

Chapter 2

Theories Explaining Sexuality

When it comes to sexuality, why are people the way they are? Why do people vary in their sexual preferences, beliefs, and behaviors? How do people change? These are the general questions that drive sexuality researchers in their work. As they attempt to answer questions like these, behavioral scientists build and use theories.

What is Theory?

Scientific theories are comprised of concepts. “Orgasm,” “sexual attraction,” and “gender” are each concepts. It is easier to use concepts like these rather than try to describe each time all of the components and complexity that make up an orgasm, or sexual attraction, or gender. Because concepts are symbols for more complex phenomena, concepts are the building blocks of theories. However, scientific theories are more than just a collection of concepts. Theories take concepts one step further by specifying how two or more concepts are related. Such propositions about relationships among concepts allow researchers to try to explain sexual phenomena, or why things are the way they are.

This chapter consists of an overview of the major theories behavioral scientists use to understand and explain sexuality. No one theory was designed to explain everything, so it is important to become very familiar with all of the theoretical perspectives. Throughout the remainder of the book we will use each theory to better understand and explain various aspects of sexuality. We assume that you learn the basic ideas behind each theory in this chapter (the theories will not be reviewed in the remaining chapters where the theories are used). There will be other, smaller or more specific theories that apply only to particular sexual phenomena, such as rape. These “mini-theories” will be discussed when we addressed the particular phenomenon itself.

Although the terminology used in the behavioral science theories may be new, each of us already holds beliefs about why people vary in their sexuality. Are people different because they are born that way? Are the differences the result of having been raised in different families? Is the larger culture most responsible for variations in peoples’ sexuality? Because you already hold beliefs related to these questions, some of the theories in this chapter will seem more reasonable to you than others. Some students in your class may feel more comfortable with other theories. Why the difference among individuals? That question brings us right back to the primary issue of why people differ. Each of the theories in this chapter has a different way of answering.

Evolutionary Theories

The process of evolution by natural selection was developed by Charles Darwin and forms the core of the field of biology. However, some behavioral scientists also take an evolutionary perspective and focus on how humans’ evolutionary history has shaped their mental and emotional nature. These theorists point out that to understand human sexuality one has to consider the long process through which the human mind and body evolved. Contemporary environments constitute but a blink of an eye in the time span involved for this process. For example, the human species diverged from chimpanzees 5-8 million years ago and began walking upright about 4 million years ago. However, it has only been during the last 20,000 years that humans engaged in agriculture. Most of the technology and societal influences in our

lives are only hundreds of years old, or even much less. Compared to the 8 million years that humans have existed as a distinct species, we can see just how small our slice of evolutionary history actually is.

What does this have to do with sexuality? The assumption is that the human brain evolved over millions of years in much the same manner as the human body. Certain traits were adaptive in that possessing those traits put one at an advantage with regard to survival and having offspring. Features that were adaptive were retained and those that were not were often weeded out. Evolutionary theorists agree that to understand sexuality, culture and learning are important, but they point out that both culture and learning are products of human brains. Humans learn certain things more easily than other things, and they create culture to both express and attempt to control human nature. For a full understanding of human sexuality, one must always go back to the base upon which present-day behavior and experience rest (the brain).

How did the brain, and the human nature it expresses, evolve? The key to answering that question is the process of *natural selection*. The term “natural” refers to the assumption that there was no divine being that fashioned humans into the ideal form. So, what evolved was not predestined nor did it result from any conscious act. The way we are today is a result of a gradual process of selection that occurred over those millions of years up to this point. Characteristics that were adaptive, that resulted in individuals being more likely to survive and have offspring, were more likely to be represented in subsequent generations. Why? Because the people who were most likely to survive and have offspring had more opportunities to pass on the genes responsible for those characteristics, even if the characteristics were far from being passed on with 100% certainty. Eventually, given enough time, everyone in the species would share certain characteristics because they were adaptive during the long period of evolutionary development.

