Our first reading comes from Ann Oakley’s groundbreaking book, Sex, Gender and Society. This was one of the earliest attempts to argue that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed. In this extract, Oakley draws on cross-cultural evidence to argue that differences between male and female (hetero) sexuality are products of culture, rather than nature.

As a leading anthropologist once observed, 'sex' is not a particularly useful word in the analysis of cultures. To survive, a culture must reproduce, and copulation is the only way. But what is defined as 'sexual' in content or implication varies infinitely from one culture to another or within the same culture in different historical periods.

In Victorian times for instance, a large group of Western females were denied their sexuality altogether, but the twentieth century has seen the emergence (or re-emergence, after the inhibitions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) of the female's right to sexuality, which has come to be defined at least partly in terms of her own sexual needs. The Victorian lady was not supposed to have sexual desires — hence her paradoxical use as a sexual object for the man’s satisfaction. Her twentieth-century counterpart, however, has considerable auras of sexuality, extending beyond the bedroom into an entire world of commercially-oriented sex and erotic meaning.

These terms 'sex' and 'sexual' are subject to constant confusion. The dictionary gives, under 'sexual', 'Of, pertaining to, or based on, sex or the sexes, or on the distinction of sexes; pertaining to generation or copulation. Perhaps it is not surprising that the confusion exists: 'sex' (biological maleness or femaleness) and 'sexuality' (behaviour related to copulation) are very closely connected. Behaviour is 'sexual' if
it refers to the kind of relationship between male and female in which copulation is, or could be, or is imagined to be, a factor. 'Sexuality' describes the whole area of personality related to sexual behaviour.

Both male and female must have some propensity for sexual behaviour if copulation is to occur, but this propensity is usually held to be different in male and female. Along with the male's greater aggression in other fields, goes his aggression in the sphere of sexuality: males initiate sexual contact, and take the symbolically, if not actually, aggressive step of vaginal penetration - a feat which is possible even with a frigid mate. They assume the dominant position in intercourse. Males ask females to go to bed with them, or marry them, or both: not vice versa.

The female's sexuality is supposed to lie in her receptiveness and this is not just a matter of her open vagina: it extends to the whole structure of feminine personality as dependent, passive, unaggressive and submissive. Female sexuality has been held to involve long arousal and slow satisfaction, inferior sex drive, susceptibility to field dependence (a crying child distracts the attention) and romantic idealism rather than lustful reality. Women are psychologically, no less than anatomically, incapable of rape.

That these stereotypes persist can be seen from any woman's magazine and almost any fiction dealing with sexual relationships.

What do we know about the sex drive in men and women, about the physiological processes involved in copulation and orgasm? Are we able to say that in these things men and women are biologically different?

[...]

The theory that male sexuality arises spontaneously and is specifically genital while the female's is not, is simply not borne out by the behaviour of males and females in other cultures - for instance by the Brazilian tribe studied by Jules Henry. . . . or the Trobriand islanders studied by Malinowski1 [ ...]. The differences in the emotional meaning of puberty to male and female in our cultures, are not necessarily universal either, any more than are the social differences influencing the ways in which they gain their sexual experience.

[...] Because puberty is a bridge between childhood and adulthood, and because the adult roles of the sexes are significantly differentiated in our society both inside and outside the home, the climate in which male and female pass through puberty tends to stress rather than ignore sex differences in the physiological process itself. An additional factor is perhaps our cultural emphasis on the importance of sexuality. The Arapesh, who as a culture devalue sexuality and develop tenderness and parental responsibility in both males and females, do not treat the adolescent girl as in need of protection from the male's exploitation of her as a sexual object.2 Menstruation is therefore not the signal of danger it is in our society. Arapesh males simply do not regard females as vessels for their own sexual satisfaction, but as individuals whose desirability as spouses is related to the culture's primary work of child-rearing. The sexual feeling that exists between spouses is not fundamentally different from the other feelings or affections that tie siblings, or parents and children, together - it is
just a more complete expression of it. In this context, adolescence is not a period of fervent mating choice either: by the age of nine or ten girls are already betrothed, and the adolescent male's task is to prepare his own betrothed for the responsibilities of parenthood which they will both share. The Arapesh have no fear that adolescents left to themselves will copulate, nor do the adolescents themselves expect that they will. Margaret Mead [. . .] explains:

. . . the Arapesh further contravene our traditional idea of men as spontaneously sexual creatures, and women as innocent of desire, until wakened, by denying spontaneous sexuality to both sexes and expecting the exceptions, when they do occur, to occur in women, Both men and women are conceived as merely capable of response to a situation that their society has already defined for them as sexual. . . with their definition of sex as response to an external stimulus rather than as spontaneous desire, both men and women are regarded as helpless in the face of seduction . . . Parents warn their sons even more than they warn their daughters against permitting themselves to get into situations in which someone can make love to them.³

Puberty for the Arapesh is therefore hardly a physiological situation at all, although it remains a sign of maturation and of readiness for the adult role.

