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978-1-107-05001-3 - How Sexual Desire Works: The Enigmatic Urge

Frederick Toates

Excerpt

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ONE

WHAT IS ENIGMATIC ABOUT SEXUAL DESIRE?

Consider the time, I hope recently, when you saw a woman or man (fill in your preference) who awoke in you, within a matter of seconds, a distinct state of lust . . . The object of origin for that awakening presented itself, in all its glory, probably not whole but in parts. Maybe what first arrested your attention was the shape of an ankle, how it connected with the back of a shoe and how it dissolved into a leg, no longer seen but just imagined, under a skirt . . . Or maybe it was the shape of a neck sticking up from a shirt. Or maybe it was not a part at all but the carriage, moves, energy, and resolve that propelled a whole body forward.

(Damasio, 2003, p. 93)¹

It would be informative to discover how Damasio's readers (and indeed mine too) have reacted to this invitation to reflection. If they are like the population sampled by sex researchers, some would find it hard to recall any such lust-filled moments, whereas others would be inundated with recent memories jockeying for occupation of the conscious mind. Some would doubtless find their desire triggered instantly by such parts of the whole as an ankle or leg, whereas a number might find it fuelled by the shoes worn. Others would only be excited slowly by a whole speaking and socially interacting personality.

The enormous variation in the reactivity of human sexual desire is why I use the term 'enigma' and is a feature that must be accommodated by any attempt to explain desire's foundations. What are the implications of this wide spectrum of responses? Is there a healthy norm, while deviations to either side indicate that something is wrong? Accounts by individuals, both famous and not, on their experience of desire are invaluable in

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understanding how it works and they will be used widely throughout the following pages.

Personal anecdotes and explanations

Insight from biographies

I respectfully held out my hand to her and she took it with an air of utter indifference, but she pressed it firmly as she climbed into the carriage. The reader will be able to imagine the flame which this sent racing through my blood. (Casanova, 1798/1958, p. 192)

Leaning toward the table, she revealed nearly everything I desired. Then, slowly straightening up, she handed me the chemise. I was trembling so violently that I was unable to hold it. (Casanova, 1798/1958, p. 52)

I was a furnace of desire, and it was becoming impossible for me to resist the flame that was consuming me. (Casanova, 1798/1958, p. 81)

... but how could I go to sleep? I was still heated from the flame which Lucrezia had ignited in me. (Casanova, 1798/1958, p. 29)

The squeeze on Casanova's hand was interpreted by him, rightly or wrongly, as a signal of reciprocity and encouragement. It would appear to exemplify a fundamental feature that can be associated with desire and serve to accentuate it: the *resolution of uncertainty*. In such terms, the 'flame racing through the blood' following the squeeze would have been triggered by a combination of an initial desire and the sudden assessment that desire might shortly be fulfilled. Investigators can now identify changes in the activity of the brain that form the basis of desire. Casanova used the metaphor of heat and flames and he documented the attention-grabbing aspect of desire associated with persistence of erotic images in his conscious mind. He witnessed the ability of erotic thoughts to interfere with sleep, a feature shared with fear and anxiety.

Remaining at the extreme end of the range of sexual desires, a century or so after Casanova there is a special place for a Victorian English autobiographer, known as 'Walter'. Like Casanova, Walter would have found Damasio's question very easy to answer, and might only have

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wondered why the suggested reaction time was as long as ‘a matter of seconds’.

I was maddened by desire . . . at the sight of the fresh, modest, naked girls cleaning themselves so unsuspectingly . . . (Walter, 1995, p. 328)

Then a thrill of desire shot through me and staggered me. I trembled as the want overtook me, and drew her closer to me . . . (Walter, 1995, p. 400)

Casanova and Walter document the power of the visual image to trigger their desire, a tendency to approach the source of desire, accompanied by a powerful emotional bodily reaction. Subsequent chapters will address the role of bodily changes, such as an accelerated heart rate and knotted stomach, in sexual desire. Are they simply the consequence of the desire or a contributory trigger to its intensity? Are they necessary for the experience of desire and can they act as a measure of its intensity? These bodily reactions seem similar to those associated with fear and anxiety. It will be suggested that this similarity is a key to understanding features of sexual desire.

