

## CHAPTER 6

### The Plasticity of the Female Sex Drive

The sexual revolution was one of the biggest events in the history of sexuality in the Western world. Almost all areas of sex were affected. People started having more sex, especially before marriage. Girls stopped aspiring to remain virgins until their wedding night. Extramarital sex increased, too, sometimes with full spousal consent, such as at "swinging" or mate-swapping parties. More people began to engage in a broader variety of sexual practices. Films, novels and nonfiction began to take ever more explicit looks at human sexuality, and pornography went from a low-quality underground industry to a huge, mass-market affair that made nude and sexually explicit images readily available to adults everywhere.

One vital fact leaps out from the complexity and diversity of the sexual revolution. It was a much bigger change for women than for men, as Ehrenreich and colleagues (1986) wrote. As they saw it, men were not very different in what they felt or desired before and after the sexual revolution, although naturally men had more opportunities to act on their desires afterward. Rather, it was women who changed in more fundamental and far-reaching ways. Women came to want different things, and they sought sexual lives quite different from those of their mothers and grandmothers.

In this chapter, we will examine one possible explanation for the gender difference in the effects of the sexual revolution: cultural and historical events may have stronger influences on women than on men, at least in the sexual realm. The sexual revolution may not be an isolated case. Perhaps all sorts of sociocultural influences—religion, education, politics, and others—affect women more than men.

This idea is quite relevant to the interplay of nature and culture in shaping human sexual behavior, which we examined in Chapter 4. The clear evidence of variation across cultures and historical periods shows how sociocultural factors can influence sex. On the other hand, it is difficult to dispute that innate, biological factors play at least some role in sexuality. Most experts believe that some mixture of nature and culture is necessary for an adequate theory of sexuality.

But what sort of mixture? There is little agreement on the relative size of nature's versus culture's influence on sexuality. The field of sexuality as a whole has been torn by the seemingly endless and unresolvable debate between these two theories and their widely different emphases (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998).

At one extreme, social constructionists have argued that social influences and even free choice are responsible for deciding who feels how much sexual desire for whom and under what circumstances. They point out that sexual practices vary from one culture to another, and that these variations support their argument that sexual desire is a product of learning, socialization, and political influence (e.g., Staples, 1973). Feminist theory, which has long been squarely in the social constructionist camp, has asserted that sexual desires of women and men tend to be shaped to serve the handful of powerful males who make up the ruling class. Some feminists have taken this view to the extreme of insisting that even women's desire to have heterosexual intercourse is simply a product of indoctrination by a male-dominated culture that wants to shape women for its own pleasure and exploitation (e.g., Kitzinger, 1987). Hence the slogan "any woman can be a lesbian."

At the other extreme, evolutionary theorists have contended that the role of culture has been vastly overrated. In their view, sexuality is largely determined by innate biological forces shaped by human evolution. They believe sexual desire is formed according to the biological agenda of passing on one's genes (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972). Culture may be no more than a system worked out to accommodate these inborn patterns of desire (see Symons, 1995).

In this chapter, we consider yet another possibility for resolving the nature-culture question: Perhaps the relative importance of nature and culture differs by gender. Although both nature and culture are present in both genders, men's sexuality may be more influenced by nature, whereas female sexuality may be more responsive to sociocultural and situational influences. Put another way, we think that women may be creatures of culture and men of nature, relatively speaking.

In a sense, this could mean that the seemingly contradictory arguments raised by the social constructionists and evolutionary theorists all have some validity. Indeed, the intuitive appeal of those theories may differ by gender. Women may find the social constructionist theories more plausible than men, and certainly feminists have been more often female than male. Meanwhile, men may find the evolutionary arguments about innate sexual patterns more intuitively appealing, and indeed it is commonly remarked that evolutionary theorists are more often male than female. At professional conferences, for example, there are often plenty of pointed remarks about the lack of

women among the ranks of evolutionary psychologists. The evolutionary arguments that sexual desire is a strong inborn pattern that is always almost out of control (i.e., you can't stop yourself from wanting; you can only stop yourself from acting on those wants, which leaves you disappointed and frustrated but not in violation of the laws or norms) seem to have more intuitive I resonance with men than women.

### **Erotic Plasticity**

The core idea is that the female sex drive is more responsive and malleable than the male (Baumeister, in press). We use the term *erotic plasticity* to describe the degree to which the sex drive changes in response to social, cultural, and situational factors. Thus, the core of the theory is that women have higher erotic plasticity than men.

Is this good or bad? We don't see any clear value judgment. That is, neither high nor low plasticity is inherently better. There are only two small exceptions to the value-free nature of this dimension, and these exceptions point in opposite directions and therefore tend toward canceling each other out.

One exception is that, in life in general, it is often better to be more flexible, because you can thus adapt to new, changing situations more easily. If women have higher erotic plasticity than men, women would be better able than men to adjust to changed circumstances. If there is a change in social pressures, roles, or other factors (such as a big shift in the sex ratios, as described in Chapter 4), men could find it more difficult than women to alter their sexual behavior and still be happy.

The other exception is that a more malleable person may be more vulnerable to external influence. If women have higher erotic plasticity, then it could be easier to talk a woman than a man into doing something sexual that is contrary to her or his best interests. Some people regard being vulnerable to influence as being gullible.

Still, neither of these seems highly important, and they may cancel each other out. We are therefore not saying that either men or women are better in this respect. Their erotic plasticity may, however, be quite different, and indeed their understanding of each other may be hampered by this discrepancy.

Three consequences can be predicted based on the idea that erotic plasticity is higher in women than men, and these can be used to check whether the theory is correct. The first is that individual women will change more over time than men. Greater flexibility will produce greater change as a person moves from one phase in life to another, especially if the situation changes.

The second prediction is that social and cultural factors will consistently have a greater impact on women's sexuality than men's. If men's sexuality is highly innate whereas women's is socially constructed, then social influences will be more successful at changing women than men.

The third is that women will show less consistency between attitudes and behavior than men. The debate over attitude-behavior consistency is an old and important one in social psychology (e.g., Wicker, 1969; see also Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983). Consistency is high when people's behavior is driven from internal factors, but when external factors play a large role, behavior may show little or no relation to attitudes.

Let us spend some time considering data about human sexuality to see whether the findings fit these three predictions. After that, we can turn to the question of why erotic plasticity might be higher in women than men.

### **Changes in People over Time**

A first way of testing the plasticity of the female sex drive is to see whether women's sexual interests, desires, and activities change more than men's over time. If women's sexuality is more responsive to social, cultural, and situational factors, then as women move from one social environment to another, they should change more than men.

The idea that individual women show more change in sexuality than individual men across their adult lives was put forward already in the Kinsey reports (see Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; and Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Kinsey interviewed thousands of people in depth in order to get their full sexual histories. He and his colleagues noted that women showed what they called "discontinuities in total outlet" (p. 681). ("Total outlet" was Kinsey's term for all the sexual activities, especially including orgasms, that the person experienced.) A similar conclusion was reached by Masters and Johnson (1966) pioneering work on human sexual response: "The mercurial tendency to shift rapidly from peak to valley has been exemplified by female study subjects, while levels of sexual expression that remain essentially constant are observed most frequently in male study subjects" (pp. 314—315).

