

Sexual Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs

“Most people are too focused on sexual activity—they think it is more important than it really is.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What is your agreement or disagreement based on? Whether you agree or disagree with this statement probably indicates something about your individual sexual beliefs and attitudes. The focus of this chapter is the sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes people hold. However, before we can examine what determines our sexual beliefs and attitudes, and their consequences, we need to draw some distinctions.

Attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and values are all cognitive in nature; they exist in our mind. In that way, they are similar to one another. However, there are some important distinctions that can be drawn between each. First, consider our beliefs and opinions about sexuality. These may correspond closely to reality, or they may be totally inaccurate (usually they are probably somewhere between these two extremes). However, the very definition of a belief includes the notion that we trust that the belief is true. We assume and act as though our beliefs accurately reflect the way things are. Otherwise, why would we believe something or hold a particular opinion?

Beliefs, in their generic sense, simply indicate what we hold to be true about the world. Beliefs do not necessarily have to include an evaluative component; whether the way things are believed to be is considered good or bad. When beliefs or opinions have to do with how things ought to be, such as in how people should behave sexually, we refer to those beliefs as **values**. People’s sexual values have a moral quality, and involve what is considered right versus wrong.

Notice then an important distinction between beliefs and values. Beliefs do not necessarily have an emotional component; they are statements as to the way things are believed to be. For example, “men are more interested in sexual activity than are women” is simply a belief, however accurate or inaccurate. Values, on the other hand, reflect beliefs as to how things should be, such as “men should not be so obsessed over sex” or “women should not be so uninterested in sex.” These statements not only include the belief that men are more interested in sex than are women, but that the world should not be that way.

Certain beliefs have to do with why something happened or what a particular type of person or group of people are like. We refer to these beliefs as **attributions**—we are attributing the cause of an event to something, or attributing certain characteristics to a person or group. If we believe that men are interested in sexual activity much of the time, we are making an attribution about men as a group. If we believe a particular man is being nice to someone because he is interested in sexual activity with that other person, we are making an attribution about the motives of that particular man. If we believe that men in general are more interested in sexual activity than are women because of societal messages men and women receive regarding sexuality, then we are making an attribution regarding the cause of the proposed male-female difference.

When we think about a particular object, behavior, group, or person, we tend to make global evaluations as to whether we feel negatively or positively about it. These **attitudes** refer to whether we generally evaluate a particular topic positively versus negatively. Psychologists consider attitudes as enduring—they may change over time, but are assumed to be rather stable unless something happens to influence the attitudes. Also, attitudes may vary in how strongly they are held and how complex or interrelated they are with other attitudes. When we are talking with someone and that person brings up the topic of sexuality, we are liable to feel positively or negatively about this change in the topic of conversation.

This reaction may indicate our general attitude about sexuality, and our reaction to this situation probably will be influenced by our attitudes about this person as well.

Beliefs, values, attributions, and attitudes also apply to our own actions and how we feel about ourselves. So, we have beliefs, attitudes, and attributions about our own sexuality that are distinct from our beliefs, attitudes, and attributions about sexuality in general. However, our beliefs and attitudes about our own sexuality are distinct from our sexual behavior. This is an important point because actual behavior does not always match or follow logically from beliefs, values, and attitudes. So, we may believe that it is possible to contract a sexually transmitted disease, and yet not take precautions. We may hold the value that sexual activity should only occur in a committed, loving relationship, and yet engage in sexual activity with someone we just met earlier that evening. Or, we may have a negative attitude toward masturbation, and consequently feel guilty for masturbating, and yet we continue to engage in the behavior.

