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College Students' Attitudes about Feminine and Masculine Sexuality

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Abstract

Sexuality is a vital part of most people's lives. Unfortunately, most people feel as though there are very different standards for what is sexually acceptable for men and what is sexually acceptable for women. There is some evidence for this, but it is a possibility that this double standard is not how college students feel today about sexuality. The study that was conducted found that both men and women thought that women's sexuality was actually more acceptable than men's sexuality. The 75 students surveyed held less conservative attitudes about what is sexually acceptable for women than for men.

College Students' Attitudes about Feminine and Masculine Sexuality

There has not been much research conducted relating to sexual attitudes, sexual permissiveness, and sexual practices (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1985). Before the study of attitudes towards sex, sexuality itself was studied. If one were to look up sexuality as it relates to women in history, one would find little to nothing about it. Sexuality has long been a taboo topic, and it is even more so when it is women's sexuality. This can be seen in how little women know about their own sexuality. An example of how taboo discussing women's sexuality is by discussing the female anatomy is the fact that even women have a difficult time saying the word "vagina." This can be illustrated through the discussion raised by the Broadway play, "The Vagina Monologues." This show has raised some awareness and education for women and their sexuality that obviously has not been discussed or talked about in schools or by others.

Historically, studies of sexuality were only of men and their sexuality. This focuses on simply the sex act, and not the part of sexuality that is outside of penetration. Studies of sexuality in the past were limited to the study of male sexuality solely through the male sex organ, which let women know that their sexuality was unimportant (Matlin, 2003). It was not even important enough to be studied. It was as though women's sexuality was invisible. Attitudes about sexuality were similarly researched. In a study cited in the book, *Psychology of Women* by Margaret Matlin, the early 1900's attitude about sex was that unmarried couples should not have sex (Matlin, 2003). This would leave one to believe that attitudes about sex were conservative for men and women. By the 1960's, however, the sexual double standard had emerged. According to Matlin, Americans "believed that premarital sex was inappropriate for women but was excusable

or even appropriate for men” (Matlin, 2003, p. 287). So, in history women were invisible in sexuality research, and when research was done it revealed that women had different standards than men. If this is the case, it is implied the attitude at that time was conservative for women and very non-conservative for men; hence, the sexual double standard.

Once sexual attitudes are learned, it seems as though stereotypes differ of what is acceptable for a man and what is acceptable for a woman. Why are these standards different? It could be said that our attitudes about sex and standards in what is “normal” is given by the media, and being full of sexuality, and a huge cultural influence, maybe this is where sexuality is learned. This idea was supported by Ward’s (2002) study, where college participants who were exposed to sexual situations that encouraged sexual stereotypes were more likely to endorse such stereotypes than people who had not viewed the segments. This would suggest that the media could possibly influence students’ attitudes about female sexuality. A second study by Ward of high school and college students showed that people who frequently watched sexually oriented television (such as soap operas and music videos) tended to have a greater acceptance for stereotypical and casual attitudes towards sex (Ward, 2002). This suggests that the media can have at least some bearing on people’s perceptions of what is normal, and of attitudes about casual sex. Another study examining gender differences in relation to the media showed that when males were exposed to sexually oriented television, they expected a broad range of sexual activities in their relationships, and women expected sex earlier in their relationships (Aubrey, 2003). This shows how the media can influence men and women’s attitudes about what is sexually appropriate. By these men and women altering

their perceptions because of the media, a sexual stereotype was enforced: mainly, women being expected to be hypersexual. Together, these studies show that media affects our sexual attitudes in some way, and that there is at least some influence by media on how we perceive the world around us. Lifelong viewing of certain sexual behaviors (e.g., promiscuity) could result in the perception that these behaviors are normal, despite clear gender differences in what is acceptable.

Another media aspect about what is acceptable male versus female behavior is on television and in the movies of men as “players.” These men have sex with many different women, and this is completely acceptable. Examples include James Bond and Shaft. Both of these characters are shown to have multiple sexual partners and without experiencing any repercussions. For example, James Bond has a different love interest in every movie and proceeds to have sex with each of these women. Condoms are never mentioned, and then the females themselves are never mentioned again. Research has shown that fictional characters are very rarely, if ever depicted as being sexually responsible (Aubrey, 2003). Thus, the media is potentially educating the viewers that, for men, multiple partners are acceptable and sexual responsibility is unnecessary. Specifically the message being sent is that women cannot behave any way that they want, (as men seemingly can) and they should not use protection. If a woman were to have the same behaviors, she would not be a hero, but be seen as “easy” or as being a “slut.” So the underlying attitude is that women must be more “virginal” and have fewer partners were as men can have sex with as many people as they want and it is socially acceptable.

