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Theoretical Perspectives on Human Sexuality



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Introduction

At various points in human history, sex has been defined and viewed in very different ways, although it has often been seen as just one thing: penis-in-vagina intercourse within the context of marriage for the purpose of procreation. Cultures and societies that have held this view have tended to characterize all other forms of genital stimulation as sinful, with violations sometimes carrying harsh legal penalties. Views on sex certainly still vary around the world in the modern era; however, the definition of sex is expanding, and sexual behavior is becoming more diverse and varied than ever, especially with the advent of technologies that afford new ways to sexually interact and express ourselves. "Sex" now encompasses a wide range of behaviors, including everything from mutual masturbation to oral, vaginal, and anal stimulation, not to mention things like sexting and phone sex. Again, while variation exists, sexual activity generally carries fewer legal and moral restrictions than it did in the past in many parts of the world and we increasingly recognize that sex itself serves multiple functions and purposes in our lives. Yes, procreation is one such purpose, but it is actually a surprisingly uncommon reason for sex! In a study in which people were asked why they have sex, participants reported 237 distinct reasons (Meston & Buss, 2007)! The most commonly cited reasons for both men and women included feeling attracted to another person, wanting to have fun or experience physical pleasure, and wanting to show affection or love for someone else. The least common reasons included making money, punishing oneself, wanting to give a sexually transmitted disease to another person, feeling closer to God, and wanting to have a child. This immense variation in sexual motives and behaviors means that understanding sex in today's world is a complicated task. The goal of this chapter is to give you the theoretical foundation necessary for appreciating the complexities and intricacies of modern human sexuality from a psychologist's perspective.

As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that every single sexual act is the result of several powerful forces acting upon one or more persons. These forces include our individual psychology, our genetic background and evolved history, as well as the current social and cultural context in which we live. Some of these influences favor sexual activity, whereas others oppose it. Whether sex occurs at any given moment depends upon which forces are strongest at the time.

Let us consider in more detail some of these different forces and the ways they can impact sexual decision making and behavior. Following that, we will consider some of the dominant theoretical perspectives used by psychologists in understanding human sexuality, before ultimately presenting the model that we will use to organize the remaining chapters in this book.

What Drives Us to Have Sex?

The forces that interact to produce sexual behavior can be lumped into three broad categories: psychological variables, cultural and societal factors, and biological and evolutionary influences. We will consider each of these in turn, providing specific examples of some of the ways they can shape human sexuality.

Psychological Influences

An enormous number of psychological factors can affect sexual behavior, including our mood states, level of cognitive alertness, disgust sensitivity, our general attitudes toward sex and relationships, perceived expectations for our behavior, as well as associations learned through reinforcement. Some of these factors are transitory, meaning they can change from moment to moment, whereas others are relatively stable characteristics we carry with us throughout our lives. Regardless of their stability, each of these psychological variables can either promote or inhibit sexual behavior.

For instance, personality is a relatively stable individual characteristic that may affect both the nature and frequency of our sexual activities (e.g., Markey & Markey, 2007; Miller et al., 2004). To illustrate this idea, just imagine the types of sexual situations that a very extraverted thrill-seeker might get into compared to someone who is very introverted and likes to play it safe. Throughout this book, we will discuss many personality characteristics, from the Big Five to sensation-seeking, to erotophilia, that can have a profound influence on our sex lives (all of these personality characteristics will be defined later in this chapter).

Learned associations are another relatively stable characteristic that can affect sexual behavior (e.g., Plaud & Martini, 1999). Each of us associates something different with sex, based upon our prior learning experiences. When someone expects that sex will lead to positive outcomes (e.g., because that person's prior experiences with sex were physically pleasurable and/or emotionally fulfilling), sex is more likely to occur. In contrast, when someone anticipates a lack of pleasure or potential harm (e.g., if one's perceived risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) appears high or if one's previous sexual experiences have been painful, traumatic, or otherwise negative), sex is less likely to occur.

Likewise, if someone has a negative attitude toward sex or their partner or they have a disgust response that is easily triggered, the odds of sexual activity decrease; in contrast, positive attitudes and lower disgust sensitivity are likely to increase sexual activity, even in cases where a person might not necessarily be "in the mood" (e.g., someone who is tired might not be particularly interested in sex, but might agree to a partner's request for sex to make that partner happy).

Finally, one's current affective or mood state is important as well—and this is one example of a psychological characteristic that varies from moment to moment in terms of the impact it has on sex. The same could be said for one's level of cognitive distraction, which can also vary considerably throughout the day (Masters & Johnson, 1970). When someone is in a negative mood or is highly distracted, not only is that person likely to be less interested in sex but the sex that an individual has will probably be less satisfying; positive mood states and low levels of distraction tend to generate an opposite pattern of effects.

It is important to note that all of the effects discussed above are bidirectional (i.e., attitudes and mood states shape sexual behavior, but sexual behavior also shapes our attitudes and mood states, thereby creating a feedback loop). Keep in mind, too, that these are just a few of the many ways that psychology and sexuality can intersect. Later in this chapter, we will explore several important theories describing other psychological variables that can affect sexuality. These include classical and operant conditioning, observational learning, and social exchange, among others.

Cultural, Societal, and Environmental Influences

The cultural and societal context in which we live plays a large role in determining sexual behavior. Virtually all societies around the world regulate sexuality in one form or another (DeLamater, 1987), effectively establishing standards for sexually "normal" and "deviant" behaviors among certain groups of people. However, there is huge variability in these standards. For instance, although most industrialized societies today have established a norm of sexual monogamy, there are other cultures that not only permit, but explicitly encourage a free exchange of sex partners, even within marriage (see Ryan & Jetha, 2010). Although it is true that some sexual views and practices are more widely shared than others across cultures, such as the promotion of marriage and the discouragement of **incest** (i.e., sexual activity among blood relatives; Gregersen, 1996), there do not appear to be many (if any) truly universal principles of sexuality. For a few provocative examples of how sexual practices vary cross-culturally, see Table 1.1.

One of the major forces behind these cultural variations in sexuality is religion. As some evidence of the powerful role that religion exerts on people's views of sexuality, we will explore a few prominent historical examples. First, consider the ancient Greeks and Romans, who shared a belief in multiple gods. Many of the most common myths and stories from these early times centered around the sexual exploits of those gods, which included everything from incest to sex with animals. These ancient peoples even had gods and goddesses devoted to sex (see Figure 1.1), such as Aphrodite (Greek) and Venus (Roman). The Greeks and Romans are thought to have been quite sexually active and to possess relatively permissive attitudes toward a wide range of sexual practices, including homosexuality and bisexuality (Boswell, 1980). For instance, relatively common in ancient Greece was **pederasty**: an arrangement in which an older man would educate and mentor a male adolescent, who would have sex with him in return (Scanlon, 2005).

