

## Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality

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Four theories about cultural suppression of female sexuality are evaluated. Data are reviewed on cross-cultural differences in power and sex ratios, reactions to the sexual revolution, direct restraining influences on adolescent and adult female sexuality, double standard patterns of sexual morality, female genital surgery, legal and religious restrictions on sex, prostitution and pornography, and sexual deception. The view that men suppress female sexuality received hardly any support and is flatly contradicted by some findings. Instead, the evidence favors the view that women have worked to stifle each other's sexuality because sex is a limited resource that women use to negotiate with men, and scarcity gives women an advantage.

The suppression of female sexuality can be regarded as one of the most remarkable psychological interventions in Western cultural history. According to Sherfey's (1966) respected statement of this view, the sex drive of the human female is naturally and innately stronger than that of the male, and it once posed a powerfully destabilizing threat to the possibility of social order. For civilized society to develop, it was allegedly necessary or at least helpful for female sexuality to be stifled. Countless women have grown up and lived their lives with far less sexual pleasure than they would have enjoyed in the absence of this large-scale suppression. Socializing influences such as parents, schools, peer groups, and legal forces have cooperated to alienate women from their own sexual desires and transform their (supposedly and relatively) sexually voracious appetites into a subdued remnant.

The double standard of sexual morality has condemned certain sexual activities by women while permitting the identical actions for men. In some cases, surgical procedures have been used to prevent women from enjoying sex. From some perspectives, these societal forces have deprived most individual women of their natural capacity to enjoy multiple orgasms and

intimate gratifications. Women have felt that they are not permitted by society to express their sexual feelings or even to enjoy sex in many contexts. Men may also have suffered, at least indirectly, insofar as they have been deprived of the pleasures that come from having partners who enjoy sex.

In this article, we review evidence from multiple sources in an effort to understand the origins of this suppression of female sexuality. Because the full extent, if not the actuality, of the suppression is unknown, it seems essential to consider alternative explanations, and so we offer two hypotheses that can explain gender differences in sexual behavior without invoking cultural suppression. These hypotheses may weaken (but not necessarily eliminate) the case that female sexuality has been culturally suppressed. We conclude, however, that some significant degree of societal suppression has occurred. In the main part of the article, we then consider two possible social processes that could produce it.

Our two theories involve implicit cooperation among large numbers of people working together to stifle female sexuality. We do not mean to imply that these were conscious, deliberate, or explicit conspiracies. Rather, people may have come to participate in these processes without full awareness of what they were doing, simply because situational forces and salient self-interest impelled them to act in ways that contributed to bringing female sexuality under restrictive control.

Although the suppression of female sexuality is of considerable interest and practical impor-

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tance in its own right, it also has broader theoretical importance. Several decades ago, social constructionist theories dominated theorizing about sex, but in recent years evolutionary and biological theories have argued that many sexual behavior patterns are based on innate predispositions, and such lines of thought implicitly tend to question the role of culture and socialization. Being newer, the evolutionary theories have the advantage of being able to start with more information, and in general they seem more elaborate and detailed (which is not to say that they are necessarily more correct) than the simple views that culture and socialization shape sexual practices.

In any case, the evolutionary theories present a challenge to the older, culture-based views, and one way to respond to this challenge is to begin developing more detailed and elaborate explanations of where and how cultures have shaped sexuality successfully. The suppression of female sexuality is (almost by definition) a cultural phenomenon, and so if the next generation of theorists seeks to revitalize sociocultural theorizing about sexuality, it may benefit by considering some major cultural events, such as the sexual revolution and the suppression that it defeated. (On the other hand, theories about suppression tend to invoke assumptions that derive from evolutionary and biological patterns, and so they are broadly compatible.) In short, we hope that following this line of argument may be one small step toward promoting culture-based theories of sexuality.

In this article, we articulate two competing hypotheses about the major proximal source of influences to suppress female sexuality. The first is that men—particularly husbands—have been the main sources of such influence, and the second is that women themselves have been the main sources. Against those theories, we present two “null hypotheses” in the sense that they argue that lesser sexual activity among women is not due to any cultural suppression. The first null hypothesis is that women simply have an innately milder sex drive than men, and so the appearance of suppression is an artifact of the natural fact of weaker desire. The other null hypothesis is that the costs of sex have generally been heavier for women than men, and so individual women learn to suppress their own sexual desires out of rational self-interest. For example, a woman may avoid sex and restrain her

desires so as not to get pregnant, not because she fell victim to cultural brainwashing. After the exposition of these four theories, we turn to the available evidence to test competing predictions based on the theories. The main focus of that review is whether men or women constituted the main proximal influences toward restraining female sexuality.

By way of definition, we understand the suppression of female sexuality as a pattern of cultural influence by which girls and women are induced to avoid feeling sexual desire and to refrain from sexual behavior. This is of course a matter of degree, and our concept of suppression does not require that women end up with no desire or sexual behavior. The lack of encouragement to explore and enjoy sex is not enough to constitute suppression; in other words, suppression involves the message that sex is bad rather than simply the failure to teach that sex is good. We do not deny that society has also sometimes sought to suppress male sexuality or sexuality in general, but these are separate processes and questions, and our focus is on efforts specifically targeted at girls and women. The double standard, for example, has consisted of judgments that many specific sexual behaviors are acceptable for men but unacceptable for women (e.g., D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997; Whyte, 1978), which is one sign that some messages of sexual restraint have been aimed primarily at women. Control and suppression of sexuality in both genders deserves a separate treatment and may well involve very different patterns, means, and motives.

## Two Suppression Theories

The two main theories differ fundamentally as to which gender is mainly responsible for the alleged suppression of female sexuality. Either men in general, or women in general, cooperated implicitly to stifle women’s sexual desire and behavior. These views give rise to competing predictions that men or women would be the main proximal sources of influence toward suppression of female sexuality.

### *The Male Control Theory*

The essence of the first suppression theory is that men have sought to suppress female sexuality. According to this view, the political goals

of men have depended on preventing women from having sexual pleasure. Several reasons have generally been suggested why men might seek to control and stifle female sexuality.

From the evolutionary point of view, the main advantage men derive by suppressing female sexuality would be an improvement in certainty about paternity (see Buss, 1994). Above all, a man does not want another man to get his wife pregnant. In this view, men want to pass on their genes, and because a woman can have only about one child per year, men jealously guard their female mates to prevent other men from possibly impregnating them. Convincing women to relinquish sexual desire could be a helpful strategy. If a woman lacks desire, according to this argument, she will be less likely to have sex with anyone other than her mate, and so he can be relatively more confident that any children she bears will be his. In a variation on this argument, writers such as Coontz and Henderson (1986) have proposed that the stabilization of property rights and the resulting desire to pass on one's property to legitimate heirs, rather than any innate jealous tendency, were what motivated men to begin restricting the sexual behavior of their wives.

This view emphasizes the male mate (husband) as the principal source of influence in suppressing female sexuality. Unattached men would have little reason to wish women would lack sexual desire; on the contrary, they would probably want women to have more sexual desire so as to increase the men's own chances of forming even a temporary liaison. Meanwhile, women would have little or no reason to want to suppress female sexuality (either their own or that of other women). Possibly, one could argue that unattached men learn to pressure women to stifle sexual desire on a societal basis because the men think that when they do eventually find a mate, she will be more likely to remain faithful (and will be more likely to be chaste when the men find them). Still, the hypothesis that men seek to stifle the sexuality of women other than their own mates would require separate evidence beyond indications that men jealously guard their own mates from having sex with other men. The crux of the paternity explanation for suppressing female sexuality is that men mainly work to suppress their wives' sexuality. Empirical support for this view might take the form of showing that men discourage sexual

desire in their wives or actually prefer a sexually unresponsive wife rather than one with higher desires.

A potential objection to this view is that if a man's mate does not desire sex, the man himself may be at a disadvantage in trying to impregnate her. Ideally, he would like her to desire him passionately but have no interest in other men. The broad suppression view would hold that men cannot have both, so they lean toward stifling female sexual desire in general. In essence, it posits that men are willing to have sexually unresponsive mates in exchange for being more certain that their mates will be faithful. Because it does not require much sex to create a pregnancy, the trade-off may seem advantageous to men. A woman with a low sex drive would probably be willing to have sex once in a great while, which is sufficient to enable the man to pass on his genes. He would not want her to desire sex any more often than that, because then she might have sex with other men.

Feminist theory offers several possible bases for male control over female sexuality (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Travis & White, 2000). In general, feminist analysis depicts social arrangements as reflecting victimization of females by males. Society is called *patriarchy* because it is made by and for males, and women are its victims. One of men's top priorities is to keep women down and use them for the men's own purposes.

One line of feminist analysis would be that men regard women as men's possessions and therefore seek to keep them to themselves. By suppressing female sexuality, men can keep women from wanting to have sex with other men. This analysis resembles the evolutionary argument on paternity certainty. It could, however, be simply that men do not want women to be autonomous creatures who make their own decisions and seek their own fulfillment, because such activities could potentially undermine male control. Lerner (1986) contended that an important step in cultural evolution was the commodification of women, according to which "women themselves became a resource" (p. 212) whose sexuality could be regulated, exchanged, and otherwise used for male benefit. McIntosh (1978) concluded more bluntly that "women's sexuality is suppressed by men or in the interests of patriarchy" (p. 64), and because

of this suppression women “are prevented from realizing their full potential” (p. 64). She stated that the greater sexual desire and sexual activity of men “is an aspect of male privilege” (p. 62) and that women’s lesser sexuality arises because patriarchal culture represses female sexual desire (p. 55).

A more sweeping line of argument is that female sexuality represents a potential threat to the orderly society that men want. Sherfey (1966) proposed that the sexual behavior of early human females resembled that of other female primates during estrus, copulating up to 50 times per day and exhausting every available male partner. According to Sherfey, this behavior created social chaos. If a stable, civilized way of life was to develop, it was necessary to institute “the ruthless subjugation of female sexuality” (Sherfey, 1966, p. 119).

This analysis has been echoed in other feminist texts. For example, “if women are insatiable creatures, their sexuality would, of course, require external constraints, or sexual chaos would reign” (Faunce & Phillips-Yonas, 1978, p. 86). A recent textbook summarized this line of thought as follows: “In prehistoric human societies, the powerful sex drive of women created havoc—not to mention making the men feel insecure—and therefore societies instituted restrictions on female sexuality to bring it more in line with male sexuality” (Hyde & DeLamater, 1997, p. 360). The textbook authors added that this argument explains “the restrictions on female sexuality that persist to the present day” (p. 360).<sup>1</sup> Lerner (1986) concluded that “the sexual regulation of women . . . is one of the foundations upon which the state rests” (p. 140) and is “an essential feature of patriarchal power” (p. 140).

Thus, the social chaos version of the male control theory holds that men desire a peaceful, orderly life. Widespread, indiscriminate copulation contributes to social chaos and is therefore opposed by men, who work together to suppress female sexuality as a way of imposing peace and order. This view rests on the assumption that the chaos and social disruption caused by promiscuity are more aversive to men than to women. That assumption is a priori questionable, although one might propose that men want peace and order because it enshrines and perpetuates the superior status of males. It also assumes that men find peace and order in soci-

ety more desirable than sexual gratification, whereas women incline toward the opposite preference, and this too can be tested.

The quotations by Hyde and DeLamater (1997) introduce yet another important point, namely male insecurity. One can use the hypothesis of male insecurity to propose one further variant on the male control theory. In this version, insatiable female sexuality would not strike men as a desirable opportunity but rather represent a threat to them, possibly because it reminds them of the greater physical limitations on male than on female sexuality. The refractory period, the inability to have multiple orgasms, the visible nature of male arousal or lack of arousal, and perhaps other limitations make males less able than females to engage in orgasmic sexual behavior. The male envy of women might therefore breed a mean-spirited effort to suppress female sexuality and thus deprive women of the greater pleasure of which they would otherwise be capable. A variation on this would be that men are insecure vis-à-vis other men, and they do not want their female sex partners to have a basis for comparing them. A sexually experienced woman might be able to judge a man’s penis as inadequate or his foreplay as inept, but an inexperienced partner would presumably be less likely to know the difference.

A similar line of argument holds that the suppression of female sexuality frees men from having to satisfy the huge female demand for sex, which otherwise would make men feel burdened or insecure. Any signs of broad male reluctance to give sexual pleasure to women would provide valuable support for this view. It is hard to find many such signs, though. On the contrary, men generally seem willing if not eager to meet women’s sexual demands. Men are more likely than women to say that giving pleasure to one’s sex partner is more important than pursuing one’s own pleasure (Janus & Janus, 1993), and the majority of men are quite receptive to female requests for sex even when the woman is a total stranger (Clark & Hatfield,

<sup>1</sup> The textbook was presenting this view, not endorsing it. We are not saying that the textbook authors themselves espoused this view, although they were plainly not unsympathetic either.

1989), whereas women are far less generous or receptive to such requests.

The common theme in these lines of argument is that men have conspired to set up a system that oppresses women so as to stifle female sexuality and that men benefit from that stifling. This approach asserts that women would prefer to have frequent sex with many partners, but men enforce a system of social controls and socialization that prevents women from realizing that dream and instead encourages women to believe that they lack sexual desire. The approach is effective, and women are either forcibly coerced or subtly pressured into believing it. These persuasive methods should be salient in evidence, because of their widespread power and importance.

The mechanisms by which men suppress female sexuality remain somewhat unclear. Men might refuse to associate with women who desire or enjoy sex beyond an acceptable minimum. Because men have controlled political power, they can institute heavy penalties for female sexual activity while permitting themselves to indulge (e.g., the double standard, institutionalized in legal penalties). They may punish promiscuous or sexually responsive women in other ways. Even so, it seems necessary to assume that these external controls are not sufficient to account for the highly internalized suppression of female sexuality, so one must assume that in some important way men manage to persuade women not to feel or not to act on sexual desires.

To summarize the male control theory: The natural condition of the female is to desire a high amount of sex, including frequent copulations with multiple partners. Men band together to stifle this female sexuality. Men's motives for doing so could encompass the jealous desire to prevent their mates from having sex with other men (which could be related to paternity uncertainty and property rights), an envy of women's greater physical capacity for intercourse, and a recognition that unrestrained female sexuality might potentially produce chaos by undermining the social order. Men are particularly concerned with stifling the sexuality of their wives and other mates.

