

Review

# Gender: A Postmodern Idea Developed in Association with the Modern Concept of Sex in Considering the Implications for Evolving Sexuality

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**Abstract:** The presently ubiquitous idea of how gender is defined remains deeply indebted to modern thought, depending on the concept of sex as its reference point. Originating with practices arising from capitalism, modern thought's concept of sex was enhanced with the search for the norm regarding standardization, then further refined through the research program of eugenics. Gender, in contrast to sex, has its roots in sexual practice changes from the second half of the twentieth century onward, developed in association with 1980s postmodern thought. The presuppositions of the two concepts differ radically. Understanding the difference between sex and gender matters because gender is now more than a critique of sex—it is an idea that is accepted and understood in popular culture and affects how people interpret their sexuality. This review examines the foundations of modern and postmodern thought, then focuses on sex and gender with respect to their history within these modes of thought. The conclusion, pointing to future research, is that a further reformulation of sexuality will be required for gender, as a postmodern idea, to truly separate itself from the presumptions of sex as a modern concept, permitting individuals to express their sexuality as they choose without negative social and psychological repercussions.

**Keywords:** gender; modern thought; sex; capitalism; standardization; eugenics; postmodern thought; sexuality



**Citation:** Nash, C. Gender: A Postmodern Idea Developed in Association with the Modern Concept of Sex in Considering the Implications for Evolving Sexuality. *Sexes* **2023**, *4*, 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes4030027>

Academic Editors: Cecilia M. Benoit and David L. Rowland

Received: 21 May 2023

Revised: 10 August 2023

Accepted: 21 August 2023

Published: 23 August 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Comparing the postmodern idea of gender with the modern concept of sex depends on an initial examination of the foundations of both modes of thought, as modernism and postmodernism each uphold very different principles affecting the development of the two terms [1]. Modernism is recognized as a highly equivocal term [2] (p. 21). Nevertheless, what is fundamental to modern thought is the understanding that the human mental landscape is confusing and difficult, but by moving through this landscape with the aid of a mental map, its limits and meanings can be revealed [3] (p. 6). Stated in more objective terms, humans can attain knowledge and understanding by controlling their environment through the use of scientific method and reason [4] (p. 10). Consequently, the idea of progress is intimately related to modernism [5]. Postmodernism has been identified as a reaction to modern thought, where postmodern thought considers facts as interpretations constructed by individuals, groups, cultures, and languages and, as such, truth is not absolute [4] (p. 12). Lacking any persistent quality, postmodern thought rejects considerations of progress in knowledge, society, and politics [6].

It is because of distinct differences in the foundational thinking of modern and postmodern thought that the modern concept of sex contrasts with that of the postmodern idea of gender. Nevertheless, these terms are often confused [7]. Sex is considered dependent on biological differences; gender on social factors [8] where, according to the Global Health 50/50 definition, these social factors include socially constructed norms that impose and determine roles, relationships, and positional power for all people across their lifetime [9].

With respect to the World Health Organization (WHO), the broader understanding of sexuality encompasses both sex and gender, as well as “roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. . . Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors” [10]. As such, it has been argued that the biological and sociocultural factors regarding sexuality are intertwined; therefore, the distinction between the terms sex and gender should be abandoned [11], providing an additional reason for the confusion regarding the two terms.

These differences and how they affect our understanding of sex and gender will be the focus of this work, concerning the implications in relation to sexuality. Making this distinction is relevant because the postmodern idea of gender is no longer merely a critique of the modern idea of sex, as it once was [12]. Gender as a differentiating category is now accepted as conceptually meaningful [13]. As such, how sex and gender contrast with respect to their modern and postmodern foundations is a decidedly pertinent topic in need of the type of examination and refinement to be undertaken here. The method used for this examination is historical. The historical method is a system by which present-day events are studied with reference to past events, seeking to explain current questions with an intensive study of the past [14] (p. 78). As such, each term is discussed as part of a timeline, beginning at the first noted introduction of the term and proceeding to the present-day understanding in following its evolution. The principal conclusions of this examination are that (1) the meanings of these two terms have developed over time in relation to the foundational thoughts of modern thought and of postmodern thought, respectively, that each thought upholds, (2) the development of these terms corresponds to, but is distinct from, their foundational modes of thought, and (3) as gender identity becomes increasingly independent from sex, individuals become progressively able to express their sexuality as they would choose, without negative social or psychological repercussions.

## 2. Foundations of Modern and Postmodern Thought

What makes modernity modern is, first and foremost, capitalism [15]. Private properties and markets are central to capitalism, depending upon the development of an effective legal framework to protect rights related to both property and markets [16]. Capitalist modernity has advanced through the creation of property and the expansion of markets by enforcing sameness, standardization, and homogenization [17]. This is because the aim of modern thought is universalizing claims based on discovering a standardized norm [18], a norm that is defined in relation to the normal, bell, or Gaussian curve [19].

