The sexual differences and similarities of men and women are critical in the area of sexuality because most of sexual imagery and interaction takes place between women and men. The success of this interaction is absolutely crucial in the attainment of sexual enjoyment and satisfaction.

For the above reason, in the chapter at hand I will particularly investigate these gender differences in sex. I will start out by reviewing findings and conclusions from international literature and theories on the subject, and to follow, again take up the most important gender differences highlighted in the present study. The data will lead us to make conclusions in the book’s final chapter about key challenges, mysteries, problems, and developmental needs arising in the field of sexuality.

Sex differences according to the theory of evolution

In recent years, reasons for male–female sexual differences have frequently been sought through the theory of evolution and biological differences between the sexes. According to Okami and Shackelford basic arguments of the theory of evolution include:

1. Women invest more in parenthood than men.
   This affects the choice of mate and their (lesser) willingness to enter into short-term relationships and their (lesser) sexual desire and interest in changing partners.

2. Men have battled and competed for women through evolutionary history more than women for men.
   In part, this has been because of the large number of communities that have allowed polygamy, but also of men’s larger physical size and their greater strength and physical aggression.

3. As a result of the gender difference in investing in parenthood, women have on average been more cautious than men in entering into sexual relationships. It has been easier for women, compared with men, to find a ready and willing mate.
This has led to sexual interaction generally being launched whenever a woman has switched her negative attitude to a positive one (gatekeeper role).

4. Men have been unable to have complete certainty that their children are in fact genetically theirs. This has made it more important for men that women remain faithful, contributing also to their (greater) jealousy.

5. From an evolutionary perspective, observing and appreciating nudity has been more important for men than for women. If our ancestors had not been aroused by the sight of a young, naked woman, they would have missed out on numerous, rewarding opportunities for procreation. The arousal that occurs when watching contemporary pornography is no doubt a partial consequence of men adapting to feeling aroused upon seeing a naked woman.

In this frame of reference men are presumed to be more jealous over a partner’s sexual infidelity, whereas women are seen as more jealous over emotional unfaithfulness (such as falling in love).

Numerous studies have tried to establish that these basic evolutionary claims are in fact functional. An American study conducted by Clark and Hatfield elaborated on the substantial differences between men and women in terms of sexual initiative-taking by assigning male students the task of asking passers-by, who were female students similar to them on a scale of attractiveness, whether they would come with a student to his apartment to have sex.

None of the women agreed to the proposition. But when women were assigned the same task, and presented the question to male passers-by, three in four men were ready to go to have sex with the woman. Even the rest were regretful and explained their refusal by saying that they were in a committed, monogamous relationships. None of the women expressed regret, or justified the rejection of the offer of sex.

Buss and Schmidt study presented similar findings. The task was to determine how long an acquaintanceship it required (seven alternatives, from one hour to five years) for men and women to be ready to have sex. In all sub-five-year alternatives, the men showed much greater willingness to have sex. It seems, then, that the bar for men is lower than it is for women, when it comes to having sex. The cause may not be evolution or biology, but men’s stronger sexual desires or behaviour models that have been socially learned.

Men have shown greater interest than women in a diversity of sexual partners. One way this is illustrated is that, compared with women, men express a wish for three times the number of lifetime sex partners. Women may have different motives than men when entering into temporary relationships. In addition, they are more likely to feel used in short-term relationships, even when they cannot rationally explain why they feel that way. Men, on the other hand, usually feel no anxiety over even large numbers of short-term relationships.
Some of the differences in degree of sexual desire between men and women derive from the fact that the survey question inquiring about desire was not asked at the time of the month when women feel the most desirous. The intensity of women’s sexual desire fluctuates during their menstrual cycle much more than men’s. With this fluctuation changes also women’s sexual preference or interest in men who look particularly masculine.

The theory of evolution makes strong propositions about the different impact evolution has had on mate selection in men and women. It posits that men value the mate’s youth and physical appearance. Women value a man’s social status, the resources he controls, and his willingness to share them with her.

In the United States, the men that women have chosen as partners earn on average 50 percent more than the men who were not chosen. In many countries, a husband who is not fiscally generous enough toward his wife has constituted grounds for divorce. There is no country in which it is grounds for divorce that a woman does not support her husband economically to a sufficient degree.

