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The media, especially magazines and television, has had an influence on shaping my sexual identity. Ever since I was a little girl, I have watched the women on TV and hoped I would grow up to look sexy and beautiful like them. I feel that because of the constant barrage of images of beautiful women on TV and in magazines young girls like me grow up with unrealistic expectations of what beauty is and are doomed to feel they have not met this exaggerated standard.

—21-year-old White female

The phone, television, and radio became my best friends. I never missed an episode of any of the latest shows, and I know all the words to every new song. And when they invented three-way calling, you would have thought the phone was glued to my ear. At school, we would talk about the shows: whom we thought was cute and how we wanted houses, cars, and husbands. All of the things we saw on TV were all of the things we fantasized about. Watching music videos and the sexual gestures were always [stereotyped as] male and female. These are the things we would talk about.

—23-year-old African American female

Though I firmly believe that we are our own harshest critics, I also believe that the media has a large role in influencing how we think of ourselves. I felt like ripping my hair out every time I saw a skinny model whose stomach was as hard and flat as a board, with their flawless skin and perfectly coifed hair. I cringed when I realized that my legs seemed to have an extra “wiggle-jiggle” when I walked. All I could do was watch the television and feel abashed at the differences in their bodies compared to mine. When magazines and movies tell me that for my age I should weigh no more than a hundred pounds, I feel like saying, “Well, gee, it’s no wonder I finally turned to laxatives with all these pressures to be thin surrounding me. I ached to be model-thin and pretty. This fixation to be as beautiful and coveted as these models so preoccupied me that I had no time to even think about anyone or anything else.

—18-year-old Filipina

*If there has been one recurring theme in my life, it’s that I often look to the magic of Hollywood to inspire my quest for the perfect date. But because of my lack of experience in the field of dating, my primary source of advice has come from movies and TV. At the age of 19, it’s quite a revelation for me to receive dating tips from movies like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Can’t Buy Me Love*, and *Swingers* and TV shows such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Friends*. Other than these shows, I’m pretty much left on my own to fill in the blanks. After one date, I quickly realized no one should get their advice from TV and movies.*

—20-year-old White male

SEXUALITY WAS ONCE HIDDEN from view in our culture: Fig leaves covered the “private parts” of nudes; poultry breasts were renamed “white meat”; censors prohibited the publication of the works of D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Henry Miller; and homosexuality was called “the love that dares not speak its name.” But over the past few generations, sexuality has become more open. In recent years, popular culture and the media have transformed what we “know” about sexuality. Not only is sexuality *not* hidden from view, it often seems to surround us.

In this chapter, we examine popular culture and the media to see how they shape our ideas about sexuality. Then we look at how sexuality has been treated in different cultures and at different times in history. Finally, we examine how society defines various aspects of our sexuality as natural or normal.

SEXUALITY, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE MEDIA

Much of sexuality is influenced and shaped by popular culture, especially the mass media. Popular culture presents us with myriad images of what it means to be sexual. But what kinds of sexuality do the media portray for our consumption? What messages do the media send about sex to children, adolescents, adults, and the aged? To men? To women? To Whites, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and other ethnic groups? Perhaps as important as what the media portray sexually is what is not portrayed—masturbation, condom use, gay and lesbian sexuality, and erotic marital interactions, for example.

Media Portrayals of Sexuality

Media depictions of sexuality are not as obvious and straightforward as we may initially think. On television, for example, we are usually presented



Images of sexuality permeate our society, sexualizing our environment. Think about the sexual images you see or hear in a 24-hour period. What messages do they communicate about sexuality?



Shock jocks such as Howard Stern are popular media personalities whose programs are filled with sexual references and innuendos. What messages do they suggest about sexuality? Men? Women? Homosexuality?



Women's magazines, such as Cosmopolitan, Redbook, YM, Seventeen, and Mademoiselle, use sex to sell their publications. How do these magazines differ from men's magazines, such as Playboy and Penthouse, in their treatment of sexuality?

with visual images that suggest but do not show sexual activities beyond intimate touching. In the movies, a wider range of sexual behaviors is shown more explicitly. Steamy sex scenes and female nudity (often combined with violence) are part of the Hollywood formula for success. ("How can we put more tits and c— [sic] into this movie?" the director of *Basic Instinct* reportedly asked upon walking onto the set [Zevin, 1992].)

The music industry is awash with sexual images. Contemporary pop music, from rock 'n' roll to rap, is filled with lyrics about sexuality mixed with messages about love, rejection, violence, and loneliness. Heavy metal often reinforces negative attitudes toward women (St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991). Popular music is transmitted through CDs and cassettes and through television and radio. MTV, VH1, BET, and music video programs broadcast videos filled with sexually suggestive lyrics, images, and dances. Because of censorship issues, the most overtly sexual music is not played on the radio, except for some college stations. Disk jockeys, "shock jocks" such as Howard Stern, and sportscasters make numerous sexual references.

Magazines, tabloids, and books contribute to the sexualization of our society. Popular novels, romances, and self-help books help disseminate ideas and values about sexuality. Supermarket tabloid headlines exploit the unusual ("Woman with Two Vaginas Has Multiple Lovers") or sensational ("Televangelist's Love Tryst Exposed").

Men's magazines have been singled out for their sexual orientation. *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, with their Playmates of the Month, Pets of the Month, and other nude pictorials, are among the most popular magazines in the world. *Playboy* sells about 10 million issues monthly, including 2 million to women (Martin, 1992). (One-quarter of the top 40 best-selling videocassettes are produced by *Playboy* and *Penthouse*.) *Sports Illustrated's* annual swimsuit edition sells over 5 million copies, twice as many as its other issues. But it would be a mistake to think that only male-oriented magazines focus on sex.

Women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Redbook* have their own sexual content. These magazines feature romantic photographs of lovers to illustrate stories with such titles as "Sizzling Sex Secrets of the World's Sexiest Women," "Making Love Last: If Your Partner Is a Premature Ejaculator," and "Turn on Your Man with Your Breasts (Even If They Are Small)." Katherine McMahon (1990) found that almost all the articles she surveyed over a 12-year period in *Cosmopolitan* magazine dealt directly or indirectly with sex. Preadolescents and young teens are not exempt from sexual images and articles in magazines such as *Seventeen* and *YM*. Some of the men's health magazines have followed the lead of women's magazines to feature sexuality-related issues as a way to sell more copies.

For many, the World Wide Web has become an important part of the media. The Internet's contributions to the commercialization of sex include live videos and chats, news groups, and links to potential or virtual sex partners (complete with fetishes). The spread of the Web is making it easier to obtain both information and sexual gratification.

Advertising in all media uses the sexual sell, promising sex, romance, popularity, and fulfillment if the consumer will only purchase the right soap, perfume, cigarettes, alcohol, toothpaste, jeans, or automobile. An advertisement for Infiniti, for example, claims: "It's not a car. It's an aphrodisiac." In reality, not only does one *not* become "sexy" or popular by consuming a certain product, but the product may actually be detrimental to one's sexual well-being, as in the case of smoking or drinking alcohol.



Sexual images are used to sell products. What ideas are conveyed by this advertisement? How does its appeal differ according to whether one is male or female?

Media images of sexuality permeate a variety of areas in people's lives. They can produce sexual arousal and emotional reactions, increase sexual behaviors, and be a source of sex information for both men and women. In their analysis of the impact of sexually explicit materials on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, researchers Clive Davis and Robert Bauserman (1993) suggest that sex in the media is a form of persuasive communication because of its clear impact on those who view it.

Mass-media depictions of sexuality are meant to entertain and exploit, not to inform. As a result, the media do not present us with "real" depictions of sexuality. Sexual activities, for example, are usually not explicitly acted out or described in mainstream media, nor is interracial dating often portrayed. Although programs like *Ally McBeal* and *ER* have challenged the toe-in-the-water approach by showing a Black and a White as a couple ("Finding Drama," 2000), television rarely portrays interracial couples in loving, long-term relationships. The social and cultural taboos that are still part of mainstream U.S. culture remain embedded in the media. Thus, the various media present the social *context* of sexuality (Smith, 1991); that is, the programs, plots, movies, stories, articles, newscasts, and vignettes tell us *what* behaviors are appropriate (e.g., kissing or having sexual intercourse), *with whom* they are appropriate (e.g., girlfriend/boyfriend, partner, heterosexual), and *why* they are appropriate (e.g., attraction, love, loneliness, exploitation). Furthermore, regular consumers of media sex are likely to believe that sex acts in various forms happen more frequently than they actually do—that there are, for example, more affairs outside marriage, as well as more rape and prostitution (Greenberg, 1994).

Television

Television is one of the most pervasive and influential mediums affecting our views of sexuality. The visual depiction of explicit sexual behavior on network television, though exciting and attractive, also tends to be unrealistic.

Television is one of the most pervasive media affecting our views of sexuality. What ideas and images about sexuality do your favorite programs convey?



The vast wasteland of TV is not interested in producing a better mousetrap but in producing a worse mouse.

