Germany emerged from the war a fractured nation. Defeated, revolutionized, and newly republican, it was immediately divided by politics, ideology—and sex. The gender-differentiated experiences of the First World War created palpable intimate and social conflicts between men and women. Many men resented the freedoms and assumed safety women enjoyed on the home front; some even blamed women for the war’s disastrous end, and accused them of delivering a fatal “stab in the back” by joining in the revolutionary activities on the home front. Meanwhile, women resented being forced by early republican law to relinquish their jobs (and thus their independent incomes and public freedoms) in favor of men returning from the war. This apparent crisis in gender relations amplified existing anxieties regarding national regeneration and repopulation following the war.

Conditions were perhaps even more transformed in Austria, which had been reduced from a multiethnic empire into a rump
republic. Austria was not only prevented from joining Germany, as it endeavored to do immediately following the war, but also lost the rich agricultural lands of Hungary and the Bohemian industrial sector that had been crucial to the empire’s well-being. As was the case in Germany, state and civil society actors desired to rehabilitate the impoverished and traumatized body politic; however, here too changing gender roles and relations were viewed as significantly complicating the project of social rehabilitation. Especially vexing was the figure of the New Woman, who was accused of threatening the stability and productivity of marriage and the family through her pursuit of happiness and sexual freedom.

The challenges presented by revised gender roles, strained heterosexual relations, and ongoing biopolitical concerns would persist throughout the 1920s in both Germany and Austria. In the field of sexology, they inspired diverse new efforts to understand, theorize, and cope practically with these new realities. During this period, sexologists expanded their research into new areas, and increasingly focused their attention on topics such as the determination of sex and the origins and nature of sexual difference. They also began to take seriously the influence of social and cultural forces in shaping sex, possibly in response to the war and revolution’s demonstration of the undeniable effects of human action and decision making in shaping sexual life.

Sexology’s increasing focus on the role of society and culture in shaping sexual roles, relationships, and behaviors is evident in the writing of many women sexologists. In this chapter I examine texts written by two women, Mathilde Vaerting and Austrian individual psychologist Sofie Lazarsfeld, that engaged social sciences, above all sex psychology, to make strikingly new and original contributions to sexology, specifically to discussions of sexual difference. These texts also mark a notable move away from eugenics and explicit engagement with biopolitical concerns. Both Mathilde Vaerting’s two-volume New Foundation for the Psychology of Man and Woman (1921, 1923) and Sofie Lazarsfeld’s Woman’s Experience of the Male (1931) were highly influential texts in their own time: they were translated into multiple languages and, in Lazarsfeld’s
case, reprinted over a thirty-year period. Lazarsfeld’s text actually references Vaerting’s work; this fact, in addition to their shared themes and similar analytical frameworks, bolsters the case for analyzing these texts together, despite the fact that one originated in Germany and the other in Austria.

Social scientific approaches to the study of sex proved productive for both Vaerting and Lazarsfeld. In their celebrated texts, Vaerting and Lazarsfeld deployed psychology and other social scientific fields to destabilize existing understandings of femininity and masculinity. Although many female sexual theorists held gender and sexuality to be variable, nonbinary, and subject to dramatic transformation even before the war, their theories were based upon a biologically based understanding of sex as the bedrock of gender and sexuality. In this chapter, we find women sexologists insisting on a fundamental disconnect between gender and sexed bodies, and playing up the role of environmental influences on gender roles, relations, and performances. Vaerting’s texts went so far as to attack the very idea that femininity and masculinity were essential traits emanating from particularly sexed bodies, and to suggest that gender categories were above all functional categories. In these ways, Vaerting and Lazarsfeld seem to depart dramatically from preceding sexological work. And yet, both texts retreat to essentialism when it comes to sexuality: in both texts the radical contingency of gender they espouse seems tethered to a foundation of naturalized heterosexuality.

Why would it not seem incongruous to Vaerting and Lazarsfeld to posit gender as a cultural construct that was fluid and determined by the ebb and flow of history and hegemony, while uncritically maintaining sexuality as natural and resistant to change, even subject to the evaluative criteria of deviancy and pathology? How can we make sense of this apparent tension in their work? I address these questions by analyzing Vaerting’s and Lazarsfeld’s texts contextually, and read them as manifestations of the changes and anxieties surrounding gender and (hetero)sexuality in 1920s Germany and Austria. I argue that these texts can be read as attempting to assuage concerns regarding changing postwar gender roles by linking them to a bedrock of sexual constancy that would ensure an enduring bond between men and women. I further maintain that the complexities of these texts manifest the ways in which postwar changes to the sexual order were putting pressure on understandings of sex itself. The meaning of sex had already been subject to decades of sexological (and feminist) scrutiny and deconstruction; Vaerting’s and Lazarsfeld’s work marks the halting, uneven ways in which sex was breaking apart into distinctive categories of gender and sexuality, and becoming subject to sociological investigations that held sex to be an effect of power. Vaerting’s and Lazarsfeld’s texts raise questions about the historical and social conditions in which gender and sexuality can become open to new forms of scrutiny and analysis. Furthermore, the tensions between gender and sexuality in their work once again instantiate the confounding blend of possibility and constraint that runs through much of women’s sexological writing.

Sex and Sexology in 1920s Germany and Austria

The dramatic changes in gender and sexuality effected by the war made them the subjects of widespread interest and anxiety from the very beginning of the postwar era. In the eyes of some commentators, the changes wrought by the war signaled an incipient “sexual crisis”—one that, as Kathleen Canning has argued, symbolized the crisis of the Republic itself, and was distinct from the sexual crisis
identified by figures like Grete Meisel-Hess before the war. Particularly vexing were the changes in women’s roles, symbolized in the ubiquitous figure of the much-maligned New Woman. Women’s new republican civil rights and freedoms, their greater public visibility, and their increased economic independence were interpreted by some as threats to the family and social order, and engendered calls for a return to prewar gender and family roles in the name of social stability. In the early years of the German Republic, the state seemed responsive to such fears and passed various laws and policies that aimed to reinstate patriarchal authority and reaffirm male privileges. The demobilization decrees, which removed married women from their jobs in favor of men returned from the war, are a fitting example. By the end of the 1920s, it seemed that reactionary critics had won the day, as women returned to more traditionally feminine fashions and seemed to prepare themselves for a return to what Marxist feminist and individual psychologist Alice Rühle Gerstel sarcastically referred to as the “good old days.”

Myriad other political, social, economic, and cultural changes ensured that no such “return” was possible, however—including key founding acts of the Republic itself, namely, the extension of the rights to vote and stand for public office to women. Among the major changes that reshaped women’s lives in the 1920s were increased university enrollment, expanded employment within the white-collar labor force, growing participation in the burgeoning consumer culture and emergent “Girl Kultur,” and greater (but still highly restricted) access to birth control through the new marriage

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and sex counseling centers. Sexuality was a major site of (highly contested) change for heterosexual women and lesbians alike. Women, and especially gay women, benefited from the emergence of new sexual publics undergirded by a proliferation of bars, clubs, cafés, newspapers, journals, and political and social organizations, as well as new fashion trends that enabled the subversion of masculine and feminine aesthetic norms.

Sexuality was also a major factor inhibiting any return to the prewar order. In addition to the aforementioned developments, the war had placed a significant strain on intimate heterosexual relationships. One telltale sign can be found in the divorce rate, which reached historic levels as many husbands and wives encountered each other as strangers following the war. Such developments, alongside the intense backlash against women’s social and political gains, have led some historians to characterize relations between men and women during the early years of the Weimar Republic as antagonistic. Intriguingly, both contemporary and retrospective analyses of the state of heterosexuality postwar seem to neglect the fraught state of sexual relations between men and women before the war, as the work of Edward Ross Dickinson and others has illustrated.


9. Ibid.
These negative postwar trends in heterosexuality not only amplified the discourse of sexual crisis sparked by changes in women’s roles, but also exacerbated biopolitical fears regarding the fate of the national population. State and civil society actors became increasingly convinced of the need to shore up monogamous (and hopefully reproductive) heterosexuality as a matter of national interest. In their view, if the changes in gender relations could not be reversed, they could at least be mitigated and rehabilitated through various forms of intervention in the intimate lives of men and especially women. Consequently, the German state enacted a range of population policies, from maternal welfare to school-based sexual education to continued restrictions on abortion that aimed to regulate women’s bodies and ensure that women continued to serve as “mothers of the nation.”¹⁰ The state, along with various civil society actors, also introduced and administered a network of sex and marriage advice counseling centers.¹¹ The 1920s also witnessed the birth of a new popular medical genre: the marital sex guide, which aimed to scientifically advise couples on how to achieve mutually pleasurable erotic (and reproductive) lives.¹²

Conditions in Austria paralleled those prevailing in Germany. As was the case in Weimar Germany, gender was a fraught topic within the new Austrian Republic, and sexuality was also invested with desires for collective regeneration and social transformation. The dramatic changes to the very constitution of the Austrian state made the prospect of a return to prewar conditions as remote as it was in Germany, also newly republican. As Maria Mesner has noted, the defeat and breakdown of the Hapsburg Empire undermined the influence of former authorities, including the Catholic Church (although the Christian Social Party dominated the national


government). In the city of Vienna, under the leadership of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party elected in 1919, conditions were particularly ripe for new forms of social and political experimentation. Over the course of the 1920s, Viennese city officials and sex reform activists established a network of sex and marriage advice counseling centers that aimed to support heterosexual and potentially reproductive couples. A “Health Advice Center for Engaged Couples” was even established in Vienna’s city hall in June 1922.

