Introduction

The image of the sexually innocent child lies at the heart of Western constructions of childhood. While there may be debates about whether children need to be kept ignorant about sex or whether they simply have no sexual feelings, the notion of childhood as a protected space leaves little room for discussions of children’s sexuality. Although puberty is generally acknowledged to bring with it the start of sexual feelings and experimentation, this, too, causes great anxieties and attempts at adult control. Children’s sexuality is one of the great concerns of early 21st-century Western societies and lies at the heart of discussions about personal and social identity. It is not a topic that has been studied in great depth by anthropologists, for reasons that the next section of this chapter will go on to discuss, but what is apparent from a cross-cultural comparison is that what are seen as universal, biological drives from a Western perspective seem very different elsewhere and that the cherished characterization of the child as a sexual innocent is not ubiquitous. Acknowledging the sensitivities of the issues surrounding this subject, this chapter will examine what is known about children’s experiences of sex, and how they and their communities understand sexuality. It will look at the difficulties involved in studying the subject and the influence of Freud on Western thinking, before turning to the few ethnographies that have shown the variations in children’s sexual cultures.
Anthropology, Sexuality, and Childhood

Different, and sometimes “exotic,” sexual practices have been a long-discussed theme in anthropology, from Bronislaw Malinowski’s provocatively entitled *The Sexual Lives of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), to more recent, reflective anthropological work that has looked at how anthropologists’ own sexuality and sexual behavior have informed understandings of identity, community relations, methodology, and kinship (Wade 1993; Kulick and Willson 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999). Anthropologists have reclaimed sexuality from biology, rejecting the idea of sexuality as a universal, natural impulse. Indeed, the more anthropologists have examined sexual practices and ideas about sexualities, the more it has become clear that sexual acts and behavior do not carry the same meanings cross-culturally, that the idea of a universal “sex drive” is false, and that rather than culture being the “added extra” which might explain the odd variation in sexual practice, it lies at the heart of understanding different sexualities (Caplan 1987; Rubin 1989; Vance 1991). In Carol Vance’s analysis, “a sexual act does not carry with it a universal social meaning, [therefore] it follows that the relationship between sexual acts and sexual meanings is not fixed, and it is projected from the observer’s time and place at great peril” (1991:878).

Despite a few recent ethnographies which have celebrated different sexual cultures and talked in explicit terms about sexual practices (Gregor 1985; Parker 1991; Crocker and Crocker 1994; Fordham 1995, 1998), detailed analyses of sexual behavior have been largely absent from ethnographic accounts. Cora Du Bois’s 1944 study of the Alor in Java is one of the few books in which an anthropologist has asked very directly and explicitly about exactly which sexual acts are performed and enjoyed within a community. Generally, however, studying sexuality has proved problematic for anthropologists, and to date there is still a certain squeamishness about prying too intimately into matters that are often viewed as private. Furthermore, anthropologists must rely solely on what they observe (which can be awkward when studying sexual behavior) and what they are told, while knowing that there is a usually a big difference between what people do and what they say they do, or between what they think they should do and their actual behavior, a situation succinctly summed up by Parker et al.:

The description of sexual culture, in turn, involves a set of basic distinctions between cultural ideals vs. actual practice, public vs. private conduct,
and prescribed vs. voluntary behavior. While the stated norms of a society may ideally require one mode of behavior, in reality a wide range of different behaviors may actually be found in any given community. What people say and do in public with regard to sexuality may differ greatly from and even contradict their private sexual behavior. The forms of sexual behavior that are prescribed in different situations may contrast sharply with the ways in which individuals may behave voluntarily. (1991:79–80)

Sexual behavior is also a difficult area to explore because of the instability and uncertainties surrounding the various definitions of sexuality and the multiple meanings around the same acts. Sexuality in some instances may be seen as being synonymous with reproduction or, conversely, as a social problem demanding intervention to prohibit fertility (the concern about teenage sexuality in the UK and the USA, for example, consists largely of how to instruct young people not to get pregnant). It comes with a variety of connotations, covering not only sexual acts such as intercourse or masturbation but also sexual knowledge or unactualized sexual feelings, and, in a Western context, sexuality also suggests enjoyment and appreciation of sexual experience, as well as being closely tied to personal identity. However, whether these ideas, especially about the inherent pleasurability of sex, are universal or fundamentally Western is highly debatable, and not all communities necessarily equate sex and pleasure, or indeed sexual activity and social or personal identity.

