# **The Sexual Double Standard: Fact or Fiction?**

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In contemporary society it is widely believed that men are socially rewarded for sexual activity, whereas women are derogated for sexual activity. To determine whether a sexual double standard exists, both undergraduate (n = 144) and Internet (n = 8,080) participants evaluated experimental targets who were described as either male or female and as having a variable number of sexual partners. Targets were more likely to be derogated as the number of sexual partners increased, and this effect held for both male and female targets. These results suggest that, although people do evaluate others as a function of sexual activity, people do not necessarily hold men and women to different sexual standards.

**KEY WORDS:** double standard; sexuality; sex partners; attitudes toward sex; gender norms; gender differences; sexual activity; gender equality; promiscuity.

In contemporary society it is widely believed that women and men are held to different standards of sexual behavior (Milhausen & Herold, 2001). As Barash and Lipton (2001, p. 145) noted, "a man who is successful with many women is likely to be seen as just that—successful ... [whereas] a woman known to have 'success' with many men is ... likely to be known as a 'slut.' "The view that men are socially rewarded and women socially derogated for sexual activity has been labeled the *sexual double standard*.

The sexual double standard has received a lot of attention from contemporary critics of Western culture (e.g., Lamb, 2002; Tanenbaum, 2000; White, 2002). Tanenbaum (2000), for example, has documented the harassment and distress experienced by adolescent girls who have been branded as "sluts" by their peers. Other writers have critiqued the way the media help to create and reinforce negative stereotypes of sexually active women (Waggett, 1989) and how these stereotypes may contribute to violence against women (Malamuth & Check, 1981). Given the attention the sexual double standard has received in contemporary discourse, one might assume that behavioral scientists have documented the double standard extensively and elucidated many of the mechanisms that generate and sustain it. Despite much systematic research, however, there is virtually no consistent evidence for the existence of this allegedly pervasive phenomenon.

We have three objectives in this article. Our first is to review briefly the empirical literature on the sexual double standard. As we discuss, research findings concerning the double standard do not strongly support its existence. Next, we discuss several methodological reasons why previous researchers may not have been able to document a double standard even if one exists. Finally, we report a study that was designed to determine whether the sexual double standard exists by rectifying the methodological limitations of previous studies.

# **Empirical Research on the Sexual Double Standard**

The sexual double standard seems to be a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary society; one recent survey revealed that 85% of people believe that a double standard exists in our culture (Marks, 2002; see also Milhausen & Herold, 2001). The double standard is frequently publicized by the media. For example, MTV, a popular cable television channel that specializes in contemporary

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culture, recently aired a program called "Fight for Your Rights: Busting the Double Standard" that was designed to convey the idea that a sexual double standard exists and that people should try to transcend it by exhibiting more egalitarian thinking (MTV Networks Music, 2003).

Although the sexual double standard seems pervasive, empirical research does not necessarily show that people evaluate sexually active men and women differently. In fact, much of the literature reveals little or no evidence of a double standard (Gentry, 1998; Oliver & Sedikides, 1992; O'Sullivan, 1995; Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988). O'Sullivan (1995), for example, conducted a person perception study in which individual participants read vignettes of a male or female target who reported a high or low number of past sexual partners. Participants then evaluated the targets in domains such as likeability, morality, and desirability as a spouse. Although men and women who engaged in casual intercourse were evaluated more negatively than those whose sexual experiences occurred in committed relationships, a double standard was not found. Gentry (1998) also employed a person perception task and found that raters judged both male and female targets who had relatively few past sexual partners and who were in monogamous relationships more positively than targets who had a high number of partners and had frequent casual sex. Again, no evidence of a double standard was found. Sprecher et al. (1988) examined how appropriate certain sexual acts were for men and women of various ages. Although older targets received more permissive responses (i.e., they were allowed more sexual freedom), there were few differences in the standards used for men versus women for any age group.

