speaking, is not fixed and absolute but varies across cultures, and changes over time. Sexual morality can signify hierarchy at both interpersonal levels and at the larger cultural level. A society’s rhetoric about sexual morality often reveals particular moral logics and deeper cultural meanings about what members consider pure or polluted, corrupt or innocent.
The shifting lines of sexual morality

It may seem surprising, but body parts and sexual acts have no inherent meaning in and of themselves — moral or otherwise. For example, there is nothing inherently sexual about breasts. It is the surrounding culture that labels some body parts and certain practices as sexual. The social situation and context determine whether we see an act as sexual or not sexual. And the same is true for sexual morality — no sexual act is inherently moral or immoral. For example, in one social context (such as during a college hookup), touching a breast is viewed as sexual, and in a different context (a breast cancer screening) it is not, and if a doctor gropes a breast in a sexual manner during a cancer screening, then the act becomes immoral. Similarly, the exact same act can be judged sexually immoral simply according to who engages in that behavior and where. In all 50 US states it is legal for men to walk around in public shirtless but women risk being charged with “indecency” for baring breasts in all but six US states. The idea that “deviance” is not inherent in the act but only acquires an immoral meaning after having been labeled so by a particular audience is known as labeling theory (Becker 1997 [1963]).

There is a great deal of cultural variance in what is considered sexually immoral. Dutch families view teen sex as normal and openly discuss and help their children approach their first sexual experience, whereas American parents tend to believe that teen sexual encounters should be handled in a more judgmental, dramatic way and teach children about the moral weight of sex (see Schalet, Chapter 66 in this volume). Some countries like Uganda condemn same-sex relationships (see Oliver, Chapter 76 in this volume), whereas other countries like Spain and Germany are largely accepting (Pew Research 2013). French culture reputedly views marital infidelity as less of a moral concern than does North American culture.

What is considered sexually immoral also varies over time. In the 1600s, when Puritan colonists weathered cold New England winters in small wood cabins, they had sex with their children present in the room; it was not considered immoral to do so, even if the kids were in the same bed (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012). Today, one could imagine Child Protective Services being called for alleged “child endangerment” in response to the same behavior.

This inconsistency in sexual mores is why we say that what gets defined as moral or immoral is socially constructed. Throughout the world, over the course of history, and in different social situations there has been no universal agreement as to what constitutes sexually immoral behavior. The belief that there are inherently right and wrong moral meanings that stretch across cultures and history is called absolutism; however, the empirical record of humanity simply does not support that theory. Even incest (having sexual relations with family members) is not the universal taboo (a forbidden act that offends sacred beliefs of a culture) it once was thought to be because which family members are defined as off-limits varies by culture. For example, in some places, sex with one’s paternal cousin would be a grave moral offense, but less so with one’s father (Hutchinson 1985). Morality, including sexual morality, is a culturally relativist phenomenon, meaning if one wants to understand it, it is best analyzed according to community standards of the cultural context in which it occurs, rather than applying one’s own ethnocentric notions to another culture’s values.

Logics of moral boundary-making

What is sexual morality all about? Why do people judge others as sexually corrupt, even in cases between mutually consenting partners? At a cultural level, how is sexual morality
organized? What moral logics and frameworks underlie sexual moral boundary-making? This section of the chapter explores some of the different logics underlying sexual morality.

**Conformity and social control**

Theorist Michael Warner argued that “most people cannot quite rid themselves of the sense that controlling the sex of others . . . is where morality begins”; thus, in his viewpoint, sexual morality is about controlling someone else’s sex life (Warner 1999: 1). From a sociological point of view, there is some truth to this statement, though morality is also more complex. On one level, morality can be about communicating to others that they are not fitting into the shared values of the group. People may use informal social control – gossip, shunning, giving people nasty looks, calling them names – to communicate that they are not following the norms of their social milieu and that they better step in line and conform if they want others’ acceptance, friendship, and trust. In this sense, sexual moralizing is about trying to control others’ sex lives for the sake of conformity and “order.” However, there is more to morality, even if we stay at this most basic level of thinking about it in terms of small group dynamics and interpersonal relations.