In terms of children’s sexuality and sexual behavior, these problems can be particularly difficult, and the unease that many feel when talking to children about their sexual behavior has meant that even anthropologists who specialize in children have largely shied away from discussions of children and sex. As attitudes in the West toward homosexuality or premarital sex have become more tolerant, and such acts carry less stigma, those toward child sex have hardened. Although children in Europe and North America are having sex earlier than before, and their experience and knowledge of sex may be greater than that of children in previous generations, children’s sexual behavior, especially if it involves any sort of age imbalance between partners, remains very difficult to discuss without accusations of prurience or even perversion. In contemporary Western societies, adult/child sex causes particular repugnance and is seen as inherently abusive. Outside the West, however, this is not universally understood or applicable and there are ethnographic cases in which children and teenagers are encouraged, and expected, to have sex with those very much older than themselves. Discussing these is problematic and, given
the acute sensitivities around the subject, it is not surprising that little work done by anthropologists concerns children’s enjoyment of sex, or their own sexual cultures, or that studies have tended to focus on abuse rather than enjoyment. Yet even the work done on sexual abuse has often remained theoretical; there are few anthropologists who wish to accuse the people who have hosted them, and whom they wish to understand, of abusing their children. Moreover, sexual abuse, by its very nature, is secretive, transgressive, and difficult to observe or discuss.

In the contemporary West it is axiomatic that sexual experience and sexual identity are intertwined and that the type of sexual experience defines a large part of identity, so that labels such as homosexual or heterosexual have become intrinsic parts of both social and private identity. As social historian Jeffrey Weeks asks of the West: “how is it that in our society sex is seen not just as a means of biological reproduction nor a source of harmless pleasure, but, on the contrary, has come to be seen as the central part of our being, the privileged site in which the truth of ourselves is to be found?” (1981:6). From an anthropological perspective, however, this identification may not always be the case. In Thailand, for example, the rise of a specific gay identity is a very recent phenomenon, first identified in the late 1980s when the arrival of HIV/AIDS led to a backlash against the previous tolerance of homosexual acts (Jackson 1989). Until that point, it was acknowledged that men could commit sexual acts with other men, and even enjoy them, but that this should not preclude marriage and children, which were the primary focus of a person’s identity. In terms of understanding children’s sexuality, this conflation of identity and experience is particularly important. The “wrong” sort of sexual experience in childhood is thought to damage children so fundamentally that they can never recover, yet ethnographic studies of children’s lives suggest that this need not be the case in contexts where sexuality is differently perceived. The ethnographies that will be discussed later in the chapter complicate any easy identification of certain types of early sexual experience with later adult dysfunction.

**Children and Sex: The Influence of Freud**

It is impossible to talk about children’s sexuality without reference to Sigmund Freud, who popularized the notion of the innately sexual child and who understood sexuality as part of the natural developmental process.
His influence on anthropology, and indeed on more general understandings of sexuality, cannot be underestimated, and even those who disagree with him are compelled to engage with his ideas. Furthermore, his influence is such that many of the concepts he first identified, such as the Oedipus complex, the death wish, or penis envy, have become well known, even by those who have not read him. Freud’s great contribution to the study of children’s sexuality was to argue that, far from being a time of asexual innocence, early childhood was a time of sexual conflict, repression, and tension. Freud claimed that childhood activities such as thumb sucking or genital manipulation had to be seen as part of a child’s growing sexual nature which the adult world aimed to bring under control and repress. That unresolved sexual conflicts in childhood could cause psychological problems in adulthood was also central to Freud’s thesis, a point which many anthropologists have built upon in their own studies of sexuality and sexual repression (see chapter 8 for a discussion of initiation as a way of overcoming these psychological traumas which originated in childhood repression).

In 1905 Freud published *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which looked broadly at issues of sexuality and which sought to show the links between early childhood experiences and adult behavior and personality. In the second essay, “Infantile Sexuality,” he argued that sexual feelings were present in the child from the moment of birth and rejected the idea held by his contemporaries that sexual experiences and sexual feelings began only at puberty. He claimed:

One feature of the popular view of the sexual instinct is that it is absent in childhood and only awakens in the period of life described as puberty. This, however, is not merely a simple error but one that has had grave consequences, for it is mainly to this idea that we owe our present ignorance of the fundamental conditions of sexual life. . . . So far as I know, not a single author has clearly recognized the regular existence of a sexual instinct in childhood; and in writings that have become so numerous on the development of children, the chapter on “Sexual Development” is as a rule omitted. (1953a[1905]:173)

In this essay, Freud went on to argue that everyone, from birth onward, was driven by sexual or bodily pleasure and this pleasure was derived from the release of mental and physical tension. However, the instinctual efforts by infants and young children to gain pleasure were frequently punished and thwarted by parental and social control. Children therefore experienced their childhoods as a series of conflicts that had to be dealt
with and overcome in order to turn them into healthy, normal adults. In other work, Freud argued that for some adults, unresolved conflicts in various stages of their development could lead to conditions such as mental illness, hysteria, or homosexuality in adult life (Freud 1953b[1913]).

