

CHAPTER 3 *Sexual Behaviour*

As several well-conducted surveys in a number of different countries have shown, sex for most of us is not a particularly adventurous affair. We have a strong tendency to fornicate with people like ourselves. Ninety percent of all sexual relationships occur between people of the same race and ethnicity; 84% involve couples with the same educational background. Whether this is due to some innate biological factor of the kind discussed in the previous chapter or whether it results from mate selection by imitation, or social pressures, or simply greater opportunity, remains to be elucidated.

Moreover, sex for the overwhelming majority of humans means essentially the same thing: heterosexual intercourse with a long-term partner. Within any given society, time, place and favoured method (including sexual position adopted), are fairly stereotyped. This is not to deny the huge variety of human sexual experience. Rather, it is to point out that - despite the impression given by some books and magazines - much of this experience is had by relatively few, or else by many but rarely.

Until recently, much of our 'knowledge' of human sexual behaviour was derived from Kinsey's surveys of male and female sexuality, published in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Unfortunately, as is still the case for many popularly published surveys, his results were based on responses from self-selected, completely unrepresentative populations. This resulted in such anomalies as Kinsey's '37% of the total male population has at least some overt homosexual experience to the point of orgasm between adolescence and old age'. In fact, more recent, better-designed and conducted surveys put the figure at about 5%, while only about 1% of women and 2% of women define themselves as homosexuals or bisexuals, have same-gender partners and express homosexual desires.

On average, we also have intercourse far less often than Kinsey's subjects reported. The overall adult average is just over once a week, with married people doing it slightly more often than singles. However, a third of men and a quarter of women wish they could do it at least twice as often. This is not due to lack of affection, more than half of couples saying they hug or kiss 'anytime they have a chance', while more than a third get affectionate at least three times a day. More than half of us tell our mates we love them daily, 15 percent weekly and 2 percent once a month; however, 23 percent never do. (On the other hand, about a sixth have thrown something at their mate and more than a third have slept apart from each other at least once because of a fight. Nearly a third don't talk to their partner for at least an hour after a fight and over a fifth are quiet for a day or more.) Age is an important factor in the frequency of intercourse, with the rate dropping from about 4-5 times weekly for those in their twenties to once every six weeks or so for those over seventy. This is not all due to aging, however; the newer a relationship, the more often couples make love.

This illustrates the important role sex plays in creating and maintaining bonding in relationships. This may well have been a critical factor in the evolution of our species. Compared with most other animals, human sexual biology and sexual practices are decidedly unusual. Women are probably the only female creatures whose desire for sex is more or less constant and independent of time of ovulation. Females of most other animals usually only look for sex during oestrus ('heat'), when they are ovulating. This event is usually highly visible to males. At other times, males and females usually show

little interest in one another.

This peculiarity of human females favours monogamy and regular copulation to ensure fertilisation, thus keeping the family together. This was especially critical for our nomadic early ancestors, and was also essential for the nurture and protection of the infants.

Though monogamy was probably practised from early human history, formal marriage probably came about through the giving of brides to other tribes to cement relationships - also a good way of limiting inbreeding in the days of social groups of small populations. However, dominant males have always sought to garner more than their fair share of available females - from the chiefs of primitive tribes through the sheiks and their harems to Mormon elders. It was democracy, with its ideals of a fair share for all, which really entrenched monogamy - helped by the Christian church, which at least in this respect followed Jesus' teachings. Incredibly, looking at the later history of the Christian church, Jesus attempted to raise the status of women; his ban on divorce in a society where a husband could divorce his wife on whim was revolutionary.

Biologically, males have two conflicting sex drives: impregnating as many females as possible; and investing in a wife and children. There are three possible solutions to this dilemma: faithful monogamy; harem-building; and to have a faithful wife and a 'bit on the side'. Which solution is chosen may depend as much on circumstances as on upbringing, but the majority solution is the latter. Because of their different biological roles to the male, the desired characteristics of casual mates and of wives are opposite.

Though the case may seem entirely different for females, it is not really so. Both sexes are primarily adapted for long-term relationships to raise secure offspring, peppered with sex on the side.