For example, a woman might have a rich sexual relationship involving regular, satisfying intercourse. Then she might break up with her partner and have no sex at all, including no masturbation, for several months. Then she might find a new partner and resume regular and frequent sex. Kinsey said that such fluctuations were almost never

found in men. If a man was having an active sex life with frequent orgasms but then broke up with his partner, he would probably begin masturbating regularly, seeking casual sex, or resorting to prostitutes, until he found another regular partner. The man's frequency of orgasms would thus not change radically. A woman's might, however. These changes suggest greater plasticity on the woman's part.

Other studies have looked at how people's sex lives change from young adulthood to older ages. As people grow old, obviously, many have less energy and less frequent sexual desires, so there is a broad pattern of decline in sex drive, which is not directly relevant to the plasticity issue. To get around that problem, Adams and Turner (1985) looked specifically for my reports of increases in any sexual activities from the person's twenties to old age (sixty-eighty-five). These changes were mainly found among women. For example, women masturbated more in old age than in their youth, unlike the men. (The sample was mainly composed of married couples, so it was not simply a matter of widows resorting to masturbation when their partners died.) Some women masturbated when you young and stopped by old age, whereas others only took it up when no longer young, and so the changes in both directions indicated greater plasticity among women, as the researchers themselves concluded.

Another place where individuals may change their sexual wishes and practices is in adapting to a long marriage. Such adaptations were studied by Ard (1977), who interviewed people who had been married for over two decades. He asked people specifically whether they or their partner had changed more. Husbands and wives agreed that the wives had changed more than the husbands.

On a smaller scale, another team of investigators examined how young people changed their sexual attitudes over the course of dating (Harrison, Bennett, Globetti, & Alsikafi, 1974). They failed to find systematic evidence of change among men, but women's attitudes changed as they gained more dating experience.

Change in sexual orientation is another important domain to search for evidence of plasticity. If people are born one certain way and cannot change it, then their sexual orientation should remain fairly inflexible, but if social and cultural factors come into play, then people might conceivably switch back and forth. Is there a gender difference in bisexuality, or at least in switching back and forth between heterosexual and homosexual orientations?

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Yes: Study after study has found that far more gay women than gay men have heterosexual experience (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Laumann et al., 1994; Rosario et al., 1996; Savin-Williams, 1990; Schafer, 1976; Whisman, 1996). Often the difference is huge: Around four out of every five lesbians have had sex with men, but only around half of gay men have even gone to bed with a woman. The same result is found if one broadens the scope to look at other categories of heterosexual activity than just intercourse (Bell & Weinberg, 1978), or if one restricts it to only meaningful sexual relationships (Whisman, 1996). Nor is this a matter of women taking longer to realize they are gay: Many lesbians have heterosexual affairs after they have taken on a lesbian identity, and even after they have been firmly lesbian for years (Rust, 1992). Likewise, some women who are quite happy and satisfied with heterosexuality will start having lesbian affairs in addition to their heterosexual love lives (Dixon, 1984).

Indeed, this pattern of plasticity has led to political conflicts. Gay pride and gay rights movements often want firm commitments from their members, and some gay people regard bisexuals as indecisive cowards or even traitors. These conflicts have been much more pronounced in the women's movements than in the men's, partly because the lesbian community has a higher proportion of bisexuals than the gay male community (e.g., Rust, 1993; see also Laumann et al., 1994). Women who have sex with other women are significantly less likely to see themselves as irrevocably, exclusively homosexual, as compared to men who have sex with other men.

We already mentioned that women are more likely than men to commence having same-gender sex during mate-swapping and group sex. A study of a large sample of swingers (Bartell, 1970) concluded that when two married couples get together and exchange partners for sex, the women will have sex with each other about 75 percent of the time, but the men would have sex with each other less than 1 percent of the time. (This pattern of mate-swapping was briefly widespread in the United States but is far less common now.) That huge difference suggests that women are more malleable in their sexual expression.

The main advantage of erotic plasticity is that it allows one to adapt better to changing circumstances and demands. Hence one final way to test the hypothesis would consider whether more males or females change from heterosexuality to homosexuality when they find themselves in a one-gender environment. Of these, prison has been studied most frequently. Although data comparing rates of consenting homosexual activity in prison are not extensive, the signs do indicate that more women than men make this adjustment (e.g., Gagnon & Simon, 1968; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). This is especially remarkable given that prison's main alternative to homosexuality is to do without sex entirely, which, as noted, Kinsey and his colleagues found to be something women did more readily than men. Heterosexual women may adopt a lesbian orientation during their time in prison and then quickly return to a heterosexual pattern once they are released.

Taken together, all the signs confirm the notion that women change more readily than men in terms of their sexual activities and desires. As a woman moves from one situation to another or from one phase in life to another, her sexuality is more likely than a man's to undergo important changes.

### Social and Cultural Influences

The next prediction is that social and cultural factors will have bigger effects on women's sexuality than on men's. We have already discussed the sexual revolution, which was a large social and cultural event that seems to have had a greater impact on women than on men. Research studies provided ample confirmation that women changed more than men. Several sets of researchers compared data from surveys conducted on similar groups (e.g., on the same college campus) before, during, and after the revolution, and they consistently found that women changed more than men. For example, on one typical campus, the percentage of university women who were virgins dropped by half (75 percent to 38 percent) between 1963 and 1978, but the corresponding change for men was slight (40 percent to 34 percent [Sherwin & Corbett, 1985]).

Likewise, the sexual revolution lowered the age of various first sexual experiences more for females than for males, and the women also changed more in reporting positive feelings about their experiences (Schmidt & Sigusch, 1972). Attitudes changed along with behavior, and again larger changes were found in women's reports on attitudes about a broad range of sexual activities, from french kissing to intercourse (Croake & James, 1973).

Another way to study the sexual revolution (without repeated surveys) is to compare young versus old people. Most people who were old in the 1970s and 1980s had come of age before the sexual revolution, whereas young people had passed puberty after it. Not surprisingly, behavior changed for both genders, but again the differences were bigger for women than men. With a national sample, W. C. Wilson (1975) found greater age discrepancies in women than men on issues such as whether the person had experienced intercourse before the age of twenty-one. That is, the percentage of twenty-one-year-old virgin men changed only slightly from before to after the sexual revolution, but in women it dropped substantially.

Even more dramatically, Laumann et al. (1994) found a big change in promiscuity for women but not men. Before the sexual revolution, only a tiny percentage (under 3 percent) of women had five or more sex partners by the age of thirty, but after the revolution a substantial minority of women (22 percent) did. Among men, the corresponding numbers were 38 percent and 49 percent, which is a more modest change.

Thus, the sexual revolution seems to have created a large minority of women who went to bed with multiple partners—a pattern that had been quite rare previously. Cultural differences likewise have a bigger impact on female than male sexuality. Cross-cultural comparisons find that women vary more than men from one culture to another (e.g., Christensen & Carpenter, 1962). In a large sample of 186 cultures from around the world, Barry and Schlegel (1984) found that female adolescent sexual behaviors varied more than male.

One may also look at what happens when people move from one culture to another. Naturally, people differ in terms of how much they embrace the new culture as opposed to retaining their identification with the old culture. This process, called *acculturation*, is a general process and not something that is specifically associated with sex. Researchers have, however, used measures of acculturation in general to see whether immigrants change their sexual practices. In an important study of Latino immigrants to Detroit, Ford and Norris (1993) found that acculturation predicted sexual behavior in many and substantial ways for women, but that the effects on men were either small or nonexistent. The implication is that when a man moves from one culture to another, his sexuality hardly changes regardless of whether he embraces the new culture or maintains his identification with the old one he left behind. In contrast, migration and acculturation make a big difference in a woman's sexuality.