The language used to describe people who are promiscuous also conveys a double standard. If a woman is promiscuous, she is a “slut,” “easy,” or a “whore.” What is the

word to describe a man who sleeps around? There is no negative word used to describe a man in this way. As was shown before, if a man has sex with many different partners, he is a “player” or even a “pimp.” Both of these words, in American popular culture, have very positive connotations! This is not the case for women. Just as there is no negative word to describe a man who sleeps around, there also is no positive word to describe a woman who has many partners. Language can be a great illustrator for what is important to a culture. This shows, through language, Americans’ attitudes towards sexuality.

Language is the first way that young people learn about culture, but what else have they learned about sexuality? A study of media’s influence on adolescents’ attitudes about sexuality suggested that media plays a huge factor in how teens perceive what is right and wrong in sexuality (Pettit, 2003). After adolescents are bombarded with sexual images and situations in the media, and totally different ideals for what is acceptable for men and women, where else might a child obtain their attitudes about sex? One possibility is sexual education in the schools. A study involving parents’ attitudes concerning sexual education in school, the vast majority of parents (95%) think that sexual education should be introduced early in a child’s school years (Weaver, 2002). Parents are also more likely to discuss sexuality with their same sex child than their opposite sex child (Matlin, 2003). Matlin also discussed what these sex education programs actually cover for the students. Matlin calls these programs “organ recitals” (Matlin, 2003). In her book, she discusses how sex education does not show the students the connections between the physical aspect of sex and also the emotions. Based on this, the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health is calling for a new approach to sexuality for adolescents. One main issue that they think needs to change in the

education of adolescents is that the adolescents are not the problem with education, adults are. The commission says that education needs to begin to include the idea that it is essential for adolescents to form a sexual identity, and this needs to be incorporated into their education. They also think that the United States needs a new paradigm for moral sexual relationships outside of what is seen in the popular media (Haffer, 1998). If all girls are taught growing up is the purely physical aspect of sex AND their parents aren't discussing it with them it should be no surprise that girls are confused about sexuality and get their ideas from the media. If girls are taught about all aspects of their sexuality early, and in a positive light, then their sexual attitudes will be more balanced growing up. They will not have to feel the pressure of the sexual double standard.

Another important factor in the creation of sexual attitudes is parent-child relationships. Research has shown that the younger adolescents and the less parental communication and closeness they reported, the less likely they were to report sexual knowledge (Sommers, 2000). This would suggest that more openness between parents and their adolescent children does not necessarily decrease the likelihood that children will be sexually active. It may be that parents are talking to their children and could have excellent relationships, but they are not talking with their kids about sex. Another study explored how growing up as an adolescent female would negatively affect sexuality later in life. It found that girls that are brought up in the United States had many sexual problems such as poor body image, lack of understanding of one's own sexuality, and sexual double standards (Tolman, 1999). Tolman (1999) suggested this problem could be resolved by doing interviews with adolescent girls to begin to get them to talk openly about their sexual attitudes, body awareness, and sexual pleasure. Tolman suggests that

just by sitting down and talking with girls about their attitudes and their bodies is an easy way for parents to begin to educate and make girls more comfortable talking about sex. By establishing a comfortable environment, girls can begin to realize that it is sex is not a dirty and mysterious thing that only males can enjoy but also something that women can enjoy and not feel dirty about. This is a way for parents to also express their morals and attitudes about sex to their daughters to better educate them about sex. With education comes responsibility, and hopefully more women that will be more comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality. This, then, will lead to more balanced sexual attitudes.

From our adolescent attitudes come our attitudes we develop as adults. What attitudes do men and women have about sex? The difficulty in studying sexuality is that there are so many influences on adult sexuality. As an adolescent, media, parents, friends, and limited education influence sexuality. An adult must consider all those influences in addition to their religious beliefs, their own personal convictions, attitudes about premarital sex, previous sexual partners, and prior relationships. Many people might think that women's sexual behavior is more harshly evaluated than men's. This might not necessarily be the case. One study found that more men than women thought men's sexual behavior is more harshly evaluated than women's (Milhausen, 2001). At the same time, in this study, men and women recognized that there is a double standard regarding men and women's sexual practices. Another study showed that when men and women were shown an ambiguous interaction between a man and a woman, men were more likely to see the interaction in sexual terms (Vrij, 2002). Maybe part of the double standard is that men see women's interactions as sexual when they might not necessarily be. If the initial interaction is perceived as sexual, then the male will most likely act in a