Why do we even develop sexual beliefs and attitudes, and why do we make attributions? One reason is because the world is complex, and having to evaluate each situation completely fresh would require too much time and effort. Our beliefs and attributions tell us what to expect and how we should behave. We can always choose to challenge our expectations or behave in different ways, but typically expectations and responses follow from our beliefs, attitudes, and attributions. It is simply easier that way. For example, when we meet someone, we instantly assess their gender, approximate age, and race or ethnic background. Then, based on the categories the new acquaintance falls into, we quickly make several assumptions or attributions as to what this person may be like or what we might expect from them (as well as how we feel toward people like this person based on our attitudes). These assumptions or attributions may or may not be accurate, but the point here is that we automatically make them because it makes social life easier. Imagine meeting a new person and trying to relate to him or her with absolutely no preconceived ideas as to what to expect or how we should react.

We see that beliefs and attributions seem to serve the function of meeting our human need for predictability and a sense of control. Another reason we form sexual beliefs and attitudes, and make attributions, is to feel good (or better) about ourselves. We hold sexual beliefs and attitudes about our own sexuality and our own behavior. In forming attitudes and making attributions about ourselves, we typically turn to others to make comparisons. As we will see in this chapter, the beliefs, attitudes, and attributions we form regarding others affects how we feel about ourselves.

We are still left with several questions. What determines the nature of our sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes? Why do they sometimes match our behavior and other times do not? What are the consequences of our sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes? These are the primary issues we address in this chapter. First we discuss beliefs, values, and attitudes at the level of the individual, then we focus on the cultural level. As we will see, unraveling all of the influences and ways sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are related is difficult business.

The Individual's Beliefs and Attitudes

Sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes are most likely multidetermined—several influences shape what we believe and how we evaluate and respond to certain topics. Researchers have performed numerous experiments to learn what factors may affect beliefs and attitudes, so we know some things about general influences on them. However, when it comes to the origins and modification of sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to conduct experimental studies. When we are left with results from correlational studies, we do not know for sure what causes what. In this chapter we discuss a few of the primary influences that are believed to most influence people's sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes.

There are probably two general classes of influences on our beliefs and attitudes—one based on our genetic make-up and the nature of the human brain, the other based on experiences we have and the cultures in which we live. It is difficult to determine which is more responsible for a particular sexual belief or attitude, especially since who we are as unique individuals (our genetic make-up) and the way our brain functions affects the kinds of experiences we have and how we interpret what we encounter.

Genetic Influences and Personality

When we hear the word “genetic” we typically think of “passed on from our parents.” This is certainly one aspect of what is meant by genetic. However, there is a more subtle use of the term that is important here. Genetic can simply refer to the fact that our inherent make-up is responsible for certain traits and ways of thinking and behaving. We usually are unable to fully appreciate the extent to which who we are as a person is influenced by our genetic make-up. Why?

Unless we have an identical twin, each of us is genetically unique. Genes from our mother and from our father came together when we were conceived, making a unique combination of those genes. Because half of our genes came from each parent, we are more likely than a stranger to possess characteristics held by either of our parents. However, because our genetic make-up consists of a unique combination of genes contributed by both of our parents, we are different from either parent, sometimes very much so. This explains why we are often very different from our siblings. We share the same parents with our siblings, but our parents' genes came together in different combinations when they were conceived, so they are genetically unique as well. Because there is no one genetically the same as ourselves, it is impossible to compare our sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes to such a person. Only by having such an opportunity could we see how much our genetic make-up appears to influence how we think and behave.

What does all of this have to do with sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes? We are not saying that we came into the world with genes for certain sexual beliefs and attitudes. However, the results of research indicates that we each came into the world with a certain temperament or personality as a result of the unique combination of genes we possess. This temperament or personality makes certain sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes easier to acquire for some individuals than for others. Depending on our overall personality, certain sexual beliefs and attitudes are a better fit than are others.

Cultural Influences

To a large extent, we are each a product of the cultures to which we belong. This appears to be especially true with regard to the sexual beliefs, values, and attitudes that we hold. Recall that by referring to a person's "cultures" we are including his or her family, ethnic group, nation, and any groups to which the person belongs. So, being a member of a religious group, or a club, or a school, entails being exposed to the beliefs, values, and attitudes shared by members of that culture and promoted by that culture. But how does a culture shape our sexual beliefs and attitudes?

