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Women Get Worse Sex: A Confound in the Explanation of Gender Differences in Sexuality

Terri D. Conley and Verena Klein
Department of Psychology, University of Michigan

Abstract

Gender differences in sexuality have gained considerable attention both within and outside of the scientific community. We argue that one of the main unacknowledged reasons for these differences is simply that women experience substantially worse sex than men do. Thus, in examinations of the etiology of gender differences in sexuality, a confound has largely been unacknowledged: Women and men are treated to different experiences of what is called "sexuality" and "having sex." We discuss four arenas in which women's experience of sexuality may often be worse than men's: (a) anatomical differences, (b) sexual violence, (c) stigma, and (d) masculine cultures of sexuality. Then we consider how each disparity might explain well-known gender differences in sexuality.

Keywords
gender differences, sexuality, stigma, inequality

Many products that we call by the same name vary widely in quality. Imagine if we randomly selected 2 dozen people who had never tried pasta and we gave 12 of them Chef Boyardee ravioli straight out of the can and 12 of them a plate of fresh ravioli hand-crafted by one of Italy's top chefs. You will note that, on the semantic surface, our two conditions could be considered equivalent—after all, both groups tried "ravioli"! If we then asked the two groups, "how do you like ravioli?" one group would likely give a very different answer than the other—not because the groups are different in ways that affect their ravioli assessment but because the two groups experienced very different ravioli.

Now let us say that the dozen participants who received Chef Boyardee ravioli were women, whereas those who received the chef-crafted ravioli were men. Would we then conclude that women like ravioli less than men do? And that the women, if provided with the same chef-crafted ravioli that men received would continue to provide a tepid ravioli response? That, at least in parallel, is the question we address in this article. We argue that an analogous (though obviously sometimes tempered) dynamic plays out in the context of assessments of gender differences in sexuality. That is, women experience a different version of "sex" than men do.

The terms "sex" and "sexuality" have multiple meanings. When we say women and men are experiencing different sexualities, we are not talking (solely) about specific experiences of genital contact or situations in which one or more participants experience arousal. Instead, "sexuality" refers to the totality of how women and men experience their sexual selves—that is, the cultural experience of sexuality, from birth onward—the sexual environment that all humans inhabit. "Sexuality" includes how others perceive someone as a sexual being, how people learn about sex, the media images that people ingest, and how people physically and psychically explore desire and pleasure, alone or with others.

Moreover, we will use the phrase "having sex" somewhat differently than it is typically used in our culture. When people use the term "having sex," they generally assume some sort of penetration; in particular, it is usually equated with penile–vaginal intercourse (PVI; Sanders & Reinsich, 1999). Here, "having sex" will encompass any partnered sexual activity designed to elicit at least one partner's physical arousal.

Corresponding Author:
Terri D. Conley, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan
Email: conleyt@umich.edu

We will show that female sexuality involves many more negative associations and outcomes. Females (i.e., girls and women) are given more negative impressions of sex—and hence fewer opportunities to experience sexuality positively—than males (i.e., men and boys) are. The sex women do encounter often is much less enjoyable than the sex men encounter. However, when researchers, therapists, or the general public talk about gender differences in "sex" or "sexuality," the phenomenon called "sex" is assumed to be equivalent across genders. As a result, people draw conclusions both informally and in empirical research about how women have less affinity for "sex" without acknowledging that women and men get different sex.

Further, the sex that women get is not just different, but of lesser quality. Women and men who are "having sex" are not having equivalent experiences. One group eats, to invoke our parable, Chef Boyardee—and the other, chef-crafted ravioli. Of course, the differences are not always as stark; women often really love sex. The differences between women's and men's sex might be like the difference between a serviceable red wine and a top-notch one. Some women have better sex than some men. But on average, women's experiences of sex are of substantially lower quality than men's. Viewed from this perspective, it is quite sensible that women would like sex quite a bit less than men do.

This distinction is important for researchers who investigate the immanence (i.e., the biological, genetic, evolutionary, or other inherent underpinnings) of gender differences (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2019). If we were speaking in experimental terms, we would describe the fact that men's sex is better than women's sex as a *confound*: A variable in which we are uninterested (the quality of the sexual experience) is varying systematically with the variable of interest (gender).[1] Of course, it is impossible to randomly assign people to be either female or male.[2] Therefore, to understand the origins of gender differences in sexuality, we have to think deeply about the context in which women and men experience sexuality—and make informed judgments about how those situations might influence their sexual experiences. In sum, although the English language employs the same term—"sexuality"—to refer to both women's and men's (a) assessments of themselves as sexual beings, (b) responses to sexual stimuli, and (c) physical experiences of sex both alone and with partners, the "sexuality" that men get is substantially better—of higher quality, more pleasant, and less stigmatized—than the sex that women get. Comparing women's and men's interest in and desire for this concept that we call "sex"—as if "sex" has the same quality across these two different groups—is a methodological error. We will not assert that these differences are wholly socially constructed (in fact, we argue that some of the circumstances that facilitate sexual inequality are indeed related to anatomical differences). Instead, we will confront conceptual problems associated with assuming that sexuality is, for women and men, the same thing.

Conceptual Influences

At a fundamental level, the concern of this article is a construct-validity issue: When researchers observe differences between women and men, they assume they are comparing proverbial apples with apples; instead, they are comparing apples and oranges. In developing this argument, we draw upon at least three different sources.

First, we draw on McClelland's (2010) intimate-justice research. McClelland (2010, 2014) demonstrated construct-validity problems in the measurement of sexual satisfaction across different genders. When women and men are presented with scales that ask them to characterize their sexual satisfaction, the endpoints of those scales have different meanings for women and men, and the factors that lead them to characterize their sexual satisfaction as high are quite different. Women are more likely to characterize their sexual satisfaction as high when their partners are satisfied, and women prioritize safety to a much greater degree than men do. By contrast, men are more likely to interpret sexual satisfaction measures as inquiries about their own physical pleasure—and more likely to identify low sexual satisfaction as meaning the lack of sex. Women construe low sexual satisfaction in much more troubling ways (i.e., as reflecting pain and degradation) consistent with the sex that women actually experience.