more sexual manner towards the female. So, maybe misinterpretation could this have something to do with the male sexual attitudes towards females. In one study, Martin reported that young women often feel coerced into sex (Martin, 2002). Martin also found that many young women feel as if sex is not a give and take from two people, but solely a taking situation done solely by males. College students had similar thoughts on interpretation of behaviors. The same study was done with college students, and the reaction was exactly the same. Men perceived ambiguous interactions as more sexual than women (Vrij, 2002). Another study about men's sexual attitudes as shown through their answers to surveys was reported by Matlin. This study was done by the National Opinion Research Center reported that 17% of men had had more than 20 sexual partners, whereas only 3% of women reported having the same number of partners (Matlin, 2003). One explanation that Matlin provides for the large discrepancy could be that men will usually over report their number of sexual partners, and women will under report theirs. This would lead to large differences in numbers, which would change the statistics and confirm the stereotype. At some times people will report having different sexual behaviors, but at other times no differences are reported. This shows men as saying that, for men, it is expected that they would have far more sexual partners. This implies that they felt men were supposed to have high numbers and women felt as though it was more normal for them to have lower numbers. Their attitudes were shown by the way they answered the questionnaire. Their attitude was that women must be more sexually conservative and that men must be less conservative. Hendrick and Hendrick (1985) considered these discrepancies in a well-publicized study. The researchers suggested the reason for the differences in results were due to a lack of a sexual attitude

scale which explored all aspects of sexuality including abortion, perfectionism with sex, and birth control, in addition to sexual attitudes. Their solution to the problem was to develop a sexual attitudes scale which contained 102 questions related to these topics, answered on a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. They studied over 800 college students of differing ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. These students were mostly undergraduate students with a mean age of 19, and slightly more than half were female. Perhaps not surprisingly, the largest number of gender differences were found to be questions loaded on the Sexual Permissiveness factor. Hendrick and Hendrick found that women were only slightly more conservative than men when it came to sexual permissiveness. This shows that the gap between men and women's sexual attitudes is not as large as most people believe it is. One unexpected finding was most women felt that they were much more sexual than people thought they were. Women feel as though they cannot express their sexuality. They hold the attitude that it is wrong for women to express their sexuality, therefore, they are more sexual than others think. Women might not openly discuss their sexuality because they do not want a negative label from others.

In summary, studies have shown that the media gives us inaccurate ideas about sex and sexuality, and can actually influence our behavior. The media also encourages the sexual double standard that women should not have multiple sexual partners, but it is perfectly acceptable for men to do so. The media also does not promote safe sex. The media influences what our children believe about sex, but so do parents. Parents want more sex education in schools, and also want more "liberal" education about sexuality, but they do not talk to children about sexuality themselves. Encouraging studies are showing that

people do not personally believe that the sexual double standard is true, but they think that others have this mentality. If the media's image of sexuality were less widely accepted as the way most people feel, maybe the average person would be more open with their attitudes about sex. When it comes right down to it, men and women have very similar attitudes about sex, but gender similarities do not sell books or make interesting reading. Maybe this is why the popular media would rather focus on gender differences rather than the similarities males and females share. It is encouraging to think that most people believe that men and women should both enjoy sex and at the same time be sexually responsible, and to make this attitude more readily discussed maybe sexual education that discusses more than just the sexual act is a way to encourage this. Open and honest discussion with parents is another way to encourage a more all-inclusive attitude toward sexuality in childhood that will lead to the same attitudes in adulthood. To date, there is not much research on gender differences in attitudes toward sexuality, but new research may bring interesting findings about attitudes toward male and female sexuality.

Current Study

The goal of study this to look at whether or not college males and females hold double standards about sexuality. The study will be a questionnaire given to Psychology 102 students asking questions related to their attitudes about male and female sexuality. Two hypotheses were tested. First, the hypothesis that women's and men's attitudes about masculine and feminine sexuality differed was tested. Specifically, men were expected to hold more conservative views of feminine sexuality than women and less conservative views of masculine sexuality. Second, the hypothesis that college students

hold a sexual double standard was addressed by testing for differences between attitudes about masculine and feminine sexuality within groups of men and women. By looking at how males and females respond to questions asking about female sexuality and then how they respond to the same question with male sexuality, it should be clear whether or not they hold a sexual double standard.

