

Gender, Belief in the Sexual Double Standard, and Sexual Talk in Heterosexual Dating Relationships¹

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This study was focused on the extent to which sex, gender, and attitudes toward sexuality influenced the amount and quality of sexual communication within 698 heterosexual dating couples. Women reported more dyadic sexual negotiation but less sexual negotiation efficacy than their male partners, and individuals with less traditional attitudes toward gender roles and sexuality indicated that they discussed more sexual issues and disclosed more sexual information with their partners. Couples with more dyadic sexual communication and sexual assertiveness (but lesser negotiation efficacy) reported increased relational satisfaction. We frame the findings from a script perspective, and our results suggest that individuals who self-disclose important information about sexual issues contribute to the effectiveness of sexual communication in a dating relationship.

KEY WORDS: gender sexual attitudes; disclosure; heterosexual dating couples; sexual scripts; sexual self-disclosure, sexual talk.

Notions about gender influence individuals' discussions about sex in personal relationships. North American mainstream culture, among others, socializes individuals to advocate for a pleasure-centered or recreational focus on sexuality for men and a person-centered or relational orientation toward sexuality for women (DeLamater, 1987). This socialization still predominates, although women's and men's sexual activity actually appears to be more similar than different (cf. Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Nearly 50% of adolescent girls and boys have engaged in sexual intercourse by age 18, and by the time adolescence is over, nearly four of five have engaged in sexual intercourse (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels,

1994). Despite these similarities, the sociosexual standards for sexual behavior differ for women and men (Fine, 1988). For instance, women generally endorse sex within a committed or dating relationship as the ideal, whereas men are more accepting of casual sex (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of attitudes toward gender roles and sexuality on heterosexual dating couples' discussion of sexual issues and how these attitudes influence the amount and quality of sexual self-disclosure. Sexual communication "is the means by which individuals come to select potential partners for sexual relations, and through which the meanings, functions, and effects of sexual relations are negotiated" (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996, p. 49). More specifically, we refer to sexual communication as the discussion of safer sex, sexual health (e.g., sexual history, STIs), sexual pleasure, and sexual limits.

The Traditional Sexual Script

Because attitudes toward gender roles are influenced by socio-cultural contexts, we used script

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theory to frame the present study. A scripting perspective allows for the examination of how socio-cultural contexts influence what people think and do (Gagnon, 1990). Sexual scripts refer to abstractions about sexuality that most individuals in a particular culture would recognize (e.g., in North America: one-night stands, pick-up lines). The traditional heterosexual sexual script emphasizes different expectations for women's and men's behavior, and sets up a contentious relationship between an "over-sexed, aggressive, emotionally insensitive male initiator who is enhanced by each sexual conquest" and an "unassertive, passive woman who is trying to protect her worth by restricting access to her sexuality while still appearing interested, sexy, and concerned about the man's needs" (Byers, 1996, p. 11). Men are expected to initiate and guide sexual activity and to be assertive and knowledgeable about sexual activity, and women are expected to be passive, compliant with the initiation of sexual activity, and responsive and pleased with a sexual encounter as it progresses (Gagnon, 1990). These scripts specify appropriate sexual goals and contexts, provide guidance for behavior, and plans to achieve sexual goals (Gagnon, 1990; Simon & Gagnon, 1987). They operate and interact on three different levels: the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels. The cultural-level script provides instructions for sexual conduct that are seen in schools', religious leaders', sex educators', and mass media's narratives. These narratives help create and maintain guidelines and social norms for appropriate sexual conduct. Interpersonal-level scripts refer to one's structured patterns of interaction (i.e., what sexual behaviors an individual acquires and maintains during sexual interactions), and intrapsychic-level scripts refer to an individual's feelings and fantasies about sexual activity that are used to reflect on past behavior and to guide current and future behavior.

Whether consciously or not, individuals tend to rely on scripts that tell them what situations are sexual and how to behave sexually (Simon & Gagnon, 1987). For example, college student participants in Edgar and Fitzpatrick's (1993) study of sexual communication behaviors generated a list of scripted behaviors for a "one-night stand" that culminated in intercourse between a man and a woman: participants' descriptions began with kissing, led to genital touching, and ended with sexual intercourse. Scripts, in short, include behaviors that correspond with a culture's expectations about what happens when, where, how, why, and by whom.

Concomitant with the traditional heterosexual sexual script is a sexual double standard that endorses different sexual behavior for women and men, whereby women are expected to confine sexual behavior to the context of a committed relationship and men are expected to engage in sexual behavior in all kinds of relationships. Research, however, demonstrates that the expectation that women and men follow this traditional sexual script has lessened and become more subtle over time, especially in the context of established relationships, and that couples may use other kinds of scripts instead (e.g., Byers, 1996; Gentry, 1998; Milhausen & Herald, 1999; O'Sullivan, 1995). For instance, some research suggests that in on-going, established relationships much overlap exists in women's and men's behavior in sexual interactions, even if expectations for their behavior differ (Byers, 1996; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). These similarities between women's and men's sexual experience demonstrate some divergence from the traditional sexual script and evaluations based on a sexual double standard, though different expectations for women's behavior can still be seen in some scripts, such as token resistance (see Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988).