Second, and in a related vein, women are unlikely to accept offers of casual sex from men, but men are far more likely to accept such offers from women (see Baranowski & Hecht, 2015; Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Conley, 2011; Guéguen, 2011). As in a prior publication (Conley, 2011), we argue that studies comparing men's and women's acceptance of offers of casual sex were flawed because the researchers always assumed that such an offer from a man was equivalent to that from a woman. This is not justifiable. Men are very different social stimuli than women are. In particular, the category of "male" has many associations that would make men worse casual sex partners than women are. Men are perceived by both women and other men as relatively more violent, more likely to have STDs, and more sexually selfish than women (Conley, 2011). This places heterosexual women in a bind—they are attracted only to men, but the sex that heterosexual women can expect to get from casual sex with men is poorer—less pleasant and more stigmatized—than the sex that heterosexual men expect to get with women. Thus,

Table 1. A Sample of Sexual Measures in Which Men Outscore Women

Sexual behavior	Selection of studies that report gender differences	Effect size[a] in Petersen & Hyde's meta-analysis (2010)
Engagement in casual sex	Conley (2011); Conley et al. (2014); Schmitt (2005)	0.38
Masturbation	Gerressu et al. (2008); Herbenick et al. (2010); Reece et al. (2010)	0.53
Sexual desire	Baumeister et al. (2001); Buss and Schmitt (1993, 2019); Laumann et al. (2005); Mitchell et al. (2013)	—
Orgasm rates	Armstrong et al. (2012); Blair et al. (2018); Frederick et al. (2018); Richters et al. (2006); Wade (2015)	—
Porn use	Grubbs et al. (2019); Herbenick et al. (2020); Rissel et al. (2017)	0.63
Number of sexual partners	Mitchell et al. (2019); Mercer et al. (2013); Todd et al. (2009)	0.36
Sexual cognition	Baumeister et al. (2001); Fisher et al. (2012); Laumann et al. (1994)	—

[a]Average effect size of Cohen's *d*.

comparing women's and men's reactions to offers of heterosexual casual sex as if the offers women and men receive are equivalent is both a conceptual and a methodological error. In this article, we apply this analysis to many other gender differences in sexuality.

Third, we draw on established experimental research demonstrating that people idiosyncratically define traits in ways that are flattering to themselves (Dunning et al., 1989; Dunning & McElwee, 1995). An analogous process has been widely acknowledged at the societal level: Dominant groups (such as White people) define terms and concepts in ways that are favorable to them, benefit them, or maintain their dominance (e.g., Perez, 2019; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). Because males (as a group) have more power in contemporary society than females (as a group), sex and sexuality may be defined in terms that are most amenable to males and that systematically disadvantage females.

Goals of the Current Research

Much has already been written on gender differences in sexuality, both globally (Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011) and in reference to specific theoretical perspectives (e.g., sexual-economics theory; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Rudman, 2017). Our goal is not to sort out whether differences in sexiness[3] are sociocultural or inherent. Rather, we argue that the very question of the etiology of sex differences has missed the point because the very difference being debated is a methodological artifact. At a basic level, the dependent variable—what we as a society call "sex" or "sexuality"—is different for women and men, rendering comparisons on this dimension faulty.

In accordance with this premise, we address the cultural concept known as "having sex" and "sexuality," and identify differences in those experiences for women and men—thereby elucidating construct-validity problems in the domain of sex more broadly. We use that lens of understanding to reexamine well-documented gender differences in sexuality. We believe that such a lens could be used to analyze many facets of sexuality (e.g., sexual versatility, creativity, or preference for specific paraphilias). However, because women's relatively lower interest in sex is a primary difference that researchers theorize, that is our focus.

Gender Differences in Sexiness

Much ado has been made about women's lesser sexiness as compared with men's. Overall (see Table 1), women have less interest in various forms of sex (i.e., casual, committed, solo) than men do. They manifest this inclination cognitively (i.e., they express less interest in sex), behaviorally (i.e., they seek out less sex and masturbate less), and affectively (i.e., they respond less favorably to sex).

The idea that women like sex less than men do is highly regarded by both researchers and the general public. Many researchers, in turn (including the current authors), have pushed back on these highly gendered interpretations of sexuality, highlighting how these differences are much smaller than laypeople likely expect, especially given researchers' tendencies to emphasize differences, rather than similarities (Conley et al., 2011; Hyde, 2005, 2014; Zell et al., 2015). This is indeed true—effect sizes demonstrate that gender differences are actually quite small in practical terms. Still, many gender differences in sexuality quite consistently appear (Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011). For example, in our own research, we have investigated gender differences in acceptance of offers of casual sex, reactions to casual sex experiences, and sexual desire, finding significant gender differences in each of these domains (Conley, 2011; Conley et al., 2013, 2014; Piemonte et al., 2019). We locate women's apparent lesser sexiness in the fact that sexuality is a lower quality experience for women than it is for men.

Dimensions of Differences

We explore here four subsets of gendered sexual experience. The first is anatomical differences, such as reduced access to the clitoris, pregnancy, and genital pain. The second is gender disparities in sexual violence; specifically, higher rates of sexual abuse and sexual assault for women. The third is inequitably applied stigma for sex, including the different sexual messages parents send to girls and boys and sexual double standards. Finally, we discuss masculine cultures of heterosexuality, illustrating that the way sex is carried out in our culture is not equally beneficial to women and men, particularly among people who participate in heterosexual encounters.

Anatomical differences

First, we discuss differences in women's and men's bodies that, given the particular social context in which women and men live, could reduce women's interest in sex (see also Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997). Note that this is an inherent difference between men and women; we do not seek to imply that women's and men's biological make-up has no impact on their sexuality.

Genital prominence. We start with an anatomical fact: Girls' clitorises are less visible than boys' penises (O'Connell et al., 2005). Girls may be less likely to touch their clitorises than boys touch their penises because penises are more obvious; girls are simply less likely to see their clitorises (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997; Kestenberg, 1968). Likewise, boys are routinely taught to touch their penises during toilet training. There is no parallel mechanism by which girls are directed to touch their clitorises; clitorises do not serve a biological function outside of sexual pleasure, but penises do. This anatomical difference should almost certainly mean that boys become more familiar with their own genitals than girls do (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997).