### *The Female Control Theory*

A second theory would hold that the women, rather than the men, cooperate to stifle female

sexuality. As with the male control theory, the term *control* is used loosely to refer to cooperative, goal-directed activities of people in general that may contribute to a common benefit even if the people have not explicitly articulated that goal or made a conscious agreement to work for this purpose.

A female control theory suffers from implausibility right from the start, simply because men have held superior political and social power throughout most of history. If society as a whole has conspired to stifle female sexuality, and men dominate society, assigning an influential role to women must seem questionable on an a priori basis. Still, assigning an active role to women in history is in accordance with some revisionist approaches to history insofar as these approaches treat women as active agents with genuine influence over circumstances and events, rather than mere passive victims and spectators of male activity.

As with the male control theory, one must begin with questions of motivation, and these too seem to raise a priori doubts about any female control theory. Why would women want to suppress female sexuality? Sex is undoubtedly a major potential source of pleasure and fulfillment in life, and for women to stifle their own sexuality would seemingly be a self-destructive act.

Social exchange theory could, however, suggest an important reason that women might seek to suppress each other's sexuality. Social exchange theory analyzes human behavior in terms of costs and rewards and therefore considers interactions as exchanges in which the various parties offer each other rewards in return for obtaining what they want (e.g., Blau, 1964; Homans, 1950, 1961). A social exchange analysis of sex would begin from the assumption that sex is a resource that men desire and women possess (e.g., Baumeister & Tice, 2000). To obtain sex, men must offer women other desired resources in return, such as money, commitment, security, attention, or respect. Waller and Hill's (1938/1951) *principle of least interest* contends that having less desire for a particular relationship gives a person greater power in the relationship. Hence, if a woman desires a sexual relationship less than the man, he is at a disadvantage and will have to provide her with other benefits to induce her to have sex with him. In a sense, female sexuality would acquire extrinsic motivators.

The reason that such an exchange framework would cause women to stifle female sexuality was proposed in Nancy Cott's (1979) discussion of female passionlessness during the Victorian period, and it also follows quite simply from the basic economic principles of supply and demand. As Cott proposed, if sex is the main asset one has with which to bargain for other benefits, one wants the price of sex to be high. As with any resource, scarcity increases the price. Restricting the supply of sex available to men would be a tactic that many monopolies have used with many products: Keeping supply below demand enables the monopoly to extract a high price. In contrast, if sex were freely available to men, then most individual women would be in a weaker position to demand much in return. Monopolies and cartels have often used the strategy of maintaining a scarcity to keep prices high.

Women might be able to garner two kinds of benefits from restricting the supply of sex available to men. First, women in general might be able to extract better treatment and other resources from men. This idea assumes that men are willing to do whatever is necessary to obtain sex and will often do roughly the minimum amount that is required. This echoes the traditional grandmotherly advice against premarital sex, colloquially expressed in the metaphoric terms that a man who can get free milk will not buy the cow. The harder it is for men to obtain sex, the more they will be willing to offer women in return. Social exchange theory emphasizes that a broad range of social rewards may be involved in such exchanges, including money, gifts, long-term relationship commitment, fair treatment, sexual fidelity, and conforming to expectations. Sexual scarcity improves women's bargaining position with respect to all of these rewards.

Second, widespread suppression of female sexuality reduces the risk that each woman will lose her male lover to another woman. Throughout history (and apparently very often today as well), men have been willing to leave one woman for another, especially when the new one is sexually more appealing. Although marital infidelity is not as common as previous estimates suggested, it still occurs millions of times each year (see Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), and moreover infidelity represents a significant risk factor for marital breakup (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Similar considerations apply to dating relationships. Hence, to the extent that a man may have sex with other women, his girlfriend or wife has a legitimate concern about losing him.

This second benefit is thus the mirror image of the threat we discussed in the section on male control, namely the fear of partner infidelity. The two theories share the view that stifling female sexuality might reduce infidelity and its attendant threats, and it seems undeniable that both men and women desire their partners to be sexually faithful to them. The focus of the threat differs slightly: The male control theory sees the female partner as the source of danger, whereas the female control theory sees other women as the source of danger.

The combination of the two benefits is especially important, however. We have stated that individual women can exert control over their men by withholding sex or otherwise limiting the men's access to sex. This control would be undermined, however, if the man could easily get sex from other women. The social exchange theory confers its benefits on women only if most women cooperate to a substantial degree in restricting sex.

Casting courtship and sexual negotiations in terms of social exchange also shifts the emphasis to the beginning of a sexual relationship, because this is presumably when the terms of exchange are decided. A man provides resources to be permitted to begin having sex with a woman. Although this period may be the most important, the exchange of resources for sex may continue over the course of a long relationship.

Several predictions follow from the hypothesis that female cooperation is needed to suppress female sexuality. First, women will punish other women who make sex too freely available to men. These women are akin to the "rate busters" in manufacturing: They end up lowering everyone's price. One term people use to derogate such a promiscuous woman is that she is "cheap," and, if taken literally, this term does invoke an exchange analysis: She is dispensing the female resource, sex, at a lower price than the going rate. When there are too many cheap products available, the purveyors of quality products feel pressure to give discounts as well. The other women will therefore put pressure on the so-called cheap woman to raise her price and demand more in exchange, not only for the

woman's own sake but for the sake of all of the women in that community.

Second, just as any monopoly tends to oppose the appearance of low-priced substitutes that could undermine its market control, women will oppose various alternative outlets for male sexual gratification, even if these outlets do not touch the women's own lives directly. Prostitution, pornography, and other forms of sexual entertainment may offer men sexual stimulation. By satisfying some of the male demand for sex, these entertainment forms could undermine women's negotiating power, and so women would naturally have an interest in stifling them (Cott, 1979).

Third, the hypothesis suggests that the stifling of female sexuality reflects a kind of "commons dilemma" for women in general (e.g., Platt, 1973). Each individual woman may benefit by offering sex a bit more readily (e.g., with less commitment or expenditure by the man) than other women, which might enable her to attract the most desirable man. In addition, of course, she would benefit in terms of satisfying her own sexual desires by doing more than the norms dictate. Against those incentives to engage in sex, her loyalty to other women and the female cause in general (in which, to be sure, she has a stake) would be the main force holding her back. In a given group of young unmarried women, the one who pushes past the limits (wherever they are normatively drawn) imposes a cost on the others, who come under pressure to offer the same to keep up. This is the sort of process with which monopolistic cartels constantly struggle: The group is better off if everyone holds the high price, but any individual member can gain immediate advantage by cutting the price slightly. The group of women can legitimately perceive the so-called cheap woman as a threat.

An evolutionary argument could be invoked with the female control theory as well. In this view, men exchange resources for sex. In many species, the male provides the female with food, and these gifts persuade her to copulate with him (e.g., Gould & Gould, 1997; Ridley, 1993). Some evolutionary psychologists interpret human behavior patterns along the same lines, such as when a man pays for food and entertainment or gives a woman jewelry to induce her to have sex.

We noted in the previous section that feminist analyses have emphasized men's attempts to keep women in an inferior political and economic position. The female control theory offers one straightforward explanation for why men may have wanted to subjugate women. Keeping social and economic power in male hands is the complement to the female strategy of restricting sex. To put it simply: The less money (and other resources) women have, the lower the price they will accept for sex. Rich, powerful women are unlikely to become prostitutes, exotic dancers, or kept mistresses or to accept sexual servitude in other ways. Poor women are presumably better prospects for becoming sexually available at an affordable price. The exchange of resources for sex produces a clear set of conflicting interests that can be expressed in crude terms: Women benefit economically if men are starved for sex, whereas men benefit sexually if women are desperate for money and other resources.

The female control theory is thus congenial to feminist analysis in that it provides a motive for the alleged male quest to seek power over women. If men recognize that they have to offer women something of value to obtain sex, then they have a clear interest in keeping women in a perpetual state of need and deprivation. Keeping women poor and powerless would improve men's chances for obtaining sex.

The mechanisms by which women would control female sexuality must be considered. Women have generally not had the legal and political power that men have, and so these sources of power would not be available to them. Still, we questioned the power of these mechanisms to explain the suppression of female sexuality anyway, because some internalization is required. Hence, the female control theory would probably have to place heavy emphasis on direct socialization by females of other females to convince women and girls not to be highly sexual. Women might also punish overly sexual women through informal sanctions such as ostracism and derogatory gossip.

To summarize: The female control theory is based on social exchange theory. It rests on the assumption that sex is a resource that men want but that is under female control. To the extent that women want to obtain other resources in return for sex, they want the price of sex to be high, and thus they seek to suppress female

sexual activity generally so as to maintain a chronic shortage (and hence high prices). Women together act to restrain female sexuality, for the sake of benefiting all women. Whereas the male control theory emphasized stifling the sexuality of wives and mates in ongoing relationships, the female control theory emphasizes stifling the sexuality of single women who are seeking mates and negotiating the terms of exchange for beginning a sexual relationship.

### Two "Null" Hypotheses

The two control theories offer explanations for the historical suppression of female sexuality. They suggest why women have had their sexual desires stifled and their opportunities for sexual action restricted. It is, however, necessary to consider the null hypothesis that there was no suppression of female sexuality. But the appearance of lesser sexual inclinations among women (as compared with men) is beyond dispute, and so it is necessary to explain why women may have seemed less sexually inclined if social forces did not produce that result artificially.

#### *Milder Sex Drive*

According to this theory, it was not necessary to suppress female sexuality, because women by their nature have less sexual desire than men. The appearance of suppression is an illusion.

The idea that women innately have less sexual desire than men is controversial and deserves a long and careful treatment in its own right (see Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Baumeister & Tice, 2000). Regardless of whether it is true or false, however, we think it is inadequate to explain the full range of phenomena. Most obviously, the sexual revolution reflects a change in female sexuality that cannot be accounted for by innate biological predispositions. The sexual revolution provides strong evidence that there was some historical suppression of female sexuality. Indeed, the sexual revolution has been shown to have produced a greater change in female than in male sexuality (Arafat & Yorburg, 1973; Bauman & Wilson, 1974; Birenbaum, 1970; Croake & James, 1973; DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979; Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1986; R. Robinson,

Ziss, Ganza, Katz, & Robinson, 1991; Rubin, 1990; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1972; Sherwin & Corbett, 1985; Staples, 1973). The increase in female sexuality wrought by the sexual revolution is good evidence that female sexuality had previously been under cultural suppression.

The mild sex drive hypothesis must, however, be kept in mind as a viable alternative explanation for some of the evidence. Even if it cannot account for all of the evidence, it may account for some. It is also worth noting that the milder sex drive hypothesis could operate in conjunction with the female control theory, because it sets the basis for social exchange. If women desired sex more than men, then acts of sex would essentially involve men doing women a favor, and women would presumably have to reward or compensate men for having intercourse with them. Instead, however, the hypothesis that the female sex drive is milder puts the man in the position of having to offer the woman something. Waller and Hill's (1938/1951) principle of least interest holds that whoever wants something less has an advantage in negotiation.

We have presented the female control theory and the milder sex drive hypothesis as separate, insofar as either could in principle be true without the other. The combination is, however, arguably more plausible than either by itself: Women start off with less desire for sex, and so sex is a female resource that women can use to negotiate exchanges with men. Inevitably, women will discover that their negotiating advantage is maximized if sex is relatively scarce.

Put another way, we have presented the milder sex drive hypothesis as an alternative or null hypothesis because it might conceivably have offered a full, complete explanation of why women have less sexual desire and engage in more restrained sexual behavior than men. If it cannot accomplish that, however (as our comments on the sexual revolution indicate), then it may simply have established the basis for social exchange that could well have led to the female control pattern. Meanwhile, however, the notion that women have a lower sex drive contradicts a basic assumption of many versions of the male control theory. As already explained, those views typically depicted the female sex drive as stronger than the male sex drive, with cultural suppression required to bring female sexuality under control within the approximate range of

male sexuality (e.g., Hyde & DeLamater, 1997; Sherfey, 1966).

### *Rational Choice and the Costs of Sex*

The second null hypothesis is that women exert self-control over their sexuality because of the costs and dangers of sex. It seems indisputable that these costs and dangers have always fallen disproportionately on women. A single act of sex does not leave any lasting change in a man's body (at least nothing that lasts beyond a brief refractory period), but a woman may become pregnant, which will alter her life radically for at least 9 months and, assuming that she accepts the burden of caring for the child, many years thereafter.

Moreover, throughout history the danger of death during childbirth was much higher than it is now, and so the mortal risk was significant. (To be sure, such risks would not affect women in societies that had not yet discovered that sex causes pregnancy.) For example, Shorter (1982) examined pre-1800 data from Europe and concluded that about 1.3% of childbirths resulted in the mother's death. Each copulation risked childbirth, and each childbirth risked death. Given these risks, women may have held back from sex, even without historical or socializing forces to stifle them. Even today, with the risks diminished, the costs of sex are still greater for women than men. The relevance of such factors was shown by Benda and DeBlasio (1994), who sought to predict adolescent sexual activity from an index of the rewards of sex minus the costs. The prediction was significant for adolescent girls but not boys.

The rational self-interest explanation has less difficulty than the mild sex drive explanation in accounting for the sexual revolution. The birth control pill and other advances in contraception (as well as the medical and legal changes that made abortion safer and more available) vastly reduced the dangers of pregnancy. Hence, women may have become freer to indulge in their sexual inclinations, and the sexual revolution was the result.

The rational self-interest explanation does have some difficulty accounting for restrictions on female desire that went beyond nonmarital intercourse. Oral sex, masturbation, and other forms of sexual expression do not carry the risks of pregnancy entailed by intercourse, and so

there would have been less reason for women to suppress their desires in those spheres. Still, it is plausible that parents sought to stifle their daughters' sexual desires in all spheres in the hope that this would reduce the young women's chances of becoming pregnant.

We think that rational self-interest also falls short of being able to account for the full range of phenomena. For example, some signs suggest that women sometimes refrained from sexual activity out of fear of getting a bad reputation, rather than fear of pregnancy (e.g., Coleman, 1961). It seems indisputable that there has been some degree of social influence toward restraining female sexual desire and activity, and to attribute everything to rational self-interest would stretch credulity. Still, the rational self-interest explanation must be kept in mind as a potential alternative explanation for many specific findings, even if it cannot account for all of the findings.

