

# Psychological Perspectives on Human Sexuality

Lenore T. Szuchman   Frank Muscarella

WILEY

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Lenore T. Szuchman  
and  
Frank Muscarella



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*To the members of the Department of  
Psychology at Barry University*

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## Preface

**T**his book is a collection of critical reviews of the scientific literature on topics in human sexuality that are of research interest to a broad audience of social scientists. In addition, each review provides some practical guidance to mental health professionals. The intent of the book is to be consistent with the scientist-practitioner tradition in which application is based on theory and empirical evidence. The scientist-practitioner emphasis has not often been applied to the field of sexology, perhaps because sexology is the product of influence and collaboration from many disciplines. Thus, disparate and sometimes conflicting approaches have defined the field. In this book, we use a predominantly psychologically based empirical perspective. Nonetheless, the varied tones of the chapters reflect the differences in training and perspectives of the contributors.

We have three audiences in mind. First, we would like to fill a gap in the training of graduate students in applied mental health programs. In the area of human sexuality, it seems that we often fail to educate the scientist half of the scientist-practitioner. Students often get a smattering of sexuality research in some of their content areas, and they may have been exposed to an undergraduate course in human sexuality. However, sometimes they are not well educated in human sexuality as an area of scientific inquiry.

The second audience is a professional group of clinicians and researchers potentially in need of a research-based state-of-the-art review. These would include, for example, people who are in general clinical practice who cannot keep up with this specialized literature but recognize the need to do so, especially in the face of the abundant and compelling pop psychology treatments in the field.

Finally, we would like to provide a means to introduce advanced undergraduates to this field as potential investigators themselves. The typical undergraduate human sexuality textbook addresses them very personally, differently from the way theories of personality or cognitive psychology texts do. Unfortunately, sensationalized and unreliable material from popular psychology may fill the gap for students. Advanced undergraduate students may become excited enough to devote their careers to this research if they come under the direct influence of a scholarly book written by leaders in the field.

A unique feature of this book is the selection and organization of the topics. In identifying topics for study, in addition to the expected chapters, we have included chapters on subjects that have only recently come to the attention of the scientific and mental health communities, such as genital surgery on children and Internet sex. Furthermore, some of the traditional areas of study have been regrouped to emphasize their impact on society and on definitions of normalcy. For example, chapters on sexual orientation and gender/transgender issues are not presented here as minority sexual behaviors. Rather, they are presented along with love and fantasy to indicate that, just as love and fantasy are common elements of "normal" sexuality, healthy, functional people all have a sexual orientation and also fit somewhere on a gender continuum.

We gratefully acknowledge the effort and cooperation of all of the contributors to this volume. We would like to thank our editor at Wiley, Jennifer Simon, for her patience and encouragement. Linda Bacheller, our graduate assistant, was a great help, and we are very grateful to her. Finally, we would like to thank Lenore's husband, Mark Szuchman, and Frank's partner, Doug Garber, for encouraging us to do this book and for making their own sacrifices so that we could.

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# Introduction

**T**hree forces contribute to the direction of contemporary scientific inquiry into human sexuality: the conceptualization of normalcy, the nature of the cultural climate, and concern for sexual victimization. We have been guided by these themes in the selection of topics for this book.

## NORMALCY

Groups of individuals who have been regarded as socially marginal and thus "abnormal" are challenging the status quo and demanding that society broaden its tolerance for diversity in expressions of human sexuality. Consequently, behaviors and expressions of human sexuality that were once considered out of the range of normalcy are beginning to be seen as acceptable variation within scientific paradigms. The phenomenon of sociopolitical themes influencing scientific paradigms in general, and paradigms in sexology in particular, is common in the history of science and sexology.

Sexual orientation is a good example of a change in the conceptualization of normalcy that is well underway for both the scientific community and a significant sector of the general public. Few readers would be surprised to find our chapter "Sexual Orientation" (not *homosexuality*) located in the section of core issues rather than relegated to a section whose topic is "sexual minorities." This may be a significant paradigm shift for many sectors of the scientific community. However, at a broader sociocultural level, the shift is less consistent. This reconceptualization began primarily as a political movement by those adversely affected by the personal consequences of the old paradigm. Their activity ultimately influenced scientific thinking, as evidenced by the depathologization of homosexuality in the *DSM*. If such a profound shift occurs in society, future scientists emerging from this society may well be inclined to further change scientific paradigms regarding this topic.

The next major movement from abnormal to normal may be precipitated by the transgender community and social scientists working with this community. This community, along with its advocates in the mental health professions, is currently exerting pressure on both the mental health and general communities. They are presenting a gender continuum rather than accepting

the traditional male-female dichotomization that necessarily pathologizes transgender. Although this may sound dubious to the scientific community and shocking to the general public, scientific beliefs change. We are reminded of the fact that 100 years ago, women who actively pursued orgasms were considered abnormal, given the diagnosis of nymphomania, and, in some cases, "treated" with clitorectomies. The paradigm shift concerning gender is still very much in the future, and we are only at the beginning stages of the process. In fact, this may be the first text for mental health professionals that reflects this reconceptualization.

Another compelling example of a politically active group urging the scientific mainstream to rethink definitions of normalcy is the intersexual community. In this case, they are advocating for the acceptance of greater diversity in anatomical structure. Standard medical practice calls for reshaping the genitalia of some infants and children to meet current conceptions of "normal" size and shape for a given sex. Intersex advocates argue that such procedures are motivated by misguided concern for aesthetic conformity rather than by appropriate concern for psychosexual adjustment. Similarly, members of the disabled community argue that many of their psychosexual difficulties arise from societal constraints on the conceptualization of appropriate sexual partners.