An Illustration with Food

Consider a fairly simple preference for certain tastes in the foods we eat. Why do we prefer a fresh, moist cookie to a fresh, moist pile of feces? It seems like a ridiculous question because we are disgusted by the thought of eating feces. However, flies and dung beetles are attracted to feces the way humans are attracted to cookies. Why the difference? Humans, flies, and dung beetles evolved to possess different taste mechanisms (preferences). So, certain substances just naturally taste good to us whereas other substances just naturally taste good to members of other species. Salty, sugary, and fatty foods naturally taste good to us, and no one has to teach infants to find these tastes appealing (imagine having to talk a child into eating candy or French fries!).

To illustrate how our current taste mechanisms may have evolved, imagine an early group of our very distant ancestors. Imagine that in this early group there was a great deal of natural variation in the taste preferences of the members. Some people were born naturally liking bitter tasting substances, others were born naturally preferring sour tasting things, and so forth. Now imagine what each type of individual was likely to eat. The individuals preferring bitter or sour tastes might have eaten unripe fruit, dirt, tree bark, and perhaps even feces (who knows what feces tastes like?). The individuals in the group who preferred sweet tastes were probably more likely to avoid these substances and instead eat ripe fruit. Which type of individual was probably most likely to maintain his or her health and live the longest? Because we all share the preferences for salty, sugary, and fatty foods, we can be confident that our distant ancestors had these preferences as well, even though they probably knew nothing about nutrition. In fact, these

preferences are older than humans in the evolutionary process as they are shared among mammals in general.

This example of inherited taste preferences also illustrates some aspects of evolutionary theory that are often overlooked. Notice that the traits that we inherited evolved over a very long span of time during which those traits were adaptive. However, our current environments have changed so quickly that what was once adaptive may now be maladaptive (harmful). The taste mechanisms evolved during a long period in which salty, fatty, and sugary foods were relatively scarce, and individuals were very physically active. So, to indulge in these foods whenever they were encountered was probably adaptive. Now we live in a culture in which we have easy access to fatty, sugary, and salty foods, and most of us lead fairly inactive lives. The result is often obesity, heart disease, diabetes, tooth decay, and other conditions that are clearly maladaptive.

Another key point illustrated in our taste mechanisms example is that culture is both shaped by our inherited preferences and shapes those preferences. Fast-food restaurants and snack foods are clearly part of Western culture. What do all fast-food restaurants and snack foods have in common? All are salty, sugary, and/or fatty. We recognize that too much of these foods is bad for us, and sometimes fast-food restaurants and snack foods are blamed for obesity and other physical problems that are prevalent today. However, which came first, our taste mechanisms or fast-food restaurants and snack foods? It seems obvious that these aspects of our culture arose to exploit our inherent preferences for certain types of food, and that fast-food restaurants did not create our preferences for salt, sugar, and fat.

Notice also that taste preferences are malleable. Culture can exert a strong influence. If you like the taste of beer or grapefruit, you have overridden the inherent tendency to find the taste of these substances unappealing. Certainly across cultures there are differences in the preferred foods, so learning and exposure are important influences on our taste preferences. Evolutionary theorists would note, however, that the underlying inherited preferences will determine the path of least resistance and the boundaries within which culture can exert an influence. So, it will always be easier to sell a hamburger and fries than a pile of feces with a side order of tree bark.

Learning Theories

Each of the behavioral science theories includes the concept of learning. The reason some of the theories are grouped together specifically as learning theories is because they focus on how learning takes place and they emphasize the concept of learning to explain human sexual behavior. The underlying assumption is that present behavior results from what was learned before, and so behavior can be modified at any point, regardless of how the behavior originated. To learning theorists, the focus is examining the direct causes of behavior. From these perspectives, evolutionary influences, instinctual drives, and unconscious impulses have nothing or little to do with it.

Classical Conditioning

The concept of classical conditioning is generally attributed the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov who observed the phenomenon in dogs during his scientific work at the end of the 19th century. The principle of classical conditioning rests on inherent reflexes animals possess. For example, when a bright light is flashed in our eyes, we blink or squint, and when our genitals are caressed

in a gentle manner we tend to experience sexual arousal. These automatic responses to certain stimuli are said to be *unconditioned responses* because they are reflexive, a person does not have to learn them. A male infant will blink or squint to light and his penis will become erect if rubbed. In these cases, the light and the rubbing are *unconditioned stimuli*.