The research described as modern is undertaken through empirical investigations (in quantitative analysis), naturalistic and interpretative approaches (in qualitative analysis), or a combination of both (in mixed methods) [20]. In this regard, the modern concept of qualitative analysis includes the collection of any analytical information other than that represented by numbers [21]. Investigations based on these research methods determine both what is intelligible to investigate in modern thought and what defines accuracy and completeness regarding the constraints of investigation [22]. As such, the norm in developing the standard is a construction representing objectivity [23], and technological standards in modern thought depend on knowing the norm as well as finding the means for data and people to be judged in relation to the norm to the extent that technological standards are seen to represent a public good [24].

Postmodern thought, if it can be considered as looking for a standard at all, bases the result on whatever the combination of actual differences [25] seen quantitatively in physical experiments is and/or the views participants provide when they are interviewed or observed in qualitative research, taking into consideration that what participants report may not be trustworthy [26]. In other words, this “standard” includes every research-verifiable result added together. It is a large, inclusive standard of actuality, rather than the modern constructed one based on discovering the norm from bell curves [27].

As a set of approaches to data intended to increase inclusivity, the understanding of what is postmodern developed from Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances [28]. Although it is theoretically conceptualizable since the posthumous publication and translation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* [29], postmodern thought in this regard became practical once supercomputers had the capacity to add large data sets together in aid of quantitative research [30], and the data mining of people's actual opinions was provided by social media for those conducting qualitative research [31]. In this way, these technologies emerged as vital components driving postmodern culture [32].

Largely, the ability of postmodern thought to add together these different points of view comes from the availability of, and extensive public participation in, online social media [33]. However, when adding together these data sets, limitations can be overlooked. These include what has been described as the automatic classification of sexism in social media [34] and the possible victimization of those participating in social media interactions [35]. As such, inferential analytics in postmodern analyses may then reinforce existing biases about gender stereotyping [36] and must be considered in the process of adding together various online points of view.

This difference in modern and postmodern thought has had a noticeable impact on how society thinks about some of the most basic tenets that define our society—notably, and most relevant to this review, the development of the idea of gender as differentiated from the concept of sex [37].

### 2.1. *Reproduction in Modernism Compared with Identity in Postmodernism*

Recognizing these two distinct foundations of thought, what is important to a discussion of the difference between the modern concept of sex and the postmodern idea of gender is how sex and gender differ. Sex, in modern thought, originated as what is necessary for reproduction. This is because modern thought views the purpose of sexuality as reproduction [38]. With respect to modern thought, the result is that homosexuality, for example, must be considered perverse from this perspective because the homosexual pair bond stands outside the reproductive growth of the family [39]. In contrast, the issue with the postmodern notion of gender is each person's relationship to their sexuality—reproduction per se is no longer the focus as gender cannot be said to follow from sex in any particular way [40].

Similar to its role in modern thought, sexuality is of primary importance in postmodern thought [41]. However, in contrast to modernism, in postmodernism there is no existence of the stable self [42]. As a result, people are expected to decidedly define their sexual identity, both for themselves and for society [43]. Foucault [44] has been noted [45] (p. 70) as the theorist who recognized the historical break between the modern notion of sex as an attribute, activity, and a dimension of human life, as well as the more recent postmodern understanding of sex as an identity. The concept of gender roles was first introduced in 1955 with the term gender identity appearing in the early 1960s [46]. Still, it was not until 1980 that gender identity disorder (GID) first appeared in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition* [47]. To be considered here are the consequences of this change in the focus of sexuality from sex to gender.

When the differences regarding sexuality among people were considered important merely with respect to reproduction, as they were during the modern period of thought, sexuality was entrenched as binary [48]. What represented males was the presence of y chromosomes and for females the absence of them [49]. These notions of male and female determined the meaning of sex—men and women were the two available norms to which all people were required to sort themselves. Intersex individuals and hermaphrodites (defined as two distinct sexual presentations [50], where gonadal histology is a necessary criterion for hermaphrodites) have always existed within society, and it has been estimated that at least 1:1000 individuals have some form of sexual development that is atypical [51]. Still, intersex individuals and hermaphrodites were considered non-groups during the modern period, and people who were neither male nor female had the choice made for

them at birth as to whether they were to be recognized as male or female [52]. These constructions were believed so fundamentally that severe penalties were devised and upheld for transgressions in classifying oneself as differing from these two extremes of male or female [53].