—Laurence Coughlin

We generally see countless acts of passionate kissing and fondling—but only between heterosexuals. Other sexual behaviors, such as coitus or oral sex, may be suggested through words (“Oh, it feels so good”) or visual or sound cues (close-ups of faces tensing during orgasm, or Ravel’s *Bolero* playing on the soundtrack). Sexual behavior is never overtly depicted, as it is in sexually oriented films. References to masturbation are rarely made; when they are, they are usually negative and consigned to an adolescent context, suggesting that such behavior is “immature.” The popular sitcom *Seinfeld* was the first program to deal openly with masturbation, while *Ally McBeal* has introduced themes related to sexual fantasies, domination, and the sexually assertive woman. Female breasts may be shown, but usually in tight garments, with suggestive cleavages or nipples outlined through clothing; nipples themselves are taboo. In most cases, TV talks about sex rather than depicts it (Greenberg, 1994). A 1999 study found that, although two-thirds of prime-time programs contained sexual content, less than 1 in 10 referred to the possible risks or responsibilities associated with sex (“TV Sex Misses Opportunities,” 1999).

Television helps form our sexual perceptions through its depiction of stereotypes and its reinforcement of **norms**, which are cultural rules or standards. Television also provides us with a social template for discussions about and expectations of sexuality and relationships. Its countless verbal and visual references to dating and sexual activity are associated with adolescents’ own sexual attitudes and expectations. In many respects, it appears that TV’s sexual portrayals help to shape adolescents’ sense of what is normal and expected (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Our perceptions are shaped differently, however, depending on the TV genre (the type of program). There are six major genres in which sexual stereotyping and norms are especially influential: situation comedies, soap operas, crime/action-adventure programs, made-for-TV movies, commercials, and music videos.

Up to 2000 hours of television programming are available in U.S. homes each day (“TV Parental Guidelines,” 2000). To help parents sort through this

volume of material and make decisions about the programs their children can watch, the TV industry, in response to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, developed a system of parental guidelines. Programs are categorized using age-related labels such as TV-Y7 (intended for children age 7 and older) and TV-PG (parental guidance suggest for younger children). They are also categorized using content descriptors: the symbols V (violence), S (sex), D (sexual dialogue), and L (adult language) for general programming, along with FV (fantasy violence) for children's shows. Parents can then program an electronic filtering device called the V-chip to block shows according to specific classifications.

The initial system was immediately criticized because it provided only age-based advisory information and failed to address any content concerns. The categories of violence, sex, and language were added to allow parents to know why a program received a certain rating. For example, initially, those who wished to use the V-chip to eliminate violent programs could not do so. Similarly, parents of older children who found the depiction of limited violence acceptable but who wished to restrict their access to sexual content could not do so because of the lack of content specificity within the age-based framework. Inherent in any discussion about ratings is the question of the reliability of ratings from the coders who are reviewing the programs.

The Kaiser Family Foundation (Kunkel et al., 1998) recently investigated the rating system and found that the TV industry has limited its ratings of nearly all programs to just three categories: TV-G, TV-PG, or TV-14. Content descriptors have been virtually omitted. The researchers went on to say that parents cannot rely on content descriptors as currently employed to effectively block all shows containing violence, sexual content, or adult language. Naturally, it remains the parents' responsibility to monitor their children's TV viewing habits.

Until recently, sexually explicit programming was allowed only during late-night hours as a way of minimizing the chance that partially audible or visible snippets might reach children. The courts have ruled that this restriction is an unconstitutional infringement of free speech, and cable companies are no longer limited to a handful of hours in which to air sexually-oriented programs. Parents can keep such programming out of their home simply by calling their cable companies ("Steamy Cable TV," 2000).

Situation Comedies Sex in sitcoms? When asked, most people think there is none. After all, sitcoms usually deal with families or familylike relationships, and children are often the main characters. Because they are family-oriented, sitcoms do not explicitly depict sex (Smith, 1991). Instead, they deal with sexuality in the form of taboos centering around marital or family issues. The taboos are mild, such as the taboo against a married person flirting with another man or woman. If a sitcom were to deal with a major taboo, such as incest, the program would go beyond the genre's normal boundaries, and most viewers would not be amused.

In sitcoms, the formula is to put characters in situations in which they unknowingly violate conventional social rules, thereby creating chaos. The chaos, however, is resolved by the show's end, and everyone "lives happily ever after" until the next episode. Thus, a married man can be getting an eyelash out of his sister-in-law's eye when his wife comes home early

Television sitcoms such as *Dharma and Greg* frequently use sexual themes. What are some of the sexual themes or ideas of the most popular sitcoms? Do they differ according to ethnicity?



and becomes jealous, suspecting her husband and sister of kissing. While the laugh track plays, the husband tries to explain that she had something in her eye.

Sitcoms are sexually stereotypical. Their range of sexual standards and implied behaviors is limited, although the sexual references have increased considerably since the days of *I Love Lucy* (Cantor, 1991). Despite the increase in sexual references, sitcoms barely touch on the variety of values and behaviors found in the real world. Will and Jack in *Will and Grace* and Ellen DeGeneres in *Ellen* (now off the air) are examples of openly gay characters in mainstream sitcoms, but they remain the exception. Conservative

advocacy groups continue to oppose depictions of gay men and lesbians as normal. Although sitcoms have a limited range, they nevertheless affirm human connectedness and family values. They usually provide a context of intimacy for sexuality. Whatever transgression occurs, it is forgotten by the next episode.

Soap Operas Soap operas are one of the most popular TV genres. The highest rated soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*, reaches 65 million households per episode ("Ratings," 1999). Although sexual transgressions are soon forgotten in sitcoms, they are never forgotten in soap operas. Transgressions are the lifeblood of soaps: jealousy and revenge are ever-present. Most characters are now, or once were, involved with one another. The ghosts of past loves haunt the mansions and townhouses; each relationship carries a heavy history with it. Infidelity, pregnancy alarms, wild affairs, betrayals, and jealousy punctuate every episode. Depictions of sexual behavior are fairly frequent: Ten hours of each of five soaps in 1994 yielded 333 incidents of sexual activity (Greenberg & Woods, 1999).

In recent years, Spanish-language soaps (*telenovelas*) such as *Te Sigo Amando* (I Still Love You), *Me Destino Eres Tu* (You Are My Destiny), and *Tres Mujeres* (Three Women) from Latin America, have become increasingly popular among the Latino population. The content and messages of Latino soaps, however, do not differ significantly from those of soaps produced in the United States. They differ mainly in that they present fewer scenes suggestive of sexual activities, such as characters in bed.

With regard to nudity on soaps: frontal shots of nude male torsos (genitals are not shown) and back shots of nude female torsos (to avoid the taboo naked female breast) are most common. Characters lounge in bed, wrapped in sheets; they are either about to engage in sex or are basking in its pleasurable aftermath. At the same time, no one seems to use contraception or take measures to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). By the odds, one would expect many pregnancies and an epidemic of STDs.

Bradley Greenberg, a leading media researcher, and Mark Woods (1999) report that the most common sexual activity portrayed on soap operas is intercourse between two people not married to each other. In their 1994 sample, they found 120 instances of unmarried intercourse (2.4 times per hour). The next most common activity, rape, was presented 1.4 times per hour. Long kissing was shown 1.1 times per hour, and intercourse between married partners was shown or referred to 0.72 times per hour. Prostitution and intimate touching were depicted infrequently, and homosexual acts or references were nonexistent. Sex-related issues that emerged in the 1990s include date rape, which was periodically portrayed, and contraception and safe sex, which were only briefly discussed. AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases were not mentioned. Furthermore, according to Greenberg (1994), the attitudes of soap characters toward sex are surprisingly negative.

In one study, researchers found that TV viewing affects our perceptions of others' sexual attitudes and behaviors but not our perceptions of our own experiences (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Males were perceived as more sexually experienced by females who watch soap operas than by females who do not watch them. Soap watchers also believed that their male peers were quite sexually experienced. But TV viewing for males was only weakly associated with their sexual attitudes and expectations; the reasons for this

Soap operas offer distinct visions of sexuality. Sexuality is portrayed as intense and as a cause of jealousy. Women are the primary audience. Why?



finding are not clear. What is apparent, however, is that television—not just soaps but all genres—portrays sex in one-dimensional terms: Sex is only for the young, single, and beautiful, and sexual encounters are always spontaneous, romantic, and risk-free.

Although there is also intimacy in the world of soaps, it is intense, unstable, and desperate. Relationships are usually stormy and short-lived, setting the scene for jealousy and revenge in subsequent episodes. There is no satisfaction or fulfillment in most soap relationships. Despite the genre's focus on sex, TV soaps give a clear message that sex is guilt-ridden, unsatisfying, and exploitative.

Crime/Action-Adventure Programs In crime and action-adventure programs, there are few intimate relationships. Instead, relationships are fundamentally sexual, based on attraction. They are the backdrop to crime and adventure, which form the basis of the plot. The basic theme of a crime program is disorder (a crime) that must be resolved so that order can be restored. Often, the disorder is caused by a sexual act or a sexually related issue, such as prostitution, pornography, rape, cross-dressing, sexual blackmail, or seduction for criminal purposes. As such, we see the underside of sex. Plots involve police searching for female killers who turn out to be cross-dressers, prostitutes who are murdered by sociopaths, runaways lured into pornography, and so on. Detectives and police go undercover, leading the audience into the underworld of prostitutes, pimps, and johns.

