

SYMPOSIA PAPER

Sex Differences in Sexual Desire

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Abstract

The standard view about sex differences in sexual desire is that males are lusty and loose, while females are cool and coy. This is widely believed and is a core premise of some scientific programs like evolutionary psychology. But is it true? A mountain of evidence seems to support the standard view. Yet, this evidence is shot through with methodological and philosophical problems. Developments in the study of sexual desire suggest that some of these problems can be resolved, and when they are, the standard view looks, at best, to be an exaggeration.

1. Introduction

Are the sexual desires of males and females similar or different? This is a question of both practical and intellectual significance. The practical importance of sex differences in sexual desire is obvious. Because a paradigmatic form of romantic, sexual, and familial relationships involves a pairing between a male and a female, often for long portions of their adult lives, an imbalance in sexual desires could have profound personal and social consequences. The intellectual significance of the question is equally clear. Many of the various sciences studying sexual desire have made claims regarding sex differences in desire. Anthropology, sociology, physiology, evolutionary psychology, and zoology make pronouncements about putative differences between the sexual desires of males and females. In some domains, such as evolutionary psychology, pronouncements regarding sex differences in sexual desire are core commitments. What I will call the *standard view* is that male and female sexual desires differ—specifically, that the strength of male desires is greater than the strength of female desires, and that males are more promiscuous in the objects of their desires—and such differences are due to evolved biological dispositions.

The standard view has been routinely assumed in the study of sexual desire. The nineteenth-century psychiatrist Krafft-Ebing made this point poetically: He claimed that if a female is “normally developed mentally, and well bred, her sexual desire is small. If this were not so the whole world would become a brothel and marriage and a family impossible” (1886, 13). Yet normal male sexual desire, according to Krafft-Ebing, is a “volcano” that “burns down and lays wasted all around it”—it is “an abyss that devours all honour, substance and health” (2).

The standard view is, of course, an empirical claim. To know if the sexual desires of males and females are similar or different, we could, for example, simply ask people about their desires and behaviors or observe behavior through other empirical means. Indeed, a massive amount of behavioral evidence has been generated pertaining to the standard view. However, as we will see, such empirical arguments face numerous methodological and philosophical problems.

The historian Thomas Laqueur argued that cross-historical variation in sexual desires is so great that the standard view “is the precise inversion of pre-Enlightenment notions that, extending back to antiquity, equated friendship with men and fleshiness with women” (1990, 4). Insofar as there are male-female differences, Laqueur argued, thinkers from antiquity to the early modern period held that female nature is more libidinous than that of males, starkly in contrast with today’s standard view.¹

This hints at several fundamental challenges to theorizing about sex differences in sexual desire. An ontological challenge, suggested by Laqueur and argued for by many others, is that our sexual desires are the product of cultural forces and norms—if in fact female sexual desires were stronger than males during the premodern period, and if now the standard view appears true, then this indicates that our desires are shaped by culture to such a degree that there is no general, culture-invariant fact regarding the nature of male-female differences in sexual desire. An epistemological challenge is that the relevant evidence severely underdetermines conclusions about sex differences in sexual desire. Such evidence is shot through with biases. Any evidence that either supports or contradicts the standard view can be explained away by appealing to social or cultural factors. Both champions and critics of the standard view employ this explaining-away strategy, and both sides explicitly accuse each other on these grounds.

This epistemological problem has a corollary: Our theorizing about the standard view is permeated by social values and cultural norms—indeed, of all objects of scientific study, the influence of values on science is perhaps most obvious in the case of sex.² Our folk beliefs and moral codes about sex and sex differences, along with broader structures of power, have influenced theorizing about sex and sex differences. Thus, whatever empirical and theoretical substantiation there is to the standard view is also permeated by social values and cultural norms. Such value-permeation would, presumably, mitigate much of the putative empirical and theoretical support for the standard view.

Yet, the behavioral sciences have developed methodological improvements that can partially alleviate this epistemological underdetermination. Evidence from those

¹ The scholarly literature has not always been precise or consistent in its use of sex and gender terminology; often the terms “man” and “woman” are used interchangeably with “male” and “female.” My focus here is on putative differences between the (putative) biological categories and so I use the corresponding terminology. As we will see, a critical argument is that gender norms influence the scientific findings and perhaps even the underlying facts about sex differences, but in any case, to make sense of that argument we need terms to refer to the biological categories. Whether the terms “male” and “female” are straightforwardly biological terms is debated; see, for example, Richardson (2022) and Griffiths (2020).

