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Topics in Human Sexuality: Sexuality Across the Lifespan Adulthood/Male and Female Sexuality

Introduction

The development of sexuality is a lifelong process that begins in infancy. As we move from infancy to adolescence and adolescence to adulthood, there are many sexual milestones. While adolescent sexuality is a time in which sexual maturation, interest and experience surge, adult sexuality continues to be a time of sexual unfolding. It is during this time that people consolidate their sexual orientation and enter into their first mature, and often long term, sexual relationships. This movement towards mature sexuality also has a number of gender-specific issues as males and females often experience sexuality differently. As people age, these differences are often marked. In addition to young and middle age adults, the elderly are often an overlooked group when it comes to discussion of sexuality. Sexuality, however, continues well into what are often considered the golden years.

This course will review the development of sexuality using a lifespan perspective. It will focus on sexuality in adulthood and in the elderly. It will discuss physical and psychological milestones connected with adult sexuality.

Educational Objectives

1. Discuss the process of attaining sexual maturity, including milestones
2. Compare and contrast remaining singles, getting married and cohabitating
3. Discuss sexuality in marriage including factors that lead to lack of marital satisfaction
4. Discuss marital or partnered sexuality including frequency of sexual intercourse, common sexual acts, and masturbation patterns
5. Review physical and emotional factors in sex after pregnancy.
6. Discuss infidelity, including statistics, behaviors, and risk factors.
7. Discuss factors related to aging.

Milestones in Adult Development

As in many cultures, the United States has various norms for sexuality. Adolescence is a time when teens try on many "sexual hats" in order to determine what is sexually pleasing. In the adolescent years, most adolescents are not engaging in partnered sexual behavior; solo masturbation is the most prevalent teenage sexual activity with

rates as high as 43% of males and 37% of females (NSSHB, 2010). In early adulthood, people move toward mature, adult sexuality. Hyde and DeLamater (2003) term this a period of sexual unfolding, and include several factors in this process.

First is the development of sexual orientation. It is estimated that 10% of people are exclusively homosexual (Elmore, 2006), making heterosexuality the more prevalent sexual orientation. According to a research by Chandra et al (2011), who looked at sexual contacts by gender, about 4%–6% of males have had same-sex contact. For females, the percentage of people who have had same-sex contact ranges from about 4% to 11%–12%. It is likely that many people explore these feelings in early adulthood, but many do not act on them due to strong societal prohibitions against homosexuality. Men more than women seem to struggle with these societal norms. Hyperheterosexuality an established part of the male role (Hyde & DeLamater, 2003) and homosexual feelings are often ignored as a result.

The trend towards more mature sexuality can be seen in data from a 2010 Kinsey survey. More than half the participants in the 2010 national sex survey ages 18-24 indicated that their most recent sexual partner was a casual or dating partner. For other age groups, the majority of study participants indicated that their most recent sexual partner was a relationship partner.

Another task of adult sexual development is learning sexual likes and dislikes and effectively communicating these to a partner (Hyde & DeLamater, 2003). This is often a process of sexual experimentation.

Singles, Marrieds and Cohabitators

During adulthood, people choose to enter into intimate or sexual relationships or to remain uncoupled. The U.S. government defines marriage as a social union or contract between people that creates kinship. Marital relationships involve many components: legal, social, spiritual, economic and sexual. The institution of marriage predates recorded history, and has primarily been defined as a partnership between two people of the opposite gender.

A relatively new practice involves same-sex couples being granted the legal marital recognition as commonly used by mixed-sex couples. The federal government does not recognize same-sex marriage in the United States, but such marriages are recognized by some individual states. As of January 2010, 29 states had constitutional provisions restricting marriage to one man and one woman, while 12 others had laws "restricting marriage to one man and one woman."

The term *never married* refers to adults who have never been married. Thirty percent of Americans have never been married — the largest percentage in the past 60 years, according to the latest U.S. Census (2010). Among those ages 25 to 29, the never-marrieds increased from 27% in 1986 to 47% in 2009.

