

Women, Men, and the Bedroom: Methodological and Conceptual Insights That Narrow, Reframe, and Eliminate Gender Differences in Sexuality

Terri D. Conley, Amy C. Moors, Jes L. Matsick, Ali Ziegler, and
Brandon A. Valentine

University of Michigan

Abstract

Many researchers have elucidated large, well-established, and reliable gender differences in sexuality, but relatively few have empirically examined conditions under which these differences can be eliminated. This article investigates some established sexuality gender differences in greater depth. We demonstrate how creative theoretical and empirical approaches may shed light on prevalent misconceptions concerning sex-related gender differences.

Keywords

sexuality, sex, gender differences

Common wisdom—as well as the research-based beliefs of many psychologists—suggest that men, simply put, like sex more than women do. For example, men are more likely to choose partners based on their sexual appeal rather than on their status (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), have more sexual thoughts (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001), prefer and have more sexual partners (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), experience more orgasms (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 2000), engage more frequently in casual sex (Petersen & Hyde, 2010), and are less choosy regarding romantic-relationship partners (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) than are women. Because this framework is popular among both psychologists and the general public, it contributes to face-value acceptance of sex-related gender differences (see Ryan & Jethà, 2010, for further discussion). Gender differences are often viewed as supporting biological, genetic, or evolutionary accounts of mating; however, upon further empirical scrutiny, these gender differences are either not what they seem, narrow considerably, or in some cases, are completely eliminated. In this article, we consider six of these (ostensible) gender differences more closely.


Do Women and Men Have Gender-Specific Preferences for Qualities of Partners?

Conventional wisdom suggests that men and women have different dating goals. Men want a partner who is sexy (i.e., physically attractive), whereas women want a partner with high status (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This notion is

often supported by examining young adults' ideal mates (see Eastwick & Finkel, 2008, for a review). And, one assumes, we need to look no further than the routine relationships of octogenarian Hugh Hefner with *Playboy* models a fraction of his age for supportive (albeit anecdotal) real-world evidence.

But what happens when we empirically consider perceptions of potential partners that participants have met in person? Eastwick and Finkel (2008) hosted a series of speed-dating events in which participants rated the importance of attractiveness and status among the individuals with whom they interacted. Contrary to conventional wisdom, when the object of one's potential affection shifted from *ideal* to *actual*, gender differences in preferred qualities of partners disappeared. Specifically, attractiveness and status were found to be *equally* important to men and women when considering actual dating partners (both in initial speed-dating encounters and a month after those encounters) across a variety of dependent measures (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). Moreover, gender differences in preferences for status and attractiveness were absent in the judgments of *current* romantic partners as well (Eastwick, Finkel, & Eagly, in press).

Bottom line: Do women and men have gender-specific preferences for qualities of partners? Not in real-world

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Corresponding Author:

Terri D. Conley, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 1012 East Hall, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1043, USA
E-mail: conleyt@umich.edu

contexts, which are presumably more valid than hypothetical musings.

Do Women Desire and Actually Have Fewer Sexual Partners Than Men Do?

Past research has consistently shown that women desire a smaller average number of sexual partners during their lifetime than men; indeed, they report wanting fewer sexual partners than men do (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). These findings appear very basic and straightforward; that is, it would seem easy to find support for common wisdom about gender differences in something as straightforwardly measured as number of sex partners.

Pedersen, Miller, Putcha-Bhagavatula, and Yang (2002) questioned that common wisdom and more closely examined the gender gap in desire for sexual partners. They asked participants to indicate their ideal number of partners over different time periods and replicated the original findings concerning gender differences in preferences for sexual partners, such that men preferred more partners than women did. However, a strange caveat emerged: This gender difference disappeared when a more accurate measure of central tendency (i.e., the location of the center of the distribution of participants' scores, or simply put, the typical response) was considered.

Specifically, the distribution of number of preferred partners was highly skewed to the right, such that higher values (i.e., grossly large numbers of sexual partners desired by men) were more spread out than lower numbers, indicating that the means likely do not represent the majority of men and women in the sample. When examining *median* values (an alternative measure of central tendency for finding the middle score of a distribution recommended when data are skewed; Wilcox & Charlin, 1986) instead of means to assess desired number of partners over a 30-year period, gender differences evaporated (see Pedersen et al., 2002, for further discussion). The use of medians revealed that the majority of men and women desire a similar number of sexual partners: *one*. These findings directly contradict the idea that most women prefer fewer sexual partners than most men do.

But what about when *actual* number of sexual partners are assessed? Are men actually having sex with large numbers of women whereas women are more selective? Alexander and Fisher (2003) recently examined gender differences in reported number of sexual partners more closely. To facilitate more truthful responses, they used a "bogus pipeline" technique, which falsely convinces participants that a sophisticated electronic apparatus can detect their true feelings. Thus, some participants were connected to a (nonfunctional) polygraph machine and informed that untruthful responses would be detected. As expected, participants who were not attached to the polygraph displayed typical gender differences—that is, men reported more sexual partners than women did.