As a sharp contrast to the sexual permissiveness of the Greeks and Romans, consider the early Christians, who believed in a single deity and enforced a set of sharply defined rules that governed sexual behavior and the roles of men and women in society. Those who did not follow these rules were subject to severe punishment, both here on earth and (as they

Table 1.1 Cross-cultural variations in human sexual behavior.

Sexual behavior with a member of the same sex is accepted in many parts of the world; however, it is illegal and punishable by death in several countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, and imprisonment in others, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan (ILGA, 2021).
Among certain tribes in New Guinea, adolescent boys ingest the semen of older men because it is believed to promote strength and virility (Herdt, 1982).
In parts of South Asia, a third gender, *hijra*, is observed. Hijra largely consist of eunuchs who have had their genitalia removed through castration, but they also include some intersex individuals (Nanda, 2001). Several cultures around the world officially recognize more than two genders.
Although kissing is considered a normative sexual behavior in most Western societies, it is far from universal. An anthropological analysis of 168 cultures around the world found that romantic kissing was not present in 54% of them, being less commonly observed among cultures from Central and South America, Africa, and Oceania (Jankowiak et al., 2015).
In some Asian and Middle Eastern countries, the practice of arranged marriage is relatively common. In such marriages, parents are responsible for selecting their child's future spouse, although the child will sometimes have input (Mehndiratta et al., 2007).



Figure 1.1 The ancient Greeks and Romans believed in gods and goddesses devoted to love and sex, such as Aphrodite, from whom aphrodisiacs got their name. ©perseomedusa / 123RF.

believed) in the afterlife. For example, one of the most prominent Christian scholars, St. Paul, wrote extensively about the sinful nature of any form of sex outside of heterosexual marriage and praised the ideals of celibacy and chastity (i.e., remaining unmarried and sexually "pure"). St. Augustine expanded upon these notions in his writings, but went even further in declaring that female submissiveness was part of God's plan. As part of this, he considered the only "natural" sexual position to be one in which the man was on top of the women (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). Given these strict rules for sexual and gender roles and the harsh punishments for violating them, sexuality became very restricted in Christian cultures, and these effects can still be felt today.

Most other early religions viewed sex in similar terms (i.e., as a sinful activity that should only exist within the confines of marriage) and promoted gender roles characterized by male dominance and female submissiveness. However, the extremity of these views varied. For instance, according to Islam, a religion that spread throughout the Middle East and Asia a few centuries after the birth of Christianity, intercourse within marriage is seen as a religious deed and is viewed positively. In fact, it is seen as a higher state than remaining single and celibate, which is quite a departure from the writings of Christian scholars such as St. Paul. Despite promoting a more permissive view in this regard, Muslims are in many ways more restrictive when it comes to gender. For example, in a high proportion of Muslim societies past and present, female modesty in clothing is mandated, and women have very few rights—they may not even be permitted to leave their homes unless accompanied by their husband or a male relative.

Taoism (a belief system with its origins in ancient China) offers another somewhat more permissive view when it comes to sex. For example, according to Taoist beliefs, sexual intercourse serves to balance the opposing forces of *yin* and *yang*, with *yin* representing female energy and *yang* representing male energy. Sex is thus held in very high regard, and is seen as serving a number of important functions beyond reproduction. However, this belief system was largely replaced by much more sexually conservative views with the rise of Confucianism about a thousand years ago. As a result of this shift, China continues to hold relatively conservative views of sex to this day.

Of course, religion is not the only cultural force acting upon sexuality. Science and the popular media play very large roles as well. We will discuss the role of science in detail in the next chapter, and the ways in which the emergence of a scientific enterprise devoted exclusively to understanding sexuality has impacted sexual attitudes and behaviors. We will focus here on the role of the media, which in today's world includes television and movies, songs, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, as well as social media and the Internet more broadly. Because of the media's omnipresence in our everyday lives, it has multiple opportunities to affect us in very visual and dramatic ways.

Since its invention, television has gradually come to include more and more sexual content, albeit with a bit of social resistance along the way. For example, it was once considered controversial for a television program to include an interracial couple (such as on the 1970s program *The Jeffersons*) or a single, pregnant woman who decides to have a baby on her own (such as on the 1990s program *Murphy Brown*). These things are pretty tame by today's standards, especially when you consider that things like full-frontal nudity and group sex scenes are increasingly depicted in popular shows on streaming networks. For a sampling of some of the ways that television shows have pushed the sexual envelope in recent years, see Table 1.2. Of course, television's evolution in this regard was not in isolation. Popular songs, music videos, and video games have become more explicit over time as well. Proponents of social learning theory (a topic we will discuss later in this chapter) argue that these sexualized media depictions have contributed to some profound changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors over the past few decades.

Table 1.2 Television shows that have pushed the sexual envelope in recent decades.

Show title	Basic premise	Selected sexual content
Queer as Folk (2000–2005)	Centers around the lives of five gay men living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.	Full-frontal male nudity present in many episodes, along with explicit simulations of oral and anal sex between men. A male high-school student, Justin, carries on a sexual relationship with a significantly older man (Brian).
The L-Word (2004–2009)	Follows the lives of several lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women living in Los Angeles, California.	Full-frontal female nudity present in many episodes, along with explicit simulations of various sexual activities between women. Nikki has sex with her girlfriend, Jenny, while wearing a strap-on penis.
Californication (2007–2014)	Tells the story of Hank Moody, a middle-aged novelist who has problems with sex, drugs, and booze.	Hank has a sexual relationship with a 16-year old girl. Hank has a dream about receiving oral sex from a nun in church.
Girls (2012–2017)	Follows the lives of four millennial women living in New York City.	Marnie receives anilingus from her boyfriend, Desi. Hannah's middle-aged parents have sex in the shower. Adam ejaculates on his girlfriend Natalia's chest in a scene that lacks explicit sexual consent.
Sense8 (2015–2018)	Explores the lives of eight strangers who discover that they are emotionally and mentally linked ("sensates").	Multiple orgy scenes take place between the sensates and their lovers over the course of the series.
Special (2019–2021)	Tells the story of Ryan, a gay man with cerebral palsy.	Ryan hires a sex worker with whom he has his very first sexual experience. The series explores the intersection of sexuality and disability in a frank, uncensored way.
Sex Education (2019–2023)	Follows the lives of various students, staff, and parents at a fictional high school. The story centers around Otis (a teenager) and his mother Jean (a sex therapist).	Maeve and Isaac (who is in a wheelchair) share an intimate scene in which they explore mutual pleasure. Over the course of the series, the show depicts teenagers navigating experiences with consent, sexual assault and harassment, and abortion. The show features various characters who are sexual and gender minorities.