Let us now turn away from historical and cultural differences to look at the effects of two of society's major institutions: education and religion. The church and the school (including the university) are among a culture's most powerful means of socializing people, and so it is useful to consider how big a difference they make. The most thorough data on how these pertain to sexuality are found in the NHSLS, the well constructed national survey about sexual behavior that we have mentioned repeatedly (Laumann et al., 1994). The question is, as one moves from the least educated to the most educated, or from the least religious to the most religious, do men or women show more change in their sexual habits?

By and large, both men and women show more liberal sexual attitudes at higher educational levels (contrary to the asexual stereotype of the brainy nerd that is popular in many Hollywood films!). But the changes are consistently bigger for women than men. For example, highly educated women are almost twice as likely to have performed oral sex as relatively uneducated women, whereas men increase by only about a third. As for receiving oral sex, women again show a bigger increase as a function of education. Parallel differences are found with anal sex (i.e., having tried it or not): Education makes a larger difference in rates of anal sex among women than men.

The researchers presented people with a list of fifteen sexual practices and asked them how many they found appealing. Men of all levels of education liked about the same number of practices, but more educated women found significantly more practices appealing than the less educated women.

Most dramatically, higher education increased the likelihood of becoming gay or bisexual, and again the effect was bigger for women. Getting a college education increased a woman's likelihood of being gay by a factor of nine, whereas for men the increase was only by a factor of two.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the research findings fall short of proving that college produces change in women. All we know is that there are more gays among college graduates than among less well educated people. In our view, the most plausible explanation is that college changes people through such means as exposing them to new ideas and practices, and causing them to reevaluate their feelings and beliefs. In principle, however, the same result could be produced if being homosexual causes people to obtain more education.

Not all variables in the NHSLS showed effects of education. Masturbation, for example, did not seem to reflect much influence (although when there were effects, they were again greater for women). In general, across all aspects of sexuality, the same conclusion kept emerging: When education did have an impact, it nearly always changed women more than men.

Religion gives the same result. It is noteworthy that the effects of religion are to reduce sexual activity, whereas education seems to increase it. Thus, society's two main institutions seem to operate in opposite ways, but regardless of whether the institution increases or suppresses sexuality, it has more impact and power for changing women than men. In the NHSL survey, the two most extreme groups were usually the people who reported having no religion at all and, at the other end, the people who were fundamentalist, evangelical Christians. In such comparisons, women again differed more than men on many issues, such as oral sex (giving and receiving), homosexuality and contraception.

Other studies have shown similar findings and even extended them to other variables. More educated women report a higher age of first intercourse than less educated ones, but educational attainment has much less of an effect on when men start having sex (W. C. Wilson, 1975). College courses on human sexuality produce greater changes in sexual attitudes of women students than male ones (Weis, Rabinowitz, & Ruckstuhl, 1992). Church attendance significantly and substantially predicts less masturbation among women, but the corresponding difference among men is small and nonsignificant (Ailams & Turner, 1985).

Thus, the educational systems and the church—two of society's main institutions for socializing people—consistently have greater effects on women than men, as showed by changes in sexual behavior. This seems to be true regardless of whether the institution's effect is toward more liberal or more conservative sexuality.

Politics is another form of sociocultural influence. The impact of political factors on sexuality has not been studied much, but what evidence exists indicates again that women are more affected than men. The main relevant pattern involves people who change their sexual orientation (particularly toward becoming homosexual) for political reasons. Many sources have asserted that the women's movement and related political influences persuaded some women to become lesbian (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Echols, 1984; Kilzinger, 1987; Penriman, 1987). The sort of influence was articulated in Johnston's (1973) statement that "Feminists who still sleep with [men] are delivering their most vital energies to the oppressor" (p. 167). In this harsh view, men and women are enemies in the battle of the sexes, and so homosexuality is the only politically correct choice for women.

Clear, convincing data on politically motivated sex are hard to find. It is obvious, however, that women are more likely than men to perceive politics as a reason for their sexual orientations. Whisman (1996) found that some women but no men cited political reasons for becoming gay. Rosenbluth (1997) reported that approximately one out of eight women in her sample cited political reasons for becoming gay, and that a similar proportion of women said that political reasons had influenced them to be heterosexual. Among a sample of women who changed from heterosexuality to lesbianism during middle adulthood (i.e., midlife), one-third cited political influences such as feminist writings (Charboinneau & Lander, 1991).

Thus, some women seem amenable to changing their sexual orientation under the influence of external factors, even if they appear to have been quite content with heterosexual sex. Driven by political ideology or even in some cases by the wish to try something new and entertain their husbands at mate-swapping parties (Dixon, 1984), women may start going to bed with other women. For men to show that kind of change is almost unheard of, and the published sources essentially never speak of men turning gay under such influences. That is, the claim that some men would turn away from women and instead start performing sex acts with other men, simply because they had read political articles in magazines telling them to do so, or because they wanted to put on a sexy show for their wives, has not been made.

The peer group is another social institution that can influence sexuality, although one cannot assume that male and female peer groups operate in similar ways and have similar values. Still, it is possible to determine

whether someone's peer group approves of a certain sexual activity and to check whether that person engages in that activity. Several such studies have found that peer group approval has a bigger effect on girls and women than on boys and men. Peers who have had sex, who approve of sex, or who encourage sex seem to predict whether girls and women, but not boys and men, have sex (Mirande, 1968; Sack, Reller, & Hinkle, 1984). In one well-controlled study that followed people over time, males' sexual practices were largely unaffected by their peer groups, but females responded significantly to them (Billy & Udry, 1985). A white female virgin whose best friend was a nonvirgin was six times more likely to lose her virginity during the following two years than a white female virgin whose best friend was also a virgin. Males showed no such effect.

To be sure, we tend to choose our friends, and so there is some theoretical possibility that people selected their friends based on their sexual intentions. This problem does not apply to parents, because people cannot choose their parents. The weight of evidence again suggests that parents have more impact on their daughters' sexuality than on their son's (Miller & Moofe, 1990). It is plausible, of course, that parents socialize their sons and daughters differently. But the parental influence goes beyond such direct efforts at education. When parents get a divorce, the effect on the daughter's sexual development is stronger and longer lasting than the effect on the son's (Newcomer & Udry, 1987). Likewise, the parents' own sexual histories and attitudes have more impact on daughters than sons (Tliomton & Camburn, 1987).

Thus far we have looked directly at sociocultural factors. Another approach, however, is to look at the problem in an opposite way. If sociocultural factors have more effect on women's sexuality, do genetic ones have more effect on men? Studies with twins (e.g., comparing identical twins reared apart and nonidentical twins raised together) and similar methods have been used by behavior geneticists to assess how much people's lives are shaped by their genes. One such large-scale study concluded that, for people born after the sexual revolution, genes accounted for 72 percent of the variance in males' age of first intercourse but only 40 percent of the variance in females (Dunne et al., 1997). Thus, the age at which people start having sex is more genetically determined for men than for women, provided that they live in a society where opportunities are present.

