

If I Am a Slut, Then What is He? A Developmental Analysis of the Sexual Double Standard

Emilie Ratter, Cassie Riccioli

Faculty Sponsor: Tracie Blumentritt, Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate developmental differences in the perception of the sexual double standard (SDS). The SDS is a social phenomenon in which men are rewarded and women are derogated for similar sexual activity. High school and college students were assessed. Participants read a hypothetical journal entry and afterward filled out an attitudes questionnaire on their perceptions of the journal author. The journal entry varied by gender of author and level of promiscuity. It was hypothesized that evidence of the SDS would be supported. Furthermore, based on the gender role intensification hypothesis, it was hypothesized that high school students – adolescents – would adhere more closely to the SDS than colleges students, meaning they would judge women more harshly than men based on sexuality. Both hypotheses were supported. The finding may have implications for approaching sexuality during adolescence in educational, parenting, and therapy settings.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the liberalization of gender roles in the United States in recent decades, stereotypes and double standards still exist. The sexual double standard (SDS), for example, continues to be perceived as an issue facing men and women. The SDS is a social phenomenon in which men are rewarded and given more freedom for sexual activity while women are given much less freedom and are even derogated for sexual activity (Marks & Fraley, 2005; Fasula, Miller, & Wiener, 2007). Over eighty-five percent of the U.S. population believes that the SDS still exists in society (Marks & Fraley, 2005).

The empirical evidence supporting or disproving the existence of the SDS is inconsistent. While some studies have found no significant findings of the SDS, others have found affirming evidence to suggest the phenomenon exists. Marks and Fraley (2005, 2006) used vignettes and diary entries about a person's sexual activity and varied the person's gender to detect a difference. Similarly, Garcia (1982) used vignettes of people having high or low sexual experiences for stimuli. Both studies found evidence of the SDS. Furthermore, Fasula, Miller, and Wiener (2007) found evidence of the SDS in parenting of African American mothers for their sons and daughters, which are more thoroughly discussed later. However, McCarthy and Bodnar (2005), along with others, have found no supporting empirical evidence to suggest that a SDS exists.

Marks and Fraley (2005, 2006) offer several reasons for the inconsistency in SDS findings. Much of the research on the SDS has been done in isolated laboratory settings and lacks real-life environments, which may possibly tamper the findings. Additionally, demand characteristics may be occurring when participants answer more egalitarian than they normally would, because they believe that is the norm for society and that the researchers want them to respond in that specific way. Finally, confirmation bias, when people attend to what supports their beliefs and ignore what goes against their beliefs, can affect SDS results. These factors and the variation in the findings lead to speculation as to whether the SDS actually exists or if there is simply a pervasive but false perception that it exists (Marks & Fraley, 2005, 2006).

Despite the lack of strong evidence supporting that the SDS exists, there are numerous implications on the mere belief of such a standard existing. For example, Dankoski, Payer, and Steinberg (1996) discuss the problem of the SDS in family therapy settings. They suggest that therapists would be more effective in dealing with sexuality issues with young people if not only girls were addressed but also their boy counterparts. Furthermore, they suggest that therapists should put equal responsibility on both boys and girls for sexual actions and outcomes, such as pregnancy or disease. Other implications of educating children on sexuality will propose further study.

The Sexual Double Standard and Adolescents

The importance of studying the SDS with adolescents is two-fold. The research serves to monitor developmental changes in regards to the understandings of sexuality and also notes changes in the trends of the age at which people begin to be sexually active. The ages of beginning sexual activity is getting younger and younger; the number of sexually active teenagers in grades nine through twelve in the U.S. today is forty-five percent and forty-eight percent, respectively (The Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, 2005). During this time of development, young men and women are formulating their own understandings of sex-roles and sexuality.

In research with adolescents, the primary findings suggest that the SDS not only exists but is highly detected as well. Jackson and Cram (2003) analyzed how adolescent girls challenge the constraints and rigidity of the SDS within their "talk." Overall, the girls were aware of the SDS and disliked it. They even went as far as to criticize the fame associated with male promiscuity. Nonetheless, their resistance to the SDS within their talk was weak because they accepted the standard as inevitable (Jackson & Cram, 2003). This gives an example of how the SDS not only degrades women by coining them "sluts" and labeling men as "studs," but how it also impacts young women and the way they grow up to view their own sexuality.

Research on the SDS in adolescence and parenting has found supporting evidence as well. Fasula et al. (2007) found that the SDS was upheld by mothers' parenting of their children. Mothers were much more tolerant of their sons' sexual development and exploration than their daughters'. In another study, Welles (2005) found that adolescent girls saw their mothers as poor role models for the sexual empowerment of women. Additionally, mothers withheld information about sex and were unable to acknowledge the sexual development of their daughters.

