

Desire Denied: A Bibliographic Overview of Sexual Inequality and Blind Women

Deborah M. Allen: McNair Scholar

Dr. Virginia Husting & Dr. Robin Allen: Mentors

Social Science



Abstract

This literature review examines social science research on blind women's experiences with sexual relationships. The findings suggest that socially constructed barriers marginalize blind women, often resulting in blind women being labeled as asexual. The intersection of able-ism and sexism positions many blind women as outsiders who do not possess sexual attractiveness. After discussing perspectives that examine socially constructed barriers rather than biological barriers to blind women's sexuality, the paper reviews some consequences of denied sexuality, such as exclusion from heterosexual and homosexual relationships and increased risk of violence. The paper concludes with suggestions on how to challenge socially constructed barriers and a call for further on blind women's experiences with sexual relationships.

Review and Analysis

Sexual democracy should be recognized as a key political struggle, not only because of the importance of the basic human right to sexual autonomy, but also because ... a group's sexual status tends to reflect and reinforce its broader political and social status. I understand sexual agency not merely as the capacity to choose, engage in, or refuse sex acts, but as a more profound good, which is in many ways socially based, involving not only a sense of oneself as a sexual being, but also a larger social dimension in which others recognize and respect one's identity (Wilkerson, 2002, p. 34).

Although my review of the literature indicates more research on blind women's experiences with sexual relationships is needed (Ferrell & Griego, 2001; White, 2003), evidence suggests that socially constructed barriers marginalize blind women, often resulting in blind women being labeled as asexual (Cole & Cole, 1999; Rosenblum, 2001; Watson-Armstrong, O'Rourke, & Schatzlein, 1999; White, 2003). After discussing perspectives that examine socially constructed barriers rather than biological barriers to blind women's sexuality, I review some consequences of denied sexuality, such as internalized self-doubts, exclusion from heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and increased risk of violence. I conclude with suggestions for how to challenge socially constructed barriers and end with ideas for further research.

This biographical essay focuses on American blind women. Since the discourses of blind women vary (Asch, 2004; Ferrell & Griego, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Milian, 2001; Mintz, 2002; Rosenblum, 2001; Schriempf, 2001; Smith, 2004), the inequities discussed here are general patterns that do not apply to all blind women. My research suggests that the intersection of disablism and sexism positions many blind women as outsiders, who do not possess sexual attractiveness (Schriempf, 2001). Nevertheless, my research also suggests some blind women are exceptions and do engage in satisfying sexual relationships (Rosenblum, 2001).

Since blind women embody complex, interconnecting, diverse subject positions involving more than blindness and gender, such as race and religion, this paper provides a simplified, narrow perspective of the lives of blind women who are denied their sexuality (Asch, 2004; Ferrell & Griego, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Milian, 2001; Mintz, 2002; Schriempf, 2001; Smith, 2004; Thomas, 1999). Moreover, because specific research about blind women's sexuality is limited (Ferrell & Griego, 1999; White, 2003), much of the information I use in this paper comes from general research about disabled women. All of the literature I cite comes from disability studies perspectives, and the literature I reviewed dated no earlier than 1999.

My use of the term sexuality is limited to romance and physical acts of sex. In addition, I use the terms

blind women and disabled women rather than using awkward and wordy people-first language, such as women who are blind or visually impaired. Many scholars and activists prefer the use of people-first language because they believe using language that emphasizes the person before a disability reduces a general tendency to judge people by their disabilities rather than by their other unique qualities as human beings; however, other scholars and activists do not adhere to the exclusive use of people-first language, preferring to use blind people and similar terms (Omansky-Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001). As a blind woman, I refer to myself as a blind woman, and my large network of blind friends and acquaintances also call each other blind people. Furthermore, many of the authors I cite in this paper use a mixture of terms, such as blind women, and people-first language.

For most blind people, living with the physical reality of blindness is easier than dealing with negative, dominant, socially constructed beliefs about blindness (Asch, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Milian, 2001; Omansky-Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001; Schriempf, 2001; Thomas, 1999). In his book about the social history of blindness in the United States, Frances Koestler discusses the historical contexts for prejudice blind people have experienced, and he asserts, "Blindness as social liability, blindness as punishment for sin, blindness as uselessness to self and others--these were but three strands woven into the cocoon of myths and superstitions which continue to influence modern attitudes" (2004, p. 3). Status, privilege, and power are typically reserved for bodies that conform to constructed cultural standards (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Milian, 2001; Wilkerson, 2002). Blind women violate hegemonic standards for sexual attractiveness (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Schriempf, 2001; White, 2003).

Common misconceptions label blind people as dependent, incapable of independence, and needing protection (Asch, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Schur, 2004). Socially constructed attitudes and environments that exclude and otherize blind people disadvantage blind people more than lack of sight (Asch, 2004; Milian, 2001; Schriempf, 2001).

