

# The Gender Discrepancy in Reported Number of Sexual Partners: Effects of Anonymity

Lindsay A. Wittrock

Faculty Sponsor: Carol Oyster, Psychology Department

## INTRODUCTION

Gender differences in sexuality have been widely researched in the field of psychology. Men and women have been found to differ in their sexual attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Sprecher, 1989). One specific gender difference in sexuality that has been the focus of many studies is the gender discrepancy in reported numbers of lifetime sexual partners (Phillis & Gromko, 1985; Wiederman, 1997). Men consistently report having had a greater number of sexual partners than do women (Lottes, 1993; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Wiederman, 1997). This finding appears to be illogical in that each heterosexual act requires one man and one woman. Theoretically, the number of sexual partners for each gender should be equal (Wiederman, 1997). Researchers have studied many theories explaining the gender discrepancy, including various sampling and response biases. This study used an experimental design to explore a particular form of response bias.

### *Theories Explaining the Gender Discrepancy*

**Sampling Bias.** One set of theories explains the gender discrepancy by exploring potential sources of sampling biases. One possible sampling bias is an unequal gender ratio in the population (Phillis & Gromko, 1985). If there are more women than men in a given population, then the men have more possible sexual partners in that population. However, most studies have found that accounting for an unequal gender ratio fails to completely correct the gender discrepancy (Smith, 1991; Wiederman, 1997).

Another potential source of sampling bias is the possible existence of a small group of women who have had many sexual partners (Wiederman, 1997). In other words, perhaps most women have had fewer sexual partners than men but a few women have had many more partners than men (e.g., prostitutes). However, researchers who have looked into this theory have not found any evidence of the existence of a small group of highly sexually active women (Einon, 1994). Controlling for the use of prostitution has also failed to correct the gender discrepancy (Einon, 1994).

**Response Bias.** Other theories explain the gender discrepancy by exploring response biases. One potential response bias would occur if men and women use different definitions of "sexual partner". Perhaps men count casual sexual partners and women do not. Perhaps men use broader definitions of what counts as sex than do women. However, most surveys include very careful definitions of what counts as a sexual partner (Wiederman, 1997). Also, Wiederman (1997) tested for inclusion of casual sexual partners and found there was no difference in the proportions of men and women who included casual sexual partners in their counts.

Other potential sources of response bias include forms of inaccuracy or dishonesty. Self-presentation bias occurs when participants give socially desirable responses in order to present themselves in a positive light (Catania, 1999; Meston, Heiman, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 1998). Since social norms about acceptable behavior may stimulate self-presentation bias (Catania, Binson, Peterson, & Canchola, 1997), researchers have suggested the possibility that a double standard may cause men to exaggerate or over-report sexual activity and women to minimize or under-report sexual activity (Catania, Binson, Van der Straten, & Stone, 1995; Smith, 1992).

### *The Double Standard*

**Evidence Supporting the Existence of a Double Standard.** The sexual double standard may be defined as prohibiting or discouraging sexual behaviors in women while accepting or encouraging the same sexual behaviors in men. Several studies have found support for the existence of a sexual double standard. In a study of college virgins conducted by Sprecher and Regan (1996), women reported more social pressure than did men to remain virgins. Lottes (1993) found that men attach more importance to marrying a virgin than do women.

Muehlenhard and Cook (1988) reported that almost two-thirds of the men in their sample had unwanted sexual intercourse due to gender role expectation, suggesting that the double standard not only discourages sexual experience for women but also encourages greater sexual experience for men.

Sheeran, Spears, Abraham, and Abrams (1996) surveyed 690 Scottish teenagers and found that women who had multiple sexual partners were rated as being more irresponsible and as having less self-respect than men with multiple partners. Sprecher and Hatfield (1996) had 389 male and 654 female undergraduates complete sexual permissiveness scales and found that men had significantly more permissive attitudes towards men than towards women. Sprecher, McKinney, and Orbach (1987) had 233 male and 320 female undergraduates rate fictional students and found that of those who had first coitus in a noncommitted relationship or at a young age, women were evaluated more negatively than were men. Milhausen and Herold (1999) surveyed 165 female undergraduates and found that 95% believed that a double standard exists in which it is more acceptable for a man to have many sexual partners than for a woman. 49% mentioned women being penalized for sexual behavior and 48% mentioned men being rewarded for sexual behavior.

**Evidence Suggesting the Double Standard has Disappeared.** The existence of a sexual double standard has been called into question by some researchers. Some research suggests that the once widely accepted double standard has diminished or even disappeared (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Differing findings across studies may be due to limitations in research designs. Crawford and Popp (2003) point out that experimental methods often ask questions about hypothetical males and females, thus abstracting behavior from its social context. Additionally, participants may be unwilling to admit to holding a double standard.

Despite research suggesting that the double standard has been reduced or eliminated, most researchers agree that further studies are needed to determine whether subtler forms of the double standard exist. Sprecher, McKinney, and Orbach (1987) suggest the existence of a conditional double standard wherein sex outside of marriage is considered acceptable for both men and women but under more restrictive conditions, such as love or engagement, for women. Lottes (1993) also discusses several studies in which it has been found that sexual behavior for women is only accepted within the context of a love relationship. Lottes also reports that though double standard beliefs have diminished, there is not strong support for a single sexual standard.

