

“Normal” and “Deviant” Sexual Behavior

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It is necessary to put aside our culturally acquired biases to achieve an objective perspective on what constitutes “normal” and “deviant” sexual behavior. Sexual practices and mores have varied widely in the course of human history and in different cultures. Our present concepts of normal and deviant behavior cannot be divorced from the value systems of contemporary society. Since value systems are always in the process of evolution and change, we must be prepared to face the possibility that some patterns of sexual behavior currently considered deviant may not always be so regarded.

It is difficult to approach the topic of human sexuality with the same kind of dispassionate scientific objectivity that can be applied to functions such as speech, digestion, or locomotion. Sexual behavior is so intimately entwined with moral issues, religious and cultural value systems, and even aesthetic reactions, that those who attempt to deal with it too open-mindedly are likely to be charged by their contemporaries with being immoral or amoral, if not illegal. Sigmund Freud's efforts at the turn of the 19th century to bring the “problems of the bedroom” under scientific scrutiny caused both colleagues and friends to turn away from him in embarrassment, and even sixty years later, in the relatively enlightened second half of the 20th century, the

meticulous physiological studies of Masters and Johnson stimulated cries of outrage in many quarters and titters of embarrassment in others.

Nevertheless, no discussion of human sexual behavior can be truly objective if one does not attempt to stand outside of the narrow framework of one's own cultural bias to see how the raw data of human sexual biology are shaped by and shape the infinitely varied mosaics of human experience in different places and at different times.

Historical Considerations.—Even a cursory look at the recorded history of human sexuality makes it abundantly clear that patterns of sexual behavior and morality have taken many diverse forms over the centuries. Far from being “natural” and inevitable, our contemporary sexual codes and mores, seen in historical perspective, would appear no less grotesque to people of other eras than theirs appear to us. Our attitudes concerning nudity, virginity, fidelity, love, mar-

riage, and “proper” sexual behavior are meaningful only within the context of our own cultural and religious mores. Thus, in the first millennium of the Christian era, in many parts of what is now Europe, public nudity was no cause for shame (as is still true in some aboriginal settings), virginity was not prized, marriage was usually a temporary arrangement, and extramarital relations were taken for granted. Frank and open sexuality was the rule, and incest was frequent. Women were open aggressors in inviting sexual intercourse. Bastardy was a mark of distinction because it often implied that some important person had slept with one's mother. In early feudal times new brides were usually deflowered by the feudal lord (*jus primae noctis*). In other early societies all the wedding guests would copulate with the bride. Far from being considered a source of concern to the husband, these practices were considered a way of strengthening the marriage in that the pain of the initial coitus would not be associated with the husband.

It was not until the Medieval Church was able to strengthen and extend its control over the peoples of Europe that guilt about sexuality began to be a cardinal feature of Western life. Even the early Hebraic laws against adultery had nothing to do with fidelity but were primarily concerned with protecting the property rights of another man (the wife being considered property). Married men were free to maintain concubines or, if they preferred, multiple

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wives; also, there was no ban in the Old Testament on premarital sex. The Medieval Church, however, exalted celibacy and virginity. In its efforts to make license in sexual intercourse as difficult as possible, it sanctioned it only for procreative purposes and ordained laws against abortion—laws that had not existed among the Greeks, Romans, or Jews. At one time it went so far as to make sexual intercourse between married couples illegal on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, as well as for forty days before Easter and forty days before Christmas, and also from the time of conception to forty days after parturition. (By contrast, Mohammedan law considered it grounds for divorce if intercourse did not take place at least once a week.)

Moreover, when the sexual taboos of the Medieval Church began to be widely enforced by cruel sanctions, a veritable epidemic of sexual pathology ensued—sodomy, flagellation, hysterical “possession” by witches and devils, incubi, succubi, phantom pregnancies, stigmata, and the like. In contrast, it is worth noting that in societies in which access to sexuality was open and guilt-free—the early Greeks, Europe prior to the Middle Ages and most “primitive” societies—the so-called sexual perversions tended not to be present. The homosexuality of the early Greeks, incidentally, was not an exclusive homosexuality, but part of a pattern of bisexuality in which homosexual feelings were considered to be as natural as heterosexual ones.

The ideals of romantic love and marriage for love which are taken for granted today are a relatively late development in Western history and did not make their appearance until the 12th century AD.¹ Clearly, there is nothing about our current sexual attitudes and practices that can be assumed to be either sacrosanct or immutable. They have been subject to much change and evolution in the past, and they will undoubtedly be different in the future.