Although sexual behavior may be similar, the current rules and roles for sexual conduct and sexual conversation do not apply evenly by gender. The double standard may remain in place in some ways, such as the "acceptable" number of lifetime sexual partners for men and women (Sprecher, 1989), the sex of the person who suggests condom or other contraceptive use (Hynie & Lydon, 1995), who should initiate sexual activity (DeLamater, 1987), and the expectation that "good/moral" women do not discuss sexual matters openly (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002). Some women deny or underreport the extent of their sexual experience. In fact, women are more likely than men to use rough approximations of the number of lifetime sexual partners rather than enumeration (Brown & Sinclair, 1999). A survey of 600 college students revealed that almost 40% of the sexually active women in the sample said that they underreport their sexual behavior to partners (Rubin, 1990).

Other research indicates that what seems to matter most for women and men is the relative level of sexual experience and whether sexual activity occurs in the context of committed relationships (O'Sullivan, 1995). Both women and men are rated as less desirable marriage partners and

friends when they are described as engaging in sex in non-committed relationships and as having high levels of sexual experience (Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbuch, 1991). However, sexually experienced women have been rated as more liberal and more assertive than less experienced women (Gentry, 1998). Most women in one study by Milhausen and Herold (1999) thought that women are more likely than men to enforce the double standard. This indicates that there may be more than one script operating in women's and men's close sexual relationships. Research on the traditional sexual script leads to questions about how individuals' beliefs in and adherence to its expectations influence a couple's sexual talk and an individual's level of sexual self-disclosure.

Sexual Assertiveness

If there are different scripts operating, an examination of sexual assertiveness may provide further insight into variations, such as whether or not women initiate sexual activity. Communication about satisfying sexual behavior and the willingness and ability to talk about sex has been labeled "sexual assertiveness." Specifically, assertive communication about sexuality refers to the ability to initiate sexual activity, to refuse unwanted sexual activity, and to negotiate desirable sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and safer-sex behaviors (Morokoff et al., 1997). Being assertive means eschewing traditional sexual scripts that require men to direct sexual activity (Morokoff, 2000). Asking explicit questions about a partner's sexual history (e.g., number of partners, STIs), directly stating sexual desires, and verbally asserting a desire to use condoms all violate cultural norms for indirectness in sexual relations and preferences for women's submissiveness and sexual inexperience (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002; Metts & Fitzpatrick, 1992; Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). O'Sullivan and Byers (1992) found that heterosexual couples involved in a steady relationship indicated more likelihood of deviating from traditional scripts in which women did not directly initiate sexual encounters. They concluded that, because sex is an accepted feature of intimate relationships, women may be rejected less for initiating sexual encounters in the context of an ongoing relationship.

The ability to talk about sexual issues, however, is not a uniform process. In a survey of women who

had at least one risk factor for HIV from heterosexual contact, Quina, Harlow, Morokoff, Burkholder, and Deiter (2000) discovered that the ability to talk about sexual pleasure was unrelated to talk about HIV risk. Their results suggested that there are different processes for sexual discussions based on topic. Although intimate partners are encouraged to talk about safer sex for health reasons, such conversations can threaten the relationship and place couples in a paradoxical position (Buysse & Ickes, 1999). Both men and women involved in a romantic relationship may fear that asking a partner to wear a condom suggests promiscuity, the presence of an STI, a casual relationship, or a lack of trust, and thus threatens the other individual's image (Afifi, 1999). For some women, fear of relational violence and feeling powerless in a relationship hinder the ability to negotiate condom use with a partner (Marin, 1996). The association of condoms with infidelity and "sleeping around" may hurt individuals' attempts and desire to convince partners to use them. Hynie, Lydon, Cote, and Wiener (1998) examined interpersonal sexual scripts and found that women who strongly endorsed a relational norm (i.e., sex should happen in a committed relationship) reported more negative attitudes toward condoms. They concluded that a relational script reduces the likelihood of condom use because of the association with casual sex. Therefore, couples in committed romantic relationships may be less likely to use condoms than couples in more short-term sexual relationships.

Research suggests that women have more positive attitudes toward safer-sex talk and discuss their sexual history with partners more than men do (Cohen & Bruce, 1997; Troth & Peterson, 2000). In fact, women often initiate the topic of safer sex (Lock, Ferguson, & Wise, 1998). Furthermore, Seal (1997) studied interpartner concordance of sexual behavior in heterosexual couples and reported that women's knowledge of a male partner's sexual history did not increase after specific sexual discussion, whereas men's knowledge of a partner's sexual history did increase after discussion. Thus, even if couples do talk, these discussions do not always produce outcomes that health practitioners, researchers, or couples themselves desire. This raises questions about the efficacy of women's talk and men's truthfulness about sexual issues with a partner.

In addition to discussion about sexual health, sexual assertiveness entails talk about likes and

dislikes. Relational and sexual satisfaction is correlated with the amount of sexual self-disclosure between relational partners (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Cupach & Comstock, 1990). For instance, Byers and Demmons (1999) found in their study on self-disclosure of sexual likes and dislikes in dating relationships that sexual satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and sexual communication satisfaction were all related to sexual self-disclosure. They suggested that sexual self-disclosure may increase sexual rewards and overall relationship satisfaction. In Wheelless and Parsons' (1995) study of sexual communication in heterosexual intimate relationships, women were more likely than men to report being more satisfied with sexual communication when they felt less apprehension. Other research shows a weak association between relationship satisfaction and both women's initiation of and refusal of sexual activity (Morokoff et al., 1997). Thus, the ability to negotiate the kind of sexual behavior and experiences that one desires has implications for satisfying relationships (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996).

