meg-john barker

the psychology of SEX

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF **EVERYTHING**

ROUTLEDGE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX

What can psychology teach us about sex? How do different bodies and brains respond sexually? How can we prevent people being stigmatised for their sexuality?

The Psychology of Sex takes you on a tour through the different ways that psychologists have created and sustained certain understandings of sex and sexuality. Bearing in mind the subjective nature of sex, the book explores cultural concerns around sexualisation, pornography, and sex addiction, as well as drawing on research from sexual communities and the applied area of sex therapy.

When so much of our relationship to sex happens in the mind, *The Psychology of Sex* shows us how important it is to understand where our ideas about sex come from.

Meg-John Barker is a writer, therapist, and activist academic specialising in sex, gender, and relationships. They are a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the Open University and a UKCP accredited psychotherapist.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EVERYTHING

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX

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PSYCHOLOGY AND SEX

Welcome to the psychology of sex. Like all of the books in the 'psychology of everything' series, a short book like this can't give you a comprehensive overview of the whole of sex and sexuality from a psychological perspective. What it can do, though, is to give you a flavour of this area with the aim of whetting your appetite for more.

Also I hope that, above all else, you'll find this book *useful*. Like it or not we're all living in a world where we're constantly bombarded by sexual information, imagery, and ideologies. Psychology isn't just about finding things out with research, it's also about *evaluating* things psychologically, and *applying* psychology to people's lives. So, in addition to giving you a lot of information about sex from various theories and studies, this book provides you with the tools to think *critically* about the messages you receive about sex and the debates that you see playing out on sexual topics. It also includes a lot about how the psychological research and ideas can be *applied* to people's lives in general, and also to your own life, relationships, and experiences.

Over the five chapters of this book I'm giving you a short introduction to what we know about the psychology of sex across a number of different areas: sexuality (sexual orientation, identity, and attraction); 'the sex act' or sexual intercourse; sexual practices and relationships; and what has recently been called the sexualisation of culture. Each

chapter links to various books and papers which you can read to find more about topics you're interested in. I've also given you a list of further resources at the end of the book where you can go to get more information about all of the topics I have covered.

But before we get started on these specific topics let's think a bit more generally about these words we're using: 'psychology' and 'sex'. You might think that it's obvious what they mean but actually they are both rather contested terms. In fact I hope that throughout every chapter of this book you'll continue to ask yourself 'what is psychology?' and 'what is sex?' and that the answers that you give will change as you go along. As with many of the best questions there are no right answers to these, but rather it's important and useful to continually ask them, and to notice how your answers shift as you reflect on them more.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?

The British Psychological Society, American Psychological Association, and other similar organisations tend to define psychology as something like 'the scientific study of mind and behaviour'.[1] From this we might understand psychology to be one among many scientific disciplines, in this case devoted to researching people's mental processes (mind) and how they act in the world (behaviour). The word 'scientific' might make us think of lab coats, experiments, and measuring these things in *objective* ways using numbers.

The narrow view

Certainly for much of its history psychology has been strongly invested in proving itself to be a science alongside other natural sciences like biology and physics. Students frequently choose a psychology degree because they're interested in people, would like to understand themselves better, or want to help people. So they're often surprised – and not always pleasantly so – by how much of the time they spend learning about mathematical statistics and brain processes!

A lot of the classic kinds of studies that psychologists conduct do seem to support this fairly narrow definition of psychology as the science of mind and behaviour. For example, you might be familiar with the kinds of memory tests that psychologists perform by flashing words up on a computer screen and measuring how many people can remember, examining whether the kind of word, or its place in the list, has an influence on how well it is remembered.[2] Or you may know about Stanley Milgram's classic studies on obedience, where he got people in a lab to think that they were giving somebody gradually increasing electric shocks to help them learn. He found that many people would give somebody a fatal electric shock if somebody in a lab coat told them to do so.[3] Those are two examples of the scientific study of mind (memory) and behaviour (obedience to authority).

I've now been working in psychology for over twenty years. I've been part of several different psychology departments and have many different psychologist friends and colleagues. What I've learned from them is that psychology is actually a good deal broader than what we might at first understand from a definition like 'the scientific study of mind and behaviour'.