Biological and Cultural Considerations.—Before we can proceed, it is necessary to clarify certain fundamental questions about the nature of human sexuality that have a bearing on the problem of sexual deviation. What is the biological core of human sexuality? Is it exclusively heterosexual, or does it have a bisexual composition? Is man “naturally” polygamous? Is woman naturally monoandrous? Are most “perversions” “unnatural?” What form does natural sexuality take in children?

Zoological and cross-cultural studies in recent years clearly demonstrate that the issue of sexual behavior goes far beyond its reproductive functions. Caspari's definition of the sexual process as “the exchange of nuclear material between cells of mating types or sexes” may have validity for relatively primitive forms of life, but as we ascend the phylogenetic scale this definition becomes manifestly inadequate. Patterns of sexual behavior evolve with the species, and at higher mammalian levels there is an increasing emphasis on various sex-related activities rather than on purely reproductive ones.

Sex in human beings is usually spoken of as being an “instinct.” By this we mean that it is a fundamental behavioral pattern dependent on internal biological factors but capable of being triggered by external cues. Either may create a state of disequilibrium experienced as urgency or tension; this tension then leads to behavior that has the effect of restoring the previous state of balance, with an accompanying sense of subjective gratification. It is important to remember, however, that such a reaction takes quite a different form in human beings than it does in lower animals, even though the term instinct is used equally for both. The lower in the scale of evolution an animal is, the more totally developed and less modifiable are such instinctual patterns; but as one moves up the evolutionary scale inherited in-

stinctual patterns tend to become less preformed and more subject to modification by learning. This development reaches its highest point in man, whose instinctual patterns at birth tend to be relatively unfocused biological drives, subject to enormous modifiability by learning and experience. This is a major factor in the extraordinary range of human adaptability.

This essentially unfocused quality of man's sexual drive in infancy is what Hampson and Hampson² have referred to as man's inherent “psychosexual neutrality” at birth—a neutrality that “permits the development and perpetuation of diverse patterns of psychosexual orientation and functioning in accordance with the life experiences each individual may encounter and transact.” This concept of psychosexual neutrality does not, as some have mistakenly inferred, mean a “driveless” state, but rather an inborn biological drive with no specific inborn object, but with the potential for adapting its gratificatory needs to whatever objects the environment makes available to it. The term “psychosexual multipotentiality” probably expresses this more adequately than psychosexual neutrality.

In human sexual behavior, situational and learning factors are of major importance in arousal and response. In the absence of heterosexual objects, human beings (as well as many lower animals) may ultimately seek gratification in homosexual objects, or if no human object is available, in relations with animals of other species, or even by contact with inanimate objects. Even the physiological route of gratification, whether through the genitals or some other erogenous zone, or via patterns of behavior which seem to have no inherent elements of erogenicity in them at all, are subject to conditioning by specific experiences or associations. Other factors in sexual responsiveness include age, health, fatigue, nutritional state, and re-

gency of drive fulfillment.

Freud believed that the bisexual anlage which can be observed in the human embryo is subsequently reflected in a universal bisexual tendency at a psychological level. The evidences of such psychic bisexuality, in this view, are seen in "latent homosexual" manifestations such as affectionate feelings for members of one's own sex and in patterns of behavior or interest that are usually (in our culture) considered to be characteristic of the opposite sex. Examples of these would be artistic or culinary interests or "passive" attitudes in males, or athletic or scientific interests or "aggressive" attitudes in females.

This hypothesis was first challenged in the psychoanalytic literature by Rado³ who pointed out that "in the final shaping of the normal individual the double embryological origin of the genital system does not result in any physiological duality of reproductive functioning." More than this, we now know that with the exception of the relatively uncommon individuals with sexual chromosome abnormalities, in almost all human beings, biological sex is clearly differentiated at the moment of conception by the XX and XY chromosomal patterns. Nevertheless, the theory of psychic bisexuality is sometimes still defended on the basis that both "male" and "female" sex hormones—androgens and estrogens—can be found in the blood of both sexes. However, although the biological activity of these hormones is essential for the growth and maturation of the primary genital apparatus in both sexes and for the development of secondary sexual characteristics, there is no evidence in humans that these hormones affect the direction of human sexuality or that they determine psychological "masculinity" or "femininity."⁴ As Money has put it,