I sicken with carnal passion, pining for as yet unseen, unknown women . . . My life is almost unbearable from unsatisfied lust . . . It is constantly on me, depresses me, and urges me to yield. (Walter cited by Kronhausen and Kronhausen, 1967, p. 184)

Here Walter reveals the role of the imagination in inventing scenarios to trigger sexual desire, their motivating power and the tension that is created when the goal of the associated craving is not attained. Later chapters will explore the link between sexual fantasy and sexual behaviour.

The mysterious author, only ever known to us as ‘Walter’, endowed the world with a vivid depiction of his series of sexual adventures in Victorian London, a study entitled *My Secret Life*. The quest for sexual novelty was enough to sustain the intrepid author’s fascination and vigour during a life that seemed to feature precious little else. Whether the vicarious re-living of this life is sufficient to hold the average reader’s attention through Walter’s 11 volumes, consisting of no fewer than 4,000 pages of unremitting graphic detail, is perhaps a moot point. By contrast, Casanova is at least a relatively short read, interspersed liberally with commentary on eighteenth-century European social history. Walter’s writing

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gives insight into the role of fantasy and novelty in inflaming desire and preventing the onset of psychological fatigue by escalating the intensity of the content:

I wish to refresh my memory by repeating the amorous exercises. . . . it rather seems as if it were strong animal want which is stimulating my desires and exercising my brain to invent even [more] voluptuous combinations. (Walter, cited by Marcus, 1966, p. 180)

Influential books and learned chapters have been written about Walter, where his exploits are scrutinized, surely the ultimate accolade for any writer of autobiography. Experts tend to agree that Walter's is not a work of fiction and that he can be used as evidence for the notions of sexual addiction and 'excessive appetite' (Orford, 2001), important topics when trying to understand so-called normal desires. Walter is an extreme case but a valuable one to study, since he illustrates how sexual desire *can* sometimes work, given ready availability and opportunity. Somewhat lacking subtlety and finesse in his approach, totally unrestrained and undeterred by threats such as sexually-transmitted diseases, it appears that Walter's desire was fired simply and instantly by the physical characteristics of the women to whom he was attracted. The variation in levels of restraint shown between individuals is another feature of desire that is central to its understanding.

Because of its relative simplicity, his life is like a laboratory for the study of exaggerated and undiluted lust. Born into a well-to-do family, social class meant little or nothing to Walter. Indeed, most of his liaisons appeared to have been greased by the woman's prospect of financial gain, which in most cases doubtless provided her with a temporary respite from grinding poverty. Although Casanova and Walter represent an extreme end of the spectrum, they are, of course, by no means unique in their instantaneous excitation and quest for novelty. A twentieth-century life illustrates this:

When I met a woman, my desire for her was immediate and crippling – a hammer blow to the heart. . . . In the beginning there was just that longing, and the sense of myself as a starved orphan gazing through a window at a room where a happy family is sitting down to dinner. (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 16)

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As a measure of its intensity, the American author Peter Trachtenberg relates desire triggered by an attractive other to the associated bodily reaction:

Once more I was intolerably drawn to other women – some I knew and some I just glimpsed across a subway platform on my way to work. I say ‘intolerably’ because what overcame me in their presence left me trembling and labouring for breath and sometimes brought tears to my eyes. God knows what those women thought when they saw a strange man gazing at them with such waif-like yearning. (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 262)

The author of autobiographical detail expressed at such intensity is most commonly a male but females are also represented, albeit with not quite such an abundance or shade of desperation, as illustrated by the French writer Catherine Millet and the American writer Susan Cheever:

crossing the huge lobby of an International hotel; the elegant and distinguished assistant who has been travelling across the country with me for two weeks catches hold of my arm when we have just said goodnight to each other, pulls me to him and kisses me on the mouth. ‘In the morning, I’ll come and see you in your room.’ I can feel the spasm rising right up to my stomach. (Millet, 2003, p. 84)

I would come to a rendezvous already in a state of exacerbated desire. From the very first full-on kisses, from the first moment when his arms crept up under my clothes, the pleasure was violent. (Millet, 2003, p. 207)

For a while there is no such thing as ‘too much’ with the object of desire. The world shrinks down to a universe of two.

When the dose wears off, however, the sex addict doesn’t need more of the same person, he or she needs a new person. (Cheever, 2008, p. 131)

This raises the topic of whether (a) there is such a thing as sexual addiction and (b) whether women as well as men are vulnerable. If the latter is the case, does this undermine any simple distinction in intensity of desires (‘sex drive’) between men and women? Is the expression ‘addiction’, which is usually framed in comparison to drug addiction, appropriate

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when it is applied to sex? It will be argued later that this notion with its drug-related connotations gives some valuable insights.