### Competing Predictions: Evidence and Interpretation

We now turn to examine the empirical evidence about the suppression of female sexuality. The focus is on the two control theories, and the recurrent question is which of them is better able to predict or interpret various relevant findings. To be sure, they are not entirely mutually exclusive, and so evidence could conceivably support both or contradict both. As already suggested, however, it will be necessary to keep the two null hypotheses in mind, especially perhaps when seemingly anomalous patterns of findings are observed.

### *Power Differences*

We begin with a classic study by Reiss (1986a) that has often been cited in connection with the suppression of female sexuality. Reiss used a sample of 186 cultures from the Human Relations Area Files. Across these cultures, he found a positive correlation between indexes of greater male power and suppression of female sexuality. The greater the power imbalance in favor of males, the more female sexuality was suppressed.

This finding has been interpreted by Reiss and others as supporting the male control the-

ory. When men have power, women are not allowed to enjoy sex, and so this seemingly implies that men use their greater power to stifle female sexuality. Insofar as these cultural differences would not alter the innate level of sex drive or the dangers of pregnancy, they are inconsistent with the null hypotheses.

Unfortunately for the sake of clear conclusions, however, Reiss's finding seems just as congenial to the female control theory as to the male theory. When women lack political and economic power, they may need to use sex to control men and gain resources, and so they might try to restrict each other's sexuality very strongly. In contrast, when women have plenty of alternative sources of power, they have less need to restrict men's access to sex, and so they can relax the controls on female sexuality. Reiss (personal communication, November 1999) has acknowledged that this interpretation is also viable for his findings and was omitted from his discussion in 1986 because it had not been proposed as a viable theory at the time.

The cross-cultural evidence linking gender imbalances in sociopolitical power to greater suppression of female sexuality, although interesting in its own right, is thus not helpful for differentiating between the two control theories. It speaks against both null hypotheses and suggests that some genuine social forces have operated to suppress female sexuality. Whether those forces were dominated by men or women remains a question for other sorts of evidence.

Guttentag and Secord (1983) offered another approach to power that is more directly relevant to sexuality itself. They focused on imbalances in the sex ratio, that is, whether a given society had more men or women. Because most mating involves one man and one woman, a relative shortage of either puts that gender in an advantageous position. For example, if there are twice as many men as women, then men must compete severely for mates, and women can dictate the terms of interaction. In contrast, a surplus of women gives men the advantage, and the individual woman has to offer the desired man a better deal or a more enjoyable time to keep his faithful attention. Probably anyone who has attended a school or college with a severe gender imbalance can attest to the salient impact that this unequal ratio produces. Petersen (1999) reported that during World War II, when the unprecedented military call-up of men left

American campuses with eight times as many women as men, some women placed newspaper advertisements for prom dates, offering to furnish the car and pay all expenses of the date.

The value of studying the sex ratio is that it bypasses the question of other resources and goes directly to the issues of romance and sex. The minority gender can pull the sexual marketplace toward its own preferences, simply because members of the majority who refuse to play along will end up without mates. Hardly anybody really wants to end up alone, so the ones faced with that danger (i.e., the more populous gender) will play by the minority's rules. Supply and demand patterns cannot be ignored in a monogamous marriage marketplace.

A clear pattern emerged from Guttentag and Secord's research: There is more sexual activity when men (as opposed to women) are in the minority. Thus, when there are many men and few women, women can set the terms of exchange, and men must provide substantial resources and other commitments to obtain sex. Premarital sex and extramarital sex are relatively rare. In contrast, when there are many women and few men, the men have more influence over the courtship process, and sex becomes much more freely available. Men do not have to offer much in the way of resources or commitments to get sex. In other words, when men have the edge, sex is cheap and abundant. When women hold the advantage, sex is rare and expensive. Men prefer sex to be free and easy; women are better off when it is precious.

These sex ratio findings seem most consistent with the female control theory and with a social exchange analysis generally. When women are in surplus, and there are not enough men to go around, women are in a poor position to bargain. If a woman does not offer her man the sexual satisfactions he wants, even before marriage, he can quickly find another woman. It is clear that many women will end up without men, and so individual women are tempted to break ranks and offer more sex to attract and keep a man, just as in the typical "commons dilemma." A surplus of women entails that more sex is available to men, and so the price goes down, so to speak.

The danger of pregnancy is not altered in any apparent way by shifts in the sex ratio, and so the second null hypothesis cannot offer a very compelling explanation of the sex ratio findings.

However, the view that women have an innately weaker sex drive could explain them, if one assumes that women are better able to minimize sexual activity when they can dictate the norms by virtue of being the more sought-after partners (because of their being fewer in number). Hence, the sex ratio patterns could be explained without recourse to cultural suppression.

The male control theory would seemingly predict that when men have supply and demand power by being in the minority, they would be able to enforce a greater suppression of female sexuality, and the data contradict that directly. One might try to salvage this view by suggesting that men cease to worry about other men having sex with their wives when there are relatively fewer other men around, but the promiscuous inclinations of men make such an argument doubtful. Men do not regard all women as the same, and having the advantage of being in the minority enables men to obtain better mates, and the men are probably still reluctant to allow these attractive mates to have sex with other men.

In particular, the version of the male control theory that emphasizes the threat of social chaos has a difficult time handling the sex ratio findings. According to this view, if men allow women to have all the sex they want, the social order will break down. When men are in the minority, they certainly must feel that their hold on political power and their ability to ensure a stable social order are weaker than usual. This view is supported by Guttentag and Secord's (1983) observation that feminist movements are more common when men are in the minority. In short, a male minority gives men power in the sexual sphere but reduces their power advantage in the political sphere. If suppressing female sexuality were an important key to men's strategy of maintaining the social order the way they like it, it should seemingly be used at maximum strength at that time. But the evidence suggests the opposite. There are certainly other versions of the male control theory, but the one linking it with concern about overall sociopolitical dominance seems contradicted here.

Recent work has provided further confirmation. A cross-cultural survey conducted by N. Barber (2000) revealed that teen pregnancy rates were correlated with the sex ratio. Specifically, teenage girls are ironically more likely to get pregnant when there is a shortage of men.

On simple statistical grounds, one would predict the opposite, because a female can become pregnant only by having sex with a male, and when there are not enough males to go around each female's degree of risk would seemingly be reduced, all else being equal. (In the limiting case in which there were no men at all, teenage girls would not get pregnant at all.) But the data indicate the opposite. The counterintuitive finding can best be explained by assuming a change in the average girl's behavior. Because there are fewer males available, each girl must compete more earnestly for them, and lowering the price of sex (as in requiring less commitment from the male or less investment of his time, affection, and money in wooing her) is a principal means of competition. Thus, again, when men have the advantage in the mating marketplace, female sexuality is liberated rather than suppressed, contrary to the male control theory.

One last form of power would be power within the dyadic relationship. The role of power in sexual relationships was examined by Browning, Kessler, Hatfield, and Choo (1999). Such evidence is important for permitting tests of the hypothesis raised by Hyde and Durik (2000), who have proposed that sexual behavior within relationships is a result of male power and female submission. Contrary to the male power hypothesis, these researchers found relatively few significant correlates of power, and most of what they did find was the same across genders. The only notable difference was that submissive women engaged in typical sexual activities at a higher rate than nonsubmissive women, whereas submissiveness in men predicted a reduction in sexual activity. The relative power of the two people in the relationship failed to predict anything. These data run directly contrary to the view that men use their power to stifle female sexuality within adult relationships. Superior male power appears to have little effect on the couple's sex life, and what little effect it has appears to push toward more rather than less sexual activity.

Converging evidence was supplied by DeMaris (1997) in examining sexual patterns in relationships characterized by physical violence, which suggests an important form of assertion of power. Conflict itself appeared to be detrimental to sex, insofar as couples were less likely to have intercourse during periods of conflict and fighting. Still, overall there was evi-

dence that relationships characterized by male physical violence involved relatively high rates of sexual activity. Supplementary analyses led DeMaris to conclude that this sexual activity reflected attempts by the woman to placate and please the man so as to avoid violence. In contrast, relationships marked by female physical violence did not involve elevated rates of sexual activity, consistent with a social exchange analysis. Again, these findings point toward male power as leading toward more sex rather than less, contrary to the theory that men use their power to stifle female sexuality.

It must be noted that violence in intimate relationships is often prompted by jealous suspicions of infidelity, some but not all of which are accurate (see Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). In that sense, intimate violence seems consistent with a male control theory. However, violent punishment of infidelity is a broad pattern found even in lesbian relationships (Renzetti, 1992), and so it does not seem special to male control over female sexuality. Again, the crucial question is whether men try to stifle their wives' sexuality generally (or select sexually stifled wives) rather than merely trying to curtail infidelity, and the evidence does not go that far.

Thus, the findings on power are less conclusive than one might have hoped for the purpose of distinguishing between these competing hypotheses. The male control theory does not fit them well, nor does the rational self-interest pattern. The female control theory can encompass all of them, but many can also be explained on the assumption that women have an innately weaker sex drive and therefore seek to restrict sex whenever they can.

### *Direct Influences on Female Adolescent Sexuality*

We turn now to what may be the most telling and important data. The two suppression theories differ as to which gender has sought to suppress female sexuality. The logical place to look for evidence is in the proximal sources of influence. Adolescence is the developmental stage at which a young woman becomes a sexual being and may begin to make choices about sexual activity. If any force in society wished to suppress female sexuality, the adolescent female would almost certainly be one of its prime targets of influence attempts. Thus, the crucial

question is whether male or female sources influence the adolescent girl to refrain from sexual activity. The male control theory would predict that male influences would be paramount, whereas the female control theory would predict that female influences would dominate.

*Parents.* It seems fair to assume that most young people get some of their lessons and moral influences from their parents. Therefore, we may begin with parental influence, although naturally peer groups will also have to be considered. Which parent has the greater influence in regard to restraining the daughter's sexuality?

The answer appears to be that mothers are the main source of anti-sexual messages for daughters. Libby, Gray, and White (1978) found that mothers were the main source of influence on the sexual behavior of both sons and daughters. DeLamater (1989) found that daughters were mainly influenced by their mothers, although fathers had a significant influence on sons. Werner-Wilson (1998) found significant correlations between the sexual attitudes of mothers and daughters, whereas daughters' sexual attitudes did not show any significant resemblance to those of their fathers. This pattern thus points toward women (i.e., mothers) as the main source of influence in restricting female sexuality.

Several studies have examined communication patterns between parents and adolescents with regard to sexual matters, and these too suggest that mothers have far more contact and influence than fathers. Nolin and Petersen (1992) sorted their sample as to whether the daughter had discussed various sexual issues with only the mother, only the father, both, or neither. To be able to compare communication from both parents, the researchers restricted their samples to families with both a mother and a father, so their results do not reflect any bias caused by single-parent situations. When only one of the two parents communicated with the daughter about sex, it was usually the mother. Thus, 61% of the mothers had talked alone to their daughters about birth control, 35% about pregnancy, and 37% about sexual morality, whereas the corresponding figures for fathers were 2%, 0%, and 2%. (There were additional cases in which both parents talked to the daughter.)

Similar findings were reported by Du Bois-Reymond and Ravesloot (1996): Mothers talked

a great deal with their daughters about sex and tried to “negotiate” (implying indirect influence), whereas fathers felt unable to deal with the issue and simply avoided the topic. A study of 300 couples by Kahn (1994) showed that mothers communicated with their daughters more than fathers did and more than the mothers communicated with sons. Indeed, the most common form of communication about sex was between mother and daughter, whereas communication between father and daughter was the rarest.

The effects of communication were confirmed by Kahn, Smith, and Roberts (1984). They assessed the degree of communication between parent and child and then correlated that with sexual activity, such as the age at which the young woman began having sex. The more the mother communicated with the daughter, the later the daughter began having sex. Thus, maternal influence appears to have had a direct effect in deterring the daughter from commencing sexual behavior. Meanwhile, the amount of communication between father and daughter had no relationship to the daughter’s sexual activity.<sup>2</sup>

A similar finding from an earlier period was reported by Lewis (1973). The sample was of high school age, and the relatively early publication year means that the data were obtained before the sexual revolution was in full swing, so the data may be especially relevant to understanding the historically traditional patterns of suppression. The item “not close to mother during high school” was significantly and positively correlated with promiscuous behavior among daughters, once again suggesting that a close relationship with the mother leads to sexual restraint. The parallel item “not close to father during high school” had no significant relationship to the daughter’s later promiscuity. Again, the data show the father’s influence to be negligible or trivial. The mother is the main parental influence toward restraining her daughter’s sexuality.

The only apparent exception to this pattern of maternal influence restraining female sexuality was described by Christian-Smith (1994), who analyzed adolescent novels. In these fictional portrayals, it was fathers and brothers who exerted the main control over the young women while the mothers and sisters remained in the background. The fictional portrayals contrast

with the actual observations to suggest that men are perceived as controlling female sexuality, whereas women are the actual sources of control.

The evidence that mothers exert more influence than fathers points toward female control, but this does not necessarily mean that the mothers are regarding their daughters as rivals and seeking to eliminate competition from them. Rather, most likely the mother believes that acceptance among the general group of girls, and later acceptance by the women, tends to require some sexual restraint. Some mothers have undoubtedly observed life-altering sadness or problems in young women as the result of sexual mistakes, and sexual abstinence might have prevented most of those problems. Hence, the mother may push her daughter toward sexual restraint as a means of protecting the daughter. Whatever the mother’s motives, however, it does appear that the mother is more influential than the father.

*Peers.* Undoubtedly the main influence on adolescent sexual behavior other than parents is the peer group. Hence, we can complement the data on parental influence by assessing how male and female peers influence the adolescent girl’s sexual behavior.

Relatively few studies have devoted much attention to how male peers affect adolescent female sexuality, but this appears to reflect the basic facts of adolescent life: Same-sex peer groups are generally far more important and influential. This fact alone represents important support for the female control theory. To the extent that the male control theory depends on adolescent peers influencing the adolescent girl to restrain her sexuality, this theory will have trouble finding support.

One of the few studies to examine cross-

<sup>2</sup> The finding is correlational, and so one must consider the opposite direction of causation. This would mean that the earlier the daughter starts having sex, the less the mother talks to her, whereas the relationship with the father is unaffected by the daughter’s sexual activity. This seems a priori less plausible, but it cannot be ruled out. Even if it is correct, however, it still favors the female control theory, because it indicates that the mother is the one who is bothered by the daughter’s sexual activity, not the father. Quite possibly he does not know anything about whether she has any sexual activity, which would be consistent with the general absence of evidence that the father has any effect on her.

gender nonromantic influences was reported by Rodgers and Rowe (1990). Their findings paralleled the parental influence findings. Girls appeared to be much more influenced by their female peers and friends than male peers and friends (not including boyfriends, who represent a special case and are considered separately later). Thus, the sexual behavior of female–female friends overlapped significantly, accounting for 22% of the variance, whereas male–female friendship pairs showed only a 5% overlap.