Researchers have also documented many characteristics of respondents that influence attitudes toward sexuality, but few, if any, of these findings are consistent with a double standard. For instance, Garcia (1982) found that respondents' degree of androgyny was related to the sexual stereotypes they held. Androgynous participants (i.e., people who possess high levels of both masculine and feminine psychological traits) displayed a single standard, whereas gender-typed respondents (i.e., masculine men and feminine women) displayed a slight preference for female targets in the low-sexual experience condition. However, a preference for highexperience male targets over low-experience male targets was not found. The number of sexual partners respondents have had also appears to influence their judgments of targets. Milhausen and Herold (1999), for example, found that women with many sexual partners were more tolerant of highly sexually active men than were women with few sexual partners. However, the interaction between target gender, target experience, and participant experience was not tested. The gender of the respondent has also been shown to influence views on sexuality. Women tend to hold sexual standards that are stricter than those of men, but do not necessarily apply those standards differently as a function of the gender of the person being evaluated (Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1988).

In summary, although it appears that people do evaluate others with respect to the number of sexual partners those people have had, research does not consistently show that those evaluations differ for male and female targets.<sup>3</sup> Even in situations in which men and women are evaluated differently, the associations usually vary only in magnitude, not in sign. In other words, there are some situations in which both women and men may be evaluated more negatively as the number of sexual partners they report increases, but this association is only slightly stronger for women than it is for men. As we will explain below, this pattern can be characterized as a "weak" rather than "strong" double standard. If the sexual double standard is as pervasive and powerful as many people believe, empirical research should reveal cross-over interactions such that the association between sexual experience and evaluations is negative for women but positive for men.

#### Sexual Double Standard Research Methodology

Although the empirical literature would seem to suggest that the sexual double standard is not in operation, it may be the case that behavioral scientists have failed to tap it properly. Commonly used paradigms for studying the sexual double standard may have methodological limitations that prevent the double standard from emerging. If this is the case, changes are needed in the methodology used in sexual double standard research.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Some authors have claimed to find support for a double standard. For instance, Sprecher, McKinney, and Orbuch (1987) found evidence of a double standard conditional on age and the context (committed or casual) in which the loss of virginity occurred. However, neither the interaction between target gender and age (Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1988) nor the context effect (O'Sullivan, 1995) has been replicated.

One limitation of past research is the likely existence of demand characteristics. For example, if a study explicitly requires participants to rate the appropriateness of certain sexual behaviors for men, immediately followed by identical questions regarding women (e.g., Ferrel, Tolone, & Walsh, 1977; Sheeran, Spears, Abraham, & Abrams, 1996; Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996), participants may try to answer either in an egalitarian manner or in a manner that is consistent with what they believe to be the norm. Given that many people have preconceived notions about the sexual double standard (Milhausen & Herold, 1999, 2001), it is important to minimize demand characteristics when researching attitudes toward sexuality.

A second limitation of past research involves the presentation of sexual activity in a valenced fashion. For example, some researchers have used materials that imply that premarital sexual intercourse "is just wrong" (Mark & Miller, 1986, p. 315) or have described a target as having a number of past sexual partners that is "a lot above average" (Gentry, 1998, p. 507). This kind of language implies that there is something abnormal or inappropriate about the target's activity. Describing sexual activity with value-laden terms or implying that a person is involved in any behavior to an excess may lead to biased evaluations of that person, regardless of whether that person is male or female. If a sexual double standard exists, the use of these kinds of descriptors may occlude researchers' ability to document it clearly.

Finally, much of the past double standard research has not differentiated between attitudes and evaluations. Attitudes toward sexual behavior may include general beliefs about the norms of the culture, personal decisions about when sex is permissible, and the perceived appropriateness of certain sexual behaviors. Evaluations concern real judgments made about specific people who engage in sexual activity. Attitudes may be independent of the way people actually evaluate one another. Because of this, results concerning attitudinal differences (e.g., women hold less permissive sexual standards than men do) as evidence of the double standard's existence may conflict with results concerning evaluations of others' behavior. We believe that at the core of popular interest in the sexual double standard is the notion that men and women are evaluated differently depending on their sexual experience. Although the general attitudes that people hold about sexuality are of interest to psychologists, these attitudes may not be reflected in the actual evaluations that people make about one another. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on the evaluations that people make about specific individuals.

