

What Sexual Scientists Know About

Gender Differences and Similarities in Sexuality

There are many stereotypical beliefs regarding differences between the sexual behavior and attitudes of people based on their gender. Thus, most cultures have focused on differences between males/females or men/women rather than similarities. The scientific evidence, however, suggests that although some of these beliefs are true, many others are clearly false. Even when differences are found, the size of these differences varies as a function of many factors such as age and culture.

Differences in Biological Responsiveness and Arousal

The most clear cut differences between males and females are in the areas of anatomy and physiology. For example, many females are able to experience multiple orgasms, whereas most males experience a rest period (called the “refractory period”) after they ejaculate and before they are able to become erect again. Also, males have an easier time determining if they are sexually aroused, likely because an erect penis provides a clear cue whereas females do not have such an obvious indicator.

Though men and women both experience sexual arousal when viewing erotic images, men are more specific than women in what arouses them. Heterosexual men become aroused mostly by women’s bodies, and homosexual men are aroused mostly by men’s bodies. Heterosexual women, however, are likely to be aroused by visual depictions of either sex, especially if sexual activity is taking place, though lesbians tend to be aroused mostly by erotic images of women (Chivers, Seto, & Blanchard, 2007).

Women tend to be more flexible throughout their lifetime in their sexual orientation and preferences for certain sexual activities compared to men, who tend to hold relatively fixed approaches to sexuality. Many more men than women develop paraphilias (sexual arousal in response to atypical situations, partners, or objects, such as a fetish for women’s feet or women’s shoes). Women with high sex drives are more likely to be attracted to both sexes, but that is not true for men with high sex drives (Lippa, 2006).

The experience of sexual desire may be somewhat different for men than for women. Although sexual scientists have long believed that male and female bodies follow the same sexual response pattern, it has been suggested (Basson, 2000) that at times, a woman’s sexual desire may be more directly linked to erotic physical stimulation or situational factors such as feelings of closeness to her partner rather than occurring spontaneously in the form of sexual thoughts or fantasies as it does in most men.

Differences Throughout the Life Span

On average, males of all ages are more likely than females to engage in masturbation, especially during childhood and adolescence. As a result, most males experience sexual pleasure initially through self-stimulation, whereas for many females, sexual pleasure may be experienced for the first time with another person. Thus, for most males, the physical pleasure of sex occurs before a relationship is formed, whereas for females, it is somewhat more likely that a relationship occurs before sexual pleasure is experienced. This has implications for differences in the way that

adolescent boys and girls view sexuality, with boys often being less concerned with the nature of a relationship. There is also some evidence that men reach their peak of sexual interest and frequency of orgasm at a much earlier age than do women. By middle age, many men have developed an increased appreciation of the relational aspects of sexuality, and many women have developed a greater enjoyment of physical pleasure. Indeed, by middle adulthood, relationship factors may be more important to men's enjoyment of sex than to women's (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2009).

Although for men there is a very gradual decline in sexual responsiveness over the lifespan, for women, menopause ushers in some noticeable changes in bodily functioning, especially a lower level of vaginal lubrication. Though the frequency of sexual activity gradually declines and bodily responses change, the majority of both men and women continue to engage in intercourse and other sexual activities throughout older age (Schick et al., 2010).

Differences in Behavior

Whereas past research has indicated that males initiated sexual activity at younger ages and engaged in sexual behavior more frequently, recent research suggests that these differences are changing (or were perhaps just differences in reporting). Men continue to report higher levels of extramarital sexual activity, and they appear to think more often about sex, though certainly not nearly to the degree that is commonly believed (Fisher, Moore, & Pittenger, 2012). While members of both sexes tend to become more aroused by a new partner, variety in sexual partners is considered more appealing to men (Schmitt et al., 2003). Indeed, men consistently report having had more sexual partners than women.

Men also report higher prevalence and frequency of masturbation at all ages. In addition, men are more likely to report viewing erotic material. Some scientists believe that this is due to a greater male need for variety in sexual partners and stimuli, whereas others suggest that most erotic material has been designed for a male audience.

Differences in Attitudes

Researchers have consistently found gender differences in sexual attitudes. Men tend to be more permissive with regard to their attitudes toward sex, and they are more accepting of casual sex. Men are also more likely than women to view sex as an activity that does not have to take place within the context of a committed relationship. In general, women are more inclined to report negative emotional reactions to sexuality, a trait known as "erotophobia."

Explanations for the Differences

A question that often arises has to do with the origins or causes of the differences that have been described. There are several theories, which basically fall into three major categories (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Some theories promote the view that there are large, biologically-based differences in the sexual behavior of men and women, stemming from genetic and hormonal origins. Other theorists suggest that the differences are largely a function of social roles and cultural influences on men and women, especially since many cultures still have some form of a double-standard (i.e., they regard certain aspects of sexuality as more acceptable for men than for women). Finally, some theories indicate that gender differences in sexuality are a function of an

interaction between biology and culture. There is some research support for each of these viewpoints.

Regardless of their origins, gender differences in sexual behavior seem to be at least in part a function of culture and historical time frame. That is, there are far fewer significant differences in the sexual behavior of men and women found in recent research compared to earlier research. For example, in the past, at least in the United States, males reported an earlier age at first intercourse than did females, but this difference seems to be disappearing or, in some studies, even reversing. This suggests that societal views and expectations have a strong influence on the expression of sexual behavior, beyond whatever aspects of sexuality might be biologically based.

Why Don't We Know More?

Part of the problem in understanding gender differences in sexual behavior is that scientists still don't have a complete understanding of many aspects of sexuality. From a biological perspective, it is clear that the sex hormone commonly known as testosterone plays a very important role in sexual desire and behavior for both men and women, and that men have much more testosterone in their bodies than do women. Estrogen is a sex hormone of which women have more than men, and the influence of estrogen on the sexual behavior of men and women is far less understood.

Another difficulty in understanding gender differences in sexual behavior is that most studies have relied on self-report. Sometimes people are not completely honest when reporting their sexual behavior, and if someone believes that certain sexual behavior is not in keeping with social expectations for their sex or gender, that person might be even more likely not to report it. Research into self-report of sexual activity has indicated that males tend to over-report whereas females tend to under-report. However, if research participants believe that their honesty is being monitored by a lie detector, there tend to be very few gender differences in reported sexual behavior (Alexander & Fisher, 2003).

Yet another complication is that much of the research has been done with college students. We know much more about gender differences in the sexual behavior of those between the ages of 18 and 25 than we do about people in any other age group, and because the men are closer to their peak of sexual development than are the women, college student research likely exaggerates sex differences.

Sexuality as an Individual Difference

Sexual desire and expression vary greatly from person to person. Expecting certain types of behavior based on gender stereotypes is likely to lead to misunderstanding and frustration when trying to understand the behavior of other people. Regardless of the nature, origin, or extent of gender differences in sexuality, differences among women and differences among men are far greater than the difference between the average woman and the average man. In other words, even in cases where there are sizeable group differences between males and females, it is not easy to predict the behavior of a given person. For example, just because men think more about sex than women, that doesn't mean that within a heterosexual couple that the man will always be the one who thinks more about sex or who will want to have sex more often. Stereotypes based on gender, even when there is some scientific support, tend to put pressure on people to behave

in certain ways that might not feel natural to them. It is better to try to understand a particular partner as an individual rather than using preconceptions or stereotypes based on gender.

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