A similar approach is to examine the role of genetics in homosexuality. The quest for the "gay gene" has been body controversial, and even homosexual leaders are themselves uncertain whether they hope the full research findings will depict homosexuality as a choice or as an innate, unchangeable feature of a person. The data, using twins or examining patterns such as whether gay people have gay siblings and cousins, are mixed. Still, a review by Bailey and Pillard (1995) concluded that evidence for a genetic aspect of homosexuality is stronger for men than for women. They observed that many experts have begun to conclude that male homosexuality is more genetically based than lesbianism, although they themselves preferred to wait for more data before drawing a strong conclusion. Still, based on what we know now, it does look like biology has a stronger part in dictating the sexual orientation of males, which makes female sexual orientation more plastic.

Perhaps the maximum level of plasticity would involve people being able to make a free personal choice about what their sexual desires would be. The role of personal is that women report more choice than men (e.g., Whisman, 1996). Ironically, men are more likely to wish they had a choice, possibly because the social stigma and social pressures penalize male homosexuality more strongly than lesbianism. But men tend to feel their sexual orientation is not at all theirs to decide. Some women, at least, do feel they have a choice.

Thus, we have a consistent pattern across many factors. Culture, history, education, religion, peers' parents, personal choice—all major sociocultural factors—have stronger effects on women's sexuality than men's. Male sexuality, in contrast, seems more affected by genetic, innate factors. These patterns provide strong support for the notion of female erotic plasticity.

### **Consistency Between Attitudes and Behavior**

The consistency between attitudes and behavior is an important issue in social psychology, and at times it has even been a sore point. Social psychologists have studied attitudes since the earliest days of their field, and the influential thinker Gordon Allport famously remarked that the attitude is the single most important concept in social psychology. The study of attitudes was, however, justified in part by the assumption that knowing a person's attitudes would help explain and predict how that person would behave. This assumption was questioned in a shocking attack by Wicker (1969), who compiled a large mass of data showing that attitudes predict behavior only weakly. Wicker went so far as to conclude that social psychology should abandon the study of attitudes.

From that moment, the issue of attitude-behavior consistency (known in some circles as the "A-B problem") became an urgent, fascinating concern. Social psychologists rushed to show how better connections between attitudes and behavior could be shown. One approach was to look for specific attitudes that might do a better job than broad, abstract attitudes at predicting behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Another was to note that many stogie

behaviors would fail to correspond to attitudes because the person wasn't thinking about the specific attitude at the time of the behavior (Fazio, Powell, & Hen, 1983). For example, if a request for donating blood is seen as a test of your social conscience, then broad attitudes about helping others will predict whether you make a donation; but if that same request is seen as a painful experience or as a risk of getting infected, then your attitudes about helping others won't predict whether you donate.

The key point is that plenty of immediate situational factors and pressures can intervene between an attitude and a behavior. In a vacuum, people probably would act consistently with their attitudes, but behavior rarely occurs in such a vacuum. Instead, personal values and noble intentions may be lost in the shuffle as people respond to their immediate situation in a variety of complex and somewhat unpredictable ways.

Erotic plasticity entails that the person would be malleable in response to situational pressures. Hence if women's erotic plasticity is higher than men's, women should show lower attitude-behavior plasticity than men.

One test of this theory has to do with infidelity. Most people disapprove strongly of infidelity in marriage, and most people in fact are relatively faithful to their spouses, so marital infidelity does not provide enough statistical variance to furnish a good test on whether actions match attitudes. In one study, however, the difficulty was solved by studying much lesser instances of infidelity among dating couples, such as if a person were to kiss or hold hands with someone other than the steady dating partner. These behaviors were compared with the relevant attitudes, especially whether the person disapproved of all such infidelity. The researcher (Hansen, 1987) found that the correlation between the person's attitude and actual behavior was lower for women than for men.

The implication is that men's actions tend to line up pretty well with their attitudes and values. For women, the match between attitude and behavior was much weaker. Some might interpret this to mean that women are fickle and like to change their minds. A more appealing explanation, however, is that a woman's behavior depends on the immediate meaning and context, and so her responses to broad, general attitude questions are less relevant. A woman may disapprove of fooling around in general, but in a particular circumstance it may seem all right to her because of social and situational reasons. For a man, the social and situational reasons make less of a difference, and so the broad attitude predicts behavior more accurately.

Condom use is another area where attitude-behavior consistency is often low: People frequently express strong approval of using condoms, but when they find themselves in the situation of actually having slept with a new partner they don't always manage to live up to their good intentions. Harold and Mewhinny (1993) found that women reported higher intentions than men to use condoms, presumably because the sexual risks are higher for women (and possibly because the decrease in pleasure is less). In actual behavior, however, they found no difference, and both sexes often neglected to use condoms. Thus there was a bigger gap between pro-condom attitude and actual (condom-less) behavior for women.

Homosexual activity provides another sphere in which to examine the A-B problem. The NHSLS (Laumann et al., 1994) asked people whether they found the idea of having sex with someone of their own same gender appealing and whether they had actually engaged in such sex acts. Although women rated the idea of having same-gender sex more appealing than men, they were less likely to have actually done it, indicating a bigger gap between attitudes and behavior. For example, among the men who liked the idea of going to bed with another man, 85 percent had actually done so in the past year. Among women who liked the idea of going to bed with another woman, less than half had actually done it in the past year. Thus, the broad attitude matched up with actual behavior much more closely among men than among women.

Similar discrepancies emerge with respect to sexual masochism. As we saw in Chapter 3, women have more submissive fantasies than men but are less likely to act them out.

### **Adding It All Up**

There are some contrary findings on the A-B problem, although not many. Occasionally men have a more positive attitude toward doing something but are less likely to do it. Most of these effects can, however, be chalked up to lack of opportunity. Opportunity is a major situational constraint on men. As Clark and Hatfield (1989) showed, most men will go to bed with a woman who asks, but women don't ask them all that often. In contrast, women have more opportunities for casual sex but do not find them appealing. Apart from opportunity constraints, though, men's behaviors correspond to their attitudes more closely than women's.

Thus, the weight of evidence does point toward female erotic plasticity. In three tests of the hypothesis, women came out higher on plasticity. First, sociocultural factors consistently have bigger effects on women than men, such as showing that women's sex lives change more than men's as a function of education, religion, history, politics, and peer influence. Second, individual women show more change in sexuality over time than individual

men. Third, women's sexual behavior is less closely linked to their inner attitude's than men's, which again suggests a greater role for situational factors and a greater degree of flexibility and responsiveness.

There was only one pattern of findings that suggests a real exception. Let us turn to it now.

### Childhood Experiences: The Big Exception

A smattering of findings deviate from the general pattern of female erotic plasticity and they all point toward one particular source: early childhood. It is quite possible that male sexuality can be shaped by situation and social experiences during childhood in more lasting and far-reaching ways than female sexuality. This is not to say that childhood experiences are irrelevant for girls. But female erotic plasticity may make these childhood influences reversible for women in a way that they are not for men.

Let us start with seemingly the most obvious exception to the principle of female plasticity: Men engage in a broader variety of unusual sexual practices (*paraphilias*, or in the more traditional and pejorative term, *perversions*) than women. Does this mean that male sexuality is more plastic in the sense that it can be molded into weird shapes more easily?

Strictly speaking, differences between different men do not reveal anything about sociocultural plasticity. Such differences could be genetic. After all, men have different hair and eye color, but that does not necessarily reflect any sociocultural influence. Still it seems odd to suggest that a shoe fetish might have a genetic basis. Could it be learned through social factors? And if so, do they indicate plasticity?

