

## Chapter 3

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# Women's Sexuality in Close Relationships

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Women need a reason to have sex. Men just need a place.  
—Billy Crystal

Desire, passion, love, sex, power, infidelity, and jealousy. These words capture some of the dynamics of sexual relationships that women and men experience throughout their lives. Whether sexuality occurs inside or outside a close relationship, it is inherently an interdependent process. Just as it takes two to tango, it takes (at least) two people to form a close, sexual relationship. This book focuses on women's sexuality, and there is good reason for such a focus: people have long been fascinated with sexuality, especially women's sexuality. Historically, sex has been lauded in works of art, poetry, and theatre, and sex has been feared and decried by religious leaders, many of whom advocated sex only within marriage for reproductive purposes (Hatfield, Luckhurst, & Rapson, 2010). Our collective fascination with women's sexuality is evidenced in a number of ways. For example, the Greeks and other ancient civilizations had goddesses devoted to fertility. Many of Shakespeare's plays were written about men's

attempts to win the hearts of the maidens whom they loved. More recently, entire social movements were founded on liberating women's sexuality.

Just as poets lauded women's sexuality, scientists have also tacitly implied that women's sexuality manifests more dynamic trajectories over their lifetime than does sexuality over the lifetime of men. In the scientific literature, numerous terms have been used to describe women's sexuality. Women have been described as sexual gatekeepers (Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977), have been attributed with high erotic plasticity (Baumeister, 2000), and have been posited to have sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008). Collectively, these terms imply that there is something distinct to the sexuality of women as compared to the sexuality of men. The primary focus of this chapter is sexuality within the romantic pair-bonds women form throughout their lives. We also discuss other important phenomena that may be generally situated outside of close relationships, but still have significant influence on close relationships once they are formed (e.g., sexual attitudes). Although the term sexuality may often refer to sexual behaviors, particularly vaginal along with oral and anal sex (e.g., Herbenick et al., 2010), we adopt a broader definition and view sexuality as embodying multiple dimensions of both attitudes and behaviors (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004). Thus, we view sexuality as including (but not limited to) intimacy, communication, sexual desires, and sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing, intercourse).

Our chapter is divided into two sections. First, we discuss the trends in women's sexual attitudes and behaviors, including changes over the last several decades and the link between women's sexual attitudes and behaviors. Second, we turn our attention to the sexuality-related processes within women's close relationships; these processes include sexual attraction and partner choice, relationship initiation behavior, love and intimacy, exchange in sexual relationships, same-sex sexuality, and the dark side of close relationships.

## **THE LANDSCAPE OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY: ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS**

Women enter close relationships with a variety of wants, needs, desires, and beliefs—their sexual attitudes. Women's sexual attitudes may differ from those of men, although to a varying degree. Thus, researchers have amassed a large body of literature on gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors. These differences pertain to multiple dimensions of attitudes and behaviors located both outside and inside close relationships (e.g., Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Schmitt, 2005). Below, we highlight the uniqueness of women's sexuality by comparing their sexual attitudes and behaviors to those of men. Then, we summarize theoretical perspectives that explain these gender differences. We end this section by discussing the attitude-behavior link in women's sexuality.

### Gender Differences in Sexual Behaviors

Differences in men's and women's sexual behaviors begin as early as their first sexual intercourse experience. On average, women tend to have their first sexual intercourse at a slightly older age than men (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Petersen & Hyde, 2011). In a large nationally representative study, it was found that among people born between 1953 and 1972, 37 percent of women had sex before the age of 16 compared to 48 percent of men; the modal age of first intercourse for women was 17 compared to 16 for men (Laumann et al., 1994). During adulthood, however, the percentage of women who reported having had sex during their lifetime is fairly similar to the percentage of men. In a more recent nationally representative study, about 90.7 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 29 reported having had sex in their lifetime compared to about 89.3 percent of men in this age range (Herbenick et al., 2010). Likewise, a review of meta-analytic and national data set studies concluded that the sex difference in the prevalence of heterosexual intercourse is small (with women reporting somewhat less frequent intercourse than men; Petersen & Hyde, 2011). Specifically, it appears that although sex is less prevalent in adolescent women (compared to adolescent men), "the prevalence of heterosexual intercourse among adults is comparable for men and women" (Petersen & Hyde, 2011, p. 153).

