A Cultural Sexuality or a Sexual Culture?
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Introduction

Sexuality and culture: is a more clear-cut distinction imaginable? Is sexuality not the instinct that we encounter in every culture, identical to itself, while culture imposes limits on it in various ways? For these reasons, sex seems to be a test case par excellence for an investigation of the different ways "culture" can be found through time and space.

In studies of cultural variations of religion, mental health or family structures, we should be aware of our own definitions of religion, mental health and family, as these tend to be culturally biased. This bias introduces a circularity when we try to find a firm basis for a definition of "culture": the concepts of religion, mental health and family cannot be considered independently from the concept of culture (cf. Soudijn et al.'s chapter). However, sex seems to permit an avoidance of the circular way of approaching the problem. Fundamentally, the definition of sexuality is straightforward and can easily account for differences imposed by culture. Would it not be pleasant if sex could calm the tormented minds of cultural psychologists participating in a Symposium? A Platonist would surely be happy. Would it not be pleasant if sexuality could give us, alongside its own joys, also the intellectual joy of a clearly perceived intellectual problem?

Unfortunately, the concept of sexuality hides some unpleasant surprises; it will be argued that sexuality cannot be perceived outside its cultural context. The way historical research has been carried out during recent decades will show us that the analysis of cultural rules concerning sexual behaviour shifted towards an analysis of the way sex is "produced" by culture. I will start with a common view, that of the "repression hypothesis." Next, I will discuss Foucault’s theories on the topic, and finally I will end with some methodological reflections.

The repression hypothesis

In its popular form, the repression hypothesis holds that the industrialisation of western society underlies the repression of every nonproductive form of sexuality. With the rise of capitalism, production became a key word, even in the ethical area. As a consequence, certain forms of sexual behaviour such as masturbation, homosexuality and contraception were castigated. Sexuality had
to be productive; only the legal marriage, the family blessed with numerous children, was accepted.

The intolerable simplicity of this version of the repression hypothesis, which has been popularised mainly in the feminist and gay liberation movements, does not need underlining. Yet, it does have the advantage of providing a clear division between sexuality and culture. In this view, sex is a term covering a whole set of possible pleasurable acts; culture system which determines which possibility is accepted and which rejected. The conclusion drawn in the sixties by the movements for liberation was simple: to regain sexual freedom, capitalism should be fought. When the production ideal had disappeared, the repression nonproductive forms of sexuality would come to an end. The disastrous consequences such as the suffering from neuroses, the disparaging of women and the prosecution of gay people, were expected to vanish once sexuality was accepted again as a "natural" gift with a wealth of Possibilities.

Even though it was too simple, the theory had many proponents. Still today, the political left is often taken to be more inclined to accept a larger freedom in sexual matters than the right wing. It is puzzling to observe the persuasive power of this far-too-simple theory. With this in mind, now turn our attention to an analysis of the relationship between sexuality and culture in the eyes of the founder of a less simplified version repression hypothesis, Jos Van Ussel.

**Van Ussel**

Van Ussel’s book, *Geschiedenis van het sexuele probleem* [History of the sexual problem] (1968), is written as a reaction against a fairly common view of the Victorian Age. According to that view, prudery would have invaded Western Europe, particularly Great Britain, during the reign of Queen Victoria (1819-1901). From this period on, sex became a taboo. Sexual education for girls was reduced to this famous piece of advice to them on the night before marriage: "Close your eyes and think of England."

Van Ussel’s book is primarily an attempt to give an explanation for the sexual developments during the Victorian Age. For that purpose, the uses the "civilisation theory" of Norbert Elias (1939), which holds that the process of civilisation goes from Fremdzwang (external pressure) to Selbstzwang (self-control). The western development of self-control is taken to be induced by the rise of industrialisation and capitalism. To enable him to use Elias’ theory, Van Ussel has to introduce two new related elements into the traditional view on the history of sexuality. Firstly, the periodisation of sexual repression has to be changed. The reign of queen Victoria (1837-1901) is too late for an explanation which lays the emphasis on industrialisation (1705: Newcomen, the steam pump; 1733: Kay, the flying shuttle; 1735: Darby,
cokes in the ferro-industries; 1785: Watt, the steam-engine). Secondly, Van Ussel has to look for traces of sexual repression in different manifestations than usually studied. He finds these in the campaign against masturbation which is traced back by him to the middle of the 18th century with the publication of a booklet *L’Onanisme* (1760) by the Genevan physician Tissot (1728-1797). This book was published in numerous editions (the last one in the 20th century!). For Van Ussel this is evidence of the existence of an "anti-sexual syndrome" accompanying the development of western capitalism.