However, TVs, radios, and game consoles are not the only forms of media we are exposed to—our computers and smartphones matter, too, and there is no denying that our constant access to the Internet has forever changed our sex lives. For one thing, a vast selection of sexual information and pornography is now available for free at the click of a button. Thus, people can readily obtain sexually explicit material that they might otherwise be unable to get, and they can avoid potential embarrassment by doing it in the privacy of their own homes. However, the Internet has done much more than that. It has also opened up the world of online dating and hookups, not to mention sexual self-expression through webcams, social media platforms, and mobile phones via cybersex (i.e., virtual sex encounters) and sexting (i.e., sending sexually explicit images via text message). Social media has received an increasing amount of research attention in the area of adolescent sexuality, with some studies pointing to associations with sexual attitudes and behaviors, as well as sexual risk-taking (Fevriasanty et al., 2021). Sexting often takes place over social media in the form of direct messages. In a nationally representative US survey of middle and high school students, 13% reported having sent a sext and 18.5% reported having received a sext (Patchin & Hinduja, 2019). Although such photos are often meant for just one other person's eyes, these images are sometimes circulated publicly after breakups ("revenge porn"), which can create significant distress and embarrassment. In addition, many adolescents fail to realize that it is a criminal act in the United States to take and distribute sexual photos of anyone under the age of 18 (see Chapter 15), which means sexting can generate potential legal troubles. We will elaborate on the complex effects of the media on sexual behavior throughout this book when we begin talking about lifespan sexual development, sexual education, risky sexual behavior, and pornography.

Beyond the roles of culture and society, many other features of the overall environment in which we are embedded can shape our sexual interests and behaviors. From political elections to major holidays to epidemics and pandemics, research shows that our sexuality is responsive to the world around us. For example, Google search trends reveal a peak in searches related to sex and dating around the Christmas and New Year's holidays (Markey & Markey, 2013). This could be due to the fact that many people work less at this time of year (thereby lowering stress and increasing leisure time), as well as the mood-enhancing effects of holiday festivities. Likewise, online searches for pornography are consistently higher in US states that voted for the winning political party than the losing party following major elections (Markey & Markey, 2010). Researchers believe this may stem from the testosterone rise that accompanies winning a competition. As one final example, the COVID-19 pandemic that first resulted in worldwide lockdowns and social restrictions in 2020 was linked to a decline in both solo and partnered sexual behavior, but an increase in sexual experimentation (Lehmiller et al., 2021).

Pandemic restrictions reduced opportunities for sex and dating, while also inducing significant stress and anxiety, which can lower sexual desire. At the same time, a rise in boredom from not being able to freely interact with the outside world may have prompted more novelty-seeking behaviors in the bedroom. As you can see, our sexuality can shift in various ways depending on what is happening in our environment.

Biological and Evolutionary Influences

The other major forces affecting human sexual behavior are biological and evolutionary factors. Before we go on, I should clarify that, on some level, all behavior—sexual and nonsexual—is biologically caused. After all, behavior must be preceded by some pattern of activity inside the brain. Thus, it is important to be clear regarding what we mean by a "biological influence on behavior" or a "biological cause of behavior." For purposes of this book, when we refer to biological factors, we will be talking about how things such as a person's genes or hormone levels might influence how their brain develops or functions. In recent years, genetics has been linked to sexuality in several ways. For instance, research has increasingly shown that homosexuality appears to be driven, at least in part, by a variety of hereditary factors, an issue we will return to in Chapter 6 (e.g., Dawood et al., 2009). Likewise, the gender roles people adopt seem to be influenced, in part, by the sex hormones they were exposed to while developing in the womb (Beltz et al., 2011). For example, individuals with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) are exposed to a higher than usual level of "male" sex hormones (i.e., androgens) in utero. Women with CAH tend to demonstrate more male-typical play behavior as children and have more stereotypically masculine interests as adults than women without CAH. In contrast, when a male fetus is insensitive to "male" sex hormones in utero, a more feminine gender identity and role tend to emerge later in life. Findings such as these demonstrate how biology has the potential to profoundly influence us in ways that we are completely unaware of.

Evolutionary factors have also been proposed to play a role in human sexuality. In making a case for this, researchers have looked at how human sexual behavior compares to that of other animal species. To the extent that our species and others around us evolved from common ancestors, we should expect to see similarities with other species in the ways we behave sexually. The results of this research suggest that, by and large, there is little that is unique about humans' sexual activities. For instance, same-sex sexual activity has been documented in hundreds of animal species (see Figure 1.2), from fruit flies to flamingos (Bagemihl, 1999). Likewise, oral sex (Tan et al., 2009) and masturbation (Bagemihl, 1999) occur in other species as well. Humans cannot even stake a claim to being the only species that has sex for pleasure, or mates face to face! Thus, although there are certainly major differences in culture, society, intelligence, and communication between us and other species, there are numerous similarities when it comes to our sexual behaviors.

Human sexuality is thus a complex phenomenon with many contributing factors, from the psychological to the social to the biological. Although the goal of this text is to primarily provide you with a psychological understanding of sexual attitudes and behaviors, we will also address and acknowledge the important roles played by these other factors.



Figure 1.2 Flamingos are just one of many animal species in which same-sex sexual behavior has been observed. ©Ground Picture / Shutterstock.

Major Theoretical Perspectives on Human Sexuality

At this point, we will turn our attention to some of the major theoretical perspectives on human sexual behavior. We will focus primarily on theories put forth by psychologists. However, please be aware that many different theories exist in other fields of study, such as sociology and anthropology; by no means is this a comprehensive list of all possible theories of sexual behavior. In this section, theories will be addressed in approximate chronological order from oldest to newest in order to give you some appreciation of how psychological perspectives have changed over time. As you will see, different psychologists may evaluate a given sexual act in very different terms, depending upon their theoretical orientation. Also, please note that none of these perspectives is necessarily better than any of the others because each provides some unique insight into the diversity of sexual behaviors and attitudes that exist. For a handy summary of the main idea(s) behind each theory, see Table 1.3.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalytic theory is one of the oldest perspectives on sexuality in the field and is credited to Sigmund Freud (see Figure 1.3). Freud believed that human behavior was driven by two factors: sex and death. He termed our sexual and life instincts **libido** (a term that is still in use today, even outside of the psychoanalytic tradition), and our death instinct, *thanatos*.

Freud believed that personality consisted of three distinct parts. First is the **id**, which is the most basic part of the personality and contains the libido. The id operates according to the *pleasure principle*, meaning it seeks to obtain gratification and fulfillment of its needs. Second is the **ego**, which exists to keep a check on the id. The ego operates under the *reality principle*, meaning it tries to satisfy the id's desires in a way that is rational and avoids self-destruction. The last portion of personality is the **superego**, which can be thought of as our conscience. The superego tries to persuade the ego to do not what is realistic, but what is moral.

