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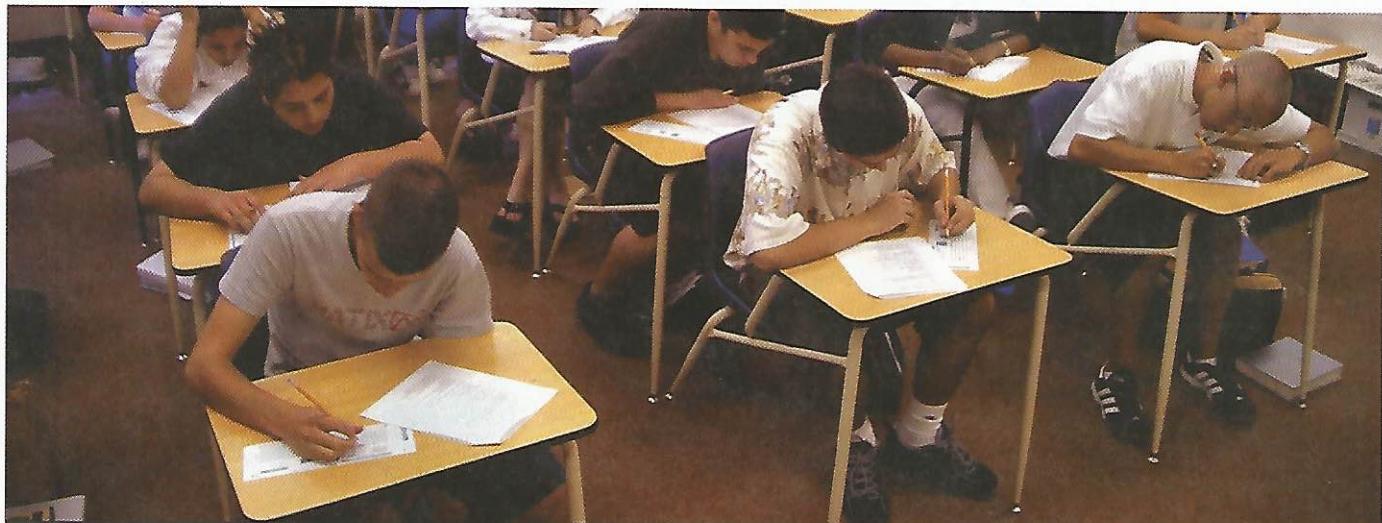
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The Big Questions

From the early writings of the founding sociologists over a century ago until about 1970, not many sociologists studied gender or sexuality. These topics were seen as more in the realm of nature than society. But since about 1970, sociologists have used their methods and approaches to study these topics. In this chapter, we will examine how sociologists answer the following big questions about gender and sexuality:

- 1. Where do gender differences come from?** In this section we will explore gender differences and examine their origins, with a focus on what sociologists have shown.
- 2. How have the lives of women and men changed in the last 50 years?** Women's lives have changed so much in the last 50 years that we often call the changes a gender revolution. Here we explore some of these changes as well as how they have affected men's lives.
- 3. How are our sex lives shaped by biology and society?** There is no question that sexual attraction and behavior are affected by biology, but, as we will see in this section, they are also strongly affected by social construction.
- 4. How has sexual behavior changed in the last 50 years?** Sexual behavior of young unmarried adults has changed substantially over the last several decades, but what about the extent to which sexual and relational behavior is affected by gender norms and inequalities? In this section we will explore sexual behavior as well as gender differences in the sexual realm.



12.1 Where Do Gender Differences Come From?

GENDER DIFFERENCES

All around us we see differences between the way men and women (or boys and girls) dress, the activities they engage in, and what they say they want. More boys than girls play certain sports, more girls than boys play with dolls, many college majors and occupations contain either mostly men or mostly women, and more women than men are stay-at-home parents.

But sometimes we exaggerate the size of these differences. Take, for example, the common belief that males score higher than females on standardized math tests. One way to quantify this is by computing the difference between the average (also called the *mean*) male and female

score. In 2012 data on the mathematics part of the SAT Reasoning Test that many students take to apply to college, men's average score, on a scale from 200 to 800, was 532, and women's was 499, with a difference of 33. (The SAT is very similar to the ACT; many readers of this book have taken one or the other.) Another way sociologists examine the gender difference is to plot the whole distribution of scores for each sex, showing the percentages for men and women at each score. Figure 12.1 shows both the male and female means and the whole male and female distributions for the 2012 Math SAT test. Each of the two curves has a large bulge in the middle, which tells you that more people score in the middle of the distribution than at either extreme. The male mean (at the center of the male



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