Although adult women are just as likely as adult men to be sexually active, some evidence indicates that women may have fewer sexual partners over their lifetime compared to men. For example, two studies that used a representative sample found that women reported having fewer sexual partners on average in their lifetime than men (Laumann et al., 1994; Smith, 1998). Petersen and Hyde (2011), in their meta-analysis, also found that women reported fewer sex partners than men, although this difference was small across the studies that they reviewed. Several explanations have been proposed to explain these gender differences, including gender differences in the definition of sex and biased self-reports (see Willetts, Sprecher, & Beck, 2004, for a review of explanations for the sex differences in reported sexual partners).

Most sexual behaviors require a partner. There is, however, a sexual behavior that can be performed alone and outside of close relationships: masturbation. Meta-analytic studies have found that the frequency of masturbation was one of the largest differences between women's and men's sexual behaviors. Women masturbate much less often than do men, though the magnitude of this sex difference has decreased over the last two decades (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011). Research using an American probability sample, for example, found that about 84.6 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 29 have masturbated in their lifetime compared to 94.3 percent of men in that age range. This gender difference

was larger in older adults: 58.3 percent of women over 70 reported to have masturbated in their lifetime compared to 80.4 percent of men (Herbenick et al., 2010). Likewise, women are much less likely to use pornographic materials than men, which is also one of the most robust differences between women's and men's sexual behaviors (Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011).

### **Gender Differences in Sexual Attitudes**

Women and men differ in some of their attitudes toward sex in relationships. These differences begin with attitudes toward virginity and continue toward sexual standards and general sexual permissiveness. College women report less distress about and more positive reasons to staying a virgin than do college men (Sprecher & Regan, 1996). Similarly, women's premarital sexual standards are on average less permissive than the sexual standards of men, especially for early stages of relationships (e.g., for a first date or in a casually dating relationship).

Sexual standards capture the degree to which people believe sex is appropriate before marriage. Some measures of sexual standards assess the degree to which people believe it is appropriate to have sex in a premarital relationship of varying emotional involvement, from first date to engagement (e.g., Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988). Researchers who first investigated college students' premarital sexual standards in the 1950s and 1960s found that most women (and even men) endorsed an abstinence standard: sex was considered permissible only within marriage (Reiss, 1964). This sexual norm has shifted toward more permissiveness over time, as college students typically endorsed the permissiveness with affection standard (sex is permissible in committed relationships) in the 1980s (Sprecher et al., 1988), 1990s (Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996), and more recently, the 2010s (Sprecher, Treger, & Sakaluk, 2011). Women, however, are more likely than men to believe that commitment is a necessary precursor for sex (e.g., Schmitt, 2005). Thus, women generally do not approve of sex in less intimate stages of relationships (e.g., first date), but do approve of sex in more committed stages of relationships (e.g., seriously dating). Men, on the other hand, generally approve of sex in casual stages of relationships to a greater degree than do women (or disapprove of sex less in casual relationships stages). Like women, men also generally approve of sex more in committed stages of relationships than in casual stages (e.g., Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996).

Research based on other measures of sexual permissiveness yields similar conclusions of less sexual permissiveness in women than men. For example, Hendrick and Hendrick's (1987) Sexual Attitudes Scale assesses sexual attitudes as consisting of four components: permissiveness, sexual practices, communion, and instrumentality. Research with this scale typically yields gender differences in two components. Women tend to be less permissive than men, disagreeing more with items such as "Casual sex is

acceptable," and less instrumental than men, disagreeing more with items such as "Sex is mostly a game between males and females." Women (and men), however, agree most with the communion component of the Sexual Attitudes Scale and fairly strongly believe that "sex is the closest form of communication between two people" (e.g., Gall, Mullet, & Shafiqhi, 2002; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987).

Using a single score that captures people's sexual attitudes and behaviors, Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) Sociosexual Orientation Inventory assesses the degree to which a person requires commitment in a relationship before having sex. Those who require commitment before sex are considered restricted and those who do not require commitment before sex are considered unrestricted. Women are, on average, more restricted in their sociosexual orientation than men (who are more unrestricted). Research using college and cross-cultural samples has found that women, compared to men, tend to disagree with certain statements, such as "Sex without love is OK," and desire fewer sexual partners over their lifetime (Schmitt, 2005; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Sprecher et al., 2011).