## **Overview of the Present Study**

The objective of the present experiment was to determine whether people evaluate men and women differently based on the number of sexual partners they have had. To do this, we asked participants to rate a target on a number of evaluative dimensions. We manipulated both (a) the sex of the target and (b) the number of sexual partners reported by the target. This experiment was explicitly designed to rectify some of the limitations of previous research on the sexual double standard. For example, we focused on the evaluations people made about specific targets rather than general perceptions of social norms. We did not include valenced or biased descriptions of sexual activity (e.g., "promiscuous," "above average number of partners"). Moreover, we employed a between-subjects design to reduce potential demand characteristics. These features enabled us to draw attention away from the sexual focus of the study and allowed us to tap the way people evaluate others who vary in gender and sexual experience. Finally, in addition to the "college sophomore" sample usually represented in the literature, we recruited an Internet-based sample. Use of these two samples enabled us to examine the possibility that a sexual double standard exists not only in the traditionally examined population (college students), but also in a more diverse population not usually studied in double standard research.

#### **Competing Hypotheses**

If a traditional or "strong" sexual double standard exists, then as the number of sexual partners reported increases, male targets would be evaluated more positively and female targets more negatively (see the left-most panel of Fig. 1). In other words, if we regress evaluations of the target on the number of partners reported by the target and the sex of the target, we would find an interaction such that the slopes of the regression functions are positive for men and negative for women.

It is also possible that a "weak" double standard exists, such that both men and women are derogated for high levels of sexual experience,



Fig. 1. Patterns of simple slopes that would indicate a traditional (or "strong") sexual double standard (left), a "weak" sexual double standard (center), or no double standard (left).

but to different degrees. A weak double standard would be evidenced by negative slopes for both men and women, but slopes for women would be more strongly negative than those for men (see the center panel of Fig. 1). Finally, if there is no sexual double standard, then we would observe equivalent slopes for male and female targets, regardless of the sign or elevation of the regression functions (see the right-most panel of Fig. 1).

## METHOD

# **Participants**

We used two samples in this investigation. One sample consisted of 8,080 self-selected people (1,347 men, 6,733 women) who participated in an on-line version of the study over the Internet. The study was listed as a "person perception study" on our Close Relationships and Personality Research website—a website that typically hosts studies on personality and attachment. The mean participant age in this sample was 23.69 (SD = 8.55, range 18–80 years). The other sample consisted of 144 undergraduates from a large midwestern university (44 men, 100 women) who participated in fulfillment of partial course credit. The mean participant age in this sample was 19.66 (SD = 3.14, range 18–30 years).

In the Internet sample, 68.6% of participants resided in the United States, 8.3% in Canada, 5.6% in the United Kingdom, 3% in Australia, and 14.5% resided in other countries or declined to declare a country of residence. The ethnic makeup of the on-line study participants was 61.9% White, 9.7%

Hispanic, 7.2% Black, 6.4% Asian, and 14.8% of other ethnicity or no ethnicity specified. This sample was recruited because some authors have critiqued the over-reliance on convenience samples of North American college students in sexual double standard research (e.g., Crawford & Popp, 2003; Milhausen & Herold, 1999).

In the student sample, all participants resided in the United States. The ethnic makeup of the student sample was 32.6% White, 32.6% Asian, 16.0% Hispanic, 9.0% Black, and 9.7% of other ethnicity, or no ethnicity specified.

#### Design

We employed a 2 (target sex)  $\times$  6 (number of partners: 0, 1, 3, 7, 12, or 19) between-subjects design. Using an alpha level of .05, our power to detect an interaction between target sex and number of partners that accounts for at least 4% of the variance was > 0.99 for the Internet sample and 0.68 for the student sample.

## Procedure

A page (constructed by the experimenters) that contained five questions and the answers to those questions was given to the participants to read. Participants were told that the page was a section from a general public survey that had been completed by an anonymous individual. The page contained answers to questions such as "What are your hobbies?" and "How do you see yourself?" Information about the target's sexual experience was conveyed in response

to the question "What is something not many people know about you?" The key phrase in the response was "I've had sex with [number] [guys/girls]. I don't really have much to say about it. It's just sort of the way I've lived my life."

After reading the page that contained the target's answers, participants were asked to rate 30 evaluative statements about the target. Participants rated each item on a 5 point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree,5 = Strongly Agree). These items were selected from a larger pool of 50 evaluative items that were based on domains shown to be sensitive to sexual information in past sexual double standard researchpower, intelligence, likeability, morality, quality as a date, quality as a spouse, physical appeal, and friendship. We should note that the dependent variables were not chosen on the basis of theoretical considerations (e.g., evolutionary theory) because we wanted to sample as broad a range of evaluative domains as possible. If we had limited our dependent measures to those entailed by any one theoretical perspective, it is likely that we would have inadvertently excluded some domains in which the double standard manifests.