**Downward social comparison**

Think about the last time you heard an acquaintance refer to someone as “nasty” or “dirty” or as a “slut” or “pervert.” The speaker is trying to say something about themselves and their own sexual morality as much as they are saying something about someone else. The father at the beginning of the chapter was trying to say something about himself and, by implication, about other parents who allow their children to watch sexual content. The implication of calling someone else immoral is the unspoken statement, “I would never do that.” Social psychologists refer to this type of statement as a form of downward social comparison where an individual tries to feel better about themselves and raise their own self-image by looking down upon someone else. In this sense, sexual morality is not just about trying to control someone else’s sex life. It is about claiming a morally superior position for oneself through stigmatizing others. This dynamic is often visible when people or groups make claims about morality, whether at the interpersonal level or at the level of the larger society.

**Sexual behaviors versus identities**

Asserting one’s own personal moral superiority and looking down on others’ morals is probably quite familiar to us from our daily interactions. But sexual moralizing also reflects much deeper meanings that shape our most basic thought processes that have been profoundly influenced by the culture and era in which we live.

Consider this story: Samuel Terry lived in a Christian community. According to Springfield, Massachusetts, court records, as a young man, he was arrested for masturbating in public, outside the church doors during a sermon. Eleven years later, he ran afoul of his Christian community when his wife had a baby five months after their wedding, revealing that the couple had engaged in premarital sex. Twelve years later, Samuel was arrested after being caught with eight other men engaging in acts of sexual exhibitionism (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012).
What do we think about Samuel Terry’s sexual morality? Are all his acts sexually immoral or only some? Should any of his offenses have landed him in court? Would we trust Samuel to mentor children? Do we think of him as someone who upholds the community’s moral standards? Or do we think of him as someone with a character flaw who must be monitored to ensure he does not engage in sexual behavior that could become more dangerous? Is he straight or gay or a different sexual identity?

Samuel Terry was a Puritan in colonial Massachusetts and his court records span from 1650 to 1673. Although Puritans were reputed to have been sexually strict and repressive, Samuel Terry was respected by his community. He was entrusted to foster another family’s son, and he later served as the town constable (a type of police officer) (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012: 15). His Puritan community’s reactions to his sexual immoralties reflected a different moral logic than that of today. In the 1600s, Western Christians believed that sins arose from the flesh and were pleasurable to engage in (see Kaye, Chapter 11 in this volume). Terry was considered a sinner who had given in to sexual temptations. Puritans punished sinful acts, and, for contrite sinners, they offered forgiveness, redemption, and reintegration into the community. Since all were sinners, any type of temptation could befall anyone and so Terry’s repeated sexual offenses were not regarded as a character flaw. He was certainly not regarded as a “sex offender” with a potential lifelong tendency to engage in sex crimes. And nor would anyone in his time think of him as having a sexual identity – heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual were not even concepts.

Morally judging others as sinful, punishing them for their acts, forgiving, and reintegrating them into the community rests on an earlier moral logic of conceptualizing sexuality in terms of behaviors. By the 1800s, Western society had reconceptualized sexual deviance in terms of identities rather than acts (Foucault 1990). Through scientific disciplines like psychiatry and sexology, sexual misbehavior came to be seen as indicative of some deep truth about the individual’s character and personality rather than as a sinful act for which one could repent. Individuals who engaged in sexually immoral acts were no longer considered as displaying mere deviations from otherwise upstanding behavior. Instead, they were considered fundamentally different types of people than those who are “normal.” In the words of Michel Foucault, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 1990: 43), meaning same-sex behaviors were now indicators of a type of person: a homosexual. Calling someone a “sex offender,” a “pervert,” or a “slut” also reflects this logic. It suggests that sexual immorality is part of the person’s character and identity rather than a behavior that arose out of a specific situation.

