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## Sociocultural Factors of Female Sexual Desire and Sexual Satisfaction

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Sociocultural Factors of Female Sexual Desire and Sexual Satisfaction

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## Abstract

Historically, research on the human sexual-response cycle has not accounted for individual differences in gender and context. As a circular female response cycle was introduced in the latter end of the 20th century, differentiation between male and female sexuality was embraced, and individual variation between women became commonly known for the first time. As part of this historical shift, sexual desire became an integral part of the sexual experience (Basson, 2000). Most research on female sexual desire focuses on low desire and diagnosable conditions, but, among researchers, there is a growing consensus for additional focus into the roots of female desire and optimal sexual experiences. Sociocultural influences, including body image and appearance, time and setting, gendered cultural scripts, and expectations for pleasure/orgasm, play an important role in helping determine sexual desire. As greater attention and understanding are given to sociocultural influence, women may experience greater desire and higher sexual satisfaction.

Historically, research on the human sexual-response cycle has been static, and studies have given little consideration to individual differences related to gender and context (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskava & Rosario, 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019b). Masters and Johnson first introduced the basic outline of the sexual-response system, characterized by arousal, orgasm, and resolution; Kaplan later introduced a desire phase (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskava & Rosario, 2018). The original notions for this system proved relatively useful in understanding men's sexual functioning, however, further research showed men and women experiencing these phenomena differently, particularly in the area of sexual desire (Basson, 2000; Busby, Chiu, Leonhardt, & Iliff, 2018; Leavitt et al., 2019b).

Basson revolutionized the study of female sexuality through separation and distinction of individual sexual phenomena. In her (2000) seminal study of the female sexual response, she presented a model depicting a circular sexual-response cycle, as opposed to the linear models accepted in previous years. The circular model supports the theory that sexual responses in women are not cause-and-effect (Basson, 2000). Research suggests that sexual desire, orgasm, and satisfaction might happen simultaneously while building upon each other (Basson, 2000). This unprecedented phenomenon has contributed to ambiguity in differentiating between individual aspects of the female sexual experience. Within this model, there is also allowance for individual variation between women (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Leavitt, 2019b; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018).

When asked directly, women describe sexual desire in abstract terms; many women struggle to describe how they understand desire, often reporting sexual desire and sexual arousal as similar constructs (Brotto et al., 2009). Historically misunderstood perceptions about the female sexual-response cycle may influence this ambiguity in differentiating between individual aspects of the female sexual experience. When sexual-response cycles were first outlined in research, traditional indicators of desire were mainly comprised of genital and physiological responses (Basson, 2000). In contrast, sexual desire today is commonly acknowledged as the emotional appeal to have sex, while arousal is more commonly defined by genital

and physiological responses. Furthermore, women sometimes report experiencing these physical responses without always feeling desire (Leavitt et al., 2019b). In other cases, evidence shows that sexual desire may not precede arousal, while other women still view arousal and desire as the same construct (Leavitt et al., 2019b). The multiple interpretations around the terms desire and arousal have resulted in a lack of understanding at a societal level. As a result, society has reverted to traditional theories in understanding sexuality, most of which appear to be tailored to men's sexual response and desire (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Cultural assumptions and lack of awareness around individual differences may negatively impact sexual desire.

Additionally, research and culture have historically focused on low sexual desire in women, abandoning the notion of varied or high sexual desire in women (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Graham et al., 2017). Earlier ideas pertaining to female sexual desire have been shown to be problematic, and yet little effort has been made to update them (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rubin et al., 2019). Because of the way sexual desire has been integrated into society, and because of its universally complex nature, women's desire and sexuality run the risk of being portrayed as inhibited (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Rubin et al., 2019). Moreover, female sexual desire may not be discussed at all, when in fact, lack of understanding presents an even greater need to explore what drives female sexual desire and overall satisfaction.

While both men and women experience biological motives for sexual activity, women often report lower biological sex urge while noting higher levels of desire for meaningful connection, emotional vulnerability, and open communication (Basson, 2000; Leavitt et al., 2019b). For them, sexuality develops within sociocultural, political, economic, relational, and interpersonal contexts (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Leavitt et al., 2019b). A closer look at female sexual desire shows that it has previously been defined in a variety of ways including one's wish to engage in sexual activity, necessity for arousal, longing for connection, and the wish to express ownership of one's

body while submitting to another's desire (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). This begins to combine women's interpersonal and physical needs and lends understanding to female sexual desire as being multi-faceted rather than defined by a single construct. Additionally, sexual desire can be initiated by intrinsic and/or extrinsic factors (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019, Leavitt et al., 2019b). Extrinsic factors are commonly rooted in context.