The female control theory might still be contradicted if female peer groups have generally used their influence to promote sexual behavior, but the evidence points in the opposite direction. For example, Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney (1998) examined the sexual pacts made by same-sex groups of college students going on spring break. The young men's pacts were generally oriented toward trying to have sex and supporting each other's efforts to do so, whereas the young women's pacts were to refrain from having sex and to help each other accomplish that (such as by agreeing in advance always to extricate a drunken friend from a man's romantic or flirtatious attentions). The female peer group thus helps restrain its members from going too far sexually, even though it may support them in sexual activity up to the prevailing norm.

Similar conclusions emerged from the investigation by Du Bois-Reymond and Ravesloot (1996) mentioned earlier. In addition to mothers, they found that the young women mainly discussed sex with their female peers and with their boyfriends, so other male influence was negligible. They reported that female peer groups put pressure on individual members not to be too sexual or promiscuous. The female peer groups discussed the importance of maintaining a good reputation, which required sexual restraint. The authors quoted some young women as saying that their female peers would disapprove and be jealous if they were to have too much sexual activity, which aptly fits the female control theory by suggesting that the female group members may feel threatened if one of them goes too far sexually. The male peer groups, incidentally, did not exhibit those patterns at all, and in fact males reported that their peer groups encouraged and even pres-

sured them to seek out sexual opportunities and experiment with various sexual activities.

A variety of other studies confirm the existence of same-gender peer influence. Billy and Udry (1985; see also Mirande, 1968; Sack, Keller, & Hinkle, 1984) found that young women tended to go as far sexually as their friends had gone. This supports a key point in the social exchange analysis, which is that the female peer group operates to maintain a relatively uniform level of sexual activity among its members.

Some of the peer concordance data could be explained in terms of peer selection. For example, when an adolescent girl loses her virginity, she might abandon her female virgin friends and make new, nonvirgin friends, in which case the appearance of peer influence would be an illusion. Billy and Udry (1985) ruled out this possibility by using longitudinal procedures. The sexual status of one's best friend at Time 1 predicted one's own sexual status at Time 2, especially among people who kept the same friends, and there was no tendency to drop virgin friends on losing one's own virginity. Thus, the evidence showed clearly that peers exert an influence on sexual behavior, and this was especially strong among White females.

Data collected before the sexual revolution may be especially important, because they indicate how things were when the cultural suppression of female sexuality was considerably stronger. Coleman (1961) provided a well-known study of student life in American high schools during the late 1950s. His data support the importance of the female peer group in restraining female sexuality. The girls were much more unanimous and emphatic than the boys in claiming that having a good reputation was an important key to being accepted in elite social groups, and this good reputation depended heavily on sexual restraint. Coleman observed that the female peer groups discussed the reputations of individual girls and shunned girls who dispensed sexual favors too liberally. He reported that the boys generally followed the girls in condemning girls who went too far (e.g., p. 121), although many boys seemed not to mind if a girl was sexually wild. Thus, the widespread pressure to maintain a good reputation for sexual restraint and propriety appears to have been enforced primarily among the female peer groups.

*Boyfriends.* Thus far we have found that both main potential sources of male influence—fathers and male peers—seem to be relatively minor figures (indeed, approaching nonentities) in terms of exhibiting any apparent influence over the sexuality of adolescent girls. One additional source of male influence must be considered, however: dating partners and boyfriends. Various studies have reported that young women do acknowledge some influence from that source (e.g., Du Bois-Reymond & Ravesloot, 1996).

Systematic studies of the nature and extent of this influence were difficult to find, but there does appear to be evidence that young men exert some influence (e.g., Christopher, 1988). Thus, there is at least one important male source of influence over female adolescent sexuality.

Unfortunately for the male control theory, however, this male influence appears to operate in precisely the opposite direction from what would be needed to support the view that men suppress female sexuality. Christopher's (1988) studies of sexual pressure suggested that nearly all of the influence exerted by the male dating partner is to induce the young woman to engage in more rather than less sexual activity. LaPlante, McCormick, and Brannigan (1980) found that samples of college students characterized male sexual influence in dating situations as consistently trying to increase sexual activity, across a broad range of strategies. Miller and Benson (1999) summarized various studies indicating that female adolescents are subjected to pressure by male dates and boyfriends to engage in sex, and sometimes the young women regret having yielded to this influence. None of the results of the studies we found showed that young men were trying to pressure their girlfriends to stifle their sexual desires and feelings or to refrain from sexual activity.

*Summary.* The available evidence suggests that suppression of female sexuality during the formative adolescent years comes directly and primarily from female sources. The mother and the female peer group have both been shown to exert a restraining influence on the daughter's progression into sexuality. Fathers and male peers seem to have little or no influence. The only significant source of male influence is the dating partner or boyfriend, whose influence seems to operate against the hypothesized sup-

pression of female sexuality, insofar as these young men encourage the young women to engage in more sexual activity.

Thus, the evidence regarding direct influences on adolescent female sexuality supports the female control theory and contradicts the male control theory. Female influence is paramount in teaching young women to restrain their sexuality. Male influence is largely absent or, in the case of boyfriends, pushes in the opposite direction, toward more sex.

The null hypothesis based on rational self-interest may be relevant, however. Mothers in particular may seek to stifle their daughter's sexuality to help the daughter avoid the pitfalls of unwanted pregnancy. Mothers may also recall that the female peer group would ostracize or punish girls who went too far sexually, and so the mother may seek to instill sexual restraint in the daughter so as to improve the daughter's social standing within the female peer group. Thus, a combination of the female control theory and the rational self-interest theory may furnish the best and most comprehensive explanation of these data.

### *Influences on Adult Female Sexuality*

Next we examine influences on adult sexuality. If female sexuality is to be stifled, then adult women must be put under pressure to restrict their sexual activities as well as their feelings. Where does this pressure come from?

Useful data come from large surveys reported by King, Balswick, and Robinson (1977) and I. E. Robinson and Jedlicka (1982). These surveys assessed disapproval of premarital sexual activity. The most relevant question was whether a woman who engaged in premarital sexual activity was immoral, the condemning judgment that would presumably be central to efforts to suppress female sexuality. Moral condemnation is especially relevant because it helps rule out the null hypotheses, insofar as moral judgment is inherently distinct from calculating rational self-interest or having an innately weak desire. The King et al. survey has the added benefit that it included data collected in 1965, before the sexual revolution had wrought major changes, and so these data furnish valuable insight into traditional attitudes and influences.

The results of these surveys again favor the female control theory. Women who engaged in premarital sex were condemned as immoral by 91% of the women in 1965, as compared with condemnation by only 42% of the men. Thus, moral disapproval of female sexual activity appears to have been much more strongly rooted in women's than in men's attitudes. The surveys of subsequent years continued to show greater disapproval by women than by men. Although the size of the gap dwindled as the sexual revolution brought more tolerance of premarital activity, women were more disapproving of female premarital sex in every year of the survey. Thus, the force of opinion and social disapproval that discourages female sexuality is that of women in general.

The double standard is undoubtedly the most widely perceived restraint on adult female sexuality. The double standard is in essence a gender-based discrimination in suppressing sexual activity: It asserts that certain behaviors are acceptable for men but not for women. Who actually supports the double standard? A meta-analysis of research on sexual attitudes and behaviors by Oliver and Hyde (1993) provided valuable evidence. They found that the double standard of sexual morality—which is central to the suppression of female sexuality—was more positively accepted by females than males across all studies they covered. Moreover, this conclusion included a number of older studies whose data were collected before the sexual revolution had managed to bring about changes, so the findings are especially helpful for understanding the traditional sources of suppression. In fact, Oliver and Hyde found that the gender difference in attitudes toward the double standard had diminished significantly in more recent as compared with older studies, confirming that the sexual revolution has reduced the difference between the genders.

The important point from Oliver and Hyde's (1993) findings, then, is that women have supported the double standard more than men, especially in the more traditional bygone days when the double standard and the general suppression of female sexuality were supposedly in full force. In its heyday, the double standard that condemned female sexual activity as immoral received more support from women than from men. This supports the female control theory.

One might wonder whether the female support for the double standard is simply an expression of the lesser sexual permissiveness that women generally show. Logically, however, the two are irrelevant. The essence of the double standard is differential permissiveness for men versus women. Whether someone is more or less permissive in general does not predict whether that person should believe that certain acts are permissible for some but forbidden for others. One could even argue that a floor effect should conceal differential permissiveness among women, whereas the more permissive men would have more latitude for making distinctions.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the female support for the double standard must be recognized as independent of the lesser female permissiveness. In all of the studies reviewed by Oliver and Hyde (1993), women were more in favor than men of the view that some sex acts are acceptable for men but not women.

Subsequent work by Millhausen and Herold (1999) was aimed at understanding whether the double standard was still active in the late 1990s, long after the sexual revolution. The women who took part in their survey strongly asserted that the double standard was still powerful and pervasive, even though they themselves did not endorse it (and in fact showed evidence of a reverse double standard that judged promiscuous men more harshly than women). One may infer from these findings that the women perceived continued societal pressure on women to restrain their sexual behavior, but this pressure seemed external to them insofar as they did not endorse the double standard themselves. The researchers reported that women cited external pressures of gossip and reputation as forces that pushed women to hold back sexually.

The crucial items, however, concerned where the support for the double standard was perceived to reside. Millhausen and Herold (1999) asked their respondents "Who judges women who have had sex with many partners more harshly?" (p. 363). The answers reflected a strong perception that women enforce the dou-

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<sup>3</sup> The most anti-sexual of women's groups advocated the single standard of sexual purity for both genders. Thus, support for the double standard is not a matter of anti-sexual feeling or an instance of the general pattern of lower female permissiveness.

ble standard. Only 12% of the women responding to the survey stated that men were the harsher judges, whereas 46% identified women as harsher. (The rest reported that men and women judged equally harshly.) The authors seem to have concurred that their findings pose a challenge to the theory that men stifle female sexuality: "Why is there a belief that men are controlling women's sexuality, yet women perceive other women to be the harshest judges of their own behavior?" (p. 367).

The Millhausen and Herold (1999) findings help dismiss the view that women's support for the double standard is simply a reflection of low female permissiveness. Their questions focused specifically on beliefs that some acts are more acceptable for men than women, and so the overall low permissiveness (which was evident also in their findings) would have been a constant and thus irrelevant to the perceptions about the double standard.

Apart from these survey data, reports of relevant behavior are also useful. Carns (1973) found that young women were relatively slow to tell their friends when they lost their virginity, as compared with men. Carns also found that the women expected significantly less approval from their female friends relative to the men. These data are consistent with the view that the influence of the female peer group is to discourage sexual activity among young women. The male group, in contrast, encourages sex, and so young men seek approval by rushing to tell their friends about their sexual accomplishments. These findings have received confirmation in more recent work by Regan and Dreyer (1999), who examined motives for engaging in casual sex. One reason reported by men was that such sexual activity brought them an increase in status among their peers, but the women did not report that casual sex brought them any improvement in status.

A theoretically interesting sample of highly sexual women was studied by Blumberg (2000). To qualify for inclusion, the women had to report wanting sex at least seven times per week, and many reported much higher desires (and actual frequencies). Although on average women desire sex less than men (see Baumeister et al., 2001), they have patterns of sexual desire that are comparable to those of many men. Consistent with the female control theory, Blumberg found that these women had typically

experienced considerable problems in their relationships with other women and had been subjected to a variety of forms of pressure to reduce their sexual activity. The women reported that some male partners were dismayed by the women's high demands for sex (consistent with the male control theory), but others reported that they got along well with their partners and with other men (contrary to the male control theory). In general, they reported that they felt more comfortable with and accepted by men than by women, which is consistent with the view that the negative reactions to active female sexuality come mainly from other women.

### *Subincision and Infibulation*

Thus far we have examined social approval and other social methods for restraining female sexuality, but in some cultures more drastic measures are used. Undoubtedly the most severe are the measures that seek to curtail female sexuality by means of surgical interventions, such as cutting off the clitoris (subincision) or sewing the vagina shut (infibulation). Such procedures directly reduce women's capacity to enjoy sexual intercourse. These practices are largely outlawed in Western countries and are most commonly practiced in the Islamic nations of Africa and the Middle East.

Who supports and perpetuates these practices of female genital surgery? The available evidence points strongly and consistently toward women. The decision about whether and when a particular girl will receive the operation is made by her mother or grandmother (Hicks, 1996; Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). The female peer group regards the operation as a mark of positive status, and girls who have not yet had it are sometimes mocked, teased, and derogated by their female peers (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). The operation itself is nearly always performed by a woman such as a midwife. "Men are completely excluded," according to one work on the topic (Boddy, 1989, p. 84).

These surgical practices are explained by the women with various justifications that appear on inspection to be dubious if not outright wrong. Some women claim that the surgery improves health, whereas in fact it produces some significant risks to health. They claim that it is required by the Koran, but scriptural ex-

perts say it is not. Women say that no one will marry a girl who has not had this operation (e.g., they believe “very few men would marry a girl who has not been excised and infibulated”; Forni, 1980, p. 26). In actual fact, however, men do marry women who have not had it. Shandall (1967, 1979) reported results from a sample of 300 Sudanese husbands, all of whom had a wife who was intact or had had only a limited version of the operation. Indeed, Lightfoot-Klein (1989) observed that European women were much sought after as wives in these Islamic African nations because the men found the European women (who had not had genital surgery) enjoyed sex more. These findings are directly contrary to the theory that African men prefer women whose sexuality has been stifled by surgical methods.

Shandall's (1967, 1979) sample actually consisted of 300 men who all had multiple wives, including one wife who had had the full operation as well as one who had not. This enabled Shandall to assess the men's preferences. Nearly all of the men reported that they preferred the wife who had not had the genital surgery. In cases in which the wives differed in the extent or severity of the operation, the men preferred the wife with the lesser operation. These findings converge with Lightfoot-Klein's (1989) observation that the men preferred wives who enjoy sex. Shandall (1967) concluded that “something other than men's sexual satisfaction must be at stake in continuing the practice” (p. 93).

