Lust
What We Know About Human Sexual Desire

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Lust
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"What Makes a Woman Bedable?" (Cosmopolitan)

"60 Wild, Erotic Ways to Excite Your Lover"
(Woman's Own)

"Love vs. Lust: How You'll Know the Difference"
(Woman's Own)

"How to Spark His Desire (Again & Again & Again)" (Redbook)

"Guy Expectations: How to Get What You Want" (Teen)

"Sex Made Easy" (Men's Health)

"Hot, Fast Sex: The Quick and the Bed" (Men's Fitness)

"Supercharged Sex: How to Find a Like-Minded Partner"
(Exercise & Health)

"Sex-cess! Get Lucky . . . Tonight!" (Exercise & Health)

"What Women Really Want" (Men's Fitness)

These quotations, taken from the headlines of several contemporary men's and women's magazines, underscore the almost obsessive fascination with which the media and the reading public approach the topic of sexual desire. Popular music, television, and
film provide countless depictions of sexually passionate relationships, alternately glorifying and vilifying the desires of the flesh. On a daily basis, talk show hosts and their invited guests tell us how to behave in a sexually desirable manner, what to say to communicate sexual desire to an attractive other, and what clothes to wear to ignite sexual desire in our current flames. Should this advice fail, we can always turn to the countless self-help books that promise to teach us in 10 easy steps how to rekindle the sexual ashes of our fading romances, once-torrid love affairs, or weatherbeaten marriages. All of these events conspire to teach us that sexual desire is a necessary ingredient in our romantic relationships and that sexual desirability is something we each should strive to attain.

That sexual desire is associated with and has implications for several meaningful experiences in human life will come as no surprise to our readers. What will come as a surprise, perhaps, is the fact that sexual desire has only recently emerged as a topic considered worthy of rigorous scientific investigation. As a result, although as private citizens we may think a lot (and think we know a lot) about sexual desire, there is a dearth of research and theory on this topic in the professional literature. In addition, what little information there is can be found buried here and there within a variety of disciplines, including biology and medicine, psychology and philosophy, sex and marital therapy, sociology and anthropology, and ethology (to name a few). Because traditionally there has been very little communication among these disciplines, the interested student of this aspect of human experience finds himself or herself faced with an unorganized mishmash of contradictory theoretical statements and confusing empirical data.

Our goal in writing this monograph is to dispel some of this confusion by reviewing and bringing together in one volume past and present theory, supposition, and knowledge about sexual desire. Although we write primarily from a social psychological perspective, our general approach is interdisciplinary in that we incorporate material from a multitude of fields. The eight chapters encompass a wide range of theoretical and empirical work. Chapter 1 sets the stage by considering the study of sexual desire from a historical perspective. In particular, we discuss how the emphasis placed by early sex researchers on abnormal sexuality, on animal sexuality, and on overt physiological and behavioral sexual responses contributed to the
neglect of such subjective, psychological sexual phenomena such as sexual desire. We then review work in clinical and social psychology that led to the emergence of sexual desire as a topic worthy of scientific scrutiny.

Of course, any discussion of sexual desire must first specify the characteristic manifestations of this experience. Thus, Chapter 2 focuses on the phenomenon of sexual desire—what it is and what events serve to indicate its occurrence. We describe characteristics of a state of (general) desire, distinguish sexual desire from both sexual arousal and sexual activity, and present the various theoretical approaches to sexual desire and its measurement.

We are particularly interested in reviewing research pertinent to the causal dynamics of sexual desire. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the "body" of desire—that is, all the hormonal, biological, and physical factors that contribute to and influence the experience of sexual desire. We examine how people's feelings of sexual desire are related to hormone levels and hormonally mediated life events (e.g., menstruation), chronological age, biological sex, physical health, and drug use.

In Chapter 5, we turn from the physical to the mental. In particular, we explore how social norms, affective expectancies, previous experiences, personality variables, mood, and emotional state may contribute to the experience of sexual desire. Because what people believe about sexual desire may influence their behavior, we also present data from our own descriptive research on men's and women's beliefs about the nature and causes of sexual desire.