The Present Study

We devised the following research questions and hypotheses based on our review of the sexual double standard, sexual scripts, and sexual assertiveness and the relationship between attitudes toward gender and sexuality and sexual talk in heterosexual dating relationships:

RQ1: How do differences in couples' perceptions of the sexual double standard influence the nature of sexual self-disclosure, dyadic sexual communication, and perceptions of the efficacy of sexual negotiation in dating relationships?

RQ2: Is there an association between relationship length and use of condoms?

RQ3: Do individuals in dating couples report different perceptions of dyadic sexual communication, sexual self-disclosure, and sexual negotiation efficacy?

H1: Attitudes toward gender and sexuality and initiation assertiveness were expected to be inversely related in women and directly related in men.

H2: In dating couples, as sexual assertiveness increased, couples were expected to report higher relational satisfaction.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 698 couples (1,396 individuals, an equal number of women and men) from a northeastern college campus and the surrounding community who ranged in age from 18–30 years ($M = 21.9$, $SD = 2.5$), and who had been dating for 2 years on average (range: 3 months to 13 years, $M = 1.78$, $SD = 2.15$). Most participants were White/European American (76%); Black/African American (6%), Hispanic (6%), Asian (8%), and other groups (< 2% each)⁵ made up the rest of the sample. The average education level was “some college.”

Individuals self-identified primarily as heterosexual (95%); 5% were bisexual but only cross-sex couples were retained for the present study. Individuals who reported being gay ($n = 10$), lesbian ($n = 9$), or married ($n = 32$) were also excluded. The couples described themselves primarily as dating one person (85%). Participants predominantly (96%) reported having experienced vaginal/penile sexual intercourse, and only couples where at least one person reported prior sexual activity were retained (13 couples were excluded). Women reported age at first intercourse within the range of 11–23 years ($M = 16.78$, $SD = 1.94$), an average of 1–2 years of sexual activity with their current partner ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 2.48$), and a range of 1–12 sexual partners in the prior 2 years ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 2.81$). Men reported age at first intercourse within the range of 8–24 years ($M = 16.48$, $SD = 2.25$), an average of 1–2 years of sexual activity with their current partner ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 2.12$), and a range of 1–14 sexual partners in the prior 2 years ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 3.97$). The final sample retained 608 couples.

⁵We did explore differences in variables in the study by race, although there were unequal representations of racial/ethnic groups. These analyses were performed by individual (not couple) race, and there were fewer differences than might have been expected (we also utilized a modified alpha of .01 to protect from Type I error). For women, there were differences on sexual double standard, $t(687) = -2.75$, $p < .01$; White women reported lower double standards than Women of Color. For women, assertive sexual talk was significant at $p < .04$. For men, there were differences on assertive sexual talk, $t(690) = 2.41$, $p < .02$; White men reported more assertive sexual talk than did Men of Color. For men, sexual double standard was significant at $p < .04$, and sexual self-disclosure was significant at $p < .03$. Future researchers might continue to explore such race differences, although there were few in the present study.

Procedures

This study is part of a larger project on sexual communication in couples. Assistants trained in a research methods course at a large northeastern university recruited participants from college campuses and the community.⁶ After providing written consent to participate, participants completed a survey alone (without discussion with their partners). The survey took approximately 30 minutes, and participants sealed their survey in an envelope with a sticker to ensure confidence that responses were anonymous. Instructions directed participants to think about the person they were currently dating when responding to the items. All participants were given a debriefing form and were told that they could provide an e-mail contact for a summary of results (246 individuals requested information and were provided 4 months later with a two page summary of preliminary results).

Measures

The survey consisted of scales to measure sexual self-disclosure with partner, dyadic sexual communication, sexual negotiation efficacy, belief in the sexual double standard, sexual assertiveness (three types), relational satisfaction, and condom use. Factor analyses and reliability estimates were calculated for women and men separately and then combined to provide the most complete image of psychometric properties, but combined psychometric estimates (collapsing women and men) are presented here.

Sexual Self-Disclosure with Partner

Sexual self-disclosure was measured using the Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (SDSS) (Herold & Way, 1988) with 11 four-point Likert-type items (1, *No*

⁶Thirty-seven research assistants participated in a training session prior to the start of the study. Each assistant practiced obtaining consent, providing instructions for the survey, and debriefing participants. Assistants contacted couples in the target age range (18–30 years), and couples filled out the survey in their homes, sometimes together but without discussion. Target couples had to be exclusively dating the other partner for at least 3 months. To verify participation, random callbacks (25%) occurred 2–4 weeks later, and all of the data were discarded for the two research assistants where callbacks indicated possible problems. Also, data were discarded (16 couples) where couples did not generally agree on relationship length and/or on the length of time they had been sexually active.

disclosure to 4, *Complete detail*). The factor analysis (varimax rotation), reliability, and scree plot indicated one factor (eigenvalue = 4.82, 43.8% var., all items loaded above .6). Instructions were: “Read each item and indicate the extent to which you have talked about that item with your partner.” A sample item is “Sexual problems or difficulties I might have.” The scores were summed and averaged to form one scale; higher scores indicate more sexual disclosure with partner. The reliability was good ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.02$, $SD = .52$).