Before entering into the critique of the facts, let us be aware of the hidden psychological model introduced by Van Ussel. One would expect that an author who wants to analyze the link between capitalism and sexuality would concentrate his attention upon sexual problems in relation to property, marriage, legal offspring, number of children and problems of hygiene (which were particularly acute in those times as syphilis prevailed). However, Van Ussel focuses his research on other topics such as prudery, the split between the adult's and children's life, sex instruction and in particular, masturbation. For him, the 18th century anti-sexual syndrome is not immediately connected to procreation. Its aim seems much more to realise a regulation of sexual pleasure. A scrupulous citizen should have a stable system of self-control over sexual desires. The success of the action to make masturbation culpable is therefore a good test of the success of the syndrome.

Van Ussel considers sexuality as the prototype of pleasure, and masturbation as the prototype of sexual pleasure. Even though this approach makes some sense, it should be recognised that sexual behaviour can also be studied from other viewpoints. Thus, theoreticians who are interested in family structures and alliances may consider the condemnation of masturbation and homosexuality as a more remote consequence of the increased importance given to the ties of marriage. The researcher who, like Van Ussel, tries to understand sexual morality starting with the condemnation of masturbation, understood as a test case for self-control, adopts a completely different approach towards the sexual problem. This position assumes a certain view on human psychology. One cannot help being aware of at least remote Freudian influences on Van Ussel; it is disappointing to observe that they are not explicitly discussed.

Here lies the ambiguity in Van Ussel’s work. He almost unconsciously introduces a shift towards an implicit psychological paradigm as the result of the periodisation required by Elias’ civilisation theory. He takes the various editions of Tissot’s booklets as examples of sexual repression in the 18th century. Meanwhile, his attention has shifted from the effects of sexual behaviour in the area of property, towards the regulation of sexual pleasure, and even of pleasure in general. Any possible answer given to that problem assumes at least an implicit psychological theory about the characteristics of "sexual" pleasure.
The shift seems to have remained unnoticed at the time his work was published. The critiques directed against Van Ussel dealt mainly with other questions, in particular with the problem who is responsible for the sexual repression. Is it the bourgeois society, as Van Ussel put it, or is it the Christian tradition, and especially the Catholic Church, as many critics maintained? Van Ussel’s emphasis on society was at least partly the result of basic mistakes in his historical data. For instance, he writes that “until the 16th and 17th century there is no coherent doctrine on sexuality [in Catholic theology],” and that Aquinas did not say a single word on masturbation (Van Ussel, pp. 208-209). A whole book has been written to criticize him and to demonstrate the influence of the church (Tarczylo, 1983). The emphasis put, by him, on masturbation as a test case for the way a culture deals with sexual matters remained unquestioned (Achterhuis, 1988; De Wit, 1983).

In an earlier article, I joined the critics of Van Ussel’s material (Vandermeersch, 1985a). I looked in the medical and especially the psychiatric textbooks, trying to check if the disastrous consequences of masturbation, as listed by Tissot, were also described there. If Tissot’s work was influential, his opinion that frequent masturbation could give rise to various problems and even to madness, should appear in psychiatric textbooks. This was not the case, at least before the years 1830-40. For the medical area, the traditional periodisation of the Victorian Age as starting in the 19th century seems to be more likely than Van Ussel’s. In other areas, say in education, an earlier preoccupation with masturbation is well possible.

Emphasising the questionable data in Van Ussel’s work could leave the central question unresolved: which assumptions about the relationship between sexuality and culture are involved here? The focus on masturbation was made by Van Ussel because he assumed a close relationship between sexual repression and industrialisation. Imagine that the repression did not start in the 18th century. Should we then abandon the question of whether masturbation is an interesting test case for the investigation of the cultural regulation of sex?