The broad view

At its best I think that psychology is the place where all the work which is relevant to our individual human experience comes together. It's a broad, encompassing discipline which draws together all of the knowledge that we have which is relevant to people, and which also looks outwards to address how we can improve people's lives. I have psychologist friends whose work is between psychology and history, psychology and geography, psychology and endocrinology, psychology and sociology, psychology and philosophy, psychology and neuroscience, psychology and criminology, psychology and drama, and many, many more. In fact I know of relatively few 'pure' psychologists. Most study psychology as it touches the edge of at least one other discipline (whether a natural science, a social science, or an arts or humanities subject).

Relatively few of these psychologists conduct lab experiments. Some are entirely engaged with developing theories, others study human behaviour in real-world settings, or interview people in depth about their experiences, or study the history of psychological thinking, or use creative methods to help people produce something that is somewhere between research data and art. Most of them also apply psychological research and theories in some way, informing, for example, the worlds of law, medicine, social justice, counselling, media, or the environment. Some of them work entirely in an applied context, providing therapy, advising organisations, catching criminals, or helping kids in school, for example.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX

Turning to the subject of this book – or any of the other books in this series – you can see why this broad understanding of psychology is important.

Sex is a fascinating, far-reaching, and fraught area of human experience. We *could* limit ourselves to a narrow view of the psychology of sex and just focus on what we can learn about how people think and behave sexually, from experiments and questionnaires, for example. However, to really reach an understanding of how sex works, how people experience it, and what they think and feel about it, it is important to draw on knowledge from across a wide range of disciplines in conjunction with psychology.

We need to know the history of how people (including psychologists) have understood sex and sexuality, and how that affects how we understand it today. We need to know about the physiology of sex and how different bodies and brains respond sexually. We need to look at sexual identities and practices across cultures and contexts, and at the development of sexual communities and social movements. We need to draw on the wealth of theories that have developed in various branches of philosophy to understand sexuality and sexual relationships. We certainly need to bring the discipline of psychology together with biology and sociology, given that human beings are biological bodies and they

all exist in a social context, shaping how they think and behave sexually. And we absolutely need to study the work of the sexologists – people who have studied sex and sexuality specifically over the years – some but not all of whom are psychologists.

And if the psychology of sex is going to be useful at all it also needs to speak to the urgent applied questions that we have about sex: How can we stop people from being marginalised, stigmatised, or even tortured and killed for their sexuality? How can we help people who are experiencing sexual problems? How can we reduce the frighteningly high rates of abusive and coercive sex? How should we treat sexual offenders to stop them committing sex crimes, and help people who have survived such attacks? What would a healthy understanding of sex look like and how might we encourage the promotion of such an understanding in mainstream, social, and sexual media? How should we educate kids about sex? I'm sure you can think of many more.

Psychology is political

One debate that hasn't stopped raging in psychology since the 1970s is whether psychology can be neutral and objective, or whether it is inevitably political: in other words, whether psychologists will have individual and cultural biases which influence what they study, how they study it, and what they find.

This is a vital issue for our purposes here because it influences how I write the rest of this book – and how you read it. Can I present you with a range of research findings and theories from psychology – in its broadest sense – so you can go away with the facts about the psychology of sex? Or will we both need to keep reminding ourselves about how all of the studies and theories we're covering were produced by certain individuals in a certain time and place – perhaps seeing these findings and ideas as *one* way of understanding the psychology of sex, but not as any kind of absolute fact?

Psychologists have often divided into two factions around these kinds of issues. The first faction we might call 'mainstream' psychologists (for want of a better word): those who believe that it's possible

for psychology to conduct objective value-free research to determine facts about human minds and behaviour. The latter faction are often called 'critical' psychologists: those who believe that psychological knowledge always develops in a specific situation which will affect what psychologists find and what they do with it. Critical psychologists are interested in how psychologists themselves *construct* knowledge in particular cultural contexts, rather than seeing psychological knowledge as a set of truths that can be uncovered. Knowledge could always have been constructed, built, and shaped in alternative ways.