Sexual pain. Pain associated with sex is much more common among women than among men and has many manifestations. Before their sexual debut, girls learn that sex (conceptualized as PVI) will likely be painful, and this is accepted as a standard part of the script of "losing one's virginity" (Carpenter, 2001; Thompson, 1990). Boys do not receive the news that their first intercourse will be painful, will involve a part of their body "breaking," or will involve bleeding. These representations of sex may quite reasonably make vaginal penetration less appealing to girls than to boys.

This pattern of associations between sex and pain continues throughout women's lives and is particularly prominent in activities involving penetration. Nationally representative data from the U.S. show that about 30% of women reported pain during vaginal intercourse and 72% of women reported pain during anal intercourse, whereas 7% and 15% of men, respectively, experience pain during the same activities (Herbenick et al., 2015). Rates of reported pain vary. In a British sample, 7.5% of sexually active women have had painful sex (Mitchell et al., 2017). But among young Swedish women, a high rate of 47% reported pain with intercourse (Elmerstig et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that half of the women experiencing pain do not mention it to their partners (Carter et al., 2019), and a majority (75%) continue sex despite being in pain (Carter et al., 2019; Elmerstig et al., 2013), presumably because sexual pain is construed as "normal" for women.

An additional anatomical difference that could lend itself to gender differences in sexual pain is the length of women's versus men's urethras. As a result of this anatomical circumstance, urinary-tract infections are very common among women and can be exceedingly painful; moreover, they are frequently caused by vaginal penetration (Foxman & Chi, 1990; Nicolle et al., 1982). Therefore, even in the absence of sexual disease or anatomical abnormality, women may associate sex with pain and dysfunction. Males do not have an analogous experience and do not have to manage the fact that sex (i.e., typical sex with a healthy partner) can cause illness in their bodies. Of course, not all women consistently experience pain, but even those that do not are almost certainly aware that pain is part of the sexual landscape for members of their gender.

Pregnancy. Possibly the most obvious, commonly noted anatomical difference between women and men as it relates to sex is that only women can get pregnant. Unplanned pregnancy is perceived as a distinct possibility (in part because of messages conveyed in abstinence-only sex education; Kohler et al., 2008; Santelli et al., 2006; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011), and birth control can be difficult to attain and use (Grindlay & Grossman, 2016). Unplanned pregnancy leads to vastly more negative outcomes for women. For example, in the United States, hundreds of women die from complications of pregnancy every year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019); the childbirth process is exceedingly painful and often damages women's bodies permanently (Gabbe et al., 2016), including by scarring and prolapse. In addition, unplanned pregnancies are socially stigmatized (Santelli et al., 2003) and disrupt the life plans of women to a greater extent than they do those of men (Sevón, 2012).

Analysis and applications. Gender differences in sexuality can be mapped onto anatomical differences. First, consider well-known differences in masturbation rates; women masturbate less frequently than men do (Gerressu et al., 2008; Herbenick et al., 2010; Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011; Reece et al., 2010). This would be expected given the prominence of girls' and boys' genitals and the fact that penises serve other biological functions. Boys have a more visually obvious sexual pleasure organ, which sets the stage for masturbation (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997). As we mentioned earlier, boys are provided with a specific context in which touching their genitals is expected behavior (i.e., during urination), and thus they are less likely to learn that it is shameful to touch their genitals. These circumstances could very reasonably mean that girls learn to touch their genitals less than boys do. Consistent with this analysis, boys on average start masturbating earlier than girls do (Herbenick et al., 2010; Leitenberg et al., 1993; Robbins et al., 2011). Moreover, even when girls do begin to masturbate, they are censured more harshly than boys for doing so (Masters et al., 1986). All these dynamics could lead to lower masturbation rates among adult women than among adult men.

Differences in masturbation, in turn, can reasonably explain other gender differences. Likely as a result of their later commencement of masturbation (Herbenick et al., 2010; Leitenberg et al., 1993; Robbins et al., 2011), girls learn to orgasm much later than boys do, which means that girls are more likely to make their sexual debut without having experienced orgasm (Sprecher et al., 1995). In turn, experience with masturbation is associated with both sexual satisfaction and orgasm during partnered sex (e.g., Heiman & LoPiccolo, 1987; Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; Laan & Rellini, 2011). Thus, because girls masturbate less, they are less likely to experience orgasm and, hence, less likely to have high-quality sexual experiences.

There are other ways in which basic anatomical differences could lead to a reduced desire for sex or likelihood of seeking out sex—a gender difference frequently observed (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2019). Again, understandably, women may be more likely to avoid sex to the extent that they have more pain during their sexual experiences than men do. A person of any gender would be more likely to avoid an activity in which pain is a regular occurrence than a person who does not experience pain during that same activity. For example, we would expect people who experience pain while walking to walk less than those who can walk pain-free.

Because pregnancy has so many well-known negative outcomes for women, it could lead women to develop more negative associations with sex than men have. A person of any gender would be more likely to avoid sex if sex entailed a major risk. And avoidance of risk is not unique to women—White males are often perceived as risk-takers, but this, too, may well be an artifact of how risk is defined. (For a review of many circumstances in which White males are more risk-averse than women and people of color, see Fine [2017].) Notably, pain associated with both penetration and pregnancy affects women who have sex with men to a far greater extent than women who do not, however, negative associations between sex and pain are likely learned very early in life; they may influence women regardless of their partners' gender.

Given that dominant groups control cultural definitions to a greater extent than do marginalized groups, it seems likely that men have a larger role in cultural definitions of "sexuality." "Having sex" is culturally defined, quite narrowly, as the specific type of sex that best suits men. As a result of their distinct set of genitals, the experience of PVI for women and for men is by no means equivalent. Men are inserting a penis, whereas women are having a penis inserted into them. The physical sensations associated with those two activities are very different. Therefore, when "sex" is interpreted narrowly as PVI, it can appear that women do not like sex as much. However, this may not be the case with other definitions of sex. Think, for example, of anal intercourse. What would happen if "having sex" were to be defined as "having a phallus inserted into one's anus?" (And, notably, we forward that defining sex in this way would be a much more equivalent comparison, as both women and men generally have anuses and the experience of insertion is held constant across women and men.) Given this just as narrow but different definition, we might even find that heterosexual men like "having sex" less than heterosexual women do.