When an unconditioned stimulus repeatedly occurs at the same time as another stimulus, eventually that other stimulus will elicit the same reaction as the unconditioned stimulus. For example, suppose that your head is secured in a device so that an experimenter can blow a quick puff of air at your eyes and you cannot move your head. Of course the puff of air makes you blink, a response that occurs automatically or reflexively (an unconditioned response to an unconditioned stimulus). Now suppose that each time the puff of air is administered, a buzzer sounds. There is no reason the buzzer should make you blink. However, after several instances in which the buzzer and the puff of air are paired, simply sounding the buzzer will cause you to blink, even when there is no puff of air.

In this example, the buzzer was a neutral stimulus, but through this process of classical conditioning it has become a *conditioned stimulus*. When you blink to the sound of the buzzer (when there is no puff of air), we say you are demonstrating a *conditioned response*. The more instances in which the buzzer and puff of air were paired, the stronger the conditioned response. Are you now forever doomed to blink whenever you hear a buzzer? Fortunately, as time goes on and you encounter buzzers without accompanying puffs of air, the conditioned response to hearing a buzzer will diminish and eventually *extinguish* altogether.

What does all this have to do with sexuality? The idea is that particular stimuli may become able to sexually arouse us through the process of classical conditioning. For example, suppose a couple had a tendency to play a particular song on the stereo while “making out.” After several such sessions, simply playing the song may result in the individuals starting to become sexually aroused. At some future point, one or both of the individuals may be in a nonsexual setting, suddenly hear the song, and then wonder why they feel some sexual desire stirring within. What should each person do if he or she no longer wants to be sexually aroused by the song? Repeatedly listening to the song in nonsexual settings, or in the usual setting with the partner but not engaging in sexual activity, will extinguish the conditioned response the song elicits.

Classical conditioning applies to a limited range of our experience of sexuality. However, it does provide an explanation for why we may come to prefer certain sexual stimuli over others. It also explains why some nonsexual stimuli associated with a past partner or sexual experience, such as a particular song or a certain scent, is sexually arousing in a different context.

Operant Conditioning

Classical conditioning is based on the simple pairing of stimuli. Other behavioral scientists, most notably B. F. Skinner, focused on the consequences of behavior and the effects they had on future behavior. In general, operant conditioning refers to the principle that behavior is influenced by its consequences. Behaviors that are followed by a positive consequence are more likely to occur again in the future (the behavior has been *reinforced*) whereas behaviors that are followed by a negative consequence are less likely to occur again (the behavior has been *punished*). These very simple behavioral principles have been shown to be extremely powerful in changing behavior and explaining why people behave in the ways they do.

When determining whether the consequence of a behavior is positive or negative, we often make a judgment based on how we think we would respond to that consequence. However, in operant conditioning there is a clear criterion for determining whether a consequence is reinforcing or punishing: Does the behavior increase or decrease in the future? If the frequency of the behavior does not change, then there was no reinforcement or punishment of that behavior.

Also, when we think of a consequence as reinforcing, we tend to think of something good being given to the individual. For example, when we think of reinforcement we might picture giving a child a treat for engaging in a desirable behavior. However, a behavior can also be reinforced by removing or avoiding some negative experience. For example, the behavior of taking medication to relieve a headache is reinforced because the behavior results in relief from the pain. When something positive is given to an individual to reinforce behavior, we have a case of *positive reinforcement*. When something negative (such as pain or anxiety) is taken away to reinforce a behavior we have a case of *negative reinforcement*. In both cases, the frequency and likelihood of the behavior will increase. The only difference is the nature of the reinforcer.

Notice that negative reinforcement is *not* punishment. Punishment results in a decrease in the frequency and likelihood of a behavior, either by administering something negative or taking away something positive. For example, certain behaviors by children are punished by slapping their hands or taking away privileges. Unfortunately, punishment is often ineffective. Punishment decreases the frequency of a behavior yet it does not teach an individual a desirable alternative behavior. Frequently the behavior that is being punished is reinforcing to engage in because the natural consequences of the behavior are positive, as in masturbation for example. Often the result is that when others try to punish the behavior, the individual continues to engage in it but simply makes sure not to get caught. Then whatever behavior led to not getting caught, such as lying or hiding the activity, is reinforced through negative reinforcement (because that behavior led to the avoidance of punishment).