These personality aspects work together to produce behavior across all situations, sexual and otherwise. To consider just one example, imagine that you meet a friend's spouse for the first time and find that person to be very attractive. Your id would probably be telling you to ignore the potential consequences of acting upon your attraction and start flirting right now. At the same time, your ego would probably step in and tell you to wait until your friend goes to the bathroom so as to avoid starting a fight. However, the superego would ultimately chime in and tell you to forget about the whole thing because you do not want to hurt your friend or become a "home-wrecker."

Table 1.3 Summary of the major psychological theories in the study of human sexuality.

Theory	Main point(s)
Psychoanalytic theory	Personality structure consisting of the id, ego, and superego drives behavior. Sexual "abnormalities" arise when individuals become fixated during one of the psychosexual stages of development.
Classical conditioning	Repeated pairing of a neutral stimulus with one that produces a specific behavior will eventually lead the neutral stimulus to elicit the same behavior.
Operant conditioning	Reinforced behaviors increase in frequency; punished behaviors decrease. Reinforcement is more effective than punishment.
Social/Observational learning	Behavior can be learned through observation of others (e.g., peers, parents) or through media exposure, including pornography.
Exchange perspectives	Exchange of resources is fundamental to social relationships. Behavior is driven by perceived costs and benefits derived from trades occurring between partners.
Personality theories	Relatively stable individual traits generate consistent patterns of behavior across situations. Big Five, erotophobia-erotophilia, sensation seeking, and sociosexuality are major personality traits associated with sexual behavior.
Evolutionary theory	Human beings are motivated to produce as many of their own offspring as possible. We have evolved preferences for physical and psychological traits and characteristics in sexual partners that promote reproductive success.
Biopsychosocial model	Biological, psychological, and social factors interact to produce variations in sexual orientations and behaviors. The mind and body are fundamentally intertwined. Sexual health is not just the absence of biological dysfunction; it runs on a continuum with varying degrees of sexual illness and wellness.



Figure 1.3 Freud made numerous contributions to the study of sexuality from a psychological perspective, including his theorized personality structure consisting of the id, ego, and superego. ©basphoto/123RF.COM.

In addition to this personality structure, Freud proposed an elaborate theory of psychosexual development. The basic idea is that all children pass through a series of five stages in which different parts of the body serve as a source of pleasure: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital. To the extent that a child does not pass through all of the stages in their expected order, that child can become "fixated," which leads to a lifelong urge to gratify the relevant body part from that stage (e.g., someone fixated in the oral stage might wind up constantly chewing on pens or fingernails as an adult). Perhaps the most well-known aspect of Freud's psychosexual theory was the notion of the *Oedipus complex* in boys (i.e., sexual desire for one's mother and hatred for one's father), as well as *penis envy* and the *Electra complex* in girls (i.e., psychological traumatization due to either the lack of a penis or sexual desire for one's father, respectively).

Although certain aspects of Freudian theory are fascinating and provocative, it has long since been rejected on numerous grounds. For one thing, much of what Freud proposed could not be tested scientifically because most of his work was based on case reports of his clinical patients (we will discuss the limitations of this research method in detail in Chapter 2). Also, if you have ever taken a course on the psychology of gender, you are probably well aware that many of Freud's theories and writings smack of sexism, especially the idea of penis envy, which suggests that, without a penis, a woman is "incomplete." In addition, consider that Freud frequently argued that women who reach orgasm through clitoral stimulation are not as "mature" as women who can reach orgasm through vaginal intercourse alone. There is no rational or scientific basis for such a claim. Despite the biases and problems inherent in Freud's work, he remains an important historical figure for getting the field of psychology to recognize the importance of studying sexuality.

Cognitive-Behavioral and Learning Theories

Psychoanalytic theory and its emphasis on unconscious factors that influence behavior fell out of favor with psychologists in the early part of the twentieth century, when a new school of thought known as behaviorism emerged. The focus shifted from studying the unknowable unconscious to an empirical investigation of overt behavior. Initially, most behaviorists adopted a rather extreme view that it was impossible to scientifically measure mental processes, thereby leaving observable behavior as psychologists' only unit of analysis. However, the field later backed away from this radical view, and began to acknowledge and addresses the vital role that cognitive processes play in producing behavior. Central to the behaviorism movement was the idea that behaviors are learned from experience. Also, through this learning process, appropriate behaviors can come to replace previously learned behaviors that are ineffective or maladaptive. The major types of learning that emerged from this movement were classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and social

(observational) learning. Each of these perspectives is still relevant to psychologists' understanding of sexual attitudes and behaviors today and you will see them referenced repeatedly throughout this book.

Classical Conditioning

The first and perhaps the most well-known learning theory that emerged from behaviorism is **classical conditioning**. Every student of psychology is familiar with Pavlov's (1927) famous experiments in which he was able to induce salivation in dogs by the simple ringing of a bell. Pavlov accomplished this by repeatedly pairing the bell with the presentation of meat powder. To demonstrate its applicability to human sexuality, we will walk through the steps involved in classical conditioning with a relevant example. First, we must identify a specific stimulus that produces a specific behavior. For example, when someone's genitals are gently touched or stroked, it will typically produce sexual arousal. Next, the original stimulus must be paired with a new stimulus that does not cause that same behavior. For instance, dirty talk (e.g., *Let me be your personal sex toy. Use me any way you want tonight!*) is something that is not inherently sexually arousing to everyone. So let us imagine that just before someone's genitals are touched, that person's partner starts talking dirty. If these two stimuli are paired together frequently enough, dirty talk can start to become arousing in and of itself because it has become a learned cue or signal for arousal. Put another way, arousal has become a conditioned response to dirty talk in this case (see Figure 1.4). Classical conditioning has been implicated as one of the major psychological roots of many sexual behaviors, including fetishes (an issue we will return to in Chapter 14). Conditioning of this nature can also be useful in the treatment of sexual difficulties (see Chapter 13).

Operant Conditioning

Classical conditioning is limited in that it cannot provide a complete understanding of all behavior, sexual or otherwise. Not every behavior is cued by a stimulus that appears immediately before it. Psychologists quickly recognized the need to explore other types of learning and the result was **operant conditioning**, initially proposed by B.F. Skinner (1938). The main idea behind operant conditioning is that when behaviors are *reinforced* (i.e., when they are rewarded or lead to pleasurable consequences), they tend to be repeated; in contrast, when behaviors are *punished* (i.e., when the consequences are unpleasant or undesirable), they tend to occur with less frequency. In order for this form of learning to occur, the reinforcement/punishment must follow the behavior immediately and consistently, otherwise the association will not be learned. As a general rule, reinforcements are generally more effective than punishments in shaping behavior.