The detectives live isolated, emotional lives. They are portrayed as loners, and their involvements are ephemeral, usually not lasting beyond a single episode. Often, their love interests are murdered; other times, the women themselves prove to be criminals. The only intimacy they may find is with their detective partners or with secretaries (Clark, 1992). Marital intercourse is virtually nonexistent. Most sexual intercourse takes place between unmarried people or between men and prostitutes (Greenberg, 1994).

Made-for-TV Movies Made-for-TV movies focus on “problem” themes. In contrast to most series, TV movies revolve around more controversial topics. When plots center on sexuality, they generally focus on sex as a social issue rather than in terms of intimacy. These movies present such topics as adolescent pregnancy, extramarital affairs, rape, sexual harassment, and AIDS. (TV movies about AIDS have introduced, for the first time, non-stereotypical gay and lesbian characters who display a full range of human emotions.) Most sexual topics lend themselves easily to sensationalism, which TV often exploits because it seeks to entertain rather than inform.

TV movies in which rape occurs often place the act within the context of entertainment. Such movies may use gratuitous sexual aggression as a means of “hooking” an audience. In the process, these movies may distort the seriousness of rape and present misleading stereotypes, such as the woman being sexually provocative, “deserving” to be raped or “leading the man on.” By using a certain type of music, they make rape seem titillating. Although most rapists are known to the victim, TV films generally depict rapists as strangers.

Commercials Commercials are a unique genre in TV programming. Although they are not part of the television program per se, because they are inserted before, after, and during it, they become a free-floating part of it. In these commercials, advertisers may manipulate sexual images to sell products. The most sexually explicit commercials generally advertise jeans, beer, and perfume.

These commercials tell a story visually through a series of brief scenes or images. They do not pretend to explain the practical benefits of their product, such as cost or effectiveness. Instead, they offer viewers an image or attitude. Directed especially toward adolescents and young adults, these commercials play upon fantasies of attractiveness, sexual success, and fun. They also work to shape our eating styles, appearance, body image, and sense of what is attractive and desirable in ourselves and others. Viewers are led to believe that they can acquire these attributes by using a particular product. However, research indicates that viewers tend to be offended by overtly sexual ads (Latour & Henthorne, 1994).

Other TV Genres Sex is present in other TV genres, too. Game shows often play on sexual themes, either suggestively (*The Newlywed Game*) or explicitly (*Blind Date*). Popular daytime talk shows, such as *Jerry Springer* and *Ricki Lake*, feature unconventional guests and topics, such as women married to gay men or transsexuals, so-called sex addicts, and polygamists. Such talk shows use unconventional sexuality to provoke viewer interest. Although their prime purpose remains entertainment, these shows can provide illuminating, firsthand accounts of atypical sexual behavior. These shows reveal the diversity of human sexuality, as well as give its participants a human face. As critic Walter Goodman (1992) observes: “They carry a gospel of tolerance, preaching openness for the unusual and encouraging greater acceptance of groups and behavior that have long been the objects of ignorance and fear.” A few syndicated programs, such as “Loveline,” offer more thoughtful and educational (though still entertaining) discussions of sexuality from a nonjudgmental perspective.

Of the delights of this world man cares most for sexual intercourse, yet he has left it out of his heaven.

—Mark Twain (1835–1910)

News programs continually report rapes, child sexual abuse, pornography, sex therapies, and opinion polls on sexuality. TV news magazines examine various sexual issues “in depth” (for example, they devote more time than insight or thought). Both types of news programs usually deal with atypical or controversial aspects of sexuality.

Like mainstream television programs, religious television networks and programs have wide appeal. Religious programming, such as *The 700 Club*, broadcasts fundamentalist Christian visions of sex, sin, and morality (Shepard, 1989; Wills, 1989, 1990). These programs stress conservative themes such as adolescent chastity and opposition to sex education, abortion, and homosexuality.

Music Videos MTV, VH1, BET, and music video programs such as *Sex Appeal* are very popular among adolescents and young adults. Most viewers, however, do not watch music videos for longer than 15 minutes at a time because they are repetitive.

Unlike audio-recorded music, music videos play to the eye and the ear. Young female artists such as Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and the Dixie Chicks have brought energy, sexuality, and individualism to the young music audience. Their music videos reflect their confidence, sensuality, and spirit. Male artists such as 'NSync and the Backstreet Boys provide young audiences with a steady dose of sexuality, power, and rhythm.

A few music groups and individuals have broken ground by expressing their views about alternative sexual orientations. The lead singer of the group Marilyn Manson is bisexual, and the members of the Pansey Division are gay and use a pink triangle as their symbol. Lesbian musicians k. d. lang and Melissa Etheridge have a strong following among gays and lesbians. All of this music is slowly finding its way to mainstream audiences.

Most music videos rely on flashy visual images to sustain audience interest. Because TV prohibits the explicit depiction of sexual acts, music videos use sexual innuendo to impart sexual meaning. Kissing, hugging, and suggestive sexual behavior occur at twice the rate as in conventional TV shows. Interestingly, almost 25% of the videos viewed in one study depicted considerable lesbian or gay exchanges. All but one, however, limited the activities to nonintimate touching or flirtation (Greenberg, 1994).

Hollywood Films

American motion pictures follow different rules from those of television regarding sexuality. Movies generally are permitted greater license in depicting sexual behavior, but they are still limited by censorship. Like television, films tend to depict sexual stereotypes and to adhere to mainstream sexual norms.

Mainstream Films From their very inception, motion pictures have dealt with sexuality. In 1896, a film entitled *The Kiss* outraged moral guardians when it showed a couple stealing a quick kiss. “Absolutely disgusting,” complained one critic. “The performance comes near being indecent in its emphasized indecency. Such things call for police action” (quoted in Webb, 1983). Today, by contrast, film critics use “sexy,” a word independent of artis-



Sexuality is an ever-present theme in rock and rap. What image is Lil' Kim communicating about herself, her music, and her fans?

tic value, to praise a film. "Sexy" films are movies in which the requisite "sex scenes" are sufficiently titillating to overcome their lack of aesthetic merit. *Eyes Wide Shut*, for example, centers on an orgy that goes terribly wrong. Such an image shows sex as neurotic, guilt-inducing, and even scary.

In Hollywood films of the 1990s, there was considerable female nudity, especially above the waist. But men are never filmed nude in the same manner as women. Men are generally clothed or partially covered; if they are fully nude, the scene takes place at night, the scene is blurred, or we see only their backsides. Except on rare occasions, the penis is never shown; if it is visible, it is flaccid (unaroused), not erect, according to one film director (Toback,

1992). Even when the central theme of the movie involves male genitals, as in *Boogie Nights* and *The Full Monty*, the erect penis is not shown. In *Basic Instinct*, the director reported that the motion picture ratings board permitted him to show the penis of a murdered man “because it was dead” (Andrews, 1992). (In the more liberal European version of the film, however, a scene reveals Michael Douglas’s penis in a frontal nude shot; the shot was cut for the American release.) A film psychologist notes: “People have gotten accustomed to wanting to see women nude. They don’t think a nude woman looks vulnerable anymore. When a man is uncovered . . . the reaction is that he is extremely vulnerable” (Andrews, 1992).

Although movies today show more naked flesh, the old war-between-the-sexes theme continues with a significant variation. In today’s film comedies and dramas, men pursue women and women resist, as they did before. What is new, however, is that the man’s persistence awakens the woman’s sexual desire. They fall in love, make love (or vice versa), and have passionate sex happily ever after. In these films, sex takes place outside of marriage (usually before marriage), reflecting the widespread acceptance of nonmarital intercourse. Such scenarios reflect traditional male/female stereotypes of the active man and passive woman. At the same time, however, they validate nonmarital sexual intercourse as a social norm.

Shots suggesting sexual intercourse and oral sex are commonplace in today’s films. But scenes of sexual intercourse are generally filmed from a male perspective; the camera explores the woman’s body and her reaction (Andrews, 1992). Even family-centered films, such as *She’s All That*, have scenes intimating sex. But other common forms of sexual behavior, such as masturbation, are virtually absent from serious contemporary films. *American Pie* and *There’s Something About Mary*, two comedies aimed at adolescent audiences, feature scenes dealing with masturbation in a humorous way. *American Beauty*, which received an Academy Award for best picture, treats sexuality much more seriously. In that film, a middle-aged man experiences a sexual and emotional awakening during which he attempts to seduce and capture the heart of his teenage daughter’s nubile classmate.

Dangerous men and dangerous women are depicted differently in movies. As film critic Jerome Weeks (1993) notes:

Masculine menace on screen and stage is usually seen as a generalized threat: Anyone would fear this particular male because he’s a master of violence or dangerously out of control. But if female performers are dangerous, they’re dangerous only “to men.” It’s practically unheard of for a female character to be intimidating in any terms that are not sexual. If they’re killers, they kill their husbands, lovers, or the patsies they need and therefore seduce.