Research has not yet yielded a clear, meaningful explanation of paraphilias. Yet some facts are clear. For one thing, these unusual sexual tastes do not show much plasticity. Men do not adopt them like they may take up a hobby, nor do they find it easy to get rid of them. Sex therapy can sometimes help a man with a paraphilia begin to enjoy regular intercourse, but these therapeutic methods are not very successful at getting rid of the special desire.

Furthermore, many paraphiliacs are quite particular and inflexible about exactly what they desire. For example, some men find it arousing to be scolded and insulted by a woman prior to sex, and they may pay a prostitute to act out such a script and say precisely the things they want. If the woman deviates from the script, though, the man loses his arousal and gets upset. He wants her to say exactly certain specified things in a particular sequence.

Thus, paraphilias seem to be fairly rigid and inflexible, contrary to the concept of plasticity (but consistent with the general pattern of male inflexibility). They also seem to have their origins in childhood (Money, 1990; Reinisch, 1990). That is, something seems to happen to boys that instills such tastes, which then become enduring themes for their adult sexuality.

The evidence about homosexuality likewise points to childhood influence. As we saw in Chapter 4, Bem's (1996) EBE (exotic becomes erotic) theory places strong emphasis on childhood experiences as the basis for adult homosexuality. Because male homosexuality is more inflexible than female homosexuality, it seems reasonable to suggest that the childhood experiences have a more lasting effect on males.

There are in fact some data pointing in that direction. The NHSLS (Laumann et al., 1994), which, as we have said, provides the best database on sexuality, produced one finding that ran contrary to the female plasticity pattern. It found that the difference between rates of homosexuality in urban versus rural (i.e., city versus country) homes was bigger among men than women. To some extent, the difference reflects migration, since gay people may move from a small country town (where there may be hardly any available partners) to a big city.

Yet the difference remained even when the researchers controlled for migration. Thus, growing up in a city as opposed to the country tended to increase the odds that a boy would be eventually torn out to be gay. The corresponding effect for girls was weaker. Possibly the difference has to do with being exposed during childhood to same-gender couples and seeing homosexuality as a real option. In any case, it had a bigger effect on boys.

A fascinating experiment was recently done in England with goats and sheep, which enabled the researchers to do things that would be impossible with human beings. They took the newborn goats and sheep and swapped them, so the goats were raised by sheep and vice versa. When the animals were fully grown, they were reunited with their own species, and the researchers observed their mating preferences (Kendrick, Hinton, Atkins, Haupt, & Skinner, 1998).

The adult females' behavior fit very well with our general pattern of erotic plasticity. The adult female sheep who had been raised by goats were willing to mate with either male sheep or goats. Likewise, the female goats who had been raised by sheep were willing to mate with either species.

In contrast, the males were not flexible—but in a very interesting way. They would only mate with their adoptive, not their biological, species. In other words, the male sheep who had been raised by goats would only have sex with goats, and the male goat who had been raised among sheep would only mate with sheep.

These male patterns speak against a strict biological explanation of sexual behavior leading directly from genes to behavior, because the males refused to mate with their own species (which is generally the only way to produce any off spring). Instead, it appears that the socialization experiences of childhood had a strong and lasting effect on the males. In the researchers' terms, the males showed "sexual imprinting," which means that the first females they were exposed to (i.e., their acting mothers) determined their sexual preferences for life. In females, sexual imprinting effects were weak and reversible.

Recent evidence on sexual dysfunction provides yet another piece of converging evidence. Using the NHSLS data set, a large study by Laumann, Paik, and Rosen (1999) examined what factors predict sexual problems during adulthood. For the most part, the evidence conformed to what we have already seen in terms of female plasticity: Female sexual dysfunction varied with sociocultural factors such as education, whereas male sexual dysfunction was linked to purely physical issues such as overall health and medical condition.

The one exception to this pattern concerned childhood sexual experiences. To the surprise of the researchers, such experiences had stronger and more lasting effects on males than females. In other words, having been touched sexually before the age of puberty had a strong link to sexual dysfunction during adulthood (and to many specific kinds of sexual problems) for males, but the link was weaker among females.

This does not mean that one can do sexual things to little girls without causing problems. Childhood sexual experiences, especially when initiated by adults, can cause lasting harm to both boys and girls. Still, the issue for the individual victim is whether you can eventually put the bad experience behind you and have a normal, happy sex life. Apparently, adult women can do this better than adult men. Erotic plasticity may be part of the reason. The adult woman can take advantage of female erotic plasticity to experience some growth and recovery of her sexuality during adulthood. The lesser flexibility of adult male sexuality means that the lasting effects of childhood mistreatment are harder to shake off,

The totality of evidence for this exception is not strong, but at present it is the best guess as to the truth (Baumeister, in press). Females have higher erotic plasticity during adolescence and adulthood, but there does seem to be a window of opportunity in childhood during which male sexuality is strongly influenced by environmental factors and socializing experiences. Once that developmental phase is over, however, the male sexuality is fairly permanently stamped and remains inflexible during adulthood, whereas female sexuality can continue to grow and change throughout life.

## **Searching for a Reason for the Gender Difference**

Let us now turn to consider various reasons for the apparent gender difference in erotic plasticity.

### **The Double Standard**

The traditional "double standard" might explain some of these differences in erotic plasticity. In this view, women are held to higher standards of sexual purity than men, and so in a sense the culture tries harder to control women's than men's sexuality. This explanation is especially hard to sort out from others, because if women have higher restrict venereal disease or to limit the population), it will be more successful if it tries to control women than men, if women are more malleable.

Then again, some thinkers have held that society tries to control women simply because society is dominated by men, and so men want to exploit and subjugate women for men's own sake. It might have nothing to do with erotic plasticity: Men simply got the power and so, to advance their own interests at the expense of women, they invented the double standard and other efforts to control female sexuality.

This view can be made to fit some but not all the findings. First of all, it is hard to find genuine evidence that a double standard exists today. When President Clinton was caught having an affair with a young White House intern in 1998, for example, a series of polls explored the American population's attitudes about sexual morality. One of them asked people whether extramarital sex is ever tolerable for a husband or for a wife. The responses (mainly disapproving) were almost identical, and in fact the tiny and nonsignificant difference that emerged indicated greater tolerance of infidelity by wives, contrary to the double standard theory (Handy, 1998).

More systematic research by Sprecher (1989) looked for double standard beliefs among young people and repeatedly failed to find them. She found that women were less tolerant than men of various practices—but that neither gender said that some acts were more acceptable for men than for women, which is the essence of the double standard. Nor was it that her procedures or measures were unable to detect any double standards. People in her study were quite willing to say that certain sex practices would be less tolerable for certain categories of people, such as their own relatives (especially brothers and sisters) and for younger people. People do make distinctions and are

very willing to say that certain acts are OK for some people and not for others. They just don't say that certain things are OK for men and not for women.

Actually, evidence of the double standard even in the past is sketchy. Data from national Roper polls before the sexual revolution were compiled by Smith (1994), and even they showed only a small minority of people endorsing a double standard. Specifically, people were asked whether such activities were always all right for everyone, never all right, or all right for men but not women. The last response is the double standard option, but only 7 percent of the people in 1937 used that response, and about the same percentage (8 percent) chose it in 1959.

Thus, there were some people who held a double standard, but they were only a tiny minority of the population. Possibly there is some other hidden or subtle form of double standard. For example, perhaps some people might believe that premarital sex is wrong for both men and women, but somehow more wrong for women than for men. This might cause the survey to show no difference even if a double standard existed. But this is admittedly groping for a basis to believe something contrary to the evidence we have. The data, even from what were supposedly the bad old days of the flourishing double standard, doesn't give much evidence that many people believed sexual activities were acceptable for men but unacceptable for women.