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Gender Differences in Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors**

Why do women and men differ in their sexual attitudes and behaviors? Researchers have typically employed two theories to explain gender differences in various dimensions of sexuality. The theoretical framework known as *socialization*, or *social learning* theory, suggests that gender differences in sexuality emerge from learned gender roles that are socialized during development (e.g., Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Other related theories, such as script theory, further assume that men and women follow different scripts in their sexual behaviors which are reinforced by various social aspects (e.g., media; DeLamater & Hyde, 2004). For example, the socialization framework would argue that women take a less active role in relationship initiation (e.g., being asked on a date by men) or possess less permissive sexual attitudes, because society or culture encourages and reinforces such attitudes and behaviors. These behaviors are further embedded within various scripts women and men use to act in socially appropriate ways (e.g., men paying for dates).

The *evolutionary* view of human sexual behavior (e.g., Buss, 1995), on the other hand, argues that human behaviors are based on underlying cognitive mechanisms which are present in modern humans, because they contributed to their ancestors' reproductive fitness (i.e., ability to survive to reproductive age and successfully reproduce). These cognitive foundations (and their subsequent behaviors) evolved over time via natural selection (adaptation to general environmental constraints) and sexual selection (adaptations to constraints in finding a mate). Evolutionary theorists

attribute gender differences in sexuality to differences in the focus of women's and men's investments in relationships and reproduction (i.e., parental investment; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Because women's investments in reproduction entail greater risks, including a nine-month long internal incubation period, birthing, and breast-feeding, they are hypothesized to be more selective of their mates, and thus have generally more restricted sexual attitudes. Men, on the other hand, have generally less risk in reproduction (some risks include uncertainty about an offspring's genetic relatedness, i.e., paternal uncertainty), as they only contribute sperm in mating, and thus may actually benefit from more permissive mating strategies that may maximize the likelihood of reproduction (i.e., being more permissive of short-term, sexual relationships; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Socialization and evolutionary theories often yield similar or identical hypotheses. Some argue that this may be because evolved human idiosyncrasies and cultural norms reinforce one another reciprocally (e.g., Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003). In other words, social norms emerge over time from evolved idiosyncrasies and continuously reinforce human behavior.

### **Putting Attitudes and Behaviors Back Together: The Attitude-Behavior Link in Women's Sexuality**

Although attitudes and behaviors are generally linked, the strength of the attitude-behavior relationship appears to be different for women and men. According to Erotic Plasticity Theory (Baumeister, 2000), women exhibit a lower attitude-behavior consistency than men: women's sexual attitudes do not predict their sexual behaviors as well as men's sexual attitudes predict men's sexual behaviors. In other words, women's sexual attitudes and behaviors are more influenced by social factors than those of men. Baumeister found support for his hypothesis in a large-scale analysis of the sexuality literature. For example, Baumeister referred to a study by Wilson (1975) that found that women with more education (a social influence) tend to be more permissive in their sexual attitudes than women with less education; education, however, had no influence on men's sexual permissiveness. In addition, Baumeister discussed work that has found inconsistencies between women's (but not men's) attitudes and behaviors. As one example, Baumeister cited a study by Herold and Mewhinney (1993) which showed that although only a minority of women anticipated having casual sex with someone, a majority of them reported having had casual sex with someone.

Another large-scale analysis of the link between sexual attitudes and behaviors was done by Wells and Twenge (2005), who explored the attitude-behavior consistency in women and men using a cross-temporal meta-analysis (i.e., an investigation of trends in sexual attitudes and behaviors

across numerous studies, over time). Specifically, they analyzed 530 studies that were published between the 1940s and 1990s and found that, over time, women became more approving of premarital sex, experienced less sexual guilt, became more sexually active, began engaging in oral sex more often, and began having sex at an earlier age. Not surprisingly, given their more liberal attitudes about sex, men exhibited much less change in their sexual attitudes and behaviors over time. Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Petersen and Hyde (2010) found that the difference between women's and men's sexual behaviors (e.g., age of first intercourse) decreased over time, such that women's sexual attitudes and behaviors became more permissive, whereas men's sexual attitudes and behaviors remained fairly stable.