Violence among men, however, is portrayed. The horrifying rape of the character Marselles in *Pulp Fiction* interweaves violence and aggression with sex. Only a few female stars, such as Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane*, Reese Witherspoon in *Freeway*, and Ashley Judd in *Double Jeopardy*, dispense aggression and violence with the ease of a Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Jean-Claude Van Damme.

Gay Men, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Transgendered People in Film Gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals are generally absent from mainstream films. When gay men and lesbians do appear, they



In recent years, movies such as Boys Don't Cry have presented their lesbian, bisexual, and gay characters as fully realized human beings.

are consistently defined in terms of their sexual orientation, as if there was nothing more to their lives than sexuality. Gay men are generally stereotyped as effeminate, flighty, or “arty,” or they may be closeted, as Kevin Kline is in *In & Out*. Lesbians are often stereotyped as humorless, mannish, or “butch” and excluded from the usual female norms of attractiveness in the media (Rothblum, 1994).

If gay men and lesbians are not shown as effeminate or butch, they are portrayed as sinister, with their sexual orientation symptomatic of a dangerous pathology. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the killer is a gay cross-dresser. Violent women are often depicted as lesbians or as having lesbian tendencies (Hart, 1994). And one film critic (Weir, 1992) notes:

In Hollywood movies, heterosexuals are never defined as evil or irrelevant simply *because* of their sexuality. Whether they act nobly or ignominiously, other aspects of their personalities are brought to bear. Gay men and lesbians, on the other hand, are consistently characterized solely in terms of their homosexuality—when they are depicted at all. What’s more, in American movies, homosexuality seems invariably to signal that a character is either sinister or irrelevant.

In recent years, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered films have been increasingly integrating their characters’ orientation into a wider focus. The poignant *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, stories of lesbian couples bonded by their passion and their politics, and *Boys Don't Cry*, a sensitive portrayal of an individual struggling with her gender identity, are not so much films about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered as they are about being human. Foreign films, by contrast, often treat gay men and lesbians more realistically than American films do. *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Full Monty*, and *Flawless* all include gay themes, but the films are not about homosexuality per se. Instead, they touch on universal themes, such as love, loyalty, and self-discovery. Film historian Vito Russo (1987) observes:

The fact they are movies about self-identified gays often confuses people into thinking that they are films by gays about homosexuality. This confusion will end when gayness is no longer a controversial topic. As Quentin Crisp has



Cybersex—fantasy sex using computers—is a popular activity among many Internet users.

said, “Homosexuality won’t be accepted until it is completely seen as boring—a mundane, inconsequential part of everyday life.”

There is no more need to identify *Jeffrey* as being about gay men than there is to identify *Gladiator* as being about heterosexuals.

Computer Sex and Dial-a-Porn

In recent years, computer networks and telephone media have created new ways of conveying or creating sexual fantasies. As a result of technological developments, we now have cybersex and dial-a-porn.

Cybersex Cybersex involves expressions of sexuality (such as fantasizing, talking about sex, and masturbating) while responding to images or words on a computer. It also includes online information about sex education and self-help groups. There is no question that the Internet is revolutionizing the way we think about sexuality. The popularity of cybersex is rooted in ease of access, affordability, and anonymity. Using a computer on the Internet, for example, a person called “Hot Dog” can enter a “place” called “Hot Tub” and soak for a couple of hours with “Bubbles,” “Sexy Lady” (a transvestite), and others who pop in and out. “Hot Dog” flirts with everyone; he describes himself, tells his fantasies, and has kinky sex with “Sexy Lady” and a dozen others. “Hot Dog” is actually a woman, but she doesn’t tell anyone. Every now and then, “Hot Dog” goes private and exchanges fantasies. But none of this happens in the physical world. “Hot Tub” is a chat room on a computer network. People at different locations, linked by the network, type their fantasies on their keyboards, and those fantasies almost immediately appear on the other people’s computer screens.

One network allows subscribers to interact with computer-animated graphic sex games. Users configure the appearance of their cartoonlike characters and engage in a variety of situations with characters controlled by other subscribers. When the characters have sex, only their faces are visible on the screen. The users, however, are able to see their partner’s face, and they can control the expression on their own character’s face.

There are over 12 million sex-related Web sites, accounting for a sizable chunk of the \$4-billion U.S. adult entertainment industry (“More Buck,” 1999). More than half of the requests on search engines are “adult-oriented,” and, next to “MP3,” “sex” is the most frequently searched-for word online (Searchwords.com, 2000). One such site is marketed by a stripper named Jenteal, who claims to earn \$50,000 per month from the site. Not only can people conduct discussions or fantasies, they can also transfer to their own computer text files describing endless sexual encounters. There are also personal ads and shopping places where users can order whips and chains. Hundreds of animated X-rated computer software programs, such as “Danni’s Hard Drive,” are available.

As Gerard Van der Leun (1995) writes of cybersex on the Internet:

A maze of steamy places that don’t exist makes up the warp and woof of sex on the Net today. . . . [O]nline sex is as wild and far-ranging as the human imagination. . . . But remember that cybersex has been going on since humans received the gift of imagination. Cybersex is, at bottom, simply old sexual fantasies in a new electronic bottle.

Computers are also used to create virtual reality (VR) sex. Jaron Lanier, who coined the term “virtual reality,” is working on VR technology that will allow cable TV subscribers to use goggles, gloves, and body sensors to create their own sexual virtual reality.

The ability to engage in open, frank, and explicit discussions about sex is one reason many people are turning to the Internet for sex therapy and sexual help. “Cybertherapy,” as it is now called, is becoming an important venue for those who are striving to build a sense of connectedness, community, and empowerment. An example of this is the growing number of sites specifically directed at women. Without having to look at another person’s face, individuals can use “sex coaches” or chat rooms to help reduce their feelings of isolation and guilt. Being accepted and heard are vital components to successful therapy. While searching for such sources, however, both consumers and professionals must be aware of the differences between therapy, consultation, and entertainment.

Because of the high volume of sexual discussions and material available on the Internet, there is an increasing demand for government regulation. In 1996, Congress passed the Communications Decency Act, which made it illegal to use computer networks to transmit “obscene” materials or place “indecent” words or images where children might see or read them. Opponents have decried this legislation as a violation of freedom of speech. (For further discussion of this issue, see Chapter 18.)

Dial-a-Porn Millions of individuals seek sexual gratification through telephone sex lines. Ads for phone sex services appear in most sexually oriented magazines; they depict nude or seminude women and men in sexually suggestive poses. For fees ranging from \$3 to \$15 a minute, a person can call a phone line and have a woman or man “talk dirty” with him or her. An analysis of dial-a-porn recordings found that subservience of the male to the female and reciprocal sex acts were the most common themes. In this survey, there were no violent themes, such as rape or bondage (Glascock & LaRose, 1993). Fantasy phone sex also caters to “specialty” interests, such as domination and submission, transvestism, and transsexualism.

Anonymous telephone sex provides the caller with pseudo-intimacy. Through the voice, the caller receives a sense of physical closeness. Because the phone worker is paid to respond to the caller’s fantasies, the caller can move the conversation in the direction desired. The worker gives the caller the illusion that his or her fantasies are being fulfilled.

Although the ads depict the fantasy phone worker as highly erotic, the calls are often forwarded to the worker’s home phone. At home, the worker is probably pursuing mundane tasks, such as washing dishes, changing a baby’s diaper, or studying for an accounting exam. Sometimes, workers become involved in the fantasy, but more often, they only half-listen while doing other tasks.



SEXUALITY ACROSS CULTURES AND TIMES

What we see as “natural” in our culture may be viewed as unnatural in other cultures. Few Americans would disagree about the erotic potential of kissing. But other cultures perceive kissing as merely the exchange of saliva. To

the Mehinaku of the Amazonian rain forest, for example, kissing is a disgusting sexual abnormality; no Mehinaku engages in it (Gregor, 1985). The fact that Whites press their lips against each other, salivate, and become sexually excited merely confirms their “strangeness” to the Mehinaku.

Culture takes our **sexual impulses**—our incitements or inclinations to act sexually—and molds and shapes them, sometimes celebrating sexuality and other times condemning it. Sexuality can be viewed as a means of spiritual enlightenment, as in the Hindu tradition, in which the gods themselves engage in sexual activities; it can also be at war with the divine, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which the flesh is the snare of the devil (Parinder, 1980).

Among the variety of factors that shape how we feel and behave sexually, culture is the most powerful. A brief exploration of sexual themes across cultures and times will give you a sense of the diverse shapes and meanings humans have given to sexuality.

