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Running Head: SEXUAL MOTIVES

Sexual Motives: The Impact of Gender, Personality, and Social Context on Sexual  
Motives and Sexual Behavior—Especially Risky Sexual Behavior

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### Abstract

Recently, scholars from a variety of disciplines have begun to investigate passionate love, sexual desire, and sexual behavior. Specifically, they have begun to investigate such profound questions as: “Why do men and women engage in (or avoid) sexual liaisons?” In this paper, we will review what theorists have learned about the motives that encourage people to engage in (or to avoid) sexual encounters, focusing specifically on what is known about the influence of gender, personality, and social context on sexual motives and sexual behavior. We will close by speculating about the possible impact of such differing motives on sexual functioning and the prevalence of STIs and AIDs.

## Introduction

In the past few years, scholars from a variety of disciplines—cultural psychology, social psychology, sociology, history, the neurosciences, biology, gender studies, “Queer” studies, and the like—have become interested in passionate love, sexual desire, and sexual behavior. They have begun to speculate about such questions as: “What motivates young men and women to choose to engage in sexual activities?” “What motivates them to avoid such activities?”

Until recently, American sexologists generally assumed that young people engage in sexual activities for one of three reasons (the Big Three): love, a desire for pleasure, and/or a desire to procreate (DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979; Hatfield & Rapson, 2006; Meston & Buss, 2007.) Take a foray into the worlds of culture, art, and literature, however, and suddenly one becomes aware of how narrow Western scientists’ perspective has been. There are a multitude of reasons why men and women might wish to engage in sexual activities. As Levin (1994) observed:

Coitus is undertaken not only for pleasure and procreation but also to degrade, control and dominate, to punish and hurt, to overcome loneliness or boredom, to rebel against authority, to establish one’s sexuality, or one’s achieving sexual competence (adulthood), or to show that sexual access was possible (to “score”), for duty, for adventure, to obtain favours such as a better position or role in life, or even for livelihood. (p. 125).

Over the past decades, Hatfield and Rapson (2006) have asked University of Hawai’i students to list the reasons why they and their friends engage in sexual relations. Among the sexual motives informants mentioned were the Big Three that scholars have so often studied—love, a desire for pleasure and eroticism (the attainment of physical pleasure; recreational sex; “sport fucking”), and the hope of procreation (DeLamater &

MacCorquodale, 1979). Our students provided a surprising array of additional reasons why they and their friends engage in sex. “I wanted to get closer to God.” “I loved her.” “I wanted to thank him for all he’s done for me.” “My friends kept teasing me, calling me: ‘SIFM: Saving it for marriage.’” “I was furious at my boyfriend and I thought: I’ll show that SOB.” “It’s a wife’s duty—like it or not.” Among the common reasons were a desire for self-esteem, status, spiritual transcendence, duty, conformity, kindness, conquest /power (people can, of course, also *withhold* sex in the hopes of attaining power), submission to others, vengeance (a desire to conquer, degrade, and punish), curiosity, money, to make up after a fight (“make-up sex”), to make someone jealous, attain health and long life (Yin and Yang), stress reduction, to save the World, political revolt, relaxation/help in getting to sleep. . . and so on.

In this paper, we will be concerned with the impact of gender, personality, and social context on the motives that spark (or dampen) young people’s casual and committed sexual behavior—especially risky sexual behavior.

### Definitions

Tang, Bensman, & Hatfield (in press) have defined sexual motives as: “The conscious and subjective reasons that men and women give for participating in sexual activities” (p. xxx). Sexual activities were defined as romantic kissing, French kissing, petting (touching of breasts and /or genitals), oral sex, manual sex, penile-vaginal intercourse, and/or anal sex.

### Scales Designed to Measure Sexual Motives

American researchers have constructed several scales designed to assess young people’s motives to seek out (and to avoid) sex. In a comprehensive survey of the

scholarly literature, Hatfield, Luckhurst, and Rapson (2010a) were able to identify 35 scales designed to assess people's motives for engaging in sex and 15 scales designed to assess people's motives for avoiding sexual encounters.

*Scales Designed to Measure Motives to Pursue Sex*

Thirty years ago, Paul Nelson (1978) developed the first personality measures designed to assess a wide variety of sexual motives. Other scales soon followed. These include test batteries developed by Browning (2004), Shapiro, Cooper, and Talley (2010); Cooper, Shapiro, and Powers (1998); DeLamater and MacCorquodale (1979), Hill and Preston (1996), Horowitz (2002), Leigh (1989), Meston and Buss (2007), Tang, et al., (2010), and Tiegs, Perrin, Kaly, and Heesacker (2007). In addition to these full-fledged test batteries designed to assess a variety of sexual motives, many researchers have attempted to assess just a motive or two. These researchers have investigated 25 additional motives for seeking out sex (see Hatfield, et al., 2010b, for a list of these motives and their sources.)

In an extensive review of possible sexual motives, Meston and Buss (2007) provided a list of relatively rare (but interesting) reasons people give for having sex. These included a desire to wreak vengeance on a date or mate (e.g., "I was mad at my girlfriend, so I had sex with someone else"), a desire to harm a rival ("I wanted to make him pay so I slept with his girlfriend,") or a stranger ("I wanted to make someone else suffer herpes or AIDS"). Some (infrequently) mentioned using sex to get a job, a promotion, money, drugs, or gifts.) Interestingly, Browning (2004) discovered that men confessed to having sex for financial

reasons more often than did women! Still others in the Meston and Buss (2007) survey reported (infrequently) that they used sex to enhance social status (“I wanted to be popular”), out of a sense of duty, or because they were pressured to do so. Finally some used sex to get rid of a headache or menstrual cramps.

