

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALITY

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### Lecture Outline

#### Are You Curious?

Questions are posed regarding male preference in female figures, arousing nature of scents, and patterns of sexual interactions.

Theories provide the framework for academic endeavors by answering the question of why people engage in the behaviors that they do.

- 1) **Evolutionary perspectives focus on the effect of evolution and the process of natural selection in addressing human sexual behavior.**
  - a) Sociobiology offers the premise that cultural conventions in mating and pair bonding stem from successful reproductive strategies.
    - i) Standards of attractiveness are generally those traits indicative of health, increasing chances of reproductive success.
    - ii) The nuclear family, pair-bonding, and infant attachment are adaptive conventions that improve the chances of offspring survival.
    - iii) Sexual selection offers an explanation for gender differences in mating strategies. In general, males compete for women through a display of power and resources, while females must effectively choose which males will have the opportunity to mate.
  - b) Evolutionary psychology proposes that emotional and cognitive functioning evolved in response to selective pressures. Evolution proposes that present forms of living things have taken successive generations and gradual changes. Those most likely to pass on their genetic code are those who make sound cognitive choices and who produce offspring best suited to do the same in a process known as sexual selection.
  - c) Sexual strategies theory finds that male strategies change in response to personal characteristics and environmental contingencies. New research indicates that females also engage in competition for access to males.
- 2) **Psychological theories pertaining to sexuality primarily consist of the following:**
  - a) Psychoanalytic theory was the brainchild of Sigmund Freud, who viewed human behavior as a resolution between *libido* (sex drive) and *thanatos* (death instinct).
    - i) The *id* functions via the pleasure principle and runs counter to the *superego*, which serves as a conscience and is founded in idealism. The resolution of the conflicting forces resides in the ego, which operates according to the reality principle.
    - ii) Libido is focused in the erogenous zones, areas of the body that induce pleasure when touched.

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- iii) Freud proposed five psychosexual stages of development in children, each of which centers on a particular erogenous zone. These stages consist of the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital stages.
  - iv) Freud proposed that during the phallic stage young boys develop an Oedipus complex whereby they fall in love with and desire their mothers and resent their fathers, whom they fear will castrate them. Over time a boy shifts to the safer strategy of identifying with the father.
  - v) For girls, Freud proposed an Electra complex, or sexual desire for their fathers borne of penis envy.
  - vi) Freud additionally distinguished between clitoral and vaginal orgasms, maintaining that vaginal orgasms resulting from penetration were more “mature.”
  - vii) The theoretical postulations of Freud have been criticized by Horney and others as flawed, largely on the basis of penis envy and Freud’s contention that females were biologically inferior due to the absence of the penis.
  - viii) A number of other criticisms have been levied against Freud’s theory, particularly against its lack of scientific testability and participant selection. Despite the criticism, Freud remains highly influential in the field of sexuality.
- b) Learning theories seek to explain sexual behavior in terms of learned behaviors.
- i) Classical conditioning describes the process by which an association is made by the pairing of a neutral stimulus with an unconditioned stimulus (US). Prior to the association, the US elicits an unconditioned response (UR). After repeated pairings, the neutral stimulus is referred to as a conditioned stimulus (CS) because it can now appear alone and still evoke the original response, which in turn has become a conditioned response (CR). Applied to sexuality, this theory is effective in explaining fetishes.
  - ii) Operant conditioning posits that behavior operates according to the following principles:
    - a. A person’s behavior may be followed by a consequence that serves as either a reinforcement (reward) or punishment.
    - b. Rewards increase the likelihood that behaviors will be repeated, and punishments decrease the chances that a behavior will recur.
    - c. Intrinsically satisfying reinforcers, such as sex and food, are called primary reinforcers.
    - d. Consequences (reinforcement or punishments) are more effective when they occur temporally close to the behavior.
    - e. Punishment appears less to eliminate problematic behaviors than to encourage avoidance of situations where the behavior will be discovered.