Freud labeled the earliest stage of infant development the oral one, in which the infant sought release and obtained his or her pleasure through sucking. The anal stage followed on from this, during which pleasure was linked to release through defecation. Afterward the young child developed an interest in his or her genitals and acknowledged them as a source of pleasure, understood by Freud as the phallic stage of development. Furthermore, he claimed that during the phallic stage of development (occurring around the age of five), male children went through a particular phase of psychosexual development characterized by the Oedipal conflict. This occurred when the boy began to be jealous of his father as his mother’s sexual partner, feeling desire for the exclusive love of his mother and an unconscious wish for his father’s death. This, however, aroused the father’s anger and the boy became afraid that the outcome of his desire would be castration by his father; a fear Freud called the castration anxiety. Around the age of five, the Oedipus complex was usually resolved by the repression of both attraction for the opposite-sex parent and hatred of the same-sex parent. A normal child at this point internalized his father’s rules, understanding that he could not sexually posses his mother and should turn his attention toward other objects of desire. He then entered a “latency” period when sexual motivations became less obvious and which did not become as significant again until puberty, when bodily development and genital changes occurred.

Freud’s views were controversial when first published and have been continuously debated ever since, especially by writers who argue that Freud ignored evidence of actual child sexual abuse because he would not, and could not, believe in it (Masson 1984). There is also still unease about whether children really are sexual beings from such a young age, or, if they do act in ways that adults might interpret as sexual, whether they are aware of this, or understand it as such. Freud’s work raised important questions about children’s sexuality which have yet to be definitively answered, such as whether children are sexually active and aware, but adults ignore or repress their sexuality, or whether they are sexually innocent, in the sense that they know nothing about sex. Is sexual experience a natural part of a child’s development or an aberration? These are all issues that those looking at children’s sexuality have to deal with, but because
of their sensitivity and the difficulties inherent in this subject, these questions have remained largely unanswered by anthropologists.

**Incest and Abuse**

From the earliest days of the discipline, anthropologists have noted, and analyzed, the universality of the incest taboo and the abomination of having sex with, or marrying, close relatives. Freud (1953b[1913]) himself used the work of Sir James Frazer, who collected accounts of aboriginal customs and who discussed the concept of taboo, to draw his own conclusions about the complete abhorrence of incest in all societies. Although, of course, the idea of what constitutes a close relative is culturally defined, and there is no single set of prohibitions that apply everywhere, all societies have marriage laws about who can marry whom, and who is forbidden to marry. One of the major concerns of anthropologists has been to deconstruct different ideas about incest and use them to discuss wider ideas of kinship and marriage (Fox 1983).

Although much of this work might seem tangential to children’s sexual lives, it contains some of the few hints that exist from the ethnographic record about children’s experiences of sex. Robert Fox, for instance, quotes Melford Spiro, who studied sexual attraction and sexual behavior among children on Israeli kibbutzes and described how children of around the age of two showed signs of “heterosexual behavior,” including “stroking or caressing, kissing and touching of genitals” (quoted in Fox 1983:30). While this may be true, such statements need to be interpreted with care, and the labeling of this behavior as heterosexual says as much about the adult beholder as it does about the child. Jean La Fontaine cautions against seeing such play by children as necessarily sexual, arguing that “before puberty children may engage in what is usually termed ‘sexual play’ with one another. This is how adults interpret it, in the same way that adults understand much childish behaviour: by reference to their own understanding” (1990:159). She further makes the point that much of what we know about children’s sexuality is based on supposition. There is little evidence about how much young brothers and sisters actually do play sexually with each other (although it is frequently assumed that they do). Nor is it clear if the curiosity that children may feel about the genitals of other children is an exploration of gender and bodily difference or the stirrings of sexuality.
The most serious problem with discussing incest and children's sexual behavior, however, concerns the fact that, until recently, anthropologists have tended to assume that taboos against, for example, father/daughter incest meant that sex between these people did not occur (La Fontaine 1988). It was not until the 1980s that social anthropologists began to look at why sexual abuse occurred even when there were strong taboos against it, and at the links between incest, sexual abuse, and wider socioeconomic and political issues. Three books in particular, Jill Korbin’s *Child Abuse and Neglect* (1981), Judith Ennew’s *The Sexual Exploitation of Children* (1986), and Jean La Fontaine’s *Child Sexual Abuse* (1990), have been very influential in this respect because they have located child’s sexuality within familial power structures and analyzed the abuse of children as being the result of an imbalance in power relationships, and as a betrayal of trust between adult and child, rather than as an extension of sexuality.

Despite Freudian claims about innate childhood sexuality, the Western ideal of childhood as a time of sexual innocence remains strong and is increasingly promoted as a global ideal. Many of the “modern panics” of recent times have focused on threats to this sacred, sexual innocence (Best 1990; La Fontaine 1998). The debate now focuses on whether children have always been sexually abused, and it has only begun to be talked about, or whether this is a newer problem, exacerbated in the West by the breakdown of the nuclear family. What is indisputable, however, is that child sexual abuse is now considered a serious social problem, and that concern about protecting children’s sexual innocence has grown exponentially. In 1975 an American psychiatric textbook estimated the numbers of children sexually abused to be one in a million (La Fontaine 1990:39), a number that today seems absurdly small. There is also a strong belief that any threat to children’s sexual innocence will damage a child so fundamentally that recovery may not be possible. As sexual identity and sexual experience are seen as synonymous, sexual abuse is understood as being so psychologically damaging as to distort the whole of a child’s personality.