In choosing a mate, women exchange their attractiveness to resources. Waynforth reports of a study in which women who married men who were older and better educated than them had more children, were more satisfied with their marriages and were less likely to divorce their husbands than other women. As the women were trading in their attractiveness for the men’s resources, the attractiveness of the man himself was less important than the attractiveness of the woman for the man.

According to one hypothesis, women select less attractive men as long-term partners because of the risk of being abandoned by a more handsome man. Women estimate that physically appealing men are more likely to betray them sexually or to abandon their spouses. Regardless of this, in a study touching on this subject, women did not show themselves averse to forming relationships with good-looking men.

In the United States, women who were presented photographs of men and asked to choose potential dating, sex, and marriage partners preferred men who wore Rolex watches on their wrists and designer suit jackets, even though these men were otherwise physically less attractive than men in the other photographs. Men, on the other hand, made their selections in the same test purely on the basis of a woman’s physical looks. Even the way the women dressed had nothing to do with the men’s choice.

Men’s interest in women’s physical attractiveness is connected to men’s stronger tendency to be visually aroused. Anthropological studies have shown that all over the world, girls begin to be dressed at an earlier age than boys and are taught to sit in ways that avoid attracting the inappropriate attention of men and their subsequent arousal.
Gender differences in sexual cognitions

The differences between men and women may also derive from different cognitive processes regarding sexuality. Attitudes toward sex are cognitive in nature. In comparing men and women, men have been shown to be a little more liberal and open-minded than women. This is particularly true with regard to short-term relationships, sexual relationships between young people, parallel relationships, and masturbation.

Geer & Manguno-Mire argue that also arousal is a cognitive process on the grounds that it is significantly affected by, for instance, a mind occasionally wandering to other things. Arousal can be effectively maintained by thinking arousing thoughts and fantasizing. Fantasies reflect cognitive activity and are essential in terms of our sexual interests. One study found that 58 percent of men entertained sexual fantasies during masturbation, while the figure for women was only 12 percent. There is reason to assume that the content of the fantasies adopted during masturbation shape and develop an individual’s sexual preferences and the ways in which they are implemented.

Male fantasies contained more actual sex, whereas women’s fantasies were more likely than men’s to feature affection and bonding. For women’s fantasies, it was the context that counted, much more so than for men. Such situational factors include the emotional atmosphere (mood) and physical characteristics (dress, sounds, and smells).

Women have indicated that they focus on the partner’s personality and emotional characteristics, and at the same time, on their own physical and emotional reactions. Men tend more to focus on a partner’s physical characteristics and love-making itself. In addition, men are much more likely than women to focus on visual imagination, particularly the sexual characteristics of the imagined partner. Women say they focus more on emotions.

A review of literature suggests that men are more likely to use direct sexual terms than women and also more likely to find them arousing. Women are more likely to be receptive to romantic rather than sexual terminology. However, many women are aroused when a man talks “dirty”.

Men report being motivated by direct sexual stimulation (female genitalia, naked women, other sexual images). Women say they are more excited by movies or literary material that is not explicitly sexual. Men have also been shown to use more pornographic materials of different kinds than women. Films that feature women or men masturbating excite women as much as men, however, though men are only aroused by seeing women masturbating.

Some studies do indicate that women, like men, are aroused by sexual imagery more than by imagery that depicts a couple’s emotional relationship, but they still harbour less affection for sexual imagery. Women’s cognitive interpretation of such
images has deviated from their physiological responses to the images in question. Numerous studies have shown that women’s subjective reporting on their own state of mind is less consistent with their physiological responses (arousal), compared with men. At a cognitive level, women reject sexual stimulation which they consider (too) arousing on a physiological level. Women’s cognitive assessments have favoured erotic over sexual imagery.

For men, the women who appear in erotic images or films are sex objects. In a way, men imagine removing the woman from the picture and having sex with her. Women, on the other hand, may be aroused by such images because they relate to the woman as the object to which the man is responding.

The process of sexual arousal (in which in-coming sexual information is processed and encoded) is affected by activating and inhibiting factors. An individual who suffers from anxiety is only prepared to receive the kind of stimulation that is relevant to his or her source of worry. When people do not pay close attention to sexual stimulation, sexual arousal does not occur.