Thus, subincision and infibulation do not seem conducive to male sexual pleasure. They might of course help ensure wifely fidelity by impairing the wife's capacity to enjoy extramarital sex. Yet, men's preference for sexually intact women speaks against the male control theory.

In recent years there has emerged an organized protest against these surgical practices. The protests are supported by women with Western educations, including some international feminist voices. Yet, other feminists question the protest. Germaine Greer, a feminist who does not seem sympathetic to the view that female sexuality has been suppressed by male influence, has criticized the Western protests as ethnocentric. Greer (1999) explicitly rejected the idea that infibulation and subincision are male driven: “This is indeed a curious explana-

tion of something that women do to women” (p. 103). Her own travels and apparently informal research in countries such as Ethiopia yielded conclusions similar to what Shandall (1967) found in the Sudan, namely that men do not prefer women who have had genital surgery. As far as Greer could determine, most men did not even know whether the women in their families had had the surgery or not. Greer argued that Western feminists should recognize these surgical practices as rooted in the female culture and female social groups and therefore should either tolerate them as such or phrase their objections in terms of debates among women about what is best for women.

Sure enough, most observers conclude that the practices are most zealously defended by women (e.g., Boddy, 1989, 1998). Men seem generally indifferent (consistent with Greer's impression that the men often do not even know). Some fathers object to having their daughters subincised or infibulated, but the men's objections are overruled by the women in the family, who insist on having the operations performed (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). Hicks (1996) also reported several findings indicating that men argued for less severe surgical practices but were thwarted by the women's determined support for the practices.

Parental attitudes were assessed in a relevant study by Williams and Sobieszczyk (1997). To be sure, it is not safe to assume that husbands' and wives' attitudes are independent phenomena. Still, the weight of the evidence indicated that the surgical procedures were mainly supported by women. In cases in which the father supported the surgery, 100% of the mothers said the daughter would have it. In cases in which the father was opposed, 41% of mothers said they would make sure the daughter had the operation anyway. In cases in which the father had no opinion, 97% of the mothers intended to have the daughter have the operation. In some cases, the mothers said the father had not expressed any opinion, and these too were strongly (79%) inclined toward having the daughter infibulated.

These findings suggest that fathers do have some influence (although the data are correlational and could reflect mere similarity among spouses), but the decisive influence appears to be the mothers. The decision appears to be up to the mother, and many mothers seem willing to

insist on the operation over the father's objections, whereas no mothers seem willing to refuse the operation when the father supports it. Thus, again, the genital surgery appears to be rooted in and controlled by the female culture.

Therefore, the evidence regarding subincision and infibulation indicates that women control and maintain the practice. This too supports the female control theory and contradicts the male control theory.

### *The Sexual Revolution*

The sexual revolution refers to the widespread changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors that occurred in the middle of the 20th century in the United States (with similar trends noted in other Western countries). Smith (1994) noted that *Time* magazine proclaimed the sexual revolution with a cover story in 1964, and a second cover story in 1984 declared that "the revolution is over." Although the exact dates may be debated by a couple of years, that approximate time span is reasonable.

We include the sexual revolution because it can be taken as important evidence of the reality of the suppression of female sexuality, and it helps rule out the null hypotheses. If the two null hypotheses are both rejected to any extent, then at least one of the control theories is presumably correct, to a degree. The sexual revolution liberated female sexuality to a certain extent, which shows that some genuine suppression had been in force previously.

This argument rests on the assumption that the sexual revolution represented centrally or primarily a change in female sexuality. Considerable evidence supports this assumption. Several historical treatments of the sexual revolution have explicitly observed that the change was greater for women than for men (Arafat & Yorburg, 1973; Birenbaum, 1970), and in fact it was a central point of the historical work by Ehrenreich et al. (1986). A variety of empirical studies documented that women's sexual attitudes and behaviors changed more than men's during the 1960s to 1980s (Bauman & Wilson, 1974; Croake & James, 1973; DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979; R. Robinson et al., 1991; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1972; Sherwin & Corbett, 1985; Staples, 1973), such as by surveying the same college campus or same population at different time points and noting

changes. The evidence on this appears to be quite consistent.

Thus, the sexual revolution mainly consisted of a change toward greater sexual permissiveness in women. This entails that the sexual revolution represented a major defeat for whatever forces conspired to suppress female sexuality. One possible approach to distinguishing between the male and the female control theories is to assess which gender seems to have lost more by virtue of those changes. For example, if the male control theory is correct and males have generally sought to suppress female sexuality, then the sexual revolution constituted a defeat for males, because it significantly liberated female sexuality. As a result, males would be expected to act like any defeated side: to exhibit distress and woe over the changes and to express more nostalgia for the earlier days when women's sexuality was more successfully suppressed.

The available evidence suggests that women have been more likely than men to express regrets and doubts about the sexual revolution. Extensive but nonquantified interviews reported by Rubin (1990) indicated that women were much more likely than men to say that the permissiveness resulting from the sexual revolution was a bad thing. More systematic data were provided by Smith (1994), who used national polls to show that women expressed more negative views than men about the rise in sexual permissiveness.

The greater regret by women than men over the sexual revolution thus again favors the conclusion that the female control theory is more accurate than the male control theory. But then why did the sexual revolution occur? Why did women allow the price of sex to drop so precipitously? To be sure, part of the answer may reside in the advances in birth control technology, which allowed women to enjoy sexual intercourse with less fear of pregnancy than earlier generations had had. Still, this is at best a partial explanation, because some forms of sex (such as oral sex) were always available without the risk of pregnancy, and because some forms of birth control had been available for decades if not centuries (see Tannahill, 1980).

An important part of the answer may be found in the broader context of women's liberation. It is well known that around 1960 women

began a massive move into the labor force and that a great many legal and institutional reforms broke down barriers to female opportunities. As women gained more money, status, power, occupational opportunities, and so forth, they became less needful of using sex to exchange for these resources. In a nutshell, women gained other ways of getting what they wanted, and so they ceased to hold sex hostage. This argument parallels the pattern noted earlier in Reiss's (1986a) data: As gender equality increases, suppression of female sexuality is reduced. In the same vein, it is probably no mere coincidence that the most extreme methods of suppressing female sexuality (i.e., the genital surgery discussed in the previous section) flourish mainly in places where women have the fewest rights and opportunities.

Although these data favor the female over the male control theory, the two null hypotheses could also fit. The null hypothesis of rational self-interest seems quite relevant to the sexual revolution, as already discussed: The birth control pill and other contraceptive advances reduced the dangers of vaginal intercourse. Meanwhile, the lesser sexual permissiveness of women could in theory be attributed to their having a milder sex drive (the first null hypothesis), and so women may be more negative than men are toward the sexual revolution, just as they are more negative toward a broad spectrum of sexual activities.

What about the male control theory? It would presumably cast men as the losers in the sexual revolution. We have found nothing to show that men feel they lost out in the sexual revolution. One might invoke the paternity issue to suggest that men ceased to need to stifle women's sexuality because the birth control pill reduced their worries that their female lovers would have sex with other men. This would entail, however, that male sexual jealousy and possessiveness subsided when the danger of pregnancy was removed. We have not found evidence of this, and if anything men still seem quite jealous and possessive (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Indeed, men seem quite possessive regardless of whether their wives risk getting pregnant by another man or not (although pregnancy does increase the stakes).

Thus, the two null hypotheses in combination, or else the female control theory by itself, can explain the sexual revolution and the atti-

tude patterns associated with it. Only the male control theory has difficulty accounting for it.

### *Harems, Honor Killings, and Other Restraints*

The male control theory has fared rather poorly through this first set of tests. It must seem, however, that something has been missed. Men do in some cultures lock their wives up in harems or purdah, restrict their contacts with other men, install chastity belts to ensure fidelity during male absence, and in severe cases beat or even kill their wives for having sex with other men. Do these patterns not constitute evidence that men suppress female sexuality?

They certainly show that men will exert a variety of coercive efforts to ensure that their women remain sexually faithful to them. Men are undeniably possessive of their mates. In this, they are hardly unique: Women seem quite possessive too, and some evidence suggests that women are even more sexually possessive than men (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) or that possessiveness levels are comparable even if they focus on slightly different forms or aspects of infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992). There is little reason to assume that women would balk at using strong methods to ensure their male partners' fidelity if they could, and the imbalance in past coercion is probably simply a reflection of superior male power (both political and physical). When women can intimidate or force their partners to remain faithful, they often do: Physical intimidation for the sake of ensuring fidelity has been documented in lesbian relationships, for example (Renzetti, 1992).

Furthermore, many cultures place strong pressures on men to maintain public esteem and reputation, often called honor. Promiscuity on the part of a wife or daughter is taken as a disgrace to the man. Even today, some countries allow parents to require their daughters to submit to medical examinations to establish virginity (Frank, Bauer, Arican, Fincanci, & Iacopino, 1999). Shorter (1975) reported that in medieval Europe, when a married woman had sex with a single man, the village would punish the misdeed by an act of public humiliation called *charivari*, and the cuckolded husband, rather than the faithless wife or interloper, was the

target of this shaming. Once male prestige has been linked to female chastity or fidelity, it is not surprising that some men have resorted to various coercive measures to ensure female sexual virtue. To relate these patterns to the present question, it would be necessary to ascertain how female chastity came to be linked to male honor in the first place.

Even so, the link between jealous possessiveness and suppression of female sexuality may be moot. Chastity belts and harems do not seek to prevent women from having sexual desire; they merely try to keep that desire focused on the husband. Some historians even view these practices as concessions to the general belief that women have strong sexual urges that cannot be tamed psychologically and hence need to be restrained behaviorally. According to Tannahill (1980), the chastity belt was invented as a protection against rape, but it soon found appeal among husbands (such as crusaders) whose duties required long absences and who regarded their wives as prone to infidelity.

The issue of spousal infidelity can be looked at another way. Both the male control and the female control theories assume that people want their spouses to be faithful. Both also see limiting female sexuality as the likely solution. The male control theory emphasizes that men want to reduce wifely infidelity and hence suppress sexual activity in wives. The female control theory emphasizes that women want to reduce husbandly infidelity and hence want to suppress sexual activity in other women (who might tempt the husbands away). On a purely statistical basis, the female control theory has the greater plausibility, because husbandly infidelity is a more widespread problem than wifely infidelity. The higher rate of husbandly than wifely infidelity has been confirmed in detailed studies of modern American behavior (Lauermann et al., 1994; Lawson, 1988) as well as in cross-cultural data (Whyte, 1978).

What can we conclude? These data seem more congenial to the male control theory than anything else covered thus far, because they suggest that men sometimes try to restrain the sexual activity of the women they "own." Still, these data fall far short of indicating any true suppression of female sexuality. Probably the master wanted the women in his harem to be full of sexual desire, as long as they satisfied it with him rather than other men. There is little to

suggest that he actually wanted them to lack sexual desire or sexual enjoyment per se. These practices are of interest in their own right and provide useful insights into phenomena of possessiveness and jealousy, but they do not properly belong in a treatment of the suppression of female sexuality. They seek to channel female sexuality and prevent it from producing acts that cost or embarrass the man, but they do not strive to suppress it.

Similar arguments can be raised regarding the practices of concealing female flesh from public view. In Islamic fundamentalist and some other cultures, women are pressured into wearing loose-fitting clothing, covering their hair, wearing veils, and otherwise hiding their bodies. Even some Christian groups have mandated clothing styles concealing female flesh. Such practices seem inimical to sexual desire, but they seem more likely designed to prevent men's than women's arousal. Display of the female body, such as in short skirts, stockings, and high heels, is arousing to men, but we have not found published evidence that women obtain sexual gratification from wearing such garb (short skirts and other revealing clothing do seem to be more popular when women have to compete most to attract men; see N. Barber, 1999). These practices are of interest in their own right, and indeed they suggest that men may externalize the problematic aspects of their own sexuality (by seeing women as at fault). Male campaigns to suppress prostitution by arresting prostitutes may well indicate the same pattern of externalization (i.e., male legislators think the sin of commercial sex should be blamed on loose women rather than on male consumer demand). Male sexual interest seems, however, to be the driving force behind both prostitution and sexy women's clothes, and so attempts to stifle them are not genuinely relevant to the suppression of female sexuality per se.

### *Sexual Deception*

When any influential group tries to suppress some activity, a common response by the targets is to conceal their interest in that activity. For example, if the government suppresses religion, people worship and study theology in secret; if slaveowners strive to suppress literacy, the slaves read surreptitiously. When adults try

to suppress teenagers' sexuality, the adolescents respond by trying to keep their sexual activities secret and hidden from adults. Hence, it seems straightforward to predict that if agent  $x$  wants to suppress female sexuality, women would conceal their sexual responses from agent  $x$ .

One might therefore examine whether women conceal their positive sexual responses and activities more from their boyfriends or their girlfriends. If men suppressed female sexuality, women would probably masturbate and perform lesbian acts to defy male control, as well as concealing their sexual desire from men. If women suppress each other's sexuality, then women might share their sexual pleasures discreetly with male partners but conceal them from female friends, especially when the women go farther than would be the norm among their friends.

Unfortunately, this seemingly straightforward prediction encounters the difficulty that the female control theory might also predict some concealment from male sex partners, so it is less divergent than one would think. (In other words, both control theories predict that women would conceal some sexual responses from men, for different reasons; thus, we cannot learn which theory is correct by establishing concealment from men.) After all, if the woman is exchanging sex for resources, she might find it to her advantage to pretend to be reluctant so that the man will offer her a higher price in exchange. This is not a strong prediction, and the female control theory could in principle operate without this deception; however, the deception is plausible.

A possible way to differentiate the two control theories is by comparing new sex partners with mates in long-term relationships. As we stated in the introduction, a supposedly central reason that men want to suppress female sexuality is to keep their wives from having sex with other men, and so concealment of sexual desire from spouses and long-term partners would be of paramount importance. Any sign that the woman enjoys sex might be threatening to her husband, because it would raise the possibility that she might seek pleasure elsewhere (or at least that is the argument in the male control view<sup>4</sup>). On the other hand, however, single men would have far less reason to want to suppress female sexuality. They may on the contrary prefer women to have high sexual desire, to

improve their own chances of having sex. In that case, women would not have any incentive to conceal sex from single men. Thus, the male control theory would predict more deception from one's long-term mate (husband) than a new prospective lover.

