

The Emotional Brain: Part 1, Sexual Desire

[Download audio](#) [show transcript](#)

Saturday 26 November 2005 1:00PM

For centuries western philosophers proclaimed emotions the enemy of rational thought. It was believed that emotions stymied cool-headed thinking. But over the last twenty years a quiet scientific and philosophical revolution has taken place. Instead of being the font of irrationality, emotions are now routinely viewed as integral to intelligent action. But uncertainty still surrounds the emotions. So what can contemporary science and philosophy tell us about our emotional selves? Over four weeks the emotional brain is explored. The series gets underway with sexual desire.



Like

Tweet



Share

Email

Transcript

[Hide](#)

Relevant links and references at the end of the transcript

Kaja: Sometimes you meet someone and you connect, you know, you might not even have spoken to that person and it's on a physical level and it's just amazing. And I think it might actually be to do with the fact that you haven't talked to them, you haven't set a framework for them to work in. You are just that physical being, so are they, and that's what you explore.

Julie Browning: That's Kaja who will share more of her insights into her life and her loves with you later in the show. Hi there, Julie Browning with you for All in the Mind. Today, the first in our special series on emotions. Over the next four weeks we'll discover what research is telling us about our emotional mind. Not only how emotions help us to survive but also how they are a key to intelligent decision making. We're kicking off with one of the most basic emotions - sexual desire. This is an exploration of science and of one woman's experience. And I need to give a warning that some of the material in today's program is sexually explicit. But before we launch into the sweaty entanglement of sexual desire let's take a step back for a moment and define what our emotions actually are. Here's Dr Dylan Evans from the University of the West of England.

Dylan Evans: It's actually very hard to define, to give a good definition of emotions, but most psychologists and philosophers today would think of an emotion as a connected set of processes that usually occur together and they involve physiological changes, those changes in your heart rate, in your blood pressure and in hormones and so on throughout your body. They involve muscular changes in the facial

expression so that you can communicate that emotion to others and so through smiling, and frowning and so on. They involve also cognitive changes so that you can remember certain things more easily and have certain thoughts more easily when you're in an emotional state and have other thoughts less easily, so when you're angry for example it's easier to think about blaming people and retribution and less easy to recall nice experiences.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly for many people, at least for the commonsense definition of emotion, there's the feeling, the conscious sensation or the conscious experience, the subjective experience of having an emotion.

Julie Browning: But is sexual desire a drive or is it an emotion? For many, desire is an emotion because it motivates us, and helps us to make decisions, to take action. But psychologist Dr Doris McIlwain from Macquarie University prefers to see desire as a very basic drive that occupies a unique space in our minds and bodies.

Doris McIlwain: Well the sex drive is unique because, unlike our other drives which are about the survival of our individual organism, the sex drive is about the survival of the species. And therefore we are mere carriers of that drive if you like, and we will often do things that might compromise our own survival in the name of sex, in the name of lust.

It starts off as a series of component drives if you like which are co-assembled in infancy, often as a result of the responses that we get from others in our world. And so every person's sex drive is like a cocktail, if you like, of other influences that have arisen from within the body and they've met certain fates, socially. They've either been condoned or condemned.

Julie Browning: So we're born with a sex drive but then it's shaped?

Doris McIlwain: We're born with a number of component sex drives which are shaped and it's like rivers running down a mountain. By the time you're an adolescent it feels like a single river, but it's actually, you know, there are lots of tributaries to that river, as it were. And that's where they arise from your erotic-genic zone so it's the whole body involved really and quite different parts of the body.

Kaja: That feeling is such a basic drive for me whenever I'm somewhere where there are, you know, a couple of people there and it's not just me and my friends, I feel this desire feeling to some extent. That would be why I do something, that's a basic drive to act.

Sometimes I want to explore myself, and in that case I think I find myself in quite outrageous situations, which is interesting because, you know, from the outside people seem to think, 'Jesus, she's putting herself out there.' Whereas I think I'm really going

the other way, I'm exploring, you know, my part of it, how far do I want to go? What does that make me feel, you know? And I want to push it, I really do, but it doesn't have much to do with the other person. You know, how many people are there whose face or name I couldn't remember? That has to do with me, because otherwise I would. And then there is people who'll touch me in a different way, you know, touching, where I get a different connection to them and I think that's not only me, but that's more spiritual.