## CULTURAL CLIMATE

The 1960s gave American society a legacy of sexual openness, freedom, and permission to seek sexual fulfillment. In fact, we are continually made aware that pleasure from sex is an essential right. Thus, for example, the emphasis on the female orgasm in the popular press has gone from sensational and pervasive to matter-of-fact. However, there are exceptions, and this legacy has not been left to all groups.

Society is uneasy about the sexual expression of some groups, for example, the elderly and the disabled. Many prefer to think of both of these groups as asexual. But of course, a fair number of older adults have always been sexually active and satisfied. Now, the arrival of hormone replacement therapy, the enthusiastic public endorsement of Viagra, and the aging of the 1960s generation have brought the sexuality of older adults into public awareness and sharp focus. Likewise, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 has made the general population more aware of the disability community and their needs. However, the acknowledgment of the sexuality of disabled persons has not attained the same level of public awareness.

Sexual pleasure is limited physically by genital mutilation. In our culture, there is general agreement that the genital cutting performed on girls in some African cultures constitutes a gross violation of the individual's right to sexual fulfillment. Some have argued that a similar violation and consequent abrogation of the individual's right to sexual fulfillment occurs routinely in the United States in the "corrective" genital surgery performed on intersexuals

and in the circumcision of male infants. The medical establishment in our own culture might not agree with the parallel; nevertheless, it is beginning to discuss changes in standard practice.

There are cultural constraints on sexuality that are considered acceptable by scientists and the general public and, therefore, less controversial. For example, adolescents and people with HIV/AIDS, whose urges we consider to be legitimate, are nevertheless encouraged to exercise certain restraints. Additionally, there are groups such as rapists and pedophiles who victimize others, thus impelling society to attempt to constrain their behavior. Psychologists have been asked to develop interventions for all of these groups.

A new cultural force, the Internet, is causing society some discomfort in terms of its impact on sexual experience and expression. We are only now beginning to ask the questions that will help us understand the problems brought about by the Internet and their solutions. At the broadest sociopolitical level, raising questions about controlling the Internet conflicts fundamentally with cultural beliefs about constitutionally protected rights. Nevertheless, questions have already arisen for which we have few clear answers, and research must proceed for society to properly weigh the risks in the contexts of those rights. What are the real dangers that are lurking for children? How extensive is the risk posed by sexual predators? What are the implications of sexually graphic Internet conversations? It is commonly accepted that sexual fantasy is a healthy and integral component of sexual expression. The Internet is a new venue for fantasy, and its implications for sexual expression are unclear. For example, is a "cyber-affair" an enhanced fantasy or adultery? Is a person who spends an hour in an S & M chat room going to be better or worse off than the person who spends an hour with an explicit S & M magazine? What are the implications for mental health professionals who will be confronted with questions about sexual behavior and the Internet when they lack the traditional, empirically based norms and guideposts for making clinical judgments?

## VICTIMIZATION

Inescapably, some forms of sexual expression lead to the victimization of their targets due to a variety of factors, such as the targets' youth, psychological vulnerability, and physical vulnerability. The identification of effective treatment guidelines for victims of incest and rape has become a priority. Also, there has been a significant controversy concerning the therapist's role in the recollection of purported abuse. Although some controversy remains and some cases of victimization may be dubious, one outcome for the mental health field is that people who have such trauma in their history have felt more comfortable in coming forth and seeking help. Also, perhaps as a result of the increased awareness of sexual victimization in general, mental health professionals themselves are more aware of and concerned about sexual misconduct in their own ranks.

This theme also touches on the topic of paraphilias. Currently, it would seem that society is more concerned with paraphilic behavior that involves victims, such as pedophilia, than with victimless fetishistic behavior. Consequently, research and intervention agendas reflect this impetus and direction.

## THE FUTURE

The chapters in this book represent what we consider to be the most important topics in human sexuality in the year 2000. Some of these topics have a long history, such as female and male sexuality and paraphilias. Others have become important only within the past few decades, for example, sexual misconduct and HIV/AIDS. Still others seem to be at the cusp of their importance at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We will soon know whether or not those predictions are accurate.

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## PART I

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# BACKGROUND





## CHAPTER 1

# Research in Human Sexuality

DAVID A. WAGSTAFF, PAUL R. ABRAMSON, and STEVEN D. PINKERTON

**I**N THIS INTRODUCTORY chapter, we provide an overview of many of the important elements that define contemporary research on human sexuality. We hope that our material facilitates the reader's enjoyment and appreciation of the interesting and informative chapters that follow. Given the limits of time and space, we had to be selective and undoubtedly excluded a number of important research areas and developments. However, we have tried to provide a broad sampling of the many flavors that constitute contemporary sex research. In this chapter, we touch on such fundamental questions as What (and who) do sex researchers study? What kinds of issues do sex researchers examine? What methods do they use?

The chapter is loosely organized in four sections. In the first, we consider definitions and, specifically, the meanings that individuals and researchers associate with the words "sex" and "research." In the second section, we discuss some of the theories that guide sex research programs and currently provide the theoretical basis for interventions that are designed to prevent sex-related social problems (such as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies). In the third section, we consider some of the methods used to collect data on human sexuality. We close, in the last section, with a discussion of clinical applications and our perspective on the future of sex research.

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