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From Risk to Pleasure: Toward a Positive Psychology of Sexuality

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From Risk to Pleasure: Toward a Positive Psychology of Sexuality

Sex is not the answer. Sex is the question. "Yes" is the answer. ~Swami X

Sexuality researchers and therapists have traditionally been reluctant to say “yes” to the benefits and pleasures of sex, and instead, have focused on understanding how people can avoid sexual risks and pain. Yet, sexuality is often a key factor in understanding happiness and satisfaction in relationships. In a cross-national sample of individuals from 29 countries, the people who were most satisfied with their sex lives were often the happiest with their lives in general (Laumann et al., 2006). Further, those who are more sexually satisfied tend to be more satisfied with their relationships, and this is true whether they are dating or married (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Regan, 2000; Sprecher, 2002). Given that satisfying romantic relationships are a vital component of physical health and psychological well-being (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2002; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996), it is essential to understand the ways in which sexuality enables individuals and couples to thrive. The majority of research on sexuality is oriented toward understanding the potential risks and negative aspects of sex, focusing on such topics as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies, sexual harassment, and low sexual desire. These are clearly problems worthy of research attention. Nevertheless, increased attention must be paid to understanding the potential benefits and pleasures of sexuality, not only because having a positive, fulfilling sexual life may provide a buffer against negative outcomes, but also because positive sexuality is an important topic to study in its own right.

There are few scholarly articles devoted to understanding sexuality from a truly *positive* perspective, and this chapter represents the first review across all age groups on this topic (see Diamond, 2006; Russell, 2005a, 2005b; and Tolman & McClelland, 2011 for positive perspectives on adolescent sexuality). The World Health Organization acknowledges sexuality as

“a central aspect of being human” and defines sexual health as “a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence” (WHO, 2004, p. 3). In line with this definition of sexual health, we suggest that a positive approach to sexuality should include adequate knowledge and freedom for all individuals to pursue safe and satisfying sexual experiences.

We have organized this chapter with specific sections on sexual motives, thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In our focus on *sexual motives*, we document the variety of reasons why people engage in sex. The most common reasons for sex involve pursuing physical pleasure and intimacy, and engaging in sex for these reasons boosts sexual desire and relationship satisfaction. In a section on *sexual thoughts*, we show that people also vary widely in their general attitudes toward sexuality and as well as thoughts about their own sexuality. Then, in a section on *sexual feelings*, we review research on sexuality and mood, as well as research on what makes people sexually satisfied, including sexual frequency, body satisfaction, and overall relationship satisfaction. Finally, in a section on *sexual behavior*, we present research on first sexual experiences, masturbation, casual sex, and other experiences in and out of the bedroom. In keeping with the overall theme of this book on the positive psychology of love and relationships, and to address an imbalance in the literature, we focus our review on positive perspectives on sexuality. We conclude the chapter by recognizing the importance of integrating this new body of research on sexual pleasure with existing research on the risks and dangers of sex.

Caveats: Culture and Gender

Sex. In America an obsession. In other parts of the world a fact. ~ Marlene Dietrich

In North American culture, sexuality is simultaneously an obsession and a source of guilt and shame (e.g., Phillips, 2000). Culture shapes how people think about sex and how they experience it. The sexual attitudes of people living in the United States, for example, are surprisingly conservative as compared to the opinions expressed by people from many other countries. In a study of attitudes toward premarital sex in 24 nations, with the exception of the Philippines and Ireland, the United States had the largest percentage of people who indicated that they thought that sex before marriage was “always wrong” (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). Attitudes in other countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands were considerably less conservative. Attitudes toward premarital sex in North America are certainly becoming more permissive, with the largest shifts occurring among girls and young women (Wells & Twenge, 2005). Given the great variability in attitudes toward sexuality across cultures, it is important to acknowledge that most of the research included in this review was conducted in North America.

It is also essential to consider the role of gender in shaping views about and experiences with sexuality. Men have arguably been afforded greater sexual freedom than women, and we remain cognizant of the fact that conceptualizations of women’s sexuality go hand in hand with conceptualizations of men’s sexuality (Tolman, 2006). A truly positive approach to the psychology of sexuality includes understanding the diversity of sexual experiences across gender, sexual orientation, race, and social class, as well as how each of these factors shapes autonomy, education, and access to sexual health. Thus, this caveat about gender is necessary to acknowledge that men are still the privileged gender in North America and throughout the world and thus have traditionally been afforded more sexual rights than women. Therefore, considering

women's sexual pleasure, desire and satisfaction represents a more dramatic shift in thinking, and thus receives more attention both in this body of literature and in the current chapter.