- iii) Behavior modification employs techniques based on classical and operant conditioning principles to address problematic behaviors. By pairing an aversive stimulus with the behavior in question, the frequency of the behavior may be reduced.
- iv) Social learning theory builds on the principles of operant conditioning, but allows for vicarious reinforcement and punishment. Imitation of and identification with a model are additional influences in whether or not the behavior will be performed. Successful engagement of the behavior (reinforcement) encourages self-efficacy.
- v) Social exchange theory is based on the principle of reinforcement that assumes people will maximize rewards and minimize costs.
- vi) Cognitive theory focuses on how actors perceive and evaluate events.
- vii) Gender schema theory addresses the ways in which an individual's framework for "knowing" about a particular topic influences subsequent thought and interactions. Bem proposes that this framework for gender predisposes us to process information based on the attributes we associate with being male or female – affecting everything from what we wear to what we see.
  - 1) Stereotypes are difficult to change due to our tendency to filter stereotype-inconsistent information

**3) Sociological perspectives focus on the ways in which culture shapes sexuality.**

- a) Influence of society is discussed in this text from the macro level of analysis, focusing on social institutions.
  - i) Judeo-Christian traditions have exercised a pervasive influence on Western sexual norms.
  - ii) Changes in the economy influence family structure and availability of sexual partners.
  - iii) Families socialize children into expected behaviors or norms.
  - iv) The medicalization of sexuality has led to increased medical intervention in childbirth, as well as a perception of problematic sexual experiences as issues of health and illness. Pharmaceutical treatments for erectile and orgasmic dysfunctions are indicators of this trend.
  - v) The laws of a society influence people's sexual behaviors in a number of ways, determining what is "normal," establishing a basis for "control," and identifying what are dominant interests.
- b) Symbolic interaction theories seek to explain human behavior by analyzing the effects of interaction and symbolic communication.
  - i) Through interaction, individuals develop a definition of the situation and must reaffirm or renegotiate these meanings in subsequent interactions.
  - ii) Role-taking describes the process of an individual viewing the self from the perspective of another.

- c) Sexual scripts are learned sets of behavior that delineate the sequence and character of sexual encounters. Studies based on this perspective indicate that cultural groups demonstrate significant agreement on the order of events in dating and sexual encounters. This explains how we infer a sexual encounter in a film when events leading to intercourse are shown, but intercourse is not and the camera “fades out.” Male-female sexual scripts have even been shown to affect the expectations of a “hookup”.
- d) Ira Reiss points out that sexuality is universally important. He explains this phenomenon as an effect of two factors: 1) Sex is associated with intense physical pleasure, and 2) intimate interaction and acts of self-disclosure are associated with sexual activity.
  - i) In addition, Reiss contends that in any society, sex is related to three structural areas, the first of which is kinship. Family ties regulate marital behavior and appropriate relationship conduct. The power structure also relates to sexuality, as powerful groups typically attempt to control the sexual behavior of those less powerful. Finally, sexuality is regulated by the ideologies of the society, which define the normalcy or “abnormalcy” of behaviors.
  - ii) The Critical THINKing Skill: Understanding the difference between truth and validity completes the chapter.

## Lecture Topics

### Discussion Questions

**DQ1: Explaining premarital intercourse.** Compare and contrast how a sociobiologist, a psychoanalyst, and a sociologist would explain why people engage in premarital intercourse. What does each perspective identify as the critical factors? How would each perspective approach the problems associated with premarital sex?

**DQ2: Gender schema theory.** Define and describe psychologist Sandra Bem’s gender schema theory. What is a schema? What does Bem’s theory suggest about the difficulty of unlearning stereotypes?

**DQ3: Making sexual choices.** When you make a sexual choice, how do your physical sensations, your feelings, your thoughts, and the influence of other people’s opinions interact to influence your choice? Which is most important at the time? Later? Are any of these factors noninfluential? Do they sometimes push you in different directions?

**DQ4: The universal importance of sexuality.** Ira Reiss believes that sexuality is universally important for two reasons. What two reasons does Reiss describe? How do these reasons interact

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with the structure of society? Can you think of any examples of this interaction? Can you think of other reasons that sexuality is universally important? Why is it important to you?

**DQ5: Sexual scripts.** Sexual scripts tell us how sexual interaction occurs, but what else do they tell us? Imagine the typical sexual encounter .... would you do this with your Uncle Harold? Would you have done this at age five? Would you do this in a classroom while the professor was lecturing? Are you more likely to do this at 10 a.m. or 10 p.m.? How are sexual scripts useful for an individual? For society? How can they be oppressive or restrictive?