This question brings us to a more accurate study of the link between masturbation, sex and culture. Let us first acknowledge that Van Ussel does not give the simplistic popular explanation that in an industrial and capitalistic society, even sex should be productive. In fact, he is very hesitant when he discusses the interrelation:

The Victorian taboo is only a part of the progression of prudery. It was not pursued wittingly, at least not in the ways it manifested itself. It is not a phenomenon which can been explained by a cause. It is rather something conjunctive and residual. The prudery expanded like the traditional network: of roads: both proceeded from particular kinds of relations between people, both are irrational and dysfunctional in some of their aspects. (p. 82)
We could perhaps try to make his explanation more explicit. During industrialisation, society needed an increasing amount of self-control of its members. The way people control themselves in that very private matter of masturbation is an adequate indicator of their more general self-control. Within this line of reasoning, masturbation refers to the deepest level of experience of pleasure and culture regulates this pleasure. This explanation of the change in attitude towards masturbation differs largely from the simple repression hypothesis with its emphasis on production, property and procreation.

Van Ussel realised that his research brought him to the point where he needed a psychological theory which could explain the interrelation between the self-control of the individual and the social regulation of sexual pleasure. A confrontation with Freudian ideas, possibly followed by a critique, would have been an obvious next step. Van Ussel, however, refrained from this step. Yet he did not completely sidestep the problem. He argues that the phase of industrialisation needed a specific "psycho-structure" (pp. 63-70), a particular psychological structure which fostered industrialisation. He argues that the Freudian Superego theory is to be understood as a reaction to the preceding phase of sexual repression. He does not adopt Freud’s focus on the question of why sexuality is a such important part of human psychology. One has the impression that for Van Ussel it remained ultimately a puzzling problem as to why the social repression was directed towards sexuality and not towards other drives. He suggests that this had to do with the bourgeois experience of the body. The body was transformed from an organ of pleasure into an organ of achievement. To Van Ussel this seems to be the final reason why the pleasurable experience of sexus and eros was made impossible in the bourgeois society.

This explanation implicitly introduces a broader category, namely the body and its pleasures, from which sexual pleasure would be a part. There is a danger in the introduction of such a general category: the concrete notion of sex becomes part of an indiscriminate entity. The crucial question of how the repression of the body results in a specific psycho-structure is left untouched by embedding sexual pleasures in a larger framework of bodily pleasures. What is needed is a psychological theory of human subjectivity in interrelation with its social environment.

Although Van Ussel did not want to cross the border with psychology, he was at least aware of the problem. In many popular views which referred to his book the problem of human subjectivity was discarded. The simplistic popular version of the repression hypothesis became popular. In spite of all the criticism that can be addressed to his work, one should acknowledge that Van Ussel came to the same fundamental question as Freud; this is not "How does culture influence sexual behaviour"? but "Is culture the result of a particular organisation of sexual pleasure"?
This is not a question that has a large appeal to a wider audience. Yet it will be the question which reveals itself as essential in the work of another author who is popular for his views on the history of sexuality, and who in the beginning of his work undoubtedly did not expect to end with this question.

Foucault

Essentially, Michel Foucault’s first book on the history of sexuality, *La Volonté de savoir* (1976), is an attempt to unmask the sexual liberation ideologies of the 1960s as a hidden continuation of an ongoing process of enslavement. It is also an implicit critique of the work of Van Ussel. According to Foucault, people got the illusion that the removal of sexual taboos would give them freedom. Where sexual matters were hidden in silence, people should now have the courage to speak about them. They should assert or even cry out their sexual feelings and preferences. According to Foucault, this ideology is a continuation in disguise of an old process. It just uses a new manifestation. The old process consists of the injunction given to people to speak of their sexuality, and to analyze their sexual wishes under the authority of someone else.

According this point of view the process of sexual enslavement started with the confession in the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance. It went on with the rise of medical psychology and sexology in the 19th century, and was strengthened by psychoanalysis. The final step is reached with the so-called liberation movements in which there is an order to cry out one’s most secret wishes, even on the streets. In fact, the ultimate point of the obligation to "confess" has been reached there. Under the mask of liberation, enslavement goes on.