Another common theme found in the SDS research within adolescence is the ambiguity of sex-roles for teenage girls. For instance, in a study done by Schleicher and Gilbert (2005), they found an ambiguity between what men wanted of women sexually and what society expected of women sexually. While men wanted their female partners to be open and assertive about their sexual desires, society wanted women to be quiet and submissive in their sexuality (Schleicher & Gilbert, 2005). The research found that women were able to be open about their sexuality only when they were in committed relationships, whereas men were able to satisfy their sexual needs in either committed or casual relationships (Schleicher & Gilbert, 2005). Such findings are prime examples of the SDS at work and how the implications of the SDS affect adolescents' thinking of their sexuality.

Cognitive Developmental Changes in the Understanding of Sexuality

Gender and sex-roles begin developing early in life. According to King (1996), the average age when children begin to grasp gender roles is between fourteen months and two-and-a-half years. Interestingly, by age four, children undoubtedly have embraced gender stereotypes, which can be seen in their play preferences and ideas about their parents (King, 1996). Later in life, when children experience the onset of puberty, averaging between ages nine and sixteen, gender role intensification occurs. The gender role intensification hypothesis states "psychological and behavioral differences between boys and girls become greater during adolescence because of increased pressures to conform to traditional masculine and feminine gender roles" (Santrock, 2008, p. 440).

While gender role intensification is occurring, sexuality for adolescents is becoming more of a reality. According to Santrock (2008), most people experience sexual intercourse for the first time in mid to late adolescence. Furthermore, research suggests that boys tend to experience their first sexual intercourse at an earlier age than girls (Dankoski et al., 1996). Dankoski et al. (1996) suggest that between the ages of thirteen and fourteen, eighteen percent of boys have had sexual intercourse.

The purpose of our study is to investigate developmental differences in the perception of the SDS. We believe that it is important to consider when the SDS is developed because there are numerous implications for sex education, parenting styles on sexuality and even family therapy, as supported by earlier studies. Based on previous research, we hypothesize that the SDS will be found. Furthermore, we hypothesize that the SDS will be more prominent in adolescents compared to young adults because of the gender role intensification that occurs during the teenage years.

METHOD

Participants

High school participants came from a local high school that had agreed to partake in the research. College student samples were taken from a local university. A total of 299 participants ranged between the ages of fifteen and fifty years old. The average age was 21.11 years old. The majority of participants (93%) identified themselves as White/Caucasian American.

Procedures and Materials

Participants were given consent forms prior to the study. For the high school students, parental permission was required. Consent forms were mailed to the parents and were asked to send back the form if they agreed to allow their child to participate in the study. If the parents did not agree, they were required to do nothing. The college students were given a consent form prior to the study.

Both high school and college students received the same information. However, the high school students participated using pen and paper, and the college students completed the research via an online database. Participants read a hypothetical journal entry written by either a man or woman student. A portion of an example of a male-author-journal-entry is as follows:

“We ended up watching a movie on the couch together. When the movie first started, we were just sitting next to each other, but by the end of it, we were making out...Later on, when I was about to put a second movie in, *she* asked if I wanted to have sex...I have been with *one* other *girl* before, but being with *Lacey* still meant something to me, and I like *her* even more now.”

The journal entries' content remained consistent throughout all levels with the exception of altering the gender of the author and the number of previous sexual partners he/she had. The italicized words were the only words that were changed in each condition. The rest remained the same.

After the participants read the journal entries, they completed an attitudes questionnaire on their perceptions of the target. The questionnaire was borrowed from Marks and Fraley (2005, 2006). For the high school students, crosswords were provided in the research packet for any participants who did not feel comfortable in completing the survey. College students were allowed to log off of the research program at any time.

Debriefing was done at the end of each participant's session. Participants were told that the journal entry was fictitious and the content was not true. They were then informed of the true nature of the study.

RESULTS

Two hundred and ninety nine ($N = 299$) students participated in the study. Of the 299 participants, 32 were high school students and 267 were college students in the Midwest. Of the 299 participants 112 were men and 187 were women. The age range was between 15 and 50, with a mean age of 21.11 ($SD = 6.03$). Two hundred seventy eight of the participants identified as “White/Caucasian”, four as “African-American”, three as “Mexican-American”, three as “Hmong” and eleven as “other.” Six of the participants identified themselves as being sophomores in high school, 26 as seniors in high school, 55 as freshmen in college, 45 as sophomores in college, 62 as juniors in college and 105 as seniors in college.