Given these statistics, it appears that most people in our society do eventually marry. Prior to making a marital commitment, many young adults engage in a pattern of

serial monogamy, dating one exclusive partner, ending the relationship, then dating another. Males 30-44 report an average of 6-8 female sexual partners in their lifetime, while females 30-44 report an average of 4 male sexual partners in their lifetime. 56% of American men and 30% of American women have had 5 or more sex partners in their lifetime (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005).

There has been some change in dating patterns with the surge of Internet dating sites. This has vastly expanded the dating pool, which previously had included couples meeting through the introductions of family and friends and through institutions such as church and school.

In early adulthood, it is common for couples to experiment with commitment at varying degrees, such as from an exclusive dating relationship to living together. Cohabitation refers to an arrangement whereby two people decide to live together on a long-term basis in an emotionally or sexually intimate relationship. From a sexuality perspective, it is interesting that cohabitation is a public declaration of a sexual relationship (Hyde & DeLamater, 2003). Cohabitation has become more common, and is sometimes an end to itself and not a precursor to marriage.

Cohabitators do appear to engage in sexual behavior with more frequency than married persons. A sample of 7,000 adults found that married couples had sexual intercourse 8 to 11 times per month while those who lived together engaged in sexual intercourse 11 to 13 times per month (Call et al, 1995).

Sex and the Married Couple

Case Vignette

Kevin and Marie, ages 28 and 26 respectively, have been married for 7 years and are seeking marital counseling. In assessing their degree of intimacy, Dr. Janey found that a frequent source of conflict between the couple was what Kevin viewed as a rejection. The couple reported engaging in sexual intercourse approximately once a week; Kevin, however, felt that anything less than 2-3 times per week was insufficient and a cause of the other problems in the marriage. How much is "normal," asks Kevin.

Questions such as this are a frequent source of discussion in marital as well as individual counseling. Although it is difficult to identify a norm, it appears that engagement in sexual intercourse is mediated by age (see chart below). As would be expected, frequency declines as both men and women get older. The explanation for this is both biological, such as decrease in vaginal lubrication and poor health, and psychological, habituation to sex with the same partner. As with the case vignette, research has found that sexual inactivity has been associated with unhappiness in the marriage (Donnelly, 1993; Huston et al, 1996). Sexual dissatisfaction is associated with increased risk of divorce and relationship dissolution. (Karney, 1995).

A large-scale study by Donnelly (1993) analyzed marital sexuality. Donnelly interviewed 6,029 married people to determine which factors are related to sexually inactive marriages and if sexually inactive marriages are less happy and satisfying than those with sexual activity. Donnelly measured nineteen independent variables including: life satisfaction, religious fundamentalism, gender role traditionality, individualism, marital interaction variables, and marital happiness. She found that the lower the marital happiness and shared activity, the greater the chance of sexual inactivity and separation. Sexual inactivity was found to be associated with old age, the presence of small children, poor health, and in males, duration of marriage. Sexually inactive marriages are not happy, therefore, are not satisfying marriages.

Another study of married couples found age and marital satisfaction to be the two variables most associated with amount of sex. As couples age, they engage in sex less frequently with half of couples age 65-75 still engaging in sex, but less than one fourth of couples over 75 still sexually active. Across all ages couples that reported higher levels of marital satisfaction also reported higher frequencies of sex. (Call, 1995).

The results of a large-scale study of married men and women is reported below.