The success of the first volume of Foucault’s *La Volonté de savoir* has been largely determined by his suggestive development of the polemic argument about the command to confess. Seen from a theoretical point of view, the content of the book is less obvious. A close reading of the book reveals that the command to confess is not the essence of Foucault’s book; the quest for knowledge in sexual matters takes a more central place, as pointedly indicated in the original title in French: The will to know. Confessing involves more than overcoming the reluctance to talk about private matters in the presence of someone else. Confessing opens the door to a specific self-knowledge, a knowledge which can only be mastered through a process of self-analysis performed under the authority of someone else. Sexuality seems to contain a hidden truth on the individual, who can only learn about his or her own identity by investigating secret sexual desires in his or her mind under the guidance of an authority. It appears thus that the practice of confession assumes two cultural facts: the taboo on speaking on sexual matters
in ordinary social life, and the transgression of that taboo in the confirmed area of "science."

The observations which led Foucault to his analysis can easily be recognised. He was struck by the fact that the West did not have an "Ars Erotica" as the East did, but had, on the contrary, developed a "Scientia Sexualis", a science about sex. At first glance, this seems to be true. We would be very surprised if we discussed erotic pleasures with friends in the same way that we are supposed to show our skill in wine-tasting. If I offered you one of my nice Pomerol Petit Village 1975, followed by a Chambolle Musigny les Charmes 1966, I would appreciate certain comments without seeming perverted by expecting them. In fact, I would find it very rude if a guest commented: "Oh, it would not bother me. I do not notice the differences between a Beaujolais Primeur and a Clos Vougeot. I just close my eyes and enjoy it." Discussion of the subtleties of pleasure is not expected in western bedrooms. In this sense there is definitely a distinction between a bedroom and a restaurant. When you talk about sex in the West, it should be done without pleasure, in a scientific context, where sex is not practised for its own sake but investigated in order to gain knowledge.

The basic question resulting from this analysis concerns an individual’s identity. This is the place where sex and knowledge are linked. Foucault then continues with this question. It is hard reading to follow his argument, while he introduces at the same time the new and interesting theme of "power," which easily captures the reader’s attention. An important part of the book is devoted to the thesis that power should not be considered primarily as something negative, that means as a limitation or, to use a more common psychological terminology, as "frustration." Power does not consist in the possibility of restricting someone, but in the possibility to produce something. Applying this insight to sexuality, Foucault argues that the puritan Victorian Age did not destroy the repertoire of sexual possibilities. On the contrary, it created new forms: the perversions. Though Victorian people might have been very silent in their legal bedrooms, they talked a lot of what could be done outside of them. They even created new terms to be able to discuss and to classify all those acts and fantasies which did not immediately increase the birthrate in Her Majesty’s Empire. They coined terms like sadism, masochism, exhibitionism, travesty and homosexuality.

The question can be asked as to whether the Victorians did not simply give names to certain peculiar forms of sexual pleasure which exist in all times and places? According to Foucault, only a superficial investigation could lead to this conclusion. It may be observed in every culture that people masturbate, that they find it pleasant to exhibit their genitals, that they dress according to the opposite sex, that they have sex with someone of the same sex, and so on. However, the meaning of it, the "experience" of it, is quite different. For instance, consider homosexuality. The existence of someone who
does not just "commit sodomy" but who experiences himself or herself as a peculiar being, with own psychological characteristics, with the specific problem of "self-acceptance", with a distinct sense for art, culture or on the contrary for a macho-look, in other words someone who is a homosexual, seems to be the typical product of the Victorian Age. In the same way, the culture of that time was not just concerned with onanistic, exhibitionist and sadistic actions, but with people who were supposed to have the psychological characteristics which are typical for the masturbator, the exhibitionist and the sadist. It is in this sense that Foucault says that the Victorian Age created new forms of sexual life. In his first project for the next volumes after *La volonté de savoir*, he intended to describe this in detail for some particular issues: the hysterical mother, the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child and the perverse adult (pp. 104-105).