In sum, our analysis of anatomical differences suggests good reasons for women to like "sex"—defined as PVI—less than men do, but it does not mean that women like "sex" less overall. We are not arguing that women's bodies preclude their affinity for sex, only that the match between women's bodies and sex as it is currently defined reduces their sexiness. People with different genitals will likely appreciate different types of sex in the same way that elite athletes with different body types are drawn to different sports. Analogously, if we narrowly defined "athletic" as being flexible, ballet dancers would be considered much better "athletes" than weightlifters. And we could say that White people have inherently inferior health than people of color—all we would have to do is define "health" in terms of skin-cancer rates.

Notably, these anatomical factors would not necessarily lead to gender differences on their own, but as they interact with societal norms and structures, these differences are amplified. For example, if girls were encouraged to interact with their clitorises, they would perhaps have as much experience with masturbation as boys do when they begin to have partnered sex. And if all girls and women had free access to reliable birth control, women who have sex with men would not need to fear pregnancy in the way they currently do.

Gender disparities in experiences of sexual violence

Next, we address women's worse sex by acknowledging that responses to a particular sexual encounter may be influenced by events from many years in the past. Because women and men have different prior experiences with sexuality, we argue, the typical woman arrives at any given sexual encounter with more negative associations than the typical man (McClelland, 2010). When a woman interprets an offer for "sex," for many more women than men that offer is directly connected to experiences with violence and mistreatment.

Many more girls than boys learn to associate sex with terror and pain at an early age. In one U.S. study, for example, 26.6% of women but only 5.1% of men reported childhood sexual abuse (Finkelhor et al., 2014). This pattern continues in adulthood. Coercive heterosexual encounters are far more likely to happen to women than to men (World Health Organization, 2013). One in five women, compared with one in 71 men, will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lives (Black et al., 2011). Women are also quite aware that sexual violence is a possibility, as evidenced by the ample measures they take to protect themselves (McKibbin et al., 2009)—whether women have personally been victims of sexual violence or not, they recognize sexual threat (Gordon & Riger, 2011).

Analysis and applications. How might these differences in experience with sexual violence help us reinterpret gender differences in sexuality? As examples, we consider desire for sex with an established partner and willingness to engage in casual sex.

Many researchers have documented that partnered heterosexual women are less likely to desire sex within their relationship (Baumeister et al., 2001; Davies et al., 1999; Klusmann, 2002; Mark & Murray, 2012) or to initiate sex than their male partners are (Byers & Heinlein, 1989). Heterosexual women are also more likely than heterosexual men to seek treatment for low sexual desire within established relationships (Dawson & Chivers, 2014). People of any gender who have experienced sexual violence have more reason to avoid sex than those who have experienced only consensual sex. But far more women have experienced sexual assault than men have. Therefore, lower rates of sexual desire and avoidance of sexual activity with a partner appear gender-based but may be an artifact of prior sexual trauma (Easton et al., 2011; Labadie et al., 2018; Lemieux & Byers, 2008; McCallum et al., 2012). By the same token, people who have been in serious automobile accidents might reasonably be less likely than the average person to avoid car rides.

Shifting to consider expressed interest in casual sex, we know that heterosexual women are far less likely to accept offers of casual sex than heterosexual men are (Baranowski & Hecht, 2015; Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Conley, 2011; Guéguen, 2011). Why might this be? Perhaps because for women, heterosexual casual sex entails putting oneself in a (typically) private situation with (often) a near-stranger who is (given sexual dimorphism in humans) usually physically stronger than she is. Both for women who have experienced sexual assault and for those who are aware of its prevalence, it is quite sensible to exercise more caution in casual-sex situations. And indeed, one study showed that gender differences in casual-sex acceptance disappeared in a safer environment. When women feel safe, women are as likely as men to consent to casual sex (Baranowski & Hecht, 2015).

In sum, the realistic threat of sexual violence may reduce the alacrity with which women engage in heterosexual encounters. A person of any gender would be more likely to avoid an activity that could reasonably cause them harm than someone for whom the risk of harm is slight. And groups of people who have already experienced trauma could quite reasonably perceive sex as more dangerous than those who have not. Thus, women's lesser sexiness could result from these experiences.

Inequitably applied stigma for sex

Next, we consider that stigma is a more central part of the experience of "sexuality" for women than it is for men. We discuss the negative sexual messages that girls receive and the greater stigma women experience for participating in sex (i.e., sexual double standards).

Negative sexual messages. Parental communication about sexuality plays a crucial role in adolescents' sexual development. The conversations parents and their children have about sexuality-related issues shape adolescents' sexual attitudes, sexual norms, and safer sex behaviors (for reviews see Flores & Barroso, 2017; Rogers, 2017; Widman et al., 2016). Gender dynamics dominate parent-adolescent communication about sexuality: Girls receive more restrictive messages surrounding sexuality and are held to stricter moral standards than boys are (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Klein et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2010). When talking to girls about their genitals, parents tend to use euphemisms, vague terms, or no terms at all (Gartrell & Mosbacher, 1984; Martin et al., 2011). Moreover, parents communicate more frequently with girls about the risks of having sex (e.g., pregnancy); by contrast, they provide boys with relatively more information about sex-positive topics (Aronowitz & Agbeshie, 2012; Evans et al., 2020; Flores & Barroso, 2017; Goldfarb et al., 2018; Wilson & Koo, 2010). Because parents help shape sexual norms, these biases in communication promote gender inequity in the appraisal of the risks and benefits of sexuality.

Sexual double standards. Women also receive greater opprobrium for participating in sexual behavior than men do. The sexual double standard is a well-known phenomenon whereby women are judged more harshly for participating in a variety of sexual activities than men are (for a review, see Bordini & Sperb, 2013). A recent meta-analysis (k = 99; N = 123,343) showed that the traditional double standard is still prevalent (d = 0.25). Although women and men did not differ in their endorsement of sexual double standards, the double standard was stronger in countries with lower levels of gender equality (Endendijk et al., 2019). Moreover, ample qualitative evidence indicates that these double standards are still in play (Bogle, 2008; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Shoveller et al., 2004). For example, U.S. college students recognize the phrase "walk of shame"—a term coined to describe a woman walking home the morning after a sexual encounter; this term is not typically applied to men (Lunceford, 2008; Pearlson & McHugh, 2010).