Beyond the sex and marriage advice centers, municipal administrators established a range of other institutions aimed at supporting families and shaping a productive new generation from the cradle to young adulthood, including kindergartens, advice centers for mothers, child transfer centers and foster homes for children with behavioral problems, school medical services, and clinics for testing and treating sexually transmitted diseases. They also introduced long-term rent control and public housing with communal facilities like laundries, baths, kindergartens, libraries, groceries, playgrounds, swimming pools, and medical and dental clinics.

Viennese sex and marriage advice centers endeavored to stabilize heterosexual relationships under the conditions of a new gender order. State-run counseling services were fundamentally informed

13. According to historian Helmut Gruber, “In Vienna between 1920 and 1934 the Socialist party (SDAP) attempted to create a comprehensive workers’ culture that was antithetical to bourgeois forms and that heralded the socialist future before the revolution. It was the largest and most ambitious attempt in interwar Europe to create a socialist culture that went to the roots of everyday life. In their aim at a total transformation of workers’ culture, the socialists erased the boundaries between the public and the private spheres, between the social and the sexual”; Helmut Gruber, “Sexuality in ‘Red Vienna’: Socialist Party Conceptions and Programs and Working-Class Life, 1920–34,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (Spring 1987): 37.


15. Ibid., 51.

by the logic of Rudolf Goldscheid’s “human economy”: they aimed to restore “organic capital” following the devastating loss of life during the war. To this end, they offered monogamous heterosexual couples information about chronic diseases and the hereditary effects of alcohol and drug addiction, in addition to expert medical advice, in the hopes that individuals would make “good” decisions regarding marriage and reproduction on these bases. While it is important to acknowledge the biopolitical logic that underwrote the opening of state sex and marriage advice centers, it is also worth noting that the founders’ intentions did not exclusively determine their use: Mesner points out that many clients using the consultation centers did not intend to marry, but rather sought reliable, detailed information about contraceptives and how to use them. Such subversive use of municipal centers is perhaps not surprising given that abortion remained illegal.

Moreover, many sex and marriage centers approached the task of healing gender rifts and heterosexual dysfunctions with different objectives that subordinated biopolitical imperatives and targeted particular populations. Centers run by the Association for Birth Control, for example, were more concerned with preventing “coerced motherhood” and providing contraceptives to poor and working-class girls and women than they were with realizing strictly eugenic objectives. Meanwhile, counseling centers run by Wilhelm Reich and Marie Frischauf’s Socialist Society for Sexual Advice and Sexual Research aimed to help blue-collar and lower-level white-collar workers by providing counseling and hygienic information, including information about masturbation and birth control. As Mesner observes, the Socialist Society’s centers were informed by Reich’s views on “correct” sexuality, which dictated that “sexual activity should be liberated from bourgeois sexual repression and be, therefore, regular, joyful, satisfying, and—as unspoken as obvious—heterosexual as well as oriented towards

18. Ibid., 53.
21. Ibid., 57–58.
orgasm. Sexual activities deviating from this scheme were deroga-

torily call[ed] ‘neurotic.’” Indeed, Reich believed homosexuality

was a sickness that resulted from a developmental disorder. Thus,
even advice centers that were not oriented toward biopolitical ob-
jectives could prove remarkably normative: as Mesner notes, the
Socialist Society combined “the rhetoric of emancipation on the
one hand and authoritative instructions on the other.”

As suggested by the role of psychoanalysis in the Socialist Soci-
ety’s sex and marriage advice centers, sexology played an impor-
tant role within the variegated postwar efforts to rehabilitate sex
and gender relations in both countries. Indeed, in Vienna, indi-

vidual psychologists (such as Sofie Lazarsfeld), who followed the


teachings of Freudian dissident Alfred Adler, assumed increasingly
authoritative social and political roles. Adlerian individual psy-

chology, which stressed cooperation as the most important human
trait and highlighted the role of social hierarchy in creating psy-

chic problems, was very popular among Austrian social democrats.

Adler himself was invited by the city of Vienna to direct an experi-

mental teaching college.

The 1920s arguably marked a renaissance for the sexological
field. Thanks to a relaxation of censorship restrictions that allowed
for more open public discussions and representations of sex and

sexuality, professional sexological organizations and their jour-
nals were revived and even expanded their activities. For the first
time, sexologists created their own center for research and edu-
cation, namely, Magnus Hirschfeld’s famous Institute for Sexual
Science. Moreover, new professional organizations and journals
proliferated, particularly within psychoanalysis, which enjoyed
heighted legitimacy and public interest during the 1920s thanks
in part to its work with so-called war hysterics. These dynamic

22. Ibid., 58–59.
23. McEwen, Sexual Knowledge, 12.
24. See Paul Lerner, Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma
in Germany, 1890–1930 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). Despite the
increasingly independent and variegated institutionalization of psychoanalysis,
psychoanalysts continued to play significant roles in the sexological field. Psycho-
analysts not only belonged to professional sexological organizations and presented
efforts at institution building led sexual researchers, theorists, and reformers from abroad to once again view German-speaking Europe (and especially Berlin and Vienna) as the international headquarters of sexological research; tellingly, it was in Berlin that the first meeting of what became the World League for Sexual Reform occurred.25

In addition to renewed efforts at institutionalization and professionalization, the sexological field also expanded its objects of inquiry during the 1920s. Aside from its perennial preoccupation with reproduction, sexology was increasingly animated by investigations into the determination of sex and the origins and causes of sex difference.26 Perhaps more significantly, in a marked divergence from prewar sexology, postwar analysts began to consider the effects of social and cultural conditions in shaping sex, both in addition to and independent of biology. This development marks epistemological and paradigmatic changes within the field itself, possibly catalyzed by postwar sociopolitical conditions and concerns. Postwar studies of sex difference and sex determination were informed by a number of new scientific developments, including new research into hormones and “flexible heredity” conducted by Eugen Steinach and Paul Kammerer;27 psychoanalysis and individual psychology, which viewed gender roles as the products of a developmental process that was shaped not only by drives but also by

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25. For details of the conference proceedings, see Dr. A. Weil, ed., Sexualreform und Sexualwissenschaft (Stuttgart: Julius Püttmann, 1922).


environment and social relations;\textsuperscript{28} and social scientific research, especially work in anthropology, such as Margaret Mead’s famous \textit{Coming of Age in Samoa} (1928), that drew attention to cultural variability in sexual norms and practices.\textsuperscript{29} The work of Mathilde Vaerting and Sofi Lazarsfeld demonstrates the impact of the field’s preoccupation with the flexibility of sex roles and sex differences, as well as the impacts of the increasing turn to social and cultural factors on understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

\textbf{Mathilde Vaerting and the New Foundation for the Psychology of Man and Woman}

Mathilde Vaerting is a complex yet little-known figure in the history of sexology. She began publishing in sexological journals in 1914, much later than many of the other writers examined in this book. Vaerting proved remarkably prolific during the war, when her texts were overwhelmingly preoccupied with biopolitical questions such as the best reproductive age of parents to ensure superior intellectual capacity in their offspring, and the racial dangers stemming from a surplus of women after the war.\textsuperscript{30} These articles were saturated with eugenic ideas, assumptions, and desires.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Psychoanalysis was a major vehicle for investigation into the formation of sex roles: it was during this time that Freudian psychoanalysts were embroiled in their own “woman question,” marked by the groundbreaking work of Karen Horney and Melanie Klein, among others.
\item \textsuperscript{29} See Andrew P. Lyons and Harriet D. Lyons, \textit{Irregular Connections: A History of Anthropology and Sexuality} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), esp. chap. 7 (“Margaret Mead, the Future of Language, and Lost Opportunities”) and chap. 6 (“Malinowski as ‘Reluctant Sexologist’”).
\end{itemize}
While eugenic concerns and theories consistently and thoroughly imbued her sexological contributions between 1914 and 1919, they are notably absent—at least on the surface—from *New Foundation for the Psychology of Man and Woman*. *New Foundation* was comprised of two volumes: *Female Character in the Male State and Male Character in the Female State* (1921) and *Truth and Misconception in Sex Psychology* (1923) (henceforth, I will refer to these volumes as *Female Character* and *Truth and Misconception*). Beginning with *Female Character*, Vaerting’s analytic focus seems to have shifted decisively to questions of power and oppression, which she argued stemmed from socially rather than biologically based inequalities.\(^{31}\) It is unclear exactly what precipitated this change. Further research will hopefully yield more than speculative answers; however, the aforementioned tendencies in sexology and the lessons the war taught regarding the impact of human actions on sexuality likely played roles in causing this shift. The first volume of *New Foundation, Female Character*, was originally published as the coauthored works of “Mathilde and Mathias Vaerting,” whom many reviewers assumed to be a married couple. However, Vaerting’s status as a female civil servant would have prohibited her from marrying, and to date there exists no record of a brother named Mathias.\(^{32}\)

The *New Foundation* series attracted international scientific and political attention. The volumes comprising *New Foundation* were reviewed in a wide range of journals between 1921 and 1933 that

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\(^{31}\) See also Mathilde Vaerting, *Soziologie und Psychologie der Macht: Die Macht der Massen* (Berlin: Dr. M. Pfeiffer, 1928); Prof. Dr. M. T. Vaerting, *Die Frau in unserer Zeit* (Darmstadt-Eberstadt: Themis-Verlag, 1952).