Unlike Baumeister (2000), who concluded that women's attitude-behavior link is weaker than men's attitude-behavior link, Wells and Twenge (2005) argued that the attitude-behavior link is actually stronger in women than in men. Specifically, they found that women's attitudes at decade  $n-1$  predicted women's behaviors at decade  $n$ , which then predicted behaviors at decade  $n+1$  (note of course that these are not the same women in each decade). For example, women's attitudes in the 1960s predicted corresponding changes in behaviors in the 1970s, which then predicted the corresponding attitudes in the 1980s. For men, the associations between attitudes and behaviors were weaker. Attitudes at decade  $n-1$  predicted behaviors at decade  $n$ , with no other temporal relationships being statistically significant. To reconcile their findings with those of Baumeister (2000), Wells and Twenge suggested that the differences may well stem from a different level of focus. Whereas Baumeister examined specific studies that focused on individuals in particular situations, Wells and Twenge focused on global or overall patterns over time with different women in each decade. Thus, Wells and Twenge noted that "inconsistencies of women's attitudes and behaviors in individual situations would not be observed in our data" (p. 259).

In summary, women are on average less permissive in their sexual attitudes and behaviors compared to men, although their attitudes and behaviors have become more permissive over time. Furthermore, it appears that women experience more variability in their sexual attitudes and behaviors (i.e., change in sexual preference) compared to men. In the next section, we shift our focus away from global sexuality processes to a discussion of women's sexuality in the domain of close relationships.

### **THE FOREFRONT OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY: CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS**

For women, sex generally occurs within a close, committed relationship, notwithstanding notable exceptions (e.g., "friends with benefits relationships"; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). Thus, the domain of close



relationships is at the forefront of women's sexuality, especially in light of the critical importance of closeness and intimacy that close relationships provide. In this section, we discuss women's sexuality specifically within close relationships, focusing on issues of attraction, relationship initiation, the transition to, and the exchange of sex. We will also discuss the dark side of sexuality in close relationships, including extradyadic involvement and sexual transgression.

### **Sexual Attraction and Attractiveness**

Attraction is typically characterized as a positive evaluation of and a strong desire to be around another person (Graziano & Bruce, 2008). In the context of close relationships, attraction often entails sexual desire. Researchers have used numerous empirical methods to assess the traits that people find attractive in a potential partner. Two of the most popular methods are the *mate selection* paradigm and the *bogus stranger* paradigm. In the mate selection paradigm (e.g., Lippa, 2007), participants are presented with a list of traits (e.g., warmth, good looks) and asked how much they desire each trait in a partner for a specific type of relationship (e.g., short-term relationship, marriage). In the bogus stranger paradigm (e.g., Byrne, 1971), participants respond to a hypothetical person (e.g., with ratings of attraction). Participants are frequently led to believe that the person they are rating is an actual other. In bogus stranger studies, at least one characteristic of the hypothetical other is manipulated (e.g., attitude similarity). Other paradigms that are used to research attraction include analyses of real or hypothetical personal ads people place in public forums (e.g., Pawlowski & Koziel, 2002), social interaction studies in which two actual participants are paired for an interaction (e.g., Sprecher & Duck, 1994), and more recently, speed-dating studies where multiple participants go on a series of mini dates with other daters and provide ratings of each other after the dates (e.g., Finkel & Eastwick, 2008).

What do women find desirable in a sexual partner? It appears that the highest rated qualities that women seek in a mate, especially a long-term partner, are *intrinsic* traits, such as warmth, kindness, and intelligence (Buss, 1989; Lippa, 2007). Men also desire these intrinsic traits in women, although several differences between women's and men's trait preferences are apparent. Specifically, women tend to rate a potential partner's social status (e.g., high salary) as more important and physical attractiveness as less important than do men (e.g., Buss, 1989). Both women and men, however, rate social status and physical attractiveness lower in desirability compared to the intrinsic traits described above.

Women's mate preferences may also vary according to biological (or hormonal) signals; particularly, signals from the ovulatory or menstrual cycle. Women's ovulatory cycles influence fluctuations predominantly in their ro-



mantic partner preferences for short-term (i.e., uncommitted) rather than long-term relationship preferences (e.g., Gangestad, Simpson, Cousins, Garver-Apgar, & Christensen, 2004). Compared to women who are non-fertile (i.e., in the luteal phase of the ovulatory cycle), fertile women (i.e., in the follicular phase of the ovulatory cycle) desire men with more masculine faces (i.e., male composite faces with exaggerated differences from female composite faces; Penton-Voak & Perrett, 2000) and more masculine voices (i.e., lower frequency; Puts, 2005). Fertile women also exhibit an increased preference for dominant men (Havlicek, Roberts, & Flegr, 2005) and attend longer to consumer items denoting (particularly men's) status (e.g., expensive cars; Lens, Driesmans, Pandelaere, & Janssens, in press). Although women tend to prefer physically symmetrical men at all times, this preference is especially strong when they are fertile (Gangestad & Thornhill, 1998).

