

Gender Differences in What Is Desired in the Sexual Relationship

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ABSTRACT. It has been proposed that women possess a “person centered” orientation to sexuality—the goal of sex is to express affection to another person in a committed relationship. Conversely, men possess a “body centered” orientation toward sex—the goal of sex is physical gratification. These different orientations toward sex in relationships should lead men and women to have different desires in the sexual relationship. We hypothesized that women will desire more activities in sex that demonstrate love and intimacy, while men will desire more activities that focus on arousal aspects of the sexual activity itself (more partner initiative; more variety). Two samples were used to test the hypotheses: 189 undergraduate students and 53 newly married couples. Men and women were asked how much they desired their partner to do less or more of a variety of activities during sex. The results indicated that there were gender differences found in what was desired from the sexual relationship that were consistent with our predictions. These differences may be explained by differential socialization and/or different evolutionary pressures.

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The authors would like to thank Kathleen McKinney for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Men and women have been found to differ somewhat in sexual attitudes and behaviors. For example, research indicates that men have more permissive premarital sexual standards (e.g., Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, & Foote, 1985; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, in press), are more likely to initiate sexual activity (e.g., Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1976), have more liberal standards about extramarital sexuality (Reis, Anderson, & Sponaugle, 1980) and are more likely to engage in extramarital sex (Hunt, 1974; Kinsey et al., 1948; 1953). Less is known about gender differences in what is *desired* from a sexual relationship.

However, if men and women differ in sexual attitudes and behaviors, it is also likely that they differ in what they desire from a sexual relationship. DeLamater (1987) has suggested that men and women have different sexual scenarios. He defines a sexual scenario as a "set of social definitions that specify the kinds of sexual behavior that can occur, the type(s) of persons who are appropriate partners for that behavior, and the time(s) and places in which that form of sexual expression is appropriate" (p. 130). Adherence to different sexual scenarios leads to different orientations to relationships. In general, females develop a "person-centered" or relational orientation to sexuality, which means that the goal of sex is to express affection to another person in a committed relationship. Males are more likely to develop a "body-centered" or recreational orientation toward sex, which means that the goal of sex is physical gratification. These different sexual orientations are likely to be manifested not only in attitudes and behaviors, but also in the desires and needs that develop within a specific sexual relationship.

The early classic sex studies by Kinsey and associates (1948; 1953) and Hunt (1974) focused primarily on sexual behaviors and did not consider needs and desires. Hite (1976; 1981) did consider the needs and desires of males and females, but her research consisted of only essay-type questions and furthermore, the same questions were not asked of males and females. Her research, however, provides suggestive evidence that females desire more loving behavior before and after sexual intercourse. For example, many women complained about the amount and type of foreplay.

While the large-scale studies have little to say about gender differences in desires and needs in the sexual relationship, there are

some recent, small-scale studies that have more directly addressed this issue. For example, Halpern and Sherman (1979) surveyed 250 individuals about what they liked in "after-play." They found that women were more likely to want more loving behavior and less physical separation after intercourse than did men. Men were more likely than women to report not enjoying excessive expression or affection after intercourse.

In another study, Denny, Field, and Quadagno (1984) asked college students about their sexual needs and desires concerning foreplay, sexual intercourse, and afterplay. Women indicated that they wanted to spend more time in foreplay and afterplay than did men, perhaps because, as the authors explain, "women value the types of verbally and physically affectionate behavior that occur during foreplay and afterplay more than do men" (p. 243).

Women's greater concern with receiving love in the sexual encounter is also reflected in a study of 50 married couples by Brown and Auerback (1981). They found that men and women gave different reasons for initiating sexual intercourse. The most common reason men gave for initiating sex was a release of sexual tension, whereas the most common reason women gave was to receive "love, intimacy, and holding." Brown and Auerback (1981) write: "Women missed conversation, joking, playfulness in the lovemaking. They wanted courtship prior to the bedroom and slower courting in bed" (p. 117). Carroll, Volk, and Hyde (1985), in a study of dating undergraduates, also found similar gender differences in motives for engaging in sexual intercourse.

If women complain about men's lack of loving behavior and intimacy, what do men complain about? The Hite (1976) research suggests that men wish that women wanted sex more often and would make more sexual advances. However, because of the methodological limitations of Hite's research, we don't have conclusive evidence that there is a gender difference in desire for more partner initiative.