Operant conditioning is very applicable to the study of sex because sex is not only a behavior than can be increased or decreased through reinforcement and punishment, but sex is also a reinforcing variable that can increase or decrease the frequency of other, nonsexual behaviors. Demonstrating the former role, people who typically experience pleasurable consequences from sex (e.g., bonding with or getting closer to a partner, having an intense orgasm) will likely have sex more frequently; those who find sex to be punishing (e.g., because of pain or perhaps from anxiety caused by a sexual difficulty) will likely have sex with less frequency. Demonstrating the latter role, an individual may use sex as a way of



Figure 1.4 Pairing dirty talk or other stimuli with sexual activity may lead those stimuli to become sexually arousing in and of themselves.
© Laurin Rinder / Shutterstock.

reinforcing desirable behaviors in a partner, such as enticing someone to do more housework with the prospect of a having sex more often. Incidentally, research has found that people who do more housework have sex more frequently, so there might be something to this idea (Gager & Yabiku, 2010)! For more on the use of operant conditioning as applied to sexual behavior, see the Digging Deeper 1.1 box.

Social/Observational Learning

Operant conditioning is incapable of providing a complete understanding of human behavior because some of our behaviors develop independently of direct reinforcement and punishment. The perspective of those who adopt a **social or observational learning** approach is that some behavioral tendencies are acquired through simple observation of others' activities. If we see others rewarded for engaging in certain behaviors, we tend to imitate them; if we see others experience negative outcomes as a result of engaging in certain behaviors, we typically avoid those behaviors.

Digging Deeper 1.1 Can You Change Someone's Sexual Orientation through Operant Conditioning?

Some therapists have attempted to use operant conditioning principles to change the sexuality of their clients from homosexual to heterosexual through a controversial (and increasingly banned) process known as **reparative therapy** (also known as conversion therapy). This is often performed by having the therapist subject clients to physical punishment upon their exposure to homoerotic stimuli (note that the use of punishments to change behavior is sometimes referred to as *aversive conditioning*). For example, the therapist might present a gay or lesbian client with erotic photos of members of the same sex and pair that with electric shocks to the genitals. Alternatively, a therapist might ask a client to wear a rubber band on the wrist all day long and snap it every time the client has a sexual thought about a member of the same sex. Can such "treatments" actually change someone's sexuality?



Figure 1.5 There is no reliable evidence that therapies designed to change patients' sexual orientation actually work. In fact, the evidence suggests that they do more harm than good. ©JessicaGirvan / Shutterstock.

There is no scientific evidence published in reputable, peer-reviewed journals indicating that reparative therapy works as intended (see Figure 1.5). In fact, the weight of the published research indicates that it is psychologically harmful to those who undergo this treatment (Halderman, 2003). The use of conditioning principles to change one's sexual orientation is not even warranted in the first place, given that homosexuality itself is not a disorder or problem in need of treatment. A listing for homosexuality is not included in either the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) or the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD), both of which are considered the definitive guides for diagnosing psychological disorders. In addition, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the World Health Organization have long held the position that homosexuality is not a disorder. Thus, reparative therapy is one of the most prominent examples of the misuse and abuse of psychological theory in the context of sexuality.

Perhaps the most well-known example of social learning in the field of psychology is Albert Bandura's classic Bobo doll experiments (Bandura et al., 1961). In these studies, Bandura and his research associates examined how exposure to violent media affects children's aggressive tendencies. What they found was that children who watched a video of an adult acting aggressively toward an inflatable Bobo doll (e.g., hitting it with a hammer, throwing it across the room) ended up terrorizing the Bobo doll when given an opportunity; kids who watched a control video of an adult sitting quietly exhibited far less aggression toward the Bobo doll.

The social learning perspective has obvious and important implications for the development of sexual behavior (see Figure 1.6). For example, if high school students see others receive a popularity boost for becoming sexually active, those students may become inclined to do the same. This perspective also speaks to the especially powerful role that the media and pornography can have on our sexuality. The sexual depictions that appear in popular music, films, television shows, advertisements, and the Internet may shape our views of what is and is not appropriate sexual behavior. To the extent that the media depicts positive sexual role models (e.g., people who practice safe sex and communicate about their sexual history), this is not inherently bad. However, if the media depicts poor sexual examples (e.g., people who do not use or even discuss protection, or who do not communicate about sexual consent), this can be dangerous. As it turns out, most media depictions of sex portray it in unrealistic and sometimes risky terms. For example, an analysis of sexual content in the most popular movies released between 1983 and 2003 found that most sex acts depicted (70%) occurred among people who had just met (Gunasekera et al., 2005). Moreover, almost every scene (98%) failed to address the topic of contraception, and virtually none of these sexual acts resulted in negative consequences (e.g., unintended pregnancies, STIs, etc.). Given these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that longitudinal research has revealed that the more sexual content adolescents are exposed to in popular films, the earlier they start having sex, the more sexual partners they have, and the less likely they are to practice safe sex (O'Hara et al., 2012). Of course, the media is not the sole contributing factor here, and other explanations are possible for these effects, such as a lack of parental supervision and involvement (for more on the limitations of correlational research, see Chapter 2). While it is easy to blame the media for everything, it is important to recognize that it is just one of many potential influences on our sex lives.

A related concern is that a growing number of adolescents are turning to pornography to determine what "normal" sexual behavior is because they are not getting this information anywhere else (Bowater, 2011). However, pornography is generally designed for entertainment, not education. For example, the genital appearance of porn performers (e.g., penis size) is often far removed from average, which can potentially lead to skewed perceptions of "normal." Further, the sexual activities and practices depicted in porn do not necessarily mirror what people desire and do in everyday life (we will return to this issue in Chapter 15 when we cover pornography in greater detail). Thus, there are potential dangers in having porn serve as one's primary source of sex education and social comparison. This is not to say that porn consumption is always linked to negative outcomes (as we will discuss later, there can be positive effects, too); rather, the point is simply that porn should not be substituting for sex education because porn is not necessarily modeling what people really need to know about sex.



Figure 1.6 Both adolescents and adults are susceptible to imitating the activities they see depicted in sexually explicit material. ©Vladimir Wrangel/Adobe Stock.

Despite their inherent value and intuitive appeal, none of the learning theories discussed above tell us the entire story when it comes to sexual behavior. After all, we do not simply imitate everything we see! These theories have been criticized for being oversimplified and depersonalized (i.e., they do not take into account idiosyncratic features of the individual, such as personality or mood states), and for failing to address important biological and hormonal influences on behavior.

Exchange Theories

Exchange theories offer another psychological explanation of human behavior, and primarily help us to understand how social relationships are formed, maintained, and discontinued. The main idea advanced by the social exchange perspective is that the way we feel about a given relationship and how we behave toward a given partner depends upon the type of outcomes we receive in return for what we have put into the relationship (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Thus, relationships are fundamentally about exchanges between the parties involved, and those trades can involve sex, money, time, or just about anything else you can think of. When our exchanges yield high rewards and low costs, we act so as to maintain our relationship; however, when the costs begin to exceed the benefits, we are likely to end things and move on.