**DQ6: Explaining racial/ethnic differences.** In Chapter 1, we identified several differences in the sexual behavior of whites, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans (see Table 1.2). Which of the theories discussed in this chapter can most easily explain these differences? Pick one specific difference and construct an explanation for it using that theory. How well does the theory help you understand cultural differences in sexuality?

**DQ7: Applying gender schema theory.** How can Sandra Bem's gender schema theory help us understand why various daily experiences appear natural to us? As a class, apply this theory while considering the prevalence of, for example, women in commercials selling cleaning products, men in commercials selling fast food, women working as nurses, and men working in local and federal government. How does gender schema theory work to make all these phenomena seem normal and natural?

**DQ8: Learning theory and sexual orientation.** Focus on a Sexually Diverse World describes how learning theory explains a sexual behavior pattern in Papua New Guinea (p. 34). The text argues that learning theory makes sense out of what appears to us to be a puzzling sexual behavior pattern. What assumptions do we have about sexual orientation that makes the behavior pattern appear puzzling, and in need of explanation, in the first place? How would learning theory explain American sexual behavior patterns?

**DQ9: Script theory and the sambia.** Focus on a Sexually Diverse World (p. 34) uses learning theory to explain the pattern of homosexual and heterosexual behavior of Sambian males. Could script theory also be used to explain this sexual behavior pattern? How?

**DQ10: Social institutions and female sexuality.** From a sociologist's point of view, how have the social institutions of family, health care/insurance, work, religion, and government controlled female sexuality? Give an example of each. How might each organization be reconstituted to be less restrictive of female sexuality?

**DQ11: Freud on women.** The text states: "Feminists argue that psychoanalytic theory is essentially a male-oriented theory that may cause harm to women. ..." What is psychoanalytic theory? Why can it be called male-oriented? How exactly might it cause harm to women? What kinds of harm, in particular, can you imagine it causing?

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## Classroom Activities

**CA1: Personal reflections.** Have students anonymously answer the questions in *Personal Reflections on Sexual Learning* (Handout 2A). Ask them to disclose their answers and discuss them with the class.

**CA2: Quiz.** Pass out the *Vocabulary Quiz* (Handout 2B) and ask students to answer the questions in order to test their knowledge on the basic vocabulary for Chapter 2.  
*Note to the instructor.* Questions 1, 3, 6, 8, and 9 are true.

**CA3: Guest speaker.** One of the most powerful experiences in a classroom can be when the students have the opportunity to listen and talk with a person who embodies the facts and issues at hand. Contact a local (perhaps university-affiliated) evolutionary psychologist, sociobiologist, psychoanalyst, social learning theorist, psychologist, or sociologist to explain his or her perspective on sexuality.

**CA4: The sexual script.** On pieces of 8-by-10-inch paper, separately write possible actions that fit into a sexual script (e.g., they learn each other's name; they go out to dinner; they talk; they kiss; she receives oral sex; he receives oral sex; she touches his chest; he touches her chest; she touches his genitals; he touches her genitals; they tell their sexual histories; they have intercourse; they say "I love you") and a series of dates (e.g., date 1, date 2, date 3). Pass out one piece of paper to each student and ask them to line up in a typical order. How much agreement is there? Where is the order contentious? Why? What would happen if we moved "they tell their sexual histories" to before "they kiss"? What would happen if we moved "they touch genitals" to before "they touch chest"? How rigid is the sexual script? Does the sexual script apply to a dating situation or every time two people come together? Has the sexual script changed over history? How?

**CA5: A problem for sociobiology?** According to the text, sociobiologists argue that "... many of the characteristics we evaluate in judging attractiveness ... are indicative of the health and vigor of the individual" and, therefore, good genes. In groups or as a class, brainstorm a list of characteristics that signal attractiveness to your students and/or bring in a contemporary magazine and examine it for characteristics that are thought to be attractive. Then, evaluate each characteristic as a signifier of health. Are some of the requirements for attractiveness less than healthy? Unhealthy? What are the most important requirements? Are these requirements signifiers of health? What else might such characteristics signify?

*Note to the instructor.* The thinness requirement for women is an excellent example of an unhealthy characteristic that is a signifier of attractiveness in our culture. What else might smallness, weakness, and fragility suggest about a woman? Are those things valued as feminine in our culture?