If men are more concerned with the sexual activity itself, as dictated by the body-centered sexual scenario attributed to them, this should be reflected in other desires men have in the sexual relationship. The sexual scenario for men seems to allow for more variety in the who, where, and how of sexual activity. While this investiga-

tion is not a study of variety in the who (extradyadic sexual behavior), we will examine desire for a variety in the how and the where sex occurs within a specific relationship.

Overall, then, we expect that women will desire more than men, activities in sex that demonstrate love and intimacy, while men will desire more than women activities that focus on arousal aspects of the sexual activity itself (more partner initiative; more variety).

METHODS

Samples and Procedure

Two different samples were used in this study. The first sample consisted of 189 undergraduate students (70 men and 119 women) in an introductory sociology class at the University of Wisconsin. The students completed an anonymous questionnaire during class time about their current romantic relationship. The average age of these respondents was 20. Sixty-seven percent of the men and 78% of the women were dating steadily; 29% of the men and 20% of the women were dating casually. The remaining students were living with their partner.

The second sample consisted of 53 couples (106 respondents) from Madison, Wisconsin who had been married less than two years. They were a subsample of a larger sample of married couples who had been interviewed a year earlier. The original sample of 118 couples had been obtained from a list of all couples who had applied for a marriage license in Madison, Wisconsin during a period of four months. The age of the married respondents ranged from 17 to 46. The average age was 27 for the men and 24 for the women. Most of the couples had dated seriously for over two years before marriage, and almost two-thirds of them had lived together before their marriage. This was the first marriage for 80% of the respondents. At both time points, husbands and wives were interviewed separately by trained interviewers. The complete interview covered a variety of topics about the relationship. (See Traupmann [1978] or Utne [1976] for a complete description.)

Measures

Activities Desired in a Sexual Relationship

Subjects were presented with 19 items that assessed whether they wanted their partner to do more or less of certain activities during sex. Each item began, "During sex, I wish my partner:" The response scale for each item ranged from (1) much less . . . , to (7) much more. . . .

The items that referred primarily to desire for love and intimacy in sex were:

- were much less caring and considerate . . . to much more caring and considerate.
- were much less complimentary about my body and actions . . . to much more complimentary about my body and actions.
- would talk lovingly much less during sex . . . to talk lovingly much more during sex.
- would be much more cool and uninvolved . . . to be much more warm and involved.
- would close his/her eyes much more . . . to look at me much more.
- would be much more reticent and shy . . . to be much more seductive.

The items that referred primarily to desire for more partner initiative and variety were:

- would do much less oral-genital sex . . . to much more oral-genital sex.
- were much more predictable about when he/she wants to have sex . . . to much more unpredictable about when he/she wants to have sex.
- would talk "dirty" much less during sex . . . to talk "dirty" much more during sex.

- would be much more gentle . . . to much more rough.
- would be much more conventional sexually . . . to much more experimental sexually.
- were much more conventional about where we have sex . . . to much more variable about where we have sex.
- liked slow, controlled, conscious sex much more . . . to fast, impulsive, abandoned sex much more.
- were much less wild and sexy . . . to much more wild and sexy.
- would give many fewer instructions and requests . . . to give many more instructions and requests.
- would initiate sex much less . . . to initiate sex much more.
- were much less willing to do what I want sexually . . . to much more willing to do what I want sexually.
- would play the dominant role in sex much less . . . to play the dominant role in sex much more.
- would play the submissive role in sex much less . . . to play the submissive role in sex much more.

Satisfaction with Sex

The questionnaire also included measures of sexual satisfaction. One question asked about overall satisfaction with the sexual relationship: "How satisfied are you with the sexual relationship with your partner?" Two questions asked how the respondent felt immediately after having sex: (a) how loving and close they usually felt after sex; and (b) how sexually satisfied they felt after sex. Two additional questions asked about the respondent's perception of how the partner felt after sex: (a) how loving and close; and (b) how sexually satisfied. Each question had an 8-point response scale with the higher number indicating more satisfaction with the relationship. The two questions about how the respondent felt after sex were summed to form an index of *respondent satisfaction after sex*.

The two questions about the partner were summed to form an index of *perceived partner satisfaction after sex*.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine how men and women differ, if at all, in what behaviors they desire from their partner in a sexual relationship. This was examined in two ways. First, the responses of the subjects to the items were subjected to Oneway ANOVAS, with gender as the independent variable and behaviors desired from the partner as the dependent variables. Second, the relative rankings of these desires were compared between men and women.