Emotions, expectancies, and beliefs often are experienced about and within a specific relationship with a particular partner. Chapter 6 considers various partner characteristics that may incite sexual desire, including physical attractiveness, physique and physique display, social status and dominance, novelty, and pheromones. In addition, we review research on the association between sexual desire and relational events (e.g., communication, satisfaction, adjustment).

Chapter 7 continues our exploration of the interpersonal aspects of sexual desire by focusing on the relationship between sexual desire and passionate love. The first part of this chapter examines theoretical statements about the link, if any, between these two experiences; the second reviews indirect and direct empirical evidence that speaks to this question.
We conclude, in Chapter 8, by considering the personal, interpersonal, and societal implications of sexual desire—the experience itself, as well as beliefs about its nature, causes, and meaning.

Sexual desire plays an important role in human lives and human interpersonal relationships. We hope that this book sheds some small degree of light on this fascinating and understudied topic.

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In this increasingly liberal political and social climate, courses on human sexuality and "sex education" appear with regularity in college, high school, and even junior high school curricula. Consequently, sexuality textbooks now abound, and it is to one of these texts that the student interested in sexual desire is likely to go to learn more about the subject. Unfortunately, what the student finds in human sexuality texts is an almost exclusive focus on the physiology of sexual response. There are wonderfully exact depictions of human sexual anatomy, volumes of information about the prevalence of various sexual behaviors, and detailed lists of the genital and physiological events associated with sexual arousal. But there is very little mention of sexual desire, the essential spark that ignites the human sexual apparatus that is so precisely detailed. When, and if, sexual desire is mentioned, it is primarily in discussions of sexual disorders or prob-
lems. Why is sexual desire, the center of the whole sexual show, sitting on the sidelines in human sexuality texts? The answer is that there simply isn’t much known about it. And there isn’t much known about it because early sex research focused on abnormal or pathological sexual phenomena, on animal sexuality, and on physiological, behavioral sexual events. In this chapter, we discuss how these historical events contributed to a neglect of sexual desire and then we consider the factors that led to the emergence of sexual desire as a topic of scientific investigation.

Early Sex Research

For many hundreds of years, the “scientific” study of the origins and manifestations of various aspects of human sexuality was the province of a handful of physicians and clerics who wrote their treatises primarily for each other rather than for the general public. These men (and they were exclusively men) focused almost entirely on sexual behavior they viewed as abnormal, gleaning their “facts” and drawing their conclusions from religious theology, criminal records, medical case studies, clandestine visits to local mental wards, and hearsay.

Masturbation, for example, was one such abnormal behavior that captured their attention. In Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry, Hunter and MacAlpine (1963) state that masturbation became firmly established as a primary cause of mental illness and nervous disorders in the minds of professionals and nonprofessionals alike by the 19th century. According to these historians, the English clergyman Richard Baxter (1615-1691) spent a great deal of his time and energy gravely warning his flock against the evils of masturbation. Similarly, the anonymous 18th-century treatise, titled Onania: Or, the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, listed gonorrhea, impotence, erectile dysfunction, barrenness, epilepsy, consumption, loss of limbs, sleep disorders, and general pain among the ills caused by the “impure” practice. To those dire consequences of masturbation, the Swiss physician Simon André Tissot (1728-1797) was to add degeneration of the spine, blindness, and brain disease.
The exclusive focus on the mental and physical problems associated with sexual behavior that dominated early medical and religious discourses created an environment in which the sexual aspect of human experience became characterized as a wicked siren waiting to drag weak persons into Hell or push them over the edge into insanity. For example, the glimpse of human sexuality provided in the pages of German physician Richard von Krafft-Ebing's (1886/1945) masterpiece *Psychopathia Sexualis* is replete with "abominable and nauseating" (p. 497) sexual acts perpetrated by a motley assortment of masturbators, rapists, pedophiles, sadists, masochists, transvestites, necrophiliacs, fetishists, voyeurs, frotteurs, and other disturbed individuals. Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), in fact, wrote his treatise in an attempt to inform legislation and jurisprudence about the nature of certain sexual aberrations. His work, which contained hundreds of graphically detailed case histories garnered from the consulting room, mental clinics, and law courts, was not created as a handbook for public consumption. To the contrary, its scientific title, obtuse medical terminology, and Latin-riddled text represented a deliberate (but ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to discourage the general public from reading information reserved for Krafft-Ebing's legal, medical, and forensic colleagues. In the preface to the 12th edition, for example, he voices his thanks for the favorable criticism accorded previous editions in "professional circles" (p. iii) and states that he has increased the number of technical terms and made freer use of the Latin language as well.

