

## Do Women Have a Milder Sex Drive Than Men? By Baumeister and Tice (2001)

Chris looked at Pat and felt affection, which included a physical stirring. Chris wanted Pat, wanted to rub both hands all over Pat's body. Chris felt such strong love that Chris felt a desire to serve Pat sexually, to submit to Pat's desires. Chris thought about performing oral sex on Pat, carefully and thoroughly. Chris yearned for the oral touch and the taste of Pat. Chris also yearned for the physical union, the joining of genitals in the ultimate symbol of merging of human souls, in intercourse. Chris vividly thought of lying entwined in Pat's arms, gently moving in slow copulation while gazing into each other's eyes, missionary position, and kissing each other, passionate kissing.

But Pat was not so eager to do this. Pat did not feel the genital stirrings of desire for contact and penetration. The offer of oral sex was sweet, but Pat wasn't sure yet about the general desirability of getting naked with Chris. Chris seemed overly passionate and romantic and all, and there was a danger of the whole involvement going rapidly too far, with the potential for a blowup and disaster. Somebody else might even find out about it, which would not be good (public humiliation). Pat liked Chris, but Pat did not feel the physical yearning for intimate body contact with Chris that Chris seemed to feel toward Pat. Pat was not averse to sex in general, but Pat had already had enough sex partners to reach the point where one can recognize when it would be a bad idea and make everybody sorry eventually, and where one can refrain from getting carried away.

Naturally, Pat wanted to avoid hurting Chris, but perhaps the least hurtful approach would be to say no immediately, rather than to give Chris a little joy and then break it off. Pat thought that any partial acts of sex might cause Chris to start falling in love and talking about long-term plans and immediately wanting to have complete physical intimacy on a regular basis. Who knows, if Pat were to go along with Chris on this, the two might rapidly end up as the married parents of a small brood. This seemed far beyond what Pat was ready to contemplate at this point. Liking somebody versus seeing somebody as a long-term companion and mate are two very different things, and it is important to avoid mistakes in this area.

In many relationships, sex is a source of conflict. Like Chris and Pat, a couple finds that one person wants sex earlier in the relationship, or more often, or in different ways, than the other. Such differences are to be expected as long as two people differ with regard to sexual motivations and feelings. Choose any two people at random, and one is likely to want sex more often than the other, and so if they were sex partners, they would have to negotiate or compromise to find a mutually agreeable pattern.

The differences are not entirely random, however. When most couples negotiate or argue about sex, it is usually the man who wants more sex. If the story about Chris and Pat made you imagine that Chris was the man and Pat the woman, your imagination was in line with the more typical pattern, even though the story was carefully worded so that Pat might have been the man and Chris the woman. There are certainly some *cases* where it is the other way around, when the woman is the one who wants sex more, but those are less common. Most commonly the man is the one with the greater appetite. Some social scientists have concluded from these patterns that men simply have a stronger sex drive than women. Indeed, the stereotype that women desire sex less than men is commonplace in modern Western culture.

Stereotypes are of course not always true, and some of them are thoroughly false. In fact, social psychologists in recent decades have struggled to ascertain whether stereotypes tend to be close to the truth, or consist of kernels of truth that have become exaggerated and blown out of proportion, or are almost entirely fictitious. There seem to be some instances of each, and so perhaps we cannot even form an accurate stereotype of stereotypes!

With gender, for example, there is some evidence that people's stereotypes are fairly accurate in terms of knowledge about the differences between men and women and about the size of those differences (Swim, 1994). Yet even that research-based impression of accuracy may be misleading. Swim's research was based on college students, whose views tend to be egalitarian and based on current patterns in the culture. It is quite possible that older or less educated people may retain more pronounced and biased stereotypes rooted in traditional patterns that have become obsolete (e.g., believing women are not suited for higher education, especially in fields such as mathematics or medicine). It is also possible that a few sexists or other bigots can do a substantial amount of harm based on their distorted views, even if such individuals are too small in number to

have a discernible effect on the average beliefs that researchers might find when making a survey of the entire population.