Sexual Motives

I think I could fall madly in bed with you. ~Author Unknown

There are a variety of reasons why people choose to engage in sex, with one of the most common reasons for both men and women involving intense feelings of physical attraction (Meston & Buss, 2007). In this section, we explore motivational components of sexuality, highlighting the diversity of reasons *why people have sex*, as well as the emotional, relational, and sexual benefits of engaging in sex in pursuit of positive outcomes and experiences, termed *approach sexual motives*.

Why Do Humans Have Sex?

Sexual motives refer to people's underlying reasons for engaging in sex with another person. Meston and Buss (2007) conducted the most comprehensive study of sexual motives to date, asking 444 men and women aged 17 to 52 to "list all of the reasons you can think of why you, or someone you have known, have engaged in sexual intercourse in the past." In response, participants generated 237 distinct reasons for engaging in sex! The most frequently cited reasons were positive in nature, such as feeling attraction, wanting to experience physical pleasure, expressing love, wanting to feel desired, wanting to escalate the depth of the relationship, and out of curiosity or the desire for new experiences. Negative reasons were also the most infrequently endorsed, such as wanting to harm another person, attaining resources such as a job, promotion, or money, out of feelings of duty or pressure. This survey revealed a large degree of similarity between men and women in their reasons for engaging in sex: out of the pool of 237 sexual motives, eight out of the top 10 and 20 out of the top 25 reasons given for

engaging in sexual intercourse were similar for men and women. However, consistent with previous research (see Peplau, 2003 for a review), men were more likely than women to endorse motives that centered around a partner's physical attractiveness such as "The person was too 'hot' (sexy) to resist" and reasons that centered around their own sexual pleasure such as "I wanted to achieve an orgasm." Consistent with previous research (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005), women exceeded men on items having to do with the relational context of sex such as "I wanted to express my love for the person." However, men and women did not differ on the emphasis that they placed on the majority of relationship-based sexual motives, supporting a growing body of research on the importance of intimacy and connection for men and women alike (see also Smiler, 2008).

The Benefits of Approach Motives

Researchers have also classified the varied reasons why people engage in sex into a smaller number of meaningful categories. One important distinction is based on approach-avoidance motivational theory (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Impett et al., 2005). In the realm of sexuality, *approach motives* for sex focus on obtaining positive outcomes such as one's own physical pleasure, a partner's pleasure, or greater relationship intimacy. In contrast, *avoidance motives* focus on averting negative outcomes such as the relief of sexual tension, a partner's loss of interest, or relationship conflict. Several studies have begun to document the emotional and relational benefits of engaging in sex for approach goals. In one study, college students in dating relationships recorded their sexual motives, emotions, and feelings about their romantic relationships each night for 14 consecutive nights (Impett et al., 2005). On days when people engaged in sex for approach motives such as to pursue their own pleasure or promote intimacy in their relationships, they experienced enhanced positive emotions and feelings of

relationship satisfaction. However, on days when they engaged in sex in pursuit of avoidance motives such as to avoid the guilt of turning a partner down, they felt more negative emotions and reported more daily conflict with their partner.

In addition to the emotional and relationship benefits of engaging in sex for approach motives, people's sex lives also improve. For example, it is well known that feelings of sexual desire tend to decline over the course of relationships (e.g., Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Across three studies, people who strived to achieve approach goals in their relationships such as heightened intimacy, growth, and connection maintained high sexual desire over a six-month period of time (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008). Further, people who pursued approach goals maintained high sexual desire even on days that would ordinarily be the most threatening to couples, such when they had disagreements with a partner. The link between approach goals and sexual desire in these studies was stronger for women than for men, consistent with research documenting that women's desire may be more "fluid" or responsive to situational cues than men's desire (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008). Impett and Tolman (2006) extended these results to an adolescent sample, showing that girls aged 16-19 who engaged in sex out of feelings of physical attraction or love were more likely than girls with lower approach motives to report that their most recent sexual experience was "good," that they liked how their body felt, and that the experience made them feel closer to their partner.

Sexual Thoughts

[Confidence] is sexier than any body part. ~ Aimee Mullins

People's attitudes and beliefs about sexuality influence their sexual experiences. Research on sexual cognition has tended to focus on dysfunction and pathology, so in this

section will emphasize two positive aspects of sexual cognition, *sexual attitudes* and *sexual self-concept*.