Humans are also rather peculiar among animals in the degree to which the sexes differ in physical characteristics. Their marked differences in bodily shape depend on literally dozens of differences in anatomy between them. They have different patterns of hair growth. And female breasts and the male penis are exaggerated and displayed in a way mimicked in few other species. The way in which these differences permeate our culture is probably an indication of the importance of the pair bond to our species.

Another unusual feature of human sexual behaviour is the fact that the majority of couples prefer the face-to-face position for intercourse most of the time. The reason for this may well be the greater intimacy possible in this position. It may also, however, have something to do with the fact (perhaps due to the upright stance that the human species adopted) that the vagina in human females is situated more toward the front of the body than it is in most other species. It is, by and large, more difficult for the female to achieve orgasm in the frontal position - a decided disadvantage which, however, must be weighed against the fact that it often results in more prolonged intercourse, with a further enhancement of intimacy. It also has the effect that it requires a longer penis for satisfactory sex.

Humans are not the only species that enjoy face-to-face sex. Bonobos, small apes that live in remote forests in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, also frequently do so. Bonobos are undoubtedly the sexiest primates on Earth. Both male and female bonobos of all ages have sex with every other member of the group - that is, they finger, rub against and mouth each other's genitals, as well as having intercourse. This is all by

no means just sex for the sake of sex. Bonobos resolve conflict by having sex and they use sex as a means of cementing social relationships.

The one other species which uses sex in this way is the dolphin - which is sexually promiscuous and engages in both heterosexual and homosexual activity.

Across cultures and across animal species, males are usually more aggressive and violent than females. This is largely a simple biologically based consequence of the greater influence of testosterone on males, from before birth throughout their lives. Women too produce testosterone but convert much of it to oestrogen. Women body builders who use testosterone to help build muscle become much more aggressive, including sexually. Combine the surge of testosterone production in adolescence with the frustrations of the inability of being able to engage freely in desired sexual relations and of being subject to control by parents and others and the aggressive and 'difficult' behaviour of many young single males becomes understandable. Another disturbing fact is that twenty percent of male-male homicide is related to sexual jealousy.

Another troubling manifestation of male aggression and violence is rape. Those who claim that rape is something unique to humans don't know much about biology. Rape occurs, at least occasionally, in a variety of insects, birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians, marine mammals and nonhuman primates. The male scorpionfly actually has an appendage (the notal organ, a clamp on top of the male's abdomen) which does not seem to have any other function than enabling rape by claspings on to one of the female's forewings to prevent her escape. It is likely that, in animals where it does not occur, this is largely because it is a virtual physical impossibility - because the female is more or less as strong as the male, because intercourse is only possible when the female is receptive, because of the physical difficulty of completing intercourse without a willing partner.

The current 'wisdom' is that rape is not about sex at all, but about power. This is really putting the cart before the horse. Power is all about obtaining a larger share of resources, whether mates, money or food. One of the prime uses of power is simply to ensure access to sexual partners. Bill Clinton is by no means the first to have used a position of power to obtain sex. The greater and the more absolute the power, the more this is true. In the West, we tend to think of Communist China as being almost puritanical but Chairman Mao used his power to obtain sexual favours in a way that makes Bill Clinton's misdemeanours pale into insignificance.

Rape is basically a male strategy for impregnating a female and ensuring the propagation of his genes. Sex, as anthropologist Donald Symons of the University of California has put it, is 'something females have that males want'. Most males prefer to get it with the consent of the female, even if this involves the expenditure of considerable time and effort and the presentation of gifts or the carrying out of deeds to sway the intended mate. However, many are also prepared to use force if they cannot get it otherwise.

As Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer have convincingly argued, in evolutionary terms, rape is a legitimate form of male reproductive behaviour. As they point out, most rape victims are women of childbearing age and these women (especially married women) experience more psychological distress after a rape than do other females. The distress caused by rape, over and above that caused by other forms of violence (which often involve greater violence than does rape, in which only 15-22 percent of instances involve violence greater than that necessary to achieve intercourse), appears to be due to

the possibility (though this may usually not be consciously recognised) of having to bear and care for a child by a father the mother did not choose and who will not support her or the child. This fear is present even in a married woman, who has a not entirely unrealistic expectation that her husband will repudiate the child and, quite possibly, her with it. A related fact is that, in many cultures, rape is treated as a crime against the victim's husband.