Both reinforcement and punishment are most effective when the consequences occur immediately after the behavior. So, if a behavior has both short-term and long-term consequences, the short-term ones tend to win out, even if the long-term consequences are much more serious or substantial. This principle helps explain why people often engage in sexual activity that places them at risk for pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease. Those long-term consequences are serious, but short-term pleasure from the sexual activity frequently wins out.

What determines whether stimuli are reinforcers, punishers, or neither? Certain stimuli are referred to as natural reinforcers and punishers because individuals do not need to learn to find these stimuli reinforcing or punishing. Sexual stimulation, food, drink, and physical affection are examples of natural reinforcers whereas cold, loud sounds, and physical pain are examples of natural punishers. However, many if not most of the stimuli we find reinforcing and punishing did not start out that way. We had to learn to associate the stimuli with other positive or negative stimuli. For example, money, attention, and status are not natural reinforcers, yet much of what people do is motivated by these reinforcers. Why? Through classical conditioning each has been associated with other reinforcers so that we eventually come to find these stimuli reinforcing in and of themselves. In contrast to natural reinforcers.

The same process that creates conditioned reinforcers also creates conditioned punishers. For

example, imagine giving a disapproving look to a young infant. Would it have any effect? Why not? The “dirty look” is not a natural punisher. However, it eventually becomes a punisher and we tend to avoid behaviors that result in such looks. Why? During childhood our caregivers punished us in a variety of ways, probably using natural punishers such as pain (spankings) and deprivation (time outs, losing privileges). While they were punishing us, they also probably had certain facial expressions. These disapproving looks were paired with the punishment, and through the process of classical conditioning we come to experience those facial expressions as punishers themselves.

What do these principles have to do with sexuality? Sexual behaviors are influenced by operant conditioning, just as are all behaviors. So, consider a case in which your partner cheats on you. Your partner’s behavior, engaging in sexual activity with someone other than you, is liable to be reinforced in many ways. The sexual stimulation is a natural reinforcer, and the attention your partner receives from the other person is an example of a conditioned reinforcer associated with the cheating behavior. By engaging in the behavior your partner may be at risk for contracting a sexually transmitted disease, suffering your wrath if you should find out, and feeling guilty later. Those are substantial punishers, but they are delayed. The immediate reinforcers are liable to win out when pitted against the long-term punishers. Suppose that at one point you become suspicious and ask questions. Your partner decides to lie. Because the deception prevents your partner from being punished for the cheating behavior, the lying is reinforced through negative reinforcement, and is more likely to occur in the future. Not a pretty picture, is it? However, many times we learn without having to experience the consequences ourselves. This is the basic principle behind social learning.

Social Learning

Theorists who developed the principles of classical conditioning and operant conditioning tended to view the individual in isolation. Subsequent theorists pointed out the importance of the social context for learning. Led by Albert Bandura, these theorists showed that people not only learn a behavior through the consequences of that behavior, but frequently through the consequences they see other people experience. So, much of human behavior is acquired through *observational learning*. If a person sees someone else perform a certain behavior and receive reinforcement, that person is more likely to engage in the behavior too. The flip-side is true for behaviors we see others engage in that lead to punishment.

At the heart of social learning theory are the concepts of *imitation* and *modeling* other people’s behavior. Social learning theorists also include cognitions (thoughts) in their explanation of behavior. If a person engages in a behavior and it repeatedly leads to a positive outcome, that person builds confidence in their ability to perform that behavior satisfactorily. They build a sense of *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1982). People high in self-efficacy with regard to a particular behavior will persist in that behavior longer under conditions of adversity than will people low in self-efficacy. People who are not very confident in their ability to perform a certain behavior will give up more easily, or may be less likely to even attempt the behavior.