\(^{32}\) Some later editions of the volumes comprising *New Foundation* were published exclusively under the name of “Dr. M. Vaerting.” It is interesting to speculate about the reasons why Vaerting initially chose to represent the texts as the work of a male-female couple. Was it out of concern for the reception of the text as a work of science? Was it meant to instantiate the texts’ claims regarding sexual equality, or its affirmation of heterosexuality? At this point it is impossible to know. Katharina Leppänen confirms that she has not been able to find traces of a “Mathias” Vaerting, and suspects he does not exist. See Katharina Leppänen, *Elin Wägner’s Alarm Clock: Ecofeminist Theory in the Interwar Era* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 41.
addressed audiences interested in sexology, psychology, medicine, sociology, eugenics, pedagogy, criminology, and women’s rights.\footnote{33} Both volumes elicited a range of critical responses that very much reflected the position of the reviewer and her or his envisioned readership. Very few reviews were as straightforwardly dismissive and condescending as the three-line notice that appeared in the Archive for Racial and Social Biology, which characterized Truth and Misconception as revealing more about the psychology of its author than anything else.\footnote{34} Some notices, such as Max Marcuse’s review of the same text in the Journal for Sexual Science, veered toward the patronizing. While noting that many of the ideas presented were “very correct” and their formulation “rather striking,” Marcuse nonetheless criticized Vaerting’s approach as “dilettantish” and “tendentious.” He offered the book the backhanded compliment that it could provide “material for scientific work.”\footnote{35} Nevertheless, most reviewers conceded that Vaerting’s work could not and should not be ignored. Regarding Female Character, a review for the Journal for Sexual Science declared the volume a “diligent compilation and processing of facts” that is “enjoyable to read.”\footnote{36} While criticizing the vagueness of Truth and Misconception, sexual researcher and theorist Else Voigtländer concluded her review by stating, “The book contains, without doubt, very important findings and points of view” that could help “eliminat[e] mistakes in the field of psychological research and . . . provid[e] access to truth.” “All in all,” she insisted, “no one who is involved with

\footnotetext[33]{33. In addition to the reviews cited herein, Vaerting’s work was also reviewed in other notable publications, including Deutsche medizinische Wochenschrift, Neue Züricher Zeitung, Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, Monatsschrift für Kriminalpsychologie, Die neue Generation, Zeitschrift für Psychologische Forschung, Das neue Deutschland, Der Tag, Die Frau in der Gegenwart, Die Frau, Volksbildung, Fortschritte der Medizin, Zeitschrift für Völkerrecht, Vossische Zeitung, Natur und Gesellschaft, Berliner Tageblatt, and the Neue freie Presse.


these relevant questions could possibly ignore this book.” Similar assessments that mixed critique with praise were made in more strictly “scientific” journals, such as the *Archive of Comprehensive Psychology*, the *Journal for Psychology and Physiology of the Sensory Organs*, and the *Journal for Applied Psychology*. These latter reviews addressed the 1932 reissue of the *New Foundation* volumes, which affirms the study’s popularity and renown.

Among certain audiences *New Foundation* was rapturously received. Writing for the socialist journal *The Struggle*, feminist theorist Therese Schlesinger heralded Vaerting’s work as no less important for sexual psychology than the work of Adler. Helene Stöcker asserted that the study constituted “a prerequisite for the true equal valuation (*Gleichbewertung*) of the sexes” and was “therefore for our movement of particular importance.” Likewise, the American *Birth Control Review* declared that, in *Female Character*, “Mathilde and Mathias Vaerting” had “blazed a new trail.” Writing in the progressive feminist journal *The Woman in the State*, Helene Rosenau hailed both volumes as providing “not only explanation and support, but also incentive to aim for unrestricted equality”—and, hinting at some of the tensions of Vaerting’s

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work, argued that the book proved that, “sexually, woman and man are indeed equal, insofar as both are heterosexual.”

The Archive for Gynaecology and Constitutional Research lavishly praised Truth and Misconception, proclaiming that “everybody who reads this will be extremely stimulated, and for many it will shine like a light in the dark of his subconscious.”

As the aforementioned reviews suggest, New Foundation was clearly a far from insignificant contribution to 1920s-era sexology. Vaerting’s texts were not only well received but also treated as authoritative by contemporaries who engaged and appropriated her ideas. They were especially popular among feminists and sex reformers, including Paul Krische and Elin Wägner of Sweden. They also attracted the attention of the famous British sexologist Havelock Ellis, who helped facilitate their English translation.

In Female Character, Vaerting mobilized historical and anthropological evidence to articulate a pioneering social constructionist and radically antiessentialist analysis of gender. Here she builds the argument that supposedly sex-differentiated roles, norms, and behaviors are not universal, unchanging, or fundamentally rooted in

44. See Lepännen, Elin Wägner’s Alarm Clock. As Peter Davies notes, Krische actually dedicated his study to Vaerting. See Peter Davies, Myth, Matriarchy, and Modernity: Johann Jakob Bachofen in German Culture, 1860–1945 (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 140.
46. The role of history, anthropology, ethnology, and related disciplines has been largely overlooked within histories of sexology; however, it is worth noting that these disciplines played important roles in studies such as Havelock Ellis’s Man and Woman (1894) and Iwan Bloch’s landmark The Sexual Life of Our Time (1908), and inspired Sigmund Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1913). Moreover, anthropologists such as Friedrich Krauss and Freiherr Ferdinand von Reitzenstein published often within sexological journals such as Sexual Problems, The New Generation, and the Journal for Sexual Science; Krauss even belonged to the editorial board of Sexual Problems.
biology. Instead, she insists they are profoundly malleable impositions and historically contingent manifestations of power relations in society. Masculinity and femininity therefore do not constitute essences, but rather empty categories that have historically recapitulated binary, unequal relationships between dominant and subordinate classes. The historical evidence Vaerting used in *Female Character* was largely dependent upon the explosion of German Orientalist studies into “ancient civilizations” such as Egypt and India from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.  

This knowledge base of course raises its own provocative questions regarding the role of Germany’s erstwhile imperialist project in underwriting her gender analysis, which deserve fuller attention.

Vaerting opened *Female Character* with a blunt critique of past and current studies of sex psychology by pointing out their fundamental methodological and epistemological failings. These studies have been wrong, she insisted, because they are based on shaky foundations and false equivalents. As Vaerting noted, previous research was conducted within a sociopolitical context wherein one sex enjoyed social, political, and economic power and privileges over the other. These studies did not proceed from neutral, equal grounds, nor did they compare like objects. As a result, Vaerting observed, “the differences shown to exist between such groups are just as likely to depend upon sociological causes, and to be the outcome of the reciprocal position of the sexes, as to be due to congenital divergencies.” She further argued that this basic methodological oversight was the result of masculine bias; in so doing, she prefigured the metacritique of contemporary sexology that she developed more fully in the second volume of *New Foundation*.

To be in a position to identify “truly congenital differentiae of sex,” Vaerting maintained that “we must compare the sexes when their position is precisely similar”: namely, across comparable relations of power. She insisted that researchers “are only entitled to

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47. On the history of German Orientalism, see Suzanne Marchard, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

compare dominant men with dominant women, subordinate men with subordinate women, or the two sexes under absolutely equal rights” (Dominant Sex, xiv). Female Character endeavored to serve as a model of how such research ought to be undertaken, and what its results would be. Here, Vaerting based her comparative analysis upon evidence from past civilizations and cultures she alternately referred to as female dominant (weibliche Vorherrschaft) or as “women’s states” (Frauenstaaten). Importantly, Vaerting does not use the language of “matriarchy” or “patriarchy,” though many scholars identify her as a matriarchal theorist; in fact, in some of the cultures and civilizations she identifies as female dominant, like ancient Egypt, men held positions of formal political power.49 Rather, what Vaerting seems to be describing is a situation of hegemony.