#### *Scales Designed to Measure Motives to Avoid Sex*

All sexual affairs involve risk. Most religions consider sex outside of marriage to be immoral (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000). Men and women may worry that if they flout community prohibitions, they may acquire a poor reputation or risk community and family reprisals. Or young people may worry about unwanted pregnancies. Sexual encounters can rouse negative emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, regret, and disappointment (Moore & Davidson, 1997; Sawyer & Smith, 1996; Tsui & Nicoladis, 2007)—especially if sex occurs in the context of coercion and abuse (Jordan, Price, Telljohann, & Chesney 1998). People contemplating sex may fear disease (contracting STIs and AIDS) if they engage in high-risk behavior—and they are right to be fearful. Casual sex with multiple partners, whether heterosexual or homosexual, without adequate protection *is* associated with disease (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000).

Researchers have developed a variety of test batteries designed to assess people’s motives for avoiding sexual liaisons. Hatfield (1984) proposed six reasons why people might fear intimacy, including sexual intimacy. These included such things as fear of (a) exposure, (b) abandonment, (c) angry attacks, (d) loss of control, (e) one’s own destructive impulses, and (f) losing one’s

individuality or being engulfed. Paul and her colleagues (2000) found that young people who fear intimacy tend to seek out casual sexual relations (“one-night stands” or “hookups,”) or to avoid sexual activity altogether—be it in casual or loving, intimate relationships (see Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Paul, et al., 2000).

Other theorists have focused on still other reasons for avoiding casual and premarital sex: see Leigh (1989) and Tiegs, Perrin, Kaly, and Heesacker (2007). In addition to the social psychologists who have devised full-fledged batteries to measure a variety of reasons why young people might choose to remain virgins or avoid casual sex, 12 researchers have attempted to assess just a reason or two for such avoidance (again, see Hatfield, et al, 2010, for a list of these motives and their sources.)

\* \* \*

A variety of theories and test batteries designed to assess people’s motivations to seek out (and to avoid) sex. Various theorists stress the importance of culture, history (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997), and social role assignments (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Eagly & Wood, 1999) in shaping men and women’s sexual attitudes and behavior (Hatfield & Rapson, 2009). Others focus on cultural universals—on the architecture of the mind that evolved in the long history of humankind (Beaumeister, Cananese, & Vohs, 2001; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) (see Hatfield, Luckhurst, & Rapson, 2010b, for a thorough review of the various theories that deal with these issues). Let us now see what all these many faceted theories have to tell us



about the relationship of gender, sexual orientation, personality, and social context on sexual motives and the impact of sexual motives on young people's sexual behavior—especially their risky sexual behavior.

### The Data

#### *The Impact of Gender on Sexual Motives*

Theorists, regardless of perspective, agree that for cultural, social, and biological reasons, men and women possess somewhat different sexual motives. Cultures promote very different “sexual scripts” for men and women. Traditional sex-role stereotypes dictate that men and women ought to engage in sex for different reasons. Men are taught to think of themselves as sexual beings, primarily concerned with physical gratification. Women are often taught that premarital sex violates social taboos; they are expected to be the sexual “gatekeepers,” refusing sex until marriage. Thus, for women, love and commitment should be a major concern. They should be more concerned with their partner's happiness than their own. There appears to be a grain of truth in some of these stereotypes (Leigh, 1989; Tiegs, et al., 2007). (Keep in mind, though, that as Petersen's & Hyde's, 2010, meta-analysis indicates, these gender differences are generally far smaller than “common sense” would suggest.)

There is considerable support for the notion that—be they gay, lesbian, or “straight”—women are generally motivated by love and a desire to get psychologically close to another, while men are more motivated by lust (such as the “She was too hot to resist,” “It felt good.” “I was feeling horny”) in making sexual decisions (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Denney, Field, & Quadagno,

1984; Leigh, 1989; Tang, et al., in press). When Whitley (1988) asked men and women: "What was your most important reason for having sexual intercourse on the most recent occasion?" a full 51% of women and a scant 24% of men mentioned love/emotion reasons; whereas 9% of women and 51% of men mentioned lust/ pleasure reasons. Patrick and her colleagues (2007) found that while college men were self-focused in their sexual decisions, women were more concerned with ethical issues and primarily partner-focused when deciding whether or not to participate in sexual activities. Christensen and Gregg (1970) reported that 23% of the women, but only 2.5% of the men in their college sample, said their first intercourse was the result of physical force, or a sense of obligation, rather than personal desire.

Evolutionary theorists also argue that men and women possess very different reasons for agreeing to participate in sexual encounters. Generally, men are primarily motivated by physical attractiveness, a desire for status, pleasure, sexual variety, and a variety of utilitarian reasons. Women generally choose to engage in sex for emotional reasons, such as expressing love or intensifying personal commitment. In fact, for the vast majority of women, love and commitment are a prerequisite for agreeing to engage in sexual activities (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Reiss, 1960; Taris & Semin, 1997.) Many scholars support for these contentions (Buss, 2003; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Carroll, et al.; 1985; Leigh, 1989; Meston & Buss, 2007; Symons, 1979; Whitley, 1988). In fact, these are among the most common gender differences to be found in the literature (Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, and Levine, 2000;

Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1995; Hill & Preston, 1996; Leigh, 1989; Nelson, 1978; Whitley, 1988).

