A Sexual Frustration Theory of Aggression, Violence, and Crime

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Abstract

Background: Sexual frustration is a common experience for many people; it is one of the biggest frustrations in some individuals' lives; and it has been cited as a cause of immoral behavior for centuries. However, it does not feature prominently in any leading criminological theories.

Methods: This review builds on findings from frustration-aggression, strain, self-control, and sexual selection theories—along with research on a wide range of sexual and non-sexual behaviors—to propose an overarching sexual frustration theory of aggression, violence, and crime.

Findings: Sexual frustration is not only a problem for those who are "involuntarily celibate"; it also affects many people who are sexually active. Frustration arising from unfulfilled desires to have sex, unavailable partners, and unsatisfying sexual activities appears to increase the risks of aggression, violence, and crime associated with relief-seeking, power-seeking, revenge-seeking, and displaced frustration.

Conclusion: Although sexual frustration does not provide a sufficient explanation for aggression, violence, or crime on its own, understanding its influence on behavior is important. Specific recommendations are offered to facilitate theory-testing and future research.

Keywords: sexual frustration, sex drives, aggression, violence, crime

Introduction

Although sexual frustration has been cited as a cause of immoral acts for centuries (Caluya, 2013; Kanin, 1967; Karras, 1998; Weeks, 1985), it does not feature prominently in any of the leading criminological theories of this era (Akers et al., 2020; Snipes et al., 2019). One reason might be that past perspectives on this subject have been so naïve. In Europe during the Middle Ages, it was widely believed that for men, sexual pressure "builds up and has to be released through a safety valve (marriage or prostitution), or eventually the dam will burst, and men will commit seduction, rape, adultery, and sodomy" (Karras, 1998, p. 6). Similar beliefs can be traced through the centuries and remain influential today (Caluya, 2013).

This perspective misrepresents how the male body functions, does not account for sexual frustration among women, implies sexual frustration inevitably grows as time passes since last having sex, ignores psychological and qualitative dimensions of sexual frustration, and fails to account for the option of masturbation. Additionally, because most crimes are committed by males, embracing the "dam-bursting" view of sexual frustration could be perceived as excusing males based on their biology or blaming females for failing to please

them. Either would be highly offensive.

However, the possibility that sexual frustration increases the risks of aggression, violence, and crime should be easy to accept. If purely psychological frustrations and strains have these effects—as is well established in the literature (Agnew, 1992; Berkowitz, 1989; Breuer & Ellson, 2017; Brezina, 2017; Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000)—similarly intense frustrations with a biological component may be even more impactful. For instance, someone could start with the same amount of frustration about wanting a material object and wanting lunch. However, only the latter is likely to prompt hunger pangs or stomach rumbling. When someone is described as "hangry" (i.e., hungry and angry), it is based on this interaction of biology and psychology. And sure enough, multiple studies have found associations between hunger and aggression (Gailliot et al., 2007; Gailliot, 2013; MacCormack & Lindquist, 2019). Similarly, sleep deprivation, which is another frustration with a biological element, has been shown to reduce self-control (Meldrum et al., 2015) and increase aggression (Kamphuis et al., 2012).

With sexual frustration, the corollary for hunger pangs may be sexual arousal.[1] Sexual arousal can involve many parts of the body, including the sensory organs (eyes, ears, mouth, nose, skin), the endocrine system (hormones), the genitals, and the brain. Merely seeing, smelling, hearing, or touching another person may alter hormone levels (Law, 2011; Miller & Maner, 2010). And this may occur even if the individual was not consciously thinking of sex, even if the physiological response was not desired, and even if the exposure occurred in a non-sexual context (e.g., a meeting at work or class at school). It seems obvious that sexual frustration can occur when people are fully or partially aroused, but it can also occur when they are not sexually aroused at all. In the latter cases, the frustration may be primarily psychological, but biological factors could still have an influence. Regular sexual activity appears to boost the immune system, improve sleep, reduce pain and stress, lower heart rates and blood pressure, and confer other health benefits (Robinson, 2013; Ueda et al., 2020). This suggests people who are not having sex are more likely to experience physiological strains that could affect their behavior. On the opposite end of the spectrum, sexual frustration that leads to compulsive or hypersexual behavior may also have negative effects on the brain and body (Voon et al., 2014), much like other addictive behaviors in which the brain's reward system is abused (Volkow et al., 2016).

In addition, because sexual frustration also involves people's emotional responses to not getting what they desire, it may have even larger effects on bad behavior than hunger and sleep deprivation. Whereas eating and sleep are essentially support functions that keep the body operating, sex is believed to have evolved as mammals' primary drive because it is required for reproduction (Dawkins, 1976; Rebellon et al., 2015). Furthermore, sleep is less contentious: it is essentially free; it is enjoyed equally by paupers and princes; it does not require investment, commitment, or a partner; and it recurs after regular, predictable intervals. And although competition for food can be quite violent in some contexts, most people in

[1] Hooven (2021) suggests that when a male rat and estrous female rat are put in a cage together with a barrier between them, this "appetitive" phase of sexual desire is "like being really hungry and then having someone put a plate of your favorite food in front of you, the smells wafting up your nose, with your hands tied behind your back" (p. 184).

developed countries can purchase food that tastes good, regardless of their social status, appearance, or likeability—and eat as often as they choose.[2] By contrast, legal sex is highly competitive. It cannot be purchased (with a few exceptions); it requires a consenting partner; it is more available to those deemed attractive or desirable; and it typically requires investment (e.g., dating) or commitment (e.g., a relationship).

Due to these differences, we might expect sexual frustration to have the most significant consequences. Accordingly, hunger and sleep deprivation are almost never cited as modern causes of crime. But there are clear examples in which sex offenders, serial killers, mass murderers, and terrorists have specifically cited sexual frustration as a reason for their actions (Blanchard, 1995; Bryden & Grier, 2011; Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; Kanin, 1985; Lankford, 2013; Masters, 1993; Stevens, 1995). It seems unlikely that sexual frustration only influences sex offending and extreme violence, but not more commonplace crimes that similarly involve anger, jealousy, risk-taking, low self-control, or lack of empathy for one's victims.[3]

This paper offers an overarching sexual frustration theory of aggression, violence, and crime. The rationale for developing it involves several considerations. First, whether one believes sex is a basic physiological need, as Maslow (1943) suggested—or merely something people want—sex drives are more primal and universal than many other motives. They exist across species, in every culture and era, and in nearly every human being, whereas many other goals are culturally defined. For some people, sexual frustration is arguably the biggest frustration in their lives, and for many others, it is a recurring tension (ADL, 2020; Blanchard, 1995; Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; Kanin, 1985; Kassel, 2020; Stevens, 1995).

Second sexual frustration, as a concept, is far more complex and multifaceted than is typically assumed. It is not only a problem for virgins or people who are involuntarily celibate. Almost everyone with sexual desires has experienced some type of sexual frustration, and many people experience it frequently. Readers might therefore benefit from a careful elucidation of this variable.

