Confessions of the Flesh: Aiming for Objective Measures of Desire

What could be more subjective than what one wants? This paper will explore the seemingly paradoxical explosion of scientific techniques for discerning sexual desire by circumventing, rather than probing, sexual subjectivity. Penile and vaginal plethysmography, attentional measures (pupil dilation, blink response, glance time), and fMRI are just a few such techniques used since the middle of the twentieth century. During these years when sexual orientation was taking shape as a scientific construct, considered a permanent and central aspect of the sexual self, scientists became increasingly wary of so-called "self reports" of sexual desire. Subjects' reliability as informants regarding their own desires was (and is) considered compromised by both deliberate distortion or concealment, and by a lack of awareness of underlying or subtle desires. Thus, each of these technologies is mean to get the flesh to "speak directly" to scientific investigators. Using research reports and especially expert discussions of the reliability and validity of various methods, including the susceptibility to "faking" or "suppressing" sexual response and the difficulty of establishing reliable measures of sexual orientation in women, this paper will explore the role of "objective desires" in the emergent ontology of scientifically-defined sexual orientation. In particular, I will explore how it has mattered that measures for sexual orientation have emerged from a context in which scientists have been concerned to eliminate the possibility of lying about desire.

Biography
Rebecca Jordan-Young is a sociomedical scientist whose research includes social epidemiology studies of HIV/AIDS, and evaluation of biological work on sex, gender and sexuality. Prior to joining the faculty at Barnard College, she was a Principal Investigator and Deputy Director of the Social Theory Core at the Center for Drug Use and HIV Research of the National Development and Research Institutes, Inc., and has been a Health Disparities Scholar sponsored by the National Institutes of Health. She teaches courses in science and technology studies, sexuality, gender theory, and HIV/AIDS. In the spring of 2008, Professor Young was a Visiting Scholar at the Cognitive Neuroscience Sector, International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA), Trieste, Italy, and a featured speaker in the FEST Trieste International Science Media Fair.