Why do people believe in the double standard, if the data do not support it? One possible reason is that it is an illusion created by the much more real and durable finding that women are less permissive than men. For example, women in the 1940s may have said that premarital sex was wrong, while men at the same time said it was acceptable. Although that difference does suggest that there was some form of a double standard in fact women were saying that premarital sex was not all right for either men or women and men were saying that it was all right for both. The gender difference in overall permissiveness created a misleading appearance of a double standard.

Another problem for the theory that female plasticity simply reflects a plot by male-dominated culture to exploit women is that the two strongest cultural institutions we covered, namely the church and the university, both affect women more than men—but in opposite directions. Religion makes people less sexually liberal, while universities seem to make them more liberal. If the culture has a master plan for exploiting women, its powerhouse institutions are working in opposite directions.

Perhaps one could counter this view by suggesting that religion enforces male oppression of females, while the university is in fact a renegade, countercultural institution that liberates women from their socialized lessons and lets them discover their true sexuality. This view of the university has both its plausible and its absurd sides, and these can be argued at length. More to the point, however, the view of the Christian church as a tool of male oppression has to contend with some seriously contrary facts. Christianity has generally appealed more to women than men, right from the early days when it rose to power in the Roman empire (Stark, 1996), and the predominance of female over male churchgoers was a powerful factor during the early modern period (Cott, 1977). The same holds today. Women attend church more than men. Thus, if the church is a tool of male oppression, one must apparently argue that women like to be oppressed more than men like oppressing them. Other institutions, meanwhile, are working in mysterious ways. The female peer group seems to have a strong effect on women's sexual behaviors (and more than the male peer group's effect on men). The exploitation theory has to contend that the female peer group is an instrument of male oppression, which seems doubtful.

### **Nature's Plaything**

Let us leave the double standard and male exploitation theories and consider another perspective on female plasticity. Perhaps, in an important sense, men are nature's playthings while women are cultural creations. That is, in the never-ending process of change due to both nature and culture, nature operates more powerfully on men, while culture operates more strongly on women. This does run contrary to some traditional stereotypes that viewed women as beings who were closer to nature and men as civilized beings whose province was culture. But such stereotypes are not necessarily based on reality.

Why would nature operate more strongly on men? Natural selection functions by creating variation through genetic mutations, and whichever version reproduces most successfully will win out. (The shift from survival to reproduction has been one of the main changes in emphasis in modern evolutionary theory, see Buss, 1994; Ridley, 1993.) To select a new genetic type, then, it is necessary to have variation in offspring. And men have more variation in number of offspring. Throughout world history, and even in other species, most females reproduce, but not all males do. (Hence men need to compete, even violently, against each other.)

Thus, at the low end, more men than women have no babies and hence fail to pass on their genes. At the high end, few women have more than ten children, and it is almost physically impossible to have more than twenty. A man, however, can certainly produce more children than that, especially in polygamous cultures (i.e., where some

men can have multiple wives). Powerful men who had several dozen wives and mistresses, without effective birth control, could produce dozens or even hundreds of children.

Is there any evidence to support the view of men as nature's playthings? One sign would be if there is more genetic variation among men than women. A full consideration of this idea is beyond the scope of this book, but at least one important example is familiar: intelligence (IQ). Most researchers currently working on intelligence believe that it has a strong genetic component. Adult men and women have essentially identical mean IQ scores, which is another way of saying that the average man and the average woman are equally smart. But the men have higher variance. In other words, there are more men at both extremes. Both the most intelligent people (i.e., geniuses) and the least intelligent (i.e., the mentally retarded) are disproportionately male (Jensen, 1998; Lehrke, 1997; Roberts, 1945). This fits the theory that nature tends to roll the dice with men more than with women.

A related argument would be that the duplication of the X chromosome in women, compared to men, who have only one, makes women more malleable. Thiessen (1994) reported various findings (including data by Vendenberg, McKusick, & McKusick, 1962) showing that female identical twins differ more in their responses (e.g., to a loud noise) than male identical twins. Among females, one of the two X chromosomes is randomly turned off (that is, it has no genetic effect), and this can produce variability. Thiessen argued that this may be a basis for female variability in sexual behavior. If this is so, then perhaps women are more affected by culture. This pattern would in fact be quite useful and functional. It would allow both nature and culture to have influence, even if those respective influences were channeled through a different gender to some extent.

Still, that does not explain why women have higher erotic plasticity. Before closing, let's consider three possible answers.

### **Male Strength and Power**

One possible explanation for female erotic plasticity is that men are physically stronger than women, and so women have to adapt to men. Being physically stronger, men do not have to adapt their views to women as much as women have to adapt their views to men. If push comes to shove, men can force women to do things, so women would be better off learning to be flexible enough to go along (rather than letting things come down to a contest of strength). This could apply even if men and women rarely get to the point of physical violence: The threat alone could be enough. Put another way, erotic plasticity could be an adaptation to the age-old problem of having to live and sleep with someone who is bigger, stronger, and more aggressive than oneself.

A variation on this idea is that men have generally held social and political power, and so women have needed to adapt to men. Men could put pressure on women to adjust, using political and financial leverage instead of physical strength. This is hardly an appealing explanation in the context of our ideals about love and romance. Men and women should ideally want to be good to each other, and issues such as physical strength and coercion ideally shouldn't enter into it. Neither is this an explanation that appeals on theoretical grounds. It isn't very elegant and puts things on a very crude, even banal footing. Still, the act that we don't like a particular explanation isn't enough reason to reject it.

There's not much doubt that men are stronger than women. Athletic competitions are routinely segregated by gender, presumably on the assumption that women couldn't compete on an equal basis with men. Sure enough, the racing times and other objective measures generally show that men can outperform women. If you compare Olympic gold medalists, for example, the men have nearly always swum or run faster than the women. Meanwhile, in sports that depend most heavily on upper body strength and physical aggressiveness (such as football, wrestling, boxing, and weight lifting), women hardly compete at all. Although many women may enjoy lifting weights or boxing, and some women can become better at these sports than most men, the best men in the sport can usually beat the best women, and the average man can beat the average woman. Even in those traditional societies where women are expected to do almost all of the physical labor and provide most of the family food, the most difficult work of breaking the soil to till the garden is done by men because of their greater upper body strength.

Likewise, surveys of political and economic power consistently indicate that men have the edge. This is still true today, after a century of feminist agitation and many efforts by the male-dominated government to include women on an equal basis. Undoubtedly the difference was much bigger in the past.

Thus, it is clear that men do have more physical strength and aggressiveness, as well as more social, political, and economic power, than women. Whether this difference explains female erotic plasticity is much more difficult to say. It is plausible, but nothing resembling proof of the direct link is available.

One important aspect of the differential strength theory is that it is not confined to sex. If gender differences in plasticity arise because of male advantages, then they should run through all spheres of behavior, and not just sex. In this respect, this explanation differs from the next two, which focus specifically on sex. Hence we have an

important question for further research: Are women more flexible and malleable than men in all behaviors, or only in sexual ones?