The belief that women have a milder sex drive than men is not universal. In fact, at some points in Western history, some groups have held the opposite stereotype—that women are more sexual than men (Tannahill, 1980). The basis for the latter stereotype is not clear, although there are several obvious possible explanations. For one thing, women have no refractory period (unlike men) and can have multiple orgasms, so in theory most could desire to keep going in sex indefinitely. Alternatively, it could be that men simply associated sex and sexual temptation with women. It could also be that the culture assumed that women had a weaker moral character than men and so were less able to restrain their sexuality. It could be that men did not understand female sexuality and simply noticed that after they (the men) had had their own, rather rapid orgasms, the women were wishing for intercourse to last longer so that they could achieve orgasm too, and the man thus inferred that women were insatiable. Then again, perhaps it was true back then that women wanted more sex than men.

Evidence of cultural or historical variation would give pause to any who might argue that women innately or biologically have a milder sex drive than men. If in some cultures women desire more sex than men, it would be difficult to make a strong case for any such biological arguments. But no modern cultures in which women want sex more than men have actually been identified. Ancient stereotypes are not exactly proof of anything, because they could have been based in ignorance or devised to fit the interests of the ruling class.

Then again, what about the sexual revolution? There is little room to doubt the fact that female sexuality changed substantially during the twentieth century. The sexual revolution did more than just give women permission to enjoy sex: It seems to have produced a fundamental change in the way women felt about their bodies and desires, and in how they made decisions about their own sexual activities. If women did in fact have less sexual desire than men before the sexual revolution, the sexual revolution brought about a substantial change.

Some feminist writers have angrily rejected the belief that women lack sexual desire compared to men. They suggested, instead, that the seeming deficit in female sexuality reflects the oppression by the male-dominated culture, which causes women to end up alienated from their own sexuality. In this view, society tells girls and women not to attend to their sexuality, fails to teach them to masturbate or enjoy sexual pleasure, and punishes women who had too many partners or who simply enjoyed sex too much. When the female potential for multiple orgasms became scientifically established in the 1960s, feminists used this to argue that female sexuality was actually superior to male in the sense of being more powerful rather than less.

Under feminist assault, the view that the male sex drive is stronger than the female has become viewed as obsolete and discredited. As Sherfey (1966) asserted, “Our myth of the female’s relative asexuality is a biological absurdity” (p. 100). More recently, a leading sexuality textbook opens its section on gender differences in sex drive by stating that “a long-standing assumption in many Western societies is the mistaken belief that women are inherently less sexually inclined than men” (Crooks & Baur, 1999, p. 68). In another influential textbook, Hyde and DeLamater (1997) note that several experts have speculated that women may actually have a stronger sex drive than males. The authors themselves were sympathetic to this view: They devote a section to the idea that women have a stronger sex drive than men but do not even consider the opposite possibility that the male sex drive is stronger. Hyde and DeLamater conclude that “perhaps, as restrictions of female sexuality lessen, future generations will regard women as having the greater sex drive” (p. 360). They do point out, however, that such ideas are mainly speculative at present.

The experts cited by Hyde and DeLamater as being in favor of the theory that the female sex drive is stronger, who included the reigning experts Masters and Johnson (1966) as well as Sherfey (1966), pointed to women’s lack of a refractory period, their ability to have many consecutive partners, and their capacity for multiple orgasms. Hyde and DeLamater said that the weaker sexual response of women compared to men found in their studies and therapeutic work could be an artificial situation resulting from sociocultural pressures on girls and women. In other words, the lessons and influence of society may have transformed women from the more sexual to the less sexual of the two genders. If that is correct, the historical suppression of female sexuality would be an extraordinarily persuasive and powerful instance of sociocultural causation, and so it would generate great theoretical excitement. Understanding how women’s sexuality was suppressed and turned from being stronger into weaker than men’s would be a high priority, because it would teach us a great deal about how socialization and social pressure can radically transform behavior.