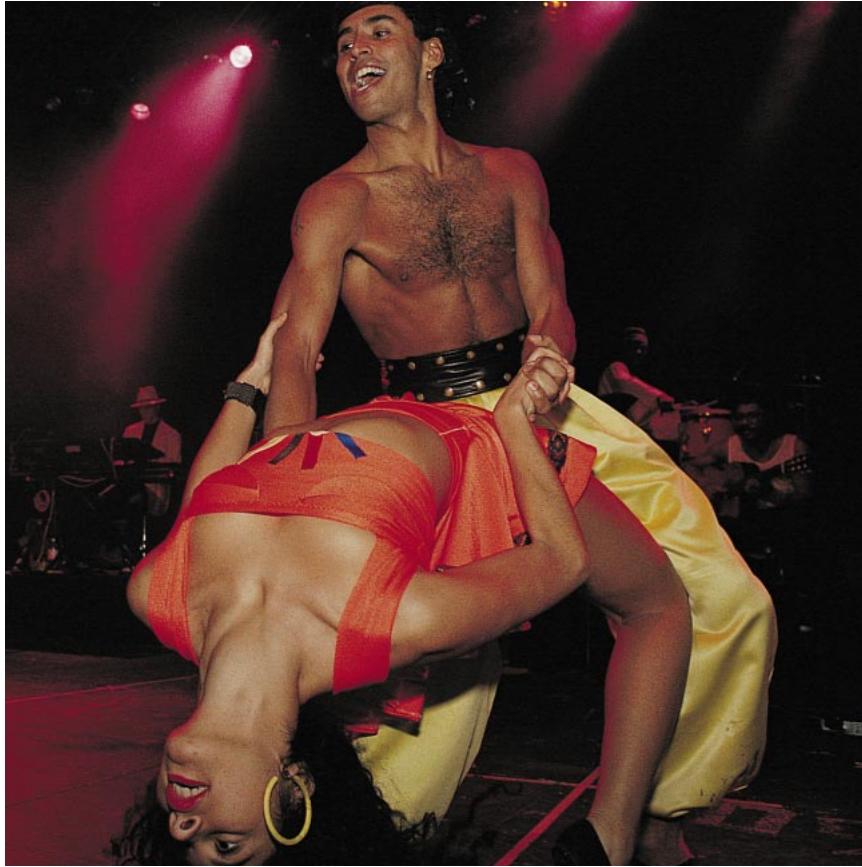
Sexual Impulses

All cultures assume that adults have the *potential* for becoming sexually aroused and for engaging in sexual intercourse for the purpose of reproduction (Davenport, 1987). But cultures differ considerably in terms of how strong they believe sexual impulses are. These beliefs, in turn, affect the level of desire expressed in each culture.

The Mangaia Among the Mangaia of Polynesia, both sexes, beginning in early adolescence, experience high levels of sexual desire (Marshall, 1971). Around age 13 or 14, following a circumcision ritual, boys are given instruction in the ways of pleasing a girl: erotic kissing, cunnilingus, breast fondling and sucking, and techniques for bringing her to multiple orgasms. After two weeks, an older, sexually experienced woman has sexual intercourse with the boy to instruct him further on how to sexually satisfy a woman. Girls the same age are instructed by older women on how to be orgasmic: how to thrust their hips and rhythmically move their vulvas in order to have multiple orgasms. A girl finally learns to be orgasmic through the efforts of a “good man.” If the woman’s partner fails to satisfy her, she is likely to leave him; she may also ruin his reputation with other women by denouncing his lack of skill. Young men and women are expected to have many sexual experiences prior to marriage.

This adolescent paradise, however, does not last forever. Mangaian believe that sexuality is strongest during youthhood. As a result, when they leave young adulthood, youths experience a rapid decline in sexual desire and activity, and they cease to be aroused as passionately as they once were. They attribute this swift decline to the workings of nature and settle into a sexually contented adulthood.

The Dani In contrast to the Mangaia, the New Guinean Dani show little interest in sexuality. To them, sex is a relatively unimportant aspect of life. The Dani express no concern about improving sexual techniques or enhancing erotic pleasure. Sexual affairs and jealousy are rare. As their only sexual concern is reproduction, sexual intercourse is performed quickly, ending with male orgasm. Female orgasm appears to be unknown to them.



The sensual movements of Latin American dancing have become popular in American culture.

Following childbirth, both mothers and fathers go through 5 years of sexual abstinence. The Dani are an extreme example of a case in which culture rather than biology shapes sexual impulses.

Victorian Americans In the nineteenth century, White middle-class Americans believed that women had little sexual desire. If they experienced desire at all, it was “reproductive desire,” the wish to have children. Reproduction entailed the unfortunate “necessity” of engaging in sexual intercourse. A leading reformer wrote that in her “natural state” a woman never makes advances based on sexual desires, for the “very plain reason that she does not feel them” (Alcott, 1868). Those women who did feel desire were “a few exceptions amounting in all probability to diseased cases.” Such women were classified by a prominent physician as suffering from “Nymphomania, or Furor Uterinus” (Bostwick, 1860).

Although women were viewed as asexual, men were believed to have raging sexual appetites. Men, driven by lust, sought to satisfy their desires by ravaging innocent women. Both men and women believed that male sexuality was dangerous, uncontrolled, and animal-like. It was part of a woman’s duty to tame unruly male sexual impulses.

The polar beliefs about the nature of male and female sexuality created destructive antagonisms between angelic women and demonic men. These beliefs provided the rationale for a “war between the sexes.” They also led

In ancient Greece, the highest form of love was that expressed between males.



to the separation of sex from love. Intimacy and love had nothing to do with male sexuality. In fact, male lust always lingered in the background of married life, threatening to destroy love by its overbearing demands.

Although a century has passed since the end of the Victorian era, many Victorian sexual beliefs and attitudes continue to influence us. Some of these include the belief that men are “naturally” sexually aggressive and women sexually passive, the sexual double standard, and the value placed on women being sexually “inexperienced.”

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is the pattern of sexual and emotional attraction based on the gender of one’s partner. **Heterosexuality** refers to emotional and sexual attraction between men and women; **homosexuality** refers to same-sex relationships; **bisexuality** is an emotional and sexual orientation to both males and females. In contemporary American culture, heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation receiving full social and legal legitimacy. Although same-sex relationships are relatively common, they do not receive general social acceptance. Some other cultures, however, view same-sex relationships as normal, acceptable, and even preferable. Marriage between members of the same sex is recognized in 15–20 cultures throughout the world (Gregersen, 1986). In this country, same-sex marriages are still not recognized, although Vermont recently legalized a “civil union” for same-sex couples.

Ancient Greece In ancient Greece, the birthplace of European culture, the Greeks accepted same-sex relationships as naturally as Americans today accept heterosexuality. For the Greeks, same-sex relationships between men represented the highest form of love.

The male-male relationship was based on love and reciprocity; sexuality was only one component of it. In this relationship, the code of conduct called for the older man to initiate the relationship. The youth initially resisted; only after the older man courted the young man with gifts and words of love would the youth reciprocate. The two men formed a close, emotional bond. The older man was the youth’s mentor as well as his lover. He introduced

the youth to men who would be useful for his advancement later; he assisted him in learning his duties as a citizen. As the youth entered adulthood, the erotic bond between the two evolved into a deep friendship. After the youth became an adult, he married a woman and later initiated a relationship with an adolescent boy.

Greek male-male relationships, however, were not substitutes for male-female marriage. The Greeks discouraged exclusive male-male relationships because marriage and children were required to continue the family. Men regarded their wives primarily as domestics and as bearers of children (Keuls, 1985). (The Greek word for woman, *gyne*, translates literally as “childbearer.”) Husbands turned not to their wives for sexual pleasure, but to *hetaerae* (hi-TIR-ee), highly regarded courtesans who were usually educated slaves.

The Sambians Among Sambian males of New Guinea, sexual orientation is very malleable (Herdt, 1987). Young boys begin with sexual activities with older boys, move to sexual activities with both sexes during adolescence, and engage in exclusively male-female activities in adulthood. Sambians believe that a boy can grow into a man only by the ingestion of semen, which is, they say, like mother’s milk. At age 7 or 8, boys begin their sexual activities with older boys; as they get older, they seek multiple partners to accelerate their growth into manhood. At adolescence, their role changes, and they must provide semen to boys to enable them to develop. At first, they worry about their own loss of semen, but they are taught to drink tree sap, which magically replenishes their supply. During adolescence, boys are betrothed to preadolescent girls, with whom they engage in sexual activities. When the girls mature, the boys give up their sexual involvement with other males. They become fully involved with adult women, losing their desire for men.

Gender

Although sexual impulses and orientation may be influenced by culture, it is difficult to imagine that culture has anything to do with **gender**, the characteristics associated with being male or female. There are, after all, only two sexes: male and female. These appear solidly rooted in our biological nature. But is being male or female *really* biological? The answer is *yes and no*. Having male or female genitals is anatomical. But the possession of a penis does not *always* make a person a man, nor does the possession of a vulva and vagina *always* make a person a woman. Men who consider themselves women, “women with penises,” are accepted or honored in many cultures throughout the world (Bullough, 1991).

Transsexuals Within the United States, there are approximately 15,000 **transsexuals**, people whose genitals and identities as men or women are discordant. In transsexuality, a person with a penis, for example, identifies as a woman, or a person with a vulva and vagina identifies as a man.