Third, sexual frustration may help answer what Snipes et al. (2019, p. 331) describe as "the single most important fact that criminology theories must be able to explain": why males commit more crimes than females. Of course, females also experience sexual frustration, and it may increase their risks of aggression and crime as well. However, males not only commit the vast majority of crimes, but they also tend to have much higher sex drives, according to data from more than 200,000 respondents across 53 countries (Lippa, 2009). Males probably experience more sexual frustration as well, as demonstrated by their greater interest in casual sex with strangers and higher rates of pornography use, prostitution use, and masturbation

[2] A 2010 report on the "Global Burden of Disease" found that over-eating has become a bigger problem than under-eating (Hamzelou, 2012)

[3] Many sex offenders, serial killers, mass murderers, and terrorists who admitted their sexual frustration committed less extreme crimes before the attacks that made them notorious, and it was not certain at that point that their behavior would escalate as it eventually did. As examples: Jeffrey Dahmer was arrested for indecent exposure, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest; the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter had a history of stalking women; the 2014 Isla Vista shooter assaulted a man whose date he envied, and the 2018 Parkland shooter threatened to kill his ex-girlfriend's new partner. This suggests sexual frustration may play a role in more common crimes, even if most people who commit them do not eventually engage in extreme violence.

(Hooven, 2021). This suggests a strong correlation between sexual frustration and crime that fits the empirical evidence on differences between males and females.

Fourth, it should be emphasized that sexual frustration may play an important causal role in a much wider range of behaviors than is commonly recognized. Sexual frustration does not only affect conduct related to sex: it can potentially affect many non-sexual decisions and actions as well. This does not mean it is the sole cause; people rarely engage in complex behaviors due to a single factor. However, without the influence of sexual frustration, a significant number of aggressive, violent, and criminal acts may not have occurred.

In the following sections, this paper will (1) build upon findings from frustration-aggression, strain, self-control, and sexual selection theories; (2) explain how sexual frustration can arise from unfulfilled desires to have sex, unavailable partners, and unsatisfying sexual activities; (3) present evidence that sexual frustration can lead to aggression and crime associated with relief-seeking, power-seeking, revenge-seeking, and displaced frustration; (4) offer recommendations for theory-testing and future research.

How Can a Sexual Frustration Theory Build Upon Prior Work?

An overarching sexual frustration theory must start somewhere, and theories on frustration-aggression, strain, self-control, and sexual selection provide a strong foundation to build upon. However, although these theories explain a wide range of behaviors, none explain the potential effects of sexual frustration on their own.

Frustration-aggression theories focus on how blocked goals, desires, or actions can produce frustrated feelings. The negative emotion of feeling frustrated can then lead to aggressive inclinations and behaviors (Berkowitz, 1989). This is clearly applicable to sexual frustration, which can also result from a blocked goal (e.g., the desire to have sex soon). Research on frustration-aggression links has shown the aggression can be directed towards a target perceived as responsible for the problem or towards other, random targets (Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000). With sexual frustration, this could include the person unwilling to have sex, others who interfered with sexual goals, or random targets struck by displaced aggression. Despite the clear relevance of frustration-aggression theory to sexual frustration, however, this theory has primarily been used to analyze psychological experiences, and may not fully account for the biological element of sexuality.

A broader array of negative experiences is covered by general strain theory. Strains are believed to come from: (1) the failure to achieve a positively valued goal, (2) the removal of positively valued stimuli, or (3) the presence of negatively valued stimuli (Agnew, 1992). Sexual frustration could involve all three types. For instance, it could be associated with failing to have sex (a blocked goal), being dumped by a former lover (the removal of positive stimuli), or being mocked for one's sexual failures (the presence of negative stimuli). As with frustration-aggression theory, general strain theory suggests negative experiences produce negative emotions, which then drive behavior (Agnew, 1992). Strain theory also focuses on psychology, however, and thus provides only a partial explanation of the subject at hand.

It is worth pausing here to consider how the biological aspect of sexual frustration adds a complicating factor that frustration-aggression and strain theories were not designed to explain. As one example, people often have sexual desires their mind wants to resist, but their

body wants to satisfy.[4] Stimuli can therefore be both positive and negative at the same time, which makes it difficult to apply frustration-aggression or strain theories in a traditional manner. For instance, if someone desperately wants to refrain from adultery, the presence of a tempting sexual partner who invites an affair may constitute both a positive stimulus (biologically) and a negative stimulus (psychologically). In these scenarios of mind-body conflict, the *achievement* of a goal (like successfully resisting temptation), rather than failure, may create sexual frustration. Conversely, if the person failed to refrain from sex, that might increase their psychological strains, but they would be less sexually frustrated—at least for a while.

Self-control theory provides some relevant insights, because it suggests individuals differ in ability to govern their behavior and resist temptation. Scholars believe people's baseline level of self-control is established during early childhood and stays relatively low or relatively high throughout their lifetime (Moffit et al., 2013). Those with the lowest levels of self-control are more prone to delinquency and crime, reckless driving, binge-eating, substance abuse, unplanned pregnancies, sexual promiscuity, and other life problems (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Goffredson, 2017).

It makes sense that people with low baseline levels of self-control are often sexually promiscuous, given their limited ability to manage their impulses. However, the relationship between self-control and frustration is multifaceted. In the short term, following one's urges and giving in to temptation may reduce frustration, but in the long term, not developing the ability to delay gratification seems to make things worse. Accordingly, people with low self-control may actually experience a lot of sexual frustration. Much like frequently yelling does not indicate a lack of anger, frequently having sex may not suggest a lack of sexual frustration, but rather the opposite (Seto, 2019). Although some people certainly become sexually frustrated because they rarely or never have sex, others may be sexually promiscuous *because* they have high levels of sexual frustration that they often seek to relieve (Bryden & Grier, 2011).

Along these lines, current understandings of sexual desire suggest it is powerfully influenced by how the brain interacts with the environment (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Both et al., 2007; Marieke et al., 2020; Seto, 2019). Some people have more powerful sex drives than others, but the strength of those drives are affected by both internal and external factors (Seto, 2019). And when people are exposed to exciting or arousing stimuli, that typically increases their sexual desire (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Both et al., 2007; Marieke et al., 2020). Therefore, if people with low baseline levels of self-control are more prone to be "peeping toms," to view pornography, to visit strip clubs, or to touch themselves sexually whenever they feel the urge—which would be consistent with their behavioral profile—they may also experience more sexual frustration, even if they are more promiscuous. If this paper's theory applies to people with low baseline levels of self-control, it would require that sexual frustration plays a causal role in some of their aggression, violence, and crime.