Researchers have found the following gender difference in sexual motives to be fairly robust.

**Table 1**

**Gender Differences in Sexual Motives**

**Women are more likely to endorse these sexual motives:**

Love and commitment	Browning, 2004; Carroll, et al., 1985; Denney, et al., 1984; Leigh, 1989; Townsend, 1998. (Others have failed to replicate these findings).
Intimacy	Hatfield, et al., 1988; Impett & Peplau, 2003.
Sexual compliance	Browning, 2004; Browning, et al., 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2003.
Please partner and meet his needs	Hill, 2002.
Solidify a relationship	Impett & Peplau, 2003.
Forced to have sex; rape	Christensen & Gregg, 1970.

**Men are more likely to endorse these sexual motives:**

Physical appeal of partner	Meston & Buss, 2007.
Pleasure	Browning, 2004; Hill & Preston, 1996; Hatfield, et al., 1988. (Others have failed to replicate these findings: Ozer, Dolcini, & Harper, 2003.)
Self-Affirmation	Browning, 2004.

Status and Recognition	Browning, 2004; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Meston & Buss, 2007. (Others have failed to replicate these findings).
Power	Hill & Preston, 1996. (Others have failed to replicate these findings).
Conquest	Leigh, 1989.
Peer Conformity	Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, and Levine, 2000; Browning, 2004; Cooper, et al., 1998; Nelson, 1978. <sup>1</sup>
Seeking sexual experience and variety	Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Schmitt, Shackelford, Duntley, Tooke, & Buss, 2001; Meston & Buss, 2007; Symons, 1979.
Stress Reduction	Browning, 2004; Hill & Preston, 1996.
Rebellion	Hatfield & Rapson, 2006.
Financial and other utilitarian motives	Browning, 2004; Meston & Buss, 2007.
Goal attainment	Meston & Buss, 2007.

Many have argued that worldwide, men appear to possess a stronger sex drive than do women (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Meston & Buss, 2007). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that men give far more reasons for participating in sex than do women.

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<sup>1</sup> If these authors had studied motives for avoiding sex, of course, perhaps they would have found women equally high on this motive, since peers often pressure women to refrain from sex—think of the once popular Dad-Daughter Pledge of Chastity dances, in which women (at 13 years of age) promise parents and friends to remain “pure” until marriage.

*Gender and motives to avoid sex.* Cultural scripts mandate that men should initiate sexual activity while women should limit it by saying “No” (DeLamater, 1987; Leigh, 1989; Peplau, et al., 1977). Not surprising, then, is the fact that young men and women differ somewhat in their reasons for clinging to virginity and refusing to participate in sexual encounters. Men often fail to “make a pass” at women because they fear rejection. Women more often cite a concern with morality and reputation—or (infrequently) a lack of interest or a failure to enjoy sex—as reasons for avoiding sex.

Tiegs and his colleagues (2007) interviewed 345 Texas undergraduates; he administered a *Beliefs about Sex Scale*. Somewhat surprisingly, they found that men were more likely to feel that sex was “more personally costly” than did women. This is surprising given that a few of the items touched on traditional female worries such as “Will he/she respect me in the morning?” and “Will I get pregnant.” The authors explained this seeming paradox this way: men are far more likely to engage in risky sex than are women.

Perhaps because men engage more often in risky sexual behaviors than women do, men reported sex as more personally costly. The more partners and the more sex one has, the more likely one is to encounter consequences, such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Men in our sample appear walk a fine line between wanting the risky sex that society says they should have and paying the price for having had it (p. 455).

As expected, women (more than men) were convinced that having sex violated social expectations and were more worried that such behavior would have more negative social impact on their reputations.

*The Impact of Sexual Orientation on Sexual Motives*

In theory, one might expect traditional sex roles to be blurred in gay and lesbian relationships, since traditional sex-role scripts assume a marriage of opposites (Peplau, 1981). Some aspects of traditional gender roles, however, seem to persist in all types of relationships, lending credence to the notion that “one’s experience and feelings during a sexual interlude seem to have less to do with whether one is gay or straight than with whether one is a man or a woman” (Tavris & Offir, 1977, p. 72). Based on previous work on sex roles, Leigh (1989) proposed that men and women would differ on whether emotional involvement was considered to be a prerequisite for sex, regardless of sexual orientation. Naturally, she also predicted that gender and sexual orientation would interact in determining whether or not fear of pregnancy and fear of STIs and AIDS were considerations in deciding whether or not to engage in casual sex. She found that she was right. Heterosexual men and women were more likely to engage in sex to please their partners and in hopes of procreation than were gays and lesbians. Gays were more motivated by a desire for conquest and the relief of sexual tension than were their peers. Interestingly, fear of STIs was a greater worry for heterosexuals than gays or lesbians. Lesbians may (correctly) assume that they are at low risk for contracting STIs, while gay men may be knowledgeable enough about STIs to be more prudent and thus less fearful. Gays were, however, naturally more worried about AIDS than were their peers.

*Personality and sexual motives.*

Personality theorists have argued that personality has a powerful impact on people's eagerness to seek out or to avoid sex. A variety of researchers have studied the impact of self-esteem, self-concept, and patterns of attachment on sexual motives. They have also focused on the Big Five personality factors—agreeableness vs. antagonism, extraversion vs. introversion, conscientiousness vs. undirectedness, neuroticism vs. emotional stability, and openness to experience vs. not open to experience—and their links to sexual motives (Browning, 2004, Davis, et al., 2004; Impett & Tolman, 2006; Meston & Buss, 2007).