Positive Sexual Attitudes

People vary quite widely in their attitudes toward sexuality. Positive sexual attitudes are often equated with *sexual permissiveness*, defined as the extent to which a person is accepting of practices such as casual sex, sex without commitment, and sex with multiple partners (Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, & Foote, 1985). Although men typically report greater sexual permissiveness than do women, particularly toward casual sex and pornography, women's sexual permissiveness has increased, and gender differences in sexual attitudes are small (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Sexual permissiveness may not be a strictly positive dimension. In some cases it may represent open-mindedness (e.g., acceptance of homosexuality or alternative sexual practices); in others, it may be problematic (e.g., acceptance of manipulation or the use of force).

Research has distinguished between two aspects of sexual cognition termed erotophilia and erotophobia (Fisher, White, Byrne, & Kelley, 1988). *Erotophilia*, broadly defined as the tendency to positively evaluate sexual cues, includes having positive attitudes toward sexually explicit material, greater sexual openness, and less sexual guilt. Erotophilia is associated with approach sexual motives, better sexual adjustment during pregnancy and postpartum, positive health behaviors such as regular gynecological visits and contraceptive use, and a greater inclination toward sexual fantasy. *Erotophobia*, by contrast, refers to the negative evaluation of sexual cues and is characterized by more negative attitudes toward sexually explicit material, discomfort with talking about sex, and sexual guilt. Erotophobia tends to have negative correlates such as less consistent use of contraception (Fisher et al, 1988). Researchers have also recently distinguished between highly sexual and less sexual women (Wentland, Herold,

Desmarais, & Milhausen, 2009). Compared to less sexual women, highly sexual women have a higher sex drive, greater body satisfaction, more frequent sex fantasies, and more positive attitudes towards casual sex, challenging the stereotypes that women are not interested in pursuing sexual pleasure and only pursue sex in relational contexts.

Sexual Self-Concept

People also vary in the extent to which they have positive or negative concepts of the self in the domain of sexuality. A person's *sexual self-concept* refers to the beliefs that they hold about sexual aspects of themselves, including both positive and negative beliefs. Beginning with research on women, a measure devised by Andersen and her colleagues called the Women's Sexual Self Schema Scale assesses two positive components of women's sexual self-concepts (i.e., passion-romanticism and openness-directness) and one negative component (i.e., embarrassment-conservatism, Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Cyranowski & Andersen, 1998). Research using this measure has shown that, compared to women with negative sexual self-concepts, women with positive sexual self-concepts tend to engage in sex more frequently, report higher levels of sexual desire and arousal, and experience less sexual anxiety (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994). The positivity of women's self-concepts was also associated with having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners as well as engaging in a broader range of sexual behaviors. These behaviors often occurred in the context of romantic relationships: women with positive sexual self-concepts also reported greater feelings of passionate love and more extensive romantic relationship histories than women with negative sexual self-concepts. In general, a greater consideration for and acceptance of one's sexual identity (sexual preferences, values, needs, and desires beyond sexual orientation) and a consistent and stable sexual self-concept

have been shown to be related to positive sexual outcomes for women, such as greater sexual satisfaction (Hucker, Mussap & McCabe, 2010; Muise, Preyde, Maitland & Milhausen, 2010).

Andersen and colleagues also devised the Men's Sexual Self-Schema Scale to assess men's sexual self-concept along three dimensions, including the extent to which men view themselves as passionate-loving, powerful-aggressive, and open-minded-liberal (Andersen, Cyranowski, & Espindle, 1999). The authors distinguish between schematic men, who see themselves in sexual terms (whether passionate, powerful, or open-minded, or some combination of the three), and aschematic men, who view themselves as less sexual than their peers. Schematic men reported more sexual relationships, a broader repertoire of sexual behavior, and higher levels of sexual arousal. Higher scores on the passionate-loving dimension were strongly correlated with sexual arousal and feelings of love toward a recent romantic partner. The open-minded-liberal dimension was also correlated with feelings of love, but was also associated with sexually-coercive behavior. Powerful-aggressiveness was highly correlated with both sex without commitment and sexually coercive behavior.

