

Evolution Of Normal Human Sexuality: A Journey Through History



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Abstract

Internet, newspapers, magazines, journals, dating advice websites and blogs are rife with information on human sexuality. Some draw reasonable conclusions. Others draw some pretty drastic and ghastly ones. The implication is the same across all of them; human sexual behaviour is pre-ordained, and men or women who deviate from it are either psychologically dysfunctional or are denying their instincts for the sake of power and dominance. It's time we understood human sexuality in an integrative, evolutionary light. Given the central importance of sexuality to the evolutionary imperative, reproductive success, there is strong theoretical impetus for understanding how evolution has shaped human sexuality in the past, and how the influence of past selective forces continue to manifest in the present. Sexuality has always provoked comment and debate, curiosity, speculation and analysis, artistic and erotic interest, and it is easy

to assume that sexual lives are an unchanging universal phenomenon of human life. However, sexual cultures and customs vary substantially between countries, and over time. Developments in the late 20th century have fundamentally and perhaps permanently changed our views on human sexuality.

Introduction

Human sexuality has a broader meaning and refers to all aspects of being sexual. Although sexuality is a basic fact of human existence, the definitions and descriptions of human sexuality are varied, complex, and, at times, vague. Sexuality has been called the quality of being human, a powerful and purposeful aspect of human nature and an important dimension of humanness. Sexuality is not just overt sexual behaviour, nor is it only an anatomical assignment of gender. It is a deep, pervasive aspect of the total human personality, which is present in some degree from birth till death [1].

Sexuality plays a dominant role in human life as a creative and pleasurable force shaping human behaviour. A healthy or positively developed sense of sexuality is responsible for positive human interactions like pair-bonding, fostering intimacy, providing pleasure, bolstering self-esteem and reducing stress [1].

Human sexuality has three strong, inter-related components; biological, psychological and sociocultural [2]. Biological factors affect human sexuality from conception through infancy, childhood, adolescence to adulthood and later life. Psychological factors like development of gender and identity, emotions, thoughts, feelings, personality traits affect sexual functions

and behaviours. Socio-cultural factors are responsible for regulating sex socialisation and sexual behaviours. These include social learning, sex role patterns, social class, religion, culture, ethics, family practices and social pressures. Understanding of human sexuality requires study of these factors, their interactions and interrelationships [2].

Human sexual behaviour is both complex and varied. Attempts to define 'Normal' sexual behaviour are fraught with perplexing problems. Definitions of sexual health and normalcy frequently contain value-laden terms which are susceptible to different interpretations. The problem of defining a 'Normal' sexual behaviour is made more complicated by use of many words like: prevalent, optimal functioning, statistical distribution, fashionable and, more important, socially acceptable. Irrespective of sexual behaviours being considered as 'Normal' or 'Abnormal' by societies or by individuals, there are patterns of sexual behaviour that are or have been prevalent at varying levels in all societies at all times [1]. A rigid definition of normal sexuality is difficult to draw and is clinically impractical.

Human sexuality

All animals have biologically driven sexual behaviours that emerge as they mature to adulthood [3]. In humans, sexuality is also grounded in biological functioning, emerging in each of us as we develop. However, human sexuality is expressed by cultures, through rules about sexual contact, attitudes about moral and immoral sexuality, habits of sexual behaviour, patterns of relations between the sexes, and

more. All sexually active people make decisions about when, where, and with whom they will engage in sexual activity. The sexual nature of human beings is unique in the animal kingdom. Although many of our fellow creatures also display complex sexual behaviours, only human beings have gone beyond instinctual mating rituals to create ideas, laws, customs, fantasies, and art around the sexual act. We learn about sexuality from our family of origin, friends, romantic partners, religion, culture, society, and many other sources [3].

The understanding of human sexuality would be incomplete without taking into account all the recent events that have profoundly affected the way we view sexuality. From the on-going debates about the legality of same-sex marriage and ban on pornography, to the advent of continuous birth-control pills and performance enhancing drugs, the media is full of stories that tell us much about how our culture understands, expresses, and limits our sexuality.

Evolution of human sexuality

Our ancestors began walking upright more than three million years ago. This evolution changed forever the way the human species engaged in sexual intercourse. The upright posture of the female resulted in the possibility of face-to-face intercourse. With more body area in contact, the female clitoris is much more easily stimulated. Only in human females does orgasm seem to be an important part of sexual contact [3].