Regardless of people's baseline levels, however, temporary vacillations in self-control may be common for almost everyone (Baumeister, 2019). And much like hunger and sleep

[4] Of course, the mind is part of the body, but it can be helpful to use this language to illustrate the conflict between what people want consciously or psychologically, and what their bodies "want" based on their physiological responses to stimuli.

deprivation can reduce self-control and increase aggression (Gailliot et al., 2007; Gailliot, 2013; MacCormack & Lindquist, 2019; Meldrum et al., 2015), sexual frustration may do the same. As noted earlier, sexual arousal involves many biological aspects, including temporary changes in hormone levels, and this could have powerful behavioral effects, because hormone levels are associated with sex drives, aggression, dominance, jealousy, lack of empathy, callousness, and impulsivity (Hooven, 2021; Le et al., 2020; Mazur, 2009; Nave et al., 2017; Shirtcliff et al., 2009; Zheng & Kendrick, 2021). Although the interaction of biology and psychology and exact mechanisms are not fully understood, this suggests that when people are struggling with sexual frustration, they may be more likely to engage in aggressive confrontations, be possessive of current or former partners, use or manipulate those around them, disregard others' feelings, lose control of their temper, or engage in crimes of passion.

Finally, evolutionary psychology's sexual selection theory also seems relevant here. Scholars suggest that for thousands of years, the males of many species had to fiercely compete for mating opportunities, whereas females could often wait for a suitable partner (Raine, 2013; Walsh & Jorgensen, 2018; Wright & Boisvert, 2009). Because the most aggressive and violent males would defeat more peaceful males, they got to have sex, father offspring, and pass on their aggressive and violent genes to future generations. Proponents of this theory suggest that because this process was repeated for millennia, the male brain has essentially been hardwired with a propensity for power-seeking, risk-taking, aggression, and violence (Dawkins, 1976; Walsh & Jorgensen, 2018; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). If correct, this would imply that when men are sexually frustrated, they may be especially likely to engage in those behaviors.

However, it is less clear how sexual selection theory applies to women's sexual frustration. Even though there are big differences in how often males and females engage in crime (Snipes et al., 2019), some recent studies have found the gap in aggression is smaller than commonly assumed, and what differs most is how it is expressed (Björkqvist, 2018; Denson et al., 2018). Perhaps sexual frustration is also relatively common, powerful, and influential for females—even if it has traditionally received less attention.

Major Types of Sexual Frustration

In the simplest terms, sexual frustration can be understood as a psychological and/or biological response to having a sexual desire that is not satisfied. Sexually frustrating experiences can vary in intensity, frequency, and duration, and some are so fleeting that they barely warrant a second thought.

This paper suggests there are three major types of sexual frustration. People become sexually frustrated about (1) unfulfilled desires to have sex, (2) unavailable partners, and (3) unsatisfying sexual activities. This could also be understood as the inability to have sex when one wants, with whom one wants, how one wants. It is helpful to think about these types separately because they can exist independently. Someone can be satisfied in any two areas but frustrated in the third. These types can also interact or overlap. For instance, people whose only option is masturbation—and who consider that unsatisfying—may also be frustrated about unavailable partners. Additionally, people often make compromises to reduce one type of frustration at the cost of increasing another. For instance, they may settle for sex soon despite not having a desired partner, or settle for unsatisfying sex because they value their partner in

other ways. Priorities vary: some people care most about being able to have sex soon, others care most about having a desired partner, and others care most about the quality or type of sexual activities they can engage in.

Narrower conceptions often fail to account for the entire spectrum of sexual frustration. For instance, the aforementioned "dam-bursting" metaphor of sexual frustration is binary: all that matters is whether someone had sex and the "pressure" was drained, or not (Caluya, 2013). This implies that sexual frustration inevitably grows stronger as time passes between sexual encounters, and that the longer people go without sex, the more frustration they feel. If this were true, an adult virgin must experience more sexual frustration than a sex addict who frequents prostitutes, based solely on the math. As another example, research on sexual desire discrepancy has traditionally focused on whether someone was discontent with the frequency of sex in a relationship, without considering dissatisfaction about the quality of sex (Marieke et al., 2020). Issues related to quantity and quality can both cause frustration, of course. A third example is the assumption that masturbation solves sexual frustration. Again, that would only be true if sexual frustration was purely a biological problem. But because sexual frustration exists in the brain—not only in the genitals—it can occur before, during, or after sex—for a wide range of reasons.

Unfulfilled Desires to Have Sex

Sexual desires are rarely satisfied immediately, and that can produce frustration. Although it is obvious that waiting a long time without sex may be frustrating, even waiting briefly (minutes, hours) could produce intense emotions, depending on the person's level of arousal and the strength of their desire (Bryden & Grier, 2011). Frustration-aggression and strain theories suggest the more important the goal is to the individual, the greater the emotional and behavioral impact if it is not achieved (Agnew, 1992; Berkowitz, 1989; Breuer & Elson, 2017; Brezina, 2017), and in some moments, nothing feels more important than having sex.

The same is true of desires for food and sleep: they can arise suddenly, feel extremely powerful, and become a fixation. As Maslow (1943) wrote, "For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food, and he wants only food" (p. 374). People can become similarly single-minded about unfulfilled sexual desires. But while the hungry person can snack in public and the sleepy person may get a boost from caffeine or a power nap, the sexually frustrated individual has limited short term options.[5]

Frustration-aggression and strain theories also suggest higher risks of aggression, violence, and crime exist if the failure to achieve the goal feels unexpected, unjust, like someone else's fault, or harmful to one's self-efficacy; if the goal was almost achieved before the failure occurred; or if the failure is chronic (Agnew, 1992; Berkowitz, 1989; Breuer & Elson, 2017; Brezina, 2017; Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000). When applied to sexual frustration, this could include people who expect sex soon but do not get it; who believe sex was unfairly withheld by a date, partner, or spouse; who lament the disparity between sexually active

[5] On the other hand, sexual frustration may be more prone to temporarily dissipate due to distractions or fatigue.

"haves" and sexually inactive "have nots"; who consider it unfair that they cannot act on their urges; who blame a partner, acquaintance, or parent (in the case of teenagers) for blocking them from having sex; who feel their unmet desire is symptomatic of their failure to succeed in life; or who experience this type of frustration frequently. These examples could apply regardless of gender or sexual orientation. In fact, historically, society has put the greatest constraints on the sexual behavior of women and LGBTQ individuals (Brownmiller, 1975; Karras, 1998; Week, 1985), so they may have experienced far more sexual frustration than is commonly recognized.

For people with low baseline levels of self-control, unfulfilled desires to have sex may be the most difficult type of sexual frustration. These individuals are not accustomed to resisting their impulses, delaying gratification, or waiting for what they want. Having a powerful urge they cannot immediately satisfy may increase their risks of bad behavior. In addition, regardless of baseline levels, unfulfilled desires to have sex may temporarily deplete self-control for many people, as hunger and sleep deprivation have been shown to do (Gailliot, 2013; MacCormack & Lindquist, 2019; Meldrum et al., 2015).