### Relationship Initiation

Women and men can initiate relationships in a variety of ways and settings via direct and indirect strategies (see Cunningham & Barbee, 2006). A direct initiation strategy involves one person approaching another for the explicit purpose of initiating a relationship (e.g., asking someone out on a date). Indirect strategies are more covert and may involve nonverbal communication that signals romantic or sexual interest, such as flirting (e.g., Moore, 1985).

Generally, women tend to use indirect strategies more than men and direct strategies less than men (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999; Moore, 1985). In her observational study of women's flirting behaviors in natural settings, Moore (1985) estimated that about 20 percent of direct relationship initiation attempts were made by women (the remaining 80% were made by men). The indirect strategies that women use to solicit initiating behaviors include nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling, eye contact, eyebrow flashing, glancing around the room, laughing, and hair flipping (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989; Moore, 1985; Walsh & Hewitt, 1985). Moore (1985) also calculated the frequency with which women displayed flirting behaviors in several settings. Moore found that in a singles bar women displayed about 70.6 flirting behaviors per hour, whereas they displayed about 18.6 flirting behaviors per hour in a snack bar and 7.5 flirting behaviors per hour in a library. In some instances, women may display nonverbal behaviors that could be classified as flirting (e.g., smiling) without the intention to lure a mate. Men, however, often misperceive such platonic (i.e., non-sexual or friendly) flirt-like gestures as signs of women's sexual interest (Haselton & Buss, 2000).

Other ways in which women may elicit initiating behaviors in men may be through their clothing (Cunningham & Barbee, 2006). For example, in one field study conducted in an Austrian discotheque, researchers assessed

women's self-reported motivation to obtain a sexual partner and their salivary levels of testosterone and estradiol, which facilitate sexual desire (Grammer, Renninger, & Fischer, 2004). Women who were more motivated to obtain a sexual partner (as indicated by hormone and self-reported levels) were found to wear more revealing clothing than women who were less motivated to obtain a sexual partner. Interestingly, women were particularly likely to do this at a time during their ovulatory cycle when they were most fertile. Fertile women have also been found to groom and ornament themselves more (Haselton, Mortezaie, Pillsworth, Bleske-Rechek, & Frederick, 2007) and wear more revealing clothing (Durante, Li, & Haselton, 2008) than women at other stages of their ovulatory cycle.

### **Transitioning into Sex**

Sex in most types of close relationships rarely occurs immediately after a woman has met her partner or experienced attraction. Excluding some types of short-term sexual relationships (e.g., hook-ups), women typically transition to sex within a close pair-bond. Within this bond, women have a variety of motives for having (as well as not having) sex, and these motives may be nested within larger broader reasons, such as love, intimacy, and physical pleasure.

Transitioning into sex for women may be influenced by a variety of motives. In an investigation of the reasons why couples had their first intercourse, Christopher and Cate (1984) found that couples' reasons could be classified into four broad categories: positive affection (e.g., love), physical arousal prior to intercourse, obligation to or pressure from partner, or circumstantial factors (e.g., alcohol use). Christopher and Cate found two gender differences in terms of what couples believed was important in facilitating their first intercourse. Specifically, women rated positive affection to be more important and obligation to be less important than did men. Yet, women and men agreed that positive affection was the most important reason to have first intercourse in a relationship (Christopher & Cate, 1984, 1985).