The views of Sherfey (1966) are especially strong on this point. Women are sexually insatiable, she said, in view of their multi-orgasmic capability. Sherfey described primate sexual behavior as indicating that a female during estrus will have intercourse twenty to fifty times per day, going from male to male and exhausting each one. She wrote, "I suggest that something akin to this behavior could be paralleled by the human female if her civilization allowed it" (p. 99). She suggested that prehistorical human females were equally voracious in their sexuality, but that the rise of civilization and in particular patriarchal rule (i.e., domination by men) required the "ruthless subjugation of female sexuality" (p. 119).

It would, after all, be of great practical value to learn how society could accomplish such a change in female sexuality. If this view is correct, then society found female sexuality problematic and was able to effect a change of such magnitude that the female sex drive switched from being stronger than men's to being weaker. By learning how that was accomplished, society might become able to effect similar changes on other forms of sexual behavior that it deemed problematic. For example, it would be of great value to society to learn how to prevent pedophilia.

In any case, as a result of this view, many authors have come to accept implicitly that female sexual desire is inherently no different in strength from male sexuality, and there are probably a strident minority who sincerely believe that female sexuality is actually stronger. Hardly anyone seems willing to propose that men have more sexual desire than women.

When researchers do find differences, they sometimes present them apologetically. For example, Leigh (1989) asked a sample of celibate people (including virgins) why they weren't having sex. Although she actually found about equal numbers of men and women in this virginal status, the genders differed in their reasons for not having sex. The women were significantly more likely than the men to say the reason was a lack of interest or enjoyment of sex. Hardly any men (but some women) said they weren't having sex because they didn't like it or didn't want it. Leigh described this result by saying that "this finding (at least superficially) conforms to the usually discredited stereotype of women having a weaker sex drive than men" (p. 206). In other words, the researcher could not accept at face value the finding that these women desired sex less than men, because it was politically incorrect and even contrary to prevailing scientific opinion. Many researchers face such pressures nowadays, and certainly it is reasonable to expect that evidence going against the currently popular opinion would be subject to some suspicion and scrutiny.

These competing views make it difficult to ascertain what is correct. This chapter will begin by considering the issue of whether men and women have different levels of sexual desire—first on a theoretical basis, and second in terms of what facts and findings have shown. After that, we will return to the issue of why women's sexuality was seemingly stifled prior to the sexual revolution, as well as why that revolution brought about such a sweeping change.

### **What Exactly Is Sex Drive?**

Before beginning, it is important to consider briefly what is meant by sex drive. In fact, we think that the question of gender differences in sex drive has been made more controversial and confusing because several different concepts have been mixed together

By sex drive, we mean the motivation to engage in sexual activity. The general desire for sex is thus the essence of sex drive. If Bill has a stronger sex drive than Al, this would mean that Bill wants sex more often, more urgently, in more varieties, with more partners, under more circumstances, and the like.

A second concept to consider is sexual capacity. This refers to how much sex a person can potentially take part in. If Bill has a greater sexual capacity than Al, that means that Bill can engage in more sexual acts, over a longer period of time, with more partners, than Al.

The third concept is sexual enjoyment. This refers to the quantity of pleasure that a person gets from engaging in sex.

Any differences (including gender differences) on one of these variables might be completely unrelated to differences on any other. For example, men are probably just as capable of dieting as women, but men have less desire and motivation to diet. In the same way differences in sexual capacity do not necessarily tell us anything about differences in sex drive.

The gender difference in sexual capacity seems well established. A woman can have sexual intercourse with a room full of men on the same day, but a man is unlikely to be able to have intercourse with very many

different women (and certainly not to orgasm). Some women but hardly any men can have multiple orgasms. Women can continue having sex after orgasm, but men cannot. Thus, the potential capacity of women is clearly superior to that of men.

Sexual enjoyment is difficult to assess, because it is quite subjective. Men have orgasms more regularly than women, and women report more negative sexual experiences than men, so perhaps men get more enjoyment overall from sex than women—if one includes acts of bad sex. If the analysis is restricted to good sex between people who are in love and trying to please each other, however, it is questionable whether there is any difference in enjoyment.

The question of sex drive, however, focuses on motivation and desire. This is the most complex and controversial question. Let us therefore take a long and careful look.