Cognitive Theories

The basis for cognitive theories of sexuality is that what and how we think are very important in determining how we feel and behave. This may seem like a basic point, yet it has profound

implications. Consider one sexual example. Would you be able to masturbate while lying in your bed if you were assured of privacy? How would you feel? Would it be difficult or easy to engage in this behavior? Now consider masturbating while still lying in your bed, but now your bed is on the stage of an auditorium containing hundreds of college students. How would you feel? Could you even imagine masturbating in this setting?

Notice that the behavior is the same in both settings, so why would it produce such different feelings? Why could you more easily perform the behavior in one setting compared to the other? Obviously the behavior itself is no more difficult in one setting or the other. The reason for the difference has to be the meanings (thoughts) attached to the behavior in the two settings. Masturbating on stage in front of hundreds of strangers means something very different than masturbating in private.

Now suppose you were offered ten million dollars to masturbate on stage, or that a gun were put to your head and you had to masturbate on stage or be killed. Could you do it now? If so, what is the difference from when the setting was simply masturbating on stage? Chances are you could overcome any embarrassment, or what your behavior might mean about you, by focusing on the payoff. How we think about things can make all the difference.

Specific thoughts about particular experiences are important for understanding people's sexuality. However, people also create cognitive structures that influence their sexuality. As people develop and have experiences they gradually create cognitive *schemas*. Cognitive schemas are patterns of beliefs and knowledge about specific aspects of the world. They help us organize what we learn and think about a specific topic, which makes it easier to remember and cognitively process new information than if we had a collection of separate, isolated bits of information and beliefs.

For example, we each maintain a cognitive schema related to the concept of masturbation. Our masturbation schema contains the memories we have related to masturbation as well as the beliefs we hold about how one masturbates, when it is most likely and appropriate, whether it is morally acceptable, and so forth. When we encounter some reference to masturbation, perhaps on television or in conversation, we make sense out of what we are hearing by filtering the new information through our schema. In turn, our masturbation schema will determine how we react to the new reference to masturbation. Differences in schemas explains why some people might hear a reference to masturbation and respond with shock or disgust whereas other people might make a joke or disclose information about their own experiences with masturbation.

Schemas take one of two general forms: general schemas and self schemas. Self schemas consist of everything we know and believe about ourselves. All other information and beliefs fall into the category of general schemas. Both types of schemas determine how we feel and how we act, and they influence how we interpret what happens to us. Suppose, for example, that two people hold different self-schemas as to their sexual attractiveness. Each person receives a compliment about his or her hair. The person with the positive self schema is probably more likely to believe the compliment, whereas the person with the negative self schema may be more likely to question the motives of the person who have the compliment. Each of these two people are likely to react very differently when they are in a social situation and encounter a person they find sexually appealing.

Cognitive schemas make life easier, but they have their costs. Because we filter our experience through our schemas as we attempt to make sense out of what is happening, our schemas can distort our perceptions. For example, in general we are more likely to notice and remember (or misremember) information that is consistent with our schemas, or prior beliefs, than we are information that runs counter to our schemas. Also, our schemas can keep us stuck believing the same things, about ourselves or others, even when new information is available.

Sociological Theories

Sociologists study sexuality at a variety of levels, especially the societal and group levels. Here the emphasis is often on the influence of societal institutions, such as religion and law, or on the nature of subcultures. Other sociological theories focus more on the interactions between individuals who are part of a couple or a family.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory is based on the assumption that sexual behavior, like all human behavior, is symbolic. There are certainly biological underpinnings to sexual drive and the process of reproduction, but how, why, when, where, and with whom people are sexual is influenced by social definitions and meanings attached to sexuality. These symbolic meanings are social in the sense that they are learned through interactions with others.

When we react to a situation, we are not reacting to the objective events but rather to the definitions and meanings we have attached to those events. In this way, we socially construct our experience of sexuality. Our interpretation of things, and hence our very experience of sexuality, is determined by our cultural context. For example, in our culture when men see women's breasts they often attach a sexual meaning, yet in many cultures women do not cover their breasts in public and men in those cultures do not attribute a sexual meaning to bare breasts.