Dyadic Sexual Communication

This variable was measured using the Dyadic Sexual Communication scale (DSC, Catania et al., 1992) with six five-point Likert-type items; responses range from (1) *Strongly agree* to (5) *Strongly disagree*. The factor analysis (varimax), reliability, and scree plot indicated one factor (eigenvalue = 2.71, 45% var., all items loaded above .65). A sample item is “My partner has no trouble talking to me about his or her sexual feelings and desires.” The scores were summed and averaged to form one scale; higher scores indicate more sexual communication with partner. The reliability was moderate ($\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.91$, $SD = .57$).

Sexual Negotiation Efficacy

This variable was measured using the Dyadic Sexual Regulation scale (DSR, Catania et al., 1992) with five five-point Likert-type items developed by Catania et al. (1992); responses range from (1) *Strongly agree* to (5) *Strongly disagree*. The factor analysis (varimax), reliability, and scree plot indicated one factor (eigenvalue = 2.22, 44% var., all items loaded above .6). A sample item is “I feel that it is difficult to get my partner to do what makes me feel good during sex.” The scores were summed and averaged to form one scale; higher scores indicate greater belief in one’s ability to influence a partner’s behavior. The reliability was moderate ($\alpha = .72$, $M = 2.69$, $SD = .29$).

Sexual Double Standard

Belief in the sexual double standard was measured using the Double Standard Scale (Caron, Davis, Halteman, & Stickle, 1993) with 10 five-point

Likert-type items; responses range from (1) *Strongly agree* to (5) *Strongly disagree*. The factor analysis (varimax), reliability, and scree plot indicated one factor (eigenvalue = 4.53, 46.2% var., all items loaded above .6). A sample item is "A woman should never appear to be prepared for a sexual encounter." The scores were summed and averaged to form one scale; higher scores indicate stronger belief in different sexual standards for women and men. The reliability was good ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 2.14$, $SD = .54$).

Sexual Assertiveness

Sexual assertiveness was measured using the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (HISA, Hurlbert, 1991) with 25 five-point Likert-type items; responses range from (1) *Never* to (5) *All of the time*. The factor analysis (varimax), reliabilities, and scree plot indicated a complex factor structure, but three factors accounted for 67% of the variance. The first factor was labeled *initiation* assertiveness, and it included eight items, such as "I feel comfortable initiating sex with my partner" ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.99$, $SD = .59$). The second factor was labeled *refusal* assertiveness, and it included six items, such as "It is hard for me to say no even when I do not want to have sex" ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 4.08$, $SD = .53$). The third factor was labeled *assertive sexual talk*, and it included five items, such as "I try to avoid discussing the subject of sex" ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.04$, $SD = .53$). The scores were summed and averaged to form three scales; in each case higher scores indicate greater sexual assertiveness.

Relational Satisfaction

Relational satisfaction was measured by five five-point Likert-type items developed by Duffy and Rusbult (1986); responses range from (1) *Strongly agree* to (5) *Strongly disagree*. The factor analysis (varimax), reliability, and scree plot indicated one factor (eigenvalue = 3.09, 61.7% var., all items loaded above .7). A sample item is "My relationship is very satisfying." The scores were summed and averaged to form one scale; higher scores indicate more relational satisfaction. The reliability was good ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 2.77$, $SD = .25$).

Condom Use

Condom use was measured by two items. A free response item asked: "What forms (if any) of

contraception do you/your partner use? List them all." Responses were coded by three trained coders (blind to the hypotheses), and one code was "male condom use."⁷ Coders recorded presence/absence of each form of contraception reported, and the kappa was .98. The second measure was an item that asked: "How often do you (does your partner) use a condom when you have vaginal-penis intercourse?" Five-point Likert-type responses ranged from (1) *Never* to (5) *Always* ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.53$); an "NA" or not sexually active option was also provided.

RESULTS

Analyses

Data were analyzed by a series of MANCOVAs, correlations, and regression models. Table I presents the zero-order correlation matrix for the variables. Table II presents the summary statistics for the within subject ANOVAs, which were performed to explore differences within couples for all variables. The level of significance was set at $p < .01$ for analyses to protect against Type I error.

RQ1: Sexual Double Standard

Research Question 1 concerned the relation between beliefs in the sexual double standard and sexual communication variables for couples. This question was analyzed using the couple as the unit of analysis; gender was a repeated within-subject factor, and belief in the sexual double standard was the covariate. Table I presents these correlations, and Table II presents differences by gender alone (without considering the influence of sexual double standard). The results of the MANCOVAs for the three sexual communication variables varied. For sexual self-disclosure, only sexual double standard was significant ($\eta^2 = .07$). For dyadic sexual communication, only sexual double standard was significant ($\eta^2 = .04$). For negotiation efficacy, both sexual double standard ($\eta^2 = .01$) and gender were significant ($\eta^2 = .03$); men ($M = 2.77$) reported significantly more negotiation efficacy than women did

⁷We also coded for female condom use (along with 16 other variables such as withdrawal, rhythm, the pill, etc.), but only three of the individuals in the study (of nearly 1400) reported having used female condoms.

