

Invited plenary to ISSID 2019: Sexual behaviour as a natural laboratory for understanding individual differences.

Dr Vincent Egan (vincent.egan@nottingham.ac.uk)

Assoc. Prof. in Forensic Psychology Practice

Dept. Psychiatry and Applied Psychology

University of Nottingham

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## SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AS A NATURAL LABORATORY FOR UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

### Abstract

As bonding primates, human sexuality is fundamental to our existence and well-being as a species and for most individuals. Sexual behaviour can be highly diverse or relatively prosaic and structured, as are the antecedent and consequent pathways, and this implies individual differences are an influence on the affordances involved. Biological dynamics such as puberty and the move from mating to parenting effort are also highly pertinent to these processes. Key findings observed by Eysenck and Wilson – extroverts are sociosexual, those high in neuroticism have problems with their sexuality, and persons high in psychoticism (i.e., low in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, or high psychopathy / Machiavellianism) may have impersonal, loveless, or deviant sexual expression – remain axiomatic. Sexual offenders and risk takers have a foundation of such dispositions, but are also troubled by sexual preoccupation, use sex for mood management, and have disturbed courtship and attachment behaviours, all of which are reconviction and relapse risk indicators. Intelligence is also relevant to human sexuality. Some persons find arousal and desire can overwhelm their intelligence, as indicated by the risks and bad choices made by otherwise rational and prudent individuals. Research into sexual behaviour (however operationalised), personality, and intelligence (and the multiple theories, models, methods, and forms of analysis it requires) make the field useful for inculcating an interest in differential psychology and its applications in health, the criminal justice system, and understanding human happiness.

## SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AS A NATURAL LABORATORY FOR UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Sexual behaviour in a variety of forms, not always academic, has informed the findings and traditions of ISSID as the key vector for biopsychosocial individual differences psychology (Eysenck, 1976). Psychology is a complex subject, and aspect of individual difference technique are often perceived as technically demanding to students. The compelling topic and intuitively understood complexity of research into sexual topics provides a powerful gateway for students to acquire the professional skills and expertise needed in our field. This essay summarises a keynote address given to the 20<sup>th</sup> ISSID conference in Florence in July 2019. It addresses the following: how one might understand sex in the normal case, how individual difference approaches have contributed to the field, and findings from my specialist area: sexual offending.

### Sex in the normal range

To know what is abnormal or pathological, you need to know what is normal, as sexuality is a behaviour with a lot of variation, even if the basics are quickly acquired. Sexuality fundamental to most bonding primates, and enables the continuing survival of species, along with personal well-being, and the consolidation of relationships (Dixon, 2015). While sexuality is diverse, the acts involved are relatively prosaic and structured, as are the antecedent and consequent pathways that lead to the acts; there are only so many orifices and erogenous zones, and although these zones can be dressed in different ways, mostly, they are not (Messiah, Blin, & Fische, 1995). The variety of ways people express their sexuality, and the love maps they have, implies individual difference influences on the affordances involved (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). Some of these are biological or developmental in origin; prenatal hormones, hormones released at puberty, the hedonic urges that emerge due to the

maturation of the sexual organs and the social context emerging with independence, the shift from mating to parenting effort, and eventually, ageing (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002).

### The natural history of sex

The natural history of sex starts with the once shocking observation of Infantile sexuality; Freud spoke of “polymorphous perversity”, and to be a parent is to see these observations laid out in front of you in your own children. Infants and children naturally discover masturbation as self-soothing pleasant sensation, and this knowledge hopefully guides their comfort with sexuality as they grow older, also learning the important rule that there is a time and place for everything (Bancroft, 2003). With puberty comes changes in behaviour associated with sexuality, such as emerging modesty to nudity; sexual rivalry and anxiety (the downside of sociosexuality), and eventual adulthood (Fortenberry, 2013). In adulthood sexual desire has to be constrained, as uncontrolled, it may lead to relationship difficulties or even criminal offending. The courtship period might be seen as a time when sexual compatibility is tested, with persons who have similar libidos being more likely to form a successful relationship (Eysenck, 1974).