The majority of research on the sexual self-concept or schema has been conducted with adults; however, a few studies have examined sexual self-concept in adolescence. Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996) classified adolescent boys and girls into one of five categories based on their level of experience with sexuality, including adolescents who they considered to be sexually naïve, unassured, competent, adventurous, and driven. Teens in the "adventurous" category were higher in positive aspects of sexuality such as sexual confidence, comfort, and active exploration of sexuality, but this category was made up primarily of boys, whereas girls were classified primarily in the less sexual experienced categories. We should note that this scale was based on adolescents' sexual behavior and experiences and is not likely to adequately capture adolescent

girls' and boys' cognitions or thoughts about their developing sexuality. O'Sullivan and her colleagues (2006) developed a more cognitive measure of sexual self-concept specifically for adolescent girls that included two positive aspects of adolescent sexuality, arousability (e.g., sexual responsiveness and thoughts about sex) and agency (e.g., curiosity and interest in sex). The higher girls scored on both arousability and agency, the more confident they felt in attracting potential partners. Sexual arousability was also associated with anticipating intercourse to be a more positive and rewarding experience. Finally, research by Impett and Tolman (2006) suggests that late adolescent girls with a positive sexual self-concept felt more satisfied with their most recent experience of sexual intercourse with a dating partner than did girls who viewed their sexuality in less positive terms.

Sexual Feelings

Sex is emotion in motion. ~Mae West

Emotions in general, as well as the feelings associated with sex specifically, are a critical part of sexual relationships. While the association between depressed mood and decreased sexual functioning has been well-documented (see Dobkin, Leiblum, Rosen, Menza & Marin, 2006 for a review), researchers have also linked the experience of positive emotions to greater sexual interest among both men and women (Mitchell, DiBartolo, Brown & Barlow, 1998; ter Kuile, Both, & van Uden, 2010; Warner & Bancroft, 1988). In this section, we explore positive emotional aspects of sexuality, including what it means to be *in the mood* for sex, and ways in which sex is related to *feeling good* (i.e., sexually satisfied).

In the Mood

A good mood is both a precursor to and an outcome of sex. Women's positive moods are strongly related to feelings of sexual interest and enjoyment (Warner & Bancroft, 1988), and

adolescent girls are more likely to report in daily diaries that they engaged in sex on days when they were in a good mood (Fortenberry, 2005). Since these are correlational studies, a positive mood could have been a precursor to sex, an outcome of sex, or both. Lending support to a causal hypothesis, an induced happy mood leads to greater subjective sexual arousal in women (ter Kuile, Both, & van Uden, 2010; Peterson & Janssen, 2007) and to greater subjective and objective sexual arousal in men than an induced sad mood (Mitchell et al., 1998). Other research suggests that there is a bidirectional relationship between mood and sex. In a focus group study, lesbian and heterosexual women revealed that sometimes they felt interested in sex prior to experiencing sexual arousal, and other times following arousal (Graham, Sanders, Milhausen & McBride, 2004). Among middle-aged women, affection and sexual activity were related to improved mood on a given day, and positive mood was related to an increased likelihood of being sexual and affectionate on the following day (Burlison, Trevathan, & Tood, 2007).

Feeling Good

In general, the United States is a sexually satisfied nation. In a nationally representative survey, Laumann and Michael (2001) found that most Americans are “extremely” or “very” pleased with the physical (87%) and emotional (85%) aspects of their sex lives. It is important to note that reports of sexual satisfaction do not imply the absence of sexual issues. In one study, half of the women who reported being sexually satisfied also reported at least one sexual problem (Ferenidou et al., 2008), suggesting that sexual function and sexual satisfaction do not always go hand-in-hand. Reporting a sexual issue does not preclude sexual satisfaction, just as the absence of sexual issues is not sufficient for sexual satisfaction (King, Holt, & Nazareth, 2007).

Although the majority of research on sexuality in the lives of older adults focuses on

sexual dysfunction and problems of low desire, some research suggests that many older adults are quite sexually satisfied. In a study of women attending a menopause clinic in Israel, participants reported high levels of sexual satisfaction and sexual communication with their partner (Woloski-Wruble, Oliel, Leefsma, & Hochner-Celnikier, 2010). Further, sexual satisfaction was strongly related to overall life satisfaction for these women. In another study of 1,977 women aged 45-80, half of the sexually active women described their overall sexual satisfaction as moderate to high (Huang et al., 2009). In this study, sexually active Latina women were more likely than White women to report at least moderate levels of sexual satisfaction.