### **Why Should Women Want Sex Less Than Men Do?**

Let us begin by asking why it would even be plausible that women would desire sex less than men do. Whether human nature was designed by God or by natural selection, it would seemingly be optimal for men and women to desire the same amount of sex. We noted at the outset that many couples end up having conflicts over how often to have sex. If men and women had identical desires, such conflicts would be mostly eliminated. That would be ideal. Why wasn't the human race designed that way?

In many species, females do not even seem to have orgasm-producing organs such as a clitoris. Human females are special because of this. The clitoris makes the woman receptive to having sex at all times of the year, instead of for only a few days of heat (estrus). One can easily understand, however, that once the clitoris began to show up in evolution, it would spread rapidly through the population. Females with a clitoris would probably reproduce more often than females without one, especially in a species such as our own, where there is no obvious estrus phase and where indeed women do not even typically know for certain that they are ovulating. Still, the clitoris and its attendant sexual pleasure seem to be a relatively recent biological innovation. In most species, the female has little or no interest in sex for most of the year (Diamond, 1997).

Evolutionary theorists can, however, offer rather convincing arguments for a gender difference in strength of sexual desire. In fact, the female orgasm seems to be nonexistent in most species, and more generally across most species there seems to be far more evidence that male animals enjoy sex more than female animals (Gould & Gould, 1997). Even though pleasure and orgasm are undeniable in human females, they may not have closed the gap entirely in terms of catching up to the males.

There are solid reasons for expecting there to be a gender difference in sexual desire. As we outlined in our discussion of nature and culture in Chapter 4, men and women have different reproductive goals and contingencies. In order to reproduce at all, it is necessary to have sex. But a male of most any species can reproduce many times by having frequent sex with many partners, whereas a female cannot. Very high levels of desire have helped males reproduce more, but they would not have been much use to females in that regard. Hence we are probably descended from more oversexed males than oversexed females.

One may also point to patterns observed in other species, although it is always a little risky to generalize from nonlanguage-using animals to human beings. In many species, males compete for top status, and only the top-ranking male gets to have sex with the females. (Actually, there tends to be some degree of cheating and sneaking around, but there is still a big difference between the alpha male and the rest of the guys.)

Moreover, because competition is intense, the alpha male can usually stay on top for only one or two seasons, after which he is replaced by a stronger, younger fellow. That one season may therefore be his only chance to reproduce, and to take full advantage he has to copulate with as many females as possible and as often as possible. No such urgency besets the female. If she fails to conceive during one season, she can do so the next time. Females tend to spend their adult lives reproducing in small amounts each year. Males have to think in terms of the one championships season and that's it.

In fact, the male animal's options are even more limited than one might realize. First, his breeding rights are limited to the brief period when he is the alpha male. Second, he can only exercise those rights when the female is in heat, which is relatively rare. Thus, even an alpha male with a harem of females may only get to have sex a few times a year. So he had better be in the mood when the rare chance arises!

Hence each female can accomplish her full reproductive potential with only a few acts of intercourse—and so she does not need to have very much sexual desire in order to succeed at reproduction. The male has to have sex every chance he gets during his window of opportunity. For him to produce the highest number of babies—and that is precisely what natural selection will favor—he has to have the most powerful, relentless desire; to be ready at any opportunity; and to be able to go repeatedly during a short, intense interval. In short, the female would require less desire than the male for optimal reproduction.

There are also social reasons for a gender difference in sexual desire, whether these are instilled in one's biological nature or shaped by social experiences. One theme of this book has involved considering sex in the framework of the social exchange theory, which is based on the assumption that women give sex to men. That usually happens as part of a basic bargain, which is one source of benefits to women, including material gain such as food (as in the meat-for-sex trade). Women, as the physically weaker gender, may have spent much of prehistory and history having an ongoing need for such benefits. With the removal of restrictions on careers, modern women may need them less than in the past, but up until quite recently women probably needed to obtain resources from men.

The meat-for-sex (actually meat or whatever else) trade only works, however, if the woman wants sex less than men do. More generally, it is to women's substantial advantage to have less sexual desire for men than the men have for the women.

