

## **Our Sexual Selves: Biology and the Social Construction of Women's Sexuality**

### **Conflicting Messages Women Receive about Sexuality**

- Women should embrace their sexuality
- Women should be "sexy"
- Women should be kinky in bed
- Women should "put out" to keep partner(s) interested
- Women having casual sex are sluts
- Women should wait until marriage to have sex
- Sexually active women are promiscuous
- When sex is bad, it's a woman's fault for not working hard enough

“Young women’s sexuality is now measured – whether by specific individuals or in the rhetoric of popular media– not only in moralist terms of abstinence and promiscuity, but also in terms related to individual agency and personal responsibility.”- *Bay-Cheng, 2015*

### **Sexuality (2002 WHO definition)**

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction.

Sexuality is a human right.

### **Sexual Expression**

- The way we choose to behave sexually is as individual and complicated as the ways we choose to dress or earn a living
- Human sexuality rarely falls into neat categories or lends itself to simple labelling but rather is a rich and complex area of human experience

### **Women's Sexual Health: Some Depressing Statistics**

- 30% of first sex unwanted
- 10% of women never had an orgasm
- 70% of women do not orgasm during penile-vaginal intercourse
- 43% suffer from ‘sexual dysfunction’
- 33% lack interest in sex
- 20% lubrication problems
- 20% sex not pleasurable

### **Why do some women report less pleasurable sex than men?**

*The Orgasm Gap:* The gap between men’s and women’s frequency of orgasm is impacted by social forces that privilege male pleasure.

- According to a large-scale survey of American adults, women have about **one orgasm** for every three a man enjoys

## The Clitoris

These are the stories we tell ourselves about the clitoris:

- Women's bodies are simply more difficult
- The clitoris is hard to find
- It disappoints its owner and mocks the efforts of her partner(s)
- Women don't need orgasms like men do
- Women are more giving in bed
- Women's pleasure is more diffuse and empathic

## Structure

- The clitoral glans is the only part of the clitoris you can see, but it's actually just the tip — in fact, approximately three quarters of the clitoris is actually inside the body
- The clitoris is composed of the hooded glans which connects to a shaft, which splits into two leg-like tendrils that sit over top two vestibular bulbs — one on either side of the vaginal opening

## Cliteracy

- The clitoris glans is a bundle of 8,000 nerve endings
- Recent research found that what we call the G-spot is actually the end of the clitoris' wishbone or legs
- Recent research has also found that orgasm contractions commonly thought of as vaginal are actually the vestibular bulbs of the clitoris contractions
- 50 to 75 percent of women who have orgasms need direct stimulation of the clitoris

## What is the sexual response cycle?

The sexual response cycle is a series of emotional and physical changes that occur as a person becomes sexually aroused and participates in sexually stimulating activities including intercourse and masturbation

### *Master's and Johnson's Linear Sexual Response*

- Both males and females may experience these phases during sexual activity, but the duration of the phase may differ
- Different durations of sexual response is why it is unlikely that sexual partners will experience simultaneous orgasm or the same intensity levels at each of the phase

### *Critiques*

- The model is entirely linear, with one component occurring prior to the next
- The model is entirely physiological with no mention of relationship factors, cultural attitudes, or any other external contributors that may be crucial when considering sexual response

### *Non-linear Model of Sexual Response*

Basson's Non-Linear Model of sexual response incorporates:

- The need for intimacy
- Acknowledges that desire can be reactive or spontaneous and may come either before or after arousal
- Recognizes that orgasms may contribute to satisfaction but aren't necessary for satisfaction
- Considers relationship factors that may impact the cycle as costs or rewards
- Women (and men) can experience sexual response in a variety of ways.
- Parts of the model are linear (e.g., arousal and stimulation occur prior to the experience of satisfaction), but other parts are circular and bidirectional (e.g., sexual desire may come before or after arousal and the two may feed into each other).

### *Takeaway Messages*

- Sexual pleasure and satisfaction aren't reliant on orgasm
- Sexual desire doesn't always have to come before sexual activity or arousal. Sometimes getting physical and experiencing arousal will elicit desire.
- External factors such as relationship dynamics, intimacy, and weighing rewards and costs of sexual experience may play an important role in sexual response.

### **Sexual Exploration**

- Sexual exploration is often framed as a joke in mainstream conversations.

What is it you're hoping to find? Here are a few of the most common reasons people give when they ask for help around sexual exploration:

- I want to learn more about sexual bodies
- I'm looking for tips on exploring sexual pleasure
- I'm hoping to understand sexual diseases and dysfunctions
- I need ideas on spicing up long-term relationships
- I'm looking for support in expressing what feels right with a new partner

Mainstream sex stores position sexual exploration through the male gaze.

### **Good Vibrations: Sex Positive Store**

- “Good Vibrations is a woman friendly education based retailer providing high-quality, sex-positive products and non-judgmental, accurate and trusted sex information through our clean and comfortable stores, web site, wholesale private label division, in order to enhance our customers’ sex lives and promote healthy attitudes about sex overall. We want to help make the world more sex positive and shame free around sexual health and sexuality.”
- Good Vibrations strives to be an agent for social change, through the lenses of sexuality, diversity and ethical business practices.

### **Social Construction of Women's Sexuality**

- Is sexuality biological or socially constructed?
- When we say that something is socially constructed, we mean that it has been given a particular agreed-upon meaning by a group of people or society.
- While lots of aspects of what we call “sex” and “sexuality” are real—so real we can truly say they have been discovered and not constructed—the borders human draw on sex categories and sexuality are invented. They are invented like other tools, to do a special job. Sometimes that job

is to assign a sex to a child, sometimes that job is to try to prohibit “same-sex” marriage, sometimes that job is to try regulate women’s bodies based on their intimate choices.

**Women learn that being sexually available and fulfilling *unrealistic* beauty standards is key to their self-worth and happiness**

### **Discourses of Sexuality**

- Discourse is language which guides beliefs and actions
- Discourse both creates and is changed by cultural environment
- Multiple discourses can exist simultaneously and conflict with each other

Sexual Violence Discourse

Abstinence Discourse

Monogamy Discourse

Pornography Discourse

Sex Positive Discourse

### **School Based Sexuality Education**

- Leading public health and medical professional organizations support a comprehensive approach to educating young people about sex
- Between 2006-2013, there were significant declines in adolescent females’ reports of receiving formal instruction about birth control, saying no to sex, STDs and HIV/AIDS
- **72%** of U.S. public and private high schools taught pregnancy prevention
- **76%** taught abstinence as the most effective method to avoid pregnancy, HIV and other STDs
- **61%** taught about contraceptive efficacy
- **35%** taught students how to correctly use a condom as part of required instruction

**Young people in the United States receive a dearth of information regarding contraception, STI and HIV/AIDS prevention, and menstruation**

- Morality vs. Factual Information

### **Sexual Orientation**

*Binary thinking*

- Right and wrong

- Good and bad
- Virgin and whore
- Straight and gay

## **Defining Sexual Orientation**

Sexual Identity

Attraction

Desire and Fantasy

Behavior

**Mainstream society creates a Sex Hierarchy that graduates sexual practices from morally "good sex" to "bad sex"**

## **Heteronormativity**

- The belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (man and woman) with natural roles in life. It assumes that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation or only norm, and states that sexual and marital relations are most (or only) fitting between people of opposite sexes.
- Heteronormativity is linked to heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.
- **Social Stigma:** Extreme disapproval of (or discontent with) a person or group on characteristics that are perceived, and serve to distinguish them, from other members of a society

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**What can a Sex Positive Future look like?**