Direct instruction and reactance. Within each culture we are exposed to teachings, both formally and informally. When we are formally taught something, we are told that it is the correct or best way of thinking or doing things. We are most likely to believe that this is the case if the person telling us is someone we respect and trust. Perhaps this is the reason that research has shown that . . . If our sexual beliefs and attitudes were simply a reflection of what significant others taught us or told us to believe, it would be simple to explain why we believe and react the way we do. Of course, the process is not so simple. For example, researchers have documented that people tend to resist direct attempts by others to change our beliefs and behavior. The idea is that humans react to perceived threats to their freedom by asserting their independence. So, if someone tells us what to believe or how to feel or how to behave, we may feel the need to act differently to demonstrate that we are our own person. This phenomenon is referred to by psychologists as **reactance**, and explains why people often seem to believe and act in ways contrary to what they are told. For example, it seems that in some families the more parents try to prevent their teenage offspring from engaging in sexual activity, the more determined the teens become to do just that.

In some instances, the individual is not able to assert independence directly by rebelling against expectations or demands. Perhaps the costs of doing so would be too great, or the person trying to control the individual's behavior has too much control, as in a parent trying to control the behavior of a young child. In such a case, reactance may occur through the individual asserting him- or herself in some other area. For example, suppose an individual is involved in a relationship with a partner who is physically abusive. The abusive partner is jealous and refuses to allow the other person to associate with members of the other gender. The abused partner may feel too threatened to rebel against this demand, but may make purchases of which the abusive partner would not approve as a way to assert some degree of independence.

Because of reactance, a direct attempt to change people's sexual beliefs and behavior may not be successful. Cultural influences that are more effective include social learning and modeling.

Social learning and modeling. Cultures teach certain beliefs and attitudes informally by modeling for others what one should believe and what attitudes one should hold. This modeling can be explained through the principles of social learning. When we see someone who is successful holding certain beliefs or reacting a certain way, we tend to learn that is the way we should believe or react. After all, this other person was rewarded (reinforced) for believing and reacting that way, so we might be rewarded for doing the same. These are the basic principles behind the concept of a role model, and why some people are concerned when members of a culture who are seen as role models by youth act in inappropriate ways. Of course there is a flip side. When we observe others being punished for their sexual beliefs and attitudes, perhaps by receiving a negative reaction from people in our culture, then the likelihood that we will take on these beliefs and attitudes should decrease.

Who are we most likely to look to as role models? Those who are successful are often considered role models. This includes people in mass media (movies, television, magazines) because in our culture success is often defined by being famous (which means being part of the mass media). Family members are often looked to as role models, perhaps because they play such an important part in our early development and learning. Also, because we tend to interact frequently and closely with family members, we have more opportunities to model their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

If this were the end of the story, however, sons and daughters would hold the same sexual beliefs and attitudes as their parents. This is often not the case. Why? Part of the answer is probably that the offspring are not genetically identical to their parents, so they have different temperaments and personalities. Another part of the answer is that parents and offspring were raised in different periods in history, and have different experiences. Another part of the answer involves the hierarchy of role models. We tend to look to those who are most similar to us when trying to figure out how we should think, act, and feel. So, people tend to look to their peers as role models. This may explain why . . .

The list of influences on our sexual beliefs and attitudes is probably much longer than what we discuss here. However, our genetic make-up and personality, our cognitive processes, and our cultures play important roles in shaping what we believe and how with regard to sexuality. Even so, we are not passive in the process. We can consciously work to change beliefs, attitudes, and actions that seem to come most easily to us. We can challenge our beliefs and attitudes, and at least in some cases we can choose the cultures to which we belong. Even in those cases where we cannot choose our culture, we can try to gain greater awareness of how living in that culture has shaped our sexual beliefs and attitudes. Then we can decide whether we wish to hold or change those beliefs and attitudes.