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**CA6: Kinds of learning.** Your text describes several kinds of learning. How is each kind of learning different from the next? Separate your students into four or eight groups and assign each of them one of the following theories of learning: classical conditioning, operant conditioning, behavior modification, or social learning theory. As a group, ask your students to figure out what differentiates their theory from the others. Then, paying special attention to how their theory differs from the others, ask them to use it to explain an adolescent boy who masturbates three times a week and an adolescent girl who never touches her privates. As a class, you might discuss which theory appears to best explain these masturbatory patterns.

**CA7: Theoretical perspectives on sexual variations.** This exercise helps students learn to apply theories as explanations for different sexual behaviors. Pass out *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Variations* (Handout 2C). For each of the selected paraphilias, ask your students to try to explain the paraphilias from each of the perspectives identified. Check your students' suggestions against the answers provided.

**CA8: Changing institutions.** The textbook discusses how social institutions influence our sexuality. Arrange your students into groups and assign each group two of the following institutions discussed: religion, economy, family, medicine, and law. Ask each group to debate the dominant sexual ideology of their assigned institutions. Then, ask them to think about how the dominant sexual ideology of their assigned institutions has changed throughout history. Finally, ask your students to discuss how the two institutions interact and affect each other in powerful and consequential ways.  
*Variation.* See outside activity, "Sexual Ideologies of Institutions" for a variation.

### Internet Activities

**IA1: Evolutionary arguments.** Visit <http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/primer.html> to read "The Evolutionary Primer" by Lea Cosmides and John Tooby. Cosmides and Tooby are well-known advocates of evolutionary psychology, and this online essay provides a good grounding in the subject.

**IA2: Theories of sexuality.** Visit <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/genderandsex/> to read about various theories of gender and sex.

**IA3: Social exchange theory:** Visit <http://www.uky.edu/~drlane/capstone/interpersonal/socexch.html> or <http://psychology.about.com/od/sindex/g/socialexchange.htm> to learn about social exchange theory and how it relates to sexuality.

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## Outside Activities

### **OA1: Book reviews**

Bancroft, J. *The Role of Theory in Sex Research*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000. Bancroft introduces a series of essays that address the theoretical concerns of research in sexuality.

Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality*. Vintage Books, 1990.

Shalin, L. *Sex, Time and Power: How Women's Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Shalin offers a contemporary defense and explication of the sociobiological perspective.

**OA2: Journal reviews.** Introduce students to the *Journal of Sex Research's* special issue (1998), *The Use of Theory in Research and Scholarship on Sexuality* (Volume 35, no. 1). This journal addresses a variety of current theoretical concerns for sexuality research.

**OA3: Sexual autobiography.** This exercise is designed to encourage students to think thoughtfully and critically about their own sexual development. Begin with students' earliest recollections of sexual experiences and progress to the present. Attempt to find connections between events or behaviors at one period of development with those at other periods of development. Advance one or more theories to explain the occurrence or the effects of phenomena. This can be assigned as a semester-long paper, or it can be completed in a brief format and used as material for group discussion.

**OA4: Sexual ideologies of institutions.** Research one of the major social institutions mentioned in the textbook (religion, economy, family, medicine, and law), and write a short essay. What is this institution's sexual ideology or ideologies? How does the institution promote its ideology? Is its ideology in conjunction with or in contrast to popular ideologies of sexuality? What other institutions does it interact with, and how?

*Variation.* See Classroom Activity 8 for a variation.



## **Handout 2A: Personal Reflections on Sexual Learning**

Please write an answer to each question. Do not write your name on the survey.

What is your first memory of learning about sexuality? How might these first experiences have affected your behavior or thinking about sexuality now?

What sort of modeling have your parents provided? Has their relationship(s) affected how you view love, marriage, or monogamy?

Describe your first sexual interaction. After your first sexual interaction, how did you feel about yourself? Your sexuality? Did you seek out more? Why or why not?

What are your strongest beliefs about sexuality? What is the source of these beliefs? What evidence comes to mind to justify these beliefs? What is the source of this evidence?