From an anthropological perspective, the recent interest in child sexual abuse has provided parallels with other long-standing concerns. Jean La Fontaine (1992) has drawn explicit links between the figure of the pedophile in Western cultures and that of the witch in other contexts, and the fears over Satanic and ritual abuse can clearly be seen to fit into sociologist Stanley Cohen’s paradigm of moral panics (Cohen 1973; La Fontaine 1998). Despite the majority of sexual abuse cases occurring within the family, the overwhelming concern is focused on “stranger danger” or
the monstrous abuse of children by Satanic practitioners. The lack of evidence for the latter and the relative infrequency of the former seem to have little impact on the fear that child sexual abuse generates. As with many concerns of the West, there is now evidence that these fears have been exported and are becoming more global. While small, isolated communities may still practice very different sexual behaviors and have radically different understandings of sexuality, the idea of an asexual, enclosed childhood is becoming the norm (Boyden 1997) and anthropologists have found evidence of a rise in concern about sexual abuse outside the West. Roger Goodman (2002) has looked at the discovery of sexual abuse in Japan, where, unlike the West, the physical abuse of children has been of as much concern as the sexual. In Thailand and the Philippines, meanwhile, fears of child sexual abuse have been linked to mass tourism and the figure of the child sex tourist (Black 1994; Montgomery 2001a).

In India, child marriage is sometimes analyzed by nongovernmental activists as a form of child sexual abuse. Similarly, when concern about child prostitution was at its height in the 1990s, Indian devadasi cults came under scrutiny as possible covers for sexual abuse. These cults are centered on certain temples in which girls are dedicated to local deities. The girls are sponsored and initiated by local men and may be expected to have sex with them in return for their protection. Devadasi are variously claimed to be dancers, sacred concubines, or prostitutes. Although some anthropologists, such as Frédérique Marglin (1985), claim that girls do not dance or take lovers until after puberty, there have been claims in the media that much younger girls are used as child prostitutes under the cover of being devadasi. The reality may lie somewhere between these two extremes. Treena Orchard’s recent study of devadasi girls (2004) in rural Karnataka in India has suggested a more complex picture where young women and girls do appear to practice some form of religiously sanctioned prostitution. While acknowledging that there were exchanges of sex for money, mediated through claims of sacred sacrifice, Orchard’s work focuses more holistically on the entire sexual culture of the devadasi’s lives, in which they experience sex differently in different types of relationships. Although seen by nongovernmental and medical organizations as social problems, vectors of diseases, and as the practitioners of a debased tradition, the devadasi themselves see their sexual lives very differently and are able to distinguish between acceptable and nonacceptable sexual behaviors and between their own sense of personal identity and the sexual acts they perform.
Ethnographies of Children and Sexuality

The number of ethnographies that focus directly on children and sexuality has been very limited and descriptions of children’s sexual experiences have often been given as part of broader discussions of children’s and young people’s lives. Malinowski, for instance, discussed Trobriand children’s sexual games and sexual behaviors claiming that “at an early age children are initiated by each other, or sometimes by a slightly older companion, into the practices of sex. Naturally at this stage they are unable to carry out the act properly, but they are content themselves with all sorts of games in which they are left quite at liberty by their elders, and thus they can satisfy their curiosity and their sensuality directly and without disguise” (1927:55). Adults noted this without concern and would refer to it as “copulation amusement” (1927:56). Other anthropologists have also noted that certain forms of sexual behavior are common amongst young children, even if they are disapproved of or denied by the adults in the community, and there is an awareness that young people do have sex, even if it is not talked about. Melvin Konner (2005), writing about the !Kung of northwestern Botswana, takes it as self-evident that sexual experimentation went on amongst young people and that although it was disapproved of by adults, they also admitted it was a normal and inevitable part of development.

Margaret Mead, in her pioneering work on children’s lives in Samoa, looked at adolescent girls’ sexuality as part of a larger analysis which aimed to challenge the prevailing idea that the “storm and stress” of adolescence, first identified by psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904, was biological in origin (see chapter 1). *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1971[1928]) was Mead’s attempt to refute Hall’s argument that this was a universal, biologically driven stage and she argued that it was culture, as much as biology, which affected young people’s lives in adolescence. This book contains some of the earliest work on children and young people’s sexuality, and while sexual behavior was not the primary focus of her work, its descriptions challenged ideas about the universality of sexuality. In the book Mead analyzed the daily lives of Samoan girls from infancy through early childhood until adolescence, aiming to make explicit comparisons between the USA and Samoa by looking at how adolescence, and the effects of puberty and sexuality, were managed differently in the two societies, thereby emphasizing the importance of culture. According to Mead, the girls whose
lives she studied started to take a series of lovers just after puberty. Usually a girl’s lover would be much older than herself and, before her marriage, she would expect to have many lovers or casual sexual partners. Sexuality was identified as a source of pleasure, rather than tension, and the flexibility of adolescent girls’ sexual behavior gave them freedom from many of the problems suffered by their counterparts in the USA. In Samoa, stress and strain were not an inevitable part of adolescence, and Mead concluded:

Adolescence represented no period of crisis or stress, but was instead an orderly developing of a set of slowly maturing interests and activities. The girls’ minds were perplexed by no conflicts, troubled by no philosophical queries, beset by no remote ambitions. To live as a girl with many lovers as long as possible and then to marry in one’s own village, near one’s own relatives, and to have many children, these were uniform and satisfying ambitions. (1971[1928]:129)

Mead identified several cultural reasons why growing up in Samoa was less stressful to both individual and society than it was in the USA, and sexual freedom was one of them. Young people in Samoa also had very limited choices which revolved around staying in their villages with their families, marrying and having children in due course, and remaining within their communities until they died. In contrast, North American adolescents were bombarded with choices and options which made their lives more difficult as they had to decide what they wanted from life.

Mead’s work has generated much debate, and a certain amount of hostility, ever since. Most publicly she was criticized by Derek Freeman (1983, 1999), who claimed that not only did she overlook many of the sources of tension in Samoa and played down the strict control that elders had over girls’ sexuality, but also that Mead’s informants hoaxed her, telling her what she wanted to hear rather than giving her accounts of their actual behavior and beliefs, which were in fact very different. Based on his own fieldwork and interviews with surviving informants, Freeman maintained that the young women of Samoa had lied to Mead, claiming that they indulged in casual and premarital sex, when in fact virginity was a highly prized cultural ideal. It has proved hard to either confirm or refute these accusations. By the time they were interviewed by Freeman, Mead’s informants were elderly women, many of whom had converted to Christianity after years of missionary activity and who may well have
played down their experiences as girls and were now expressing changed cultural ideas of chastity. They may also have been more comfortable talking about their sexual experiences with another woman of a similar age than they would with a much younger man many decades later. Whatever the criticisms of Mead, however, her work retains valuable insights into adolescent sexuality that deserve to be emphasized. Although sexuality was not the only focus of her work in Samoa, she drew an important conceptual distinction between the study of sexuality and that of marriage or child-bearing. She was also one of the first anthropologists to take children’s experiences of sex seriously and to write about them without negative comparison to Western ideals. In showing that the “problems” of adolescence were as much cultural as biological, she also showed that sexuality has to be discussed within its cultural context, that sexual morality was not universal, and that children’s experiences, and enjoyment, of sex depended very much on cultural expectations. These insights have all been supported by others who have focused more directly on children’s sexual behavior.

In many societies, young children are very knowledgeable about sex and it is part of their daily lives. In communities where privacy is not valued, children are likely to grow up hearing adults talking about sex, seeing, and even watching, their parents and other adults having sex, and its mechanics are no great mystery to them. Cora Du Bois (1944) claimed that in her study among the Alor of Java, young boys openly masturbated in public and that sexual knowledge was freely available to children. She assumed that by the age of five, young children knew the terminology and meanings of words concerned with intercourse and birth. Thomas Gregor, who has written extensively about the sexual behavior and sexuality of an Amerindian group living in Central Brazil called the Mehinaku, claims that parents openly attribute sexual motivation to very young children, joking about it and viewing it with amusement: “As toddlers play and tussle in a promiscuous huddle on the floor, parents make broad jokes about their sexual relations: ‘Look! Glipe is having sex with Pairuma’s daughter’ ” (1985:29). In this environment, an eight-year-old boy told Gregor, “I haven’t had sex yet, but in a few years I will” (1985:29).

Sexual knowledge, and the open acknowledgment of sexuality by children, is not uncommon. However, this does not mean that children’s sexuality is always viewed as unproblematic or that Mehinaku society does not distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. While little attention is paid to children’s sexual experimentation, children are
expected to do this discreetly away from the community. If children are caught, they are teased and taught that public displays of sexuality are not welcomed. The situation also changes as children get older, and boys in particular are subject to strictures once they reach the age of 12 or 13. The Mehinaku believe that boys do not mature and grow into men naturally and that this process must be brought on through medicine and through sexual abstinence. Around the age of 12, therefore, boys are secluded at one end of the communal house behind a palm wood barrier. Here a boy must take medicine, follow certain dietary rules, speak softly, and above all avoid any sexual contact with women and girls, who, once they reach puberty, become dangerous to boys, and whose menstrual blood and vaginal secretions can cause sickness.