Table I. Zero-Order Correlation Matrix for Individual Variables in the Study

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|--------|------|--------|-----|
| 1. Sexual self-disclosure | 1.0 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Dyadic sexual comm. | .42** | 1.0 | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Sexual negot. efficacy | -.09 | -.30** | 1.0 | | | | | | | |
| 4. Sexual double standard | -.28** | -.23** | .15** | 1.0 | | | | | | |
| 5. Initiation assert. | .49** | .52** | -.16** | -.14** | 1.0 | | | | | |
| 6. Refusal assert. | .13** | .29** | -.13** | -.17** | .23** | 1.0 | | | | |
| 7. Assert. sexual talk | .31** | .40** | -.10* | -.15** | .55** | .34** | 1.0 | | | |
| 8. Relationship satisfaction | .29** | .51** | -.24** | -.21** | .31** | .27** | .22** | 1.0 | | |
| 9. Condom frequency ^a | .02 | -.10* | .03 | .01 | -.10* | -.02 | -.12** | -.03 | 1.0 | |
| 10. Relationship length | .10* | -.03 | .07* | -.06 | -.01 | -.02 | -.03 | -.02 | -.19** | 1.0 |

^aCondom frequency is a continuous item: "How often do you and your partner use a condom?"

* $p \leq 0.1$; ** $p \leq .001$.

($M = 2.62$). Higher or more traditional belief in the sexual double standard was related to less sexual self-disclosure, less dyadic sexual communication, and more sexual negotiation efficacy. Negotiation efficacy was also influenced by gender (men reported higher efficacy). Thus, sexual double standards are related to sexual communication variables, and gender is also a factor in sexual negotiation efficacy.

RQ2: Relationship Length and Condom Use

The correlation between individuals' reports of relationship length and condom use was negative and significant, $r = -.20, p < .001$. That is, the longer people were dating, the less they reported using condoms. This relation also held true for reports of length of sexually activity in relationship and condom use, $r = -.19, p < .001$.

RQ3: Couples' Perceptions

Research Question 3 concerned couples' differences in sexual self-disclosure, dyadic sexual negotiation, and dyadic sexual communication (see

Table II). Women reported more dyadic sexual negotiation, but less sexual negotiation efficacy, in their relationships than did their male partners.

Hypothesis 1: Initiation and Sexual Double Standard

The overall relation between individuals' initiation assertiveness and belief in the sexual double standard was negative and significant (see Table I), but the strength of the relation varied by gender. For men, the correlation was not significant, $r = -.06, p = NS$, but for women the correlation was significant and inverse as predicted, $r = -.32, p < .001$. Thus, increased initiation assertiveness was related to less belief in the traditional sexual double standard for women, but the two variables were unrelated for men.

Hypothesis 2: Satisfaction and Assertiveness

Hypothesis 2 predicted a relationship between types of sexual assertiveness and relational satisfaction for couples, and this was generally supported (see Table I for correlations). This hypothesis was

Table II. Summary of Within-subject (Gender) MANOVAs by Couple for all Variables

| Variable | F | df | p | η^2 | x/SD Women | x/SD Men |
|------------------------|-------|-----|------|----------|--------------|------------|
| Sexual self-disclosure | 1.2 | 677 | NS | .01 | 3.03/.62 | 3.00/.63 |
| Dyadic sexual comm. | 29.3 | 691 | .001 | .04 | 3.99/.68 | 3.83/.71 |
| Sexual negot. efficacy | 57.5 | 680 | .001 | .08 | 2.62/.36 | 2.77/.41 |
| Sexual double std. | 225.9 | 689 | .001 | .25 | 1.91/.63 | 2.37/.72 |
| Initiation assert. | 17.6 | 677 | .001 | .03 | 3.93/.77 | 4.07/.71 |
| Refusal assert. | 0.8 | 691 | NS | .01 | 4.06/.69 | 4.09/.68 |
| Assert. sexual talk | 10.7 | 694 | .001 | .02 | 3.98/.69 | 4.08/.69 |
| Relat. satisfaction | 19.6 | 684 | .001 | .03 | 4.46/.62 | 4.35/.65 |

analyzed using couples as the unit of analysis; gender was a repeated within-subject factor, and the three types of sexual assertiveness were the covariates. Results of the MANCOVAs for satisfaction were consistent. For satisfaction, assertive sexual talk was significant ($\eta^2 = .06$), as was gender ($\eta^2 = .01$); women ($M = 4.47$) were higher in satisfaction than men ($M = 4.33$). Next, also for satisfaction, initiation assertiveness was significant ($\eta^2 = .11$), as was gender ($\eta^2 = .02$); women ($M = 4.48$) were higher in satisfaction than were men ($M = 4.31$). Finally, again for satisfaction, refusal assertiveness was significant ($\eta^2 = .08$), as was gender ($\eta^2 = .01$); women ($M = 4.46$) were higher in satisfaction than men were ($M = 4.33$). Thus, higher sexual assertiveness of all types is related to increased relational satisfaction. Small gender effects indicated that women were more satisfied than men with their relationships.