To overgeneralise quite a lot, mainstream psychologists have also tended to use *quantitative* research to *measure* human minds and behaviours in the form of numbers, and to generalise their findings about the causes and effects of human behaviour to everybody. Critical psychologists have tended to use *qualitative* research to study how people talk about their *experience*, and they're often cautious not to generalise beyond the people they have studied. They're often more interested in *describing* experience than *explaining* it, because they assume that people's experience will vary according to their situation, cultural background, and so on.

In reality this binary mainstream/critical distinction is a false one, and thankfully it is breaking down over the years. Just as I struggled to find examples of colleagues who were entirely 'pure' or 'applied' psychologists, most of the more mainstream psychologists I know tend to be pretty critical in their thinking, and recognise that personal and cultural biases always creep in when human beings are studying other human beings. And I also know a bunch of critical psychologists who use quantitative questions, lab experiments, and brain studies in their work. In this book I'll draw on work across this spectrum.

How psychology is shaped by individuals and their cultural context

A quick tour of the history of psychology shows us how impossible it is to study psychology in a completely objective way. Over and over again studies have found that even when they're trying to be

completely unbiased, researchers will tend to find the results that they expect to find. For example, if you give psychology trainees two groups of rats – or children – to study and tell them that one group is more intelligent than the other, then that is exactly what they will find, even when in actuality there's no difference between the two groups.[4] David Rosenhan's classic studies found that psychologists and psychiatrists would diagnose and treat somebody as mentally ill if they were in a mental health institution, even if they showed no signs of mental illness.[5] Clearly our individual expectations shape what we find in research and in professional psychological work.

The history of psychology also throws up some frankly terrifying examples of cultural biases influencing the work of psychologists. In his book *The Mismeasure of Man*,[6] Stephen J. Gould describes the project of intelligence testing to assess US army recruits in the First World War. Using the tests – which were regarded as highly scientifically rigorous – psychologists found that the average intelligence of recruits decreased with the darkness of their skin, with black people and immigrants to the US, including Jewish immigrants, obtaining the lowest scores. At the time, psychologists believed intelligence was entirely inherited, so the researchers concluded that different racial groups had different levels of 'natural' intelligence. These results were used as a basis for limiting immigration, due to fears of immigrants bringing down national intelligence. This prevented around six million Europeans from entering America between World War I and World War II, condemning them to the Holocaust. The research also determined the ways in which army recruits were allocated, effectively condemning many black soldiers to death.

When we look back on this intelligence research now, we recognise many biases which were not seen at the time because the research tallied so well with the prevailing cultural assumptions – in which the researchers were embedded. First, there were a lot of problems with the ways in which the research was conducted, meaning that illiterate and foreign-born recruits were often given tests that required English literacy. Even when that didn't happen, they had to use a pencil, write numbers, and engage in other unfamiliar

procedures. Also, many of the questions clearly did not test 'innate intellectual ability'. For example, there were pictures asking recruits to fill in the missing part of a lightbulb, gun, or playing card. And try answering these questions if you're not familiar with US culture: 'Crisco is a: patent medicine, disinfectant, toothpaste, food product?' 'Washington is to Adams as first is to . . .?' Indeed, the research found that foreign-born recruits did better depending on how many years they had been in the US, which should have given the researchers a clue that intelligence was not all down to 'nature'. We'll consider the nature/nurture debate in more depth in the next chapter.

In this example you can see how easy it is for psychologists to perpetuate and reinforce the prevailing views of the time: to divide people into categories on the basis of taken-for-granted knowledge without questioning it, and then to find differences between those categories which they assume are down to innate differences between them, because that is widely held opinion, without looking hard enough for other explanations, or examining the inbuilt biases in the materials they're using.

As Carol Tavris points out in her book *The Mismeasure of Women*,[7] there are many similar examples in the history of the psychology of gender. For example, early research on conformity found that women were more likely to conform than men were. This was used to support the theory that women were naturally intellectually inferior to men. Later research found that women and men are actually much the same when it comes to conformity, and that whether we conform or not has far more to do with how much familiarity we have with the task we're given.[8] Early research had given people tasks that were more familiar to men than women because of the way they were brought up – for example, tasks about machinery. The psychologists then looked no further because the findings confirmed their misogynist assumptions.

You could conclude from these examples that psychologists in the past were biased but now we know so much more we could never make these kinds of mistakes. That would be a dangerous view as it would leave us much more open to making the same kinds of