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## Handout 2B: Vocabulary Quiz

- |  |      |       |            |
|--|------|-------|------------|
| 1. Sociobiology is the study of how bodies are socially constructed.   | True | False | Don't Know |
| 2. Evolutionary psychology is the study of psychological mechanisms that have emerged out of evolution.                                | True | False | Don't Know |
| 3. Psychoanalytic theory assumes that we are not conscious of all our motivations.   | True | False | Don't Know |
| 4. According to Freud, the ego is the part of the personality that contains the libido.  | True | False | Don't Know |
| 5. Classical conditioning involves a process of changing the frequency of a behavior by following it with reinforcement or punishment. | True | False | Don't Know |
| 6. Self-efficacy is a sense of competence at performing an activity.   | True | False | Don't Know |
| 7. A schema is a script for an activity.   | True | False | Don't Know |
| 8. The sociological approach emphasizes the impact of institutions.  | True | False | Don't Know |
| 9. A cognitive theorist would argue that it is important to study people's thoughts.   | True | False | Don't Know |
| 10. Operant conditioning emphasizes the importance of imitation and identification.  | True | False | Don't Know |

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## **Handout 2C: Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Variations**

For each of the following sexual variations, attempt to apply principles from the text to explain how it might develop.

### *Fetishism*

1. classical conditioning explanation:

2. psychoanalytic explanation:

### *Transvestism*

1. operant conditioning explanation:

2. psychoanalytic explanation:

### *Exhibitionism*

1. observational learning explanation:

2. psychoanalytic explanation:

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**Handout 2C: Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Variations**  
(Continued)

*Sadism*

1. observational learning explanation:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. classical conditioning explanation:

*Masochism*

1. classical conditioning explanation:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. psychoanalytic explanation:

*Voyeurism*

1. operant conditioning explanation:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. observational learning explanation:

## Handout 2C: Answers

*Fetishism.* (1) Early sexual experiences occur in conjunction with a particular object; with repeated pairings of the object and arousal, the individual comes to associate arousal with the object in question. (2) The fetish object is a defense against castration anxiety. During childhood, the male with the fetish was sexually attracted to his mother but afraid of being retaliated against, in the form of castration, by his father. In order to avoid this less-than-desirable consequence, he avoids typical sexual interactions and substitutes a safer activity (e.g., sex with a shoe).

*Transvestism.* (1) A young man may try on the clothes of his parents. On certain occasions of dressing in his mother's clothes, he may receive a great deal of attention, which is rewarding. Alternatively, he might actually receive praise for this behavior. (2) As a defense against castration anxiety (specifically, the belief that females are castrated males), a male may cross-dress to show that even as a woman he does have a penis and has not been castrated.

*Exhibitionism.* (1) It might be argued that a male's tendency to display his genitals is learned from viewing sexually explicit materials. If a male's early masturbatory episodes involved viewing erotic magazines or videos in which the males readily present their genitals to approving females, the modeled behavior may later be imitated. (2) Consistent with the explanations for fetishism and transvestism, the male is fixated at the phallic stage of development when concern about castration is paramount. In exhibitionism, the male presents his genitals to a female, whose startled response reassures him that he has not been castrated and his genitals are still there.

*Sadism.* (1) The modeling of such behaviors in violent pornography may lead to imitation of this behavior. (2) A boy, while inflicting pain on someone, experiences intense arousal accompanied by erection (a frequent concomitant of general physiological arousal). The association between inflicting pain and having an erection leads to the development of the sadistic paraphilia.

*Masochism.* (1) A boy may happen to experience sexual arousal while being spanked. The pairing of the arousal and the spanking leads to an association between the two. When he is punished in the same way on subsequent occasions, he will become aroused. (There's also an element of operant conditioning within this perspective. Having developed the association, he will likely seek out similar situations (i.e., in which punishment leads to arousal) as he gets older. Each experience with spanking or punishment would lead to the associated rewards; in this way, using spanking to get sexual pleasure becomes operantly conditioned. (2) One idea is that masochism is a manifestation of the death instinct. Another possibility is that masochism results because the person finds it too threatening to express aggression against someone else. So, as a sort of defense mechanism, the aggression is expressed against one's self.

*Voyeurism.* (1) A young male, by chance, happens upon a woman removing her clothes (perhaps a neighbor across the yard). Becoming sexually aroused, he masturbates. This is reinforcing, and he looks for similar situations. (2) A male learns in our society, because of the wide availability

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of pornography and the predominance of sexual imagery in the media, that watching sex and sexual activity is the norm and socially encouraged. Observing that other males do so, he imitates these models' behavior, generalizing his viewing to live women.

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