

attachment influences developmental outcomes, however, it may be necessary to examine both mother–child and father–child attachment across childhood. In addition, more information is needed about the little studied role and importance of nonparental attachment figures such as siblings and grandparents.

Additionally, it is important to remember that attachment is just one source of influence on child development. More research should examine how attachment, in combination with other aspects of social experience, influences children's development. For example, the finding that attachment influences peer relationships should inspire research on how early attachment history and previous peer experience work together to influence children's later peer relationships. Another direction is to examine variables that may explain the links between attachment and peer relationships.

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See also Adult Attachment, Individual Differences; Adult Attachment Interview; Attachment Theory; Emotion Regulation, Developmental Influences; Parent–Child Relationships; Parenting; Strange Situation

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ATTRACTION, SEXUAL

Sexual attraction is a feeling of attraction to another person on the basis of sexual desire. Sexual attraction differs from other types of attraction such as friendship attraction in that it involves a component that is specifically sexual. For example, research has shown that there are two general types of love: passionate love, which is an intense feeling of longing for union with another, and companionate love, which is a warm feeling of affection and tenderness for those with whom people's lives are deeply connected. Sexual attraction is a particularly important aspect of passionate love but is much less relevant to companionate love.

There are several ways that researchers measure people's feelings of sexual attraction to another person: *sexual desire* (a motivational component that refers to a wish, need, or drive to seek out sexual objects or to engage in sexual activities), *sexual behavior* (a behavioral component, often assessed by determining how frequently couples engage in various sexual behaviors such as kissing, petting, and intercourse), and *sexual feelings* (an evaluative component including feelings of satisfaction, intimacy, and pleasure). Although sexual desire, sexual behavior, and sexual feelings often co-occur within a given sexual interaction, they are considered separate and distinct phenomena. For example, people can engage in sexual activity when they have little or no sexual desire, a phenomenon called *sexual compliance* or *consensual unwanted sex*. Similarly, people can experience sexual desire

and engage in sexual behavior but not find their experiences to be particularly pleasurable or satisfying. This entry examines the factors that influence sexual attraction, the features people are sexually attracted to, the people found to be sexually attractive, the reasons people engage in sex when they are sexually attracted, and the ways sexual attraction changes over the course of relationships.

What Influences Sexual Attraction?

Several theories attempt to explain the factors that influence sexual attraction. Social context theories focus on the proximal influences of sexual attraction, such as the social and cultural environments. According to these theories, sociocultural scripts guide people's attitudes, behaviors, and experiences with sexuality, including the factors that people perceive as sexually attractive. For example, in contemporary Western cultures, it is not viewed as acceptable to desire individuals much younger than oneself, especially those who are not yet socially considered to be adults. However, in other cultures, individuals, especially women, enter into marriages when they are in their teens. In contrast to social context theories, evolutionary theory considers the distal influences of sexual attraction, including how natural selection shaped sexual attraction in the time of the hunter-gatherers. Reproduction is an essential part of evolution; therefore, those traits that allowed hunter-gatherers to better survive and reproduce are now viewed as more sexually attractive. According to this theory, traits that signify health and fertility, such as facial symmetry and a fit body, are considered to be more sexually attractive.

Both of these theories attempt to explain why individuals find certain features, such as a beautiful face, to be more sexually attractive than other features. Social context theories consider current influences such as society and culture, allowing for differences in sexual attraction within different environments. Conversely, evolutionary theory attempts to explain the universality of sexual attraction, based on the traits that enhanced survival and reproduction during hunter-gatherer times. Despite their different approaches, both theories focus on gender differences in what is considered to be sexually attractive.

Which Features Do Men and Women Find Sexually Attractive?

Men and women both describe physical attractiveness as an essential part of sexual attraction as it is often an indicator of social success and physical health. Facial symmetry is a specific feature that enhances physical attractiveness. Both men and women who have more symmetrical faces are viewed as more physically attractive than those with less symmetrical faces. Other important features of physical attractiveness are prominent cheekbones, shiny teeth, a wide smile, and baby-like features such as large eyes. In men, a strong chin is also considered physically attractive. Body size is also an important component of physical attractiveness. In Western cultures, people report that thinner or average size individuals are more attractive than individuals with extremely thin or extremely overweight body sizes. For women, a thinner waist and wider hips (with the ideal waist-to-hip ratio being .7) is more attractive, whereas men with straighter hip-to-waist ratios (.8–.9) are viewed as more attractive. Other features that influence sexual attraction in addition to physical attractiveness are cultural success, wealth, personality, and sexual fidelity. Many of these features of sexual attraction are gender-specific. For example, women are more sexually attracted to men who exhibit personal success and have kind and caring personalities. These features, though still influential, are not as important for men. On the other hand, sexual fidelity is an aspect of sexual attractiveness that is more important to men.

Although some components of sexual attraction are thought to be universal, such as facial symmetry and hip-to-waist ratios, it is important to remember that many of the components of sexual attraction are culturally variable. For example, although thinner bodies are reported to be more physically attractive in general, there are certain cultures that view more overweight bodies as more attractive. In these cultures, body size is indicative of wealth, and a heavier body indicates a wealthier status.

To Whom Are People Sexually Attracted?