The minds of men suffering from sexual dysfunctions are typically focused on non-sexual thoughts. In other words, they have directed their thoughts to other things, away from the sexual stimuli they encounter. This inability to concentrate disrupts the process of arousal and frequently introduces negative feedback that diminishes arousal.

It has been observed that women’s decision-making processes are slower (the processing time is longer) in social situations than men’s, if the messages contain sexual words, and also slower compared to when using romantic words. The same phenomenon as well as difference in decision-making was observed, when the sentence carrying the message was an erotic one. Women used significantly more time than men in cognitively processing sexual words.

Women hesitated with sexual material in order to respond to it appropriately. Women with erotophobia, in whom sexual matters instil anxiety, read sexual texts in general more slowly than other women. They have a method for processing sexual information, a method that strongly inhibits decision-making and arousal. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to recall a story they have been told if it contained sexual elements.

Erotic statements are more frequently linked to the parts of a sexual story that depict a couple’s physical interaction. Romantic statements are considered those that describe caring, love and emotions. Men assess erotic statements more positively than women, and women tend more to assess romantic as well as neutral statements more positively than erotic statements.
Male and female sexual scripts
Since the 1970s, it has been said often that the differences in male and female sexuality amount to different roles and behaviour models that are shaped and transmitted by culture. The idea is that men and women adopt gender-specific models of behaviour as well as sexual scripts which they unconsciously attempt to apply in sexual situations. ‘Scripts’ refer to written and cultural – official and unofficial – instructions, models, and customs that teach us the particular expectations that govern our interactions that must be appropriate in terms of our status and role. In brief, they are internalized scripts that are applied to particular interactive situations.

These internalized models, or scripts, restrict our choices for behaviour, but at the same time, they offer hints and examples of the type of behaviour that may result in an outcome that matches our objectives and desires. The script theory does not claim that men are from Mars and women from Venus, but that the differences between men and women have been learned and can therefore be unlearned.

Wiederman presents that masculine gender roles teach boys to be independent and self-confident and to approach issues through investigation and assessment, whereas girls’ roles are based more on behaviour restrictions and internal control. In part, the difference in roles stems from women’s ability to become pregnant. Girls also often receive more sexual information in the home than boys. Much of this instruction takes the form of warnings and dangers. These teachings place women in the role of sexual gatekeeper in most male–female relations. Men are supposed to initiate and women are supposed to either reject or consent.

Early on, sexual scripts and their internalized models for interaction begin to shape boys’ and girls’ significant differences in attitudes toward sexual matters. Boys, for example, are taught how to hold their penis when urinating and washing it, whereas girls are rarely taught how to touch their clitoris. Boys learn that touching their genitals feels good, and girls learn that their genitals are “dirty” and should only be touched with certain precautions.

The models that boys are meant to emulate in their sexual responses and behaviour often view sexual arousal as mere physical enjoyment. As a result, young men’s sexual activity becomes goal oriented (pursuit of sexual pleasure and the goal of releasing pressure). For girls, contemplating sexual activity as purely bodily pleasure without any other meaning is a somewhat peculiar idea. Instead of the pursuit of pleasure, girls learn restraint and self-protection. Therefore, girls and young women generally need more incentives for sexual interaction than mere physical enjoyment.

Those young men who do not understand that their female compatriots have different sexual goals and behaviour models often feel awkward in situations where they need to interact with women. On the other hand, men may benefit from the competitiveness and achievement-orientedness ascribed to the masculine gender role. They are
a good match with the typical lesson that women have been taught, i.e. that men are supposed to win over their sexual resistance.

It is often the case that the sexual expectations and internal conditions learned by women prevent men from succeeding in attaining sexual interaction with them. This motivates men to value sexual interaction even more; they are prepared to go farther and farther to achieve their sexual goals.

The greater resistance to having sex with a new partner, regulated by female sexual scripts, makes success especially rewarding for men. It may even amplify their self-confidence as a man. For women, entering into a new relationship does not necessarily achieve the same thing. A woman’s self-esteem may be boosted only if her male partner has a higher status than her previous partners, or if he seems particularly willing and able to invest in an emotional relationship with her.

The different male and female scripts for finding a new partner also help explain why men are more likely than women to arbitrarily round up the number of their past partners, while women consider the number more carefully or underestimate it. Many of the sexual relationships women have had either represent an independent deviation from the script or a failure in trying to apply it. Some women may later regret or be ashamed of deviating from the ideal female script.