According to Vaerting, comparing qualities ascribed to masculinity and femininity under “women’s states” and “men’s states,” respectively, reveals an “extremely important fundamental law”: that “the contemporary peculiarities of women are mainly determined by the existence of the Men’s State, and that they are accurately and fully paralleled by the peculiarities of men in the Women’s State” (Dominant Sex, xiv-xv). “Sex differentiation is merely the outcome of the position of dominance or subjection,” she declared, “and is not a product of inborn biological characteristics” (51). Vaerting’s objective in Female Character was to “show that there is not a single ‘masculine quality’ which cannot be paralleled as a ‘feminine quality’ in the history of one race or another” (24). To this end, Vaerting endeavored to demonstrate how sex roles developed under conditions of male dominance constitute reversals of those that prevailed in female-dominant polities. She teased out sex norms and expectations by analyzing a range of social institutions and practices wherein sex differences are most prominent, including marriage, family forms and laws, courtship rituals, and divisions of labor. In addition, she examined moral codes, attitudes toward war, property laws, and religious systems.

49. See Vaerting and Vaerting, The Dominant Sex, 188–201, for an explanation.
Under conditions of female dominance, Vaerting claimed, one repeatedly confronts women in roles occupied by men in male-dominant societies: woman is the “wooer,” and enjoys unbounded sexual freedom; she determines her children’s status, inheritance, and name; she controls property and monopolizes the right of ownership; she is the one to “carry on occupations outside the home” (Dominant Sex, 22, 25, 27, 64–66, 71, 75). Conversely, within such societies man is the one who is wooed, who is considered sexually modest and expected to obey standards of chastity, and who is eroticized and praised for his beauty rather than his brains. He is also singularly responsible for the household and care for the family, and is denied rights of property and ownership (121, 123–127, 139). Beyond these findings, Vaerting’s comparative method led her to undermine other essentialist assumptions, including those held dear by many of her feminist contemporaries. She asserted that women are not pacifists by nature by highlighting the warlike character of many female-dominant states (chap. 15, esp. p. 210). Even more radically, she challenged the notion of inherent physiological differences between the sexes, and argued that anatomical particularities themselves arise from the division of labor (90–91, 100–113). Vaerting maintained that under a system of equal rights, the “natural resemblances” between the sexes in their stature, form, and clothing would be reasserted (114).

Based upon the evidence presented, Vaerting concluded that “the mere fact that the members of the respective sexes exhibit almost identical peculiarities as dominants or as subordinates, shows that there must be a very close similarity in the inborn psychical aptitudes of men and women. . . . The psychical trends that appear both in men and in women when one sex dominates the other are universally human and not specifically masculine or feminine.” Sexual inequality itself must constitute “the decisive factor in the formation of masculine and feminine peculiarities that are apparent in any epoch” (220). Masculinity and femininity constitute nothing more than variable manifestations of social relations of dominance and subordination when one sex is dominant.

It is for these reasons that Vaerting championed sexual equality as the only condition that would lead to “the abrogation of the
division of labour on sexual lines,” and thus enable truly individual development (94). Instead of “repress[ing] individual peculiarities in order to form two artificially divergent sexual types” and enforcing conformity within the sexes, sexual equality would liberate “men from manliness” and women from womanliness (222). Although Vaerting believed that sexual equality was inevitable, at least for a time, as a result of the “Pendulum Theory” of sexual dominance she articulated toward the end of Female Character, she believed that the challenge would lie in “discover[ing] ways and means for the permanent realisation of the ideal of sex equality, and for the prevention of either type of monosexual dominance” (268).50

As an added benefit, Vaerting further insisted that sexual equality would improve sexual morality, given the role that relations of power play in determining sexual customs (49). In her view, power determines not only sexual roles but also sexual norms, values, and relations. According to Vaerting, a sexual double standard is inevitable in states when one sex dominates (41, 48).51 She maintained that, just as in male-dominant societies, female-dominant societies ascribe complete sexual freedom to the dominant sex (in this case women) while intensely regulating the sexual behavior of the subordinate sex (men) through laws, norms, and assumptions. Within “women’s states,” men are idealized when sexually “pure” and modest, and their sexual purity (which Vaerting deems a “slave’s virtue”) is treated as a desirable quality by women (228–229). In

50. According to Vaerting’s pendulum theory, the history of sexual relations is “undulatory,” swinging from one form of sexual domination to the other. This constant shift from one form of dominance to another, she claimed, was due to what she called “the psychological law of action and reaction—the psychological law of power.” One form of sexual domination was ultimately overthrown, she claimed, because of the excesses and abuses of power by one sex over the other. Yet in the “swing” from one form of domination to the other, Vaerting maintained that a society necessarily “traverses the stage in which there is a balance of power between the sexes,” which constitutes the “phase of equal rights.” She believed that her own society was in a state of transition between forms of dominance. Although she declared that “power alone can make women free,” she cautioned against taking this power to an “extreme” and recapitulating the errors of the past. See Dominant Sex, chap. 18, “The Pendulum Movement of Monosexual Dominance.”

51. This claim is elaborated in chapter 3 in this book.
Vaerting’s view, sexual inequality tends toward degeneracy, although she does not explicitly clarify what she means by this term. Sexual equality would, she insisted, allow men and women both to become sexually free, and to be judged by the same moral standard. Furthermore, Vaerting claimed that sexual equality would increase the happiness of married men and women, eliminate prostitution, elevate the status and treatment of illegitimate children, and, in a nod to her earlier eugenic work, contribute to an “improvement in the quality of offspring” (233–234). She even suggested that sexual equality could lead to the acceptance of abortion (which she maintained is commonplace within female-dominant societies) (57–59). Finally, by enabling men and women to authentically relate to one another as individuals, sexual equality would enhance harmony and intimacy between men and women, and would prevent men and especially women from “enter[ing] the pathways of the unnatural sexual life,” whose hallmarks according to Vaerting are “self-gratification” and “Lesbian love” (228). In such instances the reader can begin to see how Vaerting’s analysis of sex roles is bound up with assumptions regarding sexuality.

Female Character would seem to offer a strong, coherent, and internally consistent theory of sexual difference that required no further elaboration. Yet Vaerting’s provocative analysis and arguments raise a number of important questions. First, if her claims are true, why had no one previously realized and publicized these facts? And second, why had the perception of binary sexual differences, regardless of their particular configuration, persisted as a seemingly transcultural, transhistorical phenomenon? Vaerting began formulating an answer to the first question in Female Character by identifying the ways in which the subjectivity and ideologies of the dominant sex influence the reading of evidence, and thus the production of knowledge (193, 196–197, 237–238). She further asserted that historical records documenting a particular form of sex dominance are routinely altered by the usurping rulers to reflect new relations of power (193, 196–199). It was not until she released Truth and Misconception, the second volume of New Foundation, that she fully addressed both questions.
In *Truth and Misconception*, Vaerting focused on two factors she claimed have caused sex psychology to become “a psychology of errors”: namely, sexual inequality and the lack of recognition of a psychological mechanism she called the “sexual component.” According to Vaerting, these two factors are interrelated, and understanding their interaction and effects would have profound implications for sexual psychology, as well as practical consequences for women’s employment and education, and broader demands for equality. Whereas her argument regarding sexual inequality clearly proceeds from the analysis she initiated in *Female Character*, her concept of the sexual component represents a marked deviation from her social constructionist approach. As we will soon discover, it is premised upon essentialist assumptions regarding sexuality.

The first part of *Truth and Misconception* offers a thorough and persuasive analysis of the ways in which sexual inequality influences the production of knowledge and, according to Vaerting, has led to glaring errors. Her case rests on her critique of early twentieth-century psychological studies of men and women. Vaerting argued that inequalities of power eliminate the possibility of objective knowledge, as the standpoint from which a researcher interprets the world is not neutral. To support this argument, she advanced three supporting claims. First, she noted that researchers proceeding from a position of dominance tend to establish their group as the measure of all things. Though in Weimar Germany this insight implicates male researchers, Vaerting took pains to note that women are subject to the same vulnerabilities when they occupy positions of power. She declared this subjective bias a *human* mistake that she named “the master’s subjectivity” (*Herrschersubjektivität*) (*Wahrheit und Irrtum*, 2).

Second, she noted that research conducted by members of sexually dominant groups tends to exaggerate the differences between the ruling and ruled groups while diminishing similarities. This tendency, Vaerting argued, aims to create distance between the ruling

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and the ruled and illuminate supposedly innate superior and inferior traits, thereby preserving prevailing relations of power. She pointed out, for example, that in a study which found 41.4 percent of men to be objective compared to 34.1 percent of women, most (male) analysts focus on the 7 percent difference, rather than their overwhelming similarity (7).

Third, Vaerting observed that researchers from the dominant sex focus on flaws identified in the subordinated group and apply them to all members of that group, whereas they only focus on the strengths of their own group and apply them to all members of their group. As a result of the exclusive focus on flaws on one side and strengths on the other, analysts from the dominant group tend to assume that activities or occupations that their members find challenging, for example, math, must be impossible for the subordinated group. Vaerting referred to this tendency as the “ruler’s argument by analogy” (Herrscheranalogieschluss) (34-40).

