WHAT IS HUMAN SEXUALITY?

PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALITY IN A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT
What is human sexuality?

- Refers to the ways in which we experience and express ourselves as sexual beings.
- Our awareness of ourselves as females or males.
- The capacity we have for erotic experiences and responses.
How do we define **sex**?

- Refers to a person’s anatomic sex, female or male.
- Refers to a person’s anatomic structures (sex organs) for reproduction and sexual pleasure.
- Refers to physical activities involving our sex organs for purposes of reproduction or pleasure, “having sex”.
- Relates to erotic feelings, experiences, or desires, such as sexual fantasies and thoughts, sexual urges, or feelings of sexual attraction.
SEXUALITY AND VALUES

- Our society is pluralistic.
  - Society embraces a wide range of sexual attitudes and values.
  - Some people are more liberal with their sexual views and behaviors while others are more conservative.
  - People’s sexual attitudes, experiences, and behaviors are shaped to a large extent by cultural traditions and beliefs.
    - They influence how, where, and with whom we become sexually involved.
CHAPTER 1

VALUE SYSTEMS FOR MAKING SEXUAL DECISIONS

- Values systems provide a framework for judging the moral acceptability of sexual options.

- We often approach sexual decisions by determining whether the choices we face are compatible with our moral values.

- Our value systems—our sexual standards—have many sources: parents, peers, religious training, ethnic subcultures, the large culture, and our appraisal of all these influences.
CHAPTER 1

VALUE SYSTEM: LEGALISM

The legalistic approach formulates ethical behavior on the basis of moral laws derived from an external source, such as religion.

Prohibitions against adultery, incest, sexual activity with people of one’s own gender, and bestiality.

Many religious followers accept the moral codes of their religion as a matter of faith and commitment.

Others view religious teachings as a general framework for decision making rather than as a set of absolute rules.
CHAPTER 1

VALUE SYSTEM: SITUATIONAL ETHICS

- Ethical decision making should be guided by love for others rather than by rigid moral rules, and sexual decision making should be based on the context of the situation that a person faces (Fletcher, 1966).

- According to Fletcher (1966), “the situationist is prepared in any concrete case to suspend, ignore, or violate any principle if by doing so, he can effect for good than by following it”.
CHAPTER 1

VALUE SYSTEM: ETHICAL RELATIVISM

- Assumes that diverse values are basic to human existence.
- Rejects the idea that there is a single correct moral view about subjects as diverse as wearing revealing clothing, masturbation, premarital sex, oral sex, anal sex, contraception, and abortion.
- Believes that there is no objective way of justifying one set of moral values over another...the essence of human morality is to derive one’s own principles and apply them according to one’s own conscience.
- Cultural Relativism: what is right or wrong must be understood in terms of the cultural beliefs that affect sexual decision making.
CHAPTER 1

VALUE SYSTEMS: HEDONISM & ASCETICISM

- **Hedonism**: guided by the pursuit of pleasure, not by whether a particular behavior is morally or situationally justified.

- “If it feels good, do it”.

- Believes sexual desires, like hunger or thirst, do not invoke moral considerations.

- **Asceticism**: self-denial of material and sexual desires.

  - Religious celibates, such as Roman Catholic priests and Buddhist monks.
VALUE SYSTEM: UTILITARIANISM

- The view that moral conduct is based on that which will bring about “the greatest good for the greatest number” (Mill, 1863).

- Characterizes behavior as ethical when it does the greatest good and causes the least harm.
VALUE SYSTEM: RATIONALISM

- The use of reason to determine a course of action.
- Believes that decisions should be based on intellect and reason rather than emotions or faith.
- Assesses the facts in a sexual situation and then weighs the consequences of various courses of action to make a decision.
A significant amount of our understanding of sexuality is influenced and shaped by popular culture, especially mass media.

Mass media depictions of sexuality are meant to entertain and exploit, not to inform.

The mass media presents the “social context of sexuality”...defines what behaviors are appropriate, with whom they are appropriate, and why they are appropriate.
According to Hall, West, and Hill (2011), some research has found that increased exposure to sexualized music lyrics has the potential to negatively impact the development of healthy and equitable sexual attitudes of adolescent males and females.

The sexualization of our society is promoted in magazines, tabloids, and the internet...they disseminate ideas and values about sexuality and body image.

- Sizzling sex tips
- Ranking the sexiest women
- How to turn on your partner
How does the mass media impact the development of one's self-concept?
The diversity of sexual behaviors across cultures and times challenges the concept of labeling specific sexual behaviors as inherently natural or unnatural, normal or abnormal.