It is in adulthood that understanding one’s own pattern of arousal and masturbation to orgasm becomes significant therapeutically; if a person is having sexual difficulties but has no difficulty in feeling sexually excited or reaching orgasm alone, the difficulty is not in the underlying arousal mechanism or sexual response, and other factors may be in operation (Avery-Clark, Weiner, & Adams-Clark, 2019). Famously, Masters and Johnson used “sensate focus” as part of a successful sex therapy, finding that sometimes persons had to overcome socially acquired inhibitions against self-pleasuring. This illustrates another truth about human sexuality, that of learning/ social influences; man is a social and thinking creature and adapts to context. If the only sexual outlet is with a same-sex peer, for some

people, this will not prove such a difficulty (Hensley & Tewksbury, 2002). Some of these people will subsequently have equally satisfying relationships with members of the opposite sex. Also social is the need for social independence to engage in courtship; societies where young adults live at home until marriage often traditionally had “love hotels” where rooms could be rented by the hour or two, giving the privacy and anonymity a person may need (Lin, 2008). Other times, persons have to leave their small towns and villages to express their sexuality in a way that is natural for them, perhaps explaining why social migration can lead some cities to have higher populations of homosexuals than others (Aspinall, 2009). In a context where you can be yourself, playfulness and experimentation is more possible, and this is particularly for those with a personality that leads them to be less inhibited. Ageing then brings it’s own challenges, though sex remains a pleasure for many (Træen et al, 2017). It is no surprise that the expressed sexuality of older adults is affected in predictable ways by basic personality traits (Allen, & Desille, 2017).

#### Broad social patterns in western society

The warp and weft of sexuality is often claimed to lead to major social differences. Wellings et al (2006) conducted a sex survey of over 1 million persons, observing that there is no major trend toward earlier sexual experience; it is more that later marriage increases premarital sex. They also found that, globally, married people have more sex than unmarried people; that sexual activity in single people more common in industrialised than in developing countries; that prostitutes remain a common sexual outlet in developing nations where sexual freedom is more curtailed; and that (serial) monogamy is dominant in most of the world. In our current times it has been noted that “Millennials” have less sex, and this has been attributed to greater use of social media, which leads to more virtual lives, the ubiquity of pornography, and the separation of sex and courtship by electronic dating applications (Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2017). Millennials are also less able to afford to move out and

their parental homes are more permissive, so there is less desire to move out. It is claimed there is more of an acceptance of LGBT in the present day, but this is affected by where persons are based, and the religiosity of the local culture and community; as West becomes more secular, immigrant religiosity becomes more influential, and this may conflict with liberal values, although simply reflect the sexual conservatism of previous decades (and likely change with generations who also shift values) (Roberts, 2019).

### Personality traits and sexual behaviour

The London school approach to understanding sexual behaviour through the lens of personality trait theory has some solid findings. Eysenck (1972) observed that in the general population persons higher in Neuroticism were subject to more sexual distress and conflicts, persons higher in Extroversion engaged in more anxiety-free sociosexuality, and that persons with higher Psychoticism (i.e., lower in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, higher in Psychopathy / Machiavellianism) were more likely to report impersonal, loveless, or deviant sexual expression. Eysenck (1974) subsequently found that assortative mating for permissiveness contributes to marital satisfaction.

The main trait theory now used derives from the Five Factor Model of personality (FFM); an exemplary study using this model found that persons who were low in Agreeableness and Openness, and higher in Extroversion significantly related to multiple high risk sexual behaviours; at the facet level, high gregariousness, high excitement seeking, low openness to fantasy, low trust, and low straightforwardness were particularly relevant (Miller, Lynam, Zimmerman, Logan, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2004). Inevitably, the FFM is relevant to understanding many sexual problems, and a meta-analysis of 137 studies and over 420000 people found Neuroticism associated with sexual dissatisfaction, negative emotions about sex, and symptoms of sexual dysfunction; Extraversion positively related to sexual