In contrast, we noted that the female control theory is based on social exchange analyses, which emphasize negotiation about whether to commence a sexual relationship. It is before the first intercourse that the woman is in the best position to stipulate what kind of immediate consideration or long-term commitment the man should make to have sex with her. In a long-term relationship, however, the terms of exchange are probably already established, and so she should be relatively free to enjoy sex, although it is necessary that she maintain the appearance (at least) that he wants sex more often than she does.

The data on this question are not extensive, but they are somewhat helpful. It appears that the female control theory has the advantage with regard to first-time sex, because women regularly conceal their sexual interest and desire in that situation. Muehlenhard and Hallabaugh (1988) examined whether women ever say no to sex when they mean yes, and the answer was emphatically positive: 39% of their sample had done it at least once, and more than two thirds had said no when they meant maybe. Even 12% of the virgins in their sample reported having said no when they meant yes, which meant that they had on at least one occasion decided to lose their virginity, but they had said no and the men had respected their stated wishes. Thus, the contexts these researchers identified pertained mainly to first-time encounters rather than established relationships, even though sex is far more common in the latter context. In other words, women conceal their desire for sex when about to have sex for the first time, consistent

<sup>4</sup> We have some differences with this line of reasoning on an a priori basis, just as we have questioned several aspects of the male control theory on conceptual grounds. If men are mainly concerned about wifely infidelity, perhaps they would want their wives to have especially powerful orgasms with them, because that would reassure the men that they satisfied their wives, and so the women would not be seeking satisfaction from others. This seems more plausible to us; however, it undermines the male control theory.

with the view that this is when they are negotiating the terms of exchange.

The male control theory would, in contrast, predict greater deception with long-term relationship partners (because they are the ones who are most threatened by female sexuality, insofar as it represents the threat of infidelity). There is in fact deception in that context too, but the nature of this deception runs directly contrary to the male control theory's prediction that this would be the most important place for women to conceal. In fact, the evidence suggests that female sexual deception is precisely the opposite of concealment: In long-term relationships, women pretend to have more sexual enjoyment than they actually have, such as by faking orgasms (Lauersen & Graves, 1984). We have already seen that men seem to prefer women with positive sexual desire and enjoyment, as in the evidence about the Muslim men who preferred European partners over Muslim women whose capacity for sexual pleasure had been surgically impaired; indeed, these men preferred even Muslim women who had not had surgery over those who had (Shandall, 1967, 1979). These data strike another serious blow to the male control theory. It appears that women pretend to have more rather than less sexual response when they seek to mislead their long-term partners. If men really wanted their wives to be asexual, the opposite pretense would be most common.

As for concealing sex from female influences, as the female control theory would predict, there is some evidence that this occurs. We already cited the study by Carns (1973) indicating that women are relatively slow to disclose their loss of virginity to their female friends, partly because they believe their friends will disapprove. The norms for acceptable degrees of sexual involvement may have changed by now, but there is still a sense that female friends will disapprove of a woman going farther sexually than is typical or normative, and hence there may be a reluctance to disclose to them (Du Bois-Reymond & Ravesloot, 1996).

It is also worth noting that the fact of faking orgasms speaks against another version of the male control theory, namely the notion that men suppress female sexuality because they envy women. If women's pleasure inspired envy in men, then faking orgasms would make this envy worse.

Thus, several predictions can be refined or modified, but the weight of the evidence again favors the female control theory. Most obviously, the fact that women sometimes fake orgasms is directly contrary to the part of the male control theory that emphasizes men wanting their mates to be sexually unresponsive. The concealment of norm-breaking sexual activity from female friends (while sharing it with the male partner) is also consistent with the view that female influences restrain sex. Meanwhile, women do conceal their sexual desire from prospective and new sexual partners, consistent with exchange theory. The concealment of female sexual desire from prospective first-time sexual partners does not seem to be to any advantage to men, and if anything it would be a disadvantage to men. Hence, it would be quite surprising that men would choose that arrangement, if they did have the power to make the women do what they want.

### *Summary and Critique*

We have reviewed several lines of evidence pitting the male and female control theories against each other. The link between sociopolitical power and suppression of female sexuality has been cited as relevant evidence, but it appears to be consistent with both theories, so it is not helpful. Demographic and romantic power based on supply and demand principles provided evidence favoring the female control theory: Sexual restraint is most common when women rather than men are able to dictate the terms of social exchange.

The most compelling evidence, in our view, involved the direct influences on adolescent female sexuality, because any culture that wanted to suppress female sexuality would probably direct its strongest efforts toward newly pubescent females. These data uniformly supported the female control theory: Almost all influences on female adolescent sexuality are female, and the sole male influence (the boyfriend) tends to operate to promote rather than suppress female sexuality. Put simply, the influences that restrain female adolescent sexuality are female.

Evidence about adult female sexuality converged with the evidence about adolescent influences. Adult women seem more disapproving of female premarital sex and other female sexual activity than adult men. Women have sup-

ported the double standard more strongly than men. The more extreme evidence about surgical interventions designed to curb female sexual responses likewise pointed toward female rather than male control.

We did find that men have exerted pressure on their wives to be sexually faithful. This does not seem remarkable, nor does it differ much from women's wishes that their husbands remain faithful. Crucially, it does not seem to carry over into suppressing female sexuality altogether. Men seem to want their wives to have sexual desire and pleasure, just to have them with their husbands rather than with other men.

Finally, sexual deception seemed most consistent with the female theory. Women conceal their interest in sex from prospective partners, which would be most relevant to negotiating the terms of what the man will exchange for sex. The male control hypothesis that men want to stifle their wives' sexuality is contradicted by evidence that women pretend to have more rather than less pleasure than they actually have (such as by faking orgasms).

The amount and quality of the evidence must be judged as only moderate. Laboratory experiments are generally considered the methodologically most conclusive way to test causal hypotheses, but the evidence we have reviewed does not include laboratory experiments, and they may not always be possible in this domain. The cross-cultural power findings and sex ratio findings are limited to single studies in each case. The finding that women are more skeptical about the sexual revolution than men is fairly clear, and it does contradict the male control theory; however, it does not unambiguously support the female control theory (because null hypotheses could account for it). The prominence of female influence in suppressing female adolescent sexuality appears to be the strongest set of evidence among these, and considering the importance of regulating adolescent female sexuality, it should be given the greatest weight. It is, however, limited to proximal influences. Whether men exert distal, indirect influence over female sexuality cannot be firmly established from these findings.

Convergence of conclusions across different methods and different spheres of evidence is potentially quite powerful in dealing with questions that cannot be tested in laboratory studies.

The convergence of evidence we have presented appears to be stronger than the methodological rigor of most of the individual studies.

In summary, the direct tests have provided fairly clear support for the female control theory. The male control theory was repeatedly contradicted. In view of these data, it would take a considerable amount of new and strong evidence even to make the male control theory plausible again. The female control theory, however, appears to provide a good fit to most of the available evidence. The null hypotheses cannot account for all of the findings but may be contributing to some of them, and in particular may operate in tandem with the female control theory.

### Noncompeting Predictions: Evidence and Interpretation

Several specific predictions were relevant to one or the other theory, even though they may not have been so directly relevant to the rival views. Insofar as the theories hypothesized different processes and mechanisms, this divergence seems unavoidable. These are important to consider because they can support or falsify at least one of the theories, even if they are not relevant to all. Hence, they can provide important sources of converging (or conflicting) evidence to augment the direct competing tests already discussed.

### *Competition: Prostitution and Pornography*

The female control theory was based on a model of social exchange by which women could exert control over men and gain resources from men by regulating men's access to sexual gratification. Prostitution and pornography offer men alternative sources of gratification. (We use the term *pornography* as synonymous with *erotica*, referring to all depictions of sexual activity or sexual stimuli.) To the extent that these sources can satisfy men, women's bargaining power would be reduced. Prostitution and pornography can be regarded as a kind of inexpensive competition that could potentially undermine women's monopoly on access to sex (Cott, 1979). Hence, the female control theory would predict that women would be particularly opposed to prostitution and pornography.

The male control theory does not lend itself to a strong prediction regarding prostitution and pornography. Some might suppose that if men want to suppress female sexuality in general, men would oppose prostitution and pornography, insofar as they involve women having sex. But we do not find this prediction convincing. One could also propose that insofar as men want to suppress female sexuality so as to gain power over women, men might like prostitution and pornography, because they represent male-dominated industries in which women cater to men's needs. We are skeptical of this argument too, and we doubt that men who like prostitution or pornography do so *because* it is a demonstration of male power and control, and indeed many clients explicitly prefer to purchase sexual scenarios that emphasize female control (e.g., Janus, Bess, & Saltus, 1977). The arguments about paternity certainty and similar concerns seem mostly irrelevant to prostitution and pornography. Hence, this section is probably irrelevant to the male control theory.

In any case, evidence supports the prediction from the female control theory: Women seem consistently more opposed than men to prostitution and pornography. Klassen, Williams, and Levitt (1989) reported the results of a survey asking whether prostitution is "always wrong." A majority (69%) of women, but only a minority (45%) of men, were willing to condemn prostitution in such categorical terms. At the opposite extreme, about three times as many men (17%) as women (6%) responded that prostitution is not wrong at all. A sourcebook on statistics published by the U.S. Department of Justice (1987) examined attitudes toward pornography. Women were more likely than men (51% vs. 34%) to support a ban on showing X-rated, sexually explicit films in theatres. Women were also more favorable toward suppressing the rental of X-rated sex videos (43% vs. 29%).

A recent poll by the newspaper *USA Today* asked respondents from a national sample whether they enjoyed nudity in popular movies (see Weiss, 1991). Once again, a majority of women (72%) but only a minority of men (42%) responded that they disliked nude scenes. Likewise, in a survey of a large sample of college students, Lottes, Weinberg, and Weller (1993) found that women were more strongly opposed to pornography than men.

Although these data are contemporary, women's opposition to pornography and prostitution is evidently long-standing. The social purity movements and other anti-prostitution campaigns of the 19th century were disproportionately popular among women, although some leadership positions were usually occupied by male clergy and other men (e.g., Walkowitz, 1980; see also D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997). It appears that many women genuinely thought they could convince women to give up the life of prostitution in exchange for other work and could also convince men to stop patronizing prostitutes. Neither expectation was borne out, by and large, although there were some individual successes.

Prostitution is of particular interest to the social exchange theory because it makes explicit the exchange of sex for resources (cash). Many observers, beginning perhaps with Marx and Engels (e.g., Engels, 1884/1902), have regarded prostitution as a simply more explicit form of the exchange that characterizes gender relations in general. Their description of marriage as "legalized prostitution" implies that wives exchange sex for their husbands' money in a more roundabout but ultimately similar fashion.

Hence, the social exchange theory can claim some support in the fact that women in general oppose prostitution. After all, one could make other predictions: If women themselves do not want to have sex with men, such as because they want to avoid pregnancy or they simply do not desire sex as frequently as their husbands, they might be expected to regard prostitutes as performing a valuable service to all women (by draining off excess male demand). There is even some evidence that prostitution reduces sex crimes, thereby making all women safer (R. N. Barber, 1969). But these possible motives for women to favor prostitution and pornography are clearly contrary to the empirical evidence. Women oppose prostitution, consistent with the idea that it might represent a threat to their own position and bargaining power.

This line of analysis is further confirmed by evidence that the sexual revolution was resisted and deplored by prostitutes. Several sources have reported that prostitutes angrily and disdainfully criticized "charity girls" who had sex with men without charging them money, because the availability of such free sex weakened

the prostitutes' own ability to obtain money for sex and thereby to make a living. "You want to put us out of business?" was one line that prostitutes used to influence women to stop "giving it away" (Reuben, 1969, p. 252). Although these data are anecdotal and lack systematic quantification, they do suggest that prostitutes recognized that their niche was linked to the broader pattern of female sexual restraint.

To be sure, it is possible to propose a variety of reasons that women might express opposition to prostitution and pornography. Whether these reasons are ultimately plausible is a more difficult question. For example, some observers have suggested that pornography exploits women, yet insofar as the industry makes its money from men, one could also argue that men are the ones who are actually exploited. In places where prostitution is legal, the industry consists of direct transfers of cash from men to women, in exchange for which the woman loses no tangible resource and performs often little effort, usually at an hourly rate that is far better than most unskilled labor. When prostitution is illegal, the lion's share of the profits probably goes to organized crime figures and petty procurers, and insofar as those figures are largely male, illegal prostitution can probably be said to consist of men exploiting both men (customers) and women (prostitutes). But that is hardly a basis for women to oppose prostitution; if anything, it suggests that collective female self-interest should cause women to support legalizing prostitution so that only men are exploited.

In sum, the evidence about prostitution and pornography is not directly relevant to the male control theory, but it is relevant to the female control theory. The latter theory could well have been contradicted if women were generally tolerant of prostitution and pornography, but the theory appears to have survived this test. Female opposition to prostitution and pornography is consistent with the social exchange analysis.

### *Legal Restrictions and Punishments*

Men have usually controlled laws, and laws can be used to regulate sex. If the purpose of the male control was to stifle female sexuality, men would use the legal system (which they have historically controlled) to regulate and punish female sexuality. The female control theory

does not have any clear prediction about how man-made laws should operate. Hence, this section is mainly relevant to the male control theory. Do men use their legal power to stifle female sexuality?

Certainly, some laws appear that way. Laws regarding adolescent sexuality do seem more protective of female than male adolescents. Wilson (1978) and Shacklady-Smith (1978) reported that the police and courts in England and the United States have been more willing to use promiscuity as a sign of delinquency with girls than with boys. Shacklady-Smith (1978) stated that girls were more likely than boys to be committed to juvenile homes for the noncriminal offense of being in need of "care, protection, and control," with promiscuous sexual behavior as the main contributing factor. Meanwhile, in the United States, statutory rape laws have forbidden adults (and possibly age peers as well) from having sex with anyone less than 18 years of age. Although the laws are often written as if gender neutral, it appears that men have mainly been prosecuted under them, which again suggests that the legal system wants to prevent adolescent girls from having sex while taking a far more casual if not cavalier attitude toward adolescent boys engaging in sex.