Combined Analyses

Finally, sets of forward regression analyses were performed to explore what combination of variables might explain these relations (see Figs. 1 and 2). The regressions were run separately for women and men. The models began with sexual double standard used to predict the three types of sexual as-

sertiveness, then types of sexual assertiveness used to predict sexual communication (dyadic sexual communication, sexual negotiation efficacy, and sexual self-disclosure), and finally the three sexual communication variables used to predict relationship satisfaction. The models are described separately by gender.

The model for men indicates that sexual double standard inversely predicts only the refusal form of sexual assertiveness. For assertiveness, initiation predicts all three sexual communication variables, assertive talk predicts dyadic sexual communication and sexual self-disclosure, and refusal assertiveness predicts dyadic sexual communication. Finally, all three communication variables predict satisfaction. Thus, for men the sexual double standard predicted only refusal and initiation assertiveness, assertiveness variables are all associated with communication variables (initiation assertiveness has the strongest association), and all communication variables predict satisfaction (dyadic sexual communication is the strongest predictor; see Fig. 1).

The model for women indicates that sexual double standard inversely predicts all three sexual assertiveness variables. For assertiveness, initiation predicts all three sexual communication variables, assertive talk only predicts dyadic sexual

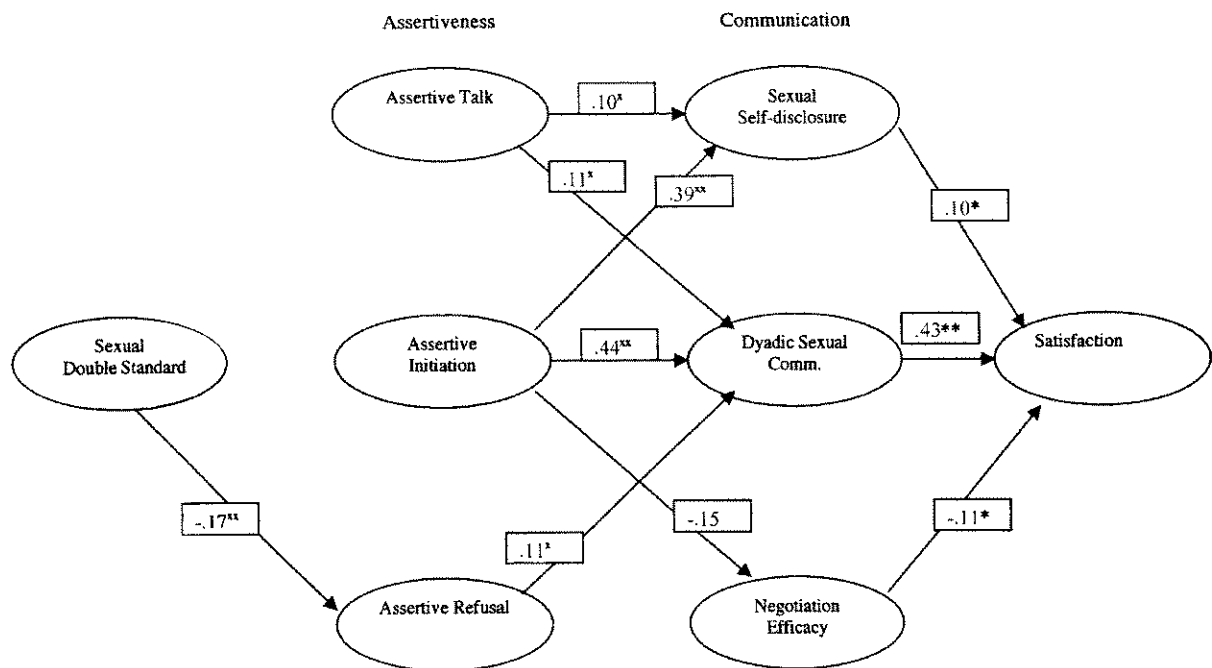


Fig. 1. Betas for Hierarchical Regression Model for Men.