We computed an independent samples t -test to examine the mean difference between high school students and college students' scores on the SDS scale. The results of the t -test were significant, $t = -3.86$ ($p < .05$), with high school students having a lower mean score ($M = 87.27$) than college students ($M = 93.63$) on the SDS scale. With equal variances not assumed, given a difference of -6.36 on the SDS scale, 95% of the time, the difference between high school and college students will not be less than -9.69 and not greater than -3.04 . The lower the mean score on the SDS scale the less positively that individual is perceived, whereas the higher the mean score on the SDS scale the more positively that individual is perceived. As illustrated in Figure 1, the data indicate that high school students have lower SDS scale scores on average than college students, showing evidence of a developmental difference in perceptions and attitudes in terms of the SDS.

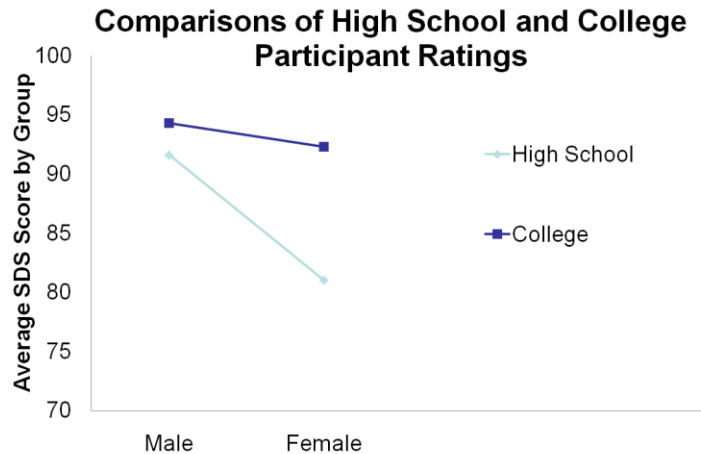


Figure 1. SDS scores based on educational level

We conducted a one-way 2 X 3 ANOVA to examine differences in perception ratings on promiscuity and gender of a hypothetical journal entry where the gender of the author and number of sexual partners of the author were manipulated. As illustrated in Figure 2, the results of the ANOVA for perception ratings based on the gender of the journal author were significant [$F(1) = 6.67, p = .01$]. A main effect of gender of author across promiscuity level (one, six, or twelve partners) was found and shown in Figure 2, where a female author’s rating was affected by the number of sexual partners voiced in the journal entry and a male author’s rating was not. The results of the ANOVA for perception rating differences between high school and college students on the SDS scale were significant [$F(1) = 9.30, p = .00$]. A main effect of educational level was found, where high school students rated journal authors based more so on the author’s gender and promiscuity level whereas college students did not.

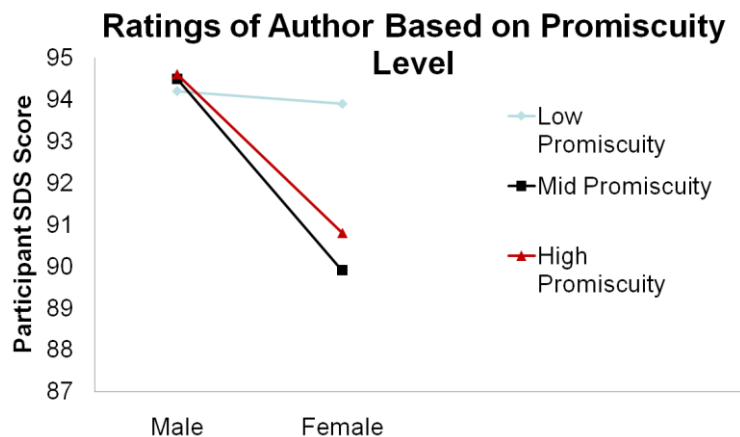


Figure 2. SDS scores based on promiscuity levels

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have found inconsistencies in evidence of the SDS. This study suggests further supporting evidence of the SDS plus a more complex interaction between perceptions of sexuality and developmental age. For men authors, the mean perception scores of participants were consistent across all promiscuity levels, whereas the mean perception scores for women authors varied as a function of promiscuity level, therefore providing evidence of the SDS. High school students had a more rigid view of sexuality, rating women authors more harshly than men authors as a function of promiscuity, which further supports evidence of the SDS. High school participants’ average perception scores were lower than college students average perception scores, meaning high school students rated

women authors less favorable as a function of promiscuity level than they rated men authors. This illustrates the developmental importance and implications of the SDS during a time when adolescents experience gender role intensification.