Kinsey Institute (NSSHB, 2010)

Percentage of Married Men Reporting Frequency of Vaginal Sex, N=2396 Age Group

	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Not in past year	4.2	1.6	4.5	9.1	20.6	33.9	54.2
A few times per year to monthly	12.5	9.3	15.6	16.2	25.0	21.2	24.2
A few times per month to weekly	30.0	36.4	32.5	24.1	31.8	20.5	63.2
2-3 times per week	26.0	27.1	39.0	25.3	18.8	38.6	0.0
4 or more times per week	10.0	6.3	6.5	11.5	4.7	2.3	0.0

Percentage of Married Women Reporting Frequency of Vaginal Sex, N=2393 Age Group

	18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Not in past year	11.8	3.5	6.5	8.1	22.0	37.0	53.5
A few times per year to monthly	14.7	11.6	16.3	21.7	23.7	20.0	25.4
A few times per month to weekly	14.7	47.7	50.2	46.6	36.2	35.9	18.3
2-3 times per week	35.3	35.2	21.9	20.8	16.9	6.2	1.4
4 or more times per week	23.5	2.0	5.1	2.7	1.1	0.0	1.4

Marital and Partnered Sexuality

The chart above describes the frequency of vaginal sexual intercourse. According to the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB), there is much variability in the sexual repertoires of U.S. adults, with more than 40 combinations of sexual activity described at adults' most recent sexual contact. It is rare that adult men and women engage in just one sex act when they have sex. While vaginal intercourse is still the most common sexual behavior reported by adults, many sexual events do not involve intercourse and include only partnered masturbation or oral sex (NSSHB, 2010). Determining what marital sexuality will be like has sometimes been described as a "mating dance," or as the process of "negotiating sex."

Sexual Practices

So what is "having sex"? In a recent study at The Kinsey Institute, nearly 45% of participants considered performing manual-genital stimulation to be "having sex," 71% considered performing oral sex to be "sex," 80.8% for anal-genital intercourse. Considerations of "sex" also varied depending on whether or not a condom was used, female or male orgasm, and if the respondent was performing or receiving the stimulation (NSSHB, 2010).

One sexual behavior that is often considered to be more taboo is anal intercourse. Part of the taboo concerns the perception that anal sex is generally a homosexual act. Anal sex commonly refers to the sex act involving insertion of the penis into the anus of a sexual partner. The term can also include other sexual acts involving the anus, anilingus (anal-oral sex). Anal sex it is not rare, although it is reported by fewer women than other partnered sex behavior. Partnered women in the age groups between 18-49 are significantly more likely to report having anal sex (NSSHB, 2010).

Masturbation

While many people think that the trend to mature sexuality means that masturbation is unusual in adulthood, this is not the case. Many people masturbate, even while they are married and have access to consensual sex. This behavior is normal, but can sometimes be kept secret due to feelings of guilt. According to one study of the masturbation habits of men and women, nearly 85% of men and 45% of women who were living with a sexual partner reported masturbating by themselves in the past year (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, Michaels, 1994). Masturbation, then, appears to be a healthy sexual outlet.

Within relationships, another pattern involves partnered or mutual masturbation. Mutual masturbation is a sexual act where two or more people stimulate themselves or one another sexually, usually with the hands. Across all age groups, partnered women are significantly more likely to report having engaged in partnered masturbation as compared to nonpartnered women (NSSHB, 2010).

Changes in Sexual Patterns

Case Vignette

Sarah and John are presenting for counseling. John feels like his whole world has turned upside down following the birth of his son, who is now 8 months old. "Sarah and I used to be so close, and had a great sex life," he says. "Since the baby has been born we've had sex a total of one time. She's just not interested."

Within marriage and partnerships, there are changes in sexual patterns. There is often a decrease in the number of sexual encounters due to habituation — couples becoming accustomed to one another sexually, which results in decreased interest in sex.

Pregnancy

Another time in which there is much change in sexual patterns is following a pregnancy. These changes are at least initially motivated by physical parameters, but may also be psychological.