Doris McIllwain: 'Sex is biological but the erotic is definitely cultural', is a line I love, because it's what actually ignites the sex drive or even the manner of expressing it I think would have a lot of individual variation.

Julie Browning: So what is the evidence of a sex drive that operates in this kind of multiplicity of ways through our bodies and in our minds?

Doris McIllwain: I suppose the evidence that you've got is that there is definitely the capacity for, say, the mouth to be sexualised both in sensual kissing, but also in eating. You get the consumption of food that's not just about the satisfaction of the hunger drive; it's also about another kind of appetite and things. So you can sort of see in the adult the influence of the sort of tributary component instincts. Freud for instance was quite famous in suggesting that the anal region was a component instinct for the sex drive and you do see signs of anality at a personality level. Someone that's terribly concerned with, you know, time and place and order and cleanliness and, you know, withholding money, et cetera, would all be part of the personality style that he would suggest would arrive from the component instinct.

Julie Browning: So if you're anally retentive, then.

Doris McIllwain: Exactly, because you know there's never the suggestion that the drives stay separate either from each other, or from affects, or from cognitions and so you can get a sort of nice marriage, if you like, or a cocktail of the sex drive with the hunger drive. And then you get that lovely appetitive, sort of gourmand approach to the world.

Julie Browning: Freud was also interested in the way in which the sex drive was repressed and he looked at fear and shame as being kind of critical in terms of manipulating or shifting sexuality. Is that something that you take up on that personalities are shaped by fear or by shame or by other affects?

Doris McIllwain: Absolutely. Partly because before we really have a fully formed moral sense or morality, or super ego, however you like to phrase it; before we have that super ego, we have mental dams to our pleasure. Like we might experience shame, or we might experience fear, and that's why I find the work of Silvan Tomkins just so

useful because he said, 'you know, with affects anything can matter and without affects nothing does'. Like if I'm in a sort of curious, interested and excited affective state then I might find absolutely everything about the world fascinating and I'll be noticing the branches on the trees and, you know, the shape of the furrows and fields and everything. In other words it renders salient in so many different parts of the world. If you're in a sort of deflated depressed or low affective state where there's not really any affects, sort of moving and inspiring you, the world feels quite flat and grey and not very much matters to you at all. And Tomkins was particularly interested to explain the way that affects and sexuality, say, could link. He was saying, you know, the affect of, say, excitement or joy would intensify or amplify sexual experience, whereas the affect of shame, wow, it would have the power to sort of like turn off the sex drive as it were. So unlike Freud, Tomkins actually says it's the affects that are primary because they can actually turn on or off the drives by either amplifying the signals from the drives or absolutely diminishing them.

Julie Browning: So without fear or without joy the sex drive, the drive for pleasure would kind of move along but with very little sense of how it should be realised.

Doris McIllwain: Absolutely yes, you know, just sort of tweaked on their path by the different emotions exactly.

Julie Browning: For thousands of years western philosophers equated emotion with irrationality. These were the very passions that needed regulation and suppression. And although Charles Darwin wrote his famous treatise, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* in 1872, concerted scientific investigation of emotions is relatively new. But with this interest, the positive and rational aspects of emotion are getting more attention. Here's Dylan Evans again, an evolutionary psychologist from the University of the West of England.

Dylan Evans: There's a whole tradition in the west, going back to Plato; two and a half thousand years of thinking, in which philosophers and later psychologists have regarded emotions as, at best, harmless luxuries and at worst outright obstacles to intelligent action they get in the way of making intelligent decisions. To use Jon Elster's evocative phrase they're sand in the machinery of action, they just grit things up. And I think one of the most interesting things about the way psychologists and philosophers and neuroscientists are changing their views about emotion over the last, just the last ten years, is that they're realising that this negative view of emotion is fundamentally wrong, and that emotions do sometimes cause us to do things we regret, of course. But if we didn't have them we wouldn't be more rational than we are today, we'd actually be less rational. We need these sort of gut feelings to guide our

rationality.

Julie Browning: The scientific community may be paying more attention to notions per se, but according to Doris McIllwain sexual desire is still put on the back-burner by researchers. It seems we remain a little coy about investigating one of our most basic drives and motivators.