Analysis and applications. How does stigma influence women's sexual attitudes and behaviors? Here we consider possible effects on acceptance rates in casual sex (Conley et al., 2013), desired number of sexual partners (Pedersen et al., 2002), and sexual-debut experiences (Else-Quest, 2014).

We (Conley and colleagues, 2013) specifically addressed the relationship between sexual double standards and acceptance rates of casual sex in heterosexual encounters. We demonstrated that women are stigmatized for engaging in casual sex, and, importantly, that recognition of this stigma is a factor in women's decision to forgo casual sex (Conley et al., 2013; Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991). That is, the perception of stigma associated with casual sex mediated the relationship between gender and casual sex (Conley et al., 2013). Heterosexual men's choices surrounding sexuality are also guided by stigma—perceived personal stigma for engaging in casual sex also reduced the extent to which men were likely to accept a casual encounter; thus, men avoid sexual activities for which they will be stigmatized in the same way that women do (Conley et al., 2013). Other research has shown that men are more likely to admit same-sex attraction when they believe that stigma for being attracted to people of the same gender is lower (Preciado et al., 2013). Thus, allowing stigma to guide sexual choices is not unique to women—rather, women experience more intense stigma surrounding their sexual behaviors, which, in turn, attenuates their sexual interest (Conley et al., 2013; Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991).

Women also desire fewer sexual partners than men do (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; but see Pedersen et al., 2002). How might stigma affect these decisions? First, a methodological consideration (see Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Fisher, 2007): Women, being aware of the stigma affecting their group, might not want to report the actual number of sexual partners they desire to researchers. Women who report high numbers of sexual partners on a questionnaire look worse than men who do the same; therefore, we would predict that, because of stigma, women would be less likely to report their true desire. Second, stigma can influence our preferences—that is, the presence of stigma influences what we actually like. As Nosek et al. (2002) note, "want, and choice, and like, are not independent of social learning and . . . social learning is constrained by the demands of social group identity and group stereotypes" (p. 58). That is, women might actually subjectively like sex less than men—but as a result of stigma.

Likewise, adolescent women report less sexual and psychological satisfaction, less pleasure, and more shame and guilt than adolescent men in response to their sexual debut (Cuffee et al., 2007; Higgins et al., 2010; Sprecher, 2014; Sprecher et al., 1995; Vasilenko et al., 2015). It is no surprise that women experience more guilt and regret than men, given sexual double standards (Else-Quest, 2014). Sexual double standards surrounding sexual debuts (i.e., young women being judged more harshly for having their sexual debut) disproportionately lead to harmful social consequences for young women (e.g., a decrease in peer acceptance; Kreager et al., 2016).

In social psychology, it is axiomatic that stigma guides people's behaviors; the idea that people are less likely to engage in behaviors for which they will be stigmatized is uncontroversial (see, e.g., Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Klein et al., 2019; Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010; Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). This dynamic plays out in a wide variety of groups—including heterosexual men (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Vandello et al., 2008). The threat of being perceived as feminine, for example, guides heterosexual men's choices about displaying communal traits and abilities (Croft et al., 2015), including modesty (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010). The fact that women are stigmatized for engaging in sex would quite naturally lead to the hypothesis that women will be less likely to accept offers of casual sex, desire sex with an established partner, or express desire for sex with many people.

Masculine cultures of heterosexuality

Most of the differences we have discussed could at least theoretically affect all women, regardless of the gender of their partners. However, some differences in sexuality apply primarily to women who have sex with men. The final category of difference we discuss involves the interpersonal experience of sexual encounters, specifically how heterosexual scripts optimize male rather than female sexual experiences. This section is framed slightly differently. We see the centrality of men's orgasms as the most consequential factor (i.e., the greatest contributor to women getting worse sex) in heterosexual encounters. However, we are cognizant of other aspects of masculine heterosexual culture that contribute—both through the mechanism of reducing orgasm and independent of it—to lower quality sexual experiences for women. Thus, we first discuss gender disparities in orgasms and then other aspects of heterosexual encounters that prioritize men's experiences over women's—with an eye toward how those affect the more prominent concern of differences in orgasm rates.

The centrality of men's orgasms. Orgasm is a highlight of sex for women and men, but one that women experience at far lower rates than men during heterosexual encounters. This is a phenomenon referred to as *the orgasm gap* (Armstrong et al., 2012; Blair et al., 2018; Conley et al., 2011; Frederick et al., 2018; Wade, 2015). The orgasm gap might reasonably lead women as a group to have less interest in sex than men; women are more likely than men to be missing this positive experience. Of course, one might argue that the origin of women's lower orgasm rate is a fundamental difference between women and men—that is, women biologically or genetically have a lesser capacity for orgasm and, as a result, desire sex less. This reasoning is logical; however, the premise is not supported by existing data. Women have no refractory period for orgasming, are able to orgasm more frequently than men, and can orgasm just as quickly as men when masturbating (Hite, 1976; Kinsey et al., 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1966). Moreover, descriptions of the physical and psychological experience of orgasms provided by women and men are indistinguishable (Vance & Wagner, 1976), and ample evidence indicates that women have the same capacity for experiencing orgasm as men do (Hite, 1976; Kinsey et al., 1953; Laumann et al., 1994; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014; Wade et al., 2005). Conversely, no evidence suggests that women are less skilled at bringing themselves to orgasm, less biologically inclined to orgasm, or that they experience orgasm more mildly than men do. Instead, the orgasm gap results from specific heterosexual practices, each of which privileges the male sexual experience. We consider some of these practices next.