#### *Current Research*

Crawford and Popp (2003) note that most research on the double standard has focused on the perspective of the perceiver rather than on the perspective of the target. This study looked at the target's perception of social standards by leading participants to believe that they would share their survey responses with one another. Anonymous testing conditions were compared with non-anonymous testing conditions.

Anonymous testing conditions are ideal for reducing self-presentation bias because participants need not worry about others' reactions to their responses. On the other hand, perceived lack of anonymity should strengthen self-presentation bias in the form of socially desirable responding (Bjarnason, Thoroddur, Adalbjardottir, & Sigrun, 2000; Harrison, 1995). Tourangeau and Smith (1996) found that among men, reports of homosexual activity decreased with less anonymity while reports of numbers of sexual partners increased with less anonymity.

If a sexual double standard does exist, the socially desirable response would be different for men than for women. Fisher and Alexander (1999) varied perceived levels of anonymity and found that as perceived level of anonymity decreased, reported amounts of masturbation decreased. However, the decrease was of a much greater magnitude for women than for men. The greatest difference between males and females was found in the group with the lowest perceived level of anonymity, suggesting that the social stigma against masturbation is greater for women than for men. The current study utilized a similar design to create socially desirable responding regarding the number of lifetime sexual partners. An anonymous group was given an anonymous survey while a "non-anonymous" group was led to believe they would have to share their responses amongst themselves.

#### *Hypotheses*

Hypotheses were that 1) women in the "non-anonymous" group would report having had fewer sexual partners than would women in the anonymous group; 2) men in the "non-anonymous" group would report having had a greater number of sexual partners than would men in the anonymous group; 3) women would report having had fewer sexual partners than would men in both the anonymous and "non-anonymous" groups; and 4) the gender discrepancy in number of lifetime sexual partners would be greater in the "non-anonymous" group than in the anonymous group.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 40 female and 19 male psychology students from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Students received one extra credit point for participating. Participants were surveyed in one large mixed-gender group of 29 participants and 3 small mixed-gender groups of 7-15 participants. The large group was surveyed under the anonymous condition while the small groups were surveyed under the non-anonymous condition.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants filled out general surveys about life at UW-L. Questions regarding the lifetime number of sexual partners were embedded in the survey. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All participants were instructed to answer all questions honestly. All participants were instructed not to put their names on their surveys. In the anonymous condition, participants were seated spread out in a large lecture room. Participants placed their surveys in a large, secure box when finished. In the "non-anonymous" condition, participants sat side-by-side around a conference table. Participants were instructed that they would be sharing and discussing their answers with the group after completing their surveys. No answers were actually discussed, and the participants were fully debriefed immediately following all participants' completion of the survey. Participants were then asked to place their surveys in a large, secure box.

## RESULTS

An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. Univariate analysis of variance indicated no statistically significant main effect of either gender or anonymity (see Table 1). The interaction between gender and anonymity was not statistically significant (see Table 1). Post-hoc *t*-tests indicated that women in the non-anonymous condition reported having had significantly fewer sexual partners than did women in the anonymous condition,  $t(27)=-2.161, p=.001$  (see Table 2). No significant difference was found between men in the two conditions.

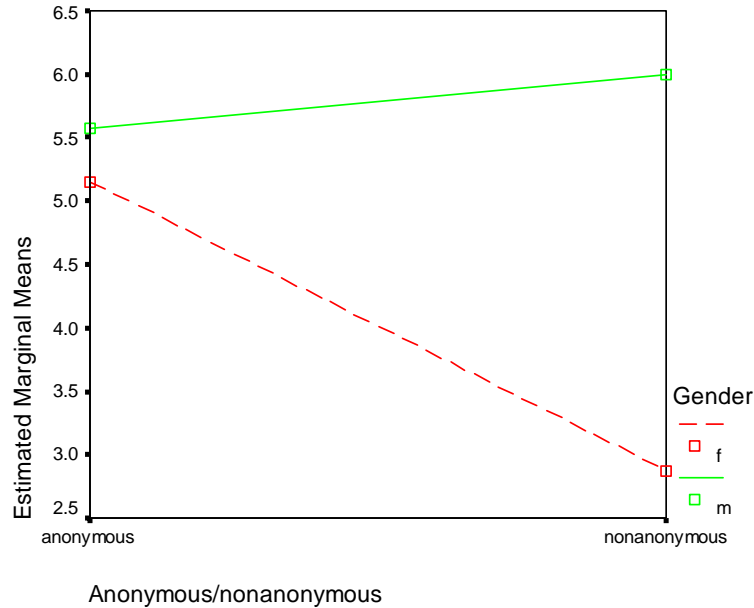
**Table 1.** Tests of Between-Subjects Effects Dependent Variable: Number of sexual partners

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
GENDER	27.954	1	27.954	1.515	.226
ANONYMIT	7.626	1	7.626	.413	.524
GENDER * ANONYMIT	16.327	1	16.327	.885	.353

a R Squared = .090 (Adjusted R Squared = .018)

**Table 2.** Post-Hoc Independent Samples T-Test for Females

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Number of sexual partners	Equal variances assumed	14.817	.001	-2.161	27	.040



**Figure 1.** Mean numbers of sexual partners

## CONCLUSIONS

As predicted, women reported fewer partners than did men across both conditions, though the main effect of gender was not significant. Also as predicted, the gender discrepancy was greater in the non-anonymous condition than in the anonymous condition. This interaction between gender and anonymity was not statistically significant, most likely due to too few participants in each cell. However, the interaction can clearly be seen in the graph of the data (see Figure 1).