Perhaps the most relevant among these efforts to control adolescent female sexuality are the institutions set up to prevent pregnancy and promiscuity among female adolescents. Nathanson (1991) provided a history of these efforts, documenting that they began in the 1800s and are still in operation. Governments and courts have set up homes for wayward girls and other institutions to control adolescent girls who have behavioral problems, and sexual activity is one prominent problem with which they have dealt. Nathanson's (1991) conclusion is revealing, however:

The principal agents of female social control are other women. Since the middle of the nineteenth century . . . the frontline workers in the sexual regulation industry—social workers, nurses, counselors, teachers, members of the semi-professions—were, and continue to be, almost exclusively female. (p. 213)

Thus, when government agencies do regulate female sexuality, women take the lead in doing so.

Laws regarding adultery may be particularly one-sided. Tannahill (1980) reported that, in ancient Athens, men but not women could di-

voice their partner for adultery, and she asserted generally that throughout Western history laws have punished female infidelity more severely than male infidelity. Lerner (1986) made similar claims about various legal systems such as the Code of Hammurabi, although she did not provide specific or quantitative evidence. For example, she pointed out that this code prescribed the death penalty for rape, incest, and performing abortions, as well as “adultery committed by wives” (p. 103), the last of which does suggest an anti-female bias in the laws; however, later (p. 107) she referred to men being put to death for adultery under the same law.

Laws restricting birth control and abortion can also be interpreted as contributing to the suppression of female sexuality, because birth control and abortion make it easier for women to engage in sex without facing the risk of life-altering pregnancy each time. To be sure, such laws have multiple and complex effects, and any effect on sexual behavior would be indirect, but it does seem likely that such effects (even if indirect) would tend to restrain female sexuality.

A piecemeal approach to sex laws seems doomed to fail, however, in part because of the thousands upon thousands of law-making bodies and laws, and also in part because of selective enforcement. Undoubtedly, one could cite various specific laws or specific patterns of unequal enforcement to argue that either gender has been targeted here or there. Instead of such an anecdotal, interpretive approach, it seems most appropriate to look at the summary statistics regarding arrests for sex crimes. The male control approach holds that men want to stifle and control female sexuality while letting male sexuality have relatively free rein. If this is correct, then the laws passed by male legislatures and enforced by male-dominated police forces will lead mainly to the prosecution of women.

According to a comprehensive report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1998), however, the sex laws mainly focus on men. The authors of that report sorted their summary of sex crime arrests into three broad categories, and it is useful to consider each of them.

The first statistic concerns sexual coercion (i.e., forcible rape). Rape rates vary widely depending on how precise and restrictive a definition of rape is used. Moreover, until recently, sexist bias on the part of researchers has pre-

vented many studies from even gathering data on sexual coercion of males by females. Still, when the same definition is used in both directions, the results suggest that men are only moderately more likely to force women into sex than the reverse. (If severe physical overpowering is used, obviously, men predominate more, because of superior upper body strength.) Struckman-Johnson (1988) reported that 22% of women and 16% of men said they had been forced to engage in sex against their wishes. But in terms of arrests for forcible rape, the statistics are very one-sided: 99% of arrests for forcible rape involve men. Clearly, those laws are aimed at controlling men, not women. If anything, men are more likely to be prosecuted than women for identical crimes.

The second category is prostitution and commercialized vice (which presumably includes procuring along with being a prostitute of either gender). Only 40% of these arrests involve men, so these laws affect females slightly more. This could be taken as evidence in favor of the male control theory, in that these laws are enforced on women more than men. But as shown in the preceding section, prostitution is opposed more severely by women than men, and so it seems a bit misleading to consider the enforcement of anti-prostitution laws an instance of men suppressing female sexuality. Far more men than women are active supporters of prostitution, and suppression of prostitution is higher on the female agenda than the male agenda.

The third category is that of all other sex offenses. This is probably the most relevant and decisive category. One could argue that the prostitution category is ambiguous because women mainly want that law, and one might even be able to argue that the forcible rape category is not conclusive proof of legal anti-male bias, possibly because rape is not a social construction and by some objective definition males are more likely than females to commit the act.<sup>5</sup> But the catch-all category that encom-

<sup>5</sup> We are not advocating this argument. It is well documented that rates of rape fluctuate widely from study to study, depending on what definition is used (see Roiphe, 1993), and this variation indicates that rape is very much socially constructed. Prostitution is presumably the category of sexual offense that is least subject to social construction, insofar as the exchange of money for sex can be documented objectively and requires the least amount of interpretation.

passes the broadest assortment of sex offenses is one that certainly is most susceptible to social construction, and so that is the optimal place to look for any sexist bias in the laws. Are the laws constructed so as to suppress female sexuality? In 1998, men were arrested for sex offenses more often than women. The difference between the genders was an order of magnitude: 92% of the arrests involved men, and so only 8% involved women. Clearly, most sex laws, based on what the society constructs as unacceptable sex acts, are aimed at the behavior of men rather than women.

For present purposes, the relevant point is that the evidence does not fit the idea that men are aggressively using the legal system, which they have historically controlled, as a tool for the suppression of female sexuality. Probably, one can find individual laws that are enforced to the detriment of women here and there, and the control of wifely infidelity is as usual the main focus of men's efforts to curtail women's sexual freedom. Still, the majority of American sex laws suggest a deep indifference to the behavior of women. Man-made laws are used to control male sexuality, not female sexuality. The idea that men use their political power to make laws that will restrict women while letting other men run free is dramatically contradicted by the data on sexual arrests.

The fact that men make sex laws mainly to regulate other men is potentially an important parallel to the female control theory we have featured here. It is plausible that both genders approach the problem of controlling sex by regulating the members of their own gender. Women use reputation, gossip, and other controls to regulate the behavior of other women, and men use laws and other forces to restrain the behavior of other men.

### *Religion as Restraining Sex*

The role of religion in suppressing female sexuality deserves to be considered, insofar as religious traditions have generally advocated sexual restraint. Undoubtedly, many women have felt guilt about sexual pleasures, and religious faith has provided one source of such guilt. Religions are generally male dominated, and nearly all major religious figures in world history have been men. Christianity, the dominant religion in the Western world, has long insisted that nearly all positions of authority be

held by men. Religion can thus be regarded as a male form of influence.

It is also clear that Christian religion (like other religions) has long been a restraining influence on sex. Christian doctrines and sermons encourage sexual restraint and virtue. Tannahill (1980) pointed out that even when Christianity first appeared, it was far more hostile to sex than any other religion that was common at the time. It extended its disapproval to many sexual practices that were tolerated by other religions, such as masturbation, homosexuality, and bestiality. More recent histories of sex have continued to assign religious figures a prominent role in anti-sexual campaigns, such as efforts to eradicate prostitution or suppress pornography (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997).

Further evidence confirms the importance of religion in restraining female sexuality. Religious women feel more guilty than other women about many sexual activities, and they act in ways suggesting sexual stifling. For example, religious women are less likely than other women to engage in oral or anal sex, lesbian sex, masturbation, and other sexual practices (Adams & Turner, 1985; Harrison, Bennett, Globetti, & Alsikafi, 1974; Laumann et al., 1994). It is therefore tempting to regard religion as supporting the male control theory. Yet, the view that men use religion to suppress female sexuality is open to question, and on further consideration it suffers from several empirical and theoretical problems.

First and foremost, religion seems to appeal more to women than to men. All of the studies reviewed here reported that women attend church more regularly than men and indicate more religiosity than men on most measures (e.g., Francis & Wilcox, 1998; Levin & Taylor, 1993; Walter & Davie, 1998). The difference may be even bigger than these numbers suggest, because apparently many men who do go to church are brought along by their wives. Levitt (1995) reported that "the decline in the proportion of attenders who are male affects all the main Christian churches" and gave as an example the current rate that twice as many females as males receive confirmation in the Church of England (p. 530). She found no gender difference among preschoolers at church (Sunday school), with 87% of girls and 86% of boys attending at least sometimes. By the ages of 12–13 years, however, 47% of the girls attended regularly, as compared with only 5% of the

boys. Girls overall had more positive attitudes toward Christianity, although not greater knowledge of its doctrines, a pattern consistent with other findings (Francis, 1989). In a sample of 38 families, Levitt did not find a single case in which the father attended more often than the mother or the son attended more often than the daughter.

Nor is this a modern phenomenon. Cott (1977) described the "feminization of religion" that occurred during colonial times in America. By 1650, females consistently represented the majority of people in attendance in New England churches. Other evidence has suggested an even earlier feminine thrust to Christianity. Stark's (1996) demographic research on the rise of Christianity during the Roman empire revealed that women led the way in converting to Christianity, outnumbering men in early congregations and also proving instrumental in bringing their husbands and other male relatives into the new church.

The greater attraction to Christianity among women than among men makes it difficult to argue that men use Christianity to suppress female sexuality. The message of sexual restraint that Christianity has always advocated seems, if anything, to have had stronger appeal to women than to men. Furthermore, although isolated instances can be found in which Christian practices condemned female sexual misdeeds more strongly than comparable male ones (see Bulough & Brundage, 1982), these could simply be accommodation to higher base rates of male sexual misdeeds. The core of Christian doctrine did not advocate any double standard. Rather, it consistently advocated a single standard of sexual purity for both men and women. The ideal for men as well as women was to have neither sexual desire nor sexual pleasure, and for individuals who could not live up to this high goal, procreative sex within marriage was the only legitimate alternative (see St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, I Corinthians 7:9: "It is better to marry than to burn").

These findings bring up the second null hypothesis, namely that women have been more sexually vulnerable than men, and so sexual restraint has more appeal to women than men. Applied to religion, it suggests that women may have been attracted to the message of sexual restraint and indeed may have sought to use religion as a force to help control sexuality in

general. Although the religious authorities were themselves men, it is debatable whether the majority of men actually warmed to the anti-sexual message as much as women.

We may therefore regard religion as one voice available in the culture to support sexual restraint. Many women have clearly been influenced by this message and have apparently been influenced to restrain their own sexual desires because of it. One must therefore ask: Who brings young women into the influence of the church, where they hear this message? Levitt's (1995) studies pointed conclusively to the mother as the main agent influencing daughters toward religion. Even mothers who regarded Christian religion as hypocritical were reluctant to identify themselves as not being religious, because they regarded the church as an important source of moral teachings. These women had typically been less religious when single and childless, but on becoming mothers they had increased their religious participation because they wanted its moralizing influence on their offspring.

Sheeran, Spears, Abraham, and Abrams (1996) found that religiosity affected women's negative judgments of other women more strongly than men's judgments. In particular, a hypothetical woman who changed her sex partner several times a year was judged as being irresponsible, and religiosity contributed to this negative judgment. Religion thus emerged from this study as a strategy that women use to control the sexuality of other women, although all effects were quite weak.

In any case, the fact that women consistently seem to embrace this message more strongly than men raises doubts about seeing religion as a male power tool and women as its passive victims. At most it suggests distal influence by males, with the proximal influences on specific women's and girls' sexuality being female.

### *Tolerance for Homosexuality*

There is no questioning the strong fact that homosexual behavior has been severely and often brutally suppressed in many societies, including our own. Because lesbian activity is an important form of female sexuality, anti-gay campaigns and laws could be regarded as relevant to the cultural suppression of female sex-

uality. One might therefore extend the two control theories to make predictions about attitudes toward homosexual behavior. A blanket effort to suppress all female sexuality should condemn lesbianism, as one form of female sexuality. Hence, one could test the two control theories by asking whether men or women are more opposed to lesbianism.

The available evidence is not extensive, but there are some signs that women are more opposed than men, consistent with the female control theory. Whitley (1988) noted that most previous studies had simply asked for attitudes toward homosexuals in general, and both men and women tend to associate homosexuality with male homosexuality. Whitley was careful to assess attitudes toward male and female homosexuality separately. He found that women were more negative and intolerant toward female homosexuality than men were. Men were more opposed to male homosexuality than to female homosexuality, contrary to the male control theory's hypothesis that men want to suppress female sexuality while allowing each other to do whatever they want. Herek and Capitanio (1999) found essentially the same thing, with some complications added when they varied the sequence of items.

Whitley (1988) summarized his findings by observing that both men and women are more negative toward homosexuality of their own gender than of the opposite gender's homosexuality. This pattern seems strongly irrational for heterosexuals of both genders. After all, the more members of one's own gender turn gay, the less competition one faces for opposite-gender mates. Heterosexual men ought seemingly to rejoice at hearing that other men are gay and should encourage as many other men as possible to become homosexual, thereby leaving more women for the dwindling ranks of heterosexual men. The same logic suggests that heterosexual women should want other women to be lesbians. But attitudes indicate the opposite reaction, possibly motivated by fear of being the target of homosexual advances. Therefore, we think that attitudes toward homosexuality should not be regarded as providing evidence relevant to theories about the suppression of female sexuality.

## General Discussion

The cultural suppression of female sexuality is of considerable interest both in its own right and as an important instance of cultural influence over sexual behavior. On the basis of previous writings, we identified two major theories regarding the source of this suppression. One of them depicted men as conspiring to suppress female sexuality, as a way of controlling women, ensuring peace and order in society, and reducing the risk of wifely infidelity. The other theory depicted women as cooperating to restrict each other's sexuality, mainly as a way of ensuring that the exchange of sex for other resources would proceed in a way favorable to women. These theories led to competing predictions about whether men or women would be the main proximal influences toward restricting female sexuality.

We reviewed all of the evidence we could find relevant to these two theories and a series of predictions based on them. This evidence repeatedly favored the female control theory. Mothers and female peers, rather than fathers and male peers, are the main sources that teach adolescent girls to refrain from sexual activity.<sup>6</sup> Boyfriends, one male source, do have some influence, but they push in the opposite direction (toward more sexual activity). Adult women feel more disapproval from female peers than from men over engaging in sexual activity beyond the current norms. Women support the double standard more than men; in other words, women are the main supporters of a moral system that condemns acts by women more severely than identical acts by men. In cultures that use surgical methods to curb female sexuality, these practices are supported and carried out by women, to almost the entire exclusion of men. In our own culture, the sexual revolution, which almost by definition was a major defeat for the forces that sought to suppress female sexuality, was received more pos-

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<sup>6</sup> As one reviewer correctly pointed out, socialization practices aimed at controlling sexuality probably begin in childhood rather than adolescence. We suspect that in childhood too female influences would predominate, but it is considerably more difficult to document and verify these influences insofar as the sexual consequences can be assessed only years later (thus requiring a longitudinal design).

itively by men than women and regretted more by women than men, implying that women were more in favor of the sexual suppression that prevailed before the sexual revolution.

