CHAPTER 5: A SYNTHESIS: THE DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTION OF SEXUAL ATTRACTIONS

Even a superficial look at other societies and some groups in our own society should be enough to convince us that a very large number of human beings—probably a majority—are bisexual in their potential capacity for love. Whether they will become exclusively hetero or exclusively homo for all their lives and in all circumstances or whether they will be able to enter into sexual and love relationships with members of both sexes is, in fact, a consequence of the way they have been brought up, of the particular beliefs and prejudices of the society they live in and, to some extent, of their own life history. — Margaret Mead

There is nothing so practical as a good theory. — Kurt Lewin, Principles of Topological Psychology

From the preceding chapters it should be evident that single-factor models of human sexual orientation do not adequately account for persistent variability in sexual attraction. Many single-factor models such as the androgen under- and overexposure theories are overly simplistic and conceptually flawed. Furthermore, most of these models address only same-sex male attraction. Although multi-dimensional models of general sexual attraction are clearly necessary, interactionist models that are in current use often just extend or combine single-factor models, retaining the same conceptual flaws. In addition, most interactionist models describe only proximate causes of sexual attraction and say nothing about ultimate causation. However, a good practical theory of human sexual attraction should account for the origin and persistence of varied sexual attractions, as well as explain the neurohormonal-social experiential interaction that
facilitates the form and expression of sexual attraction. This chapter attempts to present such a comprehensive theory.

The first section of this chapter focuses on evolutionary or ultimate causes of varied sexual attractions. Contemporary human beings living in this highly technological, rapidly mobile, compartmentalized, individualistic and self-conscious age are as much products of antiquated biological and social forces as were our human ancestors. Whether we accept it or not, age-old biological forces influence how we live our complex modern, socially constructed lives. Sexual attraction is anchored in a biology that has been shaped by ancient social pressures on survival and reproduction, although few of these forces exist in the same forms today. Biological mechanisms and social forces intertwine and interact in the individual. This first section describes how sexual attraction evolved from an instinctive sex drive and how the sexes exploited varied sexual attractions to manage intrasex and intersex challenges.

The second section of this chapter focuses on neurohormonal-social experiential or proximate causes of varied sexual attractions. This section describes the neurohormonal mechanisms that establish erotic predispositions in social information processing systems and how erotic associations develop into stable templates and eventually into a sexual orientation. The new interactionist model of sexual attraction is contrasted with a currently accepted model of attraction.

Now, to begin, let us go to the past.

5.1 ULTIMATE CAUSATION

Ultimate causes are evolutionary ones—the social or environmental demands in the distant past that favored some traits over others because those selected traits aided survival and reproductive success. Ultimate causes account for how a trait came to be; they do not account for its current existence. The forces in antiquity that contributed to the persistence of a trait may no longer be relevant and may not now support the trait.

During the past 10,000 years, however, humans have increasingly lived and thrived in less natural, more constructed environments, giving emphasis to the social evolution of traits (Symons, 1979/1987). The explication of current or immediate causes of a trait is a matter of proximate causation, which is taken up in the second section of this chapter.