In an important article, Hazan and Shaver (1987) proposed that children's early patterns of attachment would have a profound impact on their adult attachments. Children who receive sensitive and caring parenting should develop a secure attachment style. They should be comfortable with closeness and intimacy and/or independence. Children who receive insensitive or unresponsive parenting will likely develop an anxious/ambivalent attachment style. They will fall in love easily, yearn for extreme levels of closeness, and be terrified that they will be abandoned. Children whose caretakers are cold and distant will become avoidant adults who are uncomfortable about getting too close and who have difficulty trusting others.

In a number of diary studies, surveys, and experiments, attachment researchers have found considerable evidence that adults' attachment needs do shape their sexual attitudes, goals, and sexual behaviors (Hatfield & Rapson, 2009; Hazen & Shaver, 1987). In an Internet survey, Davis and her colleagues

(2004) asked 1999 men and women to complete Hill and Preston's (1996) AMORE scale, which measures people's reasons for participating in sexual activities. As predicted, they discovered that attachment style and sexual motives were tightly linked. For simplicity's sake, let us here summarize both the Davis et al., findings and those of a number of other attachment theorists who have explored this topic.

- *Secure* people are motivated to achieve closeness and intimacy. Their relationships are characterized by intimacy, commitment, and trust. They are likely to have more satisfying and stable relationships than do their peers (Hatfield & Rapson, 2009).

- *Anxious* respondents use sex primarily to express love, and to obtain acceptance, approval, and reassurance. They yearn to please their partners, enhance intimacy, and avoid abandonment (Schachner & Shaver, 2004). They are most likely to wish to engage in sex when feeling insecure and anxious (Davis, et al., 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 2009; Impett, et al., 2008; Tracy, et al., 2003). Davis and colleagues (2006) observed that the anxious tend to perceive sexual desire as a sign of love and a "barometer" of relationship quality, making them hesitant to assert their own sexual interests and needs and more likely to defer to their partner's preferences.

Perhaps as a consequence, the anxious are more likely to engage in voluntary but unwanted sex, to be more dissatisfied with sex, to face more sexual coercion, to engage in more risky sex, and to experience more unwanted pregnancies than do their peers. All and all, the anxious people have less



satisfying relationships than do their peers; nonetheless, no matter how bad things get, they tend to stick it out (Davis, Follette, & Vernon, 2001; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008; Impett & Peplau, 2002).

- *Avoidant* individuals use sex for self-defining or self-enhancing reasons, such as bolstering self-esteem, impress peers, and feel good about themselves. They also use sex for manipulative purposes—to gain a power advantage, to control the emotional tenor of a relationship, and to diffuse angry and tense situations (Davis, et al., 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 2009; Impett, et al., 2008; Schachner & Shaver, 2004; Tracy, et al., 2003.) They avoid sex out of a fear that it might lead to intimacy (Schachner & Shaver, 2004).

In a later study, Meston and Buss (2007) asked men and women to complete the Big Five Inventory as well as their *YSEX? Sexual Motives Scale*. This scale assesses four major motivations for engaging in sexual activity: physical pleasure, goal attainment, emotional reasons, and insecurity. They found that the general patterns of correlation between the Big Five personality domains and YSEX? Factors were markedly different for men and women. For women, the personality traits of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were *negatively* related to willingness to engage in sex, while Neuroticism was positively related to sexual willingness. This was not true for men.

*Sexual motives in different types of relationships.*

Thus far we have focused mainly on young people's reasons for agreeing (or refusing) to participate in casual sexual encounters. A few researchers,

however, have speculated about how young people's goals might change as affairs turn into more committed relationships, and as early commitments move into marriage and "until death do us part." A young man's goals on a Saturday night in a tavern, for example, will differ greatly from his goals after a 50-year marriage and the rearing of a family. Unfortunately, researchers have rarely investigated the impact of such life transitions on sexual motives. Let us now consider the scattering of findings that do exist.

*The young: casual sexual encounters.* In one study, Regan and Dreyer (1999) asked college men and women who had participated in casual sexual liaisons to write an essay describing their motives for doing so. Generally, men's and women's reasons for engaging in casual sex were identical. Both emphasized intra-individual factors (e.g., sexual desire, sexual experimentation, physical pleasure, as well as alcohol and drug use) and factors associated with the casual sex partner (e.g., attractiveness and possessing a "sexy" or "hot" persona) as reasons for their short-term sexual encounters. There were a very few differences, however. Men were more likely to emphasize social environmental reasons (e.g., increased status and popularity, conformity to peer group norms), whereas women cited interpersonal reasons for casual sex (e.g., hoping their casual fling would evolve into a serious romance).

Browning (2004) compared American, Native Hawaiian, and Thai men and women on 18 sexual motives. Although he discovered that men and women were far more similar than different in their reasons for engaging in sexual activity, there were some small differences. Men endorsed pleasure, stress

reduction, experimentation, recognition, peer conformity, rebellion, and financial motives more than did women, whereas women endorsed the love and submission motives more than did men.

Impett and Peplau (2003) point out that traditional gender role socialization leads some women to believe that it is their responsibility to respond to men's sexual desires and needs. (Similar gender differences in casual relationships were secured by Greiling & Buss, 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Surbey & Conohan, 2000).