To determine whether our outcomes are good, we hold them up to some **comparison level** (i.e., the standard by which we judge our relationships). For example, we may compare the outcomes we are receiving in our current relationship to those that we received in the past. What we are looking for is a cost-benefit ratio that is favorable relative to our comparison level. Whether the ratio is perceived as favorable depends largely upon whether the exchange is *equitable*, or whether the distribution of outcomes is seen as fair (Walster et al., 1978). In other words, are you getting what you think you deserve?

Social exchange theorists have proposed that sex is a fairly common resource traded in mixed-sex relationships, with women possessing more opportunities to trade sex than men (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). The idea here is one of supply and demand: women can typically obtain more resources in exchange for sex than men because, on average, there are more men who are interested in and are looking for sex (especially casual sex) than women at any given time (see Chapter 7 for an extensive look at differences in men's and women's attitudes toward casual sex). Consistent with this idea, sex work is generally a more common and profitable activity for women than it is for men. To be clear, this is not to say that all or even most women go through their lives looking to trade sex; rather, the point here is simply that in cases where sex is traded between men and women, it is more likely to be offered by a woman than it is by a man, at least on average.

The social exchange view of relationships and sexuality has its own problems, of course. For one thing, not all relationship behavior is motivated by a perceived cost–benefit analysis—sometimes people act altruistically, seeking to help another person without expecting anything in return. In fact, research indicates that willingness to sacrifice one's own self-interest for the sake of one's partner is a sign of a very healthy and high-functioning relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997).

Personality Theories

After the rejection of psychoanalytic theory, most psychological research focused solely on the study of behavior, because it was both observable and measurable. However, this emphasis on behavior gradually subsided and cognitive process started coming back into favor, which can be seen happening in both the social learning and exchange perspectives. This ultimately paved the way for a rebirth of **personality psychology**, or the study of relatively stable, intrapsychic factors that generate consistent patterns of behavior. In other words, personality refers to something enduring that resides within an individual, which leads that person to respond to specific stimuli in a certain way. In developing and validating these theories of personality, psychologists moved away from clinical case reports (the basis for Freud's work) and began applying the scientific method. Over the years, psychologists have identified numerous personality factors that are important for understanding sexuality.

For example, if you have taken other psychology courses, you have probably learned about the **Big Five** personality factors (McCrae & Costa, 1987). The idea behind the Big Five is that we can gain a reasonably good understanding of an individual's personality by looking at that person's standing on five distinct factors: *openness to experience*, *conscientiousness*, *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, and *neuroticism*. For a brief definition of each of these traits and how they relate to sexual fantasy and behavior, see Table 1.4. While each trait has linkages to different aspects of sexuality, the traits linked to being more sexually active in general include high extraversion, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness.

Table 1.4 The big five personality traits and their association with sexual fantasy and behavior.

Personality trait	Definition (McCrae & Costa, 1987)	Noted relations to sexual fantasy and behavior
Openness to experience	Desire for new and varied experiences. Inventive and curious.	High openness is related to reporting fewer sexual difficulties, more liberal sexual attitudes, less homophobia, and identifying as something other than heterosexual. High openness is linked to having a wider range of sexual fantasy content in general.
Conscientiousness	Dependable and responsible. Self-disciplined. Tendency to plan behavior rather than act spontaneously.	Low conscientiousness is linked to more frequent sex and more casual sex. High conscientiousness is linked to reporting fewer sexual difficulties, less sexual aggression, less sexual risk-taking, and less infidelity. High conscientiousness is linked to having more detail-oriented fantasies featuring elaborate settings and fewer fantasies about taboo activities.
Agreeableness	Caring and compassionate about other people. Generally friendly and helpful.	Low agreeableness is linked to more frequent sex and more casual sex. High agreeableness is linked to less infidelity, less sexual aggression, and less sexual risk-taking. High agreeableness is associated with having fewer fantasies about infidelity, BDSM, and taboo sex acts.
Extraversion	Desire to interact with other people. Self-confident and sociable.	High extraversion is linked to more frequent sexual activity in general, more casual sex, more sexual risk-taking, a greater lifetime number of sex partners, fewer sexual difficulties, and greater sexual satisfaction. Extraverts tend to have more "social" sexual fantasies, including more fantasies about group sex and non-monogamy.
Neuroticism	Characterized by feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Emotional instability.	High neuroticism is linked to reporting more sexual dissatisfaction and more sexual difficulties, especially in older age. High neuroticism is linked to having fewer fantasies about new partners and activities, and more fantasies about BDSM and romance.

Note: The sexual behavior associations discussed in this table come from a meta-analysis of 137 studies featuring a total of 420,595 participants (Allen & Walter, 2018). The sexual fantasy associations discussed come from a survey of 4,175 American adults (Lehmiller, 2018).

Beyond the Big Five, research has uncovered a number of additional personality traits that have implications for sexual behavior. For example, **erotophilia** and **erotophobia** refer to two ends of a personality continuum that comprises how individuals approach sex (Fisher et al., 1988). Erotophilia refers to a tendency to exhibit strong, *positive* emotions and attitudes toward sex; erotophobia refers to a tendency to exhibit strong, *negative* emotions and attitudes toward sex. For example, someone who scores high on the trait of erotophilia would likely agree with statements such as "engaging in group sex is an entertaining idea," and "masturbation can be an exciting experience." In contrast, people who score high on erotophobia would likely agree with statements such as "if people thought I was interested in oral sex, I would be embarrassed," and "I do not enjoy daydreaming about sexual matters" (all of these statements are items on the actual Erotophilia–Erotophobia scale). These personality traits may have implications for sexual behavior. For example, among women, greater erotophobia is linked to less sexual satisfaction (Hurlbert et al., 1993) and less consistent contraception use (Kelley et al., 1987). To see where you fall on the dimensions of erotophilia and erotophobia, check out the Your Sexuality 1.1 box.

Another personality trait relevant to sexual behavior is **sensation seeking** (see Figure 1.7), which refers to a tendency to pursue thrilling and risky activities (Zuckerman et al., 1978). Some research has suggested a biological basis for this trait, such that sensation seekers look for excitement as a means of compensating for lower levels of certain brain chemicals, with the prime candidate being the neurotransmitter *dopamine* (Geen, 1997). Dopamine is part of the brain's "reward pathway," meaning that release of this chemical tends to make us feel good. Persons who are less sensitive to the effects of dopamine may need to continually engage in thrilling activities in order to achieve the same psychological "highs" as everyone else. Consistent with this idea, research has found that a specific variation of the dopamine D4 receptor gene that leaves individuals with fewer dopamine receptors is linked to engaging in a variety of sensation-seeking behaviors, such as taking financial risks, substance use, and committing infidelity (Garcia et al., 2010). More generally, research has consistently found that sensation seekers tend to take more sexual risks, which includes having more unprotected sex and a larger numbers of sexual partners (Gullette & Lyons, 2005). Sensation seekers also tend to contract more STIs (Ripa et al., 2001).