Consider it this way: If the woman desired sex more than the man did, then whenever they had sexual intercourse, he would be doing her a favor, instead of it usually being the other way around. It's a big, meaningful difference of who owes whom what. If she wanted sex more than he did, and they had sex, she would owe him something in return. But if she wants it less, she should be able to extract some benefits from him. He owes *her* something.

Hence it is vital to women's negotiating strength to have less sexual desire than men. It does not necessarily have to be a large difference. Women could even have very strong sexual desires, as long as men's desires are still stronger.

But the line of equal sexual desire is something that women can only cross at substantial cost. Women can be free to have more and more sexual desire, up to a point: the point of wanting it just as much as men do. When they cross that point, they shift the balance of power into men's favor. That is too big a sacrifice.

Imagine being a woman, especially in a traditional society where you would lack political and economic power along with being physically weaker than men. And imagine that at the same time your desire for sex (like other women's) is stronger than men's. What could you possibly give men to gain some consideration? How could you influence them to take care of you financially and socially, provide you with benefits, and do what you wanted? How could you even manage to get them to have sex with you, if they didn't want it as much as you did? You'd need to have some alternative resource to offer them in exchange for sex.

These explanations focus on the individual and the payoffs males and females get from sexual desire. Factors external to the individual may also be considered. As we have seen, feminists have suggested that society sought to control women's sexuality and created a false appearance that women did not seek out sex. We shall return to these external causes in the second part of this chapter, but it is useful to keep them in mind when considering the evidence about whether the individuals themselves start off with different levels of sexual desire.

### **Evidence of the Gender Difference in Sex Drive**

Do women have a milder sex drive than men? There are many different ways to look for relevant evidence. *Any* category of people with a relatively low sex drive would be expected to exhibit a host of signs of it, and so we could test the theory by looking for differences in how often people want sex, think about sex, have sex, ask for sex, exchange other goods for sex, and the like. Let us proceed through a broad assortment, because no single fact is likely to be fully convincing.

One sign of motivational power is how often a person spontaneously thinks about something. People who love baseball, for example, think about it often, whereas people who don't care about baseball or don't like it probably devote relatively little time to thinking about it.

With regard to sex, men clearly think about it more than women. In a national survey, Laumann et al. (1994) found that over half the men think about sex every day, but less than one out of five women think about

it that often. Of course, in principle it is conceivable that men think about sex because they loathe it (and are therefore thinking about how awful sex is), but this seems doubtful. Most likely, they think about it every day because they want it.

Still, given the ambiguity of thought, it is perhaps better to use a measure of how often the person feels sexually turned on. Men have spontaneous sexual arousal more frequently than women (Beck, Bozman, & Qualtrough, 1991). The typical man has sexual arousal several times a day; the typical woman, only a couple times per week (Knoth, Boyd, & Singer, 1988). These findings suggest men have more frequent sexual arousal, if not necessarily more intense arousal.

Sexual fantasy is another sign, given that fantasies presumably spring from desire or interest in sex. A large review of many research studies on sexual fantasy yielded a consistent pattern: Men have more frequent sexual fantasies than women, as well as fantasizing about more different partners and acts (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Ellis and Symons (1990) asked people whether in their imagination they had had sex with over a thousand different partners. Men were four times more likely than women to say yes.

In a way, it is remarkable that anyone would say yes, especially someone in a young population such as college students. To imagine a thousand partners would require imagining a new and different one every day for three years. Hardly anyone meets that many people, even to the point of shaking hands or saying hello once. Maybe the only way for the young man to get to a thousand is to imagine having sex with about a dozen women every day, which would have to include pretty much every woman he encounters, excepting only the absolutely least attractive ones. Most of these would be repeats, of course, but possibly he might be able to average one new one every day, especially if he interacts with the public in his work (e.g., customer service department). Otherwise, maybe he imagines having sex with every woman he sees, even just a total stranger sitting on the bus or standing in the subway. That might get him to a thousand imaginary partners before he's twenty. Still, is that really a normal way to spend an entire year, or two or three, of your adult life?