It is difficult to know exactly how evolutionary psychology and sexual selection theory apply to sexual frustration, because nature's design is so complex. However, a few possibilities are worth discussing. For instance, once people have offspring, their genetic priorities expand to include parental investment (Dawkins, 1976; Walsh & Jorgensen, 2018). Therefore, we might expect this type of sexual frustration to be more aggravating for people in their reproductive primes who lack children than for similarly aged parents or older people.[6]

Sexual selection theory also suggests differences between male and female tendencies. From an evolutionary perspective, it may be important for males to experience intense sexual frustration about unfulfilled desires for sex, because otherwise, they would not engage in the high-risk competitions required for them to earn sexual opportunities. Males who do not mind prolonged periods of celibacy are less likely to father offspring, so their genes are less likely to be passed on (Dawkins, 1976; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). For females, the implications are less clear. Scholars believe that because of the time and effort required to carry a baby to term, females have evolved to be more discriminating about their partners, and to require more proof of commitment (via courting) before agreeing to sex (Dawkins, 1976; Walsh & Jorgensen, 2018). Therefore, females may tend to be better than males at waiting for sex. However, even if that is true, it still leaves open a wide range of possibilities. Females might typically differ from males in the intensity, frequency, or nature of their sexual frustration, or they might be better at coping with it.

Unavailable Partners

Even if people are satisfied with how often they have sex, they may be frustrated about who they can have sex with. Unavailable partners can include ex-lovers, friends, fellow

[6] There is some evidence that fathers who are less involved in parenting have higher testosterone levels than fathers who help raise their children, which may be associated with the less involved fathers' continued pursuit of new sexual opportunities (Hooven, 2021).

students, coworkers, celebrities, or random strangers glimpsed on social media, on dating apps, or in public. And they may be unavailable for a variety of reasons. For instance, there can be legal or cultural barriers (e.g., the age, marital status, or social class of either party) that prevent a sexual relationship, or the desired partner may simply be uninterested in having sex with the person who wants them.

Given the previously reviewed literature from frustration-aggression and strain theories (Agnew, 1992; Berkowitz, 1989; Breuer & Elson, 2017; Brezina, 2017; Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000), sexual frustration about unavailable partners should become more powerful as the individual assigns more importance to having sex with the lusted after person. Accordingly, full-fledged fantasies or prolonged obsessions should be far more problematic than a passing interest or mild crush. In addition, because exciting or arousing stimuli often increase sexual desire (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006; Both et al., 2007; Marieke et al., 2020), sexual frustration may be exacerbated by frequent exposure to the unavailable partner—whether that is in person, via remote communications (text messages, phone calls, video conferencing, etc.), or by "cyberstalking."

As noted earlier, frustrations and strains are also especially damaging if they feel unexpected, unjust, like someone else's fault, or harmful to one's self-efficacy (Agnew, 1992; Berkowitz, 1989; Breuer & Elson, 2017; Brezina, 2017; Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000). This suggests higher risks of aggression, violence, and crime may exist for people who believe a desired partner will be sexually available but are wrong; who are jealous or envious of another person who gets to have sex with their desired partner; who consider it unfair that a desired partner is unavailable or who blame that unavailability on someone else; or who feel they cannot have sex with a desired partner due to their low social status or poor appearance (which may be damaging to one's self-efficacy).

Given the behavioral tendencies of people with low baseline levels of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Goffredson, 2017), they seem more likely to settle for whichever sexual partners are available in the moment, rather than waiting for a desired individual. However, they may also find it difficult to control their impulses when interacting with or thinking about people who are sexually unavailable to them. By contrast, people with high baseline levels of self-control are more accustomed to delaying gratification and implementing long-term strategies to reach their goals (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Goffredson, 2017). If the net result of those efforts is failure, however, there may be significant emotional fallout. More broadly, as with other frustrations that have both psychological and biological components (Gailliot, 2013; MacCormack & Lindquist, 2019; Meldrum et al., 2015), sexual frustration over unavailable partners may temporarily deplete self-control for a wide range of people.

As noted earlier, applying evolutionary psychology and sexual selection theory to sexual frustration is complex. However, a clear difference between males and females is their contribution to reproduction (Dawkins, 1976). Males can sometimes get away with contributing only their sperm, so they are capable of impregnating multiple females over a short period. By contrast, females spend months in pregnancy, and they can only carry one partner's baby at a time.[7] As a result, it is riskier for females to have sex with low-quality partners (who may produce low-quality babies and provide no parenting support) than for males (who can

[7] Except in rare cases of heteropaternal superfecundation.

immediately move on to a higher-quality partner) (Dawkins, 1976; Nedelec & Beaver, 2012; Walsh & Jorgensen, 2018). This suggests that females' sexual frustration about unavailable partners may tend to be more focused on individuals they perceive as high-quality. Males' sexual frustration may tend to be less discriminating, and thus include a broader array of unavailable partners, even if they are considered low-quality or to have poor parenting potential.

In addition, because from an evolutionary perspective, casual sex with low-quality partners is risky for females (who could get pregnant with an unwanted baby) but potentially beneficial for males (who can father offspring without further investment), males may have a hardwired tendency to find casual sex more appealing. Based on her reading of the data, Hooven (2021) suggests "greater desire for sex without commitment among men is one of the largest of all psychological differences in humans" (p. 194). This implies that males may be more sexually frustrated about wanting sex with random strangers. And because random strangers are often encountered in public and on social media, males' sexual frustration about unavailable partners may be frequently exacerbated.

Unsatisfying Sexual Activities

Some sexual activities are frustrating because they are not pleasurable or do not satisfy the urge to orgasm. But sex can also satiate biological drives without being psychologically or emotionally satisfying. This frustration can relate to the type or quality of sexual activity. For instance, people can be frustrated that their only option at a certain time is masturbation; that they cannot have the type of sex (oral, anal, or vaginal) they want; that sex involves too little or too much foreplay; that they cannot have sex in certain positions; or that sex does not involve their preferred fetish, kink, or paraphilia. Dissatisfaction could also arise related to the duration, speed, sensations, and context of sex.

Given the aforementioned literature from frustration-aggression and strain theories (Agnew, 1992; Berkowitz, 1989; Breuer & Elson, 2017; Brezina, 2017; Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000), some forms of dissatisfaction may especially increase risks of aggression, violence, and crime. For instance, the more important a sexual activity is to the individual, the more frustrated that person may be about not getting to experience it. Because fantasies typically involve specific acts and images—not merely the abstract concept of "having sex"—more frequent or powerful fantasies may be associated with more intense frustration as well. Other examples of heightened frustration may include people who had sexual expectations (based on social norms, observed behaviors, or prior experiences) that were not met; who almost achieved orgasm but could not quite get there; who believed their partner was selfish or unwilling to accommodate reasonable requests; who were ashamed about their inability to please their partner (which could harm their self-efficacy); or who repeatedly experienced unsatisfying sex.

