

Sexuality

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The history of the keyword “sexuality” is inextricably interwoven with the history of a range of other disability keywords, including “freakish,” “innocent,” and—most important—“normal” and “abnormal.” As philosopher Michel Foucault has demonstrated, for the past few centuries, we have inhabited a culture of “normalization” that categorizes individuals and populations, marking certain bodies (for instance, those understood as disabled, ill, or lacking) and certain desires (for instance, those understood as perverse, queer, or mad) as “abnormal.” Systems of surveillance, control, intervention, incarceration, correction, or “cure”—what Foucault (2003) would describe as “technologies of normalization” administered by authorities assumed to possess “expert opinion”—emerged in the eighteenth century and intensified over the course of the nineteenth to facilitate this categorization. Sexuality was one of the most distinct areas of social life to succumb to these systems of control and cure.

In the first volume of his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault argued that a widespread belief emerged by the late nineteenth century that sexuality was simply “repressed” and in need of “liberation.” *The History of Sexuality* worked to challenge this truism and illuminate the ways in which the contours of “sexuality” were clearly visible *within* a history of normalization (rather than beyond, in some imagined future when “repression” would have supposedly withered away). Foucault thus excavated how “sexuality”

experienced an “incitement to discourse”: far from being (simply) repressed, in other words, sexuality was endlessly talked about, managed, pathologized, and (often) “corrected.”

Although disability is not one of Foucault’s topics in *The History of Sexuality*, his discussion of sexuality as a product of endless discourse could also be true of “ability.” Through what Foucault understood as a “proliferation of discourses,” “ability” and “disability,” like “sexuality,” materialized as supposedly knowable entities. The emergence and naturalization of these discourses positioned sexuality and ability not only as culturally and historically specific modes of experience but also as cross-temporal and in some cases even universal components of what it means to be a human being. The naturalization of sexuality and ability both privileged and linked what eventually came to be understood as “able-bodiedness” and “heterosexuality” (McRuer 2002). For instance, professional psychologists and sexologists (most notoriously, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and his study *Psychopathia Sexualis* [1886]) pathologized homosexuality and other perversions, linking them to a wide array of physical and mental impairments or disabilities.

Since the 1970s, historians of sexuality such as John D’Emilio (1983) have more specifically demonstrated the ways in which the processes of putting sexuality into discourse produced a binary system of understanding human sexuality that ultimately privileged “heterosexuality” and subordinated “homosexuality” and other so-called perversions. The sexualities known as “heterosexual” and “homosexual,” then, are not somehow timeless and natural but socially constructed or “invented” (Katz 1990). In his influential essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1983), D’Emilio tied this invention of sexuality to the history of industrial capitalism, arguing that as work (for men and some women)

became increasingly associated with a “public” space outside the home, a homosexual or gay identity became available to certain people who discovered each other in “homosexual” locations (bars, clubs, bathhouses) that emerged throughout the West. The home, meanwhile, was no longer understood primarily as a space where inhabitants worked together for survival but rather as an ideological (private and newly “heterosexual”) space where one could expect to find happiness and respite from the public world of work. This new heterosexual space was also arguably able-bodied as well, as “disability” was purged from the home (McRuer 2006). Rates of institutionalization (removal from private home spaces) skyrocketed by more than 1500 percent, for instance, between 1870 and 1915, particularly marking those deemed “feeble-minded” as in need of relocation, regulation, containment, and control (Trent 1994).

D’Emilio’s history fleshed out what Foucault himself famously insisted: that discourses of homosexuality materialized a “new species” of person. This new “species” was increasingly regulated by the state over the course of the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century (Canada 2009). Heterosexuality, in turn, solidified as the identity of the normal and *healthy* dominant group, and “heterosexuals” began to understand themselves as such. This period of increasing state control, as the institutionalization of the “feeble-minded” and others suggests, was characterized by extreme intervention and regulation around disability as well (Longmore and Umansky 2001). The parallel control of disability suggests that disability in its modern form always has been implicitly, if not explicitly, integrated into the complex discursive emergence of “sexuality” in the West. Among the many ways the histories of sexuality and disability are intermeshed, we might highlight at least three. First, like “homosexuals” more generally, disabled people were subject to pathologization and normalization.

“Abnormal” sexuality, for instance, was understood to be the cause of, or at least be related to, illness and disability, such that “abnormal” embodiment was often understood to be accompanied by “abnormal” desires and (consequently) an “abnormal” sexuality. A long-standing belief that certain disabled people have “excessive” sexual desires and thus an excessive sexuality emerges from this linkage.