The same process of learning meanings through interactions with others applies to our views of the self. Are you sexually skilled? Are you a desirable sexual partner? However you answered these questions, symbolic interaction theory points out that you what constitutes "sexually skilled" and "desirable sexual partner" depends on your culture, and you learned what these concepts mean and how they apply to you through interactions with other people, some of whom may have been sexual partners.

Symbolic interaction theory also includes the notion of social scripts. As many behaviors are complex, or involve a series of smaller behaviors, people must learn the steps that are involved. As a member of your particular cultures, you have learned the social scripts for certain behaviors in those cultures. Just as theatrical scripts tell actors what to do and say, social scripts do the same for people trying to function in their culture. Social scripts are important because they result in predictability. If most people in a culture share the same script for a particular behavior, each knows what to expect from other people, just as an actor on stage knows what the other actors will do and say because they are all following the same script. When people follow different scripts, chaos may result, and at the least people may be uneasy and not meet their goals or will not have their needs met.

How do social scripts apply to sexual behavior? First, social scripts tell us when to interpret a

behavior as sexual. For example, in an objective sense, having your genitals fondled by another person should be experienced as sexual. However, context makes all the difference. A physician or nurse may handle your genitals as part of an examination, yet you would not experience this in the same way as a romantic partner fondling your genitals. The setting and the script we have for being examined by a health care professional helps to ensure that neither person in the interaction experiences it as sexual. The script includes avoiding eye contact during the examination, talking and touching in a matter-of-fact way, and the health care professional remaining fully clothed. If a health care professional violated any of these aspects of the script, you would likely feel uncomfortable.

In addition to providing meaning, social scripts also direct our sexual behavior. Scripts tell us and our partners what to do next. If a person violates the sexual script by attempting a behavior that is not part of the script, or by performing behaviors in the unexpected order, the other person is liable to become upset and the sexual interaction may grind to a halt. For example, our cultural script for the first time a male-female couple is nude with one another in a sexual context calls for each person to caress and kiss the other. These behaviors may lead to kissing and sucking on various body parts, and eventually insertion of the male's penis into the female's vagina. Imagine a male who attempts to put his penis inside the woman's anus instead. The couple may incorporate this behavior into their shared sexual script during future interactions together, but to attempt this behavior during their first nude encounter together would violate the expected script. Or imagine that the female in this encounter attempts to go straight from taking off each other's clothes to inserting the male's penis inside her vagina. Her partner is liable to be shocked because she skipped over some of the scripted steps.

Structural Theory

Traditional theories in sociology often focus on how societal structures function (work together) and yet may come into conflict. Because all societies consider sexual activity to be important, societal structures frequently attempt to affect sexuality. Why would societies universally consider sexual activity important? Perhaps because it is necessary for reproduction, it is pleasurable, and it frequently leads to self-disclosure. Sexual activity is not only responsible for population growth, it often involves intimacy, both physical and emotional. Because sexuality is important for societal growth and individuals are typically motivated by sexual desires, societies tend to try to regulate and control sexuality to one degree or another.

Societies seek to maintain stability through kinship (family) systems. Because sexual activity is linked to reproduction, it has an important role in kinship systems. So, societies tend to create structures or institutions to regulate sexual activity and thereby protect kinship systems. For example, marriage is a societal institution that makes sexual activity between spouses legitimate and sexual activity with others illegitimate. Such an institution increases the likelihood that sexual activity will occur in the context of marriage, children will then tend to be born into established families, and kinship systems and social order will be strengthened. Other societal structures, such as law, social organizations, and religion, all work together to promote marriage, and thereby increase social stability.

Societal institutions do not always work together toward the same sexual goal. Individuals and groups sometimes differ in their sexual goals, and individuals and groups vary in the degree of power each holds. Generally, those with power try to control the sexuality of those with less

power. For example, mature adults hold more political and economic power than do children, adolescents, and young adults. So, it should be no surprise that it is mature adults who attempt to control the sexuality of children, adolescents, and young adults, rather than the other way around.

Regardless of whether societal structures are working together or against each other, structural theory focuses on understanding sexuality according to the influence societal structures and institutions impose. That influence usually serves to help stabilize society and maintain the status quo, or it is an instance of those in power trying to control those with less power.