Mechanics of PVI. One reason women as a group orgasm less is *the coital imperative*, the tendency to prioritize PVI over other sexual activities. (Braun et al., 2003; Opperman et al., 2014; Willis et al., 2018). People believe that "having sex" is having PVI (Byers et al., 2009; Randall & Byers, 2003; Sanders et al., 2010; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Women are far less likely to orgasm from PVI alone than men are because PVI does not provide adequate clitoral stimulation (Lloyd, 2009). Therefore, the idea that "real sex" is intercourse hinders women's pleasure (Willis et al., 2018). Other sexual behaviors that provide more clitoral stimulation (oral sex, manual sex) are less likely to be included in people's definition of "having sex" (Byers et al., 2009; Sanders et al., 2010; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). More striking, the coital imperative even shapes women's idea of masturbation. Although clitoral stimulation is the most common masturbatory practice, women tend to assume that self-penetration frequently occurs during women's masturbation (Fahs & Frank, 2014). This is one of the ways in which women experience sexuality within the enclosures of a masculine cultural script surrounding sex.

Besides lack of clitoral stimulation, another reason women orgasm less in heterosexual encounters is that they have far less control over the physical mechanics of prototypic heterosexual intercourse than men do. In a typical heterosexual encounter, the main event is PVI (Herbenick et al., 2010), and, in particular, participants employ a male-superior (i.e., "missionary") position. PVI provides a nearly ideal physical mechanism for most men to orgasm. The vagina envelops the penis, providing a constant, even source of stimulation. When the male is above the woman during PVI, the male is in control of the rhythm of the stimulation as well. He can thrust quickly or slowly, with either shallow or deeper thrusts, as best suits him. He can immediately adjust the course of the encounter and optimize sensations to make his orgasm more likely. Men's degree of control over their own physical sensations during intercourse strongly parallels that of solo masturbation. By contrast, the woman experiencing intercourse, though she often finds it pleasurable (Laumann et al., 1994), is unlikely to orgasm exclusively through this method of stimulation (e.g., Blair et al., 2018; Richters et al., 2006), because of a lack of similar control. By contrast, taking on an empowered sexual role positively relates to overall sexual satisfaction (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006).

Lack of cunnilingus. Cunnilingus is the most reliable way women orgasm in partnered sex (Armstrong et al., 2012; Frederick et al., 2017; Richters et al., 2006), but is less likely to be included in heterosexual encounters than fellatio (e.g., Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012). Again, the sex women get is not optimized for their anatomy in the way that the sex men get is. A study comparing the frequency of orgasms among different groups ($N = 52{,}588$) showed that heterosexual women are less likely to experience orgasm during sex (65%) than lesbians (86%) who are more likely to practice oral stimulation of the clitoris (Frederick et al., 2018). The orgasm gap can, therefore, be "clearly explained by differences in preferred and practiced sexual behaviors [rather] than by particular biological or physiological sex differences in the 'ability' to achieve orgasm" (Blair et al., 2018, p. 729).

In turn, one reason for the lower frequency of receiving cunnilingus compared with fellatio is the marginalization of female genitals. Female genitals are generally associated with negative and humiliating attributes such as "disgusting" (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Fahs, 2014), and genital appearances that diverge from a promoted beauty ideal tend to be perceived as abnormal and pathological (e.g., Moran & Lee, 2018). Consequently, many women have strong negative emotions (e.g., anxiety and frustration) regarding their vulvae (Fahs, 2014). Women's self-consciousness about their genitals also influences their experiences during sex (Schick et al., 2010). Of course, women who are worried about their partner's perceptions of their genitals feel less comfortable receiving cunnilingus (Herbenick & Reece, 2010; Smith et al., 2017).

Lack of communication during sex. Communication about sexual activity is another precipitating factor in the orgasm gap. As we already mentioned, during heterosexual PVI, the male partner can control the rhythm, pace, and intensity of the action, and, consequentially, can do so independently of the partner. That is, a male partner engaging in PVI, especially in the male superior/missionary position, need not ask the female partner to speed up, slow down, thrust more deeply or at a different angle, and so forth. But a female experiencing cunnilingus must be able to communicate these preferences to her partner. This poses at least three problems for experiencing orgasm. First, women are often uncomfortable asking for pleasure (Backstrom et al., 2012; Satinsky & Jozkowski, 2015). Because women must communicate their preferences to receive pleasure akin to the pleasure men experience from intercourse, this reticence likely contributes to the orgasm gap. Second, even if they are forthright about their sexual preferences, men in heterosexual encounters are not always responsive to their partners' requests (Armstrong et al., 2012). This might be because men erroneously assume that missionary PVI is equally optimal for both women's and men's progression to orgasm. Third, women have the disadvantage of having to communicate those preferences and wait for them to be enacted. By contrast, men engaged in missionary PVI can make adjustments immediately. These timing issues could contribute to the likelihood of orgasm, as orgasms sometimes hinge on receiving exactly the right type of stimulation at exactly the right moment. Thus, women may be less likely to orgasm than men in a heterosexual encounter precisely because women need to communicate with another person to achieve optimal pleasure during partnered encounters, whereas men do not. This asymmetry in need for communication may result in fewer orgasms for women and could make heterosexual encounters less pleasurable for them overall.

Lack of respect during heterosexual encounters. Women are known to be devalued compared with men and discriminated against broadly (for reviews of this literature, see Connor et al., 2017; Manne, 2017; Rudman & Glick, 2010). Likely as a result of their lower status position, women report that their partners exhibit disrespect. Especially in a casual context, men tend to disregard women's right to pleasure (Armstrong et al., 2012). Quotes from interviews with male undergraduates illustrate. One said, "If it's just a random hookup, I don't think [her orgasm] matters as much to the guy. Say they meet a girl at a party and it's a one night thing, I don't think it's gonna matter to them as much." Another man commented about men's approach to hook-ups: "I guess it's more of a selfish thing" (Armstrong et al., 2012, p. 456). These comments do not reflect sexual violence or lack of consent per se, but they clearly elucidate a lack of respect. Feeling disrespected in a sexual encounter could contribute to a person of any gender perceiving "sex" to be less appealing.