It is commonly held by both researchers and the general public that sexual satisfaction is a big part of what makes relationships satisfying (e.g., Byers, 2005; Schwartz & Young, 2009; Sprecher, 1998; Sprecher, 2002). Levels of intimacy and sexual and non-sexual communication in a relationship are related to feelings of sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Moret, Glaser, Page, & Bergeron, 1998). Byers and Demmons (1999) found that relationship partners who openly shared their sexual likes and dislikes were more sexually satisfied than less communicative partners. Women's feelings about their bodies are also related to levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction (Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, & Carey, 2005; Pujols, Meston, & Seal, 2009). Among married heterosexual couples, women's feelings of sexual attractiveness are positively associated with both their own and their partner's level of marital satisfaction (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010).

For both men and women, sexual satisfaction is positively associated with the frequency of engaging in sex and experiencing orgasm (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). More frequent sex is associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction in heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; McNulty & Fisher, 2008). This

association is likely to be bidirectional in that more sexually satisfied people may pursue more frequent sex, and having sex more frequently may increase sexual satisfaction (McNulty & Fisher, 2008).

In recent years, there has been a growing movement for sex therapists and researchers to shift their focus from sexual function and dysfunction to incorporate more positive approaches to sexuality. Peggy Kleinplatz has argued that sex therapy should be approached as an opportunity for *sexual enhancement* rather than merely the treatment of dysfunction or disorder (Kleinplatz, 2003, 2006, Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007; Kleinplatz et al., 2009). In her research, she explores optimal sexuality, or what her participants endorse as “great sex.” She argues that the picture of great sex that emerges from her research looks radically different than that prescribed by conventional sex therapy or the mainstream media. Eight components of great sex were identified from her interviews with sex therapists and people who had experienced great sex: being present, connection, deep sexual and erotic intimacy, extraordinary communication, interpersonal risk-taking and exploration, authenticity, vulnerability, and transcendence (Kleinplatz et al. 2009). Interestingly, orgasm, which is typically viewed as a standard indicator of sexual function, did not emerge as a key component of or even necessary to experience great sex. In fact, great sex had little to do with physical function. A more positive and balanced approach to sex therapy would focus not only on helping couples deal with sexual dysfunction, but also on identifying factors to prevent it, as well as on enabling both individuals and couples to strive for new heights of sexual experience.

Sexual Behaviors

I'd like to meet the man who invented sex and see what he's working on now.

~ Author unknown

Existing research on sexual behavior has typically focused on risk reduction and ignored the positive aspects of sexuality. Although reducing the risks of sexual behavior is a worthwhile goal, understanding the benefits of sexual behavior and experiences are equally as important. In this section we review research on positive aspects of sexual behavior, including *first sexual experiences, masturbation, casual sex relationships*, and other forms of sexual expression *in (and out) of the bedroom*.

First Sexual Experience

An individual's first sexual encounter symbolizes an important milestone or rite of passage in North America (e.g., O'Sullivan, Cheng, Harris, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). Yet, most conceptualizations of first sexual experiences are quite negative. First sexual experiences are often referred to as virginity *loss* and explored in reference to the negative consequences such as risk and feelings of guilt (see Irvine, 2002 and Levine, 2002 for a review). Initial sexual experiences lay an important foundation for sexual and relationship development (Wight et al., 2008), so it is especially important to highlight the positive aspects of these experiences.

Men consistently report more satisfying first sexual experiences than women (e.g., Carpenter, 2002). Nevertheless, focusing primarily on gender differences obscures the fact that many girls and women do indeed have pleasurable first sexual experiences (while many boys and men do not; Smiler, Ward, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2005). A recent Canadian survey found that focusing on the emotional aspects of first intercourse, as opposed to physical satisfaction, reduced the gender discrepancy. Women reported less physical satisfaction than men, but equal

levels of emotional satisfaction. Three quarters of both men and women reported having “no regrets” about first intercourse (Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004). It is important to note, however, that about half of the women reported pain at first intercourse (52%) and few reported having an orgasm (11%). Carpenter (2002) reported that women whose first sexual experience was cunnilingus with another woman were more likely to describe the experience as physically pleasurable than women whose first experience was through sexual intercourse.