More recently, Meston and Buss (2007) asked undergraduates, graduate students, and members of the community to list the general reasons they have had sex in the past. They then presented the resulting list of 237 unique reasons to a different sample of undergraduate students and asked them to rate how often each reason influenced them to have sex. Meston and Buss's unique reasons yielded four global components: physical reasons (e.g., stress reduction), goal attainment reasons (e.g., revenge), emotional reasons (e.g., love and compassion), and insecurity reasons (e.g., self-esteem boost). Interestingly, women endorsed all the components less than men except emotional reasons, for which no gender difference was found. This finding is consistent with other research on the motivation to

have sex, which found that men tend to be more motivated to have sex (i.e., desire sex more) compared to women (e.g., Peplau et al., 1977). The studies that have investigated women's and men's motivation to have sex, regardless of whether it is their 1st or 100th time, show that women (and men) believe that love—or a similar intimate or interpersonal reason—is the most significant motivator for having sex (Christopher & Cate, 1984, 1985; Meston & Buss, 2007).

### **Sexual Gatekeepers**

If men desire sex more than women, then are men more likely to initiate sex while women are more likely to limit it? This pattern of gender differences in initiation and rejection of intercourse, referred to as sexual gatekeeping, was first demonstrated by Peplau and colleagues (1977) in a longitudinal study of undergraduate heterosexual dating couples. Peplau and colleagues found that women's sexual attitudes were better predictors of whether the couple had sex and when the couple had sex (i.e., earlier or later in the relationship). Also, 64 percent of the men indicated that their partners' desire to abstain from sex was a significant reason why the couple did not have sex (compared to 11% of the women). Thus, Peplau and colleagues concluded that "characteristics of the woman were better predictors of whether a couple had coitus than characteristics of the man" (Peplau et al., 1977, p. 93). Similarly, Sprecher and Regan's (1996) examination of reasons why heterosexual college students abstained from sex found that men were more likely than women to endorse the reason: "My current (or last) partner is (was) not willing."

Scholars have proposed several theories to explain why women would act as gatekeepers. Evolutionary theorists, for example, argue that women are more selective with their mates, and thus with whom they would have sex because of their unique risks in having sex (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Social learning and socialization theorists argue that gatekeeping emerged from learned gender roles, in which men are given more social power to initiate sex and women are socialized to limit sex (Peplau et al., 1977).

### **Sex, Love, and Intimacy**

Close relationships researchers have studied the phenomena related to the quality and the outcomes of a relationship, such as whether a relationship will be maintained or terminated. Part of this research also examined the role of sexuality in these relationship phenomena (e.g., love, intimacy, satisfaction). We discuss the associations between sexuality and these relationship phenomena and how these associations may differ for men and women, next.

In the scientific literature, love has been defined in numerous ways, including as an emotion or as a physiological state (Aron, Fisher, & Strong, 2006; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). It has also been conceptualized in various ways, including as a combination of varying levels of intimacy, commitment, and passion (the triangular theory of love; Sternberg, 1986), or as manifesting in one or more of six different styles (e.g., Eros being passionate, or sexual love; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). The link between sex and love (especially passionate love; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) is well-established. For example, physiological research has found that activity in brain areas associated with love and sexual arousal overlaps, although to a small degree (Aron et al., 2006). People also believe that those in love have sex and those who have sex are in love (Regan, 1998).

As discussed earlier, research on college students' premarital sexual standards found that many college students believe that sex is permissible in a relationship that entails strong affection or love between romantic partners, with marriage (which in itself may entail multiple kinds of love) being the pinnacle of such long-term relationships (Sprecher et al., 1988). Thus, both women and men believe that love is an important prerequisite for marriage (Simpson, Campbell, & Berscheid, 1986). Other research has found that for both women and men, love is associated with sexual intimacy (Christopher & Cate, 1988), sexual attraction (Meyers & Berscheid, 1997), and sexual desire for a romantic partner (Regan, 2000).

As many scholars agree, intimacy is an important component of love, and is thus also related to sexuality. As described earlier, Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love considers intimacy as one of its three components. Intimacy is often viewed as the feeling of closeness to and the sharing of emotions and experiences with another person (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Some scales that measure intimacy in relationships also measure sexuality. For example, Schaefer and Olson (1981) measured intimacy as consisting of five components, and sexuality was one of those components (an example item is "I am satisfied with our sex life"). Women typically have and provide more intimacy in their close relationships than do men (e.g., Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005). Likewise, as discussed earlier, women are more likely to endorse intimate reasons for why they have sex compared to men (Hatfield et al., 2010; Meston & Buss, 2007).