Sex ratio studies show that when gender imbalances in the population give one gender the greater ability to dictate sexual norms, female power generally pushes for sexual restraint, whereas male power pushes toward more liberal sex. Patterns of sexual deception contradict the view that men want their wives and sex partners not to enjoy sex: If anything, women pretend to have more pleasure than they actually have with their established partners, contrary to the view that men want their partners to be sexually stifled. They mainly conceal their interest from prospective partners, which is what an exchange theory would emphasize.

Further evidence pertained to one or the other theory, and these findings again tended to contradict the male control theory or support the female theory. The male control theory would predict that men would use laws and religion to restrain female sexuality. Instead, it appears that the laws about sex (which are made by men) are mainly enforced against men. Women are the primary agents who use religious teachings to limit female sexual behavior, although the religious teachings themselves are generally written by men. Meanwhile, women oppose forms of alternative sexual gratification for men, such as pornography and prostitution, which fits the view that women want to maintain control over male access to sexual pleasure so as to keep the exchange of resources on favorable terms.

What, exactly, can we conclude from all this? First, it is clear that the proximal causes of the suppression of female sexuality are predominantly female. The female control theory is broadly consistent with the bulk of the evidence. This conclusion is consistent with feminist views arguing that women have been active agents in society and history rather than merely passive victims of male influence. In the present analysis, female behavior has been guided by a rational and correct assessment of self-interest and a corresponding adaptation to circumstances. It must be acknowledged, however, that the present review has not been able to confirm the full female control theory, merely the bottom-line prediction that female sources will be the proximal agents of influence.

The male control theory has been abundantly contradicted. Direct male influence on female sexuality was largely absent, and when direct male influence was found, it usually pushed in the direction opposite to what the theory would require (i.e., men pushed for more rather than less female sexuality). Men do not appear to be important or effective sources of proximal influence toward the general restraint of female sexuality.

A few exceptions could be raised. First and foremost, men seem to want their wives to be sexually faithful to them. Sexual possessiveness is well documented and appears to be close to universal (e.g., Reiss, 1986b). It seems safe to say that both men and women want their mates to be faithful to them. Men may have used certain methods to ensure fidelity (such as harems and chastity belts) that women were unable to use, but this does not mean that wives are indifferent to husbandly infidelity. If anything, wives appear to be more sexually possessive than husbands (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Still, crucially, the male efforts to ensure fidelity do not seem to have extended to attempting to stifle female sexuality. Men do want their wives to have sexual desire and sexual enjoyment, provided that they have them with their husbands.

The other exception involves the institutional attempts to regulate adolescent female sexuality. We cited some evidence that courts and police seem more concerned with female adolescent promiscuity than with identical behavior by young males. We suspect that parents have the same concerns and worry more about promiscuity in their daughters than their sons (e.g., Libby & Nass, 1971). Still, these efforts hardly reflect a broad attempt to stifle female sexuality. More likely, they are relevant to the point that the costs of sexual mistakes have always been greater for women than men, starting with the inability to walk away from an unwanted pregnancy. The sporadic efforts to control female adolescent sexual activity probably reflect a desire to protect these young women from being hurt and exploited and, perhaps, from willingly doing things that will end up hurting them. Although the courts, police, and fathers may be male, we also found that women were the main figures in administering these efforts to regulate wayward and promiscuous girls, again not primarily to stifle female sexuality generally but,

rather, to protect girls from coming to grief before they can make their own well-informed choices.

The costs of sex were featured as one of the null hypotheses, the other being a possibly weaker sex drive in women. These two null hypotheses do offer viable explanations for part but not all of the data. The truth may well be that they operate in combination with the female control pattern. Thus, mothers may try to stifle their daughters' sexuality so as to help them avoid the misfortune of unwanted pregnancy and even to avoid being stigmatized with a bad reputation by their female peer group. Even more important, the hypothesis of a milder female sex drive converges well with the social exchange analysis: The reason that men have to give women resources in exchange for sex could be that women innately desire sex less than men, and the female control itself essentially capitalizes on this natural advantage by trying to maximize men's state of sexual deprivation.

Beyond question, the suppression of female sexuality has received far more discussion and political commentary than careful empirical research. Neither the quality nor the quantity of research on the topic is powerful, although to some extent convergence across different methods can help compensate for weaknesses in specific studies. Overall, it seems appropriate to regard our conclusions as tentative, and we hope that this article will stimulate further empirical work on the topic of cultural suppression of sexuality. Considering the difficulty of obtaining data on the topic, we think the evidence we have reviewed does make a good case, but we hope researchers will be alert to future opportunities to gain further insight into these processes.

Thus, the main conclusion from this review is that female rather than male agents have been the primary proximal forces operating to suppress female sexuality. It is mainly from other women that girls and women have been influenced to restrain their sexual responses.

### *What About Distal Influence?*

The present evidence has generally contradicted the hypothesis that men exert proximal, direct influence in suppressing female sexuality. We cannot, however, rule out the possibility of

distal influence: Men may conceivably exert some indirect influence toward suppressing female sexuality, even though the main direct influences on female sexuality appear to be female. The message of sexual restraint in religion, in particular, has generally originated with male writers and preachers, even if its application to individual cases has been carried out by women. Likewise, laws restricting adolescent sexual activity among girls have been enacted by predominantly male legislatures, even if the proximal agents who deal with the girls are mainly female.

Yet, there are two important reasons to be skeptical of the view that men in general have conspired to exert indirect, distal influences to suppress female sexuality. The first is the fact that when we did find evidence of male influence over female sexuality, it was generally in the opposite direction. Boyfriends push young women toward more sexual activity, not less. Male power tends to produce more sex in relationships, not less. When the sex ratio is unbalanced in favor of men, the result tends to be more sexual activity. These findings suggest that if men really could exert direct control over female sexuality, they would opt for more of it, not less. To maintain a belief in male suppression of female sexuality, it is necessary to believe that men directly influence women toward greater sexuality while indirectly exerting influence in the opposite direction. The exceptions we noted (religious and legal prohibitions on sexual activity) seem more appropriately understood as attempts to restrict sexual activity by everyone, for people's own benefit, than as any strategic effort targeted specifically at controlling female sexuality.

The second reason is that a relatively negative, patronizing view of women is a prerequisite to reconciling the data with the hypothesis of distal male influence. It is apparent that women are the main proximal sources of influence in restraining female sexuality. If men are behind this, then women are simply the unwitting dupes of men's hidden influence. By that view, millions of women all over the world work together to stifle each other's sexuality, and that of their daughters, without being able to think or choose for themselves. Men's alleged influence would have to be so subtle that it is invisible to the platoons of social scientists

who have collected data, yet this evanescent influence is regarded as being strong enough to brainwash women everywhere into carrying it out, even against their own self-interest. This scarcely seems plausible. Hence, we think the male control theory seems highly dubious, whether formulated in terms of proximal or distal influence.

A different form of distal influence is more plausible, however. Specifically, it is possible that men may have unwittingly encouraged women to exploit their power advantage in sex, insofar as men have controlled most other resources and sources of power. Our social exchange analysis emphasized that women have responded to their inferior position in society in a rational manner, namely by using what they do control (sex) to pursue a better life for themselves. We proposed that women may relax their restraining influence on each other's sexuality when they gain alternative paths to the good life, and indeed we suggested that the sexual revolution occurred in part because women had gained sufficient economic, educational, occupational, and political opportunities that they no longer believed it necessary to extract the highest possible price in exchange for sex.

Thus, by dominating society, men may have played an indirect but important role in creating the conditions that stimulated women to suppress female sexuality. This was probably not men's intention, and indeed we think it more plausible that men may have pursued power and status because these often seemed to hold the promise of increased sexual satisfaction (which was indeed the case for individual men; see Betzig, 1986). Possibly men even sought to keep women in a dependent, vulnerable position in the hope that this would stimulate women to offer sex more readily (so as to obtain other resources). These arguments are purely speculative, but if they are correct, then the male power structure grossly miscalculated by keeping women down, because it failed to reckon with how women would, of necessity, band together to restrict sexual access. Ironically, it was only by granting women greater autonomy and opportunity that men were able to secure a broad rise in female sexual permissiveness.

### *Why Do Women Do It?*

In this work, we began with social exchange theory and on that basis developed the hypothesis that women would be the main proximal influences in restraining female sexuality. Social exchange theory offers a good reason for women to suppress female sexuality, because restricting the supply of sex will raise the price (in terms of commitment, attention, and other resources) that women can get for their sexual favors. In our view, the evidence we have presented provides fairly good and consistent support for the view that women are indeed the main proximal influences that restrain female sexuality. The evidence has not, however, had a great deal to say about women's reasons and motivations for doing so. Hence, some alternative motivational accounts deserve to be considered.

One possible view is that women put pressure on women to refrain from sexual activity because sexual activity carries substantial risks (especially of unwanted pregnancy), and so women suppress each other's sexuality out of an altruistic concern for each other's welfare. Undoubtedly, this is one factor that makes parents want to suppress their daughters' sexuality. There is, however, no a priori reason why this should be of concern to mothers and not fathers, insofar as both parents want their daughters to be happy, and indeed if anything a father would traditionally have had to bear the financial burden of supporting an unmarried daughter with children. Hence, this altruistic explanation does not seem sufficient to explain the differential parenting influence. Meanwhile, the altruistic explanation is seemingly contradicted by the force and sometimes cruelty of sanctions that women sometimes use to punish those who go too far. The anguish experienced by adolescent girls who have obtained a bad reputation and been ostracized by their female peers (e.g., Coleman, 1961) suggests that the control exerted by female peers is more punitive than nurturant.

Another possible theory would be that women suppress each other's sexuality so as to influence the sexual marketplace generally and thus avoid having to engage in sex themselves. By this view, sex is a burden to women, and they are often reluctant to have sex with men. Abundant evidence has certainly confirmed that

women desire sex less often than men (see Baumeister et al., 2001, for a review), including in established relationships (e.g., McCabe, 1987), and so they are often confronted with male demands for sex that they may not want to satisfy. In that context, women might be tempted to think that if they band together and all refuse sex, men will have to acquiesce and learn to do without as much sex as they want. In particular, women may feel that they can be sexually unresponsive without risk of losing their male partners as long as the men cannot find other, more satisfying partners, and so suppressing other women's sexuality is vital.

This hypothesis overlaps to a degree with social exchange theory. The main difference is that women's motivation is to avoid having to give sex rather than to gain a higher price in exchange for sexual favors. We think several findings point to the relevance of exchange for other resources, such as the fact that women seem to relax their suppression of female sexuality when their economic opportunities increase. Still, we do not think that the evidence is thorough or powerful enough at present to reject this alternative explanation entirely.

One may also suggest that insofar as the lesser sexual interest of women is relative rather than absolute, the discrepancy may be a matter of artificially heightened desire among men rather than artificially reduced desire among women. For example, McIntosh (1978) proposed that "the male needs themselves are socially produced" (p. 55). In principle, the social exchange analysis could explain equally well why women might suppress female sexuality or increase male appetite. If the goal is to obtain a high price for sex, then one might accomplish this either by restricting the supply or by stimulating higher demand. Still, we think some of the evidence points unmistakably toward suppression of female sexuality rather than stimulation of male sexuality. The gossip and bad reputation punishments meted out to sexually loose girls are clearly directed toward female targets. Likewise, the genital surgeries performed on some Islamic girls seem clearly designed to stifle female sexuality rather than to enhance male sexuality, especially because, as we noted, many men in those cultures oppose the practice and prefer genitally intact women.

In sum, the social exchange theory can offer a full explanation of the findings, but the evi-

dence is not sufficient to verify that its account of the motives is the correct one. Meanwhile, the alternative views have some difficulties fitting parts of the evidence. The full explanation may well involve a combination of factors, including the social exchange theory's emphasis on restricting supply to earn a high price, some degree of altruistic concern to protect other women (perhaps especially daughters) from the aversive consequences of sexual indulgence, and possibly some wish to restrict sex generally so that individual women will not have to meet all of the sexual demands of their partners.

### *The Future of Sexual Suppression*

Although predicting the future course of cultural suppression is hazardous, several contingencies can be suggested on the basis of the present conclusions. In the West, women have essentially all of the rights and opportunities of men and have vastly reduced the gap between themselves and men in power, status, money, and other resources. Hence, their need to rely on restricting sex to yield a favorable exchange is much lower than in the past, and so a return to the extensive suppression found in the past is unlikely. In other parts of the world, however, women remain at a much more substantial disadvantage in political and economic spheres, and hence the continued suppression of female sexuality in those places may be something women will perceive as needed. Although there are important moral arguments against subjecting infants and children to any surgery against their will (other than when life is at stake), Germain Greer (1999) and others have warned against imposing Western values on women in other cultures, including forcing them to relinquish sexual suppression. Sexual liberation without political and economic liberation could leave those women in an even weaker position in society.

Before we predict the imminent demise of the cultural suppression of female sexuality, however, one may also consider that the advantages women accrue by restricting sex continue to be there for the taking, and Western women may rediscover that some degree of suppression of female sexuality will enhance their power vis-à-vis men. Most sources believe that there has been some backlash against the sexual revolution and its implicit assumption that women

would soon be as sexually permissive as men (e.g., Petersen, 1999; Rubin, 1990; Smith, 1994). Although a return to severe suppression is unlikely, limited suppression may offer advantages that are too tempting to forgo.

One can also consider the prospects for enforcing the suppression of female sexuality. It appears to have been carried out with informal sanctions such as gossip, reputation, and maternal socialization. These may be more difficult to sustain in large, unstable social networks, especially with the mass media able to influence perceived norms. Smaller, more stable groups can enforce local norms of sexual restraint more effectively. At present, one can observe trends both toward greater urbanization and crowding and toward constructing smaller, self-contained communities (including flight from urban centers toward small towns and suburbs), and it is difficult to forecast which will prevail.

Religion is not as strong a force as it once was to lend legitimacy to sexual suppression, but health and medicine have offered alternative justifications that socializing agents can use to promote sexual restraint, although these lack the moral power that religion could invoke. The medical risks of sex have shown that they can change rapidly, in both directions (cf. AIDS and penicillin), and further changes in either direction could have an impact that would be just as great as an abrupt loss of female rights or a revival of religious fervor. The flowering of female sexuality in the late 20th century enabled it to offer more sexual pleasure to more women and more men than at any other point in world history, and these contingencies will determine whether that goes down in history as a brief and unsustainable episode or the start of a permanent era of sexual liberation.

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