In her discussion about social constructions of disabilities, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states, "Disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender" (2002, p. 4).

If human beings' perceptions of physical attractiveness are socially constructed, changing standards that deprive blind women of sexuality will be possible (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Milian, 2001; Rosenblum, 2001; Schriempf, 2001). Instead of emphasizing the need for cures for blindness, many blind people emphasize the need for changing unwelcoming attitudes and environments, such as those posing barriers to blind women's sexual equality (Ferrell & Griego, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2002; McAlland & Ditillo, 1999; Omansky-Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001; Schriempf, 2001; Thomas, 1999).

Rather than being a pathological difference, blindness is a characteristic. However, by promoting the belief that blind people "suffer" from a biological tragedy and cannot be "normal" unless their afflictions are cured, medical professionals often contribute to damaging stereotypes that mark blind individuals as other (Patterson & Satz, 2002; Thomas, 1999). In their article about genetic counseling and the disabled, Annette Patterson and Martha Satz argue that many geneticists allow their misconceptions about disabilities to guide how they counsel their clients. The authors state, "Disability rights advocates have a strong political position to exert regarding their interest in such transactions, and in general, regarding the status of those who are disabled. Their political movement, as other liberatory movements before them, asserts that an apparent "natural" hierarchy, in this case separating the abled from the disabled, is in fact one largely constructed by societal practice. They contend that the difficulties presented by a given disabling condition often have more to do with the way society defines and responds to these conditions rather than with the inherent "limitations" of the conditions themselves. They further argue that genetic counselors participate in this "construction" by attempting to define and explain the nature of a particular condition often without themselves having any significant experience of disability or interaction with disabled individuals" (2002, p. 121).

Negative attitudes relegate blind women to a marginalized status and provide a foundation for the social disadvantages many of them experience. The common belief that blind women are asexual (Cole & Cole, 1999; Rosenblum, 2001; Watson-Armstrong et al., 1999; White, 2003) is enmeshed in a complex web of other disadvantages blind women experience. For example, sexual desire cannot be mandated by legislation, but some of the social conditions that influence blind women's access to economic and social status do impact the perceived desirability of blind women as potential romantic partners. In an effort to remove some of the attitudinal and environmental barriers faced by blind people, various laws have been enacted in the United States. However, the socially constructed barriers that inhibit the lives of many blind women are so deeply entrenched in our society that enacting legislation, such as The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), has done little to improve the social standing of blind women in the United States (Asch, 2004; Milian, 2001).

Despite the implementation of the ADA, poverty rates of disabled women are approximately twice those of women without disabilities (cited in Schur, 2004). Living in poverty and lacking opportunities to become financially secure interfere with the ability of many blind women to be considered as desirable equal partners in long-term relationships. Until hegemonic, visual-centric attitudes about what it means to be blind are changed, most blind people will continue to be devalued, designated as other, and denied their sexuality (Garland-Thomson, 2002; White, 2003; Wilkerson, 2002).

The media contribute to the myths that otherize, pathologize, and neuter how blind women are commonly perceived (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Rosenblum, 2001; Wilkerson, 2002). In her review of Tennessee Williams' work, Ann Fox points out a disturbing parallel between how both disability and queerness have been pathologized in American culture (2004). In addition to perpetuating and constructing negative attitudes about people who are disabled or queer, Williams' work provides an example of how the media legitimize prejudice by medicalizing rather than embracing differences. Furthermore, when disabled people are depicted in the media, disabled-male characters are more common than disabled female characters, and both genders are usually given roles that lack sex appeal (Rosenblum, 2001).

By inaccurately representing blind women as either asexual or abnormally sexual, the media often respond to a culture that systematically devalues blind people. *Red Dragon* is an example of a recent movie that perpetuates negative beliefs about the sexuality of blind women. The fact that a sighted actress played the role of the blind character in the movie exhibits the film producers' lack of confidence in the abilities of blind people. However, even if a blind actress performed in the movie, the imbedded messages that marginalize and set blind women apart would have been clear because a blind actress would have most likely followed the same script.

A disturbing drama about the hunt for a serial killer who believes murdering others will transform himself and his victims into higher states of being, *Red Dragon* is the prequel to *Silence of the Lambs* and is part of the Hannibal Lector series. The blind character, named Reba, plays a significant, although secondary, part in the movie. The relationship that develops between Reba and her lover exaggerates a pathological connection between physical disabilities and social difference.