Because people with low baseline levels of self-control tend to follow their pleasure-seeking urges (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Goffredson, 2017), this type of sexual frustration may be the least common for them. As long as there are no problems with physical dysfunction, their sexual encounters may become uninhibited quests for satisfaction. However, they may also be more prone to violate the law in pursuit of their own pleasure, whether that involves

assuming a sexual partner has consented to all types of sex, or making coercive demands. People with higher levels of self-control may observe these legal lines more carefully, but be less likely to have their desires satisfied. As noted earlier, regardless of baseline levels, sexual frustration over unsatisfying sexual activities may temporarily deplete self-control and increase risks of bad behavior.

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, a few points seem clear. First, if any past humans had a strong preference for masturbation instead of sexual intercourse, their genes likely died out long ago.[8] Second, intercourse between partners must function properly for successful conception and reproduction. Therefore, both males and females may have a deep-seated tendency to be profoundly frustrated if they have sexual opportunities but fail to consummate due to interruption, impotence, fit, lack of lubrication, or other issues. If such failures are chronic, they pose an existential threat, so anyone who is unconcerned by them would be less likely to pass on their genes.

Because seeking sexual pleasure improves one's reproductive prospects (compared to not desiring it) (Dawkins, 1976; Walsh & Jorgensen, 2018), this tendency to be extremely frustrated about failed intercourse may also extend to dissatisfying sexual activities in general. In other words, if having a strong negative emotional response to thwarted reproductive sex has evolutionary advantages (compared to being unconcerned by it), a byproduct may be similar negative emotions whenever sexual pleasure is expected but not experienced. That would apply to the qualitative elements of sexual frustration, such as frustration when intercourse was "successfully" completed (in a reproductive sense) but disappointing for other reasons; frustration between LGBTQ partners; or frustration from not getting to experience desired fetishes or types of sex.

Consequences of Sexual Frustration: A Typology

It is proposed here that sexually frustrated individuals often (1) seek to relieve their frustration, (2) seek to increase their power, (3) seek revenge against targets they blame for their frustration, or (4) act out against targets with no connection to their frustration. More briefly, these categories are relief-seeking, power-seeking, revenge-seeking, and displaced frustration. These are not the only ways sexual frustration can increase risks of bad behavior, but they may be the most common ways. While these categories are conceptually distinct, some forms of aggression, violence, and crime appear in more than one, because the same act can involve different motives or multiple motives. These categories also include some positive behaviors, coping mechanisms, and acts that are neither illegal nor immoral.

Relief-Seeking

The most obvious consequence of sexual frustration is that it prompts relief-seeking. In their desires for relief, people sometimes act in ways they would otherwise avoid. Laboratory experiments have found that when they are experiencing unsatisfied sexual arousal, both men

[8] To this point, people with higher rates of masturbation report more dissatisfaction with their sex lives (Långström & Hanson, 2006).

and women express greater interest in risky sexual behavior (such as unprotected sex with a new partner) than under normal conditions (Skakoon-Sparling et al., 2016).[9] They also exhibit less self-control and less sexual self-restraint (Skakoon-Sparling & Cramer, 2016). Other research has found that under similar conditions, men express significantly more interest in engaging in kinky sexual behavior; in having sex with children or the elderly; and in being willing to use money, lies, alcohol, drugs, or coercion to get someone to have sex with them (Ariely & Lowenstein, 2006). Whether women have similar tendencies is unknown; a comparable study with female subjects could not be found.

Beyond the laboratory, desires for relief from sexual frustration may help explain a wide range of behaviors, such as why Congressmen have texted sexual pictures to strangers they met online or solicited sex in airport bathrooms; why a CNN legal analyst masturbated during a videoconferencing session for work; why so many male and female teachers have been caught sleeping with their students; why despite their religious beliefs, Islamic terrorists often consume pornography; why Osama bin Laden issued a special fatwa authorizing his fighters to masturbate, given their inability to find wives; and why the U.S. military has often arranged for its soldiers to visit places where prostitution is easily accessible. These examples help demonstrate the power of sexual frustration and the lengths some people will go to for relief.[10] [11]

Many forms of sex offending also have a relief-seeking component. This should be obvious: many crimes are instrumental in serving as the means to an end, and sex offending is no different. To this point, some victims of sex offenders have reported that their attackers were seeking sexual fulfillment (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Thornhill & Palmer, 2003). And more broadly, based on prior research, it appears that seeking sexual relief may play a partial, causal role in many acts of sexual harassment (Mainiero, 2020; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000), sexual coercion (Pinker, 2002; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1992; Waldner-Haugrud & Vaden Gratch, 1997), sexual assault (Pinker, 2002; Seto, 2019; Thornhill & Palmer, 2003), sexual burglary (Reale et al., 2021), rape by strangers (Bryden & Grier, 2011); date rape (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Kanin, 1967, 1985), spousal rape (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Pinker, 2002), prison rape (Thornhill & Thornhill, 1992), rape in the military (Henry et al., 2004; Lankford, 2012), pedophilia (Finkelhor, 1984; Lanning, 1992; Seto, 2019), and sexual serial killing (Blanchard, 1995). Kanin (1985) specifically found that despite being more sexually active than other men their age, college date rapists reported more sexual dissatisfaction, and some other sex offenders may be similar in this regard (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Seto, 2019). Furthermore, in some contexts where sex crimes are disproportionately high, such as prison and the military, there are reportedly high levels of sexual frustration (Thornhill & Thornhill, 1992; Lankford, 2012).

While it may be evident that sex offending is often influenced by desires to have sex, it is worth explaining how frustration about unavailable partners or unsatisfying sexual activities

[9] When researchers construct experimental conditions that produce sexual arousal, hunger, or sleep deprivation among subjects without giving them an opportunity to satisfy those desires, it may not feel frustrating for everyone, but subjects' average level of frustration is likely raised, compared to control groups.

[10] These examples are easy to find through online searches.

[11] Adultery is another relief-seeking behavior that can be motivated by sexual frustration. Despite being illegal in some U.S. states and many parts of the world—and despite the fact that it can result in extremely severe punishments, depending on one's era and context—adultery has been common in many, if not all, cultures.

may also increase the risks. Many of the aforementioned crimes can certainly be committed by people who have a partner, but have been lusting after someone else (Bryden & Grier, 2011). The danger is if they become fixated on an unavailable person or type of person, and then are willing to use violence to get what they want (Stevens, 1995). As another example, people whose paraphilias involve sadism, dominance, predation, or other dark fantasies may commit sexual assault, rape, pedophilia, or serial killing because "normal sex" is unsatisfying for them (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Blanchard, 1995; Finkelhor, 1984; Stevens, 1995). Even if these individuals seek power and control over their victims, the reason may be primarily sexual (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Seto, 2019). In some cases, it is possible to trace their frustration over time, from obsessive fantasies to non-violent relief-seeking to the desired crime itself (Lanning, 1992; Seto, 2019).

Power-Seeking

Another consequence of sexual frustration is power-seeking. As they grow up, many people struggle with unfulfilled desires to have sex, unavailable partners, or unsatisfying sexual activities. Even if their short-term priority is relief-seeking, they may also seek sexual power: the ability to have sex when they want, with whom they want, how they want. If they look around, they are likely to see others who have more of this power than them: peers, adults, celebrities, athletes, rock stars, royalty, gang members, or warlords—depending on the context. In every community, there are people with more sexual power than others.