In recent years, emphasis on the sociocultural factors of sexual desire have intensified in the midst of the biological and physiological factors that have historically taken precedence (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018; Rubin et al., 2019). Empirical evidence further dichotomizes sexual desire by labeling men's as spontaneous, while noting women's as more contextual (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018; Rubin et al., 2019). Context appears to be heavily influenced by social and cultural influences (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Although female sexuality and desire have been stereotyped and construed to match that of the male experience, female sexual desire is individual and influenced by sociocultural influence, including body image/appearance, timing and setting, gendered cultural scripts, and expectations for pleasure/orgasm. Greater understanding of female sexuality, coupled with an emphasis on these misunderstood sociocultural aspects, may increase desire for women; as a result, sexual satisfaction may be heightened. This literature review will first establish a baseline knowledge of female sexual desire and then analyze related sociocultural influences, including the effort to normalize female sexual desire and increase overall satisfaction.

## **Female Sexual Desire**

The original linear sexual-response theory did not differentiate between men and women and did not include sexual desire as part of the response system (Basson, 2000). As the differences between men and women's sexual responses have become more widely examined, sexual desire has not only been incorporated into the circular female sexual-response cycle but also has been acknowledged as an integral

part of that cycle (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; McCarthy & Ross, 2018). While men's sexual desire has historically been characterized as spontaneous, females' sexual desire tends to be responsive to external stimuli (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Furthermore, research supports women reacting to men's desire (Rubin et al., 2019).

Multiple meanings are associated with female sexual desire (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). These include the wish to increase emotional intimacy with one's partner, to feel attractive, to feel loved, to feel desired, and to experience arousal and pleasure (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018). As part of sexual arousal, women claim that feeling desired, rather than a desire for sexual activity, is arousing (Leavitt, 2019b). These drivers for sexual activity support the role of context in female sexual desire and may be influenced by societal and cultural forces.

Sexual desire can manifest itself in different ways and at different times throughout the sexual experience (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Contrary to common belief, women do not need to experience high levels of desire at the beginning of a sexual experience to have positive sexual outcomes (Leavitt et al., 2019b). No matter when the desire is felt (i.e. before, after, or in conjunction with arousal), women report feeling desire as a satisfying sexual experience (Leavitt et al., 2019b). Desire (an emotional appeal) commonly feeds into arousal (genital and physiological responses) (Basson, 2000); when women do not take time to experience full arousal, sexual satisfaction is diminished (Leavitt et al., 2019b). Giving into sexual desire has also generally been associated with overall satisfaction (Leavitt et al., 2019b). While other factors of the sexual experience certainly impact satisfaction, the intrinsic connection between sexual desire and sexual satisfaction is clear.

Over time, society has seen women become more open to talking about sexuality and sexual response. This trend has been accompanied by an increase in diagnoses associated with problematic sexual desire, including female sexual interest/arousal disorder (FSIAD) and hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD)/inhibited

sexual desire (ISD) (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Kingsberg & Woodard, 2015; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). In fact, low sexual desire is the most commonly reported problem for women seeking sex therapy (Kingsberg & Woodard, 2015; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). One study found that 30% to 50% of women report low sexual desire (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). It is possible then that sexual desire is being operationalized or construed poorly for the female population.

Significant attention has been given to studying the origins of sexual desire disorders; as a result, high sexual desire in women remains largely unexamined (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018). Speculations concerning this phenomenon center around the concept that sexual desire takes place on a continuum (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018); when both ends of said continuum are not recognized, women run the risk of having their lack of desire labeled as a clinical problem requiring a medical solution, when, in fact, sexual desire is varied and diverse (Graham et al., 2017; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Furthermore, female sexuality has been stereotyped as being inhibited and largely undiscussed at both a personal and societal level (Basson, 2000; Rubin et al., 2019).

Many factors influence female sexual desire (Basson, 2000; Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Rosenkratz & Mark 2018; Rubin et al., 2019). These factors are rooted in biological (Basson, 2000; Leavitt et al., 2019b), physiological, relational (Busby et al., 2018), lifestyle, and sociocultural motivations (Kingsberg & Woodard, 2015; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Biological and physiological factors of sexual desire include hormone levels, medical challenges, menopause, childbirth, stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and other mental health-related occurrences (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Sleep, eating, fitness, and substance-abuse habits pertain to lifestyle influences and likewise play a role in desire (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Relational factors can be comprised of relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, connectedness, and a willingness to put effort into a relationship while also striving for individual betterment (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark 2018).