Role and cultural models also put pressure on men. When a man does not express his sexual interest in a woman in relatively strong terms from the beginning of the relationship, his masculinity, sexual potency, and virility may be called into question. It may also make a woman feel like her sexual attractiveness is being called into doubt.

Both men and women are expected to make clear to one another that the other person represents something special. Men are expected to emphasize that sexual incentives are not the only reason they want to spend time with a particular woman, and women are expected to express interest in the relationship, which also entails a sexual relationship.

Part of the female role is to appear attractive and enticing and to create a mood that encourages the observation of these qualities. If a man faced with this type of situation appears more passive than the male sexual script suggests, a woman may feel anxious about trespassing past her usual role by feeling like she was an initiator. But if a woman takes responsibility for her own sexual satisfaction, a man may feel that he is left without a manly sexual role in the relationship. These interweaving sexual role models make the interaction of men and women rather challenging.
Research findings on differences between male and female sexuality

Explanations for the different approaches men and women have regarding sexual issues include, for example, that the environment and things like statements by the church have had a lesser impact on the sexual attitudes and behaviour of men than of women. Religious women are less likely than religious men to have sexually liberal attitudes, and less likely to practice masturbation. Similar differences between men and women have emerged in studying how upbringing, friends, and parents influence attitudes. Women seem more prone to adopting the requirements and models imposed by their environment regarding what is deemed sexually appropriate behaviour.

Research that was reviewed by Baumeister and Twenge found support for the theory of a particular sexual control exerted among and by women. Mothers and female friends teach girls and young women to exercise greater sexual restraint than men. The rite of passage into womanhood is still often via motherhood rather than any sexual performance. Even the custom of female genital mutilation has been upheld by women. It is the girls’ boyfriends who try to encourage them to be more sexually active.

Even adult women receive more negative feedback from other women, not men, whenever they offend against sexual norms. Women are also more likely to support double standards by condemning the same sexual behaviour more harshly for women than for men. It is important for women to restrict the sexual activity of other women, so that they minimize their own risk of losing their man in the event that they do not measure up to the man’s sexual expectations. It would be difficult for the man to find another woman in those circumstances. Both men and women want their spouses to remain faithful. Wives, however, have been more sexually possessive than husbands.

The legislation (created by men) that governs sexual behaviour primarily provides sexual restrictions directed at men. It is women who for the most part apply religious sexual norms into practice. Women are more likely than men to support norms that promote sexual restraint, whereas men are more likely than women to support a liberal approach to sexual matters. Justifications for this have included that women’s mere sexual liberation without economic and political liberation may place women in an even more difficult situation.

Many women oppose alternative forms of sexual enjoyment for men, including prostitution and pornography. This opposition is consistent with the idea that women want to control men’s opportunities for sexual enjoyment. This fits in with the sexual exchange theory presented in an earlier chapter on commercial sex, and with the idea that women have an interest in keeping the price of sex as high as possible.
In one study, young boys reported that their first sexual fantasies started from visual stimulation. Girls linked their first fantasies to an imaginary or real romantic situation. Boys often began fantasizing several years before girls, and their fantasies were more frequent and intense, distracted them from other issues, and were associated with more positive emotions than for girls. Forty-five percent of boys but only 6 percent of girls reported having several sexual fantasies every day.

Adult men too report thinking about sex more frequently than women. In the United States, for example, 54 percent of men but only 19 percent of women reported in a nation-wide study that they thought about sex every day. Men’s fantasies were more explicitly sexual and focused on various parts of the body, whereas women’s were focused on bonding and romance. Male fantasies also featured sex with several partners more frequently than women’s imaginings. In addition, men were more likely to report that they switched their partner or partners in the course of the fantasy.

In the United States, Baumeister reviewed research findings that introduced differences between the strength of men’s and women’s sexual motivation. Researchers compiled a list of findings indicating that men’s sexual motivation was stronger than women’s. The findings concerned the occurrence of sexual thoughts and fantasies, spontaneous arousal, desired frequency of intercourse, frequency of masturbation, desired number of sexual partners, willingness to be the party in charge during sex, seeking out sex as opposed to avoiding it, taking sexual initiative versus refusing sex, enjoyment of an array of sexual methods, investment of resources toward having sex, favourable attitudes regarding sexual behaviour, incidence of sexual dependency, and respondents’ own assessment of the intensity of their sexual desires.