Doris McIllwain: We haven't really kept moving forward in terms of being progressive about our capacity to speak openly about what's actually going on at the level of sexuality. And the reason I think that you can cash in on it as it were with billboards and advertisements and things is because you can then allude to it but it kind of stays off-screen somehow. You know, it's only been invoked but not actually discussed and spoken about openly, it's remaining secret in some way.

Kaja: We're really scared of strong emotions, you know, because the strong emotion takes up all your brain space and all the control mechanisms are gone. And then you know when I said earlier 'and then I say silly things and then I do things that, you know, I wouldn't do if I was controlled' but the only way to change is for that to control to be gone, and that needs to be strong. You know for some people it might be anger, for other people, it's desire.

Doris McIllwain: I think there is a fear of the body, you know, and that's why a lot of contemporary writing of a sort of critical sort or a social constructionist source they talk about the body but it's a body that's made up of phonemes or language it's not really the sort of messy pleasures of a physical body. And I think that there has been a sort of repression, if you like, of the messy pleasures of the body and it means we've bought into a mess of wellbeing and a mess of sort of mature intimacy. And many of the criticisms against, say the Freudian conception of the drives, they weren't really scientific criticisms they were moral criticisms this can't be the nature of the man, we don't want to believe that man is lived by something that's ego alien outside of its own wrong choice or morality. But in fact we are surrounded every day by examples that that is indeed the case.

Kaja: So when you first asked me about desire I was wondering, you know, is desire just the craving, is it the feeling or is it actually putting it into action? I met this guy who wanted to come over and watch me have sex with my then boyfriend. He came over, I didn't know him, my boyfriend at the time was like you know, he said, 'yeah, I'm happy for you to play and it's really exciting let's do all this'. But in the end I think he might have been a bit overwhelmed. Anyway, so I was there, I was feeling quite comfortable and really excited about, you know, this setup. And there were the boys and they were a bit shy and things, you know, things started to happen and this boy

started feeling completely uncomfortable, he was really uncomfortable he didn't want to be in that situation. It's a really important distinction to make. Like what are your desires that you want to put into action, and which are the ones that you want to have just to play with, just in your, you know, just in your own space. And maybe you don't even to share them.

Julie Browning: And you're with All in the Mind on ABC Radio National, Radio Australia and online. And today the first part of our special series on emotions the science and the experience of sexual desire. There's been something of a quiet revolution going on in the scientific community. For many years the popular view of emotions was that they were shaped by culture. Now genetics has entered the picture; most emotion researchers now agree that how we express and experience emotions is a messy and complex entanglement of both biology and culture.

Dylan Evans: In the 20th century there were many psychologists and anthropologists who argued that emotions were entirely cultural things; they were like languages, you would acquire them by growing up in a society that had those emotions and depending on the sort of society you grew up in and the emotional repertoire that you were exposed to as a child, then your emotional repertoire as an adult and your conscious experience would be different. Though if you grew up in a society where they didn't have love, for example, you wouldn't be capable of feeling love. But in the latter part of the 20th century this theory's largely discredited by a whole series of cross-cultural work in which anthropologists and psychologists traveled around the world to cultures which had had very little or no contact with the west and found that they could recognise emotional expressions on western actors or western students and those westerners could recognise their emotional expressions without any difficulty and so on. Through a whole variety of this kind of inter-cultural and cross-cultural research, the cultural theory of emotions has been largely discredited and most psychologists will now believe that most, if not all, emotions have some hardwired genetic basis. Those babies who are born blind smile, they don't have to see anyone smile to know that smiling is the expression for happiness and indeed they don't have to see anyone smile to feel happy.

When it comes to other emotions higher, more complex emotions, like love, for example, then the question becomes slightly more complex. But even here, it's not a question of saying well is it just a cultural invention as CS Lewis thought it was, or is it hardwired? But to disentangle the aspects of love which are universal, from those aspects which are more culturally variable. And so there seems to be some core aspects of romantic love which occur in every single culture that's ever been studied and we

can therefore suppose probably hardwired and genetically determined and it's evolved through natural selection. And those aspects are the fact that it tends to make us focus on one person to the exclusion of others for a while, not forever it tends to make us feel happy, it tends to make us want to have sex with that person, it tends to make us show off to that person and engage in sort of romantic gestures like giving gifts and so on and singing songs and making poems up and things like that. But on the other hand there are some culturally variable aspects so, for example, in the west we tend to see love as something that must come and take us by surprise, you know it's not something you could plan and will last a lifetime or should do, you know, and would be exclusive forever. Whereas in other cultures those assumptions are just not present. So there's both the culturally variable aspects and the biological universal aspects of love which we can attribute to evolution.