With postmodern thought—based on the view that what people think matters in devising how they are understood regarding their sexuality [54]—although people still could be differentiated with respect to a dichotomy by their chromosomes, how people see themselves might have little to do with these biological markers. This is especially so for intersex individuals as their parents, pressured by doctors [55,56], still decide whether their intersex children are surgically reconstructed as male or female [57]—a pressure that has been only slightly decreased in recent years in moving away from the paradigm of “optimal gender” towards that of “full consent” [58].

The postmodern idea of gender came to society’s consciousness starting slowly in the 1980s when gender was recognized as representing a complex social system structuring human life experience [59]. However, it was not until the ability to make use of large data sets showing the full variation of people’s views of themselves, that governments determined people could both decide their gender in fact and that they have a right to do so [60]. Questions remain as to how often people can legitimately change their gender [61], but for now, postmodern thought has encouraged citizens to realize that it is no longer useful to define people by sex outside of determining how and where in their bodies their reproductive material is located [43].

## 2.2. *Decisions on Gender Continue Their Relation to Sex*

In this movement from classification by sex to thinking about gender, a relic of modern thought remains. This is the idea that it makes sense to continue to base one’s decisions on gender in relation to sex [62]. In other words, being a man or a woman continues to be the standard by which one identifies their gender. Within postmodern thought, people still define themselves by thinking they want to assume the role of a man or of a woman as understood by society [63]. Even those who call themselves gender neutral or gender fluid [64] are neutral or fluid with respect to being on the scale of neither a man nor a woman, rather than something new entirely—although the possibility of the development of gender as a postmodern term distinct from sex arises with the evolving “Furry” phenomenon of individuals who identify with anthropomorphic or cartoon animals [65] (a point to be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.3 to follow).

What is a man and what is a woman remains based on the statistical constructs that were created by modern thought in looking for the norm. To this point, social structures make it clear from birth what being a man or being a woman is supposed to represent within society [66]. In this regard, because males have had social advantages in society, a criterion for determining if a female is considered to have a gender identity disorder is that the desire to be male is not due to the perceived cultural advantage [67]. When someone decides their gender, it is because they feel drawn to one extreme of sex or the other, in and of itself—or else they consider both extremes and say that neither represents them.

Consequently, as long as society cares about the statistical constructions of what is a man and what is a woman, norms concerning gender remain deeply embedded in modern thought’s concept of sex—they thus become the basis for postmodern thought about gender. It will not be until the question of whether a baby is a boy or a girl is asked with no more interest than asking if the baby has hair or not that society will have truly moved into a postmodern era of thought in relation to gender. In the same way that having hair or not at birth is seen to have little influence on how people live their lives—with how they keep their hair having few social ramifications [68]—whether or not they have y chromosomes resulting in a penis would be considered to have a similar level of influence on life decisions.

### 3. Modern and Postmodern Thought Regarding Sexuality

Although modern thought and postmodern thought are distinct and based on fundamentally different principles, compared with the period that can be described as pre-modern, they are both concerned with delimiting sexuality. It is assessing the form this delimitation takes that necessitates historical investigation.

#### 3.1. *Modern Boundaries of Sexuality*

According to Foucault's detailed examination of the history of sexuality, the pre-modern period represented "hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression" [44] (p. 5) with respect to sexuality. In Foucault's estimation, this ended in the seventeenth century with the development of capitalism when sexuality became "an integral part of the bourgeois order" [44] (p. 5). The explanation for this was that sex had to be repressed during working hours as incompatible with the new concentration on work that came with capitalism [69] in support of the science that replaced prejudices and superstitions with concerns about verifiable facts regarding the natural world [70]. Sex as an activity, then, could be pursued only outside of and apart from work for the purpose of procreation of new workers (especially those in support of the Atlantic slave trade that, for the most part, funded the development of capitalism) [71]. In conjunction, the notion of prostitution as a criminal activity was born to limit sexual activity not intended for procreation [72]. Yet, re-evaluating prostitution as a criminal activity neglected that it represented the work of prostitutes, undermining the capitalist notion that sex and work were necessarily separate. Regardless of this theoretical deficiency, backed by a new interest in acquiring comforts for the home through work [73], limitations to sexuality during this early period of modern thought were concerned with ensuring work was the primary activity of life rather than sex.

Work defined capitalism and the middle-class foundation of the good life [74] (p. 74). To the extent that people devoted themselves to their work, sexuality was kept to a minimum with the work ethic supporting capitalism [75]. The dividing line was between productive and non-productive activities with respect to capital, where the sex act was classified as non-productive and relegated to the home [76]. In that women could be taken from productive work as a result of pregnancy, a distinction between the sexes was formed because women could not be depended on to create capital [77]. Children were viewed, rather than as assets, as new entities that diminished capital for a significant number of years until the child matured and might yield a return on investment [78]. Capitalists, as such, continued to be less likely to want to invest in human capital, although in the long run, it might result in a more cost-effective investment than physical capital as children became the new workers to carry on the work required for maintaining capitalism [79]. In other words, the initial distinction between men and women in the early modern period related to the ability of men to create capital and women, as reproducers, to diminish that capital. When the short-run return on investment was the driving force, the original differentiation between the sexes in modern thought was made apparent. This view of the necessary distinction between men as producers in the capitalist system and women as reproducers of that system coincided with the outlawing of male homosexuality in the UK in 1885 as an abhorrent act lacking productivity [80].

