CHAPTER 3: CULTURE'S CHILD: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST MODEL

The social world contains many realities that do not exist in nature. — David Halperin, Saint Foucault

People invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity. . . Straight cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves. — James Baldwin, A Dialogue

There is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo- or heterosexual acts. Most people are a mixture of impulses if not practices, and what anyone does with a willing partner is of no social or cosmic significance. — Gore Vidal

The predominant social model of sexual attraction today is a collection of theories called social constructionism. To fully describe the model's various and complex tenets and implications, I begin by examining a radical version of the theory in the first section of this chapter. In the later part of this chapter and again in Chapter 5, I describe a less ideological, middle ground social constructionism (Vance, 1991).

Social constructionism is not a theory about sexuality; it is an epistemological position about the nature of knowledge. Social constructionism has developed from a veritable garden of diverse disciplines, including anthropology and sociology through symbolic interactionism, political science through Marxist history, social psychology and sociology again through labeling theory, and the postmodern humanities in the form of structuralism and poststructuralism, feminist and gender theory, and gay/queer studies (Burr, 1995; Vance, 1991). Most recently, social constructionism, or deconstructionism, has been a favored tool of social activists, including feminists and gay or queer writers, who use constructionist
rhetoric to deflate an opponent’s position and promote their political agenda. As a tool for persuasion, constructionism is fairly successful.

There is no one theory of social constructionism as practiced; it is a collection of ideas that share common assumptions. Rarely, are the assumptions underlying the theory ever discussed. However, identifying and understanding these assumptions are central to grasping the limitations of social constructionism in explaining sexual attraction. For this reason, I list the underlying assumptions of social constructionism now in Table 1 and will point them out again throughout this chapter. Foreknowledge of these assumptions will help the reader disentangle a number of conceptual subtleties and effectively evaluate the theory’s general claims.

Principally, social constructionism asserts that subjective meaning is the only type of knowledge that we truly possess (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1978/1990). Objectivity is a social contrivance—a conventional way of speaking about particular experiences. Concepts and categories are socially agreed upon “facts” and they do not explain social reality so much as create it. Broad concepts and values like democracy, individualism, civil rights, medicine, marriage, science, and sexuality may become institutionalized, as is the case in Western culture, but their general acceptance does not make these concepts universal or natural, although they seem that way to us.

As noted in chapter 1, culture broadly encompasses ideas about social reality, including customs; mores; cherished values about, for example, individual autonomy and civil rights; social institutions like marriage and democratic government; social role; gender role; ethnicity; class; and, most

| TABLE 1 |
| Assumptions of Social Constructionism |

1. People are constructed entirely from their continuous interactions with the social world.
2. People are generally passive respondents in the social discourse.
3. Sex is largely recreational.
4. Social labeling of sexual behavior and internalization of the “homosexual” role creates “gay” men and “lesbians.”
5. Biology sets potentialities or preconditions on sexual behavior, although the effect of these limits is small and fixed.
6. People possess diffuse undirected sexual feelings that are channeled and developed through social discourse in a given culture.
7. Sexual relationships can be structured an infinite number of ways.
8. Labeling theory of same-sex eroticism is a causal narrative.
9. Social constructionism is a critical theory.