The polygraph (bogus pipeline) condition, however, yielded far different results. When participants believed that their true

sexual history could be revealed by the polygraph, gender differences in reported sexual partners disappeared.

Bottom line: Do women desire and actually have fewer sexual partners than do men? No, gender differences in reported sexual partners stem less from sexual appetites and more from inappropriate use and interpretation of statistics and social desirability.

Do Men Think About Sex More Than Women Do?

Popular beliefs and current psychological literature seem to agree that men indubitably have stronger sex drives than women (see Baumeister et al., 2001, for a review). Frequency of sexual thoughts is the most frequently used measure of sexual drive and desire. Psychologists undoubtedly look askance at the urban myth of men having thoughts about sex "every seven seconds," but, we might wonder, isn't there a large kernel of truth to the stereotype that men's thoughts are sex-bound?

Perhaps not. Fisher, Moore, and Pittenger (2011) set out to substantiate the axiom of men's hyperactive sexual cognitions. Female and male undergraduates used tally counters to record the number of times that they thought about sex, food, or sleep over the course of a week. The results indicated that, yes, men thought about sex modestly more frequently than women did. *However*, men also thought about both food and sleep significantly more often than women did. Thus, men reported a greater number of personal-need-based thoughts than did women overall.

Fisher and colleagues suggested that men are more attentive to their own needs than women are. This is consistent with objectification theory, which suggests that women's focus on others' perceptions reduces women's attention to their own physical needs (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and with ample research demonstrating men's socialization to be agentic and self-focused (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Women are socialized to be both more attuned to others' needs and are pressured to inhibit expression of their own desires (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999).

Bottom line: Do men think about sex more than women do? Yes, but they also think more about their own physical needs, overall.

Do Women Orgasm Less Frequently Than Men?

Research supports the notion that women consistently orgasm less than men (Laumann et al., 2000). Given the biological nature of orgasms, it could be argued that gender differences in orgasm would be less susceptible to social context than other facets of sexuality. Are women simply biologically destined to experience less sexual pleasure than men? Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2009) empirically examined dimensions underlying the "orgasm gap." Researchers assessed

12,925 undergraduate responses from a nationally distributed survey and also interviewed undergraduate women about their sexual experiences.

Unsurprisingly, Armstrong and colleagues replicated the well-known orgasm gap in their research: Women in their sample orgasmed less than men did overall. But they also documented that this difference *can* largely evaporate—in the context of committed relationships. Although women orgasmed only 32% as often as men in first-time hookups and 49% as often as men in repeat hookups with the same sexual partner; they orgasmed 79% as often as men in established romantic relationships (Armstrong et al., 2009).

Why do women orgasm more in close relationships than in casual ones? Armstrong and colleagues demonstrated that male partners are more generous in providing noncoital sexual attention (i.e., “foreplay”) to their partners in committed relationships than they are in casual ones. These noncoital experiences provide women with the clitoral stimulation needed to orgasm. Ultimately, women reported more clitoral stimulation during sexual encounters in committed relationships than in hookups (Armstrong et al., 2009). Thus, biological differences appear to have little to do with women’s potential for orgasm; instead, the sexual practices performed play a significant role in narrowing the orgasm gap.

Bottom line: Do women orgasm less frequently than men? Yes, but this gap diminishes greatly when considering sexual encounters in committed relationships, and it may disappear entirely when considering varieties of sexual practices performed within those relationships.

Do Men Like Casual Sex More Than Do Women?

Men’s more positive attitudes toward and greater willingness to engage in casual sex is one of the largest documented sexuality gender differences (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Clark and Hatfield’s (1989) research classically illustrated this phenomenon: Female and male research-assistant confederates approached opposite-gender participants and invited them to engage in casual sex. No woman ever agreed to a sexual encounter with a male confederate, whereas approximately 70% of males agreed to offers from female confederates in both studies.

A difference of 70% versus 0% is truly gargantuan and, as such, might seem patently biological in origin—that is, one might wonder, how could such a large difference be explained by sociocultural factors?

One of us (Conley, 2011) attempted to unpack this stunningly large effect. Conley (2011) conducted a series of studies in which participants responded to hypothetical casual sex offers. As in the original Clark and Hatfield studies, women were much less likely to accept hypothetical offers from opposite-sex strangers than men were. However, different results emerged when Conley (2011) considered specific characteristics of casual-sex proposers (e.g., attractiveness,

familiarity). Gender differences in acceptance of heterosexual casual-sex proposals evaporated when participants considered sexual offers from very attractive or very unattractive famous individuals. Likewise, women and men were equally likely to accept offers of casual sex from close friends whom they perceived to have high sexual capabilities (i.e., whom they thought would “be a great lover” and would provide them with “a positive sexual experience”). Therefore, men are clearly not *universally* driven to accept casual sex more frequently than are women.