However, the limitations with respect to sex were not to remain focused on work, as in this early period of modern thought. As time went on, what changed regarding comprehending sex was the development in the nineteenth century of two distinct, yet equally important, disciplines in this understanding of sex—statistics and eugenics.

Although statistics may be said to have begun as a style of reasoning during the early modern period alongside the development of capitalism, based on concepts such as objectivity, fact, or truth [81] (p. 3), it was not until the nineteenth century, with Adophe Quetelet's notion of the average man, that the idea of "normal" was originated by "applying the normal curve to cluster people as a distribution" [64] (p. 8). The work of Quetelet was pivotal in this regard [82]. Experimentation in the early twentieth century thus concentrated on determining what was normal with respect to the physical and social world [83].

One Victorian researcher who was directly influenced by the work of Quetelet was Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Sir Charles Darwin [84]. Galton followed Quetelet in applying his statistical techniques with respect to the normal curve to describe human beings to the extent that it has been argued that Galton's work interpreted, adapted, and transported Quetelet's ideas into the domain of psychology [85], which he did because he believed certain human traits were more valuable than others, popularizing the idea that the human species could be "improved" through selective reproduction [86]. Coining the term "eugenics" in 1883 [87], Galton stated it was "the science of improving stock. . . to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable" [87]. Following the evolutionary theories of Darwin, Galton upheld that an attempt should be made to exert control over human evolution to direct and improve humanity through sexual selection [88].

The First International Eugenics Conference was held in 1912 in London, England. The five-day event was attended by Winston Churchill (then Britain's Lord of the Admiralty and future prime minister), Charles Eliot (president emeritus of Harvard), and Alexander Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone). The president of the event, Leonard Darwin, son of Charles Darwin, whose evolutionary theories were central to the eugenicist mission, stated then that "conscious selection must replace the blind forces of natural selection" and declared one of the movement's leading goals to be to "stamp out feeble-mindedness from future generations" [89]. In response, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* praised the conference as "an event of great importance", marking the seriousness with which eugenics was taken internationally [89]. This began the promotion of selective breeding and ultimately contributed to state-sponsored discrimination, forced sterilization, and genocide. Eugenics may have begun in Britain, but it was understood, taught, and practiced with the most dedication in the United States and Germany [90]. By 1931, 28 of the 48 states in the United States had adopted eugenic sterilization laws [91].

By 1906, some of Galton's papers on eugenics had already been translated into German and published in the *Archiv für Rassen und Gesellschafts-Biologie* [92]. Nazi policy on the responsibility of government to improve the human race followed the views expressed by Galton in those papers, but primarily, they were based on the published works of the American eugenics movement leading to the passage of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring (Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses) in July 1933—a sterilization program designed to emulate the success of sterilization laws in California [93]. The aim was for the German/Aryan people to flourish while eliminating undesirables, most notably Jews, but also those considered mentally, physically, and sexually deviant [94].

Thus, it was a result of these three factors—capitalism, statistics, and eugenics, developed over hundreds of years—that what represented the dichotomy of sex as a modern concept was fully realized. By the 1940s, being a man meant that a person displayed the qualities of a warrior, normally demonstrated in the working world [95]. Yet these qualities achieved their true purpose when men willingly went to war [96]. Women, on the other hand—though encouraged by the media at that time to help in the factories when men were at war [97]—were more importantly expected to take on the responsibility of caring for families [98]. The Nazi slogan for women became Kinder, Küche, and Kirche (children, kitchen, and church) [99]. These male/female sex roles then became the dominant paradigm in American psychology for understanding the experiences of the sexes [100], solidifying the dichotomous understanding of sex.

### 3.2. In between Period of Modern and Postmodern Views on Sexuality

The period between the end of World War II and the 1980s, when the idea of gender truly took form, was one of transition with respect to sexuality. The direction of this transition was initially guided by the 1946 results of the Nuremberg tribunal that assessed Nazi war crimes. The Nuremberg trials did not charge war criminals for their crimes against homosexuals, who were deliberately marginalized, and focused exclusively on the

experiences of men in contrast to those of women [101]. Reinforcing binary sex differences was thus integral to the construction of international law in this formative period of postwar lawmaking [101]. This, in part, was seen to legitimize the aggressive treatment of homosexuals by authorities during this transition period [102]. Furthermore, little or no attention to crimes of rape and sexual violence was part of the forty-two volume of the proceedings of the Nuremberg trials, where no mentions of “rape”, “prostitution”, or even “women” can be found among the headings or subheadings [103]. What the Nuremberg trials were able to accomplish with respect to sex was that genocide, in its purpose of endorsing eugenics for developing desired dichotomous sex qualities, was not to be condoned [104].