To make their genitals congruent with their gender identity, many transsexuals have their genitals surgically altered. If being male or female depends on genitals, then postsurgical transsexuals have changed their sex—men have become women and women have become men. But defining sex in terms of genitals presents problems, as has been shown in the world of sports. In the 1970s, Renee Richards, whose genitals had been surgically transformed from



In some cultures, men who dress or identify as women are considered shamans. We'wha was a Zuni man-woman who lived in the nineteenth century.

male to female, began competing on the women's professional tennis circuit. Protests began immediately. Although Richards' genitals were female, her body and musculature were male. Despite the surgery, she remained genetically male because her sex chromosomes were male. Her critics insisted that genetics, not genitals, defines a person's sex; anatomy can be changed, but chromosomes cannot. Richards, however, maintained that she was a woman by any common definition of the word. (Issues of sex, gender, and biology are discussed in Chapter 5.)

Two-Spirits Most Americans consider transsexuality problematic at best. But this is not necessarily true in all cultures. In some cultures, an anatomical man identifying as a woman might be considered a "man-woman" and be accorded high status and special privileges. He would be identified as a **two-spirit**, a man who assumes female dress, gender role, and status. Two-spirit is regarded as a third gender (Callendar et al., 1983). It is neither transsexuality, transvestism (wearing the clothes, or passing as a member, of the other sex), nor a form of same-sex relationship (Callendar & Kochems, 1985; Forgey, 1975; Roscoe, 1991). Two-spirits are found in numerous cultures throughout the world, including Native American, Filipino, Lapp, and Indian cultures. In Indian culture, the third gender is known as the *hijra*. Regarded as sacred, they perform as dancers or musicians at weddings and religious ceremonies, as well as providing blessings for health, prosperity, and fertility (Nanda, 1990). It is almost always men who become two-spirits, although there are a few cases of women assuming male roles in a similar fashion (Blackwood, 1984). Two-spirits are often considered shamans, individuals who possess great spiritual power.

Among the Zuni of New Mexico, two-spirits are considered a third gender (Roscoe, 1991). Despite the existence of transsexuals and pseudohermaphrodites (individuals with two testes or two ovaries but an ambiguous genital appearance), Westerners view gender as biological. The Zuni, by contrast, believe that gender is socially acquired.

Native American two-spirits were suppressed by missionaries and the U.S. government as "unnatural" or "perverted." Their ruthless repression led anthropologists to believe that two-spirits had been driven out of existence in Native American cultures. But there is evidence that two-spirits continue to hold ceremonial and fill social roles in some tribes, such as the Lakota Sioux. Understandably, two-spirit activities are kept secret from outsiders for fear of reprisals (Williams, 1985). Among gay and lesbian Native Americans, the two-spirit role provides historical continuity with their traditions (Roscoe, 1991).

SOCIETAL NORMS AND SEXUALITY

The immense diversity of sexual behaviors across cultures and times immediately calls into question the appropriateness of labeling these behaviors as *inherently* natural or unnatural, normal or abnormal. Too often, we give such labels to sexual behaviors without thinking about the basis on which we make those judgments. Such categories discourage knowledge and understanding because they are value judgments, evaluations of right and wrong. As such, they are not objective descriptions about behaviors, but statements of how we feel about those behaviors.

THE QUESTION “AM I NORMAL?” seems to haunt many people. For some, it causes a great deal of unnecessary fear, guilt, and anxiety. For others, it provides the motivation to study the literature, consult with a trusted friend or therapist, or take a course in sexuality.

What is normal? We commonly use several criteria in deciding whether to label different sexual behaviors “normal” or “abnormal.” According to professor and psychologist Leonore Tiefer (1995), these criteria are subjective, statistical, idealistic, cultural, and clinical. Regardless of what criteria we use, they ultimately reflect societal norms.

- *Subjectively “normal” behavior.* According to this definition, normalcy is any behavior that is similar to one’s own. Though most of us use this definition, few of us will admit it.
- *Statistically “normal” behavior.* According to this definition, whatever behaviors are more common are normal; less common ones are abnormal. However, the fact that a behavior is not widely practiced does not make it abnormal except in a statistical sense. **Fellatio** (fel-AY-she-o) (oral stimulation of the penis) and **cunnilingus** (cun-i-LIN-gus) (oral stimulation of the female genitals), for example, are widely practiced today because they have become “acceptable” behaviors. But a generation ago, oral sex was tabooed as something “dirty” or “shameful.”
- *Idealistically “normal” behavior.* Taking an ideal for a norm, individuals who use this approach measure all deviations against perfection. They may try to model their behavior after Christ or Gandhi. Using idealized behavior as a norm can easily lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety.

- *Culturally “normal” behavior.* This is probably the standard most of us use most of the time: We accept as normal what our culture defines as normal. This measure explains why our notions of normalcy do not always agree with those of people from other countries, religions, cultures, and historical periods. Men who kiss in public may be normal in one place but abnormal in another. It is common for deviant behavior to be perceived as dangerous and frightening in a culture that rejects it.
- *Clinically “normal” behavior.* The clinical standard uses scientific data about health and illness to make judgments. For example, the presence of the syphilis bacterium in body tissues or blood is considered abnormal because it indicates that a person has a sexually transmitted disease. Regardless of time or place, clinical definitions should stand the test of time. The four criteria mentioned above are all somewhat arbitrary—that is, they depend on individual or group opinion—but the clinical criterion has more objectivity.

These five criteria form the basis of what we usually consider normal behavior. Often, the different definitions and interpretations of “normal” conflict with one another. How does a person determine whether he or she is normal if subjectively “normal” behavior—what that person actually does—is inconsistent with his or her ideals? Such dilemmas are commonplace and lead many people to question their normalcy. However, they should not question their normalcy so much as their *concept* of normalcy.

Source: Tiefer, L. (1995). *Sex Is Not a Natural Act and Other Essays*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Natural Sex

How do we decide if a sexual behavior is natural or unnatural? To make this decision, we must have some standard of nature against which to compare the behavior. But what is “nature”? On the abstract level, nature is the essence of all things in the universe. Or, personified as nature, it is the force regulating the universe. These definitions, however, do not give us much help in trying to establish what is natural or unnatural.

When we asked our students to identify their criteria for determining which sexual behaviors they considered “natural” or “unnatural,” we received a variety of responses, including the following:

- “If a person feels something instinctive, I believe it is a natural feeling.”
- “Natural and unnatural have to do with the laws of nature. What these parts were intended for.”

AS WE DISCUSS IN THIS BOOK, organizations, groups, and entire cultures have defined “normal” or “natural” sexual expression in varied ways; many have placed narrow and restrictive codes on sexuality. These more restrictive standards, often a reflection of a particular view of morality, are ways of controlling sexual behavior. These messages are powerful and are most influential. Although some of these codes may help prevent some undesirable outcomes of sexual behavior, such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, they often result in many people being denied expression of fundamental human sexual needs. In response, the World Association of Sexology (WAS) developed a “Declaration of Sexual Rights,” which was adopted by the WAS General Assembly at the 14th World Congress of Sexology in Hong Kong, August 26, 1999.

Declaration of Sexual Rights

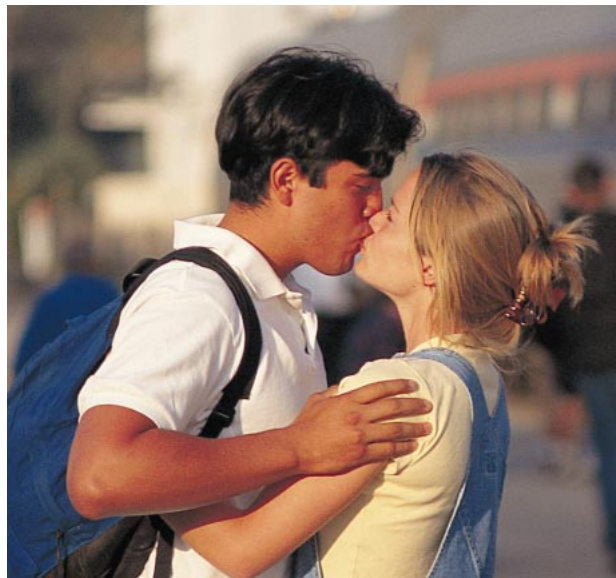
Sexuality is an integral part of the personality of every human being. Its full development depends upon the satisfaction of basic human needs such as the desire for contact, intimacy, emotional expression, pleasure, tenderness, and love. Sexuality is constructed through the interaction between the individual and social structures. Full development of sexuality is essential for individual, interpersonal, and social well being. Sexual rights are universal human rights based on the inherent freedom, dignity, and equality of all human beings. Since health is a fundamental human right, so must sexual health be a basic human right. In order to assure that human beings and societies develop healthy sexuality, the following sexual rights must be recognized, promoted, respected, and defended by all societies through all means. Sexual health is the result of an environment that recognizes, respects, and exercises these rights.