In order to reduce the 50 evaluative items to a smaller set of subscales, we performed a principal components analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization. We extracted four evaluative factors: values (9 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ), peer popularity (8 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ), power/success (8 items,  $\alpha = .84$ ), and intelligence (5 items,  $\alpha = .70$ ). Items not used either loaded poorly on all factors or did not load cleanly on a single factor. (See the Appendix for a listing of items within each domain.) Following completion of the experiment, both student and Internet participants were fully debriefed, given feedback on their responses, and thanked for their participation.

## RESULTS

We report the results for the Internet and student samples separately in the sections that follow. As will be seen, the results differed slightly across the two samples. We have illustrated the results for both samples side-by-side in Figs. 2–5. Preliminary analyses in both the Internet and student samples revealed no significant differences between male and female respondents in any domain—alone or in interaction with other variables. Thus, respondent sex and age were not used as predictor variables in the results reported in the text. In the Internet sample, we con-

Variable Dependent	Productor	D	SE D	R	A D <sup>2</sup>
Dependent	Fiedicioi	Б	SE D	ρ	$\Delta \Lambda$
Values	Partners	19	.01	29*	
	Target sex	.02	.01	.04*	
	Interaction simple slope	00 s	.01	01	.00
	Men	03	.00	29*	
	Women	03	.00	29*	
Peer popularity	Partners	.11	.01	.16*	
	Target sex	.08	.01	.12*	
	Interaction	.00	.01	.00	.00
	simple slope	S			
	Men	.02	.00	.16*	
	Women	.02	.00	.16*	
Power/Success	Partners	.00	.01	.00	
	Target sex	.01	.01	.02	
	Interaction	02	.01	03*	.001*
	simple slope	S			
	Men	.00	.00	.03	
	Women	00	.00	03	
Intelligence	Partners	10	.01	$16^{*}$	
	Target sex	.01	.01	.02	
	Interaction	03	.01	$04^{*}$	.002*
	simple slope	s			
	Men	01	.00	12*	
	Women	02	.00	$20^{*}$	

Table I. Results for the Internet Sample

*Note*: \*p < .05.

ducted exploratory analyses on participants of various age groups. Because results did not appear conditional on age, the data were collapsed across age.

#### **Internet Sample**

Because exploratory analyses revealed the effect of number of target's sex partners to be linear, hierarchical regression analyses were performed for each of the four evaluative domains.<sup>4</sup> This allowed us to separate the main effects from the interaction between them and to observe how much variance the critical interaction between target sex and number of partners explained in the dependent variables. The first block contained the number of sexual partners and the target's sex; the second block contained the interaction between these two factors. See Table I for all coefficients and simple slopes. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table II.

In the domain of values there were main effects of both target sex and number of sexual partners,

 $<sup>^{4}</sup>$ Conducting 2 × 6 ANOVAs on the dependent variables revealed identical patterns of main effects and interactions as the regression analyses in both samples.

		Internet Sample( $n = 8,080$ )			
	Partners	Men		Women	
Domain		М	SD	М	SD
Values	0	3.93	.55	3.98	.57
	1	3.91	.58	3.95	.53
	3	3.77	.63	3.80	.64
	7	3.65	.64	3.68	.67
	12	3.54	.69	3.62	.67
	19	3.39	.71	3.40	.70
Peer popularity	0	2.87	.66	3.01	.65
	1	2.92	.69	3.08	.62
	3	2.92	.65	3.10	.64
	7	3.03	.68	3.21	.67
	12	3.11	.67	3.30	.62
	19	3.19	.66	3.30	.62
Power/Success	0	2.67	.69	2.78	.67
	1	2.74	.68	2.77	.70
	3	2.69	.67	2.76	.67
	7	2.75	.73	2.73	.69
	12	2.73	.71	2.76	.67
	19	2.75	.69	2.71	.65
Intelligence	0	3.80	.55	3.88	.56
	1	3.80	.58	3.87	.58
	3	3.68	.62	3.76	.62
	7	3.70	.63	3.66	.67
	12	3.64	.61	3.66	.62
	19	3.57	.62	3.51	.62