How do we determine what is natural or normal?
How do we decide if a sexual behavior is natural or unnatural?

To answer this question, we need to develop a standard definition/understanding of what is natural.

How would you define natural?

- Instinctive?
- Gut Instincts?
- Moral?
- Using your sexual organs for their intended purpose?
When we label a sexual behavior as “natural” or “unnatural”, we are typically indicating whether the behavior conforms to our culture’s sexual norms.

Sexual norms appear to be natural because we have been “socialized” into accepting them as natural.

Therefore, specific sexual behaviors are viewed as instinctive.
Normal Sexual Behavior: behavior that conforms to a group’s average, or median, patterns of behavior...in other words, what a culture defines as normal.

To categorize sexual behavior as normal or abnormal, we may use the following criteria:

- **Subjectively Normal Behavior**: normalcy is any behavior that is similar to one’s own.
- **Statistically Normal Behavior**: whatever behaviors are more common are normal while those that are less common are abnormal.
- **Idealistically Normal Behavior**: taking an ideal for a norm, individual who use this approach measure all deviations against perfection.
- **Culturally Normal Behavior**: we accept something to be normal based on what our culture defines as normal.
- **Clinically Normal Behavior**: clinical standard uses scientific data about health and illness to make judgments.
Although we may feel pressure to behave like the average person, we really do not know how others behave sexually.

People do not ordinarily reveal much about their sexual activities.

When they do reveal, they share conformist sexual behaviors such as sexual intercourse but rarely disclose masturbation activities, fantasies, or the use of “toys”.
As sex researchers, we must attempt to avoid/reject traditional definitions of what is natural/unnatural or normal/abnormal.

Instead, we should characterize differences in human sexuality and sexual behavior as sexual variation, in other words, sexual variety and diversity.

As human beings, we vary enormously in terms of our sexual orientation, our sexual desires, our sexual fantasies, our sexual attitudes, and our sexual behaviors.

The best way to understand our sexual diversity is to view our activities as existing on a continuum...the frequency with which individuals engage in different sexual activities will range from never to always on the continuum.
SOCIETAL NORMS AND SEXUALITY: SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND VARIATIONS

By adopting the continuum, a person’s sexual behaviors can be viewed as more or less typical or atypical of the group average.

Many activities that are usually thought of as “deviant” or “abnormal” sexual behavior—activities diverging from the norm, such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, and fetishism—are engaged in by most of us to some degree.

- **Exhibitionism**: Displaying our bodies at the beach or in a revealing outfit.
- **Voyeurism**: Watching ourselves have sex (via mirror or filming).
- **Fetishism**: Sleeping in or with a piece of our partner’s clothing.

These atypical behaviors represent nothing more than sexual nonconformity.
CHAPTER 1

PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

- The Historical Perspective
  - History shows little evidence of universal sexual trends.
  - Attitudes and behaviors vary extensively from one time and place to another.
The ancient Hebrews viewed sex, at least in marriage, as a satisfying experience intended to fulfill the divine command to “be fruitful and multiply”... focus on procreation.

Male-male and female-female sexual behavior was strongly condemned because it threatened the perpetuation of the family.

Believed sex helped strengthen marital bonds and solidified the family.

Jewish law legislated the minimum frequency of marital relations, which varied according to the man’s profession and the amount of time spent at home:

- No occupation = everyday
- Laborers = twice a week
- Sailors = once every six months
A wife was considered the property of her husband and could be divorced on a whim.

- A wife could be stoned to death for adultery (while her husband could have another wife/mistress).
- Men who consorted with the wives of other men were considered to have violated the property rights of those men and would have to pay for “damages”.
The Greeks viewed people as bisexual, sexually responsive to either gender.

There are three important aspects of Greek sexuality...

- Male-male sexual behavior: deemed normal and tolerated so long as it did not threaten the institution of the family.

- Pederasty: love of boys.
  - Sex between men and prepubescent boys was illegal, but families were generally pleased if their adolescent sons attracted socially prominent mentors...boys were sometimes considered the pupil or lover of men.

- Prostitution: ranged from courtesans to concubines.
  - Courtesan: a prostitute—especially the mistress of a noble or wealthy man.
  - Concubine: a secondary wife, usually of inferior legal and social status.

No social stigma associated with visiting a prostitute.
CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE ANCIENT GREEKS

- The women of Athens had no more rights than slaves.
- Women were subject to the authority of men.
- Women did not have access to formal education and within the home, they were consigned mostly to women’s quarters.
- Women were chaperoned when they ventured outside.
- A husband could divorce his wife without cause and was obligated to do so if she committed adultery.