² The historian of sex science Jeffrey Weeks argued that “sexology is bound, by countless delicate strands, to the preoccupations of its age” (1985, 72).

methodological developments suggest sex differences in sexual desire that are more modest than that suggested by earlier behavioral science. A resolution to this epistemological problem for the scientific study of sex differences in sexual desire does not support the standard view. However, the ontological problem remains. Because this problem is normally articulated as a challenge to the standard view, the balance of philosophical and empirical considerations suggests that male-female differences in sexual desire are less than, perhaps much less, asserted by the standard view. In section 2 I articulate the theoretical aspect of the standard view and the main alternative to it, what I will call constructivism. A vast amount of evidence from a wide range of sciences has been amassed to bear on this question; in section 3 I focus on a few salient studies in behavioral science to argue that the epistemological problem can be managed and, when it is, the standard view looks far less compelling than its adherents maintain.

2. Two positions

The primary question when comparing the sexual desires of males and females is whether there are differences between typical male and female sexual desires, and if there are, what is the nature of those differences (strength of desire, heterogeneity in objects of desire, etc). Moreover, the question is whether such differences reflect deep facts about human nature. The standard view holds that male sexual desires are stronger and less choosy than female sexual desires. We saw in section 1 that the standard view has been asserted by various scientific programs, and it is of course widely asserted in folk discourse and popular culture. Yet, an alternative position denies the standard view.

Today the standard view is perhaps most prominently articulated by evolutionary psychology. Indeed, the standard view is a core commitment of evolutionary psychology, and the putative success of evolutionary psychology in explaining the standard view is held to be an argument in favor of evolutionary psychology. “Parental investment theory” of evolutionary psychology holds that the differential resources demanded of mothers and fathers to produce and raise offspring entail different optimal mating strategies for females and males. By their nature, goes this thinking, males tend toward casual sexual encounters and polygyny while females tend toward careful mate choice and monogamy.³ This view was asserted in strong terms by the evolutionary psychologist Donald Symons:

A central theme of this book is that, with respect to sexuality, there is a female human nature and a male human nature, and that these natures are extraordinarily different, though the differences are to some extent masked by the compromises heterosexual relations entail and by moral injunctions. (1979, v)

To maximize evolutionary fitness, an organism must maximize the number of surviving offspring. According to this line of thinking, females and males have different optimal reproductive strategies to maximize fitness. Males are better off reproducing

³ A canonical statement of this is by Trivers (1972, 153): “One can, in effect, treat the sexes as if they were different species, the opposite sex being a resource relevant to producing maximum surviving offspring.”

indiscriminately while females are better off being careful in their mate choices, goes this theory, and these facts of our long evolutionary history influence the nature of male and female sexual desire today. Proponents of the standard view have appealed to a massive volume of empirical evidence; I discuss an illustrative sliver of that in the text that follows. Critics have noted numerous biases in this evidence, and the inference from this evidence to conclusions about sex differences in desire is severely underdetermined.

An alternative position denies the standard view. To do so requires an explanation for the great volume of empirical evidence that has been amassed in favor of the standard view. Broadly construed, this is accomplished using various forms of constructivism about sexuality. The standard view assumes that there is a nature to sexual desire, precisely because the view holds that sexual desires of males and females are different by their nature, and therefore, sexual desires must have some natural basis. If, instead, sexual desires are constructed by social and cultural forces rather than our biological constitution, then the observed differences between males and females would be contingent and the standard view would be false.

Constructivism about sexuality has been argued for from various quarters. Shere Hite, the lead on the massive surveys of female sexuality that led to the Hite Report, claimed “our model of sex and physical relations is *culturally* (not biologically) defined, and can be redefined—or undefined” (2004 [1976], 335; emphasis in original). The philosopher Roger Scruton similarly claimed that “[s]exual desire, like the human person, is a social artefact, and can be built in many ways” (1986, 15). And the historian David Halperin made the pithy claim that “sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect” (1989, 257). Indeed, constructivism about sexuality is a staple among some historians and anthropologists, who emphasize historical and cultural variation in sexuality: homosexuality emerged in the nineteenth century, pederasty was normal in Ancient Greece and in some contemporary indigenous groups, females have been the libidinous sex in some times and places. If our sexuality is indeed so diverse and so sensitive to cultural context, then, goes this thinking, little general can be said about sex differences in sexual desire.