Kaja: Desire's never a problem in the moment that you explore it without thinking of all the problems, is it? It takes you into a very interesting space with someone else and if, you know, like the nice thing is sometimes you connect with people on that level of joy and creating pleasure, and you maybe don't have any other connection but you're really close with them at that point. It's great how nature created all these things for you to do and be high from.

Julie Browning: Our sex drive seeks out pleasure, but according to Dylan Evans it also helps us to make intelligent decisions; it fuels the gut instinct to act.

Dylan Evans: The emotional brain provides a very fundamental foundation on which the rational thinking could evolve because the emotional system in humans, one of its functions seems to be to limit the amount of options that we will consider before making a decision. And we can see this very clearly in the case of people who have some damage to a part of their brain which was serving some emotional function. And so when they lose that emotional capacity, suddenly their rationality doesn't seem to function as good as it used to. So they spend, for example, hours considering all the criteria and all the possible considerations that might be relevant to an otherwise insignificant decision like, when should we go and see the doctor, today or tomorrow? We shouldn't spend too long making a decision like that because we've got other things to do and yet without the emotional system to constrain the possibilities and without the emotional system that maybe would make us get bored with spending too long considering such a trivial thing that people with brain damage to their emotional areas of their brain can spend hours making such a tiny decision. They get trapped or locked into what I've called analysis paralysis, they become in a sense a bit like Hamlet considering for days and days a decision which they should be able to make quickly.

And they would be able to make quickly if they had some gut feelings that just produced a decision that worked through intuition.

Doris McIllwain: I certainly feel that sexuality in all of its complexity is the fund of a lot of creativity, a lot of quite appropriate resistance to, you know, an overly policed sort of social economy, in terms of governmentality and things. It's a kind of necessary fund of a kind of radicality, it's oddly a source of hope, the sex drive, because when people try to stay put in impossible positions, like they try to stay in an unsatisfactory relationship for instance, they don't manage to and they experience that as a source of distress. But in the long run it's actually taking them from an impossible position into one of growth, and hope, and newness, and freshness.

Kaja: It's that desire where you just want to hear someone's thoughts. And that can last for the night and I don't know what the difference is, but sometimes it carries on, and if it does, I think it goes into every aspect of my life. I just have more energy to do anything. Change needs energy and the energy needs to come from a very strong place and I think desire is a very strong emotion.

Dylan Evans: Emotions are designed by natural selection, to be out of control. That's the whole point of emotion. If they were easy to control they wouldn't serve the function that they're supposed to serve in evolution. Love is supposed to take you over, it's supposed to make you out of control. Anger, too, is supposed to do that.

Doris McIllwain: Once you're a mature adult the sex drive has changed the whole landscape of your inner desire. I mean in part it funds your intellectual curiosity, you know, what appeals to you about art, I mean it co-assembles with lots of affects like curiosity, interest, surprise. And in a sense it makes you who you are.

Kaja: It's so beautiful to play with people and create pleasure, you know, that's that part of desire, you know, you see someone and you want to see them when they feel pleasure, and you want to create that. That's probably one of the most fabulous things to do.

Doris McIllwain: I think we do become more bound as we grow older and we become more set in our ways and we have attitudes and values about what's right and wrong and what we should and shouldn't want. And I think those cognitions and those values and those moral beliefs inevitably shape our manner of expressing our own desires. And also I suppose passion calls to a mental sympathy, too, between people. And so there is a sense in which a particular individual becomes sometimes irreplaceable, and there's not the possibility, really, of seeking pleasure elsewhere, because there is an exquisiteness to the attachment, to the valuing, of this particular other. And that's I think as much funded by sexuality as by, you know, various other affective and moral

values that we have within our personality.

Julie Browning: Because of course the sex drive is often related in popular thinking, at least with promiscuity.