Method

Participants were recruited from a psychology 102 class, and they signed up for a time to complete the survey. They came into a room and were seated. After reading the informed consent they were handed the survey. Students were informed that if they were, at any time, uncomfortable they could leave. The questionnaire took roughly 30 minutes at which time participants left. There were 49 males and 26 females that completed the survey. The age range was from 18 to 27 ($M = 19.4$ years old), and of this group, there were 55 freshmen, 9 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 5 seniors. Of the group there were 34 students that identified themselves as single, 26 in a serious relationship, and 15 in a relationship that they did not consider serious.

Participants completed a modified version of the sexual permissiveness subscale from Hendrick and Hendrick's (1985) Sexual Attitude Survey about attitudes toward feminine sexuality. In addition to 63 items about attitudes toward male and female sexuality, there were 4 demographic questions (see Appendix A). The sexuality items were on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). After dropping filler items, there were 15 items assessing masculine sexuality (e.g., it is ok for men to have unlimited sexual experience) and 18 parallel items assessing feminine sexuality (e.g., unlimited premarital sexual experience is fine for women).

Results

Two surveys could not be used because they were not completely filled out. The 15 male sexuality items had an alpha level of .79, and the 18 female sexuality items had an alpha level of .80. An independent samples *t*-test was used to test the hypothesis that there would be gender differences in attitudes towards masculine and feminine sexuality. This hypothesis was supported, as men and women were significantly different in their attitudes toward women's sexuality, $t(73) = 2.96, p < .004$, and towards men's sexuality, $t(73) = 3.64, p < .001$. However, results were not in the expected direction. Men had more positive attitudes about women's ($M = 3.29$) and men's ($M = 3.05$) sexuality than women ($M_s = 2.87$ and 2.48 , respectively). A paired samples *t*-test was used to test the second hypothesis, that men and women would have significantly more conservative attitudes towards feminine sexuality than towards men's sexuality. There was a significant difference for men, $t(48) = 3.16, p < .01$, and a significant difference for women, $t(25) = 3.59, p < .01$. However, neither was in the expected direction. Means for men's attitudes about women's sexuality were significantly higher ($M = 3.29$) than means for their attitudes about men's sexuality ($M = 3.05$). The same pattern was seen for women's attitudes, with the mean attitude higher for women's sexuality ($M = 2.87$) than for men's ($M = 2.48$). As lower means indicate more conservative attitudes, these results suggest that women's sexual attitudes are more conservative overall, and also that women's sexual attitudes are most conservative about men's behavior.

Discussion

Surprisingly, neither hypothesis was supported. It is important that attitudes toward the sexuality of women be studied because it also shows researchers about the

feelings about women in general. By asking about sexuality, researchers can see what kind of attitudes there are about women in their everyday lives. Researchers can see if women are seen as equal or unequal to men by asking about what is acceptable for both. Our research found that both men and women were more accepting of women's sexuality. Overall, men were more accepting of sexuality, but the mythical "sexual double standard" was not present. This contradicts previous research. While women were, overall, less accepting of sexuality in general, they were more accepting of women being sexual. The next question is, why do students feel this way? This research could show that because of societal advancements, people finally are more accepting of feminine sexuality in the past. This survey shows that the average Psychology 102 student thinks that women have greater range to be sexual. This research could show that a sexual double standards are a thing of the past. On the other side of the coin, there is the possibility that the students knew that they were being surveyed about feminine sexuality, and answered the way they thought the researchers would want to hear (especially since the researchers were female).

If I could do this study differently, I would "stream line" the survey a bit more. When interpreting the results, I ended up discarding quite a few questions that did not test what I was looking for. I would have spent more time making a more concise survey, instead of one that asked a wider variety of questions. Also, I would have asked a male to administer the survey for half of the time to see if my results would turn out differently. I think I would have gotten more different responses if males had administered the survey also. If I had asked all of the questions in either a positive or negative manner, I think this could have made a difference also. This would have put the participant into one mindset,

and I think they would have gotten less confused if I had worded things that way. I also would have paid closer attention to students filling out and turning in the surveys. I did not want to make them uncomfortable, but in doing so, there were students who took advantage of this. Since sex is an uncomfortable topic with some people, I would give students more personal space also. I noticed a lot of students looking around nervously while taking the survey. Because sex is such a personal thing, I think partitions should be used in the future so that students do not feel as though their answers can be seen.

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In the scantron section, items that were used are indicated with an * and items that were recoded are indicated with an (R)

The following survey is intended to measure attitudes about male and female sexuality. For demographic questions, please write in the answers on this sheet. For the survey, please fill in your answers on the scantron sheet provided.