The important point here is that sexual contact must be appropriate and that appropriateness is culturally defined. It is also noticeable that, in this case, sexual contact is limited to young people of roughly comparable ages, and while there might be a debate about how far children see this as sexual, it is harder to argue that it is abusive. Evidence from other ethnographic sources stretches understandings of cultural relativity much further. The Canela, another Amerindian group living in Brazil, have no taboos on premarital sex, and children are encouraged to have frequent and early sexual experiences. Amongst the Canela, it is considered necessary and desirable for both boys and girls to begin experimenting sexually from a young age (around six) both before their marriage, which takes place for girls between the ages of approximately 11 and 13, and after (Crocker and Crocker 1994). Sexual generosity is important in this community and is viewed as an ancestral custom. Girls are expected to take part in “sequential sex” where they take on multiple partners at once, and girls who show any reluctance to do this are described as “stingy” and scolded by their female relatives.

Children up to 6 or 7 grow up watching and hearing adults being open about extramarital trysts and sequential sex and learn how their role models enjoy these activities. Extramarital sex thus becomes a valued expectation of these young people. Experiences continue to enhance this expectation for both sexes into adolescence, when young people become thoroughly involved in extramarital sex themselves. The general atmosphere of joy and fun surrounding extramarital sex may be the principal factor which influences young people to accept and enjoy sequential sex. (Crocker and Crocker 1994:166)
This is not simply a society where girls experience great sexual freedom or where they are able to control their sexuality, but is a society with very different ideas about the body and the nature of sex. The Canela, like other Amerindian groups such as the Huaorani (Rival 1998), believe that once a woman becomes pregnant, any further semen she receives from other men becomes a biological part of the growing baby. Therefore children have several fathers, known as co-fathers or contributing fathers. Sexual intercourse with many men is desirable and necessary for women for the formation of their child. To outsiders these practices may seem bizarre and even repugnant, yet William and Jean Crocker point out that there are strictly observed rules about who can have sex with whom and that child abuse, as it is understood in the West, is very infrequent in this society.

Our concept of child abuse includes the destruction of the child’s trust in kin and others who are supposed to be her or his protectors. We also think of such abuse as involving pain and physical damage to the sexually immature child. . . . The experience of pain in first sex is not a part of Canela sexual lore. Although girls had some anxiety before their first sequential sex, I never heard any discussion of painful experiences. Here again, cultural expectations heavily influence the physical experience. (1994:166–167)

These examples point to the complexities of studying children’s sexuality and the impossibility of doing so without linking discussions to much wider issues of gender roles, reproduction, marriage rules, and even cosmology. In other instances this becomes even more complicated when sexual acts carry very different meanings cross-culturally. The clearest example here is Papua New Guinea, where certain communities practice a form of “ritualized homosexuality.” In his work with the Sambia, Gilbert Herdt has shown how, from the age of seven, boys are gradually initiated into manhood by a series of rituals in six stages that involve fellating or being fellated by other men of the tribe. Herdt explains:

Sambia practice secret homosexual fellation, which is taught and instituted in first-stage initiation. Boys learn to ingest semen from older youths through oral sexual contacts. First- and second-stage initiates may only serve as fellators; they are forbidden to reverse erotic roles with older partners. Third-stage pubescent bachelors and older youths thus act as fellateds, inseminating prepubescent boys. All males pass through both erotic stages,
being first fellators, then fellates: there are no exceptions since all Sambia males are initiated and pressured to engage in homosexual fellatio.

(1993:173)

On reading this passage it is difficult to see anything other than sexual activity, and possibly sexual abuse, going on. Yet it is arguable whether these rituals have anything to do with sex at all. To understand what is happening here involves looking at gender roles in Sambian culture and the cultural meanings placed on semen. Sambian society is rigidly split into male and female, with women being seen as inferior men. In order to turn boys into men, they must be taken away from their mothers, whose milk they have drunk in their early years, and turned into men through the ingestion of semen. Semen is the essence of manhood and it cannot be produced by boys alone. Younger boys therefore have to take semen into their bodies from older partners, and once they have reached a certain stage of maturity they will then pass semen onto others in turn. Herdt claims that initially boys are reluctant to take part in these rituals but come to enjoy them later on. As they become older, boys become betrothed to a preadolescent girl and enter a bisexual phase. When the girl is mature, her husband will give up the homosexual rituals of his youth and become exclusively heterosexual.