There is no primary genetic or other innate mechanism to preordain the masculinity or femininity of psychosexual

differentiation. . . . The analogy is with language. Genetics and innate determinants ordain only that language can develop . . . but not whether the language will be Nahuatl, Arabic, English, or any other.⁵

Psychological and behavioral patterns of masculinity or femininity constitute what is meant by "gender role," and are not necessarily synonymous with an individual's biological sex. As the Hampsons have pointed out:

The psychologic phenomenon which we have termed gender role, or psychosexual orientation, evolves gradually in the course of growing up and cannot be assigned or discarded at will. The components of gender role are neither static nor universal. They change with the times and are an integral part of each culture and subculture. Thus one may expect important differences in what is to be considered typical and appropriate masculine or feminine gender roles as displayed by a native of Thailand and a native of Maryland. . . .²

Opler, in the same vein, comments that

a Navajo Indian may be a he-man, or gambler, and a philanderer while dressing in bright blouses adorned with jeweled belts, necklaces, and bracelets. French courtiers in the retinues of effete monarchs were equally philanderers, though rouged, powdered, and bedecked with fine lace. The Andaman Islanders like to have the man sit on his wife's lap in fond greetings, and friends and relatives, of the same or opposite sex, greet one another in the same manner after absences, crying in the affected manner of the mid-Victorian woman. . . . Obviously, the style of social and sexual behavior is something of an amalgam and is culturally influenced.⁶

The fact is that the patterning of human sexual behavior begins at birth. From the moment a child is identified as either boy or girl, it begins to be shaped by multitudinous cues which communicate certain gender role expectations to it over the succeeding years. This results in a "core gender identity" of either maleness or femaleness, which becomes so profoundly fixed by the age of three, that efforts to reverse this identity after that time are almost always doomed to failure.²

Within every society, the process

of acculturation that takes place during these critical years begins to condition the child's behavior so as to enable it to conform to the mores of its environment—how and what it should eat, where and when it may urinate and defecate, what and whom it may play with, how it should think and express itself, and how and toward whom it may express its sexual needs. The so-called "polymorphous-perverse" sexual behavior of young children described by Freud in his *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* constitutes the normal behavior of children before the acculturation processes of our society have funneled their sexual patterns into "proper channels." From it we can infer what form the "natural sexuality" of man would probably take if no cultural taboos or restrictions at all existed in this sphere. Freud obviously was not unaware of this when he wrote that "it is absolutely impossible not to recognize in the uniform predisposition to all perversions . . . a universal and primitive human tendency."⁷

Developmental Factors.—In his libido theory, Freud hypothesized that the sexual instinct followed a phylogenetically predestined evolutionary pathway. In the first year of life, the primary erotogenic focus was the oral zone, in the second and third years, the anal zone, and in the fourth and fifth years, the phallic zone. From the sixth year to puberty, the sexual drive then underwent an involitional process—the "latency period"—during which the "sexual energy" was deflected from sexual goals and "sublimated." With puberty, the sexual drive was again unleashed and now directed toward the ultimate adult goal of full genital gratification.

With the shift in psychoanalytic theory from an instinct-psychology to an ego-psychology, the unfolding of human sexuality may be viewed in a somewhat different light. The infant's sexual needs are seen as rather primitive and undifferenti-

ated at birth. Such as they are, they find expression in the exercise of the child's relatively undeveloped ego functions—in sucking, in body movements, and in experiencing cutaneous and kinesthetic sensations. In the course of its adaptive development the child discovers sucking its thumb and handling its genitals as special sources of somatic pleasure, and if not discouraged, will utilize these as accessory sources of gratification. Indeed, infantile masturbation may be regarded as one of the earliest experiences of autonomy in normal development. When the child discovers erogenous zones within himself that he can stimulate to give himself pleasure, he has achieved a significant step in ego mastery. Such masturbation is analogous to the behavioral patterns described by Olds⁸ in his experimental rats when they discovered their ability to stimulate a "pleasure area" in their hypothalamus.

This author has never been convinced that the shift to "anal erogenicity" during the second year is either as clear-cut or as inevitable as Freud believed. Where it does seem to occur, it may well be the consequence of the emphasis on bowel-training which takes place at this time in our culture, and which often becomes the locus for an emotionally laden transaction between child and mother. Moreover, the struggle at this point is not so much over the issue of the child's wish for anal-zone pleasure per se, as it is over the child's wish to move its bowels whenever and wherever it wishes. Thus the issue is not anality, but the broader one of the pleasure-principle versus the reality-principle—the basic battleground of every acculturation process.