Taken together, Vaerting claimed, the effects of power on knowledge make it impossible to accept existing scientific assessments of sexual difference as truthful and objective. The dynamics of dominance and subordination ensure that the powerful will find what they want to find, and these findings in turn will support the status quo by denigrating the subordinated group. It is for these reasons, Vaerting maintained, that women in male-dominated states are described as docile, less intelligent, emotional, gossipy, and unjust, among other unflattering inferior traits that supposedly make them incapable of relating to men as equals. Consequently, in Vaerting’s view, “there is only one factor which can remove this distance, that is power” (4).

So far, over the course of the two volumes comprising New Foundation, Vaerting has articulated a compelling, provocative argument regarding the fundamental contingency of sexual norms, attributes, roles, and behaviors, treating them as nothing more than expressions of particular, malleable configurations of power. She has also developed an incisive critique of knowledge, and has shown the ways in which inequalities of power thoroughly bias scientific studies of sex psychology. Up to this point, however, her analysis has been unable to explain why differences between the
sexes continue to be identified, and why sex has provided such a consistent staging ground for contests over power. To answer such questions, in *Truth and Misconception* Vaerting developed the concept of the sexual component, which she asserted “necessitates not only a fundamental change in current sex psychology, but is also at the same time of far-reaching importance for the whole field of applied psychology” (vii).

According to Vaerting, the sexual component can explain differences between the sexes that power alone cannot. She described the sexual component as a consequence of the “dual sexed nature of humanity” (*Zweigeschlechtlichkeit der Menschheit*), which imparts to the soul of every man and woman a “double-face” (*doppeltes Gesicht*) that causes the psyche to react very differently toward the opposite sex than toward its own. Specifically, the sexual component causes a person to act in a “sexually inflected” (*geschlechtsbe-тонten*) way toward a member of the opposite sex. Because of the sexual component, Vaerting argued, the possibility of a “sexual influence” on behavior always exists whenever men and women come into intellectual contact with one another, though she conceded that the sexual component can remain latent and inactive in some individuals (vii, 46). She further described the expression of the sexual component as either positive or negative, “namely leaning toward emphasizing lust or apathy (*Lust- oder Unlustbetonung*).” As such, the sexual component could have two opposite effects: inhibiting and arousing (*hemmend und erregend*) (46). However, Vaerting insisted that people behave “neutrally,” or rather in a nonemotional, nonsexually inflected way, toward members of their same sex (47). For her, sexual influence never comes into question between “normal” individuals of the same sex.

Vaerting maintained that the sexual component has particularly strong effects on the emotions and “ability to think” (*Denkleistungsfähigkeit*)—that it encourages the expression of emotion between the sexes while inhibiting reason (90). In her view, the sexual component exercises a particularly strong influence over girls (94–95). According to Vaerting, the sexual component explains why, for example, women may appear to men to be more emotional, and why they would be less capable of intellectual
achievement when educated solely by men and forced to engage with male-dominated cultural and educational institutions (50–53, 59, 62–71, 73–84, 226–237).\textsuperscript{53} It is for this reason, she asserted, that girls tend to excel academically under the guidance of female teachers (46, 90–91).

The sexual component served to further explain why a female researcher studying women would arrive at different findings than a male researcher studying women, and vice versa (54–57, 72, 97–98). By way of proof, she cites the work of American psychologist Helen Thompson, whose studies in comparative sex psychology contradicted the findings advanced by her male colleagues (53–57). Vaerting pointed out that not only positive but also strongly negative emotional reactions could be attributed to the workings of the sexual component; however, she insisted that these negative reactions are often signs of sexual abnormality. In her words, “A negative direction of the sexual component” can arise as “the result of a sick or confused sexuality” (71).

Vaerting never clarifies in the text exactly what kind of entity the sexual component \textit{is}; it figures as a nebulous essence of human existence. Yet many of Vaerting’s assertions regarding the nature and working of the sexual component indicate that it has something to do with sex and sexuality. Specifically, as something that binds men and women to an inexorable, dynamic, emotional, and implicitly eroticized interaction with one another, it would seem that the sexual component is a synonym for naturalized heterosexuality. It is perhaps telling that she uses the adjective “sexual” rather than “geschlecht” to describe the component, as “geschlecht” gestures to an understanding of sex more in line with what would today be called gender. Equally revealing is the fact that Vaerting characterized the component as working to either “arouse” or “inhibit” one’s “lust or apathy” toward a person of the opposite sex. Furthermore, Vaerting specified that the sexual component can only

\textsuperscript{53} Importantly, Vaerting believed that this dynamic held true for men as well—that is, that they behaved more emotionally and less rationally toward women. However, she claimed that, thanks to their current dominance, men can neglect this “weakness” in themselves, as it would potentially undermine their power.
take effect between men and women—that is, between “healthy and normal” men and women whose sexuality is not “sick” or “confused.”

Tellingly, Vaerting maintained that “sexuality is overall the driving force behind emotional life,” and that therefore “the sexual component undoubtedly has a very strong emotional effect on psychic phenomena” (50). Speaking of women, Vaerting wrote that “the woman feels as a sexual being—when her sexual component is aroused. . . . She has then consciously or unconsciously a tendency to show a man her feelings first and then her intellect, because she perceives a male in this situation as a sexual being and builds a bridge to this being by way of her feelings” (108). Conversely, Vaerting explicitly, albeit briefly, addressed the role of the sexual component in same-sex desiring individuals. She bluntly described the working of the sexual component among homosexual women as “pathological abnormalities of the sexual influence.” While she did not view homosexual men and women to be immune to the workings of the sexual component, she believed that in these individuals, “the positive orientation of the component . . . is completely directed towards its own sex,” while negative emotional responses are directed toward the opposite sex (111). Neutrality strangely does not seem to be an option here. Although she maintained that the sexual component in homosexual men and women requires further investigation, even suggesting that functional observations of the sexual component could be used to identify latent homosexuality, she stopped herself, saying that she didn’t “want to go into it any further” (111–112). Instead, she focused her attention on the effects of the sexual component upon the feelings that “healthy individuals” bear toward homosexuality (111).

Bearing in mind the arguments made in both volumes of the New Foundation, by the conclusion of Truth and Misconception the reader finds herself in a complicated position: on the one hand, gender differences are attributed to the workings of power, as determined by larger social structures and the functional demands they imply; on the other hand, the phenomenon of difference itself is naturalized as an essential, unavoidable consequence of heterosexuality. Men and women seem destined to react to one another
in certain emotionally and sexually overdetermined ways, regardless of the particular constellations of gender and power relations. Vaerting claimed that it is impossible to eradicate the effects of the sexual component, given how fundamental the component is to the souls of sexed human beings. She concluded the second volume by declaring, “It would be fairer not to make any sex responsible for the sins of dominance by one sex, because both sexes are, as a whole, victims of evolution” (253).

The best that can be done, in Vaerting’s view, is to try and mitigate the effects of the sexual component where and when they matter in the lives of individual men and women, and in the study of sexual differences. To achieve these ends, she proposed new methodologies for the study of sex psychology that would require participation and input from male and female researchers, along with reforms in the education and upbringing (Erziehung) of boys and girls (166–172, 176–181, 217–225). Perhaps even more radically, like feminist sex reformers such as Grete Meisel-Hess she advocated greater sexual freedom for women as a means of furthering their intellectual achievement (241–244). Yet because of the sexual component, Vaerting discounted the possibility of same-sex desire, attraction, and identification as viable options within a state of sexual equality. Individuals must behave neutrally or rationally toward members of their same sex; positive erotic feelings, desires, and interactions can only serve as signs of pathology and degeneration within this framework.

Sofie Lazarsfeld and the Woman’s Experience of the Male

First published in the early 1930s, Sofie Lazarsfeld’s Woman’s Experience of the Male was among the sexological studies of sex and sexual difference that drew upon Vaerting’s groundbreaking work. Lazarsfeld directly cited Vaerting to support her own arguments based in Adlerian individual psychology. Lazarsfeld’s

54. Here and below I cite from the English translation of Lazarsfeld’s work.
55. Sofie Lazarsfeld explicitly discusses Mathilde Vaerting’s work in chap. 7 (“Woman’s Erotic Personality”) of Woman’s Experience of the Male (London:
work strikingly resembles Vaerting’s in the tensions it manifests between the denaturalization of gender on the one hand and the essentialization of heterosexuality on the other. The interconnections between these texts and their similar treatment of gender and sexuality in spite of their different approaches, generic forms, and places of publication indicate the influence of broader social and cultural dynamics on sexological knowledge.