Oneway ANOVA Results: Effect of Gender

The Oneway ANOVAS were conducted separately for the dating and married samples. The results are presented in Table 1.

A significant gender difference was found for only one of the items designed to measure desire for love and intimacy in the sexual relationship. In both the dating and the married samples, women desired to a greater degree than men that their partner talk more lovingly during sex.

Several significant gender differences were found in the items designed to measure desire for partner initiative and variety. In both samples, men desired to a significantly greater degree than women that their partner be more rough, more experimental, more willing to engage in fast, impulsive sex, initiate sex more, and play the dominant role in sex more. In the married sample only, men desired to a significantly greater degree than women that their partner talk more dirty during sex and be more wild and sexy. In the dating sample only, men desired to a significantly greater degree than women that their partner be willing to be more variable in where sex is had, give more instructions, and be more willing to do what "I want."

In the dating sample, the largest gender difference found was for desire for more partner initiative (men desired it more). In the mar-

TABLE 1. Gender differences in what is desired from a sexual relationship.

Themes	<u>Dating Sample</u>			<u>Married Sample</u>		
	Men	Women	S.d.	Men	Women	S.d.
<u>Desire for Love and Intimacy</u>						
More caring and considerate	4.39	4.59	.90	4.23	4.51	.91
More complimentary	4.57	4.63	.96	4.51	4.74	.93
Talk lovingly more	4.61	4.92	.93	4.76*	4.89	.98
More warm and involved	4.90	4.67	1.02	4.81	4.60	1.00
Look at me more	4.29	4.40	.77	4.17	4.25	.80
More seductive	4.84	4.88	1.02	5.19	4.81	1.14
<u>Desire for Partner Initiative and Variety</u>						
More oral-genital sex	5.09	4.44	1.11	4.66	4.47	1.02
More unpredictable about when	4.13	4.25	1.28	4.32	4.38	1.32
Talk more dirty	4.27	4.18	.67	4.55	4.11	.74
More rough	4.47	3.99	.86	4.51	4.02	.89
More experimental	5.26	4.50	.96	5.08	4.62	.93
More variable about where	4.73	4.36	.97	4.66	4.51	.96
More fast, impulsive sex	4.30	3.81	1.02	4.66	3.85	1.16
More wild and sexy	4.63	4.51	.84	5.00	4.57	.96
More instructions	4.99	4.67	.84	4.91	4.60	.94
Partner initiate more sex	5.21	4.17	1.32	5.13	4.45	1.37
More willing to do what I want	4.74	4.49	.87	4.58	4.57	.91
Play dominant role more	4.54	4.29	.85	4.55	4.09	.87
Play submissive role more	3.76	3.88	.68	3.77	4.02	.95

* p<.05
 ** p<.01
 *** p<.001

ried sample, the largest gender difference found was for desire for more fast and impulsive sex, which was desired more by the men.

In sum, the Oneway ANOVAS yielded significant gender differences on ten items for the dating sample and eight items for the married sample. Dating and married women scored significantly higher than dating and married men on only one of these items, the desire for more loving talk during sex. Otherwise, all other significant gender differences were due to men desiring the behavior to a significantly greater degree than women.

Gender Differences in Most Desired Activities from Partner

The results indicate that men desired more overall from their partner than did women. The mean across items was higher for men. In a second analysis of the data, the five behaviors most desired by men were compared with the five behaviors most desired by women. The items with the highest means for dating men and women and married men and women are presented in Table 2.

Women from the two samples were very similar in what they most desired from their partner. They most desired love and intimacy from the sexual encounter. Both dating and married women wished their partner would talk more lovingly, be more seductive, be more complimentary, and be more warm and involved. The only items having high means for women that were not concerned with a desire for love and intimacy were a desire for instructions (in both samples) and desire for the partner to be more experimental (in the married sample).

Men were relatively less concerned about getting more love from their partner during sex and relatively more concerned about getting more variety and partner initiative. Of the items having the highest means, only one for each sample reflected concern for love and intimacy (hence, the results were just the reverse of those found for women). Married men wanted their partner to be more seductive, and dating men wished that their partner would be more warm and involved. As indicated in Table 2, men in both samples desired that their partner be more experimental, initiate sex more often, and give more instructions. The other item that had the highest mean in

TABLE 2. Behaviors most desired from partner in sexual relationship for men and women.