*Young people: As casual encounters move to intimate ones.*

As people grow older, and/or commit themselves to more loving and committed relationships, their motivations change. For single people, for example, opportunity (or its lack) is the most important predictor of whether they will engage in casual sexual activity. Once a couple commits to a primary relationship, pleasure is the major determinant of the frequency with which they have sex. Couples also worry less about fear of rejection and fear of AIDS than do their peers (Leigh, 1989).

Cooper, et al., (2010) point out that people seek out the kinds of relationships that promise the greatest need satisfaction. Presumably, intimacy needs are best satisfied in the context of a committed relationship with a single sex partner (DeLamater, 1987), whereas enhancement needs (such as a desire for sexual pleasure) may be more easily satisfied within the context of a casual relationship or with multiple partners. In a longitudinal study, Cooper et al., (1998) found that if (at Time 1) a person possessed high intimacy needs *and was*

*not in a relationship*, with the passage of time (sic months) they were likely to find themselves involved with a romantic partner. Those with high intimacy needs, who already involved with someone at Time 1, were unlikely to search for a new partner. Those with intense intimacy motives who were involved with many partners at Time 1 were more likely to settle down with just one. In brief, over time, high intimacy-motive people were more likely to move into or stay in a committed or exclusive relationship, whereas those in high enhancement motives were less likely to stay in or move into an exclusive sexual relationship over time.

Similar results were obtained in a diary study of college students who were single and who had recently suffered a romantic break-up (Barber & Cooper, 2010). Although high-sex-for-intimacy motive students were no more (or less) likely than their peers to have initiated the breakup, they experienced more distress following the breakup, and suffered more obsessive thoughts and anger toward the ex-partner. Interestingly, they were also more likely to get into a new relationship over the course of the 12-week diary study. In contrast, high enhancement motive individuals were no more distressed following the break-up than were their peers, nor were they any more or less likely to get into a new relationship over the course of the study. They were, however, likely to have sex with someone new and to have sex with significantly more new partners over the course of the study.

*As couples age . . .*

Sprague and Quadagno (1989) examined six age groups, ranging in age from 22 to 57 years of age. They found that love (as measured by the selection of “I want to show love for my partner” as a reason for engaging in sexual intercourse), began with young women endorsing it more than did men. By 35-40, however, things began to change, and by 46-57, men were endorsing that sentiment more than women were. An opposite change occurred for the item “I want a physical release.” From youth onward, men endorsed that motive more than did women. In the oldest age group, however, that difference disappeared. The gender differences in desire for love *versus* pleasure and sexual release seemed to fit the stereotypes. They did, that is, until people got older; the gender differences disappeared in middle age. (Additional support for this notion comes from Murstein & Tuerkheimer, 1998. Browning, 2004, however, failed to confirm this finding).

As people age, they also become less concerned with proving themselves. Browning (2004) interviewed a sample of Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Asians, who ranged in age from 18 to 72. He found that age was negatively correlated with peer conformity, experimentation, dominance/possession, submission, safety, making amends, rebellion, and procreation. As women aged, they became increasingly likely to endorse financial motives as a reason for having sex. Perhaps once women marry and have children, they have to worry more about finances than when they were younger.

### Practical Consequences

Adolescent sex can be a wonderful or a terrible experience. Although a minority of college women (28%) found their *first* sexual experience to be psychologically or physically satisfying, almost two thirds (61%) of them rated their more recent sexual experiences as either perfect, very good, or good. What contributes to men and women's sexual satisfaction or lack thereof? Impett and Tolman (2006) argue that two constructs—sexual self-concept and the reasons or motives that guide decisions to engage in sex with a partner are of primary importance (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Impett & Peplau, 2003). Girls make a distinction between acts taken in pursuit of pleasure (“I was in love. It was romantic, I was ready,”) and those taken to avoid negative and painful experiences (avoiding conflict, giving in to a partner's nagging, etc.). Not surprisingly, in their study of White and Latina young women, Impett and Tolman (2006) it was found that those who possessed positive self-concepts and who participated in sex for positive reasons were far more likely to feel sexual satisfaction than were their peers.

Let us consider four popular sexual motives—love, pleasure, a desire for power, and conformity—and see what impact such motives have upon people's willingness to participate in casual and/or serious sexual behavior and the benefits and the risks people confront from such activity.

### *Love*

In assessing love, theorists have really focused on two different concepts. Some equate “love” with a desperate desire to be loved at any cost. Not surprisingly, in that interpretation love leads to clinging behavior, a sacrifice of

one's own needs, and risky sexual behavior. Others equate "love" with affection for a partner who loves one in return. Such a definition of love leads for more positive results. Nelson (1978) studied men and women who considered love to be the most important motive for engaging in sexual behavior. (They scored high on such questions as: "I engage in sex because it's the way I show that I really care about someone.") He found men who equated love and sex had less casual sex, fewer sexual partners, and more intimate sex than did their peers. Women who were love centered were more likely to initiate sex, had intimate sex more frequently, a lesser frequency of casual sex, and tended to prefer an "inferior" position sexually. (Similar results were secured by Browning, et al., 2000).

### *Pleasure*

Nelson (1978) studied men and women who considered pleasure to be the most important motive for engaging in sexual behavior. (They scored high on such questions as: "I engage in sex because I am a pleasure seeker.") He found pleasure-seeking men and women were more aggressive in initiating sex, engaged in casual sex more frequently, had more sexual partner, preferred a superior sexual position, and had more orgasms.