After pregnancy, sexual contact is often delayed for several weeks or months, and may be difficult and painful for women. Injury to the perineum or episiotomy are common reasons, as is vaginal dryness may occur following giving birth for about three months due to hormonal changes. Women who breast-feed are more likely to report painful sex and reduced libido, both due to hormonal changes such as a reduction in levels of estrogen. A water-soluble lubricant, such as K-Y jelly or AstroGlide, may be helpful in reducing dryness and discomfort. Although sexual activity other than intercourse is possible sooner, some women experience a prolonged loss of sexual desire after giving birth. Although this is not uncommon, it is always advisable to consult with a physician.

Infidelity

Case Vignette

Joslyn and Eric have been married for 8 years. Joslyn has recently noticed that Eric has become more distant. She was shocked to find that he had been exchanging text messages with a female co-worker. Although Eric denies that the relationship was in any way physical, Joslyn feels angry and hurt. She expresses uncertainty that she will be able to move past her feelings of betrayal.

Within intimate, partnered, and marital relationships, there is generally a belief in the exclusivity of the relationship, particularly sexual exclusivity. Infidelity is a breach of this expectation. Infidelity tests relationships and results in feelings of betrayal and mistrust. In our culture there is also a strong prohibition against infidelity, which includes both sexual breaches and emotional unfaithfulness. Smith (1994) surveyed Americans about infidelity and found that 90% of the general public agree that it is “always” or “almost always” wrong for a married person to engage in extramarital sex. The prohibition against infidelity also extends across cultures. Betzig (1989), for example, found Infidelity to be the most cited cause of divorce in over 150 cultures. Within the counseling relationship, many couples seeking counseling are presenting due to one partner’s unfaithfulness.

How common is infidelity? Two studies of extramarital sex found similar statistics: approximately 20-25% of men and 10-15% of women engage in extramarital sex at least once during their marriage (Laumann, 1994; Wiederman, 1997). These studies did not include a sampling of cohabitating individuals. Treas and Giesen (2000) looked at infidelity among couples that are married or living together in a partnered relationship. The researchers found that 11% of adults who have ever been married or cohabited have been unfaithful to their partner (Treas & Giesen, 2000).

The faces of infidelity

There is some variability in what is considered infidelity. Certainly, sexual contact outside of a marital or partnered relationship is considered infidelity (except, of course, if the couple has the understanding that that is acceptable to both of them, such as in the case of an “open” marriage). There is less consensus, however, about other things that may be considered infidelity.

One such argument involves the idea of emotional infidelity — emotional involvement with another person, which leads to the channeling of emotional resources, such as time and attention, to someone else.

Another area that leads to disagreement is the use by one partner of pornography. This has become a particular concern in the age of the Internet. In a recent national study of Internet pornography, 14% of people reported having used a sexually explicit website ever, men more so than women. 25% of men reported visiting a pornographic site in the previous 30 days; 4% of women reported visiting pornographic sites in the same timeframe. (Buzzell, 2005). Additionally Mitchell et al.

(2005) found that overuse, pornography, infidelity, and risky behaviors are among the most frequently treated Internet-related problems by mental health professionals. Although these areas are ones that merit further study, such statistics cannot be ignored.

Factors that contribute to infidelity

Infidelity is influenced by many social and demographic factors. (Treas & Giesen, 2000) looked at these factors in a recent study. These researchers attempted to determine why some people are sexually exclusive while others have sex with someone besides their mate. Previous research had linked personal values, sexual opportunities, and quality of the marital relationship to extramarital sex. Treas and Giesen (2000) conducted a national survey of married and cohabitating couples. The researchers found that there is a higher likelihood of sexual infidelity among those with stronger sexual interests, more permissive sexual values, lower subjective satisfaction with their union, weaker network ties to partner, and greater sexual opportunities. Infidelity was also associated with having been part of a couple for a long time; having had a high number of prior sex partners and being male.

Sexuality and Aging

Case Vignette

Benjamin, age 74, and Jeanette, age 66, have been married for 47 years. They have weathered many challenges during this time, but are now really struggling. Their sex life, which had been mutually satisfying, has deteriorated due to Benjamin's impotence. Although Jeanette has been patient, she is upset that her proud husband will not tell him doctor about the problem.