Power is a recurrent theme in Foucault’s book. Reading further, one is brought to the question: "But who is responsible for those changes? Is it possible to indicate the authors of that subtle but broad process of erotization"? This question leads towards another central theme in Foucault’s analysis of power. According to him, power does not belong to someone; it is not something that can be seized and lost. Power is impersonal. "It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere they operate and which constitute their own organisation" (p. 92). It is a tactical situation, which should be analyzed in highly specific and local situations.

In attempts to understand the failure of most revolutions throughout the world, Foucault’s view of power has been frequently applied to political situations. For Foucault himself, the experience of the aftermath of May 1968 and the subsequent liberation movements has undoubtedly been very important. Many people had naively expected that the world would change after the defeat of the agency, which was supposed to hold the power. But the mere fact that a "powerful" political leader disappears does not change a situation. On the contrary, the power relations which put him in office, are still there. Attacking the most showy point of power manifestation is not an adequate way to threaten existent power relations.

The same reasoning applies to sex. Foucault insists upon the fact that it is not the repression which should be the focus of analysis, but the way sexual experience is created by culture:

In actual fact, what was involved, rather, was the very production of sexuality. Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp,
but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked one to another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (pp. 105-106)

If one wanted to change the way our culture deals with sexuality and to get rid of the legacy of the Victorian Age, it is better not to attack the all too visible manifestations of "powerful" interdicts. Instead, one should analyze the typical way in which the Victorian Age has linked sexual experience and experience of its own identity.

Foucault did not pay much attention to the question of how this should be done in concreto. The directions taken by Foucault’s thought in the later works are not so easy to follow, although they are according to me not so inconsistent as it is sometimes said (Vandermeersch, 1985b). One of the problems with Foucault’s work is that the popularised versions of his vocabulary do not consider the specific phase of Foucault’s thought in which a specific term found its origin.

This is particularly the case with the "anatomo-politics of the human body" and the "bio-politics of the population" (p. 139). These terms were introduced near the end of *La Volonté de savoir* where Foucault took a seemingly unexpected and confusing direction. He makes a link between the importance attached to sexuality in the Victorian Age and the ideal of "health" coming up in the same period, as the success of medicine clearly proofs. Elaborating on ideas developed in the book he published just a year before, *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), he relates the Victorian views of sexuality and the changes that occurred since the French Revolution concerning the body in general. In the Ancien Regime, life was experienced as something that sustained itself "naturally." Illness and death were experienced as violations inflicted on this natural gift. In this society "power" refers to "what is able to take away your life." In modern societies as they were conceived since the Enlightenment, a fundamental change occurred. Life was not experienced any more as something natural, in the sense of capable of sustaining itself, as long as it was not hampered. Life seemed to be dependent of the support given by society, not only because of basic food, but also because of hygiene and all the social structures giving support to achieving a healthy body: gymnastics, sports, regular medical inspections, diets and fitness centres. Power became that which is capable of optimising the human body as a perfectly functioning machine which was the basic source of joy for the individual’s well-being ("anatomo-politics"), and at the same time as the good instrument for the biological progress of mankind in general ("bio-politics").
Just as Van Ussel did it before him, and more explicitly than the former, Foucault widens the problem of sexuality to the more global problem of the body. Is this not eluding the specificity of the interrelations between sex and culture? Or is this the result of some hidden intuition? In fact, in the same final part of *La Volonté de savoir*, Foucault points towards the violent and sado-masochistic dimensions of sexuality. This theme was already present in Foucault’s mind since his early works (Vandermeersch, 1985b), but it had not been explicitly discussed yet. With his investigations of the historical shifts in the social practices of punishment and torture, one can speculate that Foucault became more and more aware of the crucial problem raised by the sadistic and masochistic dimensions of sexuality. The theme will nevertheless remain implicit, at least in the theoretical treatises Foucault published before his death.

There is another convergence between Van Ussel and Foucault. We noticed already that for a further theoretical elaboration, the theoretical views of the former needed a psychological model of human subjectivity. Exactly the same problem was thrust upon Foucault. The awareness of this problem did not remain implicit. In the theoretical chapter introducing *L’Usage des plaisirs* (1984a) and the subsequent *Le Souci de soi* (1984b) he accounts for the way he changed the original plan of his series on the history of sexuality. The fundamental reason, he says, is that he realised his lack of a theory on human subjectivity.