**Table II.** Descriptive Statistics for the Internet Sample

 $R^2 = .09$ , F(2, 8077) = 387.07, p < .05. Women were evaluated more positively,  $\beta = .04$ , p < .05, whereas targets with many partners were evaluated more negatively,  $\beta = -.29$ , p < .05. There was no change in  $R^2$ when the interaction term was introduced,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 8076) = 0.19$ , *ns*. (See left panel of Fig. 2.) In the domain of peer popularity there were main effects of both target sex and number of sexual partners,  $R^2 = .04$ , F(2, 8077) = 145.82, p <.05. Women were evaluated more positively,  $\beta = .12$ , p < .05, as were targets with many sexual partners,  $\beta = .16$ , p < .05. Again, there was no change in  $R^2$ when the interaction term was introduced,  $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $F_{change}(1, 8076) = 0.07$ , *ns*. (See left panel of Fig. 3.)

In the domain of power/success, there were no main effects of target sex or number of sexual partners,  $R^2 = .00$ , F(2, 8077) = 1.57, ns, but there was an interaction between them,  $\Delta R^2 = .001$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 8076) = 5.47$ , p < .05. Analysis of simple slopes revealed that men were evaluated more positively as the number of partners they had had increased,  $\beta = .03$ , p < .05, whereas women were evaluated more negatively as the number of partners they had had increased,  $\beta = -.03$ , p < .05. This interaction is consistent with the "strong" double standard discussed previously, but, as can be seen, this strong double standard manifests itself in a weak manner. (See left panel of Fig. 4.)

In the domain of intelligence, there were main effects of both target sex and number of sexual partners,  $R^2 = .02$ , F(2, 8077) = 114.58, p < .05; women were evaluated slightly more positively,  $\beta = .02$ , p = .05, and targets who had had more sexual partners were evaluated more negatively,  $\beta = -.16$ , p < .05. The interaction term was statistically significant,  $\Delta R^2 = .002$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 8076) = 14.58$ , p < .05. Analysis of the simple slopes revealed that both men,  $\beta = -.12$ , p < .05, and women,  $\beta = -.20$ , p < .05, were evaluated more negatively as the number of partners



Fig. 2. Evaluations of values as a function of target sex and the number of sexual partners reported by the target.



Fig. 3. Evaluations of peer popularity as a function of target sex and the number of sexual partners reported by the target.

increased, but the women slightly more so. This interaction pattern is consistent with the "weak" double standard described previously. (See left panel of Fig. 5.)

#### **Student Sample**

The same evaluative scales were used for the student sample; however we made some minor adjustments to the scales to maximize the reliability coefficients. The alphas for values, peer popularity, power/success, and intelligence were .82, .67, .65, and .69, respectively. As before, hierarchical regression analyses were performed for each evaluative domain. The first block contained number of sexual partners and target sex, and the second block contained the interaction term.<sup>5</sup> See Table III for all coefficients and simple slopes. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table IV.

In the values domain, there was a main effect of number of sexual partners,  $R^2 = .15$ , F(2, 141) =12.05, p < .05. Targets with more partners were evaluated more negatively,  $\beta = -.38$ , p < .05. There was no main effect of target sex and no change in  $R^2$ when the interaction term was introduced,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 140) = 1.87$ , *ns*. (See right panel of Fig. 2.) In the domain of peer popularity, there was a main effect of number of sexual partners,  $R^2 = .05$ , F(2, 141) = 3.66, p < .05. Targets with more partners were evaluated more negatively,  $\beta = -.19$ , p < .05. There was no main effect of target sex and no change in  $R^2$  when the interaction term was introduced,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 140) = 3.41$ , *ns*. (See right panel of Fig. 3.)

In the domain of power/success, there were no main effects of target sex or number of sexual partners, although there was a tendency for participants to evaluate targets with many partners more negatively,  $\beta = -.16$ , p = .06. There was no change in  $R^2$  when the interaction term was introduced,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 140) = 1.90$ , *ns*. (See right panel of Fig. 4.)

In the domain of intelligence, again there was a main effect of number of sexual partners,  $R^2 = .06$ , F(2, 141) = 4.62, p < .05. Targets with more partners were evaluated more negatively,  $\beta = -.20$ , p < .05. There was no change in  $R^2$  when the interaction term was introduced,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 140) = 2.11$ , *ns*. (See right panel of Fig. 5.)