### **The Interpersonal Exchange of Sex**

Some scholars have viewed relationships as analogous to economic marketplaces where the exchange of various goods occurs throughout interactions (e.g., Sprecher, 1998). As in economic markets, people are motivated to maximize the rewards and avoid or minimize the costs associated with their social interactions. This economic-based social exchange theory

has been used to predict various relationship phenomena, such as relationship satisfaction and commitment.

The goods that people, including dating couples, mutually exchange may come in many forms, including love, status, services, information, goods, money, and sex (e.g., Cate, Lloyd, Henton, & Larson, 1982). In relationships, partners often exchange across diverse resources, which include sex (Foa & Foa, 1974). For example, one partner can give her or his partner a gift and receive sex in exchange for that gift. Women tend to value expressive contributions toward their relationships (e.g., sexual fidelity, loving the partner) more than men (Regan & Sprecher, 1995).

As an exchanged resource, sex can entail rewards as well as costs. One study (Lawrance & Byers, 1995) that examined perceived rewards and costs of sexual activity in college students found that some of the most frequently endorsed rewards (from a checklist of 46 items) associated with sex were comfort with the partner and the fun associated with sex. Another reward, especially for women, was having sex with the same partner. The costs, on the other hand, especially for women, included having sex when they were not in the mood.

Receiving too many rewards or too many costs, relative to one's partner, can lead to inequitable relationships, which may lead to relationship dissatisfaction and negative affective reactions, such as anger when underbenefitted or guilt when overbenefitted, especially for women (Sprecher, 1998). For example, the perception of being underbenefitted in relationships, especially for women, may be related to having extradyadic sex (Prins, Buunk, & Van Yperen, 1993).

Sexual economics theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) argues that sex is a resource that women possess and men desire. Thus, men may attempt to exchange other resources to acquire sex from women. Women may be more reluctant to have sex compared to men (e.g., Peplau et al., 1977) because women possess a valued resource that men attempt to acquire by exchanging various gifts (Sprecher, 1998). The value of resources (e.g., gifts) that are exchanged for sex may be influenced by various factors (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). For example, if there are many men and few women (a high sex ratio), then the demand is high and the supply is low; thus, the value of the goods that are exchanged for sex can increase.

### **Female–Female Sexuality**

An examination of women's same-sex sexuality may help elucidate various insights that may otherwise be covert in heterosexual relationships. The relationship between partnered women may be influenced by various factors to a different degree than people involved in other types of sexual relationships, including heterosexual women or gay men (e.g., Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1983). For example, if women contribute more

intimacy to their close relationships than do men (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986), then are lesbian relationships more intimate than gay or heterosexual relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 1998)?

Sexual orientation or the preference for a sexual partner of a specific sex (either opposite-sex, same-sex, or a preference for both) is composed of multiple attitudes (e.g., sexual partner preferences) and behaviors (e.g., practicing specific sexual positions). Thus, sexual orientation has been found to exhibit more variability over time in women than in men. Specifically, fluctuations in women's sexual orientation over their lifetime have been called sexual fluidity (e.g., Diamond, 2008). Changes in women's sexual orientation may appear fairly sporadic. For example, in one wave of her longitudinal research, Diamond (2008) found that some women who began the study as lesbians redefined themselves as heterosexual, bisexual, or unlabeled, at least once over the 10-year span of the research.

Lesbian relationships typically entail a high degree of closeness, relationship satisfaction, and equality (Kurdek, 2003; Peplau et al., 1983; Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978). Compared to (particularly adolescent) heterosexual couples, lesbians define sex as less centered around achieving orgasm and tend to view behaviors, such as kissing and hugging, as sexual activity (Frye, 1990). Although lesbians may have sex less frequently than heterosexual and gay relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), they report having high rates of orgasms (Peplau et al., 1978) and the same degree of sexual satisfaction (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) as heterosexual women. Similarly, longitudinal research has found that overall, lesbian couples perceived their relationships to be of higher quality compared to gay and heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2008).

### **The Darker Side of Relationships: Jealousy, Infidelity, and Sexual Abuse**

Although sexual relationships can produce many positive outcomes for people's lives, they may entail some negative outcomes as well. We conclude our discussion of women's sexuality in close relationships by examining aspects of the dark side of relationships: jealousy, infidelity, and sexual abuse.