Moving towards the other end of the spectrum, there is the Scottish author and playwright J. M. Barrie, the creator of *Peter Pan*. One of the two boys who were closest to him observed (Chaney, 2005, p. 214):

Of all the men I have ever known, Barrie was the wittiest, and the best company. He was also the least interested in sex.

I don't believe that Uncle Jim ever experienced what one might call a stirring in the undergrowth for anyone – man, woman, or child.

If Walter is at one end of the spectrum and a lack of interest in sex in the middle, at the opposite pole from Walter is the experience of an aversion to sex. This might be in a general sense or specifically in the context of a particular relationship. It is exemplified in the account by the New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield, which is thought to be autobiographical:

She threw off her clothes, hastily, brushed out her long hair, and then suddenly looked at the wide, empty bed.

A feeling of intolerable disgust came over her.

By Lord Mandeville's pillow she saw a large bottle of eucalyptus and two clean handkerchiefs. From below in the hall she heard the sound of bolts being drawn – then the electric light switched off . . .

She sprang into bed, and suddenly, instinctively with a little childish gesture, she put one arm over her face, as though to hide something hideous and dreadful as her husband's heavy, ponderous footsteps sounded on the stairs. (Mansfield, 2012, p. 543)

Anonymous reports

Some use drug-related metaphors to express how their sexual desire feels:

I view sex as a fun experience and enjoy the thrill of meeting someone and seducing them. The feeling of having a conquest is exhilarating, like a high. (Predominantly heterosexual woman; Meston and Buss, 2009, p. 87)

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Falling in love is always a big letdown. It's like doing cocaine. You get high, but sooner or later you know that you're going to run out and you're going to come down. And it's the same with love: the rush ends after three or four months. (Saul, American fashion executive; Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 46)

Casanovas often view sex as a progression of thrills, each of which must somehow surpass the one before it. When talking with them, one often hears that they are seeking an 'ultimate sexual experience'. (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 56)

As exemplified by Saul and the insights of Peter Trachtenberg, regular sex can come to yield diminishing returns and then some people make attempts to compensate by increasing the intensity. The drug-related phenomenon of tolerance comes to mind here and later chapters will look at similarities. Walter's fantasy scenarios (just described) illustrate the same point. This quest can take the form of seeking variety and greater risk in order to attain an elusive super-high.

Conversely, some people feel no sexual desire at all but are quite happy with this and do not wish to change it (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 611):

Everyone in the asexual community wants to spread the message that it's [asexuality] not a disorder and it's not something that's a problem and needs to be fixed.

And from one asexual individual (Brotto et al., 2010, p. 611):

I've never had the interest and so, even if today you could say, 'Oh here . . . here's a pill that will fix you' . . . no, that's okay, thanks.

Fictional depictions of desire

Her skirts flew up as she fell to the ground, and she choked with laughter, saying she had not hurt herself; but as he felt her burning, sweating body against his face Jean clasped her firmly. The bitter female smell and the violent perfume of beaten hay in the open air intoxicated him and tensed all his muscles in passionate, angry desire. (Émile Zola, 1887/1975, p. 63)

Various sources of publicly available information, accurate or inaccurate, inform us on the triggers to sexual desire and how it appears to be manifest

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in behaviour. Great writers have portrayed desire, as in the fictional heroines Lady Chatterley and Emma Bovary. Film-makers have tried to capture the causes of desire and the settings in which it arises. Some individuals probably get much of their information from pornography, in which case they might absorb the erroneous impression that female desire is ever-ready, uninhibited, indiscriminate, and without complications, restraints or any requirement of reciprocity (Lederer, 1980).

A desire for pictorial sex

Casanova and Walter describe undiluted and uninhibited desire. However, we can make things even less complicated by considering desire for visual representations and what they reveal about real desire triggered by another human. Erotica and pornography permit understanding of how sexual desire works, since in some ways 'art' imitates the reality of what the consumer desires. Viewing it says something about sexual desire unrestrained by the problems of gaining access and the risk and prospect of rejection, failure and disease.