The English physician Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), the central figure in the emergence of the modern study of human sexuality, was a product of this pathologically oriented and secretive climate. His monumental, seven-volume work, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928), was the first of its kind written to inform the general public as well as the scientific community. In the Foreword to the 1938 printing of a condensed version of the manual, in fact, Ellis thanks both medical and laypersons for their cordial reception of previous editions. Unlike his predecessors, Ellis focused primarily on non-pathological sexual phenomena and attempted to explain sexual behavior in both men and women as a normal aspect of human development and function. For example, he viewed the prevalence of homosexual behavior among animals, early human societies, and
modern men as evidence that homosexuality should be classified as an anomaly rather than as a degeneration or disease. Moreover, he argued forcefully that masturbation was so widespread a human behavior that it could no longer be viewed as “abnormal.” This was the first time, too, that an attempt was made to determine the influence of social forces on individual sexuality. Ellis believed that the high incidence of “frigidity” found in many 19th-century women was not in most cases the result of some naturally occurring biological deficit in the sexual impulse but, rather, the combined result of their partners’ inadequate sexual skills, of societal and religious mores, of ignorance of sexual matters and poor education in general, and of the late age at which intercourse typically first occurred (e.g., Ellis, 1933/1963).

Like his contemporary Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) also emphasized sex as a central aspect of normal human development, constructing an elaborate psychoanalytic theory that conceived of the sexual instinct, or libido, as the primary motivating force of all human behavior. Freud scandalized his peers by suggesting that children, formerly viewed as innocent, sexless beings not yet subject to the raging hormonal influences of adolescence and adulthood, were in fact brought into the world with their sexual instincts and propensities for sexual activities wholly intact. Indeed, Freud argued vociferously that the autoerotic behaviors or genital reactions sometimes seen in infants were not the simple reflexes they were assumed to be at the time but were in fact physical manifestations of a very necessary sexual impulse that would pass through a series of stages and eventually develop into the normal sexuality of the adult (e.g., Freud, 1905/1938, 1910/1977).

In short, the almost exclusive focus on “abnormal” or “diseased” sexual behavior that pervaded the work of early sex researchers promulgated the notion that human sexuality was a mysterious and awesome beast whose systematic inspection at close range was best left to trained professionals. Interestingly, even Freud and Ellis, who labored so feverishly to bring sex out of the mental wards and prisons and into polite society, were not immune to the influence of the clannish and pathologically oriented climate that characterized earlier research. Like their predecessors Tissot, Rush, and Krafft-Ebing, Freud and Ellis derived most of their knowledge of sexual phenomena from systematic observations of what social psychologist Donn Byrne, in
his 1977 review of social psychology and the study of sexual behavior, ruefully referred to as "animal sex, native sex, and crazy sex" (p. 4). Freud, for example, based much of his theory on knowledge gained from his own personal experience of psychoanalysis as well as from the analyses of a relatively small number of disturbed patients; Ellis relied on case histories collected from colleagues, correspondents, and friends, as well as on data garnered from medical archives. Thus, although by the early 20th century, scientists interested in human sexuality were beginning to make tentative steps toward open discourse about questions of sexuality, they continued to restrict themselves to an examination of clinical populations and to "abnormal" aspects of human sexual experience.