1. The right to sexual freedom. Sexual freedom encompasses the possibility for individuals to express their full sexual potential. However, this excludes all forms of sexual coercion, exploitation, and abuse at any time and situations in life.
2. The right to sexual autonomy, sexual integrity, and safety of the sexual body. This right involves the ability to make autonomous decisions about one’s sexual life within a context of one’s own personal and social ethics. It also encompasses control and enjoyment of our own bodies free from torture, mutilation, and violence on any sort.
3. The right to sexual privacy. This involves the right for individual decisions and behaviors about intimacy as long as they do not intrude on the sexual rights of others.
4. The right to sexual equity. This refers to freedom from all forms of discrimination regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, social class, religion, or physical and emotional disability.
5. The right to sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure, including autoeroticism, is a source of physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual well being.
6. The right to emotional sexual expression. Sexual expression is more than erotic pleasure or sexual acts. Individuals have a right to express their sexuality through communication, touch, emotional expression, and love.
7. The right to sexually associate freely. This means the possibility to marry or not, to divorce, and to establish other types of responsible sexual associations.
8. The right to make free and responsible reproductive choices. This encompasses the right to decide whether or not to have children, the number and spacing of children, and the right to full access to the means of fertility regulation.
9. The right to sexual information based upon scientific inquiry. This right implies that sexual information should be generated through the process of unencumbered and yet scientifically ethical inquiry, and disseminated in appropriate ways at all societal levels.
10. The right to comprehensive sexuality education. This is a lifelong process from birth throughout the life cycle and should involve all social institutions.
11. The right to sexual health care. Sexual health care should be available for prevention and treatment of all sexual concerns, problems, and disorders

Source: World Association of Sexology (<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~colem001/was/wdeclara.htm>)

- “I decide by my gut instincts.”
- “I think all sexual activity is natural as long as it doesn’t hurt yourself or anyone else.”
- “Everything possible is natural. Everything natural is normal. If it is natural and normal, it is moral.”

When we label sexual behavior as “natural” or “unnatural,” we are actually indicating whether the behavior conforms to our culture’s sexual norms.



Our sexual norms appear natural because we have internalized them since infancy. These norms are part of the cultural air we breathe, and, like the air, they are invisible. We have learned our culture's rules so well that they have become a "natural" part of our personality, a "second nature" to us. They seem "instinctive."

Normal Sex

Closely related to the idea that sexual behavior is natural or unnatural is the belief that sexuality is either normal or abnormal. More often than not, describing behavior as "normal" or "abnormal" is merely another way of making value judgments. Although "normal" has often been used to imply

Kissing is "natural" and "normal" in our culture. It is an expression of intimacy, love, and passion for young and old, heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbians.

“healthy” or “moral” behavior, among social scientists it is used strictly as a statistical term. For them, **normal sexual behavior** is behavior that conforms to a group’s average or median patterns of behavior. Normality has nothing to do with moral or psychological deviance.

Ironically, although we may feel pressure to behave like the average person (the statistical norm), most of us don’t actually know how others behave sexually. People don’t ordinarily reveal much about their sexual activities. If they do, they generally reveal only their most conformist sexual behaviors, such as sexual intercourse. They rarely disclose their masturbatory activities, sexual fantasies, or anxieties or feelings of guilt. All that most people present of themselves—unless we know them well—is the conventional self that masks their actual sexual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors.

The only guidelines most of us have for determining our normality are given to us by our friends, partners, and parents (who usually present conventional sexual images of themselves) through stereotypes, media images, religious teachings, customs, and cultural norms. None of these, however, tells us much about how people *actually* behave. Because we don’t know how people really behave, it is easy for us to imagine that we are abnormal if we differ from our cultural norms and stereotypes. We wonder if our desires, fantasies, and activities are normal: Is it normal to fantasize? To masturbate? To enjoy erotica? To be attracted to someone of the same sex? Some of us believe that everyone else is “normal” and that only we are “sick” or “abnormal.”

Because culture determines what is normal, there is a vast range of normal behaviors across different cultures. What is considered the normal sexual urge for the Dani would send most of us into therapy for treatment of low sexual desire. And the idea of teaching sexual skills to early adolescents, as the Mangaia do, would horrify most American parents.

Morality is the custom of one’s country and the current feelings of one’s peers. Cannibalism is moral in a cannibal country.

—Samuel Butler (1612–1680)

Sexual Behavior and Variations

Sex researchers have generally rejected the traditional sexual dichotomies of natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, moral/immoral, and good/bad. Regarding the word “abnormal,” Ira Reiss (1989) writes:

We need to be aware that people will use those labels to put distance between themselves and others they dislike. In doing so, these people are not making a scientific diagnosis but are simply affirming their support of certain shared concepts of proper sexuality.

Instead of classifying behavior into what are essentially moralistic normal/abnormal and natural/unnatural categories, researchers view human sexuality as characterized by **sexual variation**—that is, sexual variety and diversity. As humans, we vary enormously in terms of our sexual orientation, our desires, our fantasies, our attitudes, and our behaviors. Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues (1948) succinctly state the matter: “The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats.”

Researchers believe that the best way to understand our sexual diversity is to view our activities as existing on a continuum. On this continuum, the frequency with which individuals engage in different sexual activities, such as sexual intercourse, masturbation, and oral sex, ranges from never to always. Significantly, there is no point on the continuum that marks normal or abnormal behavior. In fact, the difference between one individual and the

DO YOU EVER WONDER why you do what you do or feel as you feel—especially when it comes to matters like attraction, relationships, and sex? Do you wonder why the object of your affection behaves in such inexplicable ways—why he or she flies into a jealous rage for no reason? Or why your friend always seems to fall for the “wrong” person? Sometimes, the answers may be obvious, but other times, they are obscure. Our motivations come from a variety of sources, including personality traits, past experiences, peer pressure, and familial and cultural influences. Many of our feelings probably result from a complex yet subtle blending of these influences—combined with innate responses programmed into our genes. Our sexual urges and responses are largely governed by hormones, tiny chemical structures that perform a number of functions, including that of “messenger,” triggering diverse actions and reactions in the brain and various parts of the body. Our genetic makeup has been passed down to us from our early primate ancestors—both human and nonhuman. We share 98–99% of our genetic material with our closest primate cousins, the chimpanzees and bonobos (Blum, 1997).

Our growing understanding of the biological bases of behavior comes largely from the field of sociobiology and its offshoot, evolutionary psychology. Sociobiologists base their study of human behavior on Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. According to Darwin’s theory, evolution favors certain physical traits that enable a species to survive, such as, for early humans, the ability to walk upright. According to sociobiology, evolution also favors certain genetically based behaviors or “reproductive strategies” that enhance an individual’s ability to pass along his or her genes and ensure their survival (Symons, 1979). Thus, sociobiology finds biological explanations for phenomena such as male dominance, the sexual double standard, and maternal behavior.

An example of a sociobiological explanation for behavior can be found when we look at the apparently different attitudes that men and women have about the roles of sex and love. From a sociobiological perspective, males, who are consistently fertile from early adolescence on, seek to impregnate as many females as possible to ensure genetic success. Females, however, ovulate only once a month. For them, a single act of intercourse can result in pregnancy, childbirth, and years of child rearing. Thus, it is important to females to find a partner on whom they can rely for protection and support over the long course of child rearing. In this way, they help ensure that the carriers of their genes (their children) will reach adulthood and pass along their parents’ genetic legacy. The bonds of love are what keep the male

around. Or, in other words, females trade sex for love, and males trade love for sex.

Evolutionary psychologists seek to explain the biological bases of love and other emotions such as hope, anger, jealousy, fear, and grief. We may wonder why Mother Nature made us so emotional when emotion so often leads us to disaster. But, Mr. Spock notwithstanding, there are good reasons (evolutionarily speaking) for having emotions. Even though in the short term emotions can get us into trouble—if we act impulsively rather than rationally—over the long term our emotions have helped our genes survive and replicate (Pinker, 1999). Emotions exist to motivate us to do things that serve (or once served) the best interests of our genetic material—things like fleeing, fighting, or forming close relationships to protect our “genetic investment” (offspring).

Critics of sociobiology argue that inferences from animal behavior may not be applicable to human beings; they feel that sociobiologists base their assumptions about human behavior (such as men wanting sex versus women wanting love) more on cultural stereotypes than on actual behavior. Sociobiologists reply that they report what they observe in nature and suggest connections to human behavior (humans are part of nature, after all) but do not make judgments about the meaning or morality of their observations. In fact, we must take care not to assume that because something is “natural,” it is appropriate, moral, or the right thing to do. Thinking that confuses the “natural” with the “good” is called the naturalistic fallacy. This fallacy can be used to justify all sorts of antisocial or just plain rude behavior. For example, a man could use this sort of reasoning to justify extramarital affairs (“My genes made me do it”). In reality, our genes don’t “make” us do anything. As social beings, we are still expected to learn to think before we act and to take the feelings and needs of others into account. This process, in fact, has a name: It’s called “growing up.”