Turning from fantasy to desire, the evidence points in the same direction. Men want more sex partners than women. As we reported in Chapter 2, Miller and Fishkin (1997; see also Buss & Schmitt, 1993) asked a sample of college students how many people they would ideally like to go to bed with for the rest of their lives, under ideal circumstances (i.e., not having to worry about practical things such as disease). The average woman wanted to have two or three sex partners, while the average male response was sixty-four. That discrepancy points toward a stronger sex drive in men, at least in the sense of desire for a variety of partners.

Women actually report having fewer sex partners than men, although as noted in Chapter 2, this finding suffers from being logically and statistically impossible. Nearly all surveys find that men report having had more partners. The same goes if one restricts the count to extramarital sex: In both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, men seek out more partners than women (Cotton, 1975; Lawson, 1988; Spanier & Margolis, 1983; Thompson, 1983). Even if one merely counts minor infidelities in dating relationships, such as necking with someone other than your steady partner, men are more likely to say they did this (Hansen, 1987). For whatever reason men report more partners than women, although whether this is the result of style of counting or wishful thinking, it still seemingly points in the direction that men desire sex more than women.

The sexual practices of high school students were classified by Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996) into five categories of escalating interest and activity: sexually naive, sexually unassured, sexually competent, sexually adventurous, and sexually driven. The lowest category, sexually naive students, consisted of people who showed minimal sexual activity. Three-quarters of these people were girls. The second highest category, sexually adventurous, in contrast, was defined by high comfort with sex, high confidence, and high exploration. The members of this category were mostly (85 percent) boys. The top category, sexually driven, was composed of people who seemed obsessed with sex, and it consisted almost entirely (97 percent) of males. This pattern again suggests higher sex drive among males than females.

Desire can also be reflected in favorable attitudes toward the sex organs. Reinholtz and Muehlenhard (1995) showed that men have more favorable attitudes toward their penises than women have toward their vaginas. That could certainly arise from several possible things, but if it does have anything to do with strength as sex drive, it would certainly be another sign that men desire sex more than women do. Reinholtz and Muehlenhard also found that men liked vaginas more than women liked penises. Thus, both genders' sex organs are more appealing to men than women. This is important converging evidence that the sexual response is stronger in the male.

Within dating relationships, men want more sex than women. We already cited findings that men want sex earlier in the relationship than women. When a dating couple isn't having sex, it is far more often because the woman doesn't want to than because the man doesn't (Sprecher & Regan, 1996). In a large Australian sample of dating couples, McCabe (1987) found that the men (at all stages of relationship and sexual experience) often wanted more sex than what they were having, whereas the women were quite satisfied with the amount of sex they had. This doesn't reflect a difference in love. Men and women reported equal amounts of desire for affection, companionship, trust, security, and caring. But women didn't want any additional sex, whereas the men did. Furthermore, there was a very revealing category of people in long-term dating relationships who wanted sex but weren't having it. The researcher labeled this category "reluctant virgins"; it consisted almost entirely of men. Apparently the poor bastards already had a long-standing steady, monogamous relationship and had reached the stage of wanting full intercourse, but the girlfriends weren't ready to go all the way. Some of the unfortunate men had probably been holding wistful, yearning, but so far futile hopes for months. In other words, women are not usually stuck with their virginity. Many men are, however.

Even in long-term marriages, the same patterns are found. In a study of couples who had been married more than twenty years, Ard (1977) found that husbands wanted sex more often than wives wanted it. Both men and women agreed that the men wanted more sex. The average answers to "How often would you like to have sex?" and "How often do you have sex?" were almost identical for women. For the men, the desired frequency was about 50 percent higher than what they were getting. This fits the view that men have more sexual desire. Within the same marriages, the wives saw the rate of sex as just about right, while the husbands perceived a significant margin of disappointment.

Converging evidence comes from same-sex relationships. Within long-term relationships, lesbians have sex less often than gay males (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Thus, when sexual frequency is determined entirely by women, it is lower than when it is determined entirely by men.