There are some signs that women are not more flexible overall, although these findings are preliminary. Recent work on aggression has suggested that genetic factors play a stronger role in female than in male aggressiveness, which is directly opposite to the pattern with sex (Eley, Lichtenstein, & Stevenson, 1999; see also Christiansen, 1977). Meanwhile, studies of attitude-behavior consistency have not shown that women are generally lower than men in such consistency, unlike the difference found in sex. These patterns suggest that female plasticity is specific to sex, which casts doubt on male strength and power as the decisive cause.

### **A Milder Female Sex Drive?**

A second explanation for higher female erotic plasticity holds that women have a milder sex drive than men. A weaker drive might be easier to transform, redirect, or stifle than a strong one. Just as an animal is more difficult to tame if its wild impulses are strong, men's sexuality might be more difficult to bring under cultural control if it is inherently more insistent than women's.

We have already examined the idea that women have a weaker sex drive, and we tentatively concluded that it is correct. On every measure of sexual desire and sexual motivation, men score higher than women. Some might prefer to regard this as a result of socialization that stifles women and not men. Although we find this a dubious argument that amounts to simply refusing to take the totality of actual evidence at face value, it is irrelevant for the present argument: Women in fact have weaker sex drives, regardless of whether this is a result of biological evolution, innate endowment by the divine Creator, or the pressures of socialization in apparently all known societies. Whatever the source of the mildness of female sexuality, the mere fact of the mildness is enough to enable us to argue that it is the basis for plasticity. Of course, if the mildness of the female sex drive is part of women's innate or natural predisposition, this would make it all the more plausible and compelling basis for an emanation of female erotic plasticity. For now, therefore, the question is merely if women do have a weaker, milder sex drive than men, is there any good reason to think that this difference explains the difference in erotic plasticity?

Again, at present there is no good evidence that either supports or refutes the possible link between erotic plasticity and strength of sex drive. This remains a question for future research. This explanation can, however, be distinguished from the physical strength explanation, because this one is specific to sexuality, whereas the physical strength theory should entail that women are more malleable in many spheres. If women are more malleable only in sex, then the mildness of the female sex drive becomes a viable explanation, but if women are more malleable in everything, then the physical strength difference seems more parsimonious an explanation.

The most relevant means of testing this argument would be to see whether erotic plasticity is linked to strength of sex drive within one gender. Instead of comparing men against women, researchers could compare men with strong sex drives against men with weak ones. (The same test could be done with two groups of women, obviously.) If the people with milder sex drives show greater susceptibility to sociocultural influence, greater patterns of change across time, and lower attitude-behavior consistency, it would show that there is a link between plasticity and strength of sex drive. Once that link is established within one gender it would be reasonable to assume (although not yet entirely proven) that that link exists across gender too.

### **The Changeability of Women**

The third and final explanation for greater female plasticity is far more interesting theoretically than the other two, although that does not make it any more likely to be true. It suggests that change is part of the script for the female sexual role. If change is required of women more than men, then women have to be more capable of changing—and erotic plasticity would be the result.

According to this theory, women are generally more cautious and conservative about sex partners, and so when the possibility of sex arises between a man and a woman, the woman's initial attitude will tend to be more negative than the man's. The man will want to have sex earlier than the woman, and so there is a phase during which she says no. If sex is to happen, then, it depends on her changing her mind (from no to yes). Human sexuality and reproduction thus revolve around the issue of whether the woman changes her attitude, and so female sexuality has this requirement of change built in it. To make this change possible, women have to have some capacity for changing, and this capacity for change is the foundation of erotic plasticity.

We can put this another way. Many men would like to have sex with plenty of different women. Widespread promiscuity is not that good for women, however. Throughout most of history, effective contraception was rare, so women risked pregnancy whenever they had sex, and casual sex could have long-term costs for the

woman—including pregnancy and even death, insofar as many women died in childbirth. Even if pregnancy is avoided, promiscuity carries risks of venereal disease, which are greater for women than for men. In those rare cultures where promiscuity has been the norm for long periods of time, the spread of venereal diseases causes women to become sterile. Bailey and Aunger (1995) reported on such a society in Africa, where premarital and extramarital sex are common—and almost half the women end up unable to bear children.

Hence, among human beings as in many other species, the female is the gatekeeper who restrains sexual activity. It is necessary for most women to refuse most offers of sex. But of course if women refused all offers of sex, the species would fail to reproduce. Women must therefore start off with a "default" attitude of not wanting sex and then, in selected instances, change to a positive desire to have it

The basic assumptions of this explanation are supported in research findings. In heterosexual romance, men are typically ready to have sex before the women. When people are asked how long they would typically want to know someone before going to bed with that person, men give much briefer intervals than women (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Both genders agree that men want and expect sex earlier in a relationship than women (Cohen & Shetland, 1996). Men are more willing to go to bed with a partner casually, without a relationship context or commitment (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Men also fall in love faster than women, which likewise entails that they are ready for loving, committed sex earlier than their female partners (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993; Huston, Si rra, Fitzgerald, & Gate, 1981; Kanin, Davidson, & Scheck, 1970). There is also some evidence that the woman's change of attitude is associated with a special erotic charge. This finding emerged unexpectedly from an unlikely source, namely research on feminist views of pornography. Cowan and Dunn (1994) showed various erotic fill is to male and female viewers and asked them which ones were most degrading to women. Nine different themes were used, and sometimes the researchers even explained the theme (with its feminist connotations) to the viewers. People then watched the films, rated how degrading they were to women, and also rated whether they found the films arousing.

One of the films involved the theme of "submission," by which the researchers meant that the story depicted the woman initially resisting and refusing sex but then changing her mind and even enjoying the sexual activity. The researchers' feminist views predicted that this would be rated as one of the most degrading to women, because presumably it plays on stereotypes that women change their minds and are susceptible to external influence. But the viewers didn't see it that way. Neither the men nor the women rated this film as degrading to women.

Even more importantly, the "submission" film received very high ratings for being sexually arousing. Among the female viewers: it was far and away the most arousing of the nine films. It was also given the highest arousal ratings by the men, although this was a close call, because the men had several favorites. (For example, the men liked the movies on the theme "penis worship"—one can only imagine what these must have been like—whereas the women failed to appreciate what was supposed to be so great about them.) Still, the "submission" film was the favorite among both genders.

For present purposes, The important point is that the story in which a woman changed her mind from no to yes was especially exciting to women. Despite feminist teachings that would condemn such a theme, women (and men) found the idea to be a particular turn-on. Quite possibly this reflects the central importance of that change to the female sexual script. In these films, as in the actual experience of many individuals, sexual activity occurred where the woman, who started off not wanting sex, changed her attitude to desire it after all.

Similar evidence comes from research on sexual fantasy. One pattern of sexual fantasy involves a woman initially resisting sex but being overpowered or overwhelmed by the man and forced to have sex with him—which, in fantasy, turns out to be very exciting for her. A review of the research literature on sexual fantasy concluded that the fantasy of being forced to have sex is more common among women than men (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). In some studies, over half the women report having had this fantasy. In others, where participants are provided with a list of fantasies to choose among, the fantasy of being overpowered and forced to have sex is often chosen first or second (in frequency) by the women. This is also a common theme (perhaps the most common theme) in the so-called romance literature genre, which is written primarily for women readers.

It is important to remember that the fantasy of being overpowered and forced to have sex or to serve a man sexually does not reflect an actual wish to be raped. In many fantasies, the woman puts up only token resistance and then succumbs to the man in a way that brings pleasure and satisfaction to both. Even women who fantasize about being forced against their will to have sex usually say they would never want to have such an experience in reality. They simply find the idea exciting. Again, this evidence suggests that the switch from no to yes (even in a fantasy of coercion) has special sexual appeal to women.

Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that switching from no to yes is an important aspect of female sexuality. Is it, however, the basis for erotic plasticity? As with the other two explanations, there is currently no solid basis for accepting or rejecting this theory as the true cause of female plasticity. Women do change their attitudes in this one

way, and this change furthermore seems to have special sexual appeal to women (and men too) in pornography or sexual fantasy. Yet it is far from clear whether this pattern of change creates a basis for other changes as well.

Before leaving this explanation, we want to point out that there are several other ways in which the sexual role of women requires flexibility. One is simply in terms of choice of partner. Throughout most of human history, it has fallen to the male to select the partner he wants; the female is not supposed to act on her preference other than to say yes or no if the man asks. It has often been strictly taboo for women to initiate romance, such as by asking a man out on a date, and even today that pattern is far rarer than the reverse. The result is that the woman's lot, is often a matter of reconciling herself to having a partner who is not necessarily the one she would have chosen. The man at least did make the choice and initiate the romance. Flexibility would thus help the woman adapt to the partner she gets, whether chosen by the man or indeed by her family. The man can, however, cling more to his own actual choice and therefore does not have to be as flexible.

Another area of flexibility concerns timing of sex. The simple theory would be that a loving or married couple has sex whenever they feel desire for it. In practice, however, they might not feel desire at the same time. Recent research has confirmed that the timing of intercourse does not correspond to the patterns of desire for women, and some experts (e.g., Wallen, 1995) have contended that it is inadequate to analyze female sexual behavior solely in terms of desire and that the category of willingness or receptivity may in fact be more important than actual desire.

For example, some researchers have looked for time patterns in sex. Palmer, Udry, and Morris (1982) found daily and weekly but not monthly patterns. That is, couples were more likely to have sex at some times of day (in the evening, obviously) and on some days of the week (such as Sunday). There was no variation across the month, however. In contrast, when researchers ask women to keep diaries of how much sexual desire they feel, these ratings show monthly patterns, indicating that women are more desirous or "horny" around the time of ovulation (Stanislaw & Rice, 1988).

Thus, again, women have to be flexible. Couples don't necessarily have sex more when the woman wants it more. In many couples her level of desire may be irrelevant, and her willingness may be more important than her level of desire. Willingness is itself a form of flexibility, and the sex lives of many couples may require it.

The woman's role in sexual behavior thus seems to hold the requirement of flexibility in multiple ways. Whether the demands of that role produced the high level of female erotic plasticity—or whether the role evolved that way precisely because women were more flexible—is not a question that can be answered with the data available today.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on an important aspect of the female sex drive, namely its (relatively) high degree of erotic plasticity. Women's sexuality seems to be flexible and responsive to social, cultural, and situational influences—far more than men's. Although human sexuality is undoubtedly a mixture of nature and culture, the balance between the two differs by gender: Women seem to be more affected by culture than men. The basis for this difference cannot be determined given the present state of knowledge, however. We proposed several possible theories. Each has some plausible basis, but there is not yet any good way of determining which of them is correct.

What are the implications of female plasticity? Social psychology is fundamentally concerned with the power of the situation to shape behavior, and hence it requires people to be somewhat responsive to these situational factors. In the sphere of sexual behavior, social psychology will do better predicting the actions of women than men.

One implication is that a culture or society will have more success at altering the behavior (and desire) of women than men. If a society were to need a major change in its sexual habits, it would be most prudent to try to change women than men. Such needs may arise for various reasons. A war or famine might result in under population, so that many more babies were needed to replenish the population. The spread of some venereal disease, such as AIDS, might require a fairly rapid change in sexual mores, such as curtailed casual sex. An imbalance in the sex ratio might require a shift away from monogamy, so that whichever gender is in shorter supply might be permitted to have more partners. Women would adjust to such changes better than men.

Sex therapy might also work better for women than men. Therapy operates to change people's feelings and actions, and in the sexual sphere women are more changeable. They should respond better than men to treatments.

On the other hand, sexual self-knowledge would be more difficult for women than men to achieve. Men could come to understand their sexual selves relatively easily, because their wants and needs seem fairly fixed and stable, whereas women's may shift with circumstances, making understanding more difficult. A woman needs to understand not just what she wants, but how her desires and other feelings may change from one situation to another. There is in fact some evidence that women find it more difficult than men to know and understand their

own sexuality (Vanwesenbeeck, Bekker, & van Lenning, 1998). After all, men do not appear to want books such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1976), even though men buy plenty of books about sex.

Another implication is that sexual decision-making will be more complex and difficult for women than for men. To some extent, this is true simply because the consequences of bad sexual decisions have generally been more severe for women than men. Erotic plasticity means, I however, that women cannot quickly or easily make optimal decisions, because their wants and needs may change in response to different circumstances. A man can perhaps simply figure out what he wants and follow that guideline in many situations. The difficulty of self-knowledge for women makes it harder for them to follow the same plan.

In terms of the relationship between men and women, the difference in erotic plasticity creates both obstacles and opportunities. Men may find it difficult to understand why a woman's wants seem inconstant and subject to change, and women may be disappointed at how men seem unable to understand the seeming importance of situational and contextual factors for sexual response. On the positive side, greater flexibility creates greater room for compromise, and female erotic plasticity has probably done much to help men and women be able to live together.

Finally, the higher female erotic plasticity means that same-sex relationships will tend to take different forms. If it is indeed true that homosexuality is more genetically determined in men than women, then the issue for men becomes self-acceptance. For women, in contrast, sexual orientation may be continually subject to revision. Choice politics, and situational factors may play an important role in whether a woman becomes a lesbian. Moreover, as we noted, the gay community suffers more disunity among women than men, because the option of converting back to heterosexuality is far more available to women than men.

The effects of nature versus culture are brought about by vastly different mechanisms. Nature operates by physical and biological processes, which means that sexuality will be influenced by genetically programmed tendencies and by hormones. For males these factors may play the biggest role in sex.

Social and cultural factors, meanwhile, operate through meanings, that is, through interpretations that can be expressed in language. Norms, rules, expectations, relationship context, communication, and similar factors depend on meanings. Insofar as female sexuality has higher plasticity, it will be more influenced by these meanings.

The question "What does it mean" is therefore likely to play a central role in the sexual experiences of women. Who the person is, where the relationship stands, what lovemaking may signify or express, how the couple communicates, what other couples are doing, who will know about the lovemaking, what the individuals expect, what the rules are—all these will play a big role. Does sex mean that you are in love? Does having sex mean that you are a slut, or does refusing sex identify you as a prude? Does it signify a commitment? Moreover, the influence of these factors will probably be present before, during, and after the sexual act. (Considering all there is to process, it is not surprising that it takes women longer than men to fall in love and decide to want to have sex!)

For men, in contrast, such meanings will play much less a role. In fact, men may find sex a perfectly fine experience even if it hardly means anything at all. The physical, biological processes such as visual appearance, bodily sensation, and hormone processes will be decisive, not the context or interpretation (although, as we keep saying, men and women are more alike than different and most men may be at least somewhat affected by the meaning of the act).

Hence, as people move from one situation and context to another—in history, in society, in their own individual lives, or in their relationships—women may find their sexual feelings and desires changing much more substantially than men's. These contexts change the meaning of sex but leave the physical reality essentially the same. For that reason, women's sexuality will change more than men's.