Reba's lover is the Red Dragon, a brutal, serial murderer, who targets entire families. Growing up with an abusive grandmother and additional feelings of inferiority because of a soft-palate problem contribute to the Red Dragon's desire to use murder to transform himself and wield power over members of the society he believes shuns him. Reba meets the Red Dragon at the film processing company where they both work. The two relate to each other as outcasts, and they quickly begin a sexual relationship. Reba does not know that her lover feels compelled to slay others to serve a twisted belief system.

The Dragon is attracted by Reba's ability to understand being different and her inability to see what he perceives as his disfigurement.

Reba's blindness is used to make her character appear vulnerable and too pitiful for even a brutal, serial murderer to kill. Although she works and lives on her own, she becomes easy prey for a vicious murderer, who can even watch a video of his next intended victims while Reba obliviously snuggles up to him.

Her difficulties with having healthy sexual relationships are emphasized in the movie. After a coworker makes unwanted advances on her, Reba expresses her frustration with being considered different when she says, "If there is anything I hate worse than pity, it is fake pity--especially when it is from a walking hard-on." After learning her lover's true nature, Reba laments, "I should have known." Furthermore, Reba told the Dragon, "I know what it is like to always have people think you are different." The Dragon's perception of Reba as different and a fellow outcast provided the impetus for his desire to have a relationship with her. Subtle and overt messages in this movie reinforce attitudes that equate blindness with abnormal sexuality. Negative depictions of blind women in the media contribute to another dimension of a complex web of socially constructed attitude and physical barriers that restrict the lives of blind women.

Blind people live in a culture where environments designed by and for sighted people often prevent them from fully participating in aspects of life that enhance their sexual attractiveness and provide opportunities for meeting potential romantic partners (Milian, 2001; Wilkerson, 2002). With rare exceptions, accommodations are designed for those who can see. As a result, blind people must adapt to environments designed for the majority (Asch, 2004). Lack of access, such as to transportation, prevents many blind people from fitting in with their peers by being employed or by being able to attend social events (Rosenblum, 2001; Thomas, 1999). Wanting to avoid transportation problems, many blind individuals avoid becoming romantically involved with other blind people (Rosenblum, 2001). While discussing social constructions, Adrienne Asch states, "... instead of speaking of impairments at all, we should be speaking of environments" (2004, p. 21).

Accepting the myth that blindness is a personal medical tragedy rather than a characteristic of people who are systematically otherized, even academic programs often fail to include the experiences of disabled people in

multi-cultural studies (Milian, 2001; Schriempf, 2001). Furthermore, feminists have been slow to recognize and include disabled women (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Gordon and Rosenblum, 2001; Mintz, 2002; Rosenblum, 2001; Saxton, 2003; Schur, 2004; Schriempf, 2001; Wilkerson, 2002).

According to Susanna Mintz, "Feminist disability scholars have pointed out that mainstream feminism's critique of patriarchal myths of women as essentially sexual and maternal ignores the fact that ablest culture also deems disabled women to be essentially asexual and unmaternal" (2002, p. 157). Furthermore, Rosemary Garland-Thomson states, "We need to study disability in a feminist context to direct our highly honed critical skills toward the dual scholarly tasks of unmasking and re-imagining disability, not only for people with disabilities, but for everyone" (2002, p. 4).

Many blind women suffer severe consequences because of socially constructed barriers that inhibit their access to sexuality. Internalized doubts about their sexual attractiveness, rejection as a potential sex partner, and increased risk of sexual vulnerability are some of the consequences blind women often endure (Rosenblum, 2001; Milian, 2001; Schriempf, 2001).

Being marked as other and undesirable and lacking power to change dominant misconceptions can influence blind women to feel inferior (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Milian, 2001; Thomas, 1999; Wilkerson, 2002). Many disabled women internalize negative attitudes, leading to doubts about their own beauty and sexual attractiveness (Thomas, 1999). In an ethnographic study of thirteen blind individuals' perceptions of body image, Nili Kaplan-Myrth found that not being able to see others does not prevent blind people from adopting and privileging dominant visual-centric standards for attractiveness. Kaplan-Myrth concluded, "Blind people, like sighted people, see themselves through multiple lenses. Ultimately, there is no difference between blind people and sighted people; for both, 'seeing' is an interpretive act rather than a mere sensory activity. The "importance of knowing about not knowing" (the paradoxical inability for blind people to retreat into a looking-glass-free world) highlights the extent to which body image is influenced by evaluations of oneself through other people's eyes (2000, p. 297).

The misconceptions about blindness that permeate our culture can make it difficult for blind women to maintain positive self-images (Milian, 2001; Rosenblum, 2001; Thomas, 1999). Joining organizations of the blind, such as the American Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind, gives some women an opportunity to share their frustrations, find positive role models, fight for political change, and participate in promoting counter-hegemonic discourses (Asch, 2004; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Rosenblum, 2001; Schur, 2004; Wilkerson, 2002). But even among the blind, women are disadvantaged. For example, blind men often fail to see blind women as potential sex partners (Rosenblum, 2001).

