Chapter Preview

Although in most ways men and women are alike, they also differ. For example, men behave more aggressively and are perceived as more dominant, forceful, and independent. Women are more concerned with making social connections. Differing sex chromosomes and differing concentrations of sex hormones lead to significant physiological differences. Yet, gender differences vary widely depending on culture. Cultural variations in gender roles demonstrate our capacity for learning and adapting. Both social and cultural factors contribute to gender identity and gender typing.

In nonhuman animals, hormones help stimulate sexuality activity. In humans they influence sexual behavior more loosely. The human sexual response cycle normally follows a pattern of excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution. People who suffer sexual dysfunctions or paraphilias are unable to complete a normal response cycle. Problems arising from unprotected sex—sexually transmitted infections and unwanted teen pregnancies—can radically alter people’s lives. Exposure to sexually explicit material can have adverse effects. However, fantasizing about sex does not indicate a sexual problem or dissatisfaction. One’s sexual orientation seems neither willfully chosen nor willfully changed; new research links sexual orientation to biological factors.

Evolutionary psychologists study how natural selection favors behavioral tendencies that contribute to the survival and spread of our genes. They use natural selection to help us understand gender similarities and differences and important aspects of our sexuality. Throughout the world, males are more likely than females to initiate sexual activity. In addition, men have a more recreational approach to sex while women have a more relational approach. In explaining gender differences in sexual behavior, evolutionary psychologists argue that women most often send their genes into the future by pairing wisely, men by pairing widely. Critics maintain that evolutionary psychologists make too many hindsight explanations and underestimate the role of culture. Evolutionary psychologists highlight the explanatory power of their theoretical principles, especially those that offer testable predictions.

We are products of both nature and nurture, of genes and environment. For example, genes and hormones may predispose certain gender differences but gender roles also shape us. Still, we are not rigidly determined. We are architects of our future and the stream of causation runs through our present choices.
Chapter 5  Gender and Sexuality

Chapter Guide

Introductory Exercise: Fact or Falsehood?


Gender Development

5-1. Discuss gender similarities and differences in aggression, social power, and social connectedness.

In psychology, **gender** refers to the socially constructed roles and characteristics by which a culture defines male and female. Men and women are similar in genetic makeup as well as levels of intelligence, vocabulary, and happiness. Men and women differ in body fat, muscle, height, and life expectancy. Women are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. In contrast, men are more likely to commit suicide and suffer alcohol dependence. They are also much more likely to be diagnosed with autism, color-blindness, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder as children, and antisocial personalities as adults.

In surveys, men admit to more aggression than women, and experiments confirm that men tend to behave more aggressively, such as by delivering what they believe are painful electric shocks. The same difference is reflected in violent crime rates. The gender gap in physical aggression appears in many cultures and across various ages.

Throughout the world, men are perceived as more dominant, forceful, and independent, while women are viewed as more submissive, nurturing, and socially connected. In groups, leadership tends to go to men. In everyday behavior, men are more likely to talk assertively, to interrupt, to initiate touching, to smile less, to stare, and to apologize less.

Compared with men, women are more interconnected. This gender difference surfaces early, in children’s play. Girls play in smaller groups, and their play is less competitive and more imitative of social relationships. In coping with stress, women more often turn to others for support. Women emphasize caring; they tend and befriend. Both men and women indicate that their friendships with women tend to be more intimate, enjoyable, and nurturing.

5-2. Explain how biological sex is determined, and describe how sex hormones influence prenatal and adolescent development.

Biological sex is determined by the twenty-third pair of chromosomes, the sex chromosomes. The member of the pair inherited from the mother is an X chromosome. The X (female) or Y (male) **chromosome** that comes from the father determines the child’s sex. The Y chromosome triggers the production of the principal male sex hormone, **testosterone**, which in turn triggers the development of external male sex organs in the fetus and the development of male sex characteristics during puberty.

**Puberty** is the onset of rapid growth and developing sexual maturity. A surge of hormones triggers a two-year period of growth that begins in girls at about age 11 and in boys at about age 13. During the growth spurt, the reproductive organs, or **primary sex characteristics**, develop dramatically. So do the **secondary sex characteristics**, such as the breasts and hips in girls, facial hair and
a deepened voice in boys, and pubic and underarm hair in both sexes. The landmarks of puberty are the first ejaculation (spermarche) in boys, which usually occurs by about age 14, and the first menstrual period (menarche) in girls, usually within a year of age 12½.