The generally accepted (and often causally created) link between these two perceived forms of pathological excess entailed at times excessively cruel and permanently damaging forms of “rehabilitation,” such as shock therapy, sterilization, or castration. In 1927, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court famously ruled that Carrie Buck, who had been deemed “feeble-minded” and institutionalized for “incorrigible” and “promiscuous” behavior and who became pregnant after being raped, must be compulsorily sterilized. “Three generations of imbeciles is enough,” Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes declared for the court’s majority opinion, reflecting the belief that both disability and perversion could be transmitted to future generations (Trent 1994). The early twentieth-century notion that disabled people’s sexuality is excessive also can be traced in numerous cultural sites—from the freak show, where visitors might be titillated by exhibits representing both bodily difference and excessive sexuality, to literary representations such as William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), in which a cognitively disabled figure, Benjy, is castrated because he is perceived to be dangerous.

During the twentieth century, a second intertwining of sexuality and disability has also emerged: not of pathological excess but of the seemingly paradoxical notion that disabled people are outside of the system of sexuality altogether. Disabled people often have been discursively constructed as incapable of having sexual desires or a sexual identity, due to their supposed “innocence.”

The distinction between “excessive” and “innocent” often drew upon caricatures of race and class, as poor or working-class people (such as Carrie Buck) or people of color more likely were understood as excessive and dangerous than their white, middle-class, disabled counterparts. Still, the line between innocent and excessive was often very thin, and a given disabled figure (such as Faulkner’s Benjy) could quickly cross from one side to the other.

A third intertwining of sexuality and disability can be identified in the form of disabled people’s complex positioning in new systems of sexual and disabled identities. These newer, more generative understandings of the relationship between disability and sexuality have allowed, at times, for the development of alternate forms of sexual experience and subjectivity that were potentially outside of the increasingly rigidified heterosexual/homosexual binary. Historian David Serlin (2012), for example, recounts how some mid-twentieth-century sexologists, working with and interviewing disabled women about their bodies and pleasures, were confounded by forms of intimacy, touch, and autoeroticism that did not fit neatly into emerging understandings of sexuality or sexual identity. Exclusion from normality or a presumption that one could not be part of the heterosexual/homosexual system, in other words, sometimes allowed for disabled pleasures and disabled ways of knowing that were not reducible to dominant systems of heterosexuality that were dependent on able-bodied definitions of sexual norms.

These three distinct though overlapping components in a disabled history of sexuality have become legible in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century deployments of “sexuality,” particularly by and around activists in the disability rights movement. As disabled people began to speak or sign back to the systems that historically had contained them, they deliberately

confronted ideas of excessive, innocent, or alternative sexuality. This entailed at times asserting that disabled people, too, did not have excessive or unusual but “normal” (and heterosexual) sexualities. In the United States, for instance, many activists strategically challenged federal marriage penalties that would cut off benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for disabled people who married. Activists also argued for “liberation” from “repressive” ideas, thereby repudiating the widespread notion that disabled people’s sexuality was innocent or nonexistent (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies 1996). Disabled activists also worked with and through theories of disability to discover or invent new (and often queer) pleasures and sexualities. Many writers, performers, artists, and activists in disability culture as it has flourished in the early twenty-first century represent the possibilities inherent in this third intertwining area of sexuality and disability. They include Mark O’Brien, Loree Erickson, Terry Galloway, Mat Fraser, Eli Clare, Greg Walloch, and Bethany Stevens, the last of whom is a self-proclaimed “uppity crip scholar activist and sexologist.” Using this language, Stevens joins other disabled activists and artists who are self-consciously appropriating and resignifying terms from the oppressive history of sexology. Mark O’Brien’s poetry and creative nonfiction, perhaps especially his essay “On Seeing a Sex Surrogate” (1990; the basis for the film *The Sessions* [2012]), mark a particular turning point toward this third strategy.

In 1992, Anne Finger asserted, “Sexuality is often the source of our deepest oppression; it is also often the source of our deepest pain. It’s easier for us to talk about—and formulate strategies for changing—discrimination in employment, education, and housing than to talk about our exclusion from sexuality and reproduction” (9). Finger’s assertion—which might serve as a gloss to all three strategies for responding to the

disabled history of sexuality—had become well known and had traveled through a range of locations in both disability rights and disability studies, as the twenty-first century began (Siebers 2008b; McRuer and Mollow 2012). Sexuality does indeed remain, two decades later, a “source of oppression” for disabled people, but it has also become a profoundly productive site for invention, experimentation, and transformation.