Moral boundaries of purity and pollution

There are still deeper cultural patterns reflected in moral boundaries. Western culture is often described as dualistic in terms of how members are taught to make sense of physical and social reality. Dualism involves conceptualizing the world through binary, mutually exclusive, and opposing values: right and wrong, good and bad, sacred and profane. These are not just opposing concepts but hierarchical ones where right, good, and sacred are desirable, whereas wrong, bad, and profane are undesirable. These moral values can map onto other categories like white and Black, man and woman, and straight and gay that are then hierarchically organized where white, man, and straight are coded as desirable, whereas Black, woman, and gay are coded as undesirable.
People that are strongly socialized to think in a dualistic manner tend to make judgments in either/or terms: either someone is right or wrong, good or bad, Black or white, gay or straight; there is no in-between. Such individuals may be uncomfortable with categories that fall in the middle of the polarities. This discomfort means that people feel ill at ease with anything or anyone that falls in the liminal zone – the realm of the in-between – and they would rather categorize something or someone as belonging on one side or the other. For example, in the United States, many people are not comfortable with “morally gray issues,” with people who claim a multiracial identity, or with those who identify as bisexual or pansexual (see Miller, Chapter 52 in this volume).

Dualistic thinking affects how we think about sexual morality. One possible reason that some may find sex itself to be morally repugnant is because the bodily fluids associated with it – saliva and semen – are in a liminal category between solid and liquid, according to sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1991). He also argued that many people feel uncomfortable with sex because it is associated with the breakdown of physical boundaries between two people – literally the opening and merging of bodies.

One of the most important dualistic metaphors that cultures use to organize social reality is through belief systems about the sacred and the profane, reflected in religious beliefs and rituals (Durkheim 2008 [1911]). Cultures try to impose order and meaning onto a chaotic, meaningless world through classifying some things as “profane,” “dirty,” “polluted,” “dangerous,” or “guilty,” whereas other things are labeled as “sacred,” “clean,” “pure,” “safe,” or “innocent,” according to anthropologist Mary Douglas in her classic work *Purity and Pollution* (1966). Which practices a culture defines as pure or polluted tell us more about the society that created the categories than the individuals who are labeled as immoral.

What is placed into the “polluted” side of the equation – dirt, mold, bodily fluids – are often metaphorically associated with disease and are thought to contaminate whatever they encounter. They are designated as “dirty” and “dangerous.” For example, one is not supposed to eat food that has fallen on the floor because that is where dirt and bacteria accumulate, which will pollute the food. The expression “One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel” is based on the idea that mold or rot is something that spreads, ruining what it touches.

By contrast, that which is categorized as “pure” is thought to be clean. We scrub floors until they are “spotless” and wash clothes to remove stains. In the sexual realm, some fathers give “purity rings” and have “purity celebrations” to reward their daughters for being virgins – the sexual equivalent of having a “clean reputation.” Some families even want their daughters to undergo surgery to “reconstruct” their hymens (if the girl ever had one – not all girls do) to “prove” their purity for future husbands (Lewis 2021).

The purity and pollution metaphor serve as an organizing system in cultures, and this has implications for moral arguments. When we call someone “nasty” or “dirty” we are invoking the pollution metaphor and all that goes with it; we are implying that someone is potentially dangerous and that they are likely to “contaminate” others, or in the case of “pure” virgins that they will be “stained” by sexual knowledge and acts.

It is easy to see how the pollution metaphor operates in the ways that people talk about sexuality. For example, in the late 1800s white upper-class parents often proclaimed their own sexual purity. They saw themselves as morally superior to members of the working class, to African Americans, and to new immigrants to the United States. Their illusions of grandeur concerning their moral superiority led the white upper class to become consumed by exaggerated fears – a moral panic – that their children would be sexually
corrupted by the “degenerate” lower classes and immigrants (Beisel 1989). Rumors and urban legends spread that Black and immigrant servants and other people of low social standing were constantly seeking to expose upper-class children in homes and boarding schools to pornographic materials like photos of nude women or people engaged in sex acts, or “purple prose” (writing that contained explicit sexual content).

One need not look back to the 1800s to witness metaphors of pollution being applied to sex. Like the example at the beginning, parents still worry about their children being corrupted through exposure to sexual imagery, including internet pornography. Or consider American debates about legalizing same-sex marriage that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s (see Stone, Chapter 77 in this volume). The Religious Right argued that same-sex marriage would harm marriage as an institution and that it is an affront to heterosexual married couples. This line of argument rested on contamination. Why would allowing same-sex couples to marry “harm marriage”? It should not induce heterosexual individuals to suddenly seek same-sex lovers; nor should it cause them to avoid marrying altogether or to suddenly break their engagements. It was not rational logic operating but a metaphorical logic of contamination. Understanding the metaphorical logic of pollution can help us understand why many people do not have a liberal (or libertarian) “live and let live” or a “to each his own” attitude when it comes to judging others’ sexually morality. In many people’s minds, sex and anything associated with sexuality is placed on the pollution side of the pure/polluted binary. Therefore, sexual “immorality” becomes rhetorically associated with danger, rot, and disease. At some level, people may believe that those they find sexually immoral are dangerous and will corrupt others.