Some researchers have explored what makes first sexual experiences satisfying (Higgins et al., 2010; Smiler et al., 2005). Smiler and colleagues defined a positive experience not as the absence of risk, but as “a sexual experience that is mutual, respectful and empowering” (p. 50). For both men and women, relationship commitment and greater planning and intentionality (as opposed to spontaneous sexual experiences) predicted having a better first sexual experience (Higgins et al., 2010; Smiler et al., 2005). Body satisfaction was also related to having more positive experiences for both men and women (Smiler et al., 2005). O’Sullivan and Hearn (2008) explored the role of emotions in young women’s experience of first intercourse over a one-year period. Whereas many young women reported experiencing negative emotions such as nervousness *prior* to engaging in sex for the first time, the majority of women reported that they felt happy, confident and attractive when *recalling* their first intercourse experience one year later.

Lower adherence to traditional gender roles and fewer parental messages about sex being only for procreation are also related to more positive experiences for both men and women. Women who receive more messages from their parents concerning sexual freedom and comfort and fewer messages about being a “good girl” or sexual gatekeeper have more positive, empowering sexual experiences (Smiler et al., 2005). Similarly, Higgins and colleagues (2010)

found that less guilt associated with first sexual intercourse was one of the strongest predictors of sexual satisfaction. Therefore, the internalization of cultural stigma about sexual activity, especially among women, detracts from satisfaction, suggesting that framing sexuality in a more positive light may help to reduce negative sexual outcomes.

Masturbation

Although the topic of masturbation has had a controversial history, one that still lingers in some cultures, masturbation has gained greater acceptance as an important part of healthy sexuality (Smith, Rosenthal, & Reicher, 1996). From a developmental perspective, masturbation has the potential to promote a positive self-concept, sexual well-being, and fulfilling intimate relationships. In a cross-cultural study of men and women born between 1917 and 1980, Kontula and Haavio-Manilla (2003) found that the internalization of attitudes toward masturbation took place during the adolescent years. Masturbation habits remained relatively unchanged with age, highlighting the importance of positive sex education for youth. It is also noteworthy that masturbation was unrelated to relationship status, suggesting that in recent years, people have come to see masturbation as an independent means of sexual pleasure and not merely a replacement for a sexual partner.

In general, men masturbate more frequently and from an earlier age than women (Gagnon, 1985; Hyde & Jaffee, 2000; Smith et. al, 1996). Nevertheless, research suggests that the benefits of masturbation are particularly salient for women, perhaps due in part to the fact that masturbation has been viewed as less acceptable for women than for men, and therefore challenges traditional gender stereotypes about sexuality. In one study, women aged 16-20 who had experienced orgasms through masturbation had greater sexual agency, felt more entitled to sexual pleasure, and had more open communication with sexual partners than women who had

not experienced non-coital orgasms (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). Hogarth and Ingham (2009) found that young women who masturbated regularly and found it enjoyable and pleasurable felt less embarrassed talking about sexuality, and described their mothers as talking openly about sexuality as opposed to merely “talking at them” about sexual topics.

A comparative study of African-American and European-American women aged 18 to 49 revealed differences in masturbation prevalence and frequency by ethnicity. European-American women were significantly more likely to have masturbated than African-American women (69% to 51% respectively) and masturbated more frequently (26% compared to 12% reported masturbating seven times or more per month). For European women, frequency of self-pleasure was related to having a more positive body image, but this relationship was not found among African-American women, whose overall levels of body satisfaction were higher than those of the European women in the sample (Shulman & Horne, 2003).

Casual Sex Relationships

From “hooking up” or a one-night stand to “friends with benefits” (FWB) relationships, casual sexual encounters are commonplace, at least among college students (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Paul & Hayes, 2002). In recent years, researchers have begun to explore the positive aspects of these relationships. Paul and Hayes (2002) asked undergraduate men and women to describe the characteristics of their best and worst hook-up experiences, defined as an unplanned sexual encounter, possibly with a stranger, with no intention of a future relationship. The most positive experiences were characterized by strong feelings of attraction and sexual pleasure. Although not described as the purpose of a hook-up, some participants indicated that developing a romantic relationship was a potential positive outcome of hook-ups. Participants also reported

negative experiences of hook-ups characterized by intoxication, forced sexual contact, or feeling “used.”

Undergraduate students have indicated that the primary advantage of engaging in FWB relationships (defined as having a regular sexual relationship with a friend that is not exclusive) was engaging in sex with a known and trusted friend without the commitment of a romantic relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2009); but participants also worried about ruining the friendship and the possible downsides of one person developing unreciprocated romantic feelings. While public discourse about FWB relationships suggests that they may be emotionally damaging for young people, research does not support this assertion (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009). When asked about their hook ups and FWB experiences, although young adults reported both positive and negative outcomes, their reactions to casual sex relationships were largely positive (Owen & Fincham, 2011a, 2011b). This was true for both men and women, with men reporting the most positive outcomes.