Rape is also a constant companion of war and conquest, for a number of reasons. Firstly, war is fought mainly by fit young men whose sexual appetites are sharpened both by forced abstinence and by the adrenalin generated by battle. Secondly, women in these situations are usually powerless to resist and difficult to court. Thirdly, raping the women is a way of demonstrating power over their husbands, the enemy. Fourthly, there is a biological urge to spread their own genes and dilute out those of their enemy. Nowhere was this latter factor more obvious than in the war in Bosnia, where it was a stated objective of the Serb soldiers carrying out systematic rape of captured Muslim women.

Forced first intercourse is more common than generally realised. This ranges from four percent in the United States up to 32 percent of pregnant, and 18 percent of nonpregnant, sexually active girls under 19 in South Africa. However, on top of this is those whose first intercourse was not forced but was unwanted - 25 percent in the United States and 41 percent in Argentina.

Unfortunately, the entanglement of sex and power does result in much physical and sexual abuse in families and in other situations where a male stands in a parental role - e.g., priests and teachers. Much of such abuse can be viewed simply as a completely inappropriate response to sexual and power frustrations.

Around the world, at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Most often, the abuser is a member of her own family. The cultural bias in this is shown in the wide variation in women physically assaulted by an intimate male partner in different countries - from ten percent in Puerto Rico up to 56-67 percent in Papua New Guinea (where 59 percent of high school girls and 63 percent of high school boys approve of wife-beating if 'she speaks disrespectfully to him'). Many physically abused women (68 percent of those in Bangladesh) never tell anyone. About half of all wife battery is due to sexual jealousy.

Child sexual abuse is quite prevalent. Because of differing definitions, it is difficult to compare statistics from different surveys. Thus, eight percent of women and two percent of men in Malaysia reported having suffered abuse, defined as 'vaginal or anal penetration, or unsolicited sexual contact, or witnessing exhibitionism < 18 years'. On the other hand, 34 percent of girls and 11 percent of ninth grade students in Geneva reported having suffered abuse, but this was defined as 'unwanted sexual activity, contact and noncontact'.

What studies do consistently show is that, regardless of the sex of the victim, the vast majority of perpetrators are male and are known to the victim. Many perpetrators were themselves sexually abused in childhood, although most boys who are sexually abused do not grow up to abuse others.

Sexual abuse can lead to a wide variety of unhealthy consequences, including behavioural and psychological problems, sexual dysfunction, relationship problems, low self-esteem, depression, thoughts of suicide, alcohol and substance abuse and sexual risk-taking. Women who are sexually abused in childhood also are at greater risk of being

physically or sexually abused as adults.

Although, for some children, the effects of sexual abuse are severe and long term, not all will experience consequences that persist into later life. Sexual abuse is most likely to cause long term harm when it extends over a long period, is by a father or father figure, involves penetration or involves force or violence.

A child's resilience and the response a child receives when disclosing the abuse also affect the long term consequences. When children who disclose abuse are believed and supported, the consequences are often less severe than when disclosure is met with disbelief, blame or rejection.

The great majority of the worst cases of physical child abuse are perpetrated by fathers (sadly, usually with the active or passive acquiescence of the mother) on their partner's children, where these children are biologically the mother's but not the father's. It is difficult not to suspect the working of a biological law that makes males wish to perpetuate their own genes at the expense of those of others. However, the fact that the problem is much less acute among fathers of children conceived by artificial insemination of donor sperm seems to suggest the need for a more subtle explanation. Perhaps, though, in the latter case, it is simply the almost unlimited human capacity for self-deception at work; even though he may know it is impossible, as long as he is having intercourse with his partner, the human male seems inclined to accept any progeny of his partner as his own. Whatever the true situation, given the ever-increasing number of unions involving children of a previous partner, this is a subject that deserves much more study - and study in which the biology of the situation is not ignored. The active or passive acquiescence of the mother in many cases of child abuse by a partner not the biological father and the killing by mothers of their own children when these have lost a father's support (a not uncommon occurrence throughout history; abandonment is even more common) may point to a biological motive of the mother seeing a greater probability of perpetuating her genes by doing so and having more children by her new partner. Among other things, it needs to be considered whether the almost automatic granting of sole custody to the mother is really appropriate and in the best interests of the child.