It may seem that ancient civilizations were very different from ours, yet some societies had surprisingly modern attitudes about sex. Egyptians had sexual lives that do not seem all

that different from the way humans engage in sex throughout the world today. Although the Egyptians condemned adultery, it may still have been fairly common, and women had the right to divorce husbands. Egyptians seem to have invented male circumcision. Egyptian workers left behind thousands of pictures, carvings, and even cartoons of erotic scenes [3].

Greek stories and myths are full of sexual exploits, incest, and rape; they clearly distinguished between love and sex. Greece was one of the few major civilizations in western history to institutionalize homosexuality successfully. Men and the male form were idealized in homo-erotic art, and man's nonsexual love for another man was seen as the ideal love, superior to the sexual love for women [3].

The ancient Hebrews took a markedly different approach to sexuality than the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans. The Hebrew Bible contains explicit rules about sexual behaviour, such as adultery and homosexuality. Yet the Bible also contains tales of marital love and acknowledges the importance of sexuality in marital relationships. The legacy of the Hebrew attitude toward sexuality has been profound. The focus on marital sexuality and procreation, and the prohibition against things like homosexuality were adopted by Christianity and formed the basis of sexual attitudes in the west for centuries thereafter [4].

Perhaps no other culture has cultivated sexual pleasure as a spiritual ideal to the extent the ancient Hindus of India did. From the fifth century CE (Common Era) onward, Indian temples show sculptures of Gods, nymphs, and ordinary people in erotic poses. Hindu sexual practices were codified in a sex manual. 'Kama Sutra', which illustrates sexual positions, some of which

would challenge a contortionist [4]. It also holds recipes for alleged aphrodisiacs. This manual is believed to have been written by the Hindu sage Vatsyayana sometime between the third and fifth centuries CE, at about the time that Christianity was ascending in the west. In its graphic representations of sexual positions and practices, 'Kama Sutra' reflected the Hindu belief that sex was a religious duty, not a source of shame or guilt. Hindu deities were often portrayed as engaging in same-sex as well as male-female sexual activities. In the Hindu doctrine of 'Karma' (the passage of souls from one place to another), sexual fulfilment was regarded as one way to become reincarnated at a higher level of existence. Indian society grew more restrictive toward sexuality after about 1000 CE [4].

Islam and the Quran became a powerful force that conquered the entire Middle East and Persian lands and even swept across Asia. Many Muslim societies have strong rules of 'satr al-awra', or modesty, that involves covering the private parts of the body (for women often means the entire body). Although there are examples in the Quran of female saints and intellectuals, women in many Islamic lands today are still subjugated to men, segregated and not permitted to venture out of their homes, and forbidden from interacting with men who are not family members. In Islamic law, sexuality between a man and a woman is legal only when the couple is married [5]. Sexual intercourse in marriage is a good religious deed for the Muslim male, and the Quran likens wives to fields that men should cultivate as frequently as possible.

In the 19th century, a number of controversial social movements focusing on sexuality emerged. The free-love movement,

which began in the 1820s, preached that love, not marriage, should be the pre-requisite to sexual relations. By the close of the 19th century, the medical model of sexuality began to emerge. Americans became obsessed with sexual health, and physicians and reformers began to advocate self-restraint, abstention from masturbation, and eating bland foods [3].

Beginning from the early part of the 20th century, the pioneers of sexual research to made scientific advances into the understanding of sexuality. Rejecting the religious and moral teachings about how people should behave, researchers brought sex out into the open as a subject worthy of medical, scientific, and philosophical debate. During this time, the values and attitudes about sexuality that were rooted in the Christian tradition slowly began to change as society became more permissive and started accepting of sexual freedom. Advertising and other media became more sexualized, and fashion trends changed as the flapper era ushered in. The trend towards more liberal ideas and values about sexuality continued in the late 1920s, but it wasn't until the early 1960s, the real sexual revolution took place [6].

The so-called 'Sexual Revolution' of the 1960s was made possible by the contraceptive revolution. For the first time in history, the pill and the other modern contraceptive methods gave women easier access to recreational sex without fear of pregnancy [7]. The uncoupling of sex and fertility led to an increase in marital sexual activity. It also made premarital sex more common and eventually facilitated extra-marital sex as well [8]. Possibly for the first time in history, recreational sex became far more important than reproductive sex - for people of all ages, and in all socio-

economic groups. Marriage was no longer the precondition for an active sex life. The traditional distinction between marriage markets and sexual markets (typically, commercial sexual markets) eroded and seems to be vanishing in the 21st century. Two important events helped set the stage for the 1960s sexual revolution: the discovery of antibiotics in the mid-1930s and the development of media. Television, radio, and other mass media began to broadcast more liberal ideas about sexuality to viewers and listeners. Pornography also became more acceptable. In 1953, Hugh Hefner began publishing 'Playboy' magazine [6].

