



Sexuality and the Clashing of Cultures



© ephotocorp/Alamy

Eleventh-century carving on the Rajarani temple, known as the love temple, in Bhubaneswar, India.

From an evolutionary perspective, all humans seek sexual experiences. Let us begin with the culture of the U.S. college student (McAnulty, 2012). Over the past 100 years, relationships between college students in the United States have gone from “dating” to “hooking up.” In between were periods of openness and free love in the 1960s. By the 1970s, few colleges tried to “protect” women with required curfews, as most had done for decades. During the 1970s, coed dorms were set up in many colleges. A similarity of rules and other changes within the culture led to a greater sense of empowerment. Premarital sex for those who were age 20 increased from 48% in the 1950s to 65% in the 1960s to 70+% for the rest of the century (Finer, 2007).

Recent studies on college students suggest that 61% of young women and 70% of young men report having initiated sex within 6 months of a relationship. Although the popular press emphasizes “hooking up” among college

students—meeting up purely for sex—surveys indicate it is less frequent than suggested. Also, what begins as a hooking-up experience does not always lead to sexual intercourse. In addition, it is estimated that 24% of college students are virgins. In addition, for a variety of reasons, there is less research on the sexual activity of gay and lesbian individuals and their dating practices.

Both the implicit and explicit rules related to sexuality vary greatly from culture to culture. Some nonindustrialized cultures encourage adolescents to experiment with and engage in sex play, whereas others discourage any display of public affection. Among the industrial countries, Europe, Australia, and the United States report the greatest satisfaction with sexual experiences, and East Asian countries report the least (Laumann et al., 2006). There is also a strong association between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. This is reflected in the WHO report that a quarter of married couples in Japan had not had sex in the past year, whereas the Kinsey Institute reported a 5% to 10% rate for American couples, although the rate does go up after age 50. Likewise, in one survey, the average number of times a 16- to 45-year-old in Hong Kong had sex in a year was 57 compared with 138 times for an American and 141 for a French person (“Durex Global Sex Surveys,” 1996, 1998).

Although finding a mate and engaging in sexual behaviors are present in all cultures, the ease of migration throughout the world brings together a plethora of attitudes toward sexual relationships. This has resulted, for example, in Germany banning a custom of some of its immigrants: forced marriages. In 2006, the Netherlands introduced changes in its immigration laws. One change requires that those seeking to immigrate to the Netherlands watch a 108-minute film that includes nudity at a beach and same-sex couples kissing. The basic idea is that the person who seeks to move to the Netherlands should understand the types of acceptable sexual attitudes and activities in the country. Although all humans share a search for sexuality, it is the culture that shapes the process.

Thought Question: What are some of the methods different cultures use to shape sexuality among their people? Give some specific examples.