### *Power*

One concern for theorists is "What is meant by power as a sexual motive?" Does a high power score mean that people *wish* they had power, fantasize about it, strive to gain it, or already possess and enjoy it? In this section we will always try to make clear what definition of power (as a sexual motive) a given researcher is using.

Theorists often debate whether a concern with power is associated with an interest in *both* dominance and submission, or whether the two are very different (and opposite) entities. Many researchers assume that an interest in power fuels both S&M, dominance and submission, and the like. Nelson (1978), for example, argued that a concern with dominance *and* a concern with submission are two sides of the same coin—different manifestations of a fascination with power. Consistent with his thesis, a number of researchers have found these two motives to be positively correlated. (Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, and Levine, 2000; Nelson, 1978.) Others have assumed that dominance is the opposite of submission (Leary, 1957). In this section, however, we will generally discuss the two constructs separately. Then the reader may take his/her choice as to whether to think of the two as closely connected or as very different.

Let us consider, then, the research linking a concern with power (as a sexual motive) to men's and women's sexual behavior.

Oliver and Hyde (1993) pointed out that analytic, sociobiological, social learning, social role, and script theories all predict that women will have more negative attitudes toward casual, premarital sex than men. Indeed, their meta-analysis of gender differences in sexuality found large gender differences in both sexual permissiveness and casual intercourse. Thus, it is not surprising to find conflict in dating relationships as to when and to what extent sexual behavior occurs (Sprecher & McKinney, 1993).

On the basis of these findings, Browning and his colleagues (2000) reasoned that men and women who possess a great deal of power (who possess



global power, power as a sexual motive, as measured by Nelson's *Sexual Motives Scale*, and who possess actual social power [i.e., who are attractive, popular, intelligent, and the like], are likely to wield that power in their own interests. If men and women are using power to get what they want, men ought to use it to demand casual sex, while women would use power to set limits. The authors discovered they were wrong. Browning and his colleagues (2000) found that:

- Dominant men and women were both more likely than their peers to participate in premarital sex. Submissive men and women were more likely to abstain.

- Men and women possessing a great deal of power were more likely than their peers to engage in *unusual* sexual behaviors—these included such things as cross-dressing, participating in group sex, using sex toys, and anal sex. It appears then that a sexual motive to experience power in the sexual realm, regardless of who plays what role at a given moment, is associated with a tendency toward sexual experimentation.

Maslow (1942) was one of the first to attempt to propose a relationship between personality and women's sexual behavior. He administered the *Maslow Social Personality Inventory* to college students. He found that dominant women (by which he meant those possessing high self-esteem, vitality, and strength of character) were more sexual than their peers. Highly dominant women were more likely to masturbate, to sleep with more than one partner, and to engage in various "deviations" such as oral sex and lesbianism (his archaic terminology).

They were more adventuresome and experimental. They received a greater “thrill” from assuming the superior position in sex. Often low dominance women refused to be interviewed, but among those who complied, were found to be virgins; they had almost no sexual feelings. (Similar results were secured by Nelson, 1978).

### *Conformity*

Typically, men mention a conformity motive more often than do women when explaining their participation in casual sex (Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, and Levine, 2000; Nelson, 1978). Browning also found that although men and women scoring high on conformity did not differ in their willingness to engage in typical sexual behaviors, they *did* differ in willingness to engage in unusual sexual activities (anal sex, using sexual aides, group sex, engaging in sado-masochistic play, etc.) Conforming men were more likely to initiate and engaging in such daring activities, while women were less likely to do so. These findings seem consistent with the evidence that young men are more likely to experience peer pressure to engage in sexual behavior than are women (DeGaston et al., 1996; Muehlenhard and Cook, 1988).

### *The Impact of One's PARTNER'S Sexual Motives on One's Sexual Experience.*

Only a few researchers have pointed out that our partner's sexual motives may have a profound impact on our own sexual experience. Cooper, et al., (2010) is one of the first to point this out. If, for example, a man's girlfriend joyfully participates in sex for enhancement reasons (say, “sex feels good,”) he will report more frequent sex and higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Cooper et

al., 2008). Conversely, if that girlfriend participates in a sexual encounter merely please or appease her partner (i.e., for partner approval reasons), things do not go so well. He is likely to report fewer affectionate exchanges in the relationship and more likely to admit to verbally coercing his partner into sex. (The women agree that they were coerced). Such men are more likely to cheat on their partners and to have more casual extra-pair sex partners as well (Cooper, et al., 2006). If men are high in intimacy motives, their partners report less frequent intercourse. (It may be that in these longer term relationships, sex suffers a natural decline.)

A person's *mood* also has a profound impact on his or her partner. In a diary study, Cooper & Talley (2010) examined the effects of a person's motives on their *partner's* feelings the morning after. Consistent with prior findings, they found that partner's avoidance motives took a toll on their partners the next day. Individuals whose partners had sex for self-affirmation reasons were more depressed the morning after. Those whose partners had sex to please or appease them reported more angry feelings and were in a less positive mood the next day. Those whose partner had sex to cope (make themselves feel less anxious; deal with a difficult partner) felt less confident about their own attractiveness and more angry the next day. In contrast, but consistent with theory, individuals whose partners had sex to enhance their own happiness reported fewer anxious feelings the next day.

In sum: There appears to be clear evidence that one's *partner's* motives can effect one's self esteem and the pleasure of the sexual experience. People

who agree to have sex for the “wrong” reasons cause a decrease in their partner’s experience.