Analysis and applications. The inequitable presence of orgasm can be used to interpret and explain a broad array of gender differences in sexuality. Women often explicitly state that they do not care whether they orgasm when asked directly (Armstrong et al., 2012). However, indirectly, another story emerges. Statistically controlling for the presence of orgasm can eliminate some gender differences completely. When the presence or absence of orgasm in a casual sex encounter was accounted for, women and men felt equally positive about their casual sex encounters (Piemonte et al., 2019). Likewise, after controlling for anticipated orgasm, women and men were equally likely to accept offers of casual sex (Conley, Rubin, et al., 2021) and reported equal rates of sexual desire (Conley, Piemonte, & Klein, 2021). Likewise, within their sexual-debut experiences, only 7% of women (vs. 79% of men) reported having an orgasm (Sprecher et al., 1995). Women's lack of orgasm explains the gender difference in sexual-debut pleasure. In other words, women and men who experienced an orgasm during their first intercourse experience perceive their sexual debut as equally pleasurable—gender differences in sexual-debut experiences could therefore be characterized instead as differences between those who had or did not have orgasms (Sprecher et al., 1995).

Sexual pleasure is a central goal motivating people to engage in sex (Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995, 2002) and, in particular, experiencing orgasms is a primary reinforcer and motivator for engaging in sexual activities (Pfaus, 2009). Thus, the lack of orgasms is almost certainly detrimental to women's appraisals of their past sexual encounters (Piemonte et al., 2019; Sprecher et al., 1995) and reduces their desire to seek out new experiences (Conley, Piemonte, & Klein, 2021; Conley, Rubin, et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2019). The fact that women orgasm less than men do in heterosexual encounters (and the sequelae of this difference—prevalence of missionary intercourse, rejection of cunnilingus, and disrespect toward women) makes heterosexual sex less appealing for women. However, we forward the simple idea that lack of orgasm would likely be a sexual deterrent for any gender. If men orgasmed as rarely as women do in partnered sexual encounters, they might have an interest in sex equivalent to that of women. In essence, one major reward of sex—orgasm—is either inconsistent or absent for women, which could decrease women's sexiness.

Let us for a moment consider gender differences in another domain. When we ask why girls pursue math less frequently than boys, the problem could arguably be that girls and boys are appraising math differently (Cheryan et al., 2017). Of course, gender socialization and prior experiences may shape how much self-efficacy girls feel compared with boys when faced with a math test. But within the domain of math, at least the girls and boys are encountering the same math problems. The situation is quite different within heterosexuality. Even at the most proximal level of "sex"—activities performed during sexual encounters—men get better sex than women do.

Summary

At every phase of their lives, women encounter unique barriers that shepherd them to enjoy sex less than men. Because women are effectively punished more for participating in sex, they avoid sex more than men do. Because women orgasm less frequently during partnered sex with men, they enjoy sex less than men do. Because they enjoy sex less than men do, they are less likely to desire it. Because they desire sex less, they have less sex.

Implications for Research in Gender Differences in Sexuality

Many products we call by the same name vary in quality. Thus far we have argued that the "product" (see Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) called sex is quite different—and worse—for women than for men. We have shown how these disparities could allow us to reinterpret common differences in sexuality. We conclude by considering this reevaluation more broadly.

First, the influences we have discussed are not discrete; many of the themes are interconnected. For instance, anatomical differences inform the orgasm gap during PVI, a topic presented in the masculine cultures theme. Masculine cultures (i.e., disrespecting female partners) correspond with inequitably applied stigma. Gender disparities in sexual violence are related to less control over the sexual encounter, as discussed in the masculine cultures theme. Likewise, we have described pain as an anatomical difference. It is possible that women's bodies are simply more painful to live in than men's, and that this difference yields lesser interest in sex. However, it is also possible that sexual pain is a product of stigma, lack of masturbation, lack of physical control over sexual intercourse, and discomfort or inability to express to another partner what hurts and what feels good. Productive research could determine which of these factors independently influence gendered sexuality and which are interconnected.

Second, the list we have provided here is not exhaustive. For example, we cannot definitively delineate all the vast and far-reaching effects of the global devaluation of women on their sexual experiences. And we are sure that other researchers will note differences in the experience of sexuality for women and men that we have neglected to mention. Our purpose here is not to document all variables that could influence gender differences in sexuality, but to interject a consideration of the impact of distinct experiences of "sexuality" on those differences. With these points in mind, we go on to consider how researchers might employ this perspective and the implications of this perspective for the nature–nurture debate and the study of differences among social groups more broadly.

How might researchers employ this perspective?

Our overarching concern is that the lesser quality experience of sexuality for women has yielded an unfair assessment of women as less sexual than men. We briefly consider a few examples of how scientists acknowledging this confound—and controlling for the distinct experiences of women and men—might yield different conclusions about gender differences in sexuality.

Sexual violence. Given that the threat of sexual violence can quite reasonably attenuate sexual interest, efforts should be made to control for this variable. Researchers could, for example, determine the actual incidence of sexual violence toward women versus men in a given population and control for it in analyses. At the individual level, they might also ask about the perceived personal threat of sexual assault or history of sexual violence. At the most basic level, people who are concerned about sexual violence are likely to have different reactions to sex than those who are less concerned. One of the ways this difference might manifest itself is relatively reduced interest in participating in sex with others.

Definitions of "having sex." Including a broad range of activities other than PVI in definitions of "having sex" should yield smaller gender differences. For example, gender differences persist in sexual desire. Is this effect weaker in relationships where activities other than PVI are frequent? But the orgasm gap might be smaller in sexual encounters where oral sex is present but PVI is absent (e.g., Frederick et al., 2018).

Stigma. Stigma is another cross-cutting theme in this analysis. We predict that controlling for stigma will often reduce the magnitude of gender differences in sexuality. For example, gender differences in desire for oral sex might be reduced if researchers were to control for the prevalent cultural distaste for women's genitalia (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). Are women who are more aware of this stigma less sexual? If so, controlling for genital self-image (Herbenick & Reece, 2010) in future studies would be appropriate. Likewise, researchers have demonstrated that gender differences in sexuality are attenuated through use of bogus pipeline manipulations (e.g., Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Fisher, 2007; Suschinsky et al., 2020), implicit measures (Rudman, 2017), and measures that do not rely on explicit knowledge (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). It would be prudent for researchers to use methods such as these when they seek to explain gender differences in sexuality.