The majority of people report sexual attractions to members of the other sex, yet a sizable minority of

people report that they are attracted to members of the same sex. Sexual attractions to people of the same sex or the other sex have historically been measured with a Kinsey rating, which ranges between 0 and 6. A rating of 0 represents exclusive other-sex (i.e., heterosexual) attractions, a rating of 6 represents exclusive same-sex (i.e., homosexual) attractions, and a rating of 3 represents equal degrees of same-sex and other-sex attractions. In a nationally representative sample of 18-to-44-year-old men and women, 92 percent of men said that they were attracted only to females, 3.9 percent said mostly to females, and 3.2 percent said to only or mostly to males or to both males and females equally. Eighty-six percent of women said that they were attracted only to males, 10 percent said mostly to males, and 3.4 percent said only or mostly to females or to both females and males equally.

Some people, who later identify as gay or lesbian, report that they were unaware of same-sex attractions in childhood and early adolescence, whereas others report that these attractions were present at an early age. The propensity to experience same-sex attractions is not as stable as once believed, particularly for lesbian women. Lisa Diamond tracked a group of women over a 2-year period and found that half of the women in her study relinquished their initial sexual minority identity (e.g., they originally identified as lesbian or questioning and later identified as heterosexual or bisexual). Women tend to be more flexible in their same-sex attractions over the course of their lives than are men. Although researchers do not yet know why, it is possible that different neural and hormonal processes may underlie the development of sexual orientation in men and women or that rigid gender socialization for boys and men may lead to the suppression of male same-sex sexual desires.

Why Do People Engage in Sex When They Experience Sexual Attraction?

Why people engage in sex when they feel sexually attracted to a partner is referred to as *sexual motives*. People may engage in sex for *self-focused motives* such as to pursue their own physical pleasure or to avoid their own feelings of guilt from turning a partner down. They may engage in sex

for *partner-focused motives* such as pleasing their partner or preventing their partner's disappointment from being turned down. People may also engage in sex for *relationship-focused motives* such as increasing intimacy or avoiding conflict in their relationships. Reasons for engaging in sex can change over the course of sexual interactions. For example, a man may initially pursue sex to experience his own physical pleasure but may become increasingly focused on feeling close to and pleasing his partner over the course of an interaction. People's sexual motives may change across the course of the life span, such as in cases where boys engage in sex to impress their friends during their adolescence but find that this reason loses importance with increased age.

Engaging in sex repeatedly for particular reasons may lead people to develop a particular orientation toward their sexuality. For people who hold a *recreational orientation* to sex, the primary goal is to experience physical pleasure. In contrast, for people who hold a *relational orientation* to sex, the primary goal is to express love and affection for one's partner. There are important differences between men and women in these two relational orientations. Whereas men are more likely than women to adopt a recreational orientation in which no particular emotional relationship is needed as a prerequisite for sex, women are more likely than men to adopt a relational orientation in which sexuality is seen as an integral part of an ongoing relationship. It is important to point out that these male-female differences are the most dramatic during adolescence and young adulthood and may change over the course of time in relationships.

How Does Sexual Attraction Change Over the Course of Relationships?

Feelings of sexual desire or attraction to one's partner are higher and lower at different points in relationships. Sexual attraction plays an especially important role in the beginning stages of romantic relationships as partners are just beginning to fall in love and develop a relationship. In the American Couples Study of married, cohabiting, and gay and lesbian couples, the couples who engaged in sex the most frequently had been together for 2 years or less. In short, sexual desire typically peaks at the beginning of relationships as couples

are just getting to know each other and often decreases over the relationships, with the fastest rate of decline in the first several years. The transition to parenthood is one phase of relationships that involves dramatic life changes and adjustments, including changes in sexual attraction. Women's interest in sexual activity declines during pregnancy, reaching a near zero point during the immediate postpartum period, and then slowly increasing in the months after childbirth. Although male sexual desire does not decrease as dramatically as female desire during pregnancy and shortly after the birth of a child, some men also report decreased interest in sex due to fears of hurting the fetus and to the changing body of their partners.

Men's and women's sexual interests continue later in life but may be compromised by factors such as declining health of oneself or one's partner. In the National Survey of Families and Households conducted in 1988, whereas the frequency of marital sex was approximately 12 times a month for couples ages 19 to 24, it declined to 5 times a month for those ages 50 to 54, and 2 times a month for those ages 65 to 69. Despite the fact that they may be engaging in sexual activity less frequently than when they were younger, many older couples still view sex as especially important, meaningful, and satisfying, sometimes even more so than in their younger years.

In conclusion, there is a huge amount of variability in people's feelings of sexual attraction to another person. People can be attracted to different sorts of physical or personal features, people can desire partners of the same or other sex (or both), and people can engage in sex for a variety of reasons that change over the course of their lives and relationships.

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See also Love, Companionate and Passionate; Lust; Marriage and Sex; Sex and Love

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ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES IN RELATIONSHIPS

General research on attribution addresses a wide range of judgments and cognitions that occur during person perception and social interactions. Fritz Heider's seminal work on person perception, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations," provided the impetus for decades of research on how people explain the behaviors of others, a body of work that has fallen under the broad label of *attribution*. The most common use of the term within the research literature refers to judgments about the perceived causes of human behavior, emphasizing how laypeople generate common-sense explanations for the behaviors of others or themselves. The traditional focus of research within attribution work, then, is determining how people go about answering the question of "Why?" when they attempt to explain human behavior. Such explanations consist of potentially innumerable causes, consequences, and contexts. The following entry first summarizes the nature of general attribution work within the field of social psychology. The focus then shifts to attributions as they relate to the study of relationship