Pornography offers the prospect of heightened bodily arousal and of endless novelty and uncertainty:

Even though we were having sex nearly every day, I still needed my porn fix. Instead of buying magazines, I switched over to going to adult bookstores. They had these little booths with porn films, so I'd pop my quarters in there. No matter how much sex my wife and I had, I still needed the vicarious thrill and stimulation of watching porn to satisfy me. (Rob; Maltz and Maltz, 2010, p. 92)

Some people derive instantaneous soothing from pornography:

Porn gives me momentary relief from the pains of life. I don't care about the future. What matters is I have escaped for now. (Albert, a middle-aged American father of three; Maltz and Maltz, 2010, p. 62)

I turned my sexual attention more to the pornography and less to the relationship with my fiancée. I developed a pattern of masturbating to porn whenever I was feeling lonely, frustrated or bored. Our decision to hold off on sex, coupled with how easy it was to access Internet porn at my job, turned my porn use into an addiction. (Corey, an American computer analyst, aged 34; Maltz and Maltz, 2010, p. 56)

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As these quotations illustrate, the expression of sexual desire both in reality and in viewing pornography brings short-term positive mood changes and this would be expected to increase the target's future potential to attract the person. As with Corey, the virtual world of pornography can sometimes displace real sexual relationships. It becomes a 'supernormal' stimulus to sexual desire and triggers an escalation of intensity, a feature shared by some people's desires directed to real humans.

Watching Internet porn began as a natural thing but quickly turned into a compulsion. It became a craving, like a drug. It felt unnatural if I didn't look at porn in the evening.

When I get really stressed out and feel like a failure in life, it's like a little movie projector in my brain kicks on and starts showing the porn I've already seen to make me feel better. Then I get triggered to go buy and look at more porn. (Marie, an American widow, distracting herself from grief; Maltz and Maltz, 2010, pp. 92 and 200)

I was looking for the ideal woman, like the ones who exist in porn. Porn hadn't prepared me to be with a real woman. I wanted perfection or nothing.

I progressed from *Playboy* and soft-core magazines to the very edges of child pornography. And the progression was almost unnoticeable to me. It felt natural. I needed different and deeper stimulation. *Playboy* didn't satisfy me because it's too plain, too common. I wanted magazines that were barely legal. I also began using porn in combination with alcohol and other drugs to heighten the effect. (Hank; Maltz and Maltz, 2010, pp. 125–6)

These accounts reveal the phenomenon of escalation in an attempt to find perfection, a feature shared with sexual desire towards real humans. Note Hank's use of drugs to try to obtain the 'super-high'. The interaction of drugs and sex gives insight into how desire works, discussed later. We need to ask why only certain individuals are attracted to pornography and experience a need to escalate its intensity. Equally important to understand is the existence of many who view pornography but without its use becoming problematic in any way.

Linking the objective and subjective

How does sexual desire work and why does it not work in the same way for everyone? Comparing different people, from where does the enormous variety in desire's form and intensity arise?

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Personal reports in surveys that ask questions concerning what desire feels like and the conditions most likely to trigger it start to fill in the puzzle. Consider also posing the closely related questions – what does it feel like to experience sexual frustration? What is an orgasm like? Surely, the only source of evidence is to ask the person having such experiences.

However, valuable as they are, personal reports leave much unexplained, since many factors that contribute to desire lie outside conscious awareness. By simply investigating how sexual desire appears to the individual concerned, there is no way of identifying these additional factors. Consider the following phenomena that call for a very different source of insight:

- Why do some otherwise similar people differ so much in what excites them sexually?
- How do hormones, which are simply chemicals, help to excite a mental state, sexual desire? Why do they not invariably have this effect on everyone?
- Why do some people wish desperately to be fired sexually by a devoted partner but are puzzled that they simply can't get aroused?
- Why does desire for a given individual often fade over time and how do some hormones and psychoactive drugs boost a flagging desire?
- How can a woman show the objective signs of sexual arousal, measured at the genitals, but report no subjective feeling of desire or sexual arousal?
- How do sexual desire and the pleasure of sex sometimes become uncoupled?

The answers are not self-evident to the person feeling the sexual desire or wishing that they could feel it.

How can we understand the desire felt by others? Having no personal experience outside conventional bounds or even with a particular taste that violates these bounds, many people have great difficulty fathoming some of the 'less regular' or 'less acceptable' forms that other people's desire can take. For example:

- A devoted spouse who reports a good sex life cannot see why a partner would view pornography or commit adultery.