If the focus of sex, after the Nuremberg trials, was no longer developing desired sex qualities as it was when eugenics was endorsed, this permitted the questioning of the modern understanding that sex was about reproduction. In this questioning, the idea that the focus of sex instead might legitimately be personal enjoyment began to be considered, evolving sex as something public [105]. It was during the 1950s that pornography became mainstream with the creation of *Playboy* magazine [106], and the idea of the playboy who pursued sexual encounters for their pleasure rather than for reproduction originated, reimagining the good life as a result [107]. Based on this new conception of sex as primarily for pleasure rather than reproduction, the need to ensure that pregnancy was not the result of these encounters led to research support for “the pill” as an oral contraceptive, first available in 1962 [108].

Now that contraceptive protection against pregnancy was available to women (and abortion on demand started to become available throughout the world beginning in the late 1950s as a result of the direct consequences resulting from the legal recognition of women’s civil rights [109], further separating sex from reproduction), the playboy lifestyle was increasingly advanced in popular culture to become the “sexual revolution”—normalizing all forms of sexual exploration, including those outside the normal sexual boundaries imposed by the modern concept of sex as reproduction [110]. Marriage itself as a boundary was expanded with the swapping of mates in what was known as “swinging” [111] while same-sex encounters that arose from orgies [112] and in and of themselves became accepted as commonplace [113] during this in-between period when sexuality was reappraised to be primarily about pleasure rather than reproduction.

With the 1970s refining what pleasure was with respect to sex, this concept progressed publicly [114], and the traits that differentiated the sexes were modified as a result of the sexual revolution [115]. Men were considered those who were best at receiving pleasure, and women, those who were most capable of providing it, with sex for pleasure seen as a lifelong pursuit [116]. Men were considered manlier the larger their penis was and the more hair they had on their chests [117]; women were epitomized as being female the more sexually attractive they were and the more eager they appeared to have sex [118] (p. 147)—long full hair was desired for both sexes [119]. It was a time when pleasure also evolved to include sadistic and masochistic culture [120], with men considered natural sadists and women natural masochists—which then expanded in SM culture to male masochists and female sadists [121]. This accepted switch, in part, came from men feeling overburdened with their responsibilities regarding work and wanting to see themselves as “weak, helpless or inferior and implicitly or explicitly demanding considerations and advantages on this basis” [122]. In this regard, with respect to homosexual relationships, one partner was expected to assume the top (male) role and the other the bottom (female) role, although in many societies, only the bottom role defined a man as homosexual with the top seen as a “normal” man of power [123] (p. 45).

It is quite possible that sex as pleasure would have continued to be upheld and expanded upon had AIDS not surfaced as a new and deadly sexually transmitted disease in 1981 [124] resulting from the HIV virus, primarily transferred by blood and semen [125]. In this regard, it was homosexual men, through unprotected anal sex [126], who were most likely to be infected [127]. The result in popular culture was that, as homosexual

sex was considered engaged in purely for pleasure, the idea of having sex primarily for pleasure was reconsidered [114]. The sex act at the beginning of the 1980s was no longer only about reproduction or pleasure, it was now something to be feared [128]. There was now a devaluing, mistreating, and blaming of those testing HIV+ [129], especially as heterosexuals began to be infected by AIDS (most often through unprotected anal sex or as a result of the presence of genital ulcers [130]), predominantly in poorer countries [131]. The thought regarding sex, as a result of AIDS, was now at a historical turning point.

### 3.3. Postmodern Identities Concerning Sexuality

Unlike the modern concept of sex, the postmodern idea of gender is not linked to the material conditions of capitalism [132]. As such, its concern is neither regulating the sex act by focusing on reproduction nor controlling reproduction so that sex could be enjoyed when it was performed. Resulting from AIDS, and the additional alarming fear of herpes simplex that became prominent a few years later [133], penetrative sex was now considered potentially dangerous [134]. Therefore, appearing sexually attractive in the way encouraged in the 1970s was seen as detrimental and, as a result, masturbation became identified as the safe form of sex with respect to sexually transmitted diseases [135].