activity and risky sexual behaviour and negatively related to symptoms of sexual dysfunction; Openness was positively related to homosexual orientation and liberal attitudes toward sex; Agreeableness and conscientiousness were negatively related to sexually aggressive behaviour and sexual infidelity. Age, gender, and study quality were important moderators of these effects (Allen & Walter, 2018). It should be noted that not all problematic sexual behaviour is a reflection of personality extremes; in the case of sexual coaxing and coercion, when mating effort (an index of effort put into the acquisition of mates) was examined in conjunction with personality and the dark triad, whilst there were simple associations with the more antagonistic and difficult traits at the bivariate level, in terms of regression, only mating effort predicted inappropriate pressure of ardour (Koscielska, Flowe, & Egan, 2020).

Glenn Wilson is another major London School researcher on sex and sexual fantasies. He has written 9 books on sex and personality, plus many scholarly articles and research papers. Some of his best known work includes a large study of sexual fantasies and behaviour in the readers of the once-notorious British tabloid newspaper, “The Sun” (Wilson, 1987) along with work on persons with sexual variations that may bring participants into involvement with the medical and criminal justice systems. Wilson and Gosselin (1980) surveyed sadomasochists and fetishists, sadomasochism being potentially criminal even when participants consent to being physically assaulted for their or another’s pleasure. This work was followed by a major study by Wilson and Cox (1983), who reviewed the members of the (then legal) “Paedophile Information Exchange”, and compared them to male non-paedophile controls. It was found that paedophiles were high in Psychoticism and Neuroticism, and low in Extroversion. They were clinically shy, sensitive, lonely, depressed, and humourless. This profile was reiterated when a cohort of imprisoned male child molesters were assessed with a FFM structures assessment, finding them again high in Neuroticism, and low in Extroversion

and Conscientiousness. (Dennison et al, 2001). A study using FFM instruments with paraphilic (fetishist) men found them higher in Neuroticism, and lower in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Fagen et al, 1991). A study of sexual offenders against children, comparing them to non-sexually offending mentally disordered offenders found them similarly high in Neuroticism, and low in Extroversion and Openness, but higher in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Egan et al, 2004).

Sensation Seeking (Zuckerman, 1979) is also germane to understanding sexual behaviour from an individual differences point of view. In a sample of almost 3000 young adults, there was a positive correlation between sensation seeking and lifetime number of sexual partners, the mean number of partners per sexually active year, the shortest time a partner was known before having sex, the percentage of previous relationships that were short-term, the number of partners desired in the next year, and the variety of sexual activities participants had experienced or would like to experience. Negatively correlated with sensation seeking was age at first intercourse (Donohew, Zimmerman, Cupp, Novak, Colon, & Abell, 2000). A more focussed sexual sensation seeking scale has been developed, which is associated with persons engaging in more risky sexual behaviour, unsafe sex, and acquiring HIV (Kalichman, Johnson, Adair, Rompa, Multhauf, & Kelly, 1994).

### Homosexuality

Homosexuality is a difference between people that can be likened to lefthandedness; a difference but an expression of variation in human development (Lalumière, Blanchard, & Zucker, 2000). It is likely to have some biological foundation (Rahman & Wilson, 2003). Though homosexuality was once a psychiatric diagnosis (and remained so for rather too long), this was because of the views of Freudians, who saw the behaviour as a 'perversion' from normality (Roughton, 2002). In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association voted 58%



to 42% to stop homosexuality being regarded as an illness, although the World Health Association retained it as a 'mental disorder' till 1992. In perpetuating this view, the psychiatrists involved – were basing themselves on theory rather than evidence, as homosexual behaviour and bonds are common in the animal kingdom, and not just as dominance activity (Bagemihl, 1999); a number of internalising disorders (depression, anxiety, para-suicide, addictions other than alcohol) are more common in sexual minorities (Semlyen, King, Varney et al, 2016); a test of whether these are inherent or a response to prejudice may be made by seeing whether the incidence reduces in these more tolerant times. Paradoxically, homosexuality seems heritable, although there do not seem to be consistent gene-loci for this (Ganna et al, 2019), and must be passed on by bisexual men. The specifics of this are unclear; it may be matrilineal, attributable to in-utero hormone exposure, the presence of older brothers, or hypothalamic development.