*Willingness to Engage in Risky Sexual Behavior*

A few researchers have investigated the relationship between various sexual motives and risky sexual behavior. They ask: “Are sexual motives related to a willingness to risk casual sex with strangers? To a failure to use contraception? To a failure to practice safe sex?”

There is compelling evidence that people’s sexual motives do matter—motives shape their sexual choices and experiences in theoretically meaningful ways (see Barber & Cooper, 2010; Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000; Cooper et al., 1998; Cooper, Pioli, Levitt, Talley, Micheas, & Collins, 2006; Cooper, Talley, Sheldon, Levitt, & Barber, 2008; Cooper & Talley, 2010; Herold & Mewhiney, 1993; Patrick, Maggs, Cooper, & Lee, in press; Shapiro & Cooper, 1993; Sheldon, Cooper, Geary, Hoard, & DeSoto, 2006; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003).

Cooper, et al., (2010) proposed that “people use sex to achieve different goals, and that these differences shape the experience and expression of their sexuality (p. 2).” They argued for a four motive typology:

(1) *Self-focused approach motives* (such as having sex to enhance emotional or physical pleasure).

(2) *Self-focused avoidance motives* (such as having sex to cope with threats to self-esteem or to deal with anxiety, depression, or fear.)

(3) *Social approach motives* (such as having sex to express love or to get closer to a loved one.)

(4) *Social avoidance motives* (such as having sex to avoid peer censure or partner anger.)

Those who have sex for approach reasons, are by definition, seeking a positive or rewarding outcome—be it a physically enjoyable experience or a closer connection with their partner. Consistent with this logic, both intimacy and relationship enhancement motives have been found to be associated with positive feelings about sex, frequent intercourse, and higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Cooper, et al., 1998; Cooper, et al., 2008; Patrick, et al., in press.) In contrast, people who have sex for avoidance reasons, are, by definition, seeking to minimize, avoid, or escape such unpleasant feelings as a bad mood, feelings of inadequacy, or feared rejection by those they care about. Such a negative orientation toward sex has been found to take a toll on the quality of social interactions and to inhibit the development of intimate bonds (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006). Not surprisingly, then, avoidance motives are strongly associated with negative responses to sex, are (often) correlated with low frequency of sex, and low levels of sexual satisfaction (Cooper, et al., 1998; Patrick, et al., in press).

Avoidance motives are also likely to lead to maladaptive promiscuous and risky sexual behavior. As Cooper, et al., (in press) observe:

In particular, the focus on negative experiences and possibilities intrinsic to an avoidant orientation is hypothesized to interfere with clear thinking and constructive action, just as the negative emotions associated with avoidance motivated behaviors are thought to trigger impulsive behaviors aimed at providing immediate relief from these negative states (p. 7).

Cooper et al., (1998), in a study of community-residing adolescents and young adults, found that young people who were high in coping motives (using sex to manage unpleasant emotions) had more sex partners, more casual liaisons, and more risky sex than did their peers. They did not have more frequent sex, however. Those who were high in partner approval motives (having sex to placate partners), reported more casual and risky sex partners, a greater failure to use reliable birth control methods, and higher rates of unplanned pregnancies. All of which, the authors assumed, were a consequence of their fear of asserting themselves and risking their partner's wrath.

These same people were interviewed 1½ years later (along with their partners). The typical couple had been together for an average of 2½ years. The authors found that men who were high in a composite measure of avoidance motives were more likely to “cheat” on their partners, had more casual and risky extra-pair sex partners (Cooper, et al., 2006), and employed more coercive sexual tactics with their partners (Cooper, et al., 2008). Women who were high in self-affirmation (avoidance) motives also reported significantly more casual and risky extra-pair sex partners (Cooper, et al., 2006).

The Cooper team has also found that self- versus social-motivations provoke different kinds of choices. People who are primarily motivated by intimacy needs tend to view sexual contact as appropriate only in the context of an emotional relationship, and thus generally restrict themselves to a single, committed sex partner (Cooper, 2010). One interesting finding (related to the intimacy need-intimate relationship link) is the fact that women's intimacy

motives decline as estrogen levels increase just prior to ovulation (i.e., at peak fertility) (Sheldon, et al., 2006). Evolutionary psychologists argue that cycle phase shifts such as these are adaptations that focus women on the genetic fitness of potential mates when they are fertile, thus increasing the likelihood of having generically fit offspring (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Thornhill, 2006). Cooper et al., (2010) point out:

Given that high levels of intimacy motives focus a woman on a single partner who may or may not offer her the “best genes,” a hormonally triggered decline in intimacy motives at peak fertility may function as part of this suite of responses aimed at promoting genetic fitness of one’s offspring (p. 9).

The authors find that in general high-intimacy motive people are less promiscuous and less risky than their peers. They drink alcohol less often in conjunction with sex, use more effective birth control, and experience (marginally) lower rates of unplanned pregnancies (Cooper, et al., 1998; Patrick, et al., in press.) At first glance, one finding seems to conflict with this clear pattern of results: Those high in intimacy motives report more frequent sexual intercourse and lower rates of condom use. The authors point out, however, that perhaps this is not really such “risky” behavior as it seems at first glance, since (1) committed couples have more opportunities for sex since they are in a committed, exclusive relationship, and (2) sex is less risky, given its exclusivity.