A consequence of this new view of masturbation as likely the healthiest form of sex was that sexuality became something linked to self-enjoyment rather than being pleased by or pleasing another [136]. In defining self-enjoyment, how individuals related to sex norms regarding the modern ideals of men and women became the focus. Deciding who one was as a sexual being represented the idea of gender [137]. In this way, gender was a self-advertisement of the type of sexual life to which a person felt most connected. The purpose was no longer attracting a sexual partner (as this could be risky), instead, it was defining the way that each person preferred to approach the world as part of their belief system [138].

Although this was an entirely new way of thinking about sexuality, what was not new were the variables from which people could choose in making their decision of who they were as sexual beings. The options were men, women, or neither men nor women [139]. Choice in relation to dichotomous sex as an attribute was still the defining feature. What was interesting, however, was the way that the questions of what is a man and what is a woman were perceived to be in making this choice. The sexiness of the 1970s related to pursuing pleasure with the display of long hair was no longer relevant. Rather, in deciding their gender, people returned to the modern binary choices for one's sex before sexuality became about pleasure [140], increasingly infantilizing themselves with the complete removal of their body hair [106,141].

AIDS itself became controllable for those living with HIV as a result of two biomedical interventions that had been introduced in the past decade to prevent HIV, treatment as prevention (TasP) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), each proven to be remarkably effective. However, sex for pleasure was now seen as potentially perilous as a result of the memory of AIDS, the preoccupation with acquiring herpes, and increasing trends in bacterial sexually transmitted infections [142]. As a result, the only truly safe form sex with another was thought to be that which came with the purpose of reproduction in a fully committed relationship [143]. On the other hand, commitment for the purpose of reproduction now extended to same-sex couples who expanded their ability to reproduce to include choices outside the pair bond [144,145]. In other words, once again, when selecting their gender, the extremes that people looked to were the image of the strong man willing and able to fight and the woman who would care for the home, children, and spirituality [146]. This has recently been noted in a study that found the extremes of sex to be greater the more gender equals the society [147]. One's gender thus became defined as some form of melding of these extreme characteristics.

Yet, regarding postmodern thought, another important aspect is the inclusion of all points of view in creating a consensus. A predominant aspect of this is the use of internet-gleaned postings to compile points of view in understanding and interpreting the self [148].



This is particularly relevant regarding sexual practices—and the most visited sites providing information concerning these sexual practices are pornographic [149]. For those who are not deterred from indulging in sex, the rise in online pornography introduced people to a range of sexual behaviors previously unknown to most people pre-internet. As a result, what was expected of trusted partners with respect to sexual performance demanded, for example, unprotected anal sex, oral–penile sex, as well as anal–oral sex promoted on these pornography sites [149]. This need to emulate pornographic actors meant that interventions to promote the use of condoms in homosexuals for example, though found effective for a few months, waned within a year; this is especially so as oral sex rarely involves condom use [142]. At the same time, it is noted that those who engage in these high-risk sexual behaviors are those most prone to acquiring sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) [114].

As a result of these developments, gender, unlike the sex for pleasure of the 1970s, has become a serious notion in postmodernism. When the sexual act could now result in detrimental consequences as a result of increasingly prevalent STDs [114] and the knowledge of current sexual practices as presented in pornographic sites is expected by partners, deciding on one's gender demands dedication. If, for example, one's gender is counter to the sex with which a person was born, the person—in valuing their gender—is expected and even encouraged by celebrities who have undergone such procedures [150] to use the health system to medically change their sex to correspond to their gender [151]. Where being a man used to mean going to war for one's country, potentially it now meant going to war against one's own body as medically based, normative understandings of sex and gender continued to place undue restrictions on people's autonomy [152], although, from the standpoint of trans people, the more formidable war is against the bio-medical dominance in sex determination [153].

It is, perhaps, in countering this increasingly public definition of one's gender that Furry culture was initiated—to begin to determine gender as something irrespective of the ideals of identifying as either a man or a woman [154]. Furies involve dressing as non-human anime characters, sometimes expressing sexual engagement and gender subjectivity through that practice [155]. The identification as a Furry is deeply felt and may include more serious identification with actual animals themselves, as some choose to live in an everyday sense of being their preferred animal [65]. This is seen as a result of lifestyles in postmodern culture moving into being post-human and subscribing to becoming animals [156]. Representing a postmodern subculture, the Furry community construction of identity emerged through very dispersed online voices of those interested in this particular activity, creating a language and a shared sense of community with respect to gender [157]. Yet, similar to the equivocation regarding the sex act in postmodernism generally, Furry culture is also highly represented by those who publicly deny the identification of being a Furry with sexuality [147]. Yet, at the same time, Furry culture also is dominated by significant interest in, and the online posting of, Furry-related porn material [158].