Who corrupts? Symbolic boundaries and power

*Symbolic boundaries* “are lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others” (Lamont et al. 2015: 850). The purity/pollution dualism is invoked to draw symbolic boundaries around groups. People within a community will try to claim that someone does not “belong” because their behaviors supposedly do not match up to the community’s standards. Symbolic boundaries mark a group’s borders in much the same way countries decide that a river or a line drawn on a map marks a national boundary. Those inside the line are “citizens” who are entitled to certain rights and privileges; those on the other side are not worthy of such respect. With moral boundaries (a type of symbolic boundary), people claim that members of their own group (like Christians or upper-class whites) are morally superior, whereas those outside the group are morally suspect.

Symbolic boundaries play a role in exercising power and reinforcing inequality (Lamont et al. 2015: 850). In high school, some girls exclude other girls by calling them “sluts,” casting shade on their sexual morality. In her book *Slut!* Leora Tanenbaum (2000) found that calling someone a “slut” had little to do with actual sexual behavior. Instead, the label was used as a weapon in social conflicts between girls to mark outsiders – the girls who do not fit in. Likewise, C.J. Pascoe found that boys labeled other boys who did not fit in as “fags” to stigmatize them with outsider status (see Pascoe, Chapter 35 in this volume). Who labels others as sexually immoral reflects power relations between dominant in-groups and subordinate out-groups; in both preceding examples, the popular girls and boys had the power to mark others as sexual outsiders and make the negative reputation stick.

Similarly, at the societal level, powerful elites and majority populations can use their power to suppress minorities through sexual scapegoating and moralistic rhetoric. Labeling members of oppressed groups (the lower class, non-white ethnic and racial groups,
LGBTQ+ people) as sexually immoral has been used to justify systematic discrimination and violence. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of this in US history, such as whites claiming that Black people were sexually immoral to rationalize white supremacist violence and racial oppression. During slavery, white slave owners justified raping Black enslaved women by claiming that they were “promiscuous.” After the Civil War, the lynching of Black men by white mobs was almost always justified by whites claiming that Black men had committed a sexual offense against white women. Whites used charges of sexual immorality to maintain a hierarchical racial boundary.

If we look at who labels whom as morally corrupt today, power relations between dominant and subordinate groups are frequently apparent. African American men and women are still labeled as sexually immoral, with claims that Black music artists are too overtly sexual in their lyrics, videos, and public performances. The sexual double standard where women who have sex with numerous partners are considered “sluts” whereas men are considered “studs” or “players” shows the power relations between these two groups. In this sense, drawing lines between who is considered sexually pure and impure is not a simple matter of a culture going through some “natural” process of determining its own norms and then sorting out who follows the rules and who breaks them, but is one more way that dominant groups maintain and demonstrate their power against oppressed groups.

**Who is at risk of being corrupted?**

According to our culture’s dualistic logic, to become polluted, one must first be pure; corruptibility only makes sense in relation to innocence. Which groups of people can be portrayed as symbols of sexual purity and innocence? Sexual innocence is not symbolically available to everyone in society. For example, adult men are almost never thought of as sexually innocent.

Victorian upper-class white women were once symbols of moral purity. In nineteenth-century society, there were dichotomized public and private spheres for upper-class men and women that carried moral implications. The public sphere of politics and work was where competition and the desire to get the upper hand meant that “anything goes” in terms of moral behavior. Bourgeois men braved this “dangerous” public world and its “seedy” constituents such as working-class men and foreigners. Many upper-class men used this notion of a sullied, prurient, salacious public sphere to excuse their own immorality as they sought sexual relationships with working-class women and men (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012).