Doris McIllwain: Yes, and I think in the early phases while you're still finding your identity in things it certainly is. I mean it's what a good organism does in a sense. But Freud's often characterised as a sort of philosopher of the one night stand, you know, sort of organ pleasure and forget the rest. And, you know, as if the person never becomes a whole other to they just become a source of, supplies for transient pleasures. And I don't think that's to do a full service to the characterisation of sexuality it's not *either* mature intimacy *or* sexual pleasure, it's about the two possibly coming together optimally. It's just that in some people they come together rather later than others or never. There's room for difference in the world that people find different places for their own pleasures.

Dylan Evans: Though it's true to say, I think, that we're only beginning now to uncover the neural mechanisms of emotion, we have made an amazing amount of progress in the last ten years compared to what we knew about the neural basis of emotion before. You know, we've just, in the last ten years we've learned more about the neural basis of emotion than we did in the previous 2,000 years. So although it's only beginning we are actually really now making very fast progress, and that's one of the most exciting areas of neuroscience, to look at the emotional mechanisms in the brain that influence emotion. And the chemicals that do that, too.

Julie Browning: Dr Dylan Evans from Computing, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences at the University of the West of England. And you also heard from psychologist Dr Doris McIllwain from Macquarie University, and Kaya, who spoke with producer Gretchen Miller.

I hope you enjoyed the show today and you can find a transcript of the discussion later in the week. Head to abc.net.au/rn and click on All in the Mind under programs and you can catch the show again as real audio or download on your MP3 player.

Thanks today to studio engineer Jen Parsonage, and I hope you can join me next week when we tackle one of the most dangerous emotions anger. Until then.

Kaja: Its like, you know, when you feel a lot of the pleasure is in your head, and sometimes you can let go of it, and it drops, and phew, it goes everywhere, it goes through your whole body.

Guests

Dr Dylan Evans

Senior Lecturer in Intelligent Autonomous Systems

Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences

University of the West of England

Dr Doris McIlwain

Department of Psychology

Macquarie University

Publications

TitleEmotion, Evolution and Rationality

AuthorD.Evans and P. Cruse (eds)

PublisherOxford University Press, 2004.

TitleEmotion: The Science of Sentiment

AuthorD. Evans

PublisherOxford University Press, 2001

TitleBypassing Empathy: Mapping a Machiavellian Theory of Mind and Sneaky Power

AuthorD. McIlwain, D. in B. Repacholi and V. Slaughter (Eds), Individual differences in theory of mind: Implications for typical and atypical development. "Macquarie Monographs in Cognitive Science".

PublisherPsychology Press Series, 2003.

Description.

TitleThe Gods are Libido: a review of Richard Noll, The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement,

AuthorD.McIlwain

PublisherPrinceton University Press 1995, Metascience, New Series (issue 7), pp212-215.

TitleCan the science of love catch up with common sense?

AuthorD. McIlwain.

DescriptionAustralian Review of Public Affairs, June 2004.

TitleThe Dynamic Unconscious Revisited

AuthorD.McIlwain J. R. Morss, N. Stephenson, H. Van Rappard (eds)

PublisherKluwer Academic, 2001, Theoretical Issues in Psychology, Boston, pp.379-392.

TitleThe Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness

AuthorA. Damasio

PublisherHarcourt Brace

DescriptionNew York, 1999, 2000.

TitleDescartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain,

AuthorA. Damasio

PublisherGrosset/Putnam, New York, 1994; (hardcover); Hayrer Collins, New York, 1995; (paperback).

TitleAffective Neuroscience - The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions.

AuthorJ. Panksepp.

PublisherOxford University Press

DescriptionNew York, 1998

TitleThe Emotional Brain: The mysterious underpinnings of Emotional Life

AuthorJ. E. LeDoux

PublisherSimon & Schuster; Reprint edition 1998

TitleExploring Affect : The Selected Writings of Silvan S Tomkins (Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction)

AuthorS. Tomkins

PublisherCambridge University Press;

Description1995.

Title'Civilized' Sexual Morality And Modern Nervous Illness

AuthorS. Freud

DescriptionFirst published in 1908

TitleSexuality In The Aetiology Of The Neuroses

AuthorS. Freud

DescriptionFirst published in 1898.

TitleThe Many Faces of Shame

AuthorD. Nathason (ed.)

PublisherGuilford Press

Description1998

Credits

PresenterJulie Browning

ProducerGretchen Miller