Sexual behaviour as a way to teach individual differences.

As noted, sexual behaviour is a ubiquitous phenomenon which is as significant if it is not engaged in, as if it is, and invites exploration in relation to other behaviours and models (learning, cognition, self-construction, language, development; Ellis & Abarbanel, 2013).

Means of assessment are also varied (scales, tasks, stimuli, confounds, the difficulty of assessing a behaviour that is not generally seen and largely dependent on informant ratings, e.g., Fisher, Davis, & Yarber, 2013). Populations are varied and sampling issues are critical (are you researching specialist cohorts and subsequent cohort effects, diversity of populations, the nature of appropriate controls). Data obtained in studies such as these may be complex, and most likely will have covarying constructs that need to be accommodated and understood in more complex models than those based on bivariate or factorial analyses (Byrne, 2016). This is where studying sexual behaviour is powerful; as it is an interesting topic, it captures the imagination of the student who can intuitively see how concurrent

constructs may need to be understood or accounted for, and in this way enables more complex analytic methods to be grasped; seeing how sadomasochistic behaviour could be defined using smallest space analysis focusses the mind considerably (Alison Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001). As one is conducting research on a sensitive topic, understanding issues to do with ethics is also important (how ask the question, gather information, respect privacy /dignity, anonymity and confidentiality; Abramson, 1977); again, as these issues are salient in everyone's life, the principles are more easily grasped. The very nature of conducting research and its process is also expedited; getting a sensitive topic through ethics requires a grasp of the issues and optics to a cautious and litigation-averse regulatory system and stake and service holders, so ensures tact. Lastly, the implications of the work are more obvious, and the researcher has to think actively to convey findings to stakeholders controlling the health, criminal justice system, and education systems from whom cohorts may have been recruited.

### Sex in the abnormal range

Researchers who adopt an individual differences model tend to see extremes of human behaviour as the poles of normal dimensions of disposition, rather than categorically different states. In many cases, this assumption is correct. Sexual offenders and sexual risk takers are subject to same forces as persons who do not offend or act in a risky way, but have more extreme dispositions that lead to the behaviour (e.g., Kingston, Malamuth, Fedoroff, & Marshall, 2009; Egan & Duff, 2018). One key construct in predicting sexual risk in offenders is excessive sexual preoccupation (Tully, Browne, & Craig, 2015). Another key marker for risk is the person who uses sex for mood management (Stinson, Becker, & Sales, 2008). Disturbed attachments and courtship behaviours, possibly caused by traumatic events in an individual's past also denote a variety of risks, not all sexual (many persons who commit domestic violence also have these difficulties) (Marshall, 2010). Another generic risk, not

exclusive to sexual offending and risk, are those persons with disinhibited and antagonistic externalising behaviours that follow internal distress; such persons are commonly part of the criminal justice system when they act-out their anger in public (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). There are persons with particular sexual fixations, and these were once regarded as an essentially conditioned response (McGuire, Carlisle, & Young, 1965). This view is now more modified to include evolutionary issues (Quinsey & Lalumière, 1995). Another area in which extremes interact with evolutionary issues is the age at which a person finds another sexually attractive; while pedophilia is well known, gerontophilia is also a concern, but if you are also youthful, or older, you may find persons in your age cohort sexually attractive, so appropriate chronophilia may indicate genuine and healthy sexual maturity (Seto, 2017). Finally, intelligence at the extremes may prove a complicating factor for individual lives; persons at the high end of the intelligence distribution may have difficulty finding partners so become isolated; and persons with lower intelligence are more at risk of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted or premature pregnancy, or sexual offending itself (noting that opportunity, sexual preoccupation, arousal, and desire can overwhelm intelligent choices in the highly educated and intelligent, as indicated by serious sexual offences committed by renown public figures) (Baines, Emerson, Robertson, & Hatton, 2018).