Recent social changes that affect sexuality

As we enter the 21st century, our sexual expressions were influenced by certain changes that have recently occurred. Some of these changes are truly global in scale. One ongoing social change is the acceptance of premarital sexual behavior. Some see this new norm as destructive and harmful to our society, believing that it has contributed to sexual callousness, the spread of sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies. Others see it as bringing an end to the sexual double standard, and as an adaptive response to the strong economic pressures to postpone marriage.

While different societies have diversity of attitudes, there is now greater openness regarding homosexuality and bisexuality in many cultures. In some segments of our society, there is more toleration of this form of sexual expression, while in others, very negative attitudes and behaviors still prevail. However, issues related to gay men and lesbian women are now frequently examined in the headlines, mass media, courtrooms, and

classrooms of our society. Recent years have brought an increased awareness regarding coercive and violent sexual behavior. Rape, child sexual abuse, and incest were once believed to be rare events, perpetrated by deranged deviants. Today, descriptions of these acts permeate our novels, movies, and news media. Researchers study them, and therapists try to help persons who are recovering from such trauma and who are perpetuating such acts. Sex educators and policy makers attempt to prevent such acts from occurring.

The mass media has inundated our society with sexual images and sexual material. Much of it is senseless and designed to sell, titillate, or entertain. Some of it seeks to enhance our sexual lives, whereas some communicates harmful or violent norms and false notions about human sexuality. Today, sexually explicit and pornographic materials are available to anyone with an internet access. Many believe that these materials have a very negative effect on interpersonal relationships as well as on sexual attitudes and behaviors. Others celebrate the greater openness about sexual matters. Internet stimulates continuing change in sexual markets. Dating websites cater to people of all ages, all socio-economic groups -- married and unmarried. Some websites specialise in particular social and/or sexual groups, making it easier for people with arcane tastes and interests to meet up. Commercial sexual services also took to the Internet, and advertise their services.

With the increase in affluence and leisure in our society, many more people can afford to pursue the more pleasure-oriented aspects of sexuality. They can buy or rent videos that demonstrate exotic sexual techniques, pay

to learn how to increase their orgasmic capacities, purchase penile implants to experience erections well into old age and so forth. More teenagers are sexually active today, and at younger ages, than their counterparts a couple of generations ago [9]. In addition to premarital sex, two other features of the sexual revolution have become permanent parts of our social fabric: the liberation of female sexuality and the greater willingness to discuss sex openly. Countless pornography websites populate the Internet and can be accessed by children. Today, however with multiple websites offering the opportunity to download videos and pictures of celebrities engaging in sexual activity, pornography has nearly reached the status of wallpaper. Most societies place a value on procreative sex within the context of an enduring relationship, usually in the form of marriage. Marriage provides security for children, maintains or increases the population, and institutionalizes the orderly transfer of property from generation to generation. Other sexual practices—masturbation, promiscuous sex, male–male sexual behaviour, female–female sexual behavior, prostitution, polygamy, and so on have been condemned in some societies, tolerated by others, and still encouraged by others.

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More than thirty years after the ‘Sexual Revolution’ of the 1960s, the AIDS epidemic has changed the way most of us view casual sexual encounters. All of these forces have a direct or indirect impact on our personal sexual attitudes and behaviors. They influence our sexual thoughts, fantasies, and concerns as well as our sexual decision making. Ultimately, they affect our behavior.

Conclusion

Given the complexity and range of human sexual behavior, we need to consider multiple perspectives to understand sexuality. First, human sexuality appears to reflect a combination of biological, social, cultural, and psychological factors that interact in complex ways. Second, there are few universal patterns of sexual behavior, and views on what is right and what is wrong show great diversity. Third, although our own cultural values and beliefs may be deeply meaningful to us, they may not indicate what is normal and natural in terms of sexual behavior. The complexity of human sexuality, a complexity that causes it to remain somewhat baffling even to scientists, adds to the wonder and richness of our sexual experience.

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