Sometimes nature blurs the biological line between males and females. Intersex individuals are born with intermediate or unusual combinations of male and female physical features.

5-3. Describe how gender roles and gender typing influence gender development.

Although biology influences our gender, gender is also socially constructed, as the biopsychosocial perspective reminds us. Culture shapes our roles: a role is a cluster of prescribed actions. For example, gender roles—the social expectations that guide men’s and women’s behavior—vary across time and place. For instance, in nomadic societies of food-gathering people, there is little division of labor by sex. Thus, boys and girls receive much the same upbringing. In agricultural societies, women stay close to home, while men often roam more freely. Such societies typically socialize children into more distinct gender roles. Even among industrialized countries, gender roles vary greatly.

Society assigns each of us to the social category of male and female. The result is our gender identity, our sense of being male or female. To varying degrees, we also become gender typed, acquiring a traditional male or female role. Social learning theory assumes that children learn gender-linked behaviors by observing and imitating significant others and by being rewarded and punished. Thinking also matters. From their culture, children learn a concept or gender schema of what it means to be male or female and adjust their behavior accordingly. For some people, however, comparing themselves with the traditional concept of gender produces feelings of confusion and discord. Transgender people’s sense of being male or female differs from their birth sex.

Human Sexuality


The sex hormones, especially in nonhuman animals, activate sexual behavior. Although testosterone is present in both sexes, males have a higher level of this hormone. The female hormones, the estrogens (such as estradiol), peak during ovulation.

In humans, the hormones influence sexual behaviors more loosely, especially once sufficient hormone levels are present. Women more than other mammalian females are responsive to their testosterone level. If the level drops, her sexual interest wanes. In later life, as sex hormones decline, the frequency of sexual fantasies and intercourse also declines.

5-5. Describe the human sexual response cycle, and distinguish between sexual dysfunctions and paraphilias.

The human sexual response cycle normally follows a pattern of excitement, plateau, orgasm (which seems to involve similar feelings and brain activity in males and females), and resolution, followed in males by a refractory period, during which renewed arousal and orgasm are not possible.

Sexual dysfunctions are problems that consistently impair sexual arousal or functioning. Premature ejaculation and orgasmic dysfunction can often be treated by therapy. Erectile dysfunction is routinely treated by taking a pill.
The paraphilias, such as exhibitionism and fetishism, involve sexual arousal related to socially unacceptable behaviors.

5-6. **Explain how sexually transmitted infections can be prevented.**

Rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are rising, and two-thirds of the new infections have occurred in people under 25. Teenage girls, because of their less mature biological development and lower levels of protective antibodies, seem especially vulnerable to STIs.

Condoms offer only limited protection against certain skin-to-skin STIs, such as herpes. However, condoms have been 80 percent effective in preventing transmission of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus—the virus that causes AIDS) from an infected partner. Recent studies show a significant link between oral sex and transmission of STIs, such as the human papilloma virus (HPV).

- Exercises: The Sexual Opinion Survey (p. 626); Hendrick Sexual Attitudes Scale (p. 627)
- Lecture: Fear of Intimacy Scale (p. 626)

5-7. **Describe how external and imagined stimuli contribute to sexual arousal.**

External stimuli, such as sexually explicit materials, can trigger arousal in both men and women. With repeated exposure, the emotional response to any erotic stimulus often lessens, or habituates. Sexually coercive material tends to increase viewers’ acceptance of rape and violence toward women. Images of sexually attractive men and women may lead people to devalue their own partners and relationships. Our imaginations also influence sexual motivation.

Wide-awake people become sexually aroused both by memories of prior sexual activities and by fantasies. About 95 percent of both men and women say they have had sexual fantasies. Fantasizing about sex does not indicate a sexual problem or dissatisfaction. If anything, sexually active people have more sexual fantasies.