### On-line sexual activity

There are many sexual offences, but an emerging field is that of on-line sexual offences. These offences are driven by the Internet's triple A engine: availability, accessibility and (apparent) anonymity. The emergence of Web 2.0 in which user-generated content and social media determine the content of webpages has meant 'specialist' images are now easily produced and shared, and the nature of this content is a reflection of the imagination and the communities involved, whether virtuous or otherwise. On-line sexual activity groups can be grouped into recreational, sexually compulsive, and at-risk populations 20 years ago (Cooper,

Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999). This at-risk group divides into persons who are depressed, those who are stress reactive, and sexual fantasists are unable, for whatever reason, to carry out these fantasies in real life (Cooper, Galbreath & Becker, 2004). Persons can acquire huge collections of pornographic materials, which may be indicators of their obsessional natures. Henry, Mandeville-Norden, Hayes, and Egan (2010) assessed 633 British men convicted of downloading indecent pictures of children who were on Probation, and they were screened with the Sex Offers Assessment Package, impulsivity, and BIDR measures. The cohort had a mean age of 40 years (SD 12). Results were corrected for social desirability. Participants The men divided into 3 clusters; (statistically) 'normal', emotionally inadequate, and sexually deviant. The emotionally vulnerable were more impulsive. Offenders in the normal range were not impulsive, so evidently more considered in their actions. This research shows Internet offenders are heterogeneous, and need a variety of intervention approaches and assessments.

### Sexual obsessionality and preoccupation

My research and clinical work has focussed on what Freud called repetition-compulsion; the repeating of problematic actions over time (though the foundation of this is behavioural, rather than psychodynamic; Schlesinger, 2008). Observers of sex and pornography note the variety of possible expressions, but the number of organs and acts is actually very finite. Persons may seek countless sexual partners, or collect thousands of sexual images, but even here, ultimately there is more consistency than variety. Practitioners working overtime sometimes re-assess a client who they had assessed previously. Sexual offenders are not well-regarded in prison, and a conviction for such an offence is shaming, as is the awareness that you have committed such offences, even if not convicted. So why do people repeatedly commit sex offences / take sexual risks?

Many sexual behaviours show a compulsive/ addictive/ binge-indulgence pattern beyond the norm: e.g., womanising, homosexual ‘cruising’, and chronic masturbation. This is recognised by practitioners, and has led to many synonyms for hypersexuality (“sexual addiction”, sexual OCD, excessive sexual desire disorder, etc.; Kafka, 2003). Is some sexual offending a reflection of compulsivity (Egan, 2017)? A key predictor of sexual reoffending is sexual preoccupation, and assessment instruments which build this in are more effective (Tully, Browne, & Craig, 2015). Persons who become sexually preoccupied are often in a predatory state of arousal, and may be using sex to mood-manage. One argument for sexual preoccupation having an OCD type basis derives from Comings (1994), who studied persons with Tourette’s Syndrome (a tic disorder) along with family probands, finding persons with Tourettes and their probands have more DSM paraphilias, compared to controls. Features of OCD are more common in sexual offenders (Egan Kavanagh, & Blair, 2005), and it is because of this OCD that some sexual offenders find it harder to break problematic behaviours. The partial correlation between attitudes supporting sex with children and scores on the Maudsley Obsessive Compulsive Inventory were 0.34 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and this association was unchanged, even Neuroticism was controlled for, itself associated with OCD to a similar degree. The generality of this mechanism is suggested by a general obsessional model encompassing Internet, pornography and sexual addiction, which was predicted by younger age, low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, high Neuroticism, and compulsive checking (Egan & Parmar, 2013).

## Conclusions

The Eysenckian tradition helps us to understand normal and problematic expressions of human sexuality. The field is tractable for junior researchers and many of the basic phenomena are both diverse and in the general population. An interesting, “sexy” topic

enables one to facilitate more complex understanding and methods in students as the subject matter is inherently compelling.

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