Your Sexuality 1.1 Are You Erotophilic or Erotophobic?

Below is a subset of items from the erotophilia–erotophobia scale. Please indicate how much you agree with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

1) I think it would be very entertaining to look at hardcore pornography.
2) Pornography is obviously filthy and people should not try to describe it as anything else.
3) Masturbation can be an exciting experience.
4) If people thought I was interested in oral sex, I would be embarrassed.
5) Engaging in group sex is an entertaining idea.
6) Almost all pornographic material is nauseating.
7) It would be emotionally upsetting to me to see someone exposing themselves publicly.
8) Touching my genitals would probably be an arousing experience.
9) I do not enjoy daydreaming about sexual matters.
10) Swimming in the nude with someone else would be an exciting experience.

Add up your scores for items 1, 3, 5, 8, and 10 (erotophilic items). Then add up your scores for items 2, 4, 6, 7, and 9 (erotophobic items). Which of the two scores is higher? Is there a big difference between them? Were your responses mixed? Are your scores consistent with how you view your own sexuality? Please note that there is no correct or incorrect score to have. It is not necessarily "better" to be erotophilic or erotophobic.

Note: Adapted from Fisher et al. (1988). The wording of some items has been modified from the original scale and scoring criteria have changed to fit the abbreviated version presented here.



Figure 1.7 Sensation seekers tend to engage in activities that bring more thrills and excitement, such as seeking multiple partners, perhaps because their brains require greater stimulation in order to feel pleasure. ©detailblick-foto/Adobe Stock.

One other personality trait that is particularly relevant here is **sociosexuality**, which refers to a person's willingness to have sex in the absence of commitment and without an emotional connection to one's partner (Gangestad & Simpson, 1990). Persons with what is known as a *restricted sociosexual orientation* require feelings of closeness to a partner before having sex and tend to seek out more long-term relationships (e.g., they would agree with statements such as "I would have to be closely attached to someone before I could feel comfortable and fully enjoy having sex"); in contrast, persons with an *unrestricted sociosexual orientation* do not need to establish such an emotional connection first and tend to seek more short-term relationships (e.g., they would agree with statements such as "sex without love is OK"; Simpson

& Gangestad, 1991). The more unrestricted a person's sociosexual orientation is, the more frequently they tend to have sex and the more sexual partners they report. In addition, research has found that having an unrestricted orientation is associated with greater impulsivity, as well as a higher likelihood of having unprotected sex (Seal & Agostinelli, 1994). On a side note, popular media portrayals might lead one to assume that there is a huge difference between men and women in sociosexuality, with men tending toward unrestricted and women tending toward restricted. While there is some truth to this, it is important to note that there is far more variability within sex than between sex (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). What this means is that whereas men are more interested in casual sex *on average*, this is not true for all men. It also means that there are some women who are more interested in casual sex than some men. This is but one of many reminders throughout this book that it is not wise to assume anyone's sexual interests and practices based solely upon their sexual or gender identity.

The personality perspective is appealing to many psychologists who study sexual behavior, but it has its own limitations. For one thing, some of the scales used to measure personality appear to measure attitudes more than enduring traits or characteristics (e.g., erotophilia–erotophobia). This calls into question whether we are measuring personality or something else (e.g., learned associations based upon past experience). In addition, it seems to be the case that some personality effects may be accounted for by genetics (e.g., consider our discussion of the role of the D4 receptor gene in sensation seeking; Garcia et al., 2010). Thus, is the key factor here really one's personality or one's biological makeup? Furthermore, while personality traits are often argued to be stable, research suggests that they can change significantly with age (Graham et al., 2020), which suggests that personality is not destiny.

Evolutionary Theory

One of the more recent theoretical developments applicable to the study of human sexuality comes from **evolutionary psychology**. The idea of evolution itself is certainly not new (Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was originally published in 1859), but the study of psychological traits as evolved adaptions has only become a major area of research in the past three or four decades. Because evolution-based studies of human sexuality have undergone explosive growth in recent years, evolutionary psychology will be covered extensively in this book. At this point, however, we will simply summarize some of the major highlights and findings of this theoretical perspective.

One of the main ideas promoted by evolutionary psychologists is that human beings have an inherent motivation to produce as many of their own offspring as possible. To assist us in achieving this goal, it is thought that we have gradually developed preferences for specific physical and psychological characteristics in our romantic and sexual partners that are likely to result in successful reproduction. In other words, the reason you find certain traits to be attractive and "sexy" in another person may be a result of thousands of years of selection pressures pushing humans to gravitate toward partners who are genetically fit and who are likely to have the most reproductive potential. For example, heterosexual men today tend to report attraction to young, "hourglass"-shaped women with long, silky hair (Hinsz et al., 2001; Singh, 1993; Walter et al., 2020). Each of the characteristics can be viewed as a likely signal of good health and capacity to have children: younger women are more fertile (fertility decreases with age), women with "hourglass" figures face fewer risks during vaginal childbirth, and long, silky hair indicates good physical health (see Figure 1.8). It is theorized that our early ancestors recognized the reproductive value associated with such traits (either consciously or unconsciously) and developed preferences for them, thereby laying the seeds for what humans in the modern era deem most attractive on average. Note that "on average" is a key caveat when discussing evolutionary theory because there is always vast individual variability!

Another key component of evolutionary psychology is the idea that men and women have developed different approaches to mating. From the perspective of **sexual strategies theory** (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), these differences evolved because the *parental investment* required to produce a child (i.e., the amount of time and bodily effort expended) differs across the sexes. Specifically, the investment required by men to make a baby is relatively small. Some of them can do their part in under a minute. In order to maximize their chances of reproductive success, then, men should have evolved to pursue sexual activity with a lot of fertile women. This could help to explain modern man's well-documented desire for many sexual partners and his disproportionate attention to physical appearance. In contrast, the investment required to make a baby is huge for women—pregnancy lasts nine months and after that, the child needs to be nourished and taken care of until it is self-sufficient (and historically—and even today—childcare responsibilities have disproportionately fallen on women). Thus, to maximize reproductive success, women should have evolved to look for men who are going to stick around and provide the time and resources necessary to help raise any children conceived. This may explain modern woman's well-documented tendency to desire reliable men with high social status and good jobs. Numerous studies have found support for these sex differences in mating preferences (e.g., Okami & Schackelford, 2001; Walter et al., 2020).



Figure 1.8 Evolutionary theory posits that heterosexual men are attracted to women whose bodies are shaped like an hourglass and who have long, silky hair because these are likely signs of good health and fertility. ©Valua Vitaly/Adobe Stock.