The pursuit of sexual power is usually competitive (Dawkins, 1976; Raine, 2013; Wilson & Daly, 1985; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996), and without sexual frustration, there would be no reason to compete.[12] For comparison, where starvation is common, access to food becomes the subject of aggressive and violent power struggles; where starvation is rare, access to food is not fiercely contested. Unfortunately, it is difficult to imagine many human societies where sexual frustration is rare. Even in the few communities that promote hedonism or "free love," high-quality partners are not obtainable for everyone.[13]

Sexual power can be gained in a variety of ways, such as by improving one's social status or appearance, defeating competitors, or seizing it through force. Sometimes people experience sexual frustration, set a goal of improving their sexual power, and compete with that end in mind. It does not have to involve crime: they could become more ambitious or aggressive in their work; attempt to increase their wealth; or start a new diet or workout regimen.[14] In school, at work, and online, sexual frustration may drive bullying, which is one way to reduce others' status in front of potential sexual partners, while increasing your own. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that at least for males, competition for status and power is often driven by sex, even when people do not realize it (Dawkins, 1976; Kanazawa, 2009; Raine, 2013; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996).

Many crimes also seem to have a power-seeking element. For instance, acts of assault

[12] Competitions for sexual power usually involve males competing against males and females against females, because most people seek either male or female partners, but not both.

[13] According to Wilson and Daly (1998), "there is no evidence that there has ever been a human society anywhere on earth in which male sexual jealousy and attendant risk of violence were not conspicuous" (p. 292).

[14] Of course, not all efforts at self-improvement or self-actualization are driven by sexual frustration.

and homicide often involve males challenging other males in scenarios where one will gain status, and the other will lose it (Raine, 2013; Wilson & Daly, 1985). Even if the winner does not directly obtain more sexual opportunities, defeating competitors is generally associated with increased sexual power (Kanazawa, 2009; Wilson & Daly, 1985). From this perspective, many old-fashioned duels, bar fights, argument-induced homicides, and gang shootings may not be fundamentally different from male chimpanzees, lions, rams, or elephant seals clashing in their quests for dominance and sexual supremacy (Kanazawa, 2009; Raine, 2013; Wilson & Daly, 1985; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). Property crimes and white-collar crimes that bring perpetrators more financial power are likely to increase status and sexual opportunities as well (Kanazawa, 2009; Raine, 2013). And when people join gangs or other criminal groups, that can increase their number of sexual partners and the types of sex they get to have (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2017; Palmer & Tilley, 1995). It can also help them defeat competitors, raise their status, and acquire more wealth—all of which typically increases sexual power as well (Palmer & Tilley, 1995). If the proposed theory is applicable here, it does not mean that all instances of the aforementioned crimes are influenced by sexual frustration, just that experiences of sexual frustration increase the likelihood that people engage in these behaviors.

Some sex crimes may also be committed by people who experience sexual frustration and then seek increased sexual power. For instance, this may explain why for thousands of years, military leaders recruited men to battle with promises that they could rape conquered women and take them as "wives, concubines, slave labor or battle-camp trophy" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 25). If not for sexual frustration, why would this be an effective offer that encouraged men to risk their lives? As another example, thousands of boys have been sexually abused while in the Boy Scouts. It seems likely that their abusers made calculated decisions, influenced by sexual frustration, to become scout leaders with power over young people, so they could then commit these crimes.

In some cases, intimate partner violence may also be committed by sexually frustrated perpetrators who believe that by assaulting their partners, they will gain increased sexual power and control over their partner, ensure their partner's sexual compliance, and prevent infidelity (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Buss & Duntley, 2011; McOrmond-Plummer et al., 2016; Wilson & Daly, 1998). By not letting their partners leave, they might also be attempting to avoid the heighted sexual frustration that could result (McOrmond-Plummer et al., 2016). More broadly, in various scenarios, rapists, pedophiles, serial killers, and other sex offenders have acquired weapons, drugs, or money to facilitate their crimes, or attacked in environments where resistance or escape appeared futile, because that gave them more power (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Finkelhor, 1984; Masters, 1993; McOrmond-Plummer et al., 2016). The more power they had, the better they could satisfy whatever type of sexual frustration was on their mind (Stevens, 1995).

Revenge-Seeking

Sexual frustration can also drive people to seek revenge against whomever they blame for their suffering. Among males, sexual frustration is associated with significantly higher hostility towards females (Konutgan, 2020; Stickel, 2020), and it may be an important cause of misogyny. Sexual themes are extremely common in misogynistic discourse (Konutgan, 2020;

Stickel, 2020; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), viewing women as sexual objects appears to increase misogynistic attitudes (Rollero, 2013), and levels of misogyny are higher among heterosexual men (who seek sex with women) than among gay men (who do not) (Cowie et al., 2019). Notably, misogyny is associated with increased rates of crime against women (Blake et al., 2021). Men's sexual frustration can also increase hostility towards other men (Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020). In addition, women also experience revenge-seeking fantasies when they feel unfairly treated (Goldner et al., 2019), although less is known about how sexual frustration shapes their behavior.

Prior research suggests that many forms of aggression and crime have been motivated by revenge-seeking against specific targets that perpetrators were frustrated with sexually, or frustrated about being unable to have sex with. These behaviors include passive-aggression (Beechay, 2019), verbal abuse (Beechay, 2019; McOrmond-Plummer et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 1999), vandalism and property damage (Mullen et al., 1999), stalking (Duntley & Buss, 2012), revenge porn (Beechay, 2019; Citron & Franks, 2014), physical abuse (Beechay, 2019; McOrmond-Plummer et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1998), and murder (Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; McOrmond-Plummer et al., 2016; Shackelford et al., 2003). In addition, many types of aggression and violence have been directed at competitors: the people who perpetrators blamed for dating or having sex with their desired partner (Buss & Duntley, 2011; Wilson & Daly, 1985, 1998). Sex offending can also have a revenge-seeking element in which perpetrators want their victims to suffer (Brownmiller, 1975; Bryden & Grier, 2011; Seto, 2019; Stevens, 1995).

When revenge-seeking involves perpetrators targeting symbolic victims, it often occurs in public or involves strangers. For instance, the classic case of a construction worker catcalling an attractive passerby may constitute sexually frustrated revenge-seeking. It is unlikely he believes shouting at her will lead to sex; more likely, he is frustrated because he knows she is unobtainable for him, and he wants to hurt her for that. Similarly, when public mobs have sexually assaulted women in Egypt by grabbing their genitals or stripping their clothes and calling them "whores" (Eltahawy, 2013), the perpetrators may have been seeking revenge for their own experiences of sexual frustration.