Compared with men, women were less promiscuous, unfaithful, or interested in hard-core pornography. They masturbated less, were less likely to purchase sexual services, had fewer fetishes about the male body, and were more content with fewer sex partners in life, or even just one. Women generally indicated that they had not enjoyed sex without commitment, and even if they had fantasized about animals, they were less likely than men to approach them in a sexual way. Women almost never commit sexual murders and are less likely than men to abuse children sexually. Women also show less interest in certain paraphilias.

This review summary from the United States needs to be equipped with the note that most of the observed gender differences in sexual issues are rather minor. We should also not forget that some women are just as promiscuous as men. Women also experience far greater fluctuations in their sexual desires and experiences during their lifetime. A study that offers a cross section of a certain point in time is only able to show a narrow strip of the total landscape of female sexuality. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the evidence that on average, men’s sexual desires are fairly convincingly stronger than women’s.
The most significant gender differences in sexuality in Finland

In terms of gender differences in sexual issues in Finland, it has to be said right away that over the last decades and years, those differences have in many ways decreased and to some extent have even disappeared. Men and women share much in their goals and assessments, as well as the experiences and emotions they have regarding sex. They also report in very similar ways about most items to which men and women ought to respond similarly in this type of representative sample of the population. Issues like that include particularly sexual interaction in relationships.

One of the last bastions particularly separating men and women in their survey responses and pursuits is now in the process of coming down. By this, I mean the number of sexual partners. In the youngest generation, differences between men and women have all but vanished. Above all, this has occurred because young and also middle-aged women have been having more relationships than previously. On the other hand, especially young men, but also men in general, have been reporting fewer sexual relationships.

On the basis of their responses, however, there are still a host of issues in which men and women differ. Many of these issues were the same findings that were highlighted in studies conducted abroad and as described above. The present study presents a more detailed and in some ways different view.

The most fundamental difference between men and women in this study stems from the particular focus of this book, i.e. sexual desire. Men experienced sexual desire approximately twice as often as women, and the same gap also existed in preferred frequency of sexual intercourse. In the oldest age group, men reported wanting to have sex up to four times more often than women. Also in couple relationships men would have preferred to have sex twice as often as their partners. Add to this that women were experiencing fairly frequent loss of sexual desire at a rate three times higher than men, and the difference in the sexual desire experienced by men and women has been definitively verified. The finding is consistent with earlier studies from other countries.

This gender difference seems to hold steady even with women’s increased tendency to enter into short-term relationships, which was something that men used to report more frequently than women. In addition, differences in the sexual desire that men and women feel have not diminished substantially. Not all of the measures of desire used in the study permitted an analysis of this change. It was possible to compare respondents’ preferred frequency of sexual intercourse to figures from the early 1970s. This comparison mostly showed an increase in the sexual desire of men, not a decline in the gender difference.

Another measure that enables comparisons with the early 1990s was respondents’ satisfaction with the frequency of sexual intercourse in their current relationship. In
this case, the increase in desire for more sex grew more among women than men in relative terms, but men were still expressing more of a wish for more frequent sex at a rate twice that of women. This measure does not allow making direct claims about changing trends in sexual desire, because the responses in this case relate to actual frequency of sexual intercourse. When desired intercourse frequency was contrasted with actual intercourse frequency, the result showed that women’s desire for more frequent sex was indeed associated with a decline in intercourse frequency in relationships. Thus, the increase among women who wanted more sex in their relationships was not a sign of any significant shrinkage in the gender gap.

A third comparable measure similarly extends to the early 1990s and suggests that lack of sexual desire is becoming increasingly common among women. The gap between men and women grew even more in terms of sexual desire. The study as a whole does not support the assumption that the gender gap in sexual desire had been narrowing since the 1970s.

The differences between male and female desire have given rise to many other key issues and gender variations in the sexual lives of Finns. It emerges as soon as young people take their first steps in sexual activity. Boys are on average a couple of years younger than girls when they first start masturbating and experiencing orgasms. Boys also begin to desire sexual intercourse at an earlier age than girls, and experience more sexual desire the first time they have it. The gender difference in the level of desire experienced at first intercourse had, however, diminished as girls were expressing greater sexual desire.