Anthropology shows that the whole area of human sexuality is subject to tremendous cultural variation. The following are among the many features of human sexual behaviour which vary: sexual play between children (which may be specifically genital and widely permitted throughout childhood, as among the Trobrianders, or heavily discouraged and repressed, in middle childhood especially, as in our own society); intercourse between immature adults (which may be a common occurrence unrelated to marriage and procreation, as in Samoa, or discouraged, as again in Western culture); the importance of sexual activity itself (which may be defined as the appropriate preoccupation for an entire society to the exclusion of other interests, as among the Truk, or may take a very secondary place indeed as among the Arapesh); the extent to which sexual desire is dangerous and needs curbing, as among the Manus, or is weak and uncertain and likely to fail altogether, as in Bali.⁴

The idea that the female's sexuality is qualitatively different from the male's, and in particular that it is slow to mature and in need of intensive stimulation, is not universal in all cultures. In the Southwest Pacific society described by William Davenport [. . .] sexual intercourse is assumed to be highly pleasurable (and deprivation harmful) for both sexes.⁵ During the early years of marriage men and women are reported to have intercourse twice a day, with both reaching orgasm simultaneously. Intercourse is defined as a prolonged period of foreplay, during which there is a mutual genital stimulation by both partners, and a short period of copulation lasting fifteen to thirty-seconds. It is firmly believed that, once stimulated during foreplay, neither male nor female can fail to reach orgasm, and women unable to reach orgasm are unheard of. Either husband or wife can break up the marriage if sexual intercourse is infrequent (that is, about every ten days).
In this society children beyond the age of three or four are discouraged from genital play, and all sex play between children is frowned upon; there is a latency period from about five or six until puberty when sexual behaviour is not in evidence. Beyond puberty and before marriage both males and females are urged to masturbate to orgasm in order to relieve sexual tension, which is assumed to be as great in females as in males.

Malinowski reported a similar convergence of male and female sexual behaviour among the Trobriand Islanders. Like many other people, the Trobrianders appear to do without latency - there is no period of childhood during which sexual interests and activities are absent. Small children play sexual games together; genital manipulation and oral genital stimulation are frequent. By the age of four or five children are mimicking intercourse, and girls of six to eight have intercourse with penetration. (This experience is delayed for boys, presumably until they are able to achieve full intercourse at the age of ten or twelve.) These sexual activities continue unabated throughout childhood, but at adolescence become more serious — the subject of great endeavour and absorbing preoccupation.

Amongst the Trobrianders, as also among the Lesu, Kurtatchi, Lepcha, Kwoma and Mataco, women frequently take the initiative in sexual relationships. Indeed, in the last two societies, sexual initiatives are taken by the female exclusively.

The positions used in intercourse by the Trobrianders omit the usual dorsal-ventral (man on top of woman) position which they dislike because the woman is hampered by the weight of the man and cannot be sufficiently active. The expression for orgasm means 'the seminal fluid discharge' and is used of both sexes, referring also to the nocturnal emission of seminal and glandular secretions in male and female. Masturbation is looked on by the Trobrianders as the practice of an idiot, one who is unable to indulge in heterosexual intercourse. It is unworthy of both men and women, whose proper sexuality is bound up with their mutual relationship. Malinowski, in comparing the sexuality of the Trobrianders with that of his own culture, concluded that there were qualitative differences between them.

Differences in the sexuality of male and female have been variously attributed to differences in (a) their anatomies (b) the functioning of their hormones (c) their psychologies (d) their personalities and (e) the cultural learning processes to which, they are subjected.

Of these five, only the first two and the last are contrasting explanations, since the psychology and personality of male and female largely depend on culture. In fact the role of anatomy in determining sexuality must remain a purely hypothetical one until some explanation is given on how the two connect. As it stands the statement 'anatomy is destiny' offers no real explanation. Freudian theory can be interpreted as a massive attempt to take on the one hand distinctions of anatomy and on the other distinctions of 'destiny' (or social role) and propose a series of processes by which one might lead to the other.

[...] In industrial cultures (and in some others too) the sexual relationship between male
and female has been subsumed in the general power relationship of the sexes. This - the thesis of Kate Millett's 'Sexual Politics' - has far-reaching implications for many areas of sex differentiation, including sexuality itself.

NOTES

3. Ibid.