Mass murder is sometimes committed by sexually frustrated, revenge-seeking individuals as well. For instance, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter had stalked female classmates who would not date him, and the first line of his manifesto complains about "the happiness I could have had mingling among you hedonists" (Langman, 2014, p. 1). The 2009 LA Fitness shooter lamented that he had not had sex in nearly twenty years and that it felt like "30 million women rejected me," and he ultimately killed women in an aerobics class (Lankford, 2013, p. 114). The 2014 Isla Vista shooter had attempted non-lethal attacks on young women and men, and then posted online that "I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it," before killing his roommates and attacking a sorority house (Cottee, 2021, p. 106). And a 2018 Canadian mass killer posted online, "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!" in a reference to war against sexually popular men and women (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 570). These are some of the most obvious examples of revenge-seeking by sexually frustrated perpetrators because they openly admitted

it.[15] Many people with similar motives may be less forthcoming, especially if they feel ashamed about their sexual failures.

Displaced Frustration

In addition to the direct effects of sexual frustration, there can also be side effects. For instance, one laboratory experiment found that when men and women experience unsatisfied sexual arousal, they make more aggressive decisions to "hit" while playing Blackjack card games (Skakoon-Sparling et al., 2016).[16] Another study found that under similar conditions, men and women express more interest in drinking alcohol (Spelman & Simons, 2018). These tendencies are probably related to their reduced self-control, which as noted earlier, generally increases risks of aggression and crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Goffredson, 2017).

When these side effects involve people acting out against targets with no direct connection to their problems, that can be understood as displaced frustration. This is related to the concept of displaced aggression (Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000), but broader in scope. For example, imagine an employee who was turned down for sex, lusting after an unavailable ex-girlfriend, or impotent in a sexual encounter the previous night. The next morning, he might be more prone to verbally attack a colleague's presentation, lie to a customer, or bill his employer for hours he did not actually work. Only the first of these would technically constitute aggression. None, however, would be instrumental attempts to solve his sexual frustration, and none would have occurred because he blamed people at work for his sexual problems. When people exhibit displaced frustration, they may not be fully aware of the reasons behind their behavior (Marcus-Newhall et. al., 2000).

Although the displaced effects of sexual frustration have rarely been studied, some cautious speculation is warranted. Given the previously reviewed evidence that sexual frustration temporarily reduces self-control (Ariely & Lowenstein, 2006; Skakoon-Sparling & Cramer, 2016; Skakoon-Sparling et al., 2016; Spelman & Simons, 2018), it seems likely that behaviors involving poor self-control, loss of temper, or impulsivity would be affected. For instance, sexual frustration might increase the risks that people yell at their children or pets, commit vandalism or theft, engage in "road rage," use illegal substances, pick verbal or physical fights, or even perpetrate lethal crimes of passion. None of these acts would be caused by sexual frustration alone, but it could be an important contributing factor.

Displaced frustration might even affect premeditated crimes. If sexual frustration is chronic, it could produce negative emotions that grow alongside criminal plans, and fester until they are released. For instance, some scholars suggest that Islamic terrorism is driven, at least in part, by sexual frustration (Caluya, 2013; Cottee, 2018). As one terrorism scholar summarized rather glibly, "Can't get married, can't have sex, so they blow things up" (Cottee, 2018). This might apply to some Western terrorists as well. For example, during his bombing spree, the Unabomber wrote "I am tormented by bitter regret at never having had the opportunity to

[15] Many other mass shooters appear to have struggled with sexual frustration as well, but in some cases, their behavior may be more accurately categorized as power-seeking or displaced frustration.

[16] This seems more like aggression than merely risk-taking, because there was not a reported increase in standing or staying in Blackjack when having low cards (which would also be risky).

experience the love of a woman" (Graysmith, 1997). Although the Unabomber never cited this as a reason for his attacks, if it were displaced frustration, he may not have been fully conscious of its effects on his behavior. It is also worth noting that some terrorist rehabilitation programs strategically attempt to find wives for former terrorists, because they believe that will reduce the likelihood of future violence (Lankford & Gillespie, 2011). Being married may not eliminate sexual frustration, but for individuals who struggled to find a partner, it is likely beneficial.

Recommendations for Theory Testing and Future Research

Although this paper has offered a sexual frustration theory of aggression, violence, and crime and provided evidence for its basic tenets, there are still many ways this subject could be better understood, and many important questions yet to be answered. Below, several recommendations are offered to facilitate theory-testing and future research.

One way to study the effects of sexual frustration is by observing non-human animals. For instance, it should be easy to conduct experiments in which animals are put in situations where they will experience sexual frustration, and then the effects are measured. Although prior studies with this focus could not be found, there are some relevant findings. For instance, if male fruit flies are exposed to female sex pheromones but are not allowed to mate, they become more susceptible to starvation and stress and have shorter life spans (Gendron et al., 2014).[17] When male dogs smell a female in heat they cannot access, they may be more likely to run away from home and less responsive to rewards or punishments (Mertens, 2006). And for most of the year, male deer have low testosterone, but when mating season approaches, their testosterone skyrockets, along with their interest in sex and likelihood of aggression and violence (Hooven, 2021). Because the strongest stags control "harems" of female deer, other males are denied the opportunity for sex. As a result, the sexually frustrated males have two options for success: either they attempt to sneak in and have sex when the powerful stag is distracted, or they directly challenge the stag in an aggressive confrontation (Hooven, 2021). Perhaps sexually frustrated humans adopt similar strategies involving plotting or confrontation, depending on their physical strength and the context. Future research on animal behavior may yield additional insights on this matter.

In addition, research on humans would benefit from the development of more comprehensive and accurate measures of sexual frustration itself. As with early research on frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939), scholars might prefer quantitative measures based solely on the presence or absence of key events. However, sexual frustration cannot be fully captured by calculating people's frequency of sex acts; frequency of orgasms; number of available or unavailable partners; types of sex experienced; or time elapsed since last sex act. These variables would not account for the qualitative side of sexual frustration or the range of people's sex drives and priorities. For instance, some people who choose to be abstinent may be less frustrated than those who have sex often.

A better approach might involve asking people to report their own feelings of sexual frustration. There are multiple ways this information could be collected. For instance,

[17] Perhaps relatedly, some research suggests sexual frustration may be associated with increased suicidal tendencies (Daly & Reed, 2021).

researchers who study sexual desire discrepancy in relationships ask each partner how often they would like to have sex versus how often they actually have it (Marieke et al., 2020). If questions were added about sexual frustration related to unavailable partners and unsatisfying sexual activities, this might provide a good measure for couples and singles alike. Another approach could be modeled off research in which people were asked to spend a week tallying every time they thought about a specific subject (Fisher et al., 2012). In one study using this method, both men and women averaged more thoughts about sex than food or sleep, but there was a wide range across individuals, from merely one sexual thought per day to more than 300 (Fisher et al., 2012). If this approach were expanded, subjects could be asked to tally every time they experience sexual frustration, and to mark the specific type of sexual frustration and intensity of their feeling in that moment. These reports could be supplemented with information on each participant's sexual behavior (including masturbation). An important caveat, however, is that self-reports are not always reliable, and self-reports on sensitive issues may be especially prone to distortion.[18]