As you study human sexuality, we hope that the information you gain from this text will help you integrate your own feelings and experiences with the information and advice you get from family, friends, lovers, and society. In the text, we take what might be called a “bio-psycho-social” approach to our subject, recognizing that the sexual self is produced by the interconnections of body, mind, spirit, and culture. As you continue your study, remember that, although our culture, beliefs, and cognitive processes (what we might call the “software” of the mind) have been created by humans, our bodies and brains (the “hardware” of the mind) are the products of evolution. They’ve been developing over a long, long time.

next on the continuum is minimal (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). The most that can be said of a person is that his or her behaviors are more or less typical or atypical of the group average. Furthermore, nothing can be inferred about an individual whose behavior differs significantly from the group average except that his or her behavior is atypical. The individual who differs is not sick, abnormal, or perverted; rather, he or she is a sexual nonconformist (Reiss, 1986, 1989). Except for engaging in sexually atypical behavior, one person may be indistinguishable from any other.

Many activities that are usually thought of as **deviant sexual behavior**—activities diverging from the norm, such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, and fetishism—are engaged in by most of us to some degree. We may delight in displaying our bodies on the beach or in “dirty dancing” in crowded clubs (exhibitionism). We may like watching ourselves make love, viewing erotic videos, or seeing our partner undress (voyeurism). Or we may enjoy kissing our lover’s photograph, keeping a lock of hair, or sleeping with an article of his or her clothing (fetishism). Most of the time, these feelings or activities are only one aspect of our sexual selves; they are not especially significant in our overall sexuality. Such atypical behaviors represent nothing more than sexual nonconformity when they occur between mutually consenting adults and do not cause distress (Reiss, 1989).

The rejection of natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, and moral/immoral categories by sex researchers does not mean that standards for evaluating sexual behavior do not exist. There are many sexual behaviors that are harmful to oneself (e.g., masturbatory asphyxia: suffocating or hanging oneself during masturbation to increase sexual arousal) and to others (e.g., rape, child molestation, exhibitionism, and obscene phone calls). Current psychological standards for determining the harmfulness of sexual behaviors center around the issues of coercion, potential harm to oneself or others, and personal distress. (These issues are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10.)

We, the authors, believe that the basic standard for judging various sexual activities is whether they are between consenting adults and whether they cause harm. Normality and naturalness are not useful terms for evaluating sexual behavior, especially variations, because they are usually nothing more than moral judgments. What people consider “normal” is often statistically common sexual behavior, which is then defined as good or healthy. But for many forms of sexual behavior, a large percentage of people will not conform to the average. There is a great deal of variation, for example, in the extent to which people eroticize boxer shorts and lacy underwear. Who determines at what point on the continuum that interest in undergarments is no longer acceptable? The individual? His or her peer group? Religious groups? Society? As Suzanna Rose and Victoria Sork (1984) note: “Because everyone’s sexuality does not completely overlap with the norm, the only liberating approach to sexuality is to envision it from the perspective of variation.”

As social scientists, sex researchers have a mandate to *describe* sexual behavior, not evaluate it as good or bad, moral or immoral. It is up to the individual to evaluate the ethical or moral aspect of sexual behavior in accordance with his or her ethical or religious values. At the same time, however, understanding diverse sexual attitudes, motives, behaviors, and values will help deepen the individual’s own value system.

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

—Matthew 7:1

■ Popular culture both encourages and discourages sexuality. It promotes stereotypical sexual interactions between men and women and fails to touch on the deeper significance sexuality holds for us. Love and sexuality in a committed relationship are infrequently depicted, in contrast to casual sex. (By ignoring sex between committed partners, popular culture implies that partnership is a sexual wasteland. Yet it is within couples that the overwhelming majority of sexual interactions take place.) The media ignore or disparage the wide array of sexual behaviors and choices, from masturbation to gay and lesbian relationships, that are significant in many people's lives. They discourage the linking of sex and intimacy, contraceptive responsibility, and the acknowledgment of STD risks.

What is clear from examining other cultures is that sexual behaviors and norms vary from culture to culture and, within our own society, from one time to another. The variety of sexual behaviors even within our own culture testifies to diversity not only between cultures but within cultures. Understanding diversity allows us to acknowledge that there is no such thing as inherently "normal" or "natural" sexual behavior. Rather, sexual behavior is strongly influenced by culture—including our own.

SUMMARY

Sexuality, Popular Culture, and the Media

- Popular culture, especially the media, strongly influences our sexuality through the depiction of sexual stereotypes and *norms*. Mainstream media do not explicitly depict sexual behavior.
- Each television genre depicts sexuality according to its formula. Situation comedies focus on the violation of minor taboos centering on marital and family issues. Soap operas deal with sexual transgressions, jealousy, and power linked to sex. Crime/action-adventure programs depict relationships that are based on attraction and are short-lived; detective heroes form close relationships primarily with their detective partners or secretaries. Made-for-TV movies focus on "problem" themes, such as rape or adolescent pregnancy. TV commercials may promote a product by suggesting that consuming it will lead to attractiveness or sexual success. Many popular music videos rely on suggestiveness and innuendo to depict sexuality. Women are usually portrayed as sex objects.
- Although Hollywood films depict sexual behavior more graphically than television does, sex scenes are often gratuitous. Sexuality tends to be stereotypical. Gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals have generally been absent from films

except in stereotypical roles. More recently, a few nonstereotypical characters have been introduced.

- Computer networks and telephone media have created *cybersex*, providing new ways of conveying sexual fantasies. The debate concerning the transmittal of these materials continues.

Sexuality Across Cultures and Times

- The most powerful force shaping human sexuality is culture. Culture molds and shapes our *sexual impulses*.
- The Mangaia of Polynesia and the Dani of New Guinea represent cultures at the opposite ends of a continuum, with the Mangaia having an elaborate social and cultural framework for instructing adolescents in sexual technique and the Dani downplaying the importance of sex.
- Middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century believed that men had strong sexual drives but that women had little sexual desire. Because sexuality was considered animalistic, the Victorians separated sex and love.
- *Sexual orientation* is the pattern of sexual and emotional attraction based on the sex of one's partner. In contemporary America, *heterosexuality*, or attraction between men and women, is the only sexual orientation that receives full societal and legal legitimacy.

Homosexuality refers to same-sex relations while *bisexuality* involves attraction to both males and females.

- In ancient Greece, same-sex relationships between men represented the highest form of love. Among the Sambians of New Guinea, boys have sexual relations with older boys, believing that the ingestion of semen is required for growth. When the girls to whom they are betrothed reach puberty, adolescent boys cease these same-sex sexual relations.
- A *transsexual* has the genitals of one sex but identifies as a member of the other sex.
- A *two-spirit* is a person of one sex who identifies with the other sex; in some cultures, such as the Zuni, a two-spirit is considered a third gender and is believed to possess great spiritual power.

Societal Norms and Sexuality

- Sexuality tends to be evaluated according to categories of natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, and moral/immoral. These terms are value judgments, reflecting social norms rather than any quality inherent in the behavior itself.
- There is no commonly accepted definition of natural sexual behavior. *Normal sexual behavior* is what a culture defines as normal. We commonly use five criteria to categorize sexual behavior as normal or abnormal: subjectively normal, statistically normal, idealistically normal, culturally normal, and clinically normal.
- Human sexuality is characterized by *sexual variation*. Researchers believe that the best way to examine sexual behavior is on a continuum. Many activities that are considered *deviant sexual behavior* exist in most of us to some degree. These include exhibitionism, voyeurism, and fetishism.
- Behaviors are not abnormal or unnatural; rather, they are more or less typical or atypical of the group average. Those whose behaviors are atypical may be regarded as sexual nonconformists rather than as abnormal or perverse.

Sex and the Internet

Sex and the Media

With over 12 million sex-related Web sites available, you might wonder about the issues and laws

associated with access to cyberspace. Though the following sites each deal primarily with intellectual freedom, they also contain information and links to other sites that address issues of sex and the media. Select one of the following:

- American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom:
<http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif>
- Electronic Frontier Foundation:
<http://www.eff.org>
- Sex, Laws and Cyberspace:
<http://www.spectacle.org/freespch/>

Go to the site and answer the following questions:

- What is the mission of the site—if any?
- Who are its supporters and advocates?
- Who is its target audience?
- What is its predominant message?
- What current issue is it highlighting?

Given what you have learned about this site, how do your feelings about sex and the Internet compare with those who created this Web site?

SUGGESTED READING

- D'Emilio, John, & Freedman, Estelle. (1997). *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. An important study of American sexuality, especially in the nineteenth century.
- Dines, Gail, & Humez, Jean (Eds.). (1995). *Gender, Race, and Class in the Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. An excellent introduction to popular culture and the media.
- Francoeur, Robert T., & Taverner, William J. (Eds.). (1998). *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Human Sexuality* (6th ed.). Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill. Point-counterpoint discussions that help readers clarify their personal values and identify what society's are or should be.
- Stein, Edward. (1999). *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. A thorough and thoughtful investigation of homosexuality.
- Suggs, David N., & Miracle, Andrew (Eds.). (1999). *Culture, Biology, and Sexuality*. Athens: University of Georgia Press. A collection of essays on sexuality in diverse cultures throughout the world.