While heavily researched, the evolutionary perspective is not free of problems or controversy. For example, evolutionary psychology has always struggled to explain why variations in sexual orientation exist. As many students have asked me over the years: if human beings are inherently motivated to reproduce, why would anyone be anything other than heterosexual? We will return to this question in Chapter 6, where we explore evolutionary theories that account for sexual diversity. Additionally, recent research suggests that many of the noted sex differences in attraction and mating preferences have been overstated and that some of these differences can be reduced in size or eliminated completely when certain social factors are taken into account, such as the fact that women are judged more harshly than men for being sexually active (Conley et al., 2011). Finally, some have argued that evolution-based interpretations of human sexuality are fundamentally flawed and that modern mating preferences have little, and perhaps nothing, to do with parental investment and an inherently "selfish" drive to propagate one's genes (Ryan & Jetha, 2010). We will consider these critiques in more detail in Chapter 7.

The Perspective of This Text

As you probably noticed earlier, psychological theories of sexuality largely fall into one of two camps (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). On the one hand, we have "essentialist" theories, which view sexuality as an essential aspect of humans, rooted in evolution and biology. Such theories look to factors including hormones, genetics, evolved processes, or innate characteristics for the answers to their questions. On the other hand, we have "social constructionist" theories, which view sexuality largely as a product of socialization and cultural influences. Such theories argue that our sexuality is not "hardwired" and, instead, is largely learned.

My perspective is that taking a singular approach to the study of sexuality would be both misleading and unfulfilling. It should be clear by now that human sexuality is determined by multiple factors. In addition, despite a vast range of theories designed to explain our sexual attitudes and behaviors, each one offers only a partial explanation at best. In order to address this issue and to create a unifying theme and perspective to organize the remainder of this book, we will adopt a **biopsychosocial perspective** (see Figure 1.9).

If you have ever taken a course in health psychology, you are probably familiar with the biopsychosocial model, which proposes that one's health status is the result of a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors (Engel, 1977). For example, a health psychologist might view coronary heart disease as the product of not just

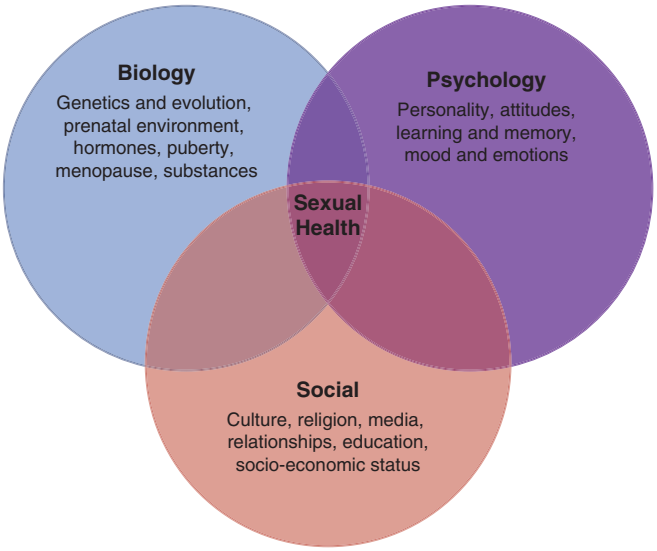


Figure 1.9 The biopsychosocial model as applied to sexual health.

biological (e.g., cholesterol and blood pressure levels) and genetic factors (e.g., family history of heart problems), but also psychological traits (e.g., Type A personality pattern) and social variables (e.g., occupational and marital stress). The objective of this textbook is to view sexual health and behavior through a similar lens. For instance, if we want to understand why a given woman has difficulty reaching orgasm, we need to consider possible explanations at the biological (e.g., is intercourse painful due to the presence of a sexually transmitted infection or a lack of lubrication?), psychological (e.g., is she depressed, anxious, or under a lot of stress?), and social levels (e.g., is there a lot of conflict in her relationship? Is she attracted to her partner? Is the sex itself even good?).

Although the biopsychosocial approach is not often discussed in relation to sexuality, it is extremely applicable to this area. As discussed at length earlier, sexual behavior is a consequence of multiple disparate forces acting upon a person. Some of these forces are internal and specific to the individual, whereas others are broad, external factors that affect virtually everyone in a given culture or society. Moreover, some of these factors are under our complete conscious control, while we are victims of circumstance to others. Some of these factors are certainly more important than others in helping us to understand human sexuality, and the relative importance of these factors can vary considerably across individuals and across the lifespan. However, the biopsychosocial perspective acknowledges this complexity and allows us to look at sexuality as a product of the whole person, with the mind and body being fundamentally and intimately interconnected.

One unique advantage of adopting a biopsychosocial perspective is that it allows us to put sexual health on a continuum, running from wellness to illness (just as health psychologists do with the more general concept of "health"). Thus, rather than seeing sexual health as simply the absence of disease or dysfunction, we can view it as having different degrees of wellness and illness. Individuals may move back and forth on this continuum from exhibiting healthy to unhealthy sexual behavior depending upon the unique biological, psychological, and social forces acting upon them at the time. For instance, imagine that someone were to experience an episode of clinical depression. The resulting emotional state and lack of energy might negatively affect that person's sex life in a powerful way, pushing them toward the unhealthy end of the continuum. However, after undergoing treatment and perhaps making some important life changes, the patient's sex life might improve back to the point that it was before and possibly even exceed the previous level. The strength of looking at sexuality on such a continuum is that it offers a much more holistic approach where we consider the entire person, rather than just looking for a specific sexual problem. Thus, having an optimum state of sexual health is a function of possessing physical, psychological, *and* social well-being—it is so much more than just being free of physical dysfunction and disease.

Another important implication of this model and its focus on the mind–body connection is that psychology can be viewed not only as a factor that causes or drives sexual behavior, but also as a product of sexual behavior. In other words, not only do our emotions, cognitions, and behaviors affect our sex lives, but our sex lives have a direct impact on our psychology.

Throughout the remainder of this book, we will consider sexuality from a biopsychosocial perspective. However, because this is inherently a psychological textbook, psychology will have a more prominent, front and center role than some of the other factors. This will allow you to see how the study of sex is approached in the field of psychology and understand how the material connects to other psychological areas, while still acknowledging the irreducible complexity of human sexuality.

Key Terms

incest
pederasty
libido
id
ego
superego
classical conditioning
operant conditioning
reparative therapy
social or observational learning
comparison level
exchange theories
personality psychology
Big Five
erotophilia
erotophobia
sensation seeking
sociosexuality
evolutionary psychology
sexual strategies theory
biopsychosocial perspective

Discussion Questions: What Is Your Perspective on Sex?

- We know that biological, psychological, and social factors all contribute to human sexual behavior; however, do you see one of these factors as being relatively more important than the others in your own life? Why?
- Does sexual content in television and film truly affect people's sexual behavior, or does it simply reflect contemporary sexual practices? How much influence does the media really have on us?
- Some research has suggested that as gender equality has increased, men's and women's mating preferences have become more similar. What does this mean for our understanding of evolution-based accounts of human sexuality?

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