Gender (please circle one)

Male

Female

Age (please fill in)

Year in school (please circle one)

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Relationship status (please circle one)

Single

Serious relationship

In a relationship, but not serious

Please fill in the scantron sheet with the following rating scale for each question

1 = Strongly agree 2 = Moderately agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Moderately Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree

1. To have good sex, a woman should know her partner pretty well. *
2. If a woman has casual sex, it is acceptable. (R) *
3. During sexual intercourse, intense awareness of the partner is the best frame of mind.
4. Life would have fewer problems if women could have sex more freely. (R) *
5. Too much thinking about sex can spoil it.
6. It is possible for a woman to have sex with someone and not like that person very much. (R) *
7. Sex should occur between equal partners, not when a woman has power or authority over the other. (R) *
8. It's ok for a woman to gain dominance over a man. (R)

1 = Strongly agree 2 = Moderately agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Moderately Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree

9. Sex is natural for a woman; they should never feel guilty about it. (R) *
10. At its best, sex seems to be the merging of two souls.
11. It is right for a woman to pressure a man into having sex. (R) *
12. It is ok for women to have ongoing sexual relationships with more than one person at a time. (R) *
13. While a woman is having sex with someone, it is wrong for her to have fantasies about someone else.
14. It is acceptable for a woman to manipulate someone into having sex as long as no future promises are made. (R) *
15. Women should at least be friends with someone before they have sex together. *
16. For a woman to create sexual desire in someone is one of the best ways to dominate that person.
17. Sex can sometimes be playful for women. (R) *
18. Sometimes I am ashamed of my sexuality.
19. Sex is fundamentally good for women. (R)
20. I do not need to be committed to a person to have sex with him/her.
21. Lovers should be able to communicate fully about their sexual relationships.
22. Sex should be mutually desired by both partners.
23. It is acceptable for a woman to use sex as a simple exchange of favors if both people agree to it. (R) *
24. When women have premarital sex, it is ok under most circumstances. (R) *
25. Unlimited premarital sexual experience is fine for women. (R) *
26. Women's homosexual relations are just as acceptable as heterosexual relations. (R) *
27. Women should be as free as men to ask someone to have sex. (R) *
28. Birth control is part of women's responsible sexuality. (R)
29. Women enjoy penile-vaginal intercourse more than oral sex.
30. It is possible for a husband to rape his wife.
31. Sex is permissible only within marriage for women.
32. It is ok for a woman to fake an orgasm. (R)
33. When women have sex before marriage, it is ok only if the partners plan to marry each other.
34. It is acceptable for women to masturbate. (R) *
35. I am content with the size of my breasts (if I am female) or penis (if I am male).
36. Women's extramarital affairs are all right as long as their partner doesn't know about them. (R)
37. When women masturbate their partner during intercourse it can increase the pleasure of sex. (R)
38. Women's extramarital affairs are unacceptable.
39. A woman should share responsibility for birth control.
40. I am uncomfortable about masturbating.
41. Women's prostitution should be accepted by society. (R)
42. Women using "sex toys" during lovemaking is abnormal. *
43. I never worry about getting V.D.

1 = Strongly agree 2 = Moderately agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Moderately Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree

44. A man should share responsibility for birth control.
45. It is acceptable for men to have casual sex. (R) *
46. Life would have fewer problems if men could have sex more freely. (R) *
47. It is ok for a man to gain dominance over a woman. (R) *
48. Men should never feel guilty about sex. (R) *
49. It is ok for a man to pressure a woman into having sex. (R) *
50. It is ok for men to have multiple sexual relationships at the same time. (R) *
51. While a man is having sex with someone it is wrong for him to fantasize about someone else.
52. It is ok for a man to manipulate someone into having sex as long as no future promises are made. (R) *
53. A man should at least be friends with someone before they have sex. *
54. For men, sex can be playful. (R) *
55. It is acceptable for a man to have sex as an exchange of favors. (R) *
56. Sex and power are highly related for men.
57. It is ok, under most circumstances, for men to have premarital sex. (R) *
58. It is ok for men to have unlimited sexual experience. (R) *
59. Men's homosexual relationships are just as acceptable as heterosexual relationships. (R) *
60. Men are as free as women to ask someone to have sex. *
61. It is acceptable for men to masturbate. (R)
62. Men's extramarital affairs are all right as long as his partner does not know about them. (R) *
63. Men using "sex toys" during lovemaking is abnormal.