Dating Sample	
Men	Women
1) More experimental	1) Talk lovingly more
2) Initiate sex more	2) More seductive
3) More oral-genital sex	3) More warm & involved
4) Give more instructions	4) Give more instructions
5) More warm and involved	5) More complimentary

Married Sample	
Men	Women
1) More seductive	1) Talk lovingly more
2) Initiate sex more	2) More seductive
3) More experimental	3) More complimentary
4) More wild and sexy	4) More experimental
5) Give more instructions	* -5) Give more instructions
	-5) More warm & involved

* = tied for 5th

the male samples was "more oral-genital sex" for dating men and "more wild and sexy" for married men.

Satisfaction with the Sexual Relationship

If men are more likely than women to want their partner to engage in more sexual behaviors, does this mean that they are less satisfied with the sexual relationship? The answer is no. The results indicated that men and women were generally equally satisfied with the sexual relationship. Both men and women reported feeling

“moderately” to “very” satisfied with the overall sexual relationship with the partner. A gender difference was not found on any of the indexes of satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

We examined differences between men and women in what they desire from their partner in a sexual relationship. We had hypothesized that women would desire more than men that their partner engage in behaviors that show love and intimacy and that men would desire more than women that their partner take more initiative and be willing to try a variety of sexual behaviors.

The results for the items reflecting concern for love and intimacy suggest that men and women are really not so different in the amount of caring and closeness they desire in the sexual relationship. However, there are some limitations with our items. Because this was an exploratory study, we cannot guarantee that the items adequately represent the domain of possible desires in the area of love and intimacy. Furthermore, in retrospect, we believe that some of the items may be interpreted in different ways depending on one's relative desire for love vs. physical gratification. For example, desire for the partner to be more “caring and considerate” could be interpreted as a desire for more loving behavior or alternatively, as a desire for more sexual/physical behavior. The same applies to “more warm and involved”; one could be warm and involved in either an emotional or a physical/sexual way. Even the desire to have a partner “look more” could have either sexual or loving/emotional implications.

Although the ANOVA results did not provide strong support for the first prediction, the results listing the five items having the highest means for each gender indicate that females desired the love/intimacy behaviors more than the partner initiative/variety behaviors, while the reverse was true for males.

Stronger support was found for the second prediction — that men are more likely than women to want their partner to take more initiative and be willing to engage in more variety. More specifically, men (married and/or dating) desired to a greater degree than women that their partner be more rough, more experimental, more willing

to engage in fast, impulsive sex, initiate more sex, play the dominant role in sex more, talk more dirty during sex, be more wild and sexy, be more variable in where sex is had, give more instructions, and be more willing to do what "I want." This gender difference may be explained by the different sexual scripts that men and women develop as a result of the socialization process. Men, who are taught that it is acceptable to be oriented toward physical gratification, may be more focused on what may facilitate their sexual arousal. Women, who are socialized to have sex only when there is love involved, are less oriented toward activities that might increase physical arousal and more focused toward activities that increase love in the relationship.

Another possible explanation for gender differences in desires for activities within the sexual relationship stems from the sociobiological or evolutionary theory (see Hinde, 1984). According to this perspective, gender differences in sexual behaviors, attitudes, and desires are "wired in," or due to evolution. Thus, differences found today between men and women are a result of having different requirements for successful reproduction. In order to transmit her genes into the future, the female (who has limited gametes) must concentrate her energy on raising children and trying to keep the father bonded to the relationship. The best strategy for the man (who has unlimited gametes) for passing on genes is to be somewhat promiscuous. Natural selection may have resulted in today's women being more bond- and love-focused, and today's men being more concerned with variety and unconventional sex. This concern for variety and unconventional sex may be manifested not only in desire for multiple partners (men's greater desire in this area has been documented elsewhere), but also in different experiences desired with the same partner.

If men desire their partner to engage in several more behaviors in the sexual relationship, why are they not less satisfied with the sexual relationship? The results of this study indicated that men and women were equally satisfied with the sexual relationship. It is probably because men also know the female sexual scripts and thus don't *expect* more of their partner. There is a difference between wishing for something and actually expecting it. Most social psychologists (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) agree that it is when our

expectations are not fulfilled that unhappiness or dissatisfaction result.

In sum, we found some interesting results that are consistent with the limited literature in this area. We encourage continued research into what men and women desire from other sexual relationships. Furthermore, there are several other, related questions that could be examined. For example, to what degree and how are desires communicated to the partner (see Metts & Cupach, in press). Additionally, are there gender differences in expectations for what sex will be like in a long-term committed relationship, such as marriage?

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