Alfred Kinsey and the Modern Study of Human Sexual Behavior

This state of affairs began to change in the mid-20th century, when a few courageous individuals began to break the unspoken rules that had guided much of the earlier work on human sexuality and to conduct empirical research on the sexual behaviors and attitudes of the ordinary person. However, the first of these modern sex researchers tended to focus primarily on discrete behavioral, physical, or physiological events that could be readily observed and tabulated, while ignoring, or deeming unimportant, more intangible, subjective aspects of sexuality (such as sexual desire).

For example, Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) and his colleagues Wardell Pomeroy, Clyde Martin, and Paul Gebhard were the first to quantify the study of human sexuality. Kinsey, a biology professor at Indiana University in the mid-1930s, was confronted with the daunting task of designing and teaching a marriage and family course in the summer of 1938. To his dismay, he found that little scientifically valid information was available about the sexual aspects of marriage. In response, he and his group began a program of research designed to fill the missing gaps in the literature. At first, this endeavor took the form of questionnaires that asked about the sexual experiences and histories of the students in Kinsey's classes. By the end of 1938, however, the Kinsey research team had graduated to conducting face-to-face, indi-
individual interviews using a standardized questionnaire, and they had broadened their subject population to include the American public. Data from approximately 12,000 interviews gathered over a decade were incorporated into two works, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953).

The publication of these compilations of statistics about human sexual behavior met with disbelief and anger from many quarters. Several attempts were made to prevent the publication of the research results and to dismiss Kinsey from his academic post at Indiana University, and the entire group faced opposition at the hands of the police, the legal and medical communities, and many scientific colleagues. That these two books were published during the McCarthy era, a time of intense political repression, no doubt contributed to such harassment. No one had ever dared to openly discuss "unpleasant" topics such as adultery, homosexuality, masturbation, bestiality, and premarital intercourse and, worse, provide statistical evidence that many Americans did such things more frequently than anyone had ever imagined. Indeed, the researchers noted in their 1948 publication that several well-meaning colleagues had suggested that the investigation be confined to "normal" sexual behavior (p. 12). Despite the outcry, however, Kinsey and his colleagues persevered in their efforts, and in so doing, they paved the way for subsequent investigations of sexual behavior and attitudes.

Animal Sexuality: Extrapolating From the Barn to the Bedroom

During the period in which Kinsey and colleagues published their data on human sexual behavior, several other researchers interested in human sexuality were examining animal sexual responses. Comparative psychology was at that time a strong subdiscipline within psychology, and it was assumed that researchers could learn about human sexuality by observing the mating behaviors of lower-order mammals and infrahuman primates and then extrapolating from these to humans. In addition, given the kind of outcry that met
Kinsey's research, it was no doubt politically "safer" to study sex in the barn than sex in the bedroom.

Research on animal sexuality focuses on hormones, anatomy, and molar sexual behavior (e.g., Beach, 1976; Ford & Beach, 1951), and researchers of human sexuality have borrowed this biologically and behaviorally based template in their attempts to uncover the mechanisms and correlates of human sexual responses. For example, a vast literature on the hormonal correlates of sexual behavior and arousal in men and women has been established and flourishes, and researchers continue to investigate the relation between sexual activity and hormonally mediated female life events such as menstruation, pregnancy and lactation, and menopause. Extensive efforts also have been made to delineate the effects of the administration of exogenous hormones on the sexual behavior and function of individuals with hormonal abnormalities as well as on the sexual function of sex offenders. In addition, interest in the influence of pheromones on human sexual behavior has increased in recent years, perhaps fueled by the finding that compounds that have pheromonal properties in other animals can be found in the urine and sweat of humans.