The significant difference in reported number of partners between women in the non-anonymous and anonymous conditions but not between men supports the existence of a sexual double standard. The women in the non-anonymous condition may have felt social pressure regarding their sexuality whereas men did not.

The existence of a sexual double standard has great implications for society. Crawford and Popp (2003) suggest that the most important aspect of the double standard is its effects on those who perceive it. For example, Hynie and Lydon (1995) found that women may be less likely to be contraceptively prepared due to fear of negative social evaluation. In fact, a woman's perception of her partner's endorsement of a double standard is more predictive of her condom use than are her own beliefs (Hynie & Lydon, 1995).

Durham (1998) found that girls "experience dissonance when they are depicted as sexual objects yet defined in terms of sluts and whores when they express their sexuality (Crawford & Popp, 2003)."

Further research is needed to determine the sources and the extent of the sexual double standard as well as its effects on those who perceive its existence. Clearly the perception of a double standard exists and affects both behavior and emotions regardless of our ability to clearly identify the existence of the double standard.

## REFERENCES

- Catania, J. A. (1999). A framework for conceptualizing reporting bias and its antecedents in interviews assessing human sexuality. *Journal of Sex Research, 36*, 25-38.
- Catania, J. A., Binson, D., Van der Straten, A., & Stone, V. (1995). Methodological research on sexual behavior in the AIDS era. *Annual Review of Sex Research, 6*, 77-125.
- Crawford, M. and Popp, D. (2003). Sexual double standards: a review and methodological critique of two decades of research. *Journal of Sex Research, 40*, 13-26.
- Einon, D. (1994). Are men more promiscuous than women? *Ethology and Sociobiology, 15*, 131-143.
- Fisher, T. D., and Alexander, M. G. (199, May). *Sex differences in reports of masturbation as a function of testing conditions*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Midcontinent Region of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, Madison, WI.
- Harrison, L. D. (1995). The validity of self-reported data on drug use. *Journal of Drug Issues, 25*, 91-111.
- Lottes, I. L. (1993) Nontraditional gender roles and the sexual experiences of heterosexual college students. *Sex Roles, 29*, 645-669.
- Meston, C., Heiman, J., Trapnell, P., & Paulhus, D. (1998). Socially desirable responding and sexuality self-reports. *Journal of Sex Research, 35*, 148-157.
- Milhausen, R. R., and Herold, S. E. (1999). Does the sexual double standard still exist? Perceptions of university women. *Journal of Sex Research, 36*.
- Muehlenhard, C. L., and Cook, S. W. (1988) Men's self-reports of unwanted sexual activity. *Journal of Sex Research, 24*, 58-72.
- Oliver, M. B., and Hyde, J. S. (1993) Gender differences in sexuality: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*, 29-51.
- Phillis, D. E., and Gromko, M. H. (1985). Sex differences in sexual activity: Reality or illusion? *Journal of Sex Research, 21*, 437-448.
- Sheeran, P., Spears, R., Abraham, S. C. S., & Abrams, D. (1996). Religiosity, gender, and the double standard. *Journal of Psychology, 130*, 23-33.
- Smith, T. W. (1991). Adult sexual behavior in 1989: Number of partners, frequency of intercourse and risk of AIDS. *Family Planning Perspectives, 23*, 102-107.
- Smith, T. W. (1992). Discrepancies between men and women in reporting number of sexual partners: A summary from four countries. *Social Biology, 39*, 203-211.
- Sprecher, S. (1989). Premarital sexual standards for different categories of individuals. *Journal of Sex Research, 26*, 232-248.
- Sprecher, S., & Hatfield, E. (1996). Premarital sexual standards among U.S. college students: Comparison with Russian and Japanese students. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 25*, 261-288.
- Sprecher, S., McKinney, K., & Orbuch, T. L. (1987). Has the double standard disappeared? An experimental test. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 50*, 24-31.
- Sprecher, S., and Regan, P. C. (1996). College virgins: How men and women perceive their sexual status. *Journal of Sex Research, 33*, 3-16.
- Tourangeau, R., and Smith, T. (1996). Asking sensitive questions: The impact of data collection mode, question format, and question context. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 60*, 275-304.
- Wiederman, M. W. (1997). The truth must be in here somewhere: Examining the gender discrepancy in self-reported lifetime number of sex partners. *Journal of Sex Research, 34*, 375-387.