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

Frederick Toates

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HOW SEXUAL DESIRE WORKS

There are countless books on sex and an endless fascination with the subject. Varieties and vagaries of sexual desire have long been documented, but there has been little engagement with cutting-edge scientific research to uncover the biological and psychological bases of sexual desire. Here, Frederick Toates uses the insights of modern science to show how a wide range of desire-related phenomena – fantasy, novelty-seeking, sexual addiction, sex–drug interactions, fetishes, voyeurism, and sexual violence and killing – start to make sense. For example, the role of the brain’s neurochemical dopamine can now be much better understood in terms of wanting, and a distinction between wanting and liking has been established. Also, an understanding of the layered organization of the brain, sometimes described as hierarchical, can be used to explain temptation and conflict. This is a fascinating book with great social relevance to society and its problems with sexuality.

Frederick Toates is Emeritus Professor of Biological Psychology at The Open University and Vice-President of The Open University Psychology Society.

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THE ENIGMATIC URGE

Frederick Toates

The Open University

United Kingdom



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I dedicate this book to my wife, Olga.

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PREFACE

Sexual desire could at times appear to bring pleasure and misery in somewhat equal proportions. It is my firm conviction that a better understanding of it can help to tilt the weight away from misery, the present book being based upon the belief that knowledge is empowering. For example, rightly or wrongly, people sometimes think that their tastes are socially and morally unacceptable and better knowledge could prove valuable in seeing how the taste might have arisen and coming to terms with it. Similarly, couples frequently find that discord arises from divergent tastes or intensities of desire. Insights into how desire works might yield greater tolerance of differences and thereby harmony. To give a full account of the range of desires, Chapters 20–1 describe the nightmare world of sexual violence, for which, of course, there can be no degrees of tolerance. I believe that a greater insight into the causes of sexual violence could help to combat it. However, the reader seeking only insight into harmonious and consensual sex might wish to skip these two chapters.

I have a wide range of different readers in mind, such as neuroscientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, counsellors, teachers, social workers, police and probation officers, as well as the general public. I have tried very hard to write it in a style that is accessible to such a spectrum of different readers and I can only hope that I have succeeded. To respect such a spectrum, some information on, for example, details of brain processes is put in footnotes, which can be ignored without losing the story-line.

My attempt has been to give a balanced account using the most relevant sources that I can find. However, without doubt, a massive amount of

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highly relevant material has been omitted and I can only apologize to the multitude of authors whose work has not been included.

I would like to express my appreciation of the efforts of Barry Singer, who gave me the initial momentum in this area of research, and of Erick Janssen, whose invitation to speak in Amsterdam was the trigger for a revised model of sexual desire and thereby for the appearance of this book. I am very grateful to Kent Berridge and my wife, Olga Coschug-Toates, for reading and critically commenting upon the whole book. My gratitude is also owed to a number of people who scrutinized one or more chapters: Lesel Dawson, Ellen Laan, Karen Littleton, Jaak Panksepp, Julia Robertson, Mark Spiering, Sandie Taylor, Madeline Watson and Lance Workman, as well as the anonymous referees. For IT help and patience, I wish to thank Stanislav Coschug, Becky Efthimiou, Becky Loake and David Robinson. For their support throughout this project, I am very grateful to Chloé Harries, Hetty Marx, Carrie Parkinson, Sarah Payne and Becky Taylor of Cambridge University Press and to the Open University library staff and Giles Clark. Anna Oxbury made a superb and tireless job of editing the work and has vastly improved it. I wish to express my appreciation of her skill and patience.

If anyone has any comments on the book, I would be pleased to hear from you and will do my best to answer.