A specific version of constructivism with respect to sex differences in sexual desire was offered by Freud. Freud seemed to think that males and females had similar sexual natures through childhood, yet “[a]mong girls, the tendency to sexual repression generally appears greater” (1905, essay 3). Freud proceeded to argue that apparent differences between the sexes do not appear until after puberty: “[T]he sexuality of little girls is entirely masculine in character,” in which, by masculine sexuality, Freud meant simply that the libido is strong. He continued, “the libido is regularly and invariably masculine in nature, whether it occurs in men or in women, and irrespective of whether its object is a man or a woman.” In short, Freud seemed to hold that the strength of sexual desires of males and females is similar by nature, but females tend to experience more repression, which becomes more salient as females mature and is pronounced by teenage years.

Another version of constructivism that could call into doubt any empirical support for the standard view was defended by the feminist scholar Catherine MacKinnon, who urged that the study of female sexuality must consider inequality and sexual violence. There is no way to understand female sexual desire, argued

MacKinnon—including what females in fact do and what they say they desire—without considering the constant threat of injustice and violence that females face: “This is why interpreting female sexuality as an expression of women’s agency and autonomy, as if sexism did not exist, is always denigrating and bizarre and reductive” (1989, 153). Thus, we ought not interpret first-person claims about female sexual desire, or third-person observations of female sexual behavior, as authentic manifestations of female sexual nature, even if the females under study explicitly claim that their desires are autonomous features of their agency. If so, then empirical evidence based on first-person reports or observations of sexual behavior cannot confirm or disconfirm theories about the nature of female sexuality or natural differences between male and female sexual desires.

Thus, there are two profoundly different positions regarding the standard view: One position, often asserted by evolutionary psychologists and others, defends the standard view, while the other position, often asserted by the human sciences, denies it, holding instead that observed sex differences in sexual desire are the result of social forces.

3. Behavioral science

An enormous range of evidence has been gathered that has been taken to both vindicate and challenge the standard view, including evidence from anthropology, psychology, primatology, and sociology. To illustrate the sorts of methodological problems such work can face, and how scientists address these problems, I focus on a few lines of evidence from the study of human behavior.

Two forms of evidence that are relevant to the standard view are what people say they do and what people in fact do. For example, the evolutionary biologist Buss (2016) claims that “Women’s current mate preferences provide a window for viewing our mating past,” and thereby provides insight into the nature of female sexual desire, while MacKinnon (1989, 138) argues that pornography viewing habits “provide an answer” regarding the nature of sexual desire. The study of sexual behavior has generated much evidence that appears to support the standard view. However, critics respond by noting that what people say they desire, their self-reported claims about sexual behavior, and sexual behaviors themselves, are heavily modulated by social contexts. To address this criticism, scientists have developed their observational techniques in a variety of ways, such as using fake lie-detector machines, studying sexual behaviors in a diverse range of social contexts, and asking subjects how they would behave in controlled or idealised conditions. The results of these methods suggest the presence of sex differences that are much smaller than earlier survey methods.

The first large-scale surveys about sex led to the Kinsey Reports (the report on males was published in 1948 and the report on females in 1953). Kinsey’s group interviewed thousands of people and gathered data on frequency of various kinds of sexual behavior and demographic data such as sex, age, income, and religion.

One phenomenon that seemed to emerge from such surveys is that males are more interested in casual sex than females. In a widely cited study, males and females in their early twenties on a college campus made one of three kinds of proposals to people of the opposite sex: whether they would go on a date with the proposer, whether

they would come over to their apartment that night, or whether they would go to bed that night with the proposer (Clark and Hatfield 1989). Both males and females said yes to the proposed date roughly 50 percent of the time; in contrast, about 70 percent of males said yes to the proposed sex, while no females did. This article is deemed by some to be a classic in social psychology, and evolutionary psychologists have taken this result as convincing evidence for the standard view (see, e.g., Buss 2016). However, alternative explanations to this result have been proposed and tested. One alternative way to interpret these findings is that females are more concerned about their safety with a stranger rather than less interested in casual sex. A second alternative is that females are just as interested in casual sex but less confident that they would enjoy it with the young males who approached them. Another alternative explanation is that males are merely more willing to say that they are interested in casual sex compared with females, not that they in fact are more interested, and this difference in willingness to say they are interested in casual sex could arise because norms of masculinity nudge males' willingness to say that they are interested in casual sex upward, or because norms of femininity nudge females' willingness to say that they are interested in casual sex downward, or both.