These factors and influences are in no way exhaustive or all-inclusive, but they provide important insight into the sociocultural influence of female sexual desire. While not easy, lifestyle habits and relational components can be adjusted, and a vast number of resources exist for physiological concerns. Sociocultural factors, on the other hand, encompass long-held values, norms, and inequalities (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Because they take place on a large population scale, the role of sociocultural influences is often downplayed due to the reality that they are not quick or simple fixes (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). The following society and culture-based motives in sexual desire have the capacity to enhance or hinder sexual outcomes and influence sexual satisfaction (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018).

### **Sociocultural Factors and Sexual Satisfaction**

For women, challenges with sexual desire are commonly interrelated with the context of everyday life in addition to the many other factors that play into the presence of sexual desire. (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rubin et al., 2019). Cultural assumptions pertaining to women having lower sexual desire than men are contradicted by research showing that sexual desire for women is contextually based and situationally sensitive (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). These contextual factors are often rooted in sociocultural influences (Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018) and can be related to body image and appearance, timing and setting, gendered cultural scripts, and expectations for pleasure and orgasm (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Leavitt et al., 2019b; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018; Rubin et al., 2019).

#### **Body Image**

Society has shaped many cultural beliefs around physical appearance (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Cultural attitudes toward the female body can encourage or discourage a sense of agency, integrity, and ownership over one's sexuality from a young age (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018).

Conflicting attitudes emerge and have the power to inhibit sexuality by subduing sexual body esteem and promoting body objectification (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018). One study notes how this can take place from a young age within parent-child relationships; parents can foster self-consciousness and reduce sexual body esteem and agency in how they refer to their own body and talk about their child's body (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018). A qualitative study of personal interviews showed that positive body image, confidence, and being comfortable in one's own body helped stimulate sexual desire, while negative body image, insecurity, weight gain, and lack of fitness impeded such (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019).

How the female body is approached at a societal level has a significant impact in either fostering positive or negative body-image conceptualization. In relationships, women have expressed increased sexual desire when they feel that their whole self is desired by their partner, rather than just their body (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). While society has shaped body image and confidence to mean solely physical features, a woman's image of herself includes many more facets, including a sense of autonomy and integrity of self. These additional factors of self-concept have been shown to foster sexual desire (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2018).

### **Timing and Setting**

Timing, setting, and presence also play an important sociocultural role in female sexual desire (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). At a personal level, individuals are increasingly time oriented. Society sometimes presents the idea that life events should not interrupt a regular sex schedule (Graham et al., 2017), yet females report that a lack of time hinders their sexual desire and overall sexual experience (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Sexual desire is best fostered in relaxed and slowed-down settings, while lack of time is reported to hinder desire (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Timing refers to the full time allotted for the sexual experience and the timing of initiation. When these factors are timed right, desire increases, which can increase sexual satisfaction overall (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019). Relaxed and slowed-down settings within one's home

can be intertwined with and influenced by the cultural scripts and norms that are reinforced outside of the private realm of one's sexual relationships and life.

### **Gendered Cultural Scripts**

An overarching cultural assumption is that sexual desire should be strong and spontaneous instead of being reactive and responsive (Graham et al., 2017; Leavitt et al., 2019b). Females often do not match the male-centric stereotypes assigned to them, yet gendered cultural scripts and rigid binary roles are socially reinforced (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018; Rubin et al., 2019). These scripts and roles include the expectations that males have an active desire for sex while females supposedly experience naturally weak desire, and that men initiate sexual advances while women restrict them (Rubin et al., 2019). Although stepping outside assigned roles is often frowned upon at a societal level, research shows that freedom to break the binary can increase desire (Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Likewise, gendered cultural scripts have the potential to create stress and pressure to meet societal expectations. Failure to meet these can contribute to feelings of guilt and shame and lower sexual desire as females are acting outside their stereotypical, scripted roles (Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018).

Cultural influences, such as religious views, may also lessen desire as religious beliefs often prohibit sexual exploration (Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Christian beliefs emphasize dangers of female sexuality without giving the same attention to men (Leonhardt et al., 2019). This double standard has been associated with feelings of guilt and shame for women and their sexuality (Leonhardt et al., 2019). Meanwhile, one's personal relationship to sexuality, including, anxiety, self-consciousness, embarrassment, insecurity, and guilt, can hinder sexual desire. Alternatively, religious beliefs can promote sexual sanctification (the belief that sexuality has divine character and significance) (Leonhardt et al., 2019). This type of divine meaning-making of the sexual experience can invite peace and transcendence and has been linked to greater sexual satisfaction (Leonhardt et al., 2019). Overall, there are both negative and positive connections

between religiosity and the sexual experience for women, but religious influences, in the context of gendered cultural scripts, run the risk of suppressing female sexuality to the point of sexual guilt and anxiety. This can negatively impact the sexual experience (Leonhardt et al., 2019).