- Lecture: Virginity Pledges (p. 627)
- Feature Film: *Juno* (p. 627)

5-8. **Discuss the factors that influence teenagers’ sexual behaviors and use of contraceptives.**

Compared with European teens, American teens have a higher pregnancy and STIs rate. One reason for this high rate is minimum communication about birth control, as many teenagers are uncomfortable discussing contraception with either parents or partners. Guilt related to sexual activity sometimes results in lack of planned birth control. When passion overwhelms intentions, the result may be conception. Sexually active teens also tend to use alcohol, which can break down normal restraints. Finally, television and movies foster sexual norms of unprotected promiscuity.

Teens with high rather than average intelligence more often delay sex. Religiosity, father presence, and participation in service learning programs are also predictors of sexual restraint.

**Sexual Orientation**

- Lecture: Bisexuality (p. 629)
- Exercises: Attitudes Toward Homosexual Persons (p. 628); The Complexity of Sexual Orientation (p. 628)
- Worth Video Anthology: Homosexuality and the Nature–Nurture Debate; Sexual Orientation and Activity

5-9. **Summarize what research has taught us about sexual orientation.**

**Sexual orientation** is our enduring sexual attraction toward members of either our own sex (homosexual orientation), the other sex (heterosexual orientation), or both sexes (bisexual orientation). Studies in both Europe and the United States suggest that about 3 percent of men and 1 or 2 percent of women are homosexual. Most psychologists today view sexual orientation as neither willfully chosen nor willfully changed. Women’s sexual orientation tends to be less strongly felt and potentially more fluid and changing than men’s, referred to as erotic plasticity. Women are somewhat more likely than men to feel and act on bisexual attractions.
There is no evidence that environmental influences determine sexual orientation. No links have been found between homosexuality and a child’s relationships with parents, fear or hatred of people of the other gender, levels of sex hormones currently in the blood, or childhood sexual experience. On the other hand, biological influences are evident in studies of same-sex relations in several hundred species, straight-gay differences in body and brain characteristics, genetic studies of family members and twins, and the effect of exposure to certain hormones during critical periods of prenatal development.

On several traits, gays and lesbians appear to fall midway between straight females and males. For example, there are differences between gays and straights in handedness and spatial abilities.

An Evolutionary Explanation of Human Sexuality

5-10. Discuss how an evolutionary psychologist might explain gender differences in sexuality and mating preferences.

One of the largest reported gender differences is women’s greater disapproval of and lesser willingness to engage in casual, uncommitted sex. In comparison to women, men think more about sex, masturbate more often, are more likely to initiate sex, and desire more frequent sex.

Evolutionary psychologists apply the principle of natural selection to explain women’s more relational and men’s more recreational approaches to sex. While a woman usually incubates and nurses one infant at a time, a man can spread his genes through other females. Women most often send their genes into the future by pairing wisely, men by pairing widely. Women increase their own and children’s chances of survival by searching for mates with economic resources and social status. Being attracted to healthy, fertile-appearing partners increases men’s chances of spreading their genes widely.

5-11. List the key criticisms of evolutionary explanations of human sexuality, and describe how evolutionary psychologists respond.

Critics argue that evolutionary psychologists start with an effect (e.g., gender sexuality difference) and work backward to propose an explanation. In addition, much of who we are is not hard-wired. Cultural expectations shape the genders. Still others suggest that evolutionary explanations may undercut moral responsibility. In response, evolutionary psychologists point to the explanatory and predictive power of their theoretical principles. They also note that understanding our propensities may help us to overcome them.
## Fact or Falsehood?

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<td>1. Women are more likely to commit suicide than are men.</td>
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<td>2. Throughout the world, hunting and fighting are primarily men’s activities.</td>
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<td>3. Both men and women report their friendships with women to be more intimate, enjoyable, and nurturing.</td>
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<td>4. Even when families discourage traditional gender typing, children still organize themselves into “boy worlds” and “girl worlds,” each guided by rules for what boys and girls do.</td>
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<td>5. Descriptions of the feelings of orgasm written by men cannot be distinguished from those written by women.</td>
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<td>6. Normal fluctuations in sex hormones have a significant effect on human sexual desire.</td>
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<td>7. Women are somewhat more likely than men to feel bisexual attractions.</td>
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<td>8. Research has shown that homosexuality is linked with problems in a child’s relationships with parents.</td>
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<td>9. Men who have older brothers are somewhat more likely to be gay.</td>
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<td>10. In many places around the world, females are more likely than males to initiate sexual activity.</td>
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