So, the standard view is underdetermined by the empirical evidence from such surveys. But scientists find creative ways to manage this underdetermination.

Developing the survey approach, Conley (2011) asked subjects to imagine this scenario: While on vacation in Los Angeles you are visiting a trendy restaurant, and sitting a few tables away is a famous person, X, who catches your eye and approaches you and asks if you would join X in bed that night. For the male subjects, X was Christie Brinkley, Angelina Jolie, and Rosanne Barr. For the female subjects, X was Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, and Donald Trump (this study was performed prior to Trump's foray into politics). Female subjects agreed to the propositions from Depp and Pitt about as often as male subjects agreed to the propositions from Brinkley and Jolie. Barr was rejected by the male subjects, and the female subjects emphatically rejected Trump.

In another survey Conley asked subjects "what did you say the last time someone asked to have sex with you?" Female and male subjects both reported having said yes about half the time. Conley surveyed males and females about their willingness to have casual sex with a good friend of the opposite sex, and when perceived sexual competence was controlled for, females reported willingness as often as males (also reported in Conley 2011).

Heterosexual males and females report vastly different sexual behaviors, some of which appear paradoxical (such as the mean numbers of lifetime opposite-sex partners, as suggested by the Kinsey reports and later surveys). One possible explanation for these reported differences is that the sexual desires and behaviors of males and females are in fact very different, thereby substantiating the standard view (though this would not explain difference in mean numbers of lifetime heterosexual partners). However, this observed difference has an obvious alternative explanation: Given social expectations such as the sexual double standard, males are more likely to honestly report or exaggerate particular sexual behaviors and desires (such as their number of lifetime partners) while females are more likely to underreport. Alexander and Fisher (2003) posed questions to males and females about their sexual desires and behavior under three scenarios: one in which subjects observed that the

experimenter could view their responses, one in which subjects' responses were kept anonymous, and one in which subjects believed that lying could be detected because they had been connected to a (fake) lie detection machine. The differences between reports of sexual behavior and desire between males and females were greatest in the first scenario, modest in the second scenario, and all but disappeared in the third scenario.

In another genre of experimental design, researchers have subjects engage in a "speed dating" exercise to test the standard view's prediction of differential selectivity between male and female choices of potential sex partners (Finkel and Eastwick 2009). Such settings are usually structured as follow: Females are seated around a room in a circle, and males are seated across them in an outer circle; after a set time (usually a few minutes), the "date" between pairs is over, and males stand and move one place over; at the end of the night subjects are asked who they would like to have a second date with, and mutual matches are connected. Psychologists have gathered data from such venues. An advantage of such venues for testing mate choice, compared to studying mate choice "in the wild," is that the partners who we in fact settle with are the result not only of our preferences but also of our limited range of opportunities—to mate, you must meet.

One finding that seemed to consistently emerge from this genre is that females are far less likely than males to want a second date—roughly half as likely, by some estimates. However, there appears to have been a confound in some of these studies. Speed dating venues have adopted a norm in which it is the males who get up and move tables to greet the next female. Finkel and Eastwick (2009) tested to see if the role of "approacher" versus that of "approached" modulates willingness for a second date: In their experiment half the time males approached females and half the time females approached males. They found that when females approached males, they were more likely than males were to say yes to a second date.

Commenting on the reliance of behavioral evidence for the standard view by evolutionary psychologists, John Dupré noted the problem of underdetermination suggested by the previously mentioned examples: "[T]he evidence, for example the answers to the questionnaires designed by Buss to elicit the sexual preferences of large numbers of men and women, do nothing to discriminate between these different kinds of explanation" (2001, 57). That is, there are various alternative hypotheses that can explain the evidence generated by methods used by studies such as that reported in Clark and Hatfield (1989), and this mitigates the empirical support that such evidence provides to the standard view. Yet, such underdetermination is not always insurmountable, as suggested by Conley's clever experiments and Alexander and Fisher's use of the fake lie detector. A conclusion that can be drawn, albeit tentatively, is that when questions about sexual desire and behavior are posed in ways that attempt to control for effects of social context, such as the influence of social norms or concerns that casual encounters will be dangerous or unpleasant, male and female sexual desires look more similar than in behavioral studies that do not control for those confounding factors.