Conley next sought to determine which characteristics of the proposer yielded greater acceptance of casual-sex offers, considering both hypothetical proposals from strangers and previously experienced real-life proposals. Across multiple studies, perceived sexual capabilities of sexual proposers most strongly predicted acceptance of casual-sex offers among *both* women and men. Moreover, perceived proposer sexual capabilities partially mediated the gender differences in casual sex. In sum, women accepted fewer casual-sex offers from men than vice versa because male proposers were perceived to have relatively poorer sexual capabilities.

Stigma associated with engaging in casual sex for women also helps explain women’s reluctance to accept offers of casual sex; women are perceived more negatively than men for accepting casual sex. And women recognize this: Those who anticipated social opprobrium for casual sex (i.e., “slut-bashing,” a term regularly used by participants) were less likely to have accepted the most recent casual-sex offer that they received and were less likely to accept hypothetical casual-sex offers (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2011). A belief that one will be stigmatized harshly partially explains gender differences in casual sex. Gender differences are minimized when women feel that they can avoid being stigmatized for their behavior.

Most strikingly, when *both* proposer sexual capabilities *and* stigma associated with participation in casual sex are accounted for, the giant gender differences in acceptance evaporate completely.

Bottom line: Do men like casual sex more than women do? Yes, but those differences can be explained by the proposers’ sexual capabilities and women’s anticipation of being stigmatized for accepting the offer.

Are Women “Choosier” Than Men?

The assumption that women are choosier (i.e., more selective) than men with regard to sexual partners forms the foundation of many evolutionary theories (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Yet the research reviewed here concerning preferences for number of partners and for casual sex suggests indirectly that evidence of women’s greater choosiness may be overstated. Recent research tests the choosiness hypothesis more directly (Finkel & Eastwick, 2009).

Men typically pursue women rather than vice versa, following a traditional gender-stereotyped (and culturally bound;

Table 1. Incorrect or Exaggerated Beliefs About Gender Differences in Sexuality and Plausible Explanations

Supposed difference	Explanation
Women and men have gender-specific preferences for qualities of partners	Not in real-world contexts, which are presumably more valid than hypothetical musings
Women desire and actually have fewer sexual partners than men	No, gender differences in reported sexual partners stem less from sexual appetites and more from inappropriate statistics and social desirability
Men think about sex more than women	Yes, but they also think more about their own physical needs, overall
Women orgasm less frequently than men	Yes, but this gap diminishes greatly when considering sexual encounters in committed relationships and may disappear entirely when considering varieties of sexual practices performed within those relationships
Men like casual sex more than women do	Yes, but those differences can be explained by the proposers' sexual capabilities and women's anticipation of being stigmatized for accepting the offer
Women are "choosier" than men	Yes, but potentially only because they are approached more often than men are

Ryan & Jethå, 2010) social script (e.g., Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989). Therefore, women are approached more often than men are. Assumptions about women's choosiness have been based on our culture's traditional gender dynamics.

But what happens when *women* are in the "approacher" role? Recently, Finkel and Eastwick (2009) tested just that. They manipulated approacher gender within the context of speed-dating: Either men approached women or women approached men. The mere act of physically approaching someone (i.e., simply rotating through potential partners and introducing oneself during speed-dating) caused individuals to evaluate potential partners more favorably (e.g., reporting greater romantic chemistry and increased likelihood of a romantic relationship developing). Moreover, when women approached men, women behaved more like men (becoming *less* choosy), and men behaved more like women (becoming *more* choosy). Thus, this research suggests that "choosiness" may be an artifact of gendered social norms concerning who approaches whom.

Bottom line: Are women choosier than men? Yes, but potentially only because they are approached more often than men are.

Conclusion

Popular perceptions within psychology and among the greater public are that gender differences in sexuality are immutable and largely unaffected by the proximal social environment. We suggest that these conclusions are premature; in fact, gender differences can often be directly linked to forces within our current social world. Using varied methodological approaches and conceptual insights, psychologists are bringing such social influences to light and can make gender differences empirically diminish or disappear.

Within psychology, perspectives that draw upon adaptively evolved mechanisms (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Eagly & Wood, 1999) are typically utilized to explain gender differences in sexuality. That is, the behaviors we see today are presumed to be relics of our evolutionary past. The research reviewed suggests that these gender differences are in fact rooted in much more mundane causes: stigma against women for expressing sexual desires; women's socialization to attend to other's needs rather than their own; and, more broadly, a double standard that dictates (different sets of) appropriate sexual behaviors for men and women.

In sum, gender differences related to sex, though sometimes quite pronounced, are rarely as stable or immutable as they seem at first glance (see Table 1). Consumers of research on this topic should bear in mind the complex interplay of societal constraints of supposed gender differences in sexuality.

Recommended Reading

Petersen, J. L., & Hyde, J. S. (2010). (See References). A comprehensive, accessible meta-analysis of gender differences in sexuality.

Ryan, C. & Jethå, C. (2010). (See References). A recent review of anthropological, biological, and social accounts of human mating.

Conley, T. D. (2011). (See References). A more in-depth examination of gender differences in casual sex.

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