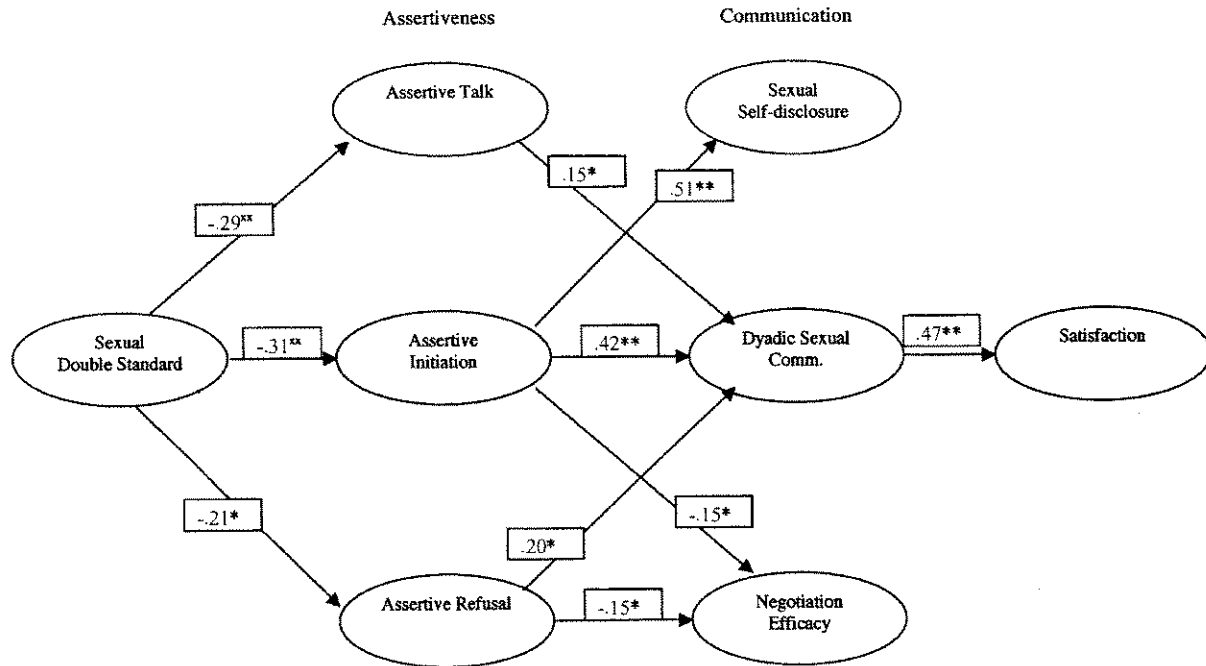


Fig. 2. Betas for Hierarchical Regression Model for Women.

communication, and refusal assertiveness predicts dyadic sexual communication and negotiation efficacy. Finally, only dyadic sexual communication predicts satisfaction. Thus, for women the sexual double standard predicts all assertiveness variables, assertiveness variables are all associated with communication variables (strongest for initiation assertiveness, as in the model for men), and dyadic sexual communication alone predicted satisfaction (see Fig. 2).

DISCUSSION

This research was focused on how sex and attitudes toward gender roles and sexuality influence sexual self-disclosure and communication in heterosexual dating relationships. We explored specific information about the nature of the sexual talk that dating partners report and the consequences of such talk for their relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, couples who endorsed less traditional attitudes toward sexuality (i.e., less belief in the sexual double standard) reported more sexual self-disclosure and dyadic sexual communication. It seems that not adhering to expectations that men only use sex for recreation and women are only sexual in relation-

ships contributes to couples' discussions of sexual issues and individuals' self-disclosure about sexuality. The question is whether this talk affects couples' perceptions of their ability to influence one another's sexual behavior and whether there have been changes in the traditional heterosexual sexual script.

Sexual self-disclosure and the amount of sexual talk couples reported did not influence their efficacy regarding the result of the request for certain sexual behavior. Specifically, women reported more dyadic sexual negotiation but less sexual negotiation efficacy than their male partners did. Women perceived themselves and their partners to be engaging in effective talk about sexuality, although they did not indicate that this talk made them confident in their ability to influence their partners' sexual behavior. In heterosexual relationships, women's gender socialization provides them with fewer skills to negotiate sexual relationships (Gomez & Marin, 1996). Other studies, for instance, have shown that women who provide a condom to a male partner violate subtle cultural norms and risk assessments in other behavioral areas (e.g., too liberal, too assertive); women are assessed more positively when they engage in unprotected intercourse or allow a male partner to provide the condom (Gentry, 1998; Hynie & Lydon, 1995). Both men and women make

these assessments of women's behavior which suggests that some elements of the traditional sexual script have not changed.

Sexual Scripts

Sexual scripts interact at three levels: the cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels (Simon & Gagnon, 1987). Narratives that include instructions for sexual conduct operate at the cultural level, such as cultural information and images about how women and men should behave sexually. Couples in the present study generally did not report strong belief in the sexual double standard, which adds to previous work on the weakening of the traditional double standard in established relationships (e.g., Gentry, 1998; Milhausen & Herold, 1999), although more evidence for the double standard tends to be found with the use of qualitative methods (Crawford & Popp, 2003). The sexual double standard could be weaker among college students than among the general population. For example, differences in number of sexual partners in the past 2 years were not as large as might be expected. In fact, women and men in the present study reported many similarities in sexual experience (e.g., age at first sexual intercourse, length of time sexually active), which demonstrates some divergence from the expectations of the traditional double standard.

The sexual double standard scores explained sexual communication variables, such that less traditional scores were related to more sexual self-disclosure and more dyadic sexual communication. For some couples, traditional-cultural level sexual scripts may not describe their experiences and values, and thus, open talk about sexual issues between dating partners is acceptable. However, the finding that less traditional scores were not associated with sexual negotiation efficacy (i.e., the perception that one's sexual talk and communication behavior would lead to a particular outcome, such as engaging in a novel desired sexual activity) indicates that, perhaps in subtle ways, the traditional sexual script, or some of its elements, remains in force. Individuals' preferences and sexual desire, especially women's, may not translate into a substantive redefinition of romantic relationships (Giffin, 1998).

Interpersonal level scripts describe structured patterns of interaction, that is, what sexual behaviors an individual acquires and maintains during sexual interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1987). As past

research indicated, women in the present study reported talking more about sexual issues than their male partners did (Cohen & Bruce, 1997; Lock et al., 1998; Troth & Peterson, 2000), which demonstrates that women are not afraid to discuss sexual problems (Quina et al., 2000). Couples who reported less traditional ideas about gender roles and sexuality indicated that they talked more with one another about sexual issues than did those with more traditional attitudes. In addition, those who reported more sexual self-disclosure described less adherence to sexual double standards, which indicates there is some similarity in how men's and women's beliefs in traditional sexual double standards influence relationships (Byers, 1996; Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Some couples may alter cultural level scripts that advocate men as the sexual initiators, the more sexually experienced ones, and the ones who should respond positively to the initiation of sexual activity, which would make it easier for couples to discuss sexual experience and desires together as well as to negotiate sexual activity.