Nevertheless, no matter how clever the behavioral methods have become for studying sexual desire, the approaches canvassed in the preceding text are fundamentally based on what people in fact do, what people say they do, or what people say they want to do. What people in fact do is constrained by all sorts of factors, such as

social norms or sheer availability of opportunity. What people say they do and what people say they want to do is similarly modulated by social forces. Indeed, what people in fact want to do is plausibly modulated by social forces. That, in turn, motivates an alternative form of evidence pertaining to our behavior, one that is perhaps less constrained by social norms and availability of opportunity: pornography viewing habits.

Studies of pornography viewing habits, afforded by large datasets available from internet pornography venues, have found some male-female differences: Males consume more pornography, begin viewing at a younger age, use it more frequently when in relationships, and view more hardcore content. As noted in the preceding text, the feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon claimed that pornography provides the “truth about sex,” specifically, the truth about male sexual desire: “If pornography has not become sex to and from the male point of view, it is hard to explain why the pornography industry makes a known ten billion dollars a year selling it as sex mostly to men” (1989, 139). However, MacKinnon also claimed that “pornography is a means through which sexuality is socially constructed” (*ibid.*). That is, pornography can both reflect the nature of sexual desires and influence what is taken to be that nature.

So, when considering what we can learn about the nature of sexual desire by studying pornography, there are two opposing models of the direction of causation. One we can call the “microscope model”: Studying pornography viewing habits informs us about the real nature of sexual desire, which otherwise remains shrouded by factors such as self-censorship in surveys or by social control of behavior. On this model, the content of pornography is evidence about the real nature of our desires; the content of pornography is ultimately caused by, or responsive to, the content of sexual desires. Pornography is like a microscope that can provide evidence about the nature of sexual desire. The other model we can call the “advertisement model”: Studying pornography allows us to observe a way in which our sexual desires are shaped by cultural forces, just as advertisements and other media modulate our desires and preferences more generally. On this model, the content of pornography shapes the content of our sexual desires. Pornography is like an advertisement that influences our sexual desires, just as advertisements influence our desire for many other kinds of objects and activities. MacKinnon is appealing to both models and, indeed, both models might be true: Between the content of sexual desires and the content of pornography, the causal influence is plausibly bidirectional.

Yet, MacKinnon and some other commentators seem to emphasize the microscope model. Here, for example, MacKinnon cites Dworkin, who claims that pornography “reveals that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting” (1989, 140), suggesting that pornography can indeed reveal the true nature of male sexual desires. As another example, MacKinnon writes “From pornography one learns that forcible violation of women is the essence of sex” (*ibid.*), implying that there is indeed an essence to (male) sexuality, and that pornography is a microscope to learn about it.

A problem with interpreting evidence from pornography viewing habits was suggested by MacKinnon: The direction of causation between contents of desires and contents of pornography is very likely bidirectional. Moreover, the relevance of pornography viewing habits to the standard view is less direct than evidence from

behavioral studies. The standard view involves a cluster of claims about strength of desire, desired number of partners, degree of promiscuity, and so forth, and it is not obvious how to make an inference about those aspects of sexual desire from pornography viewing practices.

4. Conclusion

I have focused on the epistemological challenge to theorizing about sex differences in sexual desire. A wide variety of evidence is relevant to the standard view of sex differences in sexual desire, yet this evidence is very often infused with biases, and there are problems of interpreting this evidence. One might think that such a challenge entails that we simply cannot know if the standard view is true or false because the evidence so severely underdetermines any possible conclusion on the question. However, that would be an excessively sceptical resignation to the epistemological challenge. Using behavioral sciences as an example, I showed that methodological innovations can mitigate the impact of biases such that more reliable conclusions can be made about sex differences in sexual desire. More reliable behavioral evidence in fact suggests that the standard view is at the very least exaggerated and that males and females have sexual desires more similar than is often asserted by popular culture or by scientific programs such as evolutionary psychology.

Among other challenges, the ontological challenge remains. Fully articulating and addressing the ontological challenge is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, the ontological challenge, if it is sound, repudiates the standard view. Thus, the balance of empirical and philosophical considerations suggests that the standard view is false. This conclusion can be articulated as a dilemma for the standard view. Either the ontological challenge is sound, in which case the standard view is false, or the ontological challenge is not sound, which would entail that there is some relatively stable nature in male and female sexual desires, the truth of which is to be elucidated empirically, and when such empirical evidence is more reliably gathered, sexual desires of males and females appear similar, and thus the standard view is also false.

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