The case of the Sambia is an important one because it directs attention away from girls’ sexuality, which is often given much greater prominence than that of boys’, and also because it calls into question the nature of sexual activity. In this instance what is seen as a sexual practice in Western terms becomes something very different when looked at from a Sambian perspective. The expectations on boys to perform fellatio and the cultural meanings given to semen mean that boys cannot become men without being initiated and initiating others in turn. Therefore it is debatable whether these initiation practices have anything to do with sexuality or even if they are sexual acts. Yet Herdt (1999) writes that after an initial reluctance, the boys come to enjoy these activities, and there does seem to be some element of sexual gratification in them, complicating understandings and raising questions about sexuality and sexual pleasure. Whether or not such initiations still occur is harder to know, and Herdt has argued that modernization, globalisation, and the advent of Christianity (among others things) have led to a rapid decline in ritualized homosexuality and that as a custom it is now rare. Bruce Knauf (2003), who worked on ritualized homosexuality in another part of Papua New Guinea, recalled
the shocked and horrified reactions of contemporary young men when he described the practice to them; they voiced disbelief that their fathers had ever done such a thing. That such practices did occur in the past is not disputed, even though there is some unease about the fact that they were labeled ritualized homosexuality, when perhaps the term "boy insemination" would have proved more useful and less open to accusations of imposing false, Western labels.

Child Prostitution

Many of the same difficulties of discussing children and sex turn up in studies of child prostitution, especially when it occurs in non-Western contexts. Prostitution is viewed very strongly as the "wrong" sort of sexual experience for children, violating not only their bodies but also socially constructed ideals of the child who is innocent of sex, work, and money. Child prostitution has been a major concern of the international children's rights movement in recent years and has attracted much media attention. It has often been based on the assumption that the psychological trauma inflicted on children by prostitution is so great that they will never recover. The small amount of anthropological work on children's own understandings of what they do, and how they view sex within this context, however, has given a very different picture (Muecke 1992; Montgomery 2001a; see also, from a sociological perspective, O'Connell-Davison 2005). As previously discussed, definitions of prostitution can depend very much on perspective. The devadasi studied by Orchard were called prostitutes by outsiders and those campaigning to end the practice but the girls themselves rejected this label.

I have previously conducted fieldwork among young prostitutes aged between six and 15 in a small tourist destination in Thailand (Montgomery 2001a). Both boys and girls worked as prostitutes here, and unlike the majority of young prostitutes in Thailand, their clients were exclusively Western, male tourists. The focus of my work was the kinship ties between these children and their families and their own understandings of sexuality, their bodies, and the extent to which they understood prostitution as a form of abuse. The children whom I worked with lived with their families, and one of my main conclusions was the importance of understanding kinship obligations and filial duty in any analysis of the children's justifications for working as prostitutes. It was because of the duties that
kin felt toward one another that the children were able to rationalize and condone what they did. Children were seen as a parental investment with an anticipated return and were expected to work for the family as soon as they were able. Owing to the lack of well-paid jobs in the neighborhood, prostitution was a known source of income that children turned to after they had tried a series of low-paid and dangerous jobs such as begging or scavenging on local garbage tips. The concepts of gratitude and obedience toward parents were taken seriously and the duties that a child had to his or her mother were especially important. The mother/child relationship was viewed as the most important one of the child’s life and the one which carried the heaviest burden of obligation and reciprocity.

This emphasis on filial duty has been a constant theme in ethnographic and other studies of prostitution in Thailand. Economist Pasuk Phongpaichit (1982) has shown that daughters who left their rural homes to work as prostitutes were not running away, or discarding the principles of support and repayment, but were fulfilling them as best they could in a changed environment, by earning money elsewhere and sending home the remittances. Marjorie Muecke (1992) makes the same point, arguing that while their mothers’ generation would have earned money to fulfill their filial obligations through market trading, contemporary young women were likely to earn money through prostitution. Although there has been increasing political and social condemnation of both child and adult prostitutes, and their parents, the one section of society most tolerant of prostitution, at least in its refusal to condemn it, is the Buddhist clergy. With the focus in Thai Buddhism on the intention rather than the act, and on making merit through good deeds, the sale of sex can be understood somewhat differently. Muecke interviewed monks about this, claiming that while “some monks denied that merit could be made through prostitution, most opined that the karmic outcome depended upon the prostitute’s ‘intention’ in prostituting herself. If she did so solely to help others or to make merit and not for pleasure, they found it plausible (but not likely) that her merit would be sufficiently great to counterbalance the demerit of prostituting herself” (1992:894). Other anthropologists have been even more explicit in linking prostitution with the low social role that women occupy in institutional Buddhism (Thitsa 1980; Kirsch 1982, 1985), looking at how the most important source of merit-making open to a man, joining the monkhood, is closed to women. Women are seen as pollutants to monks and the temple and as spiritually inferior to men (Kirsch 1982; Tanabe 1991). This inferiority, combined
with the promotion of female sacrifice as an ideal, helps explain some of the motivation that a dutiful daughter has in becoming a prostitute to help her family. Khin Thitsa writes that “with the low value attached to the female body and the female spirit by Buddhism, they [women] have been sufficiently degraded already to enter prostitution-service” (1980:20).