Men initiate sex more often than women in heterosexual relationships (Byers & Heinlein, 1989; O'Sullivan & flyers, 1992). Women refuse sex more often than men. Within a marriage or committed relationship, this second finding is not always found (i.e., men and women refuse equally, although men still initiate more). But outside of the relationship, the refusal rates diverge sharply (Clark & Hatfield, 1989).

One team of researchers came up with a list of nineteen strategies for avoiding or obtaining sex. Then they showed this list to a sample of subjects and asked them to rate whether each strategy was more typical of men or women. Both men and women respondents gave essentially the same answers. All ten of the strategies for obtaining sex were rated as more typical of men than women. All nine of the strategies for avoiding sex were rated as more typical of women than men (Mercer & Kohn, 1979). Clearly, the participants in that study perceived that the majority of sexual negotiations involve men trying to obtain sex and women trying to avoid it. The men are seen as acting like they want sex more than the women. Both men and women see the same gender difference on that point.

Masturbation is another very revealing and important indicator of the sex drive, because it is not severely constrained by opportunity, interpersonal concerns, love, romanticism, fear of venereal disease, fear of pregnancy or other issues. It is a fairly pure and unhindered measure of sex drive. Men masturbate more than women. This is true by two different ways of counting. First, men are far more likely than women to masturbate at all. In other words, a higher percentage of men than women ever engage in masturbation.

Second, among masturbators, men masturbate more often than women (Laumann et al., 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). The incidence difference is one of the few gender differences to reach what statisticians call a large effect size. There are many gender differences, but most are officially small or medium, although they can still be quite important. Only a few are large. Masturbation is one of the few large differences, and that also it means that masturbation is one of the biggest differences between men and women across all possible ways of being different.

Within either gender, masturbation is related to the strength of the sex drive (Abramson, 1973), which provides further reason to think that the difference between men and women also shows a difference in sex drive. In other words, within gender, the effect is consistent: Men with higher sex drives masturbate more than other men. The same holds true among women. The higher your sex drive, the more likely you are to masturbate. The direct link to strength of sex drive is another reason to think that the masturbation gap between men and women is in fact a result of weaker sex drive among women.

Among people who don't masturbate, it is reasonable to ask why. Multiple potential reasons exist, of course, including guilt and lack of privacy. Perhaps surprisingly, the male non-masturbators were most likely than women to mention guilt as a reason. The crucial point, however, was that the women mainly cited lack of desire as their reason (Arafat & Cotton, 1974). Many women apparently regard masturbation as not worth the bother. But few men feel that way.

We mentioned that some feminists have blamed societal teachings, including the fact that society does not teach girls to masturbate, for the lower rates of masturbation among women. Technically it is true that society does not teach girls to masturbate—but no one actually teaches the boys either. Most boys and girls who learn to masturbate figure it out (or discover it) by themselves (Arafat & Cotton, 1974). An equal number of boys and girls learn it from peers and siblings. Thus, lack of female masturbation doesn't reflect the fact that society teaches boys but not girls to do it; it instead reflects the fact that many females simply don't have the inclination because they have fewer or less frequent sexual impulses. Most people who get horny enough to masturbate manage to figure out how to do it, sooner or later.

Along the same lines, women spend less money on sexual aids and devices and are less likely to purchase any such sexual products (e.g., Laumann et al., 1994). The same goes for pornography. Even when men and women are presented with erotic stimuli under identical laboratory conditions, women usually report less enjoyment, although the differences are fairly small in fact (e.g., Reed & Reed, 1972; Sigusch, Schmidt, Reinfeld, & Wiedemann-Sutor, 1970; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1970; cf. Fisher & Byrne, 1978).

It could be argued that pornography is generally produced for men rather than women, so naturally women would enjoy it less. Then again, if there were a large, viable market for female-targeted pornography, the products would probably be available. In any case, the opposite is true for sexual stimulation devices: The vibrator for women seems to be a superior, more effective device than anything that is available to men (on satisfaction with vibrators, see Davis, Blank, Lin, & Bonillas, 1996). But most women don't purchase vibrators.

Another very important indicator is how many sexual practices people enjoy. In the NHLS, people were presented with a list of fifteen sexual practices and asked how many they found appealing. Across all categories, men liked more practices than women (Laumann et al., 1994). Also, almost every practice was liked more by men than women, although not all the differences were significant. Still, the overall composite certainly was significant: Men like more different sexual acts than women.