Although boys wanted sex more, girls started having sex at an earlier age than boys, and their first partners were on average two years older than boys’ first sexual partners. Girls and young women were much less likely, however, to have experienced orgasms the first time they had sex, and in spite of their younger initiation age, girls were significantly older than boys when they finally experienced an orgasm from intercourse. In addition, men reported much more frequently than women that they had experienced orgasms through masturbation several years before commencing sexual intercourse.

Differences in sexual desire were also reflected in masturbation. Even though masturbation was strongly increasing among women, men were much younger when starting it and practiced it in far greater numbers than women as adults. For example, approximately twice as many men as women had masturbated. Comparing the incidence of masturbation among men and women, women were consistently about 20 years behind in the changes that had occurred among men of the same age group.

Differences in sexual desire and masturbation also led to significant gender distinctions in the use of pornography and paid sex. Men were more likely than women to frequent sex shops and had watched and read more porn. Men were many times
more likely than women to use Internet porn. Men were also more active users of sexual services, offering and paying money in exchange for sex, whereas women were more likely than men to be the target of such monetary offers. Men’s motivation to watch and experience sex was clearly higher than women’s, even if they had to pay for it.

Differences in sexual desire were also apparent in that women were much less likely to initiate sex within the relationship and rejected moves made by their male partners at a rate twice that of men. In part this was associated with the greater incidence of loss of sexual desire among women. The biggest gender difference in this was between young women and men. Women did not become sexually motivated merely because a man proposed sex to them.

Behind such differences in desire was the ability to enjoy sexual relations and intercourse. The factor here was having orgasms. Women, much more than men, had trouble having orgasms during intercourse. The gender difference was nearly two-fold when comparing the number of respondents who always had an orgasm from intercourse and how many had had one the last time they had sex. Women also experienced fewer orgasms when masturbating. Instead, multiple orgasms were more common among women than men. Women’s capacity for sexual enjoyment fluctuated much more than men’s, from one woman to the next.

Women’s difficulties with sexual enjoyment had an impact on their experiences of sexual pleasure and desire. Young men, for instance, were twice as likely as young women to feel that sexual intercourse was highly enjoyable. In this regard, the gender difference peaked strongly over the eight-year period.

Differences in sexual desire were partly associated with the different values and attitudes regarding sexual issues that men and women had. Men were more likely than women to accept sexual relationships between young people who were not dating as well as relationships between teenagers. Men also showed greater support for sexual relationships that did not involve love, as well as the sexual infidelity of husbands and wives and other extramarital relationships. More men than women also said that they could maintain a parallel sexual relationship, and men were more likely than women to believe than men are natural polygamists.

Women were more likely than men to consider as perversions group sex and partner swapping, having sex in public, wanting sex constantly, and free sex. Women were far less likely than men to tolerate prostitution or brothels. Women also felt more frequently than men that there was too much nudity in advertising and were less likely to think that porn was very stimulating.

Women were more likely than men to think that sex gets better, the longer the partners have known each other. Women were also more likely than men to accept a sexual relationship between two adult men as well as marriage between same-sex partners.
Women also displayed greater sexual interest in their own gender.

Differences in sexual desire and values came out in many ways also in the sexual experiences that men and women had had. Even though differences in the number of sexual partners had declined, men continued to report a greater number of sex partners in their lifetime as well as more partners within the last several years, compared with women. Men were also more likely to enter into parallel relationships alongside their current relationship, and had had more such relationships than women.

Based on the research, the greatest differences between men and women emerged in the following:

1. Sexual desire in general
2. Desire for first experiences and enjoyment thereof
3. Beginning and frequency of masturbation
4. Enjoyment and use of porn
5. Paying for sex
6. Initiating sex
7. Experiencing orgasms
8. Sexual relationships without commitment

All of the above were more characteristic of men, or else, men engaged in them more actively. In their own way, they reflect the interplay between masculine and feminine sex. Masculine-oriented sex, more often than feminine-oriented sex, focuses on the pursuit of physical pleasure through sex. Men set fewer conditions than women on when this pursuit of pleasure is appropriate or inappropriate. Sexual pleasure for men more often than for women is a value in itself.