When I asked the children whom I was working with about prostitution, these ideas were often referred to and I was always told that prostitution was a means to an end, a way of fulfilling the filial obligations that they felt were demanded of them by their families. Although they did not engage with the philosophy, they claimed to be Buddhists and continually made references to what they understood as Buddhist views of filial duty and sacrifice for their families. Despite the known stigma against prostitution, a powerful mitigating circumstance for many of them was the financial support they provided for their mothers. This is not to argue that child prostitution is an intrinsic part of Thai culture or that it is not abusive, but it does emphasize that the children’s view of prostitution should be understood through the cultural reference points of duty and obligation. From the interviews carried out, and the observations made of these children, it was clear that they had profoundly different understandings of sex to those seen as fundamental and non-negotiable by Western observers. For these children, neither prostitution nor sexuality was the focus of their identity, which was based instead on being a dutiful son or daughter, belonging to a society, and fulfilling obligations to their family and to the community.

The children had strategies for rationalizing prostitution and for coming to terms with it. They had found an ethical system whereby the public selling of their bodies did not affect their private sense of humanity and identity. When I asked one 13-year-old about selling her body, she replied “it’s only my body,” but when I asked her about the difference between adultery and prostitution, she told me that adultery was very wrong. In her eyes, adultery was a betrayal of a private relationship whereas prostitution was simply done for money. She could make a clear conceptual difference between her body and what happened to it and what she perceived to be her innermost “self.” She, like the other children interviewed, could delineate clear boundaries between what happened to her body and what affected her personal sense of identity and morality. Betraying family members, failing to provide for parents, or cheating on spouses or boyfriends was roundly condemned, but exchanging sex for money, especially when that money was used for moral ends, was not
blameworthy and violated no ethical codes. Ideas about sexual abuse played limited parts in these children’s understandings of what they did.

My study also showed very different understandings about both the short- and long-term effects of sex on these children. In Western psychological terms such acts would be seen as causing life-long damage, but they were seen very differently in this context. When asked about whether or not she was worried because her eight-year-old son was a prostitute, one mother replied, “It’s just for one hour. What harm can happen to him in one hour?” Even though a child’s body is too small for penetration by an adult and some of the harm done by these men was evident in the bleeding and tearing that occurred during these encounters, this aspect tended to be ignored. It would be easy to condemn the mothers of the children – such physical evidence of abuse must surely have suggested that these encounters were unbearably exploitative and abusive – and yet even this comment must be interpreted with caution as my own personal value judgment. Mothers would condemn such acts and do whatever they could to help their children overcome the pain of such encounters, but the understanding of the effects of such abuse was very different. Mothers did not see it as fundamentally harmful in the long term to their children or as damaging to their mental health. Such occurrences were viewed entirely in physical, rather than psychological, terms, and there was no belief that long-term damage could be inflicted on a child in “just one hour.” Such viewpoints challenge once again the limits of how far cultural relativism can be pushed and whether it is enough to simply take what informants say at face value. Anthropologists have been criticized in the past for ignoring the abuse of children which took place before them (see chapter 6), but even owning my own feelings of revulsion and condemnation at this, it was clear that the children and their parents had a radically different understanding of sexuality and their bodies from my own.

During the time I worked in this community, there were observable changes in the ways in which children talked about sex and there were signs that government and social pressure was changing the way that people behaved, even if there was less evidence that it changed what they believed. Children stopped talking so openly about prostitution, and sometimes referred to it as an “ugly” thing. Both children and their parents became aware of the penalties that allowing prostitution would incur, such as the children being placed in rehabilitation homes and the parents put in prison, with the loss of all parental rights. More importantly, HIV/AIDS started to take its toll and many people left the
community, afraid of disease. Globalization, in the form of pressure from nongovernmental organizations, also began to have an impact on these children’s lives, showing that, as ever, ideas about childhood, and appropriate experiences for children, be they sexual, physical, or emotional, change and are influenced by wider social and political forces. However, this study illuminates that even those issues that to modern Western sensibilities are most important – the inviolable body of the child and the sexual innocence that is seen as the right of all children – are not natural, unshakable, universal facts, or even unquestionable human rights. They are challenged and contested in other places by peoples who have a very different understanding of children, their bodies, their sexualities, and indeed their families and societies.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the little amount of literature that has analyzed children’s sexuality. It has identified several themes and several bodies of work which have looked at children’s sexuality from a variety of angles and which have shown that children’s sexual experience, and their understandings of it, cannot be divorced from its cultural context. Children’s sexuality has very rarely been the focus of anthropological research; ethnographers have looked at it extremely obliquely, and in order to find what is there, we have to look in studies of incest, religion, and, more recently, abuse. The biggest gap in the literature remains children’s own understandings of their sexual experience and, in particular, an examination of their own ideas about what is sexual. Modern Western concerns about child sexual abuse have made it particularly hard for adult ethnographers to question children about their sexual experiences, and the degree of sensitivity around the subject is such that it is not surprising that many people are disinclined to make it their focus of study or are discouraged from doing so. It remains a subject that is central to modern understandings of children and childhood and it would be a shame if such sensitivities prevented anthropologists from looking at such an important area of child research in the depth it deserves.