Like Mathilde Vaerting, Sofie Lazarsfeld has received little attention from scholars until recently. The first book-length biography of Lazarsfeld was only published in 2015, and bears the subtitle *The Rediscovery of a Pioneer of Individual Psychology*. Sofie Lazarsfeld (née Munk) was born in 1881 in Troppau, part of the Austrian section of Schlesien (now Czech Republic). Even though she lacked university education, following her move to Vienna, she and her husband became part of the city’s socialist-intellectual milieu, and she proved an avid autodidact. Through her friendships with Margarete Hilferding and Alfred Adler, Lazarsfeld became interested in individual psychology and pursued its study. At this time, women made up 50 percent of the Viennese Association for Individual Psychology’s membership. Upon qualification, she dedicated her career to issues concerning women’s and children’s sexuality. In 1925, Lazarsfeld opened up a sex and marriage counseling center in her apartment and began writing a sex advice column. She later assumed leading roles in professional organizations dedicated to individual psychology in the United States, following her forced emigration because of her ethnicity and socialist politics.

Like Vaerting’s *New Foundation, Woman’s Experience of the Male* was widely reviewed in journals addressing diverse audiences, including *Biological Healing Arts, The Woman in the State, The New Generation, New Home Economics, The Struggle, Journal for Applied Psychology, Journal for School Health and Social Hygiene*, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the *Journal for Individual Psychology*.

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Sexual Politics and Feminist Science

Psychology. The early English translation of her book, entitled _Rhythm of Life_, was also reviewed in the _Journal of Personality_. As was the case with _New Foundation_, _Woman’s Experience of the Male_ was no stranger to condescending commentary. The British _Journal of Personality_’s review of Lazarsfeld’s book disparagingly referred to it as “a rather strange though interesting conglomeration of quotations from medical authorities, philosophers, psychologists, and poets on the one hand, and some practical experiences in, and statistics on, an Austrian ‘marital advice bureau,’ written in a typically journalistic style.” Although it noted that Lazarsfeld “took a leading part in one of those Central European bureaus which . . . give advice before the final decision to marry is taken,” and that she “kept careful statistics on the cases treated,” it also stated that she “quote[d] extensively” authors “whose views she found in agreement with her own observations.” Aside from this dismissive review, on the whole the book was positively received. Writing for the feminist journal _The Woman in the State_, E. Paulsen exclaimed in the very first lines of her review, “An important book! Every woman read it!” Paulsen noted that the book was firmly grounded in experience and clinical evidence, and written in a lively, accessible way. She especially celebrated Lazarsfeld’s theory that men’s feeling of sexual inferiority was the origin of many social phenomena, including women’s oppression, which I outline below. Although this aspect of _Woman’s Experience of the Male_ was downplayed in the review that appeared in the _Journal for Applied Psychology_, its author, H. Keller, nonetheless declared that the book should be comprehensively studied by men as well as women. Writing for _Biological Healing Arts_, Dr. Werner

58. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. H. Keller, “Sofie Lazarsfeld: Wie die Frau den Mann erlebt,” _Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie_ 40 (1931): 537. According to Keller, “The work does not want to turn against the man—although it speaks here and there about the
Becker pointed out that although the author sympathetically identified with the sexual condition of women, and that as a “highly modern” woman she stressed the equality of the sexes, Lazarsfeld never lost the impartiality needed for this work, and did not assign blame for sexual dysfunction exclusively to one sex. Becker ultimately recommended reading *Woman’s Experience of the Male*, noting that everyone could learn from Lazarsfeld and her wealth of experience.\(^{62}\)

Unlike *New Foundation*, Lazarsfeld’s *Woman’s Experience of the Male* was not meant to be an academic contribution to the study of sex and sexual difference. Rather, Lazarsfeld aimed to write a sexological guidebook by a woman for women, based on her knowledge and experience as an Adlerian psychologist. Although less familiar than Freudian or even Jungian psychoanalytic traditions, Adlerian or individual psychology was an important and influential movement, particularly in 1920s Vienna. Unlike Freudian or Jungian traditions, Adlerian psychology stresses the importance of the total environment on the development of an individual’s personality. The individual is treated holistically, not as a collection of drives or instincts, although Adlerians attribute much importance to the motivating forces of aggression and feelings of inferiority. Adlerians are responsible for developing the concepts of the “inferiority complex” and “overcompensation.” They were much more attuned to relations of power and social relations in shaping subjectivity, including an individual’s sense of masculinity or femininity, than many other psychologists at the time.\(^ {63}\) Adlerians also heavily


stressed the importance of self-awareness and individual willpower as means of developing a productive, fulfilling lifestyle that would enable a person to realize her or his fullest sense of self. For this reason, Adlerians heavily stressed the importance of taking responsibility for one’s choices and one’s life path.

In the introduction to *Woman’s Experience of the Male*, Lazarsfeld bemoaned the lack of sexological texts written by women, writing that “in so far as [sexological texts] are founded upon real knowledge and practical experience of life, they are written by men and for men, from the male point of view. They show clearly the traces of the man, favoring as they do the civilization in which woman plays a subordinate role, and they betray a certain condescension” (18). “Even where the investigations have been carried out conscientiously, and have led to the conclusion that the sexes are equal,” she noted that “the male author’s unconscious acceptance of the subordination of the female sex becomes apparent again and again” (105). What was needed, she claimed, was a book like hers: a sexological text written by a woman for women, one that combined “feminine attitude” with specialist knowledge gained from practical, professional experience. Lazarsfeld positioned herself as the ideal author of such a work by appealing not only to her gender, but also to her experience running a sex and marriage advice center in Vienna. Books like hers, she insisted, would correct studies written by men: bringing women’s experience to bear on existing facts and theories would remedy sexual half-truths and ultimately enable women to determine their future as autonomous sexual agents.

One of Lazarsfeld’s major interventions in *Woman’s Experience of the Male* was her challenge to two general attitudes toward sex and sexuality that she claimed shaped the existing “erotic atmosphere”: first, that “sex and sexuality represent . . . rigid, immutable principle[s],” and second, that “woman’s sexual role is . . . inferior” (95). Lazarsfeld was particularly critical of the essentialization of femininity, and the ways in which “natural laws” were mobilized in order to “justify the subordination of women” (102). In her view, it was essential to attack these attitudes not only because they “have caused and continue to cause a great deal of harm,” but also
because they were unfounded and had been disproven by “both scientific investigation and practical experience” (95). From the outset of her text, she expressed criticism of the notion of absolute sex differences, writing that “we are very careful not to describe anything as ‘typically masculine,’ because we are convinced that there is no such thing in the psychological sense, and because we are of the opinion that it is hardly correct to speak of ‘men’ or ‘women’ on the basis of such distinctions at all. Actually, the difference between one woman and another may be far greater than that between a man and a woman” (21).

In support of her argument that gender distinctions are not natural phenomena, Lazarsfeld appealed to a range of social and natural scientific resources. She drew upon new findings in biology, which she claimed were proving that distinctions between the sexes did not exist, or were at least found to be of degree rather than kind (104–105). According to Lazarsfeld, cutting-edge biology proved “that none of these distinctions apply naturally as between the sexes, and that in so far as they existed they were due to an imposed and enforced status and mode of life” (102). As a supplement, she invoked “ethnological investigations into the matriarchate,” including Vaerting’s studies of hegemonically female societies, which demonstrated that gender roles, norms, and performances varied according to the given relations of power in a social order (103). To further prove her point, Lazarsfeld referenced new research on hormones, which she claimed affirmed the malleability of gender, as it proved that “it is possible to change a woman almost completely into a male or a man into a female, at least theoretically” (49). The very physiology associated with masculinity and femininity, such as degrees of fat accumulation and skeletal build, was variable, she insisted, and was proven by “experience” through the example of “masculinized” American women (200–201). Even in instances when physiological differences may have distinctively shaped male and female sexuality, Lazarsfeld asserted that they had been incorrectly interpreted against women’s interests and pleasure. Using the examples of women’s sexual desires during menstruation, she drew upon her experience as a sexual consultant and the expertise of the British sexologist Marie
Stopes to prove that women “particularly sought sexual contact” during menstruation, and that they “enjoy[ed] it with far greater intensity than usual” (135). “All this had to be said in some detail,” she maintained, “because it is essential to disprove the hypocritical argument concerning the biological inferiority of women which is so glibly used to support the tendency of suppressing the development of the feminine personality. Modern science has definitely destroyed that argument, and has proved that there is no ‘feminine biological tragedy’ and women can be independent. Nor is there any doubt that women could make themselves independent if they wanted to do so” (222–223). Because the idea of biological inequality between men and women was a myth, Lazarsfeld believed that contemporary women ought to find “assurance and confidence in the knowledge of the natural equality of the sexes” (205; emphasis in original).

Undermining arguments regarding essential sex differences and drawing upon individual psychology enabled Lazarsfeld not only to argue on behalf of sexual equality, but also to theorize alternate accounts of men’s sexual oppression of women that, while not ignoring the body, stressed the importance of psychological and social motivations. Lazarsfeld’s analysis proceeded from a fundamental premise of individual psychology: namely, that fear is the motivating factor behind human action and behavior, and that this “life fear” produces a sense of inferiority (98–99). In terms of sexuality, fears of sexual inferiority lead a person to overinflate the importance of sex, and to treat sex as a realm in which to pursue personal power over others. Both tendencies, she insisted, were especially evident in men (101–102). Consequently, Lazarsfeld argued, “Sexual life in our man-ruled world is built on the subordination of the woman, and this situation is maintained and convulsively adhered to despite the harm resulting from it to the man as well as the woman” (101).