Consideration of multiple sexual and gender identities. Notably, different gender-related identities can be used to help discern when observed gender differences are a result of anatomy, socialization, or partner's gender. If transwomen and ciswomen have similar sexuality experiences, then feminine self-presentation in sexual encounters could be an explanatory variable. Similarities in the experiences of transwomen and cismen suggest that anatomy or early socialization may figure prominently in the quality of sex that women experience.

Likewise, the heterosexual experiences of women and men are unequal; therefore, it may be useful to tease apart participant gender and partner gender. Productive research would examine gender differences between women who have sex only with women (i.e., lesbians) and men who have sex only with men (i.e., gay men); these groups may sometimes have more comparable experiences because neither group is negotiating a power difference that is inherent to female-male relationships. It may also be useful to compare heterosexual women with lesbians. As one example, lesbians are known to orgasm more frequently than heterosexual women (Frederick et al., 2018), suggesting that partner gender influences the quality of women's sexual experiences. Studying people who have sex with more than one gender (i.e., bisexual and pansexual people) also allows researchers to observe differences based on partner gender. On the basis of our analysis, we would predict that gender differences in sexuality would be larger in sexual encounters with men than sexual encounters with women, a prediction which was supported in casual sex contexts (Conley et al., 2014).

Different sex for different genders and the nature–nurture debate

For researchers intrigued by the classic (some might say hackneyed) nature–nurture debate, the facile answer to the question of whether inherent or social factors are driving gender differences often boils down to "they both do." However, we suggest the need for more than the cursory assessment of the origins of gender differences that yields this politic inference.

A basic task in the development of any experiment is to rule out confounds. Obviously, researchers investigating gender differences cannot randomly assign people to be female, male, or nonbinary. It is, therefore, incumbent upon researchers who study gender differences to identify and rule out factors that systematically vary with gender. This has been lacking in much prior research about gender differences in sexuality on both sides of the nature–nurture debate.

In the current research, we are not arguing that gender differences in sexuality are sociocultural or that they are immanent. Instead, we argue that before we can even accurately engage with the question of whether these differences are due more to nature or nurture, we must ensure that we are measuring the same "sexuality"—and the same "having sex"—for both women and men. This often will mean taking into account the differences we have delineated.

Some theoretical predictors of gender differences in sexuality might get smaller once researchers control for different definitions of sex, stigma, violence, and masculine cultures of sexuality. Quantitative empiricists who want to test a specific theoretical argument that predicts a sexuality gender difference should be statistically controlling for disparate sexual experiences. That is, if a researcher is attempting to assess the effects of a particular predictor, it may be useful to rule out the influences of some of the factors we have outlined here or to incorporate them into models as potential third variables. Those who are trying to show that these differences do not exist should also be accounting for these differences (something the current authors have neglected to do on numerous occasions).

Although we are not taking a particular position on the ultimate etiology of gender differences in sexuality in this article, our perspective does promote the recognition of social constraints on the individual. Social psychologists, in particular, are in the business of recognizing the power of the situation. At least some of the acceptance of the research on gender differences, we argue, must rely on a correspondence bias (Gilbert & Jones, 1986) from researchers. In a field that studies stereotypes and unconscious processes, psychologists have been all too willing to attribute the behavior of females to properties of their gender, rather than considering the social situation in which they are enmeshed. Glaring examples of the different sexual landscape for women and men are right under our noses. It is puzzling, then, that hundreds of publications asserting essential gender differences in sexuality have been published without, apparently, consistent requests that authors control for these preexisting differences.

Thinking of an example outside of sexuality may help illustrate our point. Researchers who study helping could examine the stable personality differences that lead someone to agree to help (Nadler, 1991), but it is reasonable to assume that the main predictor of whether someone helps is whether they have been asked—the social situation is a far stronger determinant of people's behaviors than an individual's personal qualities. Imagine that we were interested in comparing the helping behaviors of two groups—say, women and men—in a given situation. Let us say we focused on giving directions as a helping behavior. We asked people how many times in the past year they have given directions. Say we found that women have provided directions less frequently than men have. Of course, it could have something to do with the brain or "biology" (broadly writ), but it would make sense to first answer the basic question of whether men were asked to help more often than women were.

In sum, the aforementioned common response to the nature–nurture debate is to throw up one's hands and declare that both nature and nurture are operating. However, simply resorting to nescience on these topics ignores a pivotal point in the argument. Unless we can demonstrate empirically or create circumstances in which women and men are having equally positive experiences, making claims of biology, brain differences, hormonal differences, or evolutionarily determined differences in sexuality is irresponsible.

Conclusion

Women—on average—experience worse sex than men do. Sometimes the differences between women's and men's sex may be more like the differences between ravioli that is either chef-crafted or Chef Boyardee. In other circumstances, it might be more like more minor distinctions between varieties of fine wine, where women on average receive a pleasant wine and men a higher quality version. But even still, compared with the fraught sexual experiences of some women, the typical male experience of the totality of sexuality is far more positive.

Psychologists have a checkered past when it comes to assessing reasons for differences between members of different groups; early psychological research on racial differences provides horrifying examples (see Richards, 1997). Caution in making such judgments is thus warranted. If researchers wish to make claims about differences between groups, they should go to great pains to ensure that the groups are having as close to the same experience as possible—remembering that participants from different social groups cannot be randomly assigned to experimental conditions. This is not an issue of differences being "sociocultural" or "inherent" or the politics that surround that debate—it is a matter of basic research methods.

Transparency

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Notes

1. We could also think of this as an overlooked mediator, but we consider it is useful to represent this as a confound. A common question is whether gender differences are immanent/biological, or socially constructed. For people who are attempting to answer that specific question, gender differences in quality of sexuality experienced is a confound.
2. In this article we consider the experiences of women and men. The experiences of gender nonbinary people are a worthy topic of study, but at this point there is so little research available on this group that it would be impossible to make comparisons. Likewise, when we use the terms "women" and "men" throughout the article, we are referring to cisgender people because of the similar lack of information on other gender groups.
3. Meaning, in this context, having a propensity toward sex—an older definition of the term (see Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

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