I know that those two books are frequently put apart as alien and inconsistent with the previous part of Foucault’s work. In these two books he goes back to ancient Greece and to Rome in order to find the roots of our western sexuality. This is surprising for an author who has always insisted upon discontinuity in history and upon the importance of the analysis of small but decisive shifts in the culture, conceived as a network. The broad perspective of such a large historical span deserves more argumentation than it actually receives. The examples with which Foucault introduces the problem of subjectivity are very appealing. Three texts are given: one dealing with the disastrous consequences of masturbation, another on the importance of chastity and fidelity in marriage, and finally a description of the effeminate homosexual. At first glance, one would locate each of these texts in the Victorian Age, while, in fact, these were written in Ancient Greece.

By giving these examples, it is not Foucault’s intention to assert that there are no historical changes. On the contrary, despite the seemingly similar attitudes towards sexual conducts, there is an important difference in the reason why these are accepted or rejected. Thus, the contempt of the effeminate homosexual is not rooted in the rejection of homosexual behaviour as such, as sufficiently demonstrated by the existence of pederasty in Ancient Greece. The central moral issue in Greece lays in the ideal of being completely one’s own master. One should be able to restrain one’s own passions.
From this point of view, a freeborn man who was not able to control his homosexual passion for handsome boys was to be blamed, in exactly the same way as the Greek Don Juan who could not control his tendencies towards women met disapproval. The reason for the disapproval was not homosexuality as a deviation from something like a "natural" standard, but the lack of self-mastery, which was equally immoral in homosexual and heterosexual practices.

This brings Foucault to the thesis that one should distinguish three different aspects in morality. First, there is the moral code, the set of values and rules a culture wants to impose upon human behaviour. Second, there is the real behaviour of individuals in relation to these values and rules. Finally, there are the different ways of self-conduct that can be chosen by individuals in their relation to the social morality. It is especially this third aspect on which Foucault wants to shed light by his analysis. He describes how sex was conceived in ancient Greece as a set of pleasurable acts at a person's disposal; there was nothing mysterious about them. The head of the family personified this combination of moderation and self-control. Among the Romans, sex was more and more experienced as something wild and dangerous. The Greek ideal of moderation, which found sex not problematic at all, shifted towards an ideal of caution. With Christianity, this movement went further. Sex now became identified with a dangerous, secret aspect of inner life. Sex became the hidden "other" within one's own identity. The Christian moral preoccupation with sex became a hermeneutic process. People were invited to undertake a process of self-decipherment and to recognise the dangerous seductive power of an alien in their passion.

Despite the similarities between the Greek texts on masturbation, conjugal morality and homosexuality and corresponding western Victorian writings, there is a huge difference between the moral experiences underneath. This consists of the way in which the human subject achieves an inner transformation of his or her self in relation to the social aspect of morality. Foucault, who is frequently said to be the author of "the dead of the human subject" in Les Mots et les choses (1966), ends his work with the quest for the subject, a project he could not complete before his death. We can but guess how he would have further elaborated on the question of how this subject, as the effect of the moral praxis, could be conceived

Conclusions

The influence of both Foucault and Van Ussel can be traced in recent research on the history of sexuality; the same holds for their unsolved problems. Studies have been made of the Victorian Age, in which it was argued that the experience of sex was much more differentiated than earlier views assumed
The idea that in this period a strong link was established between sexual practices and the experience of a corresponding psychology proved to be fruitful; it was integrated in women’s and ‘gay studies (Hekma, 1986). Many historical studies focused less on sexuality, and broadened their perspective to the more general problem of the experience of the body (Bynum, 1987; Rousselle, 1983). Also, the peculiar influence of Christianity on the experience of the body regained new interest (Brown, 1988; Despland, 1987; Serres, 1985; Vandermeersch, 1988).

Let us now take a closer look at the conclusions which can be drawn from these writings about the general theme of the paper: the relation between culture and sexuality. Discussing the influence of culture upon sexuality, people are mostly inclined to conceive sex as a set of available practices and fantasies, as a set of possible pleasures, and culture as the external factor which enables choices and imposes limitations on the individual. In the case of the two authors discussed, we saw that the definition of sexuality became problematic when they tried to define the influence of culture on sexuality. This happened in a twofold way. Firstly, sexuality appeared to be linked with a specific expression of personal identity which appeared to be culturally and historically determined. Secondly, this "cultural" modelling of sexuality was supposed to be part of a broader culturally determined experience of the body.