Meanwhile, bourgeois wives were safely tucked away in the private sphere of the home in supposed blissful domesticity, nurturing and watching over their children. They were expected to be the moral pillars of Victorian society. They were responsible for controlling sexual relations within marital relationships, making sure that conjugal relations were more about procreation than recreation (Smith-Rosenberg 1978). Sex between married partners was sometimes viewed by wives as a “necessary evil” or part of one’s “wifely duties,” and was not necessarily something to be enjoyed. This lack of sexual desire helped define mothers as innocent and gave them moral respectability. However, not all women could be constructed as innocent or respectable. The working-class woman who had to work for a living in the public sphere in the factory or as a prostitute was at the bottom of the moral hierarchy and was often characterized as a “fallen woman.”

However, women did not remain symbols of moral purity. Women began to recognize the constraints of this virgin/whore stereotype, seeing how it limited their roles to caring
for children and ensured their financial dependence upon men. It also left them out of the important political decisions of the day. Women began to protest, including demanding the vote. Additionally, some women argued for new ways of organizing society on a sexual basis and played strong roles in movements for birth control and were even vocal advocates for free-love societies (communities that believed in sexual relationships without marriage) (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012). In the wake of these sexualized protests, women could not remain the symbols of moral purity in American society.

Children eventually took women’s place as symbols of purity (Freedman 1987). In the Middle Ages, children were thought to be inherently evil; they were born into sin, and the devil must be beaten out of them. The phrase “Spare the rod and spoil the child” reflects this ethos. But by the turn of the twentieth century, they were instead regarded as innocent unless they fell prey to the adult world of moral corruption. Sexually speaking, children were considered blank slates – unaware of adult desires and lust. In the late 1800s, a moral panic arose about children becoming the victims of adult sexual corruption. Sexual knowledge was thought to morally ruin children. For example, here are the words of moral reformer Anthony Comstock on what effect exposure to sexual imagery would have on the minds of innocent upper-class boys from 1877:

The boy’s mind becomes a sink of corruption and he is a loathing unto himself. In his better moments he wrestles and cries out against this foe, but all in vain. . . . Despair takes possession of his soul as he finds himself losing strength of will – becoming nervous and infirm; he suffers unutterable agony during the hours of the night, and awakes only to carry a burdened heart through all the day.

(quoted in Beisel 1989: 110)

Not surprisingly, the dominant ideology became one where people believed that children must be protected from sexual knowledge and experiences at all costs. This belief, which can be traced to the late 1800s, largely remains with us today.

Many adults equate sexual innocence with the assumption that children should be ignorant of all sexual matters. They actively try to shield them from sexual knowledge by avoiding talk of sex or preventing them from seeing sexual imagery. Some parents will not permit their children to attend comprehensive sexual education classes and instead insist on abstinence-only sex education, which avoids discussion of birth control options or ways for teens to have safe sex and instead recommends that the only way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections is to avoid all sexual contact. Politicians and parents who promote abstinence-only education claim that regular sexual education programming that includes instruction on birth control will put ideas into children’s heads and lead them to sex and unwanted pregnancies. However, the price of shielding children from more comprehensive sexual education programming seems to be more sexual violence and coercion in teen relationships, higher rates of sexually transmitted illnesses, and more teen pregnancies than teens in the Netherlands or France, where sexual education is incorporated throughout the entire school curriculum and parents and educators begin talking with kids about sex when they are young (Levine 2002).

**Conclusion**

So, the next time you hear someone drawing a line in terms of sexual morality – whether it is referring to onscreen sex scenes as “smut,” a friend referring to someone as “nasty,” or
a politician legislating sexual matters in the name of “protecting children” – think about the deeper meanings that are invoked. What are they saying about others or implying about themselves? Are they framing sex in terms of behaviors or identities? Are they relying on a metaphorical logic of pollution and corruption, and who specifically are they worried about being “corrupted”? Sexual morality is loaded with meanings. By analyzing a society’s sexual morals, we can unpack deeper cultural patterns and long historical trends that influence how people draw boundaries between what they think of as acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior, and between “corruption” and “innocence.”

Chapter review questions
1. Why does the author describe the moral boundaries that mark sexual behavior as moral or immoral as socially constructed rather than as “absolute”?
2. What are some of the different logics that underlie sexual morality? Provide examples from the chapter.
3. How do cultural associations with purity and pollution affect how Western culture thinks about sexual morality?

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