The valence of some frequently mentioned words people use to describe relationships are positive, such as love and commitment (Fehr & Russell, 1991). Jealousy, however, is also highly associated with close relationships (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993). Jealousy is a negative affective reaction experienced when a person perceives that a real or imagined rival will jeopardize her or his relationship (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). For women and men alike, experiencing jealousy may trigger other negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, depression, and helplessness



(Pines & Friedman, 1998). Experiences of jealousy, however, may be a normal part of experiencing passionate love (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986).

Theorists have identified two main types of infidelity that may trigger jealous reactions (Buss et al., 1992). *Emotional* infidelity entails a person developing a strong affection or emotional bond for someone other than her or his primary relationship partner, but without having sex with that other person. *Sexual* infidelity entails a person having sex with someone other than the primary partner without any emotional attachments to the person. Although women find both cues of infidelity distressing, they tend to report being distressed more by emotional than by sexual infidelity (e.g., Treger & Sprecher, 2011). Women's distress at emotional infidelity is often explained by evolutionary theory, as emotional cues from a mate signal commitment and resources that are used to care for offspring (Buss et al., 1992). Social learning theorists, however, argue that women are more distressed by emotional infidelity not because of parental investment, but because they believe a man who falls in love with another woman would also have sex with her (Harris, 2003).

Though the experience of a partner's infidelity is highly distressing for women, some research suggests that women may have more reasons (i.e., predictors) for committing infidelity than do men. Research that used representative samples has estimated that about 11–15 percent of women have cheated on their spouse (Laumann et al., 1994; Wiederman, 1997), and the incidence of infidelity is higher among younger (vs. older) women and men (Wiederman, 1997). Buss and Shackelford (1997) analyzed various correlates of committing extradyadic sex in newlywed couples, and found that personality variables predicted the likelihood of committing infidelity better for women than for men. Women high in neuroticism (i.e., emotional instability) or narcissism (i.e., excessive self-love) and low in conscientiousness were found to be more likely to commit infidelity than women on the opposite poles of these personality dimensions. Furthermore, women who were unhappy with their marriage were found to be more likely to commit infidelity than men who were unhappy with their marriage. Women (but not men) have also been found to be more likely to commit infidelity if they are between the ages of 30 and 50 (compared to women under 30 and over 50; Wiederman, 1997), are not religious (Forste & Tanfer, 1996), or have more education than their partner (Forste & Tanfer, 1996).

Sexual abuse is another dark side of close relationships. Women are more often the victim of abuse in relationships than are men (see Spitzberg, 2010). One study that used a large sample of college students found that about 53.7 percent of the women had reported experiencing some sort of sexual abuse, including rape (15.4%) and attempted rape (12.1%; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Another study estimated that about 50 percent of the reported cases of rape occur within dating relationships

(Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988). Sexual coercion can also occur in marriages. Over the last three decades, scholars have estimated that between 10 and 26 percent of women had sex with their husbands due to their husbands' physical or verbal abuse (Finkelhor & Yllö, 1985; Painter & Farrington, 1999; Russell, 1982). Similarly, women who have an abusive husband tend to have more sex than women who have a nonabusive husband, possibly because wives with abusive husbands have sex out of fear of retaliation (DeMaris & Swinford, 1996).

In sum, the close relationship is the primary context in which women's sexuality unfolds. Women's sexual desires, needs, and behaviors significantly influence every stage of the relationship, regardless of whether that influence is direct or indirect. An examination of female–female sexuality can lead to many unique insights about women's sexuality that may otherwise not be salient in heterosexual relationships, such as women's sexual fluidity, more general definitions of sex, and more intimacy and closeness in lesbian relationships. Although people's close sexual relationships lead to many positive outcomes in people's lives, they may also have a darker side: women tend to be sexually abused in relationships more than men and tend to have more reasons to commit infidelity than do men.

## CONCLUSION

Sexuality, and especially the sexuality of women, has long fascinated people, and social scientists have been exploring this human fascination for more than five decades. In this chapter, we have discussed what we believe to be some of the most important dimensions of women's sexuality in close relationships. Our discussion spanned issues, such as women's sexual attitudes and behaviors, sexual attraction, relationship initiation, motivation to have sex, same-sex sexuality, and the dark side of sexual relationships. Although a focus on women's sexuality can yield many important insights, sexuality is inherently an interpersonal process. Thus, researchers who use a more holistic, interdependent approach to studying sexuality may get closer to solving the mystery of human sexuality that has fascinated us for so long.

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