In (and Out) of the Bedroom

Sexual pleasure can be experienced in a variety of relationships, through distinct sexual behaviors, as well through a wide range of thoughts, desires, and fantasies (Rye & Meany, 2007). As intuition suggests, people are more likely to pursue sexual activities that they find pleasurable than those that they find less pleasurable (Browning, Hatfield, Kessler & Levine, 2000; Pinkerton, Cecil, Bogart & Abramson, 2003). Sexually explicit materials have been shown to promote sexual pleasure and satisfaction for both individuals and couples (Keesling, 2005; Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman, 2011). In a recent U.S. nationally representative survey, vibrator use was found to be common among both men and women, and was associated with higher levels of desire, arousal, lubrication, more frequent orgasms and less pain (Herbenick et al.,

2010; Reece, Herbenick, Sanders, Dodge, Ghassemi, & Fortenberry, 2010).

Opportunities for sexual expression, particularly for women, have increased in other domains as well. Growing numbers of women are attending striptease and pole dancing classes (Killingbeck & Powell, 2009) as well as having erotic photographs taken by professional photographers (Wentland & Muise, 2010). One recent study found that women experienced increased feelings of empowerment, sexual confidence and body satisfaction as a result of their participation in erotic photography (Muise, Herold, & Gillis, 2010).

Conclusions and Future Directions

For the first time in history, sex is more dangerous than the cigarette afterward. ~Jay Leno

Sex is portrayed as a risky business in North American culture, on par with, or even more risky than cigarette smoking. There are certainly good reasons to focus on preventing the risks associated with sex. Lack of sexual desire for a romantic partner is one of the most common presenting problems at sex therapy clinics (e.g., Rosen, 2000). Despite the fact that many young people report positive outcomes of first coitus, more than half of young women describe their first sexual experience as painful or disappointing (as cited in Smiler et al., 2005). Nearly half of all sexually active adolescents and young adults currently engage in unprotected sexual intercourse and put themselves at heightened risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (CDC, 2006). In short, the risks, dangers, and downsides of sex are incontrovertible. Yet to dwell on these and other negative outcomes of sex is at odds with several simple notions. Most people want to engage in sex, and they do so for a variety of reasons, typically out of powerful feelings of attraction to and love for another person. Most people are moderately or highly satisfied with their sexual relationships and can derive joy and pleasure from engaging in a broad range of sexual behaviors.

One important reason why research on sexuality has focused far more on risk, danger, and dysfunction than on pleasure and intimate connection stems from the pervasive influence of the medical disease model. When sex is viewed as a problem that needs to be fixed, researchers and funding agencies invest heavily in identifying the proximal causes of sexual dysfunction and creating therapies for those who are already suffering from sexual problems. Applying the medical model to research on sexuality restricts our ability to account for the diversity of sexual experience (Tiefer & Kaschak, 2001). To illustrate this idea in the domain of sex therapy, Leonore Tiefer (2010) recently posed the question “Is sex more like dancing or digestion?” She argued that digestion is primarily driven by biology, and that deviations from normal digestion typically prompt people to seek medical attention. In contrast, dancing is influenced by culture, relational dynamics, and personal preferences. There is not a single, healthy way to dance, and instead, there are many types of dances that an individual can pursue and enjoy, with many different partners. In short, the traditional medical model of sex therapy treats sex like digestion, when Tiefer argues that it should be treated more like dancing. Moving forward, it will be especially important for scholars and therapists to integrate what we know about sexual risk and dysfunction with the burgeoning field of positive sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Toward this end, we believe that an approach-avoidance motivational perspective holds particular promise in creating this integration of perspectives, as there are certainly sexual risks to avoid, but also great rewards to pursue.

Our primary goal in writing this review was to provide a counterpoint to what has seemed like a laser focus on sexual risk by reviewing research that paints a more positive picture of sexuality in relationships. To accomplish this goal, we presented research on four interrelated topics, showing how positive sexual *motives, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors* can improve the

quality of people's lives and relationships. With great eagerness, we look forward to a time when our understanding of sexuality and relationships is more balanced, comprehensive, and integrates what we know about the risks of sex with what can ultimately be one of the greatest sources of pleasure in life.

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