The mistrust of traditional notions of sexuality that evolved with respect to postmodernism can be seen, within the United States, to have climaxed with the overturning of *Roe versus Wade* in 2022, revoking the constitutional right to seek abortion care in the United States [159]. With this judgment, it became evident that the idea of the sex act as a private matter primarily for fun that may result in an unwanted pregnancy that could be terminated was no longer predominant. When engaging in heterosexual sex, people were now expected to be responsible, and if pregnancy was the result, then the woman was legally expected to carry through with the pregnancy. In this way, women lost control over both their autonomy and privacy with respect to the outcome of heterosexual acts [160]. As a result, heterosexual acts were now considered ones that should be well-thought-out and only engaged in by those with the expectation that a new life may be the result [161]. The heterosexual sex act, if considered playful at all, retained a focus on pleasure only in committed relationships where at least one person in the relationship was willing to take individual responsibility for the rise in pregnancy that was predicted [162]. Furthermore, in this retuning of focus on sex related to reproduction with respect to the extremes in

ideals of gender identity, there is concern that the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* will lead to the cancellation of same-sex marriages because they are considered based on pleasure rather than reproductive responsibility [163].

Consequently, particularly in the United States, heterosexuality now had two reasons to be feared: the possibility of STDs and unwanted pregnancies that cannot be legally terminated. Furthermore, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* also brought with it increasing assaults on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) rights in legislatures across the United States [164]. As a result, the chosen alternative has increasingly become identifying as asexual—that is, not attracted to others sexually [165]. Asexuals may be interested in hugging and cuddling [166], but they self-identify as lacking sexual attraction [167]. Some may avoid all forms of sex, but many asexuals achieve sexual gratification through masturbation [168].

#### 4. Discussion

As postmodernism has encouraged individuals to have gender identities rather than to be displays of their sex for others, it is reasonable for gender to abandon its current connection with the dichotomies of sex. What is envisioned is that people treat their gender as irrelevant to their biological makeup. Fitness for reproduction—that is, the social conventions for men and women with respect to reproduction based on biology—should no longer guide people in determining their gender. Rather, as an example, people would develop a similar attitude to their gender as they have to their hair. In the same way that no person would likely feel compelled to remove their scalp because they do not like the hair with which they are born, in the meaning of gender that is not concerned with the modern understanding of sex, no person would undergo medical procedures on their body merely because the biology they were born with does not match their gender. Just as people change their hairstyle whenever they want—with perhaps some social ramifications [169] but without legal and biological consequences—individuals should feel free to change their gender without medical intervention when it suits them and not be held legally and biologically accountable for doing so in following the postmodern understanding of gender as identity. Furry culture is one option that represents changing one's gender as it suits the individual without medical intervention [170].

How this change would affect daily life is that when a baby is born, asking if it is a boy or a girl would become similar to asking if it has any hair. People will know that being born one sex does not determine the gender the child will choose, similar to if the child is born with no hair, it says nothing about the hair it will have in the future. The point is, in both cases, parents and society, in general, will have to wait to see how the child's gender (and its hair) turn out. In the meantime, parents may refer to the child in the gender they prefer, just as they might choose to put a bow on the head of a hairless child or choose not to assign a gender at all—although the majority of parents still adhere to binary notions of gender [171]. To overcome this prejudice, parents would be encouraged to watch for signs that their child is not comfortable with the ideas of gender that parents are suggesting with their words and actions. In the same way that, as they grow, parents give their children more responsibility in deciding how they keep their hair, it is envisioned they will offer the same type of responsibility to their children in deciding their gender.

#### *Limitations*

The account that has been presented regarding the evolution of sex as a concept in modern thought and gender as an idea of postmodern thought has been presented as if that evolution were straightforward and complete—it is not. The focus has been on when attitudes changed regarding sexuality to the point that these changes represented the popular understanding of the time. Yet, for almost every assertion that has been made regarding modern or postmodern thought related to sex, gender, or sexuality (or capitalism), there are exceptions. Furthermore, instead of disappearing, each of the views

regarding sex in the modern era of thought and the in-between time still continue to be represented today as subcultures in the world dependent on particular conditions.

For countries where factory work is undertaken under conditions similar to those of the beginning of capitalism, the concept of sex in defining sex roles corresponds to that of early modern thought [172]. In this way, the sex role of men today continues under these conditions to be to produce and that of women to reproduce, with the sharp distinction being between the workplace and the home where work is the defining culture [173]. Under these conditions, there is no consideration of the idea of gender as identity found in postmodern thought. In other words, the conditions of capitalism act as the controlling aspect of sex roles in these cases, similar to early modern thought, and when such conditions exist with respect to production, how sex roles are understood remains as they were recognized during that period in history.