Sexuality occurs across the lifespan. Although there is some decline in the frequency of sexual contact as men and women age, many older men and women continue to be sexual (see the chart below). Many of the issues previously discussed, such as sexual communication issues and relational problems, apply to aging people. There are, however, specific, aging related issues that require some adaptation. While these do not apply to all older adults, it is helpful to understand some of the physical and psychological changes associated with aging.

Kinsey Institute

Frequency of Sexual Intercourse

Frequency	Men 50-80+	Women 50-80+
Not in past year	46.4	58.0
A few times per year	17.8	13.5
2 or 3 times per week	24.6	20.3
A few times per month	10.2	6.8
4 or more times per week	0.9	1.4

People over 50 are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. According to a recent factsheet on aging, the number of Americans age 55 and older will almost double between now and 2030 – from 60 million today to 107.6 million as Baby Boomers reach retirement age.

The current population of older adults is one of the most highly educated and financially sound groups in history. It is also a very active group: nearly half of all Americans age 55 and over volunteered at least once in the past year. Even among those age 75 and older, 43 percent had volunteered at some point in the previous year. Older Americans no longer see retirement as an “endless vacation,” but increasingly as an active, engaged phase of life that includes work and public service (Fact Sheet on Aging, Experience Corps, <http://www.experiencecorps.org>).

Although this is clearly a vibrant group of men and women, there are certain aspects of aging that can negatively affect sexual interest, activity and satisfaction. Among these factors are losses, changes in body image, changed living arrangements and physical changes associated with aging.

Psychological Changes

Societal Prohibitions against Sexuality/Reactions to Aging

Ageism extends to our beliefs about sexuality. Older adults are often indirectly told that sexuality is for the young. Images in the media equate sexuality with youth. Sexual attractiveness, then, is often connected with the young. For women in particular there is a sexual double standard. Men are often thought to maintain their sexual activity, while older women are not. Sexually appealing women are depicted as young, and the importance of maintaining youth is supported by cosmetics that hide gray hair, wrinkles, etc. Women then are more prone to developing concerns about the physical aspects of aging, such as drooping breasts, weight gain, etc. There has been a rise in the number of late stage eating disorders, and these body image issues

play a role in the increase. Body image, of course, affects sexuality (Crooks & Baur, 2000).

Loss of a Partner

Loss of a partner is a life crisis that many men and women will face over the course of their lifetime. Although people react to this crisis in many ways, some eschewing further relationships and some open to them. Women statistically have a longer life expectancy than men. More men than women, however, go on to remarry. One problem sometimes seen in this situation is the aptly named “widowers syndrome” in which a man can become sexually aroused by a new partner but cannot maintain an erection (Rossi, 1999) and which is often a result of survivor’s guilt. Women can experience the same problem.

Changes in Living Environment

With increasing medical needs, many elderly people need to enter nursing homes or assisted living facilities. These environments often fail to address the sexual needs of older men and women. There may be restrictions on behavior or the inability to live with a spouse or partner. There are sometimes similar issues when an aging parent goes to live with a child. These issues need to be considered in making choices about living situations.

Physical Changes

There are many physical changes associated with healthy aging which are described below. Additionally there are illnesses that may limit a person's ability to relate sexually.

Physical Changes in Women (Zeiss & Kasi-Godley, 2001)

- Reduced levels of hormones (estrogen, progesterone, androgen)
- Thinning of vaginal walls
- Decreased vaginal lubrication
- Changes in the labia, making penetration more difficult
- Reduction in vaginal contractions

Physical Changes in Men (Zeiss & Kasi-Godley, 2001)

- Reduced levels of hormones (testosterone)
- Decreased firmness during erections

- Reduction in amount of ejaculate
- Longer refractory period
- Need for more direct stimulation to support erection

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