



12.3 How Are Our Sex Lives Shaped by Biology and Society?

SEXUALITY

We've already examined many aspects of men's and women's lives, but we've so far ignored one key area: sexuality. We often think of sex as an entirely natural, biological matter, not socially constructed at all. It seems biological because nonhuman animals as well as humans have sex, and the age at which we are interested in sex is affected by hormones. There is no question that sexual attractions and behavior are affected by biology, but, as we'll consider in this section, they are also strongly affected by social construction (Gagnon and Simon 1973).



In the "Long Neck" tribe in Northern Thailand, women are seen as more beautiful if they have long necks, and some take drastic measures to achieve this beauty. What drastic measures do American women take to alter their bodies?

For example, social norms regulate fine details about what appearances are seen as sexually appealing or disgusting. In China prior to 1920, many upper-class girls' feet were bound, a painful process that stunted their growth; men evidently found tiny feet sexually alluring (Mackie 1996). Today's notion that ultrathin women are the most beautiful would mystify people in many cultures, where such women would be seen as unhealthy and not sexy at all! In Mauritania, a country in West Africa where among some groups fatness is considered beauty, many young girls are force-fed to become fat enough to attract a mate (Waterlow 2013).

Societies also put many restrictions on sex. In some societies, homosexual behavior is illegal and punishable by prison time (Ottosson 2010), while, by contrast, the right to same-sex marriage is protected by law in some countries around in the world and in a growing number of U.S. states. Premarital sex and childbearing have been stigmatized in some historical periods, and still are today in some nations, but they are extremely common in other societies. In this section we will explore these and other social influences on sexuality.

Sexual Orientation

12.3.1: Discuss the relative influence of biology and society on sexual orientation.

The term sexual orientation refers to whether individuals are attracted to members of the other sex, the same sex, or both. Today we use the medical terms *heterosexual*, *homosexual* (although homosexual women are increasingly referred to as lesbians and men as gay—sometimes the term *gay* is also used to describe either men or women who have sex with members of their own sex), or *bisexual* to describe three dominant sexual orientations. But not everyone fits