Most modern American married couples practice fellatio and cunnilingus, at least occasionally. Even so, women rate these activities less appealing than men. Researchers have suggested that many women seem to perform these more out of a sense of obligation than out of genuine desire and enjoyment. The men were more prone to really like them.

Last, when people rate the strength of their sexual urges, women give lower ratings than men (Mercer & Kohn, 1979). Among people who are not having sex, more women than men cite lack of desire as the reason (Leigh, 1989). When married couples are asked to indicate whether they are having as much sex as they want, far more men than women express the wish for more sex (Ard, 1977; Julien, Bouchard, Gagnon, & Pomerleau, 1992).

Those are the main relevant findings. In our view, they provide more than enough proof that men have more sexual desire than women. To avoid that conclusion, you would have to define the sex drive in a way that does not involve thinking about sex, feeling sexual desire, desiring different partners, enjoying different activities, wanting to have sex often, having frequent sexual fantasies, having more variety of sexual fantasies, masturbating, and self-reporting desire. Such a definition would be absurd. You can't sensibly talk about sexual desire if you throw all those things out.

How could anyone have believed otherwise? We suspect that some researchers were misled by two observations, both of which have been repeated at least since the influential first book by Masters and Johnson (1966). First, some women are capable of having multiple orgasms, whereas men generally aren't. Second, women can continue copulating after orgasm, but men must usually stop. This, however, reflects capacity, not the sex drive per se. Yes, a woman is physically capable of having more orgasms than a man—but that doesn't mean that the average woman typically wants or tries to have them. Women *can* do more; men *want* to do more. The wanting is the sign of the drive for sex.

Another possible source of confusion is that during the height of passionate love, women may well desire sex just as much as men. In other words, when the female sex drive is fully aroused, it does not seem any milder or weaker than the male. We shall return to this point in Chapter 7. The observation may well be true

(although we do not know of clear data), but it too is beside the point. Perhaps men and women are equally sexual when fully aroused, but men reach that level of arousal more often and more easily than women. Ultimately this too refers to the potential level of female eroticism, which may be as high as (or even higher than) men's. The sex drive question is, however, a matter not of erotic potential but rather of strength and frequency of desire. Clearly, men are blessed or cursed with stronger, more frequent desires.

Taken together, the evidence is thus essentially unanimous and unambiguous; Women do have milder sex drives than men. Women surpass men on sexual capacity, and enjoyment of good sex is probably quite similar in men and women, but men desire sex more than women.

Does this mean something bad about women? There is nothing inherently wonderful or superior about wanting more sex. In fact, in Chapter 8 we shall suggest that the strength of the male sex drive is a source of problems and unhappiness for many men. We suspect that the obsolete value judgments from the 1970s, at the height of the sexual revolution, may have caused women to think it important to believe that women have as much sexual desire as men, but we also think that those value judgments need to be reassessed. More sexual desire is not always better, especially when one considers the wide range of personal and social misfortunes that can be traced to sexual excesses. A moderate sex drive is probably best. Women should more likely be pleased and proud, rather than offended or defeated, about having a moderate sex drive.

We cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the gender difference in sex drive reflects cultural influence, and so it would be going beyond the data to insist that the unchangeable biological nature of women dictates that they have a sex drive weaker than men's. That view may, however, be correct, and unless the field can clearly identify some societies in which women consistently desire sex more than men—reflected in more frequent masturbation, desire for more sex acts and more partners, and so forth—then we should probably assume a biological basis as a reasonable working hypothesis.

Even if there is a biological foundation for the different strength of sex drive, however, there is ample room for culture to exert some influence. Even the most ardent supporter of biological determinism must seemingly concede that different cultures and historical eras have exerted different degrees of pressure on women to control their sexuality. Let us now leave the basic question of differences in strength of sex drive and turn to the fascinating problem of cultural suppression.

From *Social Dimension of Sex*, Baumeister & Tice, 2001, pages 95-107