But why should men feel inferior, given that, as Lazarsfeld noted, they enjoy “every privilege, [play] the leading role in every sphere, ha[ve] every opportunity for the full development of [their] personality and [do] not occupy a position of inferiority anywhere”? (108). The answer, she declared, lies in man’s sense of inferiority
regarding his sexual capacity. She identified certain physical limitations on male sexuality that do not exist for women:

His capacity for sexual pleasure depends on certain physiological conditions; hers does not; his ability to engage in sexual contact is conditional upon his achieving an erection; hers is not thus limited. Therefore, the man’s activity depends on and is limited by certain physiological conditions, while the woman is always capable of sexual contact; repetition is not always possible to the man, but always possible to the woman. (111)

It is out of a sense of physiological lack, Lazarsfeld declared, that men are led to “overcompensate” by insisting on their dominance over women. According to Lazarsfeld, “Out of man’s consciousness of the woman’s physiological superiority there has developed a whole fear complex which makes itself felt not only in every aspect of our sexual life, but in the very structure of society. It is the man’s fear of sexual failure, sexual defeat”—and ultimately, she insisted, men’s fear of the “entire female sex”—that “really governs our lives” (111–113). This fear is further responsible for denigrating women’s sexual role through theories such as that of penis envy, which, Lazarsfeld maintained, “springs from the over-compensation of masculine sexual inadequacy due to physiological causes” (116). “Actually,” Lazarsfeld noted, “what women desire is not the possession of a penis in their own organism, but rather the power and privileges which the possessors of a penis have secured for themselves by way of over-compensation for the physiological inadequacy of that organ” (117).

According to Lazarsfeld, then, if there were no intrinsic, essential differences between men and women, it followed that women had as much capacity for sexual pleasure and sexual agency as men. In addition to using biology to debunk prevailing stereotypes, Lazarsfeld also mobilized psychology as a way to highlight the sexual potential that lay dormant in all people. In line with her training in Adlerian psychology, Lazarsfeld stressed that sexual personality was individualized, not overdetermined by gender; it was influenced by a person’s erotic atmosphere, and thus changeable. In Lazarsfeld’s words, individual sexuality “is not fixed, but variable, and it is therefore up to him to develop it; everyone has
the kind of sexuality which he or she deserves” (118). In order to establish more authentic sexual subjectivities, untethered from essentialist ideas regarding gender, Lazarsfeld stressed the need particularly for women to develop what individual psychologists call a “life plan,” and advocated that women work outside the home to build their self-confidence and free themselves from a gendered sense of inferiority (191–192). In her view, “The full development of the human personality, both masculine and feminine, demands both love and work” (233). Lazarsfeld therefore called for a transformation of the broader erotic environment that shaped sexuality.

Lazarsfeld did not believe that pursuing professional work was enough in itself, however: she further insisted that women must be paid equally with men for their labor. According to her, “A really satisfactory sexual relationship between men and women in the future can only be achieved if female labor is rated just as highly as male labor, and women attain economic independence of their sexual partner” (256). Equally paid employment would provide women not only with greater confidence, but also greater material independence; both, Lazarsfeld believed, would reduce the burden on demands for fulfillment through sex, and would reduce inhibitions between sexual partners, critical to any pleasurable sexual experience (231–232). Here it is worth noting that the demand for women’s economic independence—whether through (equally) paid labor outside the home, or through maternal welfare schemes—has been a constant demand of female sexual theorists, and has been consistently identified as a fundamental precondition for healthy sexual relations between men and women. Lazarsfeld further called for a new education for girls and boys that would train girls to embrace work outside the home and its psychological benefits, and teach boys to appreciate women and desire equality between the sexes. “It is to be hoped,” she declared, “that the rational education of boys will cause at some future time all men to realize that perfect sexual happiness for both sexes lies not in antagonistic opposition but in cooperation on equal terms. . . . That time will relieve the men of their exaggerated and totally unfounded sexual fear of women, and will free both sexes from the
many troubles from which we are at present suffering as a result of this fear” (264).

Lazarsfeld’s engagement with individual psychology and its stress on social forces, power relations, and the motivating force of feelings like fear, aggression, and inferiority all enabled her to destabilize the naturalization of gender and especially the essentialization of female sexuality. Individual psychology also supported Lazarsfeld’s calls for sexual equality and the need to individualize sexuality. As the preceding paragraph suggests, however, Lazarsfeld’s goals in writing *Woman’s Experience of the Male* were not limited to deconstructing sex roles and providing women readers with gender-specific sexological guidance. Perhaps even more importantly, Lazarsfeld endeavored to rehabilitate heterosexual relations between men and women to ensure that both parties could enjoy a mutually satisfactory sex life (144–148). After all, this book was informed not just by Lazarsfeld’s training in individual psychology, but also by her experiences running a sex and marriage advice center and penning a sex advice column (19–22). For Lazarsfeld, it was necessary to abandon essentialist understandings of sex roles precisely in order to create healthier heterosexual unions. For Adlerians, as Lazarsfeld pointed out, “it is decisive for the happiness of any conjugal or sexual relationship that each partner should recognise the separate personality of the other and his or her absolute right to decide the conditions of his or her love” (26; see also 27, 36).

On its surface, the goal of improving sexual relations between men and women may seem benign, especially when paired with demands for sexual equality and women’s empowerment in the workforce. Yet the fact that Lazarsfeld’s destabilization of gender is linked so closely to the affirmation of heterosexuality should give the reader pause. In Lazarsfeld’s view, heterosexual relations constituted the bedrock of social, cultural, and psychological life. According to her, “The destiny of the individual, as well as that of the nations, to a considerable extent depends on that relationship [between a man and a woman]” (53). She even maintained that the “relationship between man and woman comprises every form of relationship that may exist between one human and another,”
including “the erotic and sexual relationship,” reproduction, and labor (54–55). Heterosexual relations informed not only social structure but also spiritual life, and even shaped the most fundamental trait of the human psyche (from an Adlerian point of view), the urge for personal power (55). According to Lazarsfeld, only with the emergence of sexual science were researchers and laypeople alike coming to realize not only the centrality but also the necessity of heterosexuality for human survival and social order—and that the security of this institution was not something to be taken for granted, given the myriad sexual problems of the present day.

Accompanying Lazarsfeld’s insistence on and celebration of heterosexuality was her rather damning (though sometimes ambivalent) presentation of female homosexuality as a pathological consequence of unsatisfactory heterosexual relations (307). Though she refrained from “enter[ing] into the medical dispute as to whether homosexuality is congenital,” she nonetheless maintained that “homosexuality in many cases arises from defects in education” (304). More specifically, she asserted that in her clinical work, she was “frequently able to trace a childhood situation which, via passive discouragement or active defiance led to a deflection of the sexual bent” (304). In the case of female homosexuality, she declared that in many cases it was caused by a “dis-satisfaction with the feminine sexual role in early girlhood,” or the particulars of family dynamics: “a brilliant or too insignificant mother,

64. Intriguingly, in her discussion of reproduction, Lazarsfeld insisted on distinguishing the reproductive from the sexual drives in ways that resembled the arguments of the women sexologists whose ideas were examined in chapter 2: “It is frequently said that there is such a thing as the instinct of reproduction and a hypocritical science that places this on a footing of equality with the sexual urge. That, of course, is sheer nonsense. We all know that sexual relationships are generally entered into without the least thought of reproduction, and sometimes with the express intention of avoiding reproduction... In any case, it is quite certain that the sexual urge has become separated and entirely independent of the urge for reproduction”; Lazarsfeld, Woman’s Experience of the Male, 54–55.

65. “Curiously enough, science took a long time to establish the vital significance of this problem. It seems as though science, too, was prevented by a certain reluctance, a certain inner resistance, from settling down to its proper investigation”; Lazarsfeld, Woman’s Experience of the Male, 53.
neglect in favour of a pretty sister, manifested disappointment of parents, who wanted a boy instead of a girl” (304–305). Here, she referenced Radclyffe Hall’s novel The Well of Loneliness (1928) to support her claims.

In Lazarsfeld’s view, “acquired homosexuality” could be cured through psychotherapy; yet without overt surprise or frustration, she noted that “many women so afflicted do not wish to be cured,” as “they feel just as happy in their abnormal associations as do the heterosexuals in theirs” (305). Lazarsfeld observed that “homosexual women do not feel inferior to their normal sisters,” but rather “feel superior, as though they possessed something that the others lack”—an observation that is all the more fascinating in light of the theories of homosexuality advanced by early twentieth-century women sexologists (305). Lazarsfeld claimed that this sense of superiority and contentedness with one’s homosexuality was what distinguished homosexual women from men, as the latter were driven to “despair, even suicide” as a result of the legal prohibitions on sex acts between men (305). Another distinguishing feature she identified was the fact that homosexuality was, in her view, “completely unconquerable” in a man, whereas a woman’s sexuality could be reformed; after all, she declared that over the course of her practice she had met “many women who were capable both of heterosexual and homosexual love” (307).