Systems and Social Exchange Theories

Systems theory emphasizes that a family or couple is more than just a collection of individuals. The members of couples and families share mutual dependencies on one another. Although such members vary as to their level of dependency on other members, they still get needs met by being part of the system (couple or family). So, even someone who appears not to depend on his or her partner at all is probably still meeting a need to take care of others. In this case, the seemingly independent person will have some investment in maintaining the relationship, even though to people outside the couple (system) it appears that the person does not get anything out of being in the relationship.

Systems theorists point out that to understand sexuality one has to consider the entire system (couple or family) and not just the individual. Because these systems are made up of interdependent members, a change in one member's behavior is liable to result in changes in other members' behavior as well. For example, as one member of a couple gradually initiates sexual activity more frequently, the other member of the couple may gradually initiate sexual activity less frequently. In this way, a sort of balance is achieved so that, overall, the level of sexual activity within this couple remains about the same.

As systems theorists point to the interrelated nature of couples and families, an important element is the social exchange that occurs. Social exchange theory simply emphasizes that for people to maintain relationships, they must get something for doing so. There is always an exchange between members of a couple as each gets various needs met and experiences various benefits from being involved in the relationship. By examining what is being exchanged, you can sometimes gain greater insight into why a relationship continues, or why people act they way they do. For example, consider a male-female couple who has not engaged in sexual activity together. The male may provide compliments and indications that he is interested in an ongoing relationship in hopes that the female will exchange these things for sexual activity.

Feminist Theories

What is feminism? There are liable to be as many different answers as there are people. However, at the core of feminism is the belief that everyone should have equal opportunities. Prejudice and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, level of physical ability, and so forth are unacceptable. The emphasis of feminist perspectives is *sexism*, or prejudice and discrimination based on gender. Typically sexism takes the form of negative beliefs about women, and inferior treatment of women, compared to men.

How do feminist perspectives fit with the study of sexuality? Feminist scientists and writers

point to the ways that sexism, in a variety of forms, affects sexuality. Such perspectives are similar to the structural theories in sociology that are based on examination of power in societies and how such power influences the expression of sexuality. The power feminist perspectives focus on is the power males traditionally hold over females. In particular, feminist perspectives are critical of *patriarchy*, or the societal organization based on men as the heads of families. In patriarchal societies, men hold the power within families and lines of descent are traced through males (women and children take on the last names of their husbands and fathers). One connotation of such a system is that women and children are the property or servants of the men who are over them. Feminist writers point out the numerous ways in which male-female differences in power shape male and female sexuality.

At the core of feminist perspectives on sexuality is a belief that gender is socially constructed. There are very few differences between males and females that are absolute or destined to display themselves. Whatever gender differences that are left are the result of male and females being treated differently during development, and differences in the societal roles that males and females take on. Feminists note that there are many stereotypes as to how males and females are different, and these stereotypes lead to differences in the ways males and females are perceived, treated, and end up behaving. Such stereotypes, and the differences in perceptions, treatment, and behavior that result, are usually detrimental to women.

Evaluating Theories

Which theory is best? You might have been tempted to answer with the theory or theories that sounded the most reasonable to you. Those theories are the ones that best match your beliefs as to what influences our sexuality. This is nothing to be ashamed about—sexuality researchers do the same thing. However, the question is a trick one. Each theory works best at a particular level. You probably noticed that some theories seemed more reasonable for explaining certain aspects of sexuality than others. There is no one theory that accurately explains everything. So, does that make all of them equally as valuable?

Sorry. It was another trick question. All theories are valuable in the sense that they provide something to think about, or an explanation to try on. However, some theories seem to be more valuable than others in terms of how much can be explained by each. All else being equal, a comprehensive theory is more valuable than one that only explains a narrow slice of sexuality. Theories also vary in their value according to how accurately they explain sexuality. A theory may be very clever, and sound convincing, but if what people experience and observe does not match what the theory predicts, then it is probably inaccurate. The accuracy, and subsequent value, of the theory is determined by how well it matches *research*.