Investigation of the influence of hormones and pheromones on sexual behavior is necessary (and we review this research in Chapters 3 and 6). Like our animal cousins, we humans are born with a sexual apparatus that can be coaxed into a state of arousal through the aid of manual manipulation, appropriate levels of circulating hormones, and exposure to erotic stimuli such as the genitals of a sexually receptive partner. These similarities aside, however, sexual phenomena are far more complex in humans than in other animals, as the presence of a more highly developed cerebral cortex in humans would suggest. For example, Reiss (e.g., 1986b) proposes that sexual interaction is important to humans not only because it yields pleasure, but because it allows an individual to disclose (sexually) intimate aspects of the self to others, which in turn may lead to emotional, intellectual, or affectionate disclosure; that is, sexual interaction in humans always possesses an inherent relationship potential. In addition, unlike animals, humans can arouse themselves in the absence of direct stimulation or external erotic stimuli through the use of sexual fantasy—a self-initiated, creative mental process that represents a spontaneous, improvisational, psychological phenomenon not included in the ani-
mal sexual response repertoire. Similarly, genital stimulation and exposure to erotic stimuli not only trigger physiological and genital arousal in humans but also can evoke affective, informational, and imaginative responses that in turn mediate sexual arousal (e.g., Byrne, 1977, 1983a, 1983b; Fisher, Byrne, White, & Kelley, 1988).

In conclusion, although certain parallels exist between animal and human sexuality (e.g., we share some of the triggering mechanisms for sexual arousal, and sexual behavior can serve a reproductive purpose), we cannot easily apply what we know of animal sexuality to the human sexual experience. The greater cognitive capacity of humans and the resultant increased role played by psychological phenomena, the multitude of meanings that society places on sexual events and interactions, and the consequences such events and interactions have for the individual all have contributed to vast differences between the two.

Masters and Johnson and the Physiology of Human Sexuality

Like Kinsey and the sex researchers who used templates of animal sexuality to understand human sexual response, William Masters and Virginia Johnson also focused on the physiological and behavioral aspects of sexuality. Challenging scientific and public opinion even more than did Kinsey, these researchers recorded the physiological and genital responses of men and women as they engaged in a variety of sexual behaviors in the laboratory. Masters, an obstetrician-gynecologist at the Washington University School of Medicine, began his work in the field of human sexuality in 1953, just after the second Kinsey book was published. Believing that an understanding of human sexuality must begin with detailed knowledge of sexual anatomy and physiology, this enterprising physician established a laboratory in 1954 in which he and his colleague Virginia Johnson observed and recorded the physical details of what came to be known as the "human sexual response cycle"—a cycle consisting of physiological reactions or processes labeled excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution.
Like Kinsey's behavioral data, this four-phase cycle is noticeably reticent on the topic of sexual desire. Masters and Johnson (1966) simply say this:

The first or excitement phase of the human cycle of sexual response develops from any source of somatogenic or psychogenic stimulation. The stimulative factor is of major import in establishing sufficient increment of sexual tension to extend the cycle. (p. 5)

They do not elaborate. Rather, the discussion for the excitement phase—as well as discussion of the plateau, orgasm, and resolution phases—focuses on physical responses to increases and decreases in sexual tension, including changes in heart rate, blood flow, muscle tension, breathing patterns, and reproductive organs (e.g., nipple and penis erection, breast and clitoral enlargement, lubrication and lengthening of the vagina). In fact, the only subjective, psychological responses mentioned by Masters and Johnson are those associated with orgasm in men and women. They note, for example, that female orgasm is accompanied or followed by "intense sensual awareness" and a sensation of "suffusion of warmth" (pp. 135-136), and that male orgasm is preceded by a "sensation of ejaculatory inevitability" and subjective "appreciation of fluid volume" (p. 215).

The Emergence of Sexual Desire as a Scientific Question

The work of Kinsey and his colleagues and of Masters and Johnson was instrumental in demonstrating that sexuality is a normal part of the human experience as well as an appropriate topic of scientific investigation. Both—perhaps necessarily, given the primary focus of their investigations—made only cursory mentions of sexual desire. However, there is more to the human sexual experience than physiological, genital, and behavioral responses. People do not suddenly find themselves flushed, panting, lubricated, tensed, and ready for sexual action; something opens the gates of the sexual response cycle. But what creates the sexual tension and provides impetus to the excitement phase?