It is probably not accidental also that phallic-zone interest develops when it does. The third year of life corresponds with the shift in cultural emphasis from bowel sphincter training to the development of urinary control. Simultaneously, the

developing and intrusive ego of the child at this age begins to perceive, and concern itself with, the shame-ridden issues of the anatomical differences between the sexes, where babies come from, and how much fun it is to play with the forbidden genitals. This is the period of the "polymorphous-perverse."

That a latency period should occur in our culture after this kind of behavior should not come as a surprise. Freud believed this period to be "organically determined," but the absence of such a reaction of latency in cultures where there are no prohibitions to the free expression of sexuality in children, clearly indicates that this is not so. Sexual latency, when it occurs, is obviously the result of repression in a culture that strongly indoctrinates the child with the conviction that its "polymorphous and perverse" sexual interests are dirty, shameful, and sinful. Under this pressure, with threats of physical punishment and loss of love (both "castration" threats), many children in our society repress their sexuality until the imperative thrust of puberty brings it to the fore again. It is worth noting, however, that there has been evidence in recent years that increasing numbers of children in their prepubertal years continue to be sexually active and interested. This is a reflection of the more accepting attitudes toward sexuality that have been emerging in our culture in recent decades.

The subsequent vicissitudes of adult sexuality also take many forms. Monogamy as a compulsory pattern of mateship, for example, occurs in only a minority of human societies—only 16% of 185 societies studied by Ford and Beach.⁹ (Even in that 16%, less than one third wholly disapproved of both premarital and extramarital liaisons.) Strict monogamy, however, is not necessarily a mark of advanced civilization—some extremely primitive societies are strongly monogamous.

Patterns of monogamy and polyg-

amy (or polyandry) are usually dependent on economic factors. Even in societies where multiple mateships are permitted, only the well-to-do usually are able to exercise this option, and single mateships, although not required, are the rule.

Rules governing premarital and extramarital relations also vary widely in different cultures. There are numerous societies in which extramarital sex is permitted and expected, and in which there is no censure of adultery. Indeed, among the polyandrous Toda of India, there is no word in their language for adultery, and moral opprobrium is attached to the man who begrudges his wife to another! It is interesting to note also that in societies that have no double standard in sexual matters and in which liaisons are freely permitted, women avail themselves of their opportunities as eagerly as men, a fact that casts serious doubts on the popular assumption that females are, by nature, less sexually assertive than males.

Definition of Sexual Deviation.—How then can one define sexual deviations? It is clear from our preceding discussion that an adequate definition cannot be based on any assumption of the biological "naturalness" of any particular pattern of sexual behavior in man. What is evaluated as psychologically healthy in one era or culture may not be so in another. The normal sexual behavior of an adolescent girl among the Marquesans or Trobrianders would be considered nymphomaniac or delinquent in our society. Homosexual behavior is regarded as deviant in many cultures, including our own, but was not so adjudged in ancient Greece and pre-Meiji Japan, or among the Tanalans of Madagascar, the Siwanis of Africa, the Aranda of Australia, the Keraki of New Guinea, and many others.

It is sometimes argued that this kind of culture-oriented relativistic concept of normalcy is fallacious

because it fails to recognize that there is an "optimal" conception of health that transcends all cultural norms. The difficulty with this argument is that the concept of optimal itself is culture-bound. Even granting that within any culture a concept such as personality homeostasis or self-realization has validity, the content of such concepts still vary in different times and places. A definition of psychological health in psychoanalytic terms implies the ability of the "ego" to effectively handle and integrate its relationships with the "id," the "superego," and the outer world. Such a definition could undoubtedly be used cross-culturally. But again, its content will vary in different cultural contexts since the nature of the "normal" superego and of the outer-world are culture-dependent.

Comment

It seems to this author, therefore, that there is no way in which the concepts of normal and deviant sexual behavior can be divorced from the value systems of our society; and since such value systems are always in the process of evolution and change, we must be prepared to face the possibility that some patterns currently considered deviant may not always be so regarded. The fact that we now refer to sexual "deviations" rather than to "perversions" already represents an evolutionary change within our culture toward a more objective and scientific approach to these problems, in contrast to the highly moralistic and pejorative approach of the previous generation. Perhaps some day we shall talk simply of "variations" in sexual object choice.