What about those who choose to have sex out self-focused enhancement motives? These are people who report stronger thrill and adventure-seeking needs, more unrestricted attitudes toward sex (as evidenced by their greater willingness to have sex with casual, uncommitted partners), and have more sex partners, especially casual sex partners, than their peers (Cooper, et al., 1998). In

fact, such people engage in a pervasive pattern of sexual risk-taking. They drink more often in conjunction with sex, and are less likely to use condoms in spite of the fact they have more casual sex partners. Finally, and not surprisingly, they also have higher rates of both STDs and unplanned pregnancies (Cooper, et al., 1998; Patrick, et al., in press.)

Individuals high in internal avoidance measures (those who, say, have sex to reassure themselves that they are desirable or assuage their anxiety) tend to be ambivalent about sex—they both desire and like it, but experience a host of negative emotions in conjunction with it. In contrast, those who are high in social avoidance motives do not appear to find sex rewarding, but use it primarily as a way to avoid social costs (Cooper, et al., 2010).

Like many others, Browning and his colleagues (2000) found that men and women who focus on pleasure in their casual sexual relations are often negligent about using condoms and worse yet, participate in risky sex. Hill and Preston (1986) found that those motivated by pleasure or a desire to please their partners were less likely to use pills, condoms, or IUD, relying instead on the rhythm method, withdrawal, or no protection at all. Those who cite other reasons (such as peer conformity and rebellion) are more cautious and more likely to engage in safe sex. (Other researchers have secured similar results.)

In light of these findings, in discussing the sexual behavior of gay men, Kelley and Kalichman's (1998) argued that an understanding of gay men's sexual motives may improve HIV risk reduction models. Similarly, O'Leary (2000), in her review of the literature on women at risk for HIV from a primary



partner, emphasized the importance of paying attention to women's desire to please their partner as a potential source of danger in cases where he suffers from STIs or AIDS.

### Conclusions

When scanning the research literature, it is evident that scholars are often unaware of other theorists' work. (How many times have we read: "Ours is the first attempt to develop a comprehensive measure of sexual motives"?) This is not surprising. The researchers we have cited hailed from a variety of disciplines, possessed a diversity of theoretical models, posed a variety of questions, attempted to answer them in very different ways, and published their results in different journals. It is hoped that this review may help facilitate a conversation between present-day researchers and facilitate attempts to bring some unity to their competing theorizing, constructs, measures, and reporting styles. There is actually a great deal of research on sexual motives out there in the literature.

There is yet another reason why, on first glance, the scholarly research described herein may feel a bit overwhelming in its complexity. These days, the United States, like the rest of the world, finds itself swept up in breathtaking historical and social changes. No surprise then that attitudes and beliefs about sexuality are in flux and thus difficult to summarize. Thumb through an *Introductory History* book, and you will be struck by the social revolutions that transpired—they started slowly and then gathered speed. In the 1500s and 1600s: Catholicism challenged, the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Counter-

reformation; the Age of Enlightenment; the “invention” of marriage for love rather than family or practical reasons.

And in more recent times: Margaret Sanger, offering slum families information about family planning. Alfred Kinsey, providing Americans with a glimpse into the realities of sexual behavior. A Jewish émigré, Carl Djerassi, inventing the birth control pill. (For the first time men and women could engage in sexual activity without worrying about pregnancy.) Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan’s promoting the Women’s Liberation Movement. The Sexual Revolution of the 1960 and 1970s, young people chanting: “Make love, not war.” The global village created by worldwide communication, computers and satellites, information exchange, travel, and trade. The appearance of AIDS and the STIs, casting a pall over the idea of casual sex.

What do all these changes mean for men and women’s sexual activities, feelings, and behavior? How do they affect the complexity of the results we have reported?

1. American’s values seem to be in such flux. Many traditionalists still cling to the old values; modern-day pioneers are embarking on new adventures. Young people seek pleasure and get hurt; they resolve to do things differently the next time; they do or they don’t. No surprise then that today a confusing array of values exists out there. People may embark on sex for one reason in their 20s, discover that their life doesn’t suit them, and seek out other gratifications (and attempt to avoid other pains).

2. Men and women’s sexual values and motives seem to be becoming increasingly similar.

3. People seem to possess a surprising array of reasons for participating in sexual activity—far more reasons for choosing to engage in sexual activity than in former times. They do in fact participate in more sexual activity than heretofore.

4. Sexual activity may be in process of becoming demystified. Instead of the mystery, fear, anxiety, and sacrilization that have surrounded sexual activity for so many centuries, that activity seems to have become “no beeg teeng,” as we say in Hawaii. What that means for society and for individuals is anyone’s guess. And the exponential growth of cybersex and pornography further clouds the crystal ball.

At this stage, we conclude by saying that the expansion of possible motives for having sex probably *is* a big thing and that we are well advised to take that expansion seriously and try to come to grips with it, to understand it as one of our planet’s most important new developments.

In this review we discovered that men and women may indeed choose to engage in sexual activities for a plethora of reasons. Hopefully, a knowledge of men and women’s personalities, sexual orientations, situations, and (most importantly) sexual motivations can assist scholars in gaining an understanding of sexual fantasy, masturbation, and sexual activity in general (Davis, et al., 2004; Hill & Preston, 1996; Nelson, 1978). An awareness of one’s partner’s sexual motives may also facilitate communication. Given differences in the meanings that people assign to sex, misunderstandings are inevitable. An understanding of the diversity of sexual motives may help reduce conflict in romantic relationships. Finally, information as to how gender, personality, and sexual motives effect sexual behavior—especially risky sexual behavior—may assist public health

officials in crafting messages and programs designed to reduce young people's risky sexual behavior.

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