With better data, researchers could more comprehensively test whether people who experience more sexual frustration are more often engaged in aggression, violence, or crime. Even if new studies could only establish correlation, not causation, that would still be an important contribution. For instance, there are reasons to expect strong associations between being unmarried, sexually frustrated, and a perpetrator of crime. Although married people can certainly experience sexual frustration, unmarried people are far more likely to have had no sex in the past year (Ueda et al., 2020). In addition, one of the most common reasons why sexually active males do not get married is because they want sex with new partners (Smith, 2013). As a result, the unmarried group includes the vast majority of virgins, people who are involuntarily celibate, *and* people who are sexually compulsive or hypersexual, while few people meeting any of these descriptions are married. If unmarried people show higher levels of sexual frustration, that supports this paper's theory, because they are also more likely to commit crimes in general (Sampson et al., 2006), to commit murder (Lankford et al., 2021), and to commit public mass shootings (Lankford et al., 2021). Being unmarried is also associated with higher rates of criminal recidivism (Kendler et al., 2017), and sexual frustration could be part of the explanation. In future research, the amount of sexual frustration among married and unmarried people, and its relationship with crime, could be verified using some of the improved measures recommended above.

A wide range of other studies establishing correlations would be valuable as well. For instance, as noted earlier, some sex offenders report more sexual dissatisfaction than other men their age (Bryden & Grier, 2011; Kanin, 1985; Seto, 2019). If the proposed theory is correct, people who engage in other forms of aggression and crime—like those reviewed in the relief-seeking, power-seeking, revenge-seeking, and displaced frustration sections of this paper—would also have experienced more sexual frustration, on average, than their better-behaved counterparts.[19]

[18] Also, an individual's sexual frustration is not static, so attempts to measure it should account for its potential to change. The amount of sexual frustration felt before committing a crime might differ from the amount felt afterwards (or in a different context, such as prison).

[19] Of course, accurate tests require sufficient use of control variables.

Testing for causation may be more difficult, but it is certainly possible. For instance, in the previously reviewed experiments (Ariely & Lowenstein, 2006; Skakoon-Sparling & Cramer, 2016; Skakoon-Sparling et al., 2016; Spelman & Simons, 2018), researchers got subjects to experience unsatisfied sexual arousal, and then tested for effects on their subsequent attitudes and behavior, compared to controls. This could be expanded to experiments that involve different types and levels of sexual frustration, along with different behavioral outcomes. Another approach would be to look for natural experiments in which sexual frustration suddenly increased or decreased, and then examine concurrent (or appropriately lagged) changes in crime rates. For instance, when people experience military deployment, prison incarceration, or pandemic-based quarantine, that might consistently produce more sexual frustration. But this hypothesis would need to be tested. If the decrease in sexual opportunities is offset by a change in priorities or reduction in sexual expectations, it might not create as much sexual frustration as assumed. Other options for research include (1) multi-stage investigations that explore the effects of sexual frustration on misogyny and of misogyny on crimes against women; (2) longitudinal studies that trace sexual frustration and crime among cohorts; (3) neurological scans that identify the effects of sexual frustration on areas of the brain that control behavior; and (4) retrospective biographical studies that examine whether periods of intense sexual frustration closely preceded people's acts of aggression or crime.

Conclusion

This paper began by noting that although sexual frustration has been cited as a cause of immoral behavior for centuries, it does not feature prominently in any leading criminological theories. That omission is understandable, given past misconceptions and biases. But it is also worth reconsidering. Perhaps our ancestors were right about some of their observations, just wrong about the details and mechanisms involved. If this paper's thesis is correct, it is not merely applicable to modern criminological challenges, but also explains a basic causal relationship between frustrated sexual desires and negative behaviors that has existed for thousands of years.

To briefly review, there are many reasons why a sexual frustration theory may add to modern understandings of aggression, violence, and crime. First, it is already well-established that purely psychological frustrations can increase the likelihood of aggression, so frustrations with a biological component may produce even more significant effects. Second, other biological frustrations, such as hunger and sleep deprivation, have been found to reduce self-control and increase aggression. Third, sexual arousal creates temporary changes in hormone levels that could have powerful behavioral effects, because hormone levels are associated with sex drives, aggression, dominance, jealousy, lack of empathy, callousness, and impulsivity. Fourth, sexual desires are one of humans' most primal and powerful drives, with deep connections to our other behavioral tendencies. Fifth, sexual frustration is not only a problem for virgins or those who are involuntarily celibate; it also affects many people who are sexually active. Sixth, some people consider sexual frustration one of their biggest or most recurrent frustrations in life, so its effects might be substantial. Seventh, sexual frustration may play an important causal role in a much wider range of sexual and non-sexual behaviors than is commonly recognized. Eighth, sexual frustration may be an important cause of misogyny, which

motivates aggression and violence against women. Ninth, sexual frustration may help answer one of the biggest questions in criminology: why do males commit more crimes than females? And tenth, some criminals have specifically cited sexual frustration as a reason for their actions.

None of this means that sexual frustration provides a sufficient explanation on its own. Most complex behaviors are influenced by multiple factors, and there are undoubtedly many instances of aggression and crime in which sexual frustration played no role. Without accounting for the influence of sexual frustration at all, however, we might be missing something important.

And yet, so much remains unknown and so much more can still be discovered. Hopefully, this paper has provided a glimpse of the opportunities for original research in this area. In addition, scholars could test (and extend or improve) this paper's applications of frustration-aggression, strain, self-control, and sexual selection theories. These theories may be tremendously valuable in explaining which frustrating experiences are most likely to provoke strong emotional responses, and why some sexually frustrated people are more likely than others to engage in aggression, violence, or crime. It would also be interesting to learn more about which types of sexual frustration are connected to different types of crime. For instance, it may be that unfulfilled desires for sex are the most common type for mass shooters, while pedophiles struggle most with wanting unavailable partners, and serial killers are most aggravated by unsatisfying sexual activities. But these possibilities (and many more) would benefit from rigorous examination.

There are also important unanswered questions about future trends in sexual frustration and potential strategies for mitigation. For instance, if American culture is becoming increasingly sexualized, will that lead to more frustration or less? Is it possible for societies to become more sexually frustrated but less aggressive and violent, due to parallel progress in other civilizing forces? What effects do online pornography, masturbation, prostitution, and conjugal visits have on short-term and long-term sexual frustration? Do various forms of relief-seeking provide emotional catharsis or ultimately make things worse? And to what degree can non-sexual activities that stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain—such as exercising, gambling, watching movies, playing video games, and eating delicious food—provide a satisfying substitute for sex? Are they only temporary distractions, or do they provide more permanent benefits?

Even if sexual frustration is an endemic part of the human experience, its effects may be malleable. Perhaps more can be done to channel it into creative behaviors, rather than destructive ones. But it is only through improved scientific understandings—on the shoulders of highly motivated researchers—that future progress is likely.

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