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Why Have Sex, Anyway?

A Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspective

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Introduction

Recently, scholars from a variety of disciplines have become interested in topics such as passionate love and sexual attitudes, desire, and behavior. The advent of multidisciplinary work has had a profound impact on the questions social psychologists ask. Consider, for example, such a basic question as: “What motivates men and women engage in sexual activities?” Until recently, American sexologists have assumed that men and women generally engage in sexual relations for one of three reasons: expressing love, procreation, or pleasure. Take a foray into the worlds of culture, time, art, and literature, however, and suddenly you become aware of how narrow Western scientists’ perspective have been. There are a variety of other, generally unstudied, reasons why person might wish to engage in sexual activities.

Over the past decade, (building on the work of two historians, John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, 1988) I and my students have interviewed more than 400 men and women from various cultures, SESs, and occupations to list the reasons why they have engage in sexual relations. Among the sexual motives such informants mention are, indeed, the Big Three—passionate love, procreation, and eroticism (the attainment of

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physical pleasure; recreational sex; “sport fucking.”) But our informants mention an impressive array of other motivations as well—among them: Self-Esteem, Status, Spiritual transcendence, Duty, Conformity, Kindness, Conquer /Power (people can, of course, also *withhold* sex in the hopes of attaining power,) Submission to others, Vengeance (to conquer, degrade, punish,) Curiosity, Money, Make Someone Jealous, Health and Long Life (Yin and Yang); Stress Reduction, Save the World, Political Revolt. . . and so on.

A. Psychometric Research

Recently, a few American researchers have devised excellent scales designed to assess a variety of sexual motives (see Browning, 2004; Hill & Preston, 1978; Meston & Buss, 2007; Nelson, 1978.) We, too, have constructed a *Sexual Motives Scale*, designed to measure a broad range of sexual motives—motives that might loom large for men and women in other cultures and historical eras: Western and non-Western, traditional and modern, urban and rural, poor and rich, individualistic and communal.² Currently, we are still working on perfecting this scale.

B. Cross-Cultural and Historical Research

Over the last decade, we have begun to explore the impact of gender, status, and the desire (or possession) of power on people’s sexual attitudes, sexual motives, and sexual behavior. Currently, one of my students—Melody Dudding—is comparing the sexual attitudes, motives, and behavior of three groups of women: erotic dancers, waitresses, and college students.

A Few Useful References

² For a copy of this questionnaire, see: <http://www.goldenservices.net/survey.asp>.

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