Regarding the search for the normal, concerning the binary nature of sex that originated with Quetelet's statistical revolution in the nineteenth century, to a large degree, the interest in determining the normal with respect to men on the one hand and women on the other remains a focus of certain psychological research, even though there is current neuroscience evidence undermining the gender binary [11]. In this regard, the core belief remains for this psychological research that there are two discrete categories sorting individuals and that membership to these categories is biologically determined, recognizable at birth, stable over a lifetime, important, meaningful in defining self, and remains powerfully predictive with respect to various psychological variables [141]. To this extent, such present psychological research is still bound to the sex roles understood as normal within modern thought, similar to the late nineteenth century.

Although public support for eugenic principles ended in Western countries with the rulings of the Nuremberg trials [174], Russia, for example, continues to represent the largest and most powerful country openly basing political decisions on ideology inspired by the eugenics movement with respect to sex. The invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, although not an ethnic conflict per se [175], represents the most recent example of Russian policy to regain territory that was at one time Russian [176] to be inhabited by Russian people, as the country's leaders consider Russians to epitomize the sex roles of men and women most effectively and, consequently, for Russians to be the legitimate heirs to the region [177].

Considering sexual liaisons to be primarily about a full range of pleasure, and sex as a quality indicating the ability of men to engage in this pleasure and women to provide it through their sexiness [178], remained a visible public interest once the idea of gender became commonplace. The rise of online pornography [179] and popular themes of SM in the twenty-first century [180] attest to this. However, that sex as pleasure was no longer to be supported publicly became evident with the guilty verdict of movie producer Harvey Weinstein, who was convicted on 24 February 2020 on two counts of committing a criminal sexual act in the first-degree and third-degree rape [181]. Even more recently, on 9 May 2023, the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, was found to have sexually abused columnist E. Jean Carroll [182]. Similar to many men of their age [183], they continued to presuppose sex as being for pleasure and supported the roles of men and women in this regard since the 1970s—something brought to the forefront by feminist critique [184]. As a result of Weinstein's convictions, public sentiment towards sex as pleasure turned in a different direction [185], supported by the postmodern interest in gender as sexual identity developed with the early public focus on the #MeToo movement, founded in 2017, where women publicly self-identified as being victims of rape to an overwhelming and unexpected degree [186].

Left unmentioned in this account of the evolution of sex as a concept in modern thought and gender as an idea in postmodern thought is the role of religion in maintaining the dichotomy of male and female. The reason is that the role of teaching dependent on religious texts has been continuous in this regard [187], although policies have changed for some religions regarding inclusion of sexually diverse members in the congregation

as well as recognizing and performing same-sex marriages [188,189]. It is because these religious views regarding the roles of men and women are based on texts that have not been modified over this period that religious views following these texts have not been a powerful catalyst in the evolution of sex as a modern concept or gender as a postmodern idea. For this reason, the role of religion in relation to sex and gender has remained outside this discussion. Nevertheless, certain religions over this period have become more militant in their views on the distinction they recognize in the sex roles of men and women, as has occurred with the fundamentalist influence of Islam in countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Sudan [190]. At the same time, all religions have had to come to terms with the international shift from pro-fertility norms to individual rights norms in seeing their sudden decline, as the majority of countries in the world have become significantly less religious since 2007 [191].

## 5. Conclusions

The modern idea of sex and the postmodern idea of gender have been recognized as two terms that have changed their meaning over time and, though based on opposing principles, are common in their understanding that they are attributes in relation to the dichotomy of men and women. Sex has been revealed to have been primarily concerned with reproduction in modern thought and, during a transition period, with pleasure. In both, sex before postmodern thought was considered a positive activity. However, with the sex act between two individuals re-evaluated as a result of a fear of STDs, sex between two heterosexual individuals became a non-positive activity (although not necessarily negative) in postmodern thought, requiring a committed relationship. This led to an assessment that, by necessity, sex between individuals should be primarily about reproduction. Nevertheless, at the same time, the postmodern concern of including all points of view as witnessed through the internet has increased interest in the range of sexuality visible through pornography and discussions of non-binary sexuality. The results of these changes in thinking are in two directions. With respect to the primacy of reproduction, abortion is no longer a constitutional right in the United States, a decision that may lead other countries to consider the idea that engaging in sex most importantly relates to reproduction, threatening the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. Regarding the postmodern expansion in thinking concerning gender, powerful white men are now being held accountable for their publicly perceived sexual transgressions, which is in line with the growing international interest in individual rights over reproductive rights. In this regard, increasingly, asexuality is the sexual orientation people are recognizing as their gender identity based on disinterest in interpersonal sex and not being attracted to others for sexual purposes. It has been suggested that gender identity, to be a separate idea from sex, cannot be based on the statistically created sex binary. With gender identity separate from sex, individuals then would be free to express their sexuality as it suited them, garnering no more social interest than might a new haircut. The Furry culture phenomenon represents a development in this direction in need of further study regarding the continuing evolution of sexuality.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declare no conflict of interest.

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