Some researchers suggest that both heterosexual and lesbian blind women are at a disadvantage because they cannot engage in visual courtship rituals (Cole & Cole, 1999; Ferrell & Griego, 2001; Rosenblum, 2001; White, 2003). However, since blind women appear to have more difficulty establishing sexual relationships than blind men, not being able to see cues fails to provide a full answer. For example, blind women are more likely to live alone and less likely to marry or have children than blind men (cited in Rosenblum, 2001; Schur, 2004).

Being marked as other also endangers blind women. Blind women experience higher rates of violence than non-disabled women (cited in Cole & Cole, 1999; Ferrell & Griego, 2001; Watson-Armstrong et al., 1999). The common belief that blind women are inferior is a suspected contributor to the high rate of violence they experience (Watson-Armstrong et al., 1999). In one study, over 50 percent of congenitally blind women reported being forced to have sex at least once during their lifetimes, and another study revealed that two-thirds of women with disabilities interviewed experienced some kind of sexual assault (cited in Rosenblum, 2001). Resisting the tendency to internalize negative beliefs is often made even more difficult for blind lesbians who are frequently rejected by other blind people (Ferrell & Griego, 2001). According to an essay by Patrick White, after a long history of attempting to repress the sexuality of blind children, compulsory heterosexuality has become the emphasis in sex education for blind youth during the past thirty years (2003).

For blind lesbians, who are already at increased risk of experiencing violence because of their gender and disability, safety concerns can prevent them from coming out (Ferrell & Griego, 2001; Wilkerson, 2002). Hate crimes perpetrated against homosexuals, such as the murder of Mathew Shepard, provide support for those fears (Ferrell & Griego, 2001). Wanting to avoid associating themselves with marginalized communities, many disabled lesbians hide both their disabilities and sexual preferences (Samuels, 2003). Internalized negative beliefs about disabilities and homosexuality can result in some blind lesbians suppressing their sexuality and having enough self-hatred to commit suicide (McAlland et al., 1999).

Changing the systematic and individualized inequalities that mark blind women as undesirable will require individual and joint advocacy, inclusion of disabled women in the feminist agenda, public education about gender and disability, and deconstructing macro-and micro-level discrimination (Rosenblum, 2001; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Mintz, 2002; Saxton, 2003; Schriempf, 2001; Wilkerson, 2002). In her discussion about how disabled women

can challenge multifaceted barriers to sexual and reproductive equality, Marsha Saxton wrote, "... we must be prepared to take on the discriminatory policies of a variety of institutions: medical, social services, legal, and media. But we must also do battle within ourselves" (2003, p. 292).

Blind women must lead the effort to claim sexual equality. They must take the initiative to research their own lives and educate others about their experiences. As Patrick White suggests, "I hope that in the future blind people will wrest control of the story of their own sexuality from the hands of the sighted, for the available material, painfully limited though it is, constitutes the totality of our cultural inheritance of official information on the subject" (2003, p. 134).

Among feminists the saying "the personal is political" is common knowledge (Schriempf, 2001). Claiming sexual equity is an act of both personal and political empowerment for blind women (Wilkerson, 2002). Blind women must become aware of and counter internal and external beliefs and conditions that set them apart as other and undesirable. They must reject the social constructs that divide the nondisabled from the disabled and the feminine from the masculine. Although non-disabled people need to join in tearing down social constructs that designate them as undesirable and different, blind women need to lead the way to change. When socially constructed barriers that mark blind women as other and undesirable are deconstructed, Adrian Asch's words will become a reality. She states, "I am interested in achieving a society where eyesight is no more consequential for life chances than is eye color" (2004, p. 10).

My review of the literature provides much evidence for blind women's experiences with sexual inequality in the United States. Although the research about the existence of sexual inequity is clear, more empirical research about the impact of denied desire on blind women is needed. Much of the literature I reviewed focused on conceptual issues or referred to studies conducted over a decade ago. In addition, with rare exceptions, research that has been conducted regarding the sexuality of disabled women lumps women with a wide variety of cognitive and physical disabilities together. Specific research on the sexual experiences of blind women is needed. Qualitative and quantitative studies about the impact of teaching both blind and sighted peers sexual socialization skills that include blind people, effective ways to use the media to project positive sexual images of blind people, and blind individuals' experiences with sexual violence require attention. None of the literature I reviewed contained recent statistics describing rates of sexual violence perpetrated against blind women. The intersection of blindness and gender with class, race, employment, and education needs more exploration. Furthermore, the diverse narratives of blind women's experiences with sexuality deserve more recognition in disability studies literature.

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