As stated earlier, gender role intensification occurs during adolescence and is a time when psychological and behavioral differences between boys and girls become more apparent (Santrock, 2008). This is a time period when adolescents feel pressure to conform to traditional masculine and feminine gender roles and is an important aspect of investigation within this study (Santrock, 2008). The belief is that because gender role intensification marks such an influential period of development for adolescents, the formation of sexuality and gender role perceptions are malleable. This shows the importance of such research on the SDS because adolescents' views and assumptions about sexuality can be challenged during this period of development; hopefully reducing biased thinking in terms of promiscuity, sexuality, and gender roles. Such a reduction in biased thinking would most likely take place within schools in the form of sexual education courses. Adolescence is a time period riddled with outside pressures and conformity and if educational leaders keep research that has analyzed developmental components of the SDS in mind while educating, students will benefit more so and hopefully begin to move away from erroneous assumptions and biases.

Although high school students were found to have lower perception rating scores than college students, when both sets of data were collapsed an overall finding of the SDS was still evident. This is likely a result of societal norms, and may have its roots in evolutionary psychology. In centuries past, it has been the goal of men to impregnate as many women as possible to increase their number of offspring. On the other hand, women's goal was focused on the quality of a mate and to find a man who would stay and help raise the children. It is possible that even in current society these evolutionary themes are at work. Although the exact source of such a double standard cannot be certain, it is evident that the SDS will not be erased from society any time soon. The SDS is deeply rooted and may never go away. Bringing forth awareness of the SDS will help combat the double standard we hold for men and women, especially when considering the impact it can have on adolescent development. Nevertheless, there is more research to be done and ways in which the current research can be improved.

The main limitation of this study has to do with acquiring the parental consent of minors when the research pertains to sexuality. This affected the sample size of high school students available to participate in the study. On the other hand, because college students are traditionally legal adults, more college students were available resulting in unequal sample sizes.

Another limitation of the research was a lack of ethnic diversity in research participants. Because the vast majority of participants identified themselves as "White/Caucasian American," the validity of the results across all ethnic and racial groups in the United States declines significantly. Therefore, because of these limitations, there are a few considerations for future researchers.

Future research should take into account the difficulty of obtaining parental consent of minors and should plan accordingly. It would be interesting—if ethical guidelines allowed—to compare the average perception scores of middle school, high school, and college students on a SDS survey. Furthermore, a cross-cultural developmental analysis may benefit the field because different cultures have varying approaches, attitudes, and perceptions towards sexuality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support of the UW-La Crosse Undergraduate Research Grants Committee, the high school administrators, our advisor Tracie Blumentritt, Ph.D., and our Honors Professor Betsy Morgan, Ph.D.

REFERENCES

- Dankoski, M. E., Payer, R., & Steinberg, M. (1996). Broadening the concept of adolescent promiscuity: Male accountability made visible and the implications for family therapists. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 24(4), 367-381.
- Fasula, A. M., Miller, K. S., & Wiener, J. (2007). The sexual double standard in African American adolescent women's sexual risk reduction socialization. *Women & Health*. 46(2/3), 3-21.
- Garcia, T. Luis (1982). Sex-Role Orientation and Stereotypes about Male-Female Sexuality. *Sex Roles*, 8(8), 863,875.
- Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2005). Retrieved on February 21, 2007, from <http://www.kff.org/youthhivstds/upload/U-S-Teen-Sexual-Activity-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

- Jackson, M. Susan & Cram, Fiona (2003). Disrupting the sexual double standard: Young women's talk about heterosexuality. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42, 113-127.
- King, B. M. (1996). *Human Sexuality Today*, 2, 203-209. New Orleans, LA: Prentice Hall.
- Marks, M. J. & Fraley, R. C. (2005). The sexual double standard: Fact or fiction? *Sex Roles*, 52, 175-186.
- Marks, M. J. & Fraley, R. C. (2006). Confirmation bias and the sexual double standard. *Sex Roles*, 54, 19-25.
- McCarthy, B.W. & Bodnar, L.E. (2005). The equity model of sexuality: Navigating and negotiating the similarities and differences between men and women in sexual behaviour, roles and values. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 20 (2), 225-235.
- Santrock, J.W. (2008). *Life-Span Development*, 10, 439-445. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Schleicher, Starling Sabrina & Gilbert, Albino Lucia (2005). Heterosexual dating discourses among college students: Is there still a double standard? *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 19(3).
- Welles, E. Caitlin (2005). Breaking the Silence Surrounding Female Adolescent Sexual Desire. *Women & Therapy*, 28(2), 31-45.