The instrument with which they tried to measure the influence of culture appeared to be influenced by culture, too. Sexuality is not a phenomenon which allows the avoidance of circularity, even when one tries to study sex from the viewpoint of social sciences. Does this mean that research in this area has to abandon every claim of objectivity? Not at all. We are brought to the point where a cross-cultural and a historical approach are vital for research. They make us aware, not only of cultural differences in general, but also of the impact of cultures on the range of phenomena to which a concept can be applied.

As an illustration, the problem of anorexia nervosa can be mentioned, which recently was analyzed from a historical perspective (Vandereycken & Van Deth, 1988). Such a study could be performed in order to investigate whether anorexia occurs in other times and cultures, possibly hidden under other forms as religious fasting. This was the way history was practised in older psychiatry. Renowned psychiatrists and neurologists wrote voluminous books on church history in order to prove that lunacy (Calmeil, 1845, 1982) or hysteria (Charcot & Richer, 1887/1987) had always existed, but had not been recognised before due to the religious obscurantism of earlier times. Fortunately, the modern approach is aware of the crude presupposition of this apologetic psychiatric literature.

In the new approach it is investigated if the phenomena, which are now neatly defined and listed in the DSM III-R, were recognised and circumscribed in the same way in earlier times. Interestingly, recent historical investigations
of anorexia and psychiatric diagnoses in general (Hutschemaekers, 1990) do not end with a general statement about the presence or absence of cultural differences. They make a further step which, at an intermediate level, distinguishes between the association and dissociation of phenomena which are caught under one heading in the researcher’s cultural environment: to what extent are the phenomena studies embedded in and influenced by their larger cultural context? In this way, the historical study of anorexia is not only concerned with the question whether the refusal to consume food is always linked with the rejection of sexuality, but also with the question as to what is experienced as "sexual" in that culture.

It should be realised that calling something sexual is of no less importance than the presupposed underlying preverbal sexual nature of some bodily sensations, as recent discussions on the delimitation of "unwanted intimacies at work" illustrate. Both aspects are involved in the study of sexuality. The historical approach to anorexia is an opportunity to resume Freud’s approach described in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/1974) and to ask the question of how far we can decompose sexuality into components, and at what level of aggregation particular problem are likely to arise.

Next to this question, there is the related and more general problem of the relationship between subjectivity and sexuality. The two authors we discussed, scarcely took the Freudian perspective into account. The simplification Freudian theory underwent when it was received by a bigger audience, its distortion in the United States, and the caricature of it which circulates in women’s and gay liberation movements, are in part responsible for this (Vandermeersch, 1978). (This shows, by the way, that the hazards of the "Wirkungsgeschichte" of psychoanalysis could be a good topic for research in cultural psychology.) A reduction of psychoanalysis to the discussion of the universality of the Oedipus complex, as if this were the central issue, puts aside central analytic themes which could be fruitful for our topic here. In particular the way in which Freud tried to distinguish various kinds of psychopathology, each with its own structural characteristics, could be fruitfully combined with a cross-cultural or historical approach. While reading Foucault’s distinctions on the different effects of the "practice of the self" upon an individual’s subjectivity, one can only think of the distinctions made in psychoanalysis today between neurotic, psychotic, perverse and psychopathic structures as referring to different structural possibilities of human subjectivity. In the same way, the Freudian theory of "cathexis" could be re-examined. In this theoretical construct, Freud tried to grasp why a paranoiac relates to the mental representations belonging to his delusion differently than the neurotic to his fantasies, and why there is yet another experience of the relation between mental representation and reality in the case of a religious believer who is convinced that Truth transcends the religious expression, in the case of a child who believes in fairy-tales, and in
the case of the scientist who believes in "theory." The fact that Freud himself was not able to solve the problem and closed the discussion with Jung on that topic with an inconsistent "reality principle," is no reason for us not to take up the problem again, and to re-examine the problem of "cathexis" together with the theory of social representations.

References


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