### ***Expectations for Pleasure***

Many cultural assumptions exist around female's expectations for pleasure and/or orgasm (Graham et al., 2017; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Rubin et al., 2019). Not only are female orgasms complex at times, sometimes elusive, and less consistent than men's orgasm (Graham et al., 2017), but gendered cultural scripts may prioritize male pleasure over female pleasure. Society and culture have shaped perception in creating false notions that women experience less orgasms and that their orgasms are less important (Rubin et al., 2019). Furthermore, female sexuality is too often focused on the act of being sexual rather than enjoying the sexual experience (McClelland, 2010). This can create scenarios where women neglect their own pleasure needs and instead focus on their partner's pleasure due to women's expectations often being so low that they do not advocate for themselves (McClelland, 2010). Routine and orgasm-focused sex can feel obligatory and lessen desire and overall satisfaction. Women are at risk for a pleasure disadvantage due to these cultural norms.

### ***Desire-Focused Intervention***

Sociocultural influences can either enhance or inhibit sexual desire, which can result in an increase or decrease in sexual satisfaction (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; McCarthy & Ross, 2018; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Low sexual desire and related diagnoses (i.e. hypoactive sexual desire disorder) have become increasingly prevalent among women. Because sexual desire has been socialized, researchers have suggested that this increase in diagnoses may not have a biological root but might be rooted situations where women's personal preferences and pleasures are not being communicated or maximized (Kingsberg & Woodard, 2015). Consequently, desire becomes further inhibited. (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019).

In contrast, there is a growing need to focus on what enhances and increases female sexual desire. As these influences are understood in more depth and challenged, female sexual desire may be redefined to better align with the circular sexual-response system (Basson, 2000). This could eventually shift individual perception and attitude to a more comprehensive view of multi-faceted sexual desire, which may lend itself to a fundamental change in societal attitudes. A more sex-positive approach can be taken towards female sexual desire as a result. As desire increases and is recognized in its true context, the overall sexual experience for women will improve (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Research suggests that the lack of knowledge about the female sexual-response cycle and desire has influenced social norms (Krasnow & Maglio, 2019, Leavitt, 2019b), and that female sexual desire can be inhibited or enhanced through various sociocultural influences. While most research is centered on low sexual desire, there is a growing need for sex-positive approaches (especially directed towards women) and a societal paradigm shift. (Cherkasskava & Rosario, 2018; Krasnow & Maglio, 2019; Leavitt, 2019b; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Specific measures can be taken to encourage and facilitate this cultural shift. Sexual mindfulness is one suggested evidence-based practice prescribed to help people be aware of and attentive to the pleasure of their partner, as well as their own pleasure (Leavitt et al., 2019a; Leavitt et al., 2019b). This practice is especially helpful for females. Women who can acknowledge their need for pleasure and insist on this need being met are more likely to experience sexual satisfaction. Research shows that engaging in sexual mindfulness boosts self-esteem, thus battling the guilt and shame that have long been associated with female sexual response and desire (Leavitt et al., 2019a; Rosenkratz & Mark, 2018). Changes in individual perception have the capacity to eventually influence society as a whole.

Other interventions that can take place on a large scale encompass components of sex education. Sex-positive curriculum that not only presents sex in a positive light but also acknowledges the pleasure

that women can experience and should expect in a relationship is needed. This approach could be incorporated into existing sex education in schools. Additionally, government resources could offer related curriculum that is widely accessible, including educational sex counseling and classes. Federally funded websites and organizations could also publish information on women's sexual desire and response cycle that is not commonly known. As research evolves, education must accompany it. Similar to how changes in individual perception can influence society, interventions from a government level has the potential to influence individual homes and families. As wives and mothers become familiar with and empowered in their own sexuality, they will likely educate their daughters differently than how they were educated. Women can also educate boys and men to be aware of the sexual needs of women and encourage men to be partners that tend to women's needs and encourage women to feel sexually empowered.

While these interventions and strategies carry potential, there is little empirical evidence to support them. Much of the existing research on female sexual desire focuses on low sexual desire and sexual dysfunction. The minimal research that does exist on female sexual desire enhancement and sex-positive approaches often takes place on a small scale with relatively little samples. While these studies are rich in qualitative data, larger studies are needed in order to generalize results and encourage widespread change and shifts in long-held stereotypes. Society might also benefit from longitudinal studies to see what ages women tend to experience the most negative effects related to their sexuality. Imprint periods could then be examined, and interventions could be strategically organized by age. As sex-positive approaches are taken in both research and education, the sociocultural aspects of female sexual desire may be better understood, and the barriers and stereotypes surrounding it may begin to dissolve. As a result, sexual desire may increase for women, thus increasing overall sexual satisfaction.

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