Despite this belief in some women’s innate bisexuality, Lazarsfeld reiterated her observation that the women she counseled—even women who were “good wives and mothers, and . . . by no means insensible to normal love”—“always preferred homosexual love” (307). Whether this was a result of congenital factors or of unsatisfactory heterosexual experiences, Lazarsfeld could not say, as “the women mentioned above were quite normal, [and did not] complain of lack of potency on the part of their male partners” (307). In a startling admission, she even conceded that in the course of her clinical practice, she had “never come across a single case of heterosexual love that could compare in devotion and tenderness with the usual homosexual association between two women” (307).

Lest one think this last statement constituted approval and acceptance of homosexuality, in the very next sentence Lazarsfeld
was quick to add, “I need hardly say that I am not praising this form of love. As I have shown throughout this book, the only completely satisfactory sexual life for a woman is a permanent association with a normally potent and sexually skilled man” (307). The only reason to even address homosexuality in women, she maintained, was “that there is no sense in shutting our eyes to realities. It undoubtedly exists, and the fact must be faced. My experience has taught me that much evil is caused by clinging to pleasant fictions and that only good can come from . . . facing up to realities” (308). Although this statement may be read as ambivalent—here she claims to simply be pointing out a “fact,” without judgment—elsewhere in her text she proved less neutral. In response to a letter from an inquirer named “Carl H.,” for example, she advised,

> It is quite possible that the woman in question has, perhaps without being conscious of it, carried within her a deep love for the deceased, and has now transferred it to his mistress. That frequently happens, and arises out of the vague feeling that love for another man is forbidden, but love for a woman is natural and permissible. The science of psychology knows that this is not the case, for it is precisely such associations that frequently prove to be more destructive than any others, thereby constituting a real danger. Perhaps it may be possible to persuade the woman in question to undergo psychological treatment. (33)

Despite conceding the fact that most female homosexuals are quite happy with their lives, do not wish treatment, and view themselves as possessing something “normal” women lack, so strong was Lazarsfeld’s conviction regarding the necessity of heterosexuality as a foundational social and psychological institution that she recommended psychological counseling to straighten out women like the object of Carl H.’s concern.

In addition to denying what she herself acknowledged was the psychological good health of her lesbian clients, at certain points in *Woman’s Experience of the Male*, Lazarsfeld even sacrificed her deconstructionist view of gender in order to ensure the smooth functioning of heterosexual relations, specifically to protect men’s egos. Curiously, despite her stress on the importance of individualizing one’s sex role and sexuality, Lazarsfeld insisted that women
 ought to continue performing feminine subordination and observing hegemonic beauty standards in order to satisfy their male partners. While stressing the importance of women’s professional work for personal fulfillment, self-confidence, and the formation of a personality independent of sex, Lazarsfeld warned that the professional woman must not lose her (hetero)sexual attractiveness, and must “do everything in her power to enhance her feminine charm and make herself desirable” (247; see also 231, 233, 256). Because she claimed that “there are few men to-day with sufficient courage and self-confidence to forgive feminine progress” (255), she advised women to “pretend to be a little more dependent, a little weaker” than they actually were, as “nothing can be gained by ‘rubbing it in’” (259). After all, she pointed out, “the masculine world inflicts a punishment on the woman who dares to develop and assert herself, and grows into a better individual than the men consider desirable”; consequently “women must therefore endeavor to reconcile the men to the change” (254–255). In the strictly sexual realm, Lazarsfeld insisted that women had to recognize that the success of heterosexual encounters rested on the “correct behavior on the part of the woman” (127): by this she meant that women must not “commit the blunder of giving expression to their subjective desire” (148). Precisely because women’s sexual needs were greater than men’s ability to satisfy them, Lazarsfeld maintained that “women must adjust themselves to the man and refrain from doing or saying anything that might interfere with his rest or might be an attempt to excite him again” (150).

Ultimately, Lazarsfeld’s approach to gender and sexuality demonstrates tensions and conflicts similar to those identified in Vaerting’s work. On the one hand, Lazarsfeld was well aware that gender is not biologically rooted, and drew upon a diverse body of scientific evidence to support this insight. As an Adlerian and a socialist, she was, like Vaerting, a supporter of the view that gender or “sex roles” are socially constructed or conditioned. For this reason, she supported the idea that an individual’s personality ought to be free to develop independently of socially determined sex roles, and even advanced feminist demands for sexual and social reform. On the other hand, it quickly becomes clear that Lazarsfeld’s approach to
gender was closely linked to her broader goal of “healing” heterosexual relations. “Authentic” personalities free from gender roles are needed for both partners in a heterosexual union to enjoy mutual satisfaction. As was true of Vaerting’s work, Lazarsfeld’s naturalization of heterosexuality was also tied to her pathologization of homosexuality, which she treated as a consequence of inauthentic gender and heterosexuality gone wrong. Lazarsfeld went so far as to prescribe the continued performance of conventional, unequal gender roles to ensure heterosexual harmony, both through obedience to hegemonic feminine beauty standards and subordination to men’s sexual needs in the bedroom (precisely the thing she seemed to argue was at the root of women’s oppression in the first place!). Woman’s Experience of the Male, like New Foundation for the Psychology of Men and Women, demonstrates how nascent antiessentialist, social constructionist approaches to gender were undermined by recapitulations of binary sexual difference as the inevitable consequence of heterosexual imperatives.

Both New Foundation for the Psychology of Men and Women and Woman’s Experience of the Male contributed to dynamic sexological discussions regarding the determination of sex and the nature of sexual difference, discussions that took place amid the highly vexed, volatile sexual politics of 1920s Germany and Austria. In both texts, one can identify echoes of the long-standing feminist insight, dating back at least to the time of Mary Wollstonecraft, that social conditions determined the existential possibilities of womanhood; however, Vaerting and Lazarsfeld are arguably more groundbreaking and subversive because of their insistence on the role of social power in determining and creating masculinity and femininity themselves. Vaerting in particular put forward a thoroughgoing refutation of the idea that sexual character or psychology was overdetermined by physiology almost thirty years before the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949). By arguing that “masculinity” and “femininity” were merely instantiations of shifting power relations between dominant and subordinate groups, Vaerting effectively questioned whether they exist as anything other than merely functional categories. Meanwhile,
Lazarsfeld’s denaturalization of gender, along with her stress on the dynamics of socialization and Adlerian analysis of sexual psychological mechanisms, opened up the possibility of greater sexual self-determination and individualized personal development.

Both *New Foundation* and *Woman’s Experience of the Male* offer interpretations of gender as fundamentally contingent on power relations—views that were controversial in the 1920s and that seem strikingly modern and progressive. Nevertheless, I have demonstrated that the arguments regarding gender advanced in both texts are ultimately tethered to constraining claims regarding sexuality in at least two ways. For both Vaerting and Lazarsfeld, the project of critically examining gender roles was legitimized by claiming that so doing would help rehabilitate heterosexuality. Moreover, both authors ultimately reified the existence of binary sexual difference as a necessary effect of heterosexuality. Vaerting and Lazarsfeld treated heterosexuality as a stable, essential feature of human existence that ensures the persistence of difference and the continued relationship between men and women. They treated homosexuality as pathological and even, in Vaerting’s case, as a potential obstacle to sexual equality. Ultimately, both *New Foundation* and *Woman’s Experience of the Male* present a confounding mix of constructionist and essentialist (to say nothing of homophobic) arguments.

To make sense of the tensions between constructed gender and essentialized sexuality, I have suggested that these texts must be firmly situated in their historical context. By the 1920s, understandings of sex as a unified concept signifying physiology, social roles, and sexual desires were breaking down within sexology, albeit haltingly, as a result of broader social changes, greater consideration of social and cultural factors in shaping sex, and new scientific developments and trends. As writers concerned with the advancement of women’s social rights and roles, both Vaerting and Lazarsfeld arguably endeavored to prove that changing gender roles, such as those demonstrated by the rise of the New Woman, need not exacerbate the “crisis” in heterosexual relations that was the cause of widespread anxiety following the First World War. The tensions between Vaerting’s and Lazarsfeld’s treatments of gender
and sexuality provide further evidence of the historical contingency of understandings and theorizations of sex, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, they raise questions about the kinds of social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that had to be present for intellectuals to begin simultaneously deconstructing gender and sexuality as effects of power relations. Appreciating the contingency of intellectual possibility when it comes to thinking about sex ultimately contributes to a richer understanding of the ambivalent course of sexual theorizing, as well as a recognition of both the potential and the limits of the sexological field as a site for such thought experiments.