The intrapsychic level script describes an individual's feelings and fantasies about sexual activity. A person uses these feelings and fantasies and cultural scenarios to reflect on past behavior and to guide current and future behavior. In the present study, women who endorsed less traditional attitudes about the sexual double standard indicated more sexual assertiveness (initiation, refusal, and sexual talk). Those individuals who do not believe in traditional sexual double standards for women and men may be able to discuss more effectively sexual issues such as HIV, and to initiate and refuse sexual activity. However, just because couples can talk about such issues does not mean that the conversation will be effective or that the talk will lead to specific behaviors, as we see with women's reports of lower sexual negotiation efficacy. Self-disclosing information at one time is no guarantee that a particular issue will be a viable conversational topic at another time (Faulkner & Greene, 2002; Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002; Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003) or that talking about a sexual topic, such as desire for more oral sex, will lead to that particular behavior.

Relational Satisfaction

When we consider relational satisfaction, the picture becomes more multifaceted. Couples' dyadic sexual communication and negotiation efficacy, as well as their sexual assertiveness was associated with

increased relational satisfaction. Satisfied couples appear to be the ones who discuss sexual issues together and disclose more, but they do *not* perceive that talk has the ability to influence sexual behavior (e.g., to get a partner to use a form of contraception). This reaffirms past research, which has demonstrated that relational and sexual satisfaction are correlated with the amount of sexual self-disclosure between relational partners (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Cupach & Comstock, 1990). The inverse association between satisfaction and negotiation efficacy is inconsistent with prior research and should be explored further, as other researchers have reported that individuals' abilities to negotiate the kind of sexual behavior and experiences that they desire has implications for satisfying relationships (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). The finding that all types of assertiveness are related to satisfaction is consistent with previous research that indicates that women's initiation of and refusal of sexual activity is associated with relational satisfaction (Morokoff et al., 1997).

However, satisfaction does not guarantee safer-sexual behavior or that all kinds of sexual talk are practiced and effective. For women, dyadic communication alone predicted relational satisfaction, whereas for men, dyadic communication, self-disclosure, and negotiation efficacy predicted satisfaction. This implies, for example, that sexual negotiation efficacy is not necessary for women to feel satisfied in their relationships, and this may hinder their assertiveness. At the interpersonal level, women who talk more assertively about sexual issues may violate norms for sexual interaction. The traditional heterosexual sexual script may be operating in more subtle ways at present, such as the stereotypical evaluation of highly sexual women in other domains of behavior, for instance, as more assertive and liberal (cf. Gentry, 1998).

Summary

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that couples who reported being more sexually assertive self-disclosed about sexual issues (e.g., oral sex, contraception), tended to talk more about sexual issues together, and felt more able to influence their partner's sexual behavior through talk (e.g., to have sexual activity as often as they desired). This suggests that individuals who self-disclose important information about sexual issues may contribute to the quality of sexual communication and satisfaction in a dat-

ing relationship. The ability to discuss past sexual history, contraception, and sexual desire is an important component of a healthy sexual relationship, and it appears to be related to less stereotypical attitudes toward women's and men's sexual behavior. Disclosure of sexual information leads to other positive things in a romantic relationship, such as relational satisfaction and positive sexual experiences. Changes in individuals' attitudes toward gender roles and sexuality may influence cultural level scripts and how couples negotiate sexual interaction.

Limitations

We note several limitations of the present study. The relatively homogenous college aged sample from the northeastern US limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations. It could be that older adults and individuals in different regions of the country have different attitudes and behaviors. Second, there may be relevant cultural variables and identities that influence sexual talk that were not explored in the present study. The self-report measures of talk may also be overestimations (or even underestimations) of how much couples talk in actual interaction. The exploration of these issues in qualitative interviews seems warranted as an extension and an avenue for exploring other potentially relevant variables. Also, some results accounted for small portions of variance.

The use of couple data is an important addition not seen in many studies of sexual communication and allows for examination of both individual and couple level variables.

Future Research

Despite the limitations, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of studying partners' perceptions of gender attitudes about sexual issues. This study contributes to our understanding of sexual scripts and sexual talk. More research is needed about the process of sexual talk for heterosexual dating couples, the kinds of talk in which they engage, and the outcomes of such talk. Longitudinal studies of couples and examination of how cultural factors interact with gender and sexual talk would allow us to see which of these features actually predict relational outcomes (e.g., wanted pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, relational satisfaction, and relationship

dissolution). Researchers should study in more detail what constitutes successful and unsuccessful conversation about sex, including a focus on turning points in relationships to see if and how these are related to sexual communication and behavior. An examination of how people talk about major sexual events in their relationships and the stories they use to describe them would be beneficial. The success of sexual talk rests on the ability and knowledge of couples to access and expand their comfort levels with sexuality, thus it is important to continue studying couples' sexual talk.

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