Such a relativistic approach to normalcy should not, however, be mistaken for a nihilistic one. We are all products of our culture, and within the context of our current Western cultural value system there are indeed certain patterns that can be regarded as psychologically optimal

and healthy.

Although there is a wide spectrum of variations in human sexual motivation and behavior—most human beings, in the privacy of their bedrooms, in one way or another, and at one time or another, violate the rigid conventional standards of "proper" sexual behavior—there are nevertheless certain more widely deviant patterns of sexual behavior that in all likelihood would be considered abnormal in every society. For example, practices that involve serious injury to one of the participants in the sexual relationship could hardly be considered adaptive in any society since they would ultimately jeopardize its survival.

One way of defining a large category of sexual practices that is considered deviant in our culture is that they involve the habitual and preferential use of nongenital outlets for sexual release. The emphasis is on the terms "habitual" and "preferential," since extragenital gratification may be a part of normal sexual foreplay, or of variations in sexual experiences between perfectly normal adults. When, however, such variant activity becomes an habitual end in itself, it almost always, in the context of our culture, means some disturbance in personality functioning.

It should be noted that the above definition is a psychiatric not a legal one. Statutes in most of the United States regard any use of nongenital outlets for sexual release as illegal. Kinsey and his coworkers, after their extensive surveys of sexual practices of males and females, concluded that there are probably very few adults who have not technically violated such statutes at one time or another.

Other major forms of sexual behavior that are defined as deviant in our society involve activity that is homosexual, or sexual activity with immature partners of either sex (pedophilia), animals (bestiality), dead people (necrophilia), or inani-

mate objects (fetishism).

Although sexual deviations are commonly separated in terms of their outstanding clinical manifestations, in actuality they are far from discrete phenomena. There is frequent overlapping among them and it is not uncommon for an individual to present simultaneous evidence of more than one of these manifestations. Thus, a fetishist may also be an exhibitionist and a voyeur; a transvestite may also be involved in sadomasochistic practices; incest and pedophilia may be associated in the same person, and so forth.

The reason for this overlapping rests in the underlying psychodynamics that are common to all sexual deviations in our society. The deviant is in almost all instances an individual who has difficulty in achieving normal or satisfactory sexual relations with a mature partner of the opposite sex. Thus his deviant practices represent alternative ways of attempting to achieve sexual gratification; they are displacement phenomena and in many instances the displacement mechanism may operate in more than one direction. Some deviants exhibit polymorphous-perverse patterns of sexual behavior akin to that of very young children who have not yet been adequately acculturated. In this sense they may be considered to have been "fixated" at an early stage of psychosexual development, or to have "regressed" to this stage.

The choice of deviant pattern, like the choice of symptom in neurosis, is dependent on complex determinants which have to be ferreted out by a painstaking history and psychodynamic evaluation in each individual case. Disturbances in core family relationships, impairment in gender identity development, poor ego development, and specific conditioning experiences are all involved.

Apart from such clearly definable deviant patterns, human sexual relationships are often complicated by unconscious motivations of fear,

hate, or guilt, which leave their stamps on the quality of the sexual transactions between partners. In our culture, a key distinguishing factor between what is regarded as healthy or unhealthy sexual behavior is whether such behavior is motivated by feelings of love or whether it becomes a vehicle for the discharge of anxiety, hostility, or guilt. Healthy sexuality seeks erotic pleasure in the context of tenderness and affection; pathologic sexuality is motivated by needs for reassurance or relief from nonsexual sources of tension. Healthy sexuality seeks both to give and receive pleasure; neurotic forms are unbalanced toward excessive giving or taking. Healthy sexuality is discriminating as to partner; neurotic patterns often tend to be nondiscriminating. The periodicity of healthy sexuality is determined primarily by recurrent erotic tensions in the context of affection. Neurotic sexual drives, on the other hand, are triggered less by erotic needs than by nonerotic tensions and are therefore more apt to be compulsive in their patterns of occurrence.

A sharp line of distinction, however, cannot always be drawn between healthy and neurotic sexuality. Since patterns of sexual behavior always reflect personality patterns and problems, and since no one in our complex society is totally exempt from individual idiosyncracies, tensions, and anxieties, these will be manifested in sexual patterns no less than in other areas of interpersonal transactions. No human being is perfect, and nowhere is the humanity of man more transparent than in the varied patterns of his sexual relationships.

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