# DISCUSSION

To date, there has been little evidence that women are evaluated more negatively than men for having many sexual partners. However, if the double standard exists, methodological limitations of previous research may have prevented it from emerging clearly. In the present research, we sought to provide a rigorous test of whether or not the sexual double standard exists by rectifying methodological limitations of previous studies. Our data reveal virtually no

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>One may note that the simple slopes in the student sample appear consistent with a weak double standard, as the betas of the simple slopes for women are significant, but most of those for men are not. However, to interpret the interaction effect, one must reference the beta for the interaction term in the regression equation containing both sexes. As can be seen, these interactions only account for 1 to 2% of the variance in participant evaluations in any given domain.



Fig. 4. Evaluations of power/success as a function of target sex and the number of sexual partners reported by the target.

evidence of a traditional, or "strong," sexual double standard.

The only domain in which a traditional sexual double standard emerged was that of power/success, and this was true only in the Internet sample. However, the effect was quite small; it accounted for less than 1% of the variance in people's evaluations. We also found some evidence of a "weak" double standard in the domain of intelligence for the Internet sample. Both male and female targets were rated as less intelligent as their reported number of partners increased, but the effect was stronger for female targets. Again, this interaction only accounted for less than 1% of the variance in participants' evaluations. In no other domain was there an interaction between the sex of the target and how many sexual partners the target had had.

These results and others (e.g., Sprecher et al., 1987) suggest that although the double standard may not operate in overall evaluations of persons, it may play a role in shaping perceptions of sexually active people in specific domains. Concerning the domain of intelligence, for example, engaging in frequent casual sex may not be a "smart" thing to do in light of the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases (especially AIDS). However, the consequences of engaging in frequent casual sex may be seen as more severe for women than for men. Also, domains associated with sexual stereotypes (e.g., power or dominance; Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Lips, 1994) may be more sensitive to the double standard than those that are not (e.g., peer popularity).

These results suggest that even after addressing some of the methodological limitations of previous



Fig. 5. Evaluations of intelligence as a function of target sex and the number of sexual partners reported by the target.

Variable					
Dependant	Predictor	В	SE B	β	$\Delta R^2$
Values	Partners	24	.05	38*	
	Target sex	.09	.05	.07	
	Interaction	07	.05	11	.01
	Mon	.5 02	01	20*	
	Waman	03	.01	20	
Poor Popularity	Portnors	05	.01	4/	
reel ropulatily	Target are	11	.05	19	
	Target sex	.14	.05	.12	02
	simple slope	—.09 :s	.05	15	.02
	Men	.00	.01	04	
	Women	03	.01	35*	
Power/Success	Partners	09	.05	16	
	Target sex	01	.05	01	
	Interaction simple slope	07	.05	11	.01
	Men	00	01	- 05	
	Women	00	.01	05 - 22*	
Intelligence	Partners	- 10	.01	- 20*	
intelligence	Target sev	.10	.04	.20	
	Interaction	- 06	.04	_ 12	01
	simple slope	00 s	.07	12	.01
	Men	01	.01	08	
	Women	03	.01	32*	

		Stude	Student Sample ( $n = 144$ )			
		Men		Women		
Domain	Partners	М	SD	М	SD	
Values	0	3.75	.42	3.89	.42	
	1	3.72	.59	3.97	.61	
	3	3.32	.73	3.67	.57	
	7	3.33	.52	3.24	.63	
	12	3.16	.41	3.20	.58	
	19	3.26	.84	3.10	.64	
Peer popularity	0	3.46	.57	3.77	.59	
	1	3.64	.51	3.62	.62	
	3	3.06	.81	3.67	.54	
	7	3.40	.41	3.56	.49	
	12	3.40	.56	3.41	.52	
	19	3.38	.69	3.14	.58	
Power/Success	0	3.20	.65	3.31	.57	
	1	3.10	.52	3.25	.54	
	3	2.79	.52	3.10	.62	
	7	3.31	.36	3.02	.62	
	12	3.15	.36	2.93	.49	
	19	2.96	.57	2.90	.66	
Intelligence	0	3.90	.47	3.97	.47	
	1	3.86	.52	4.21	.32	
	3	3.65	.59	4.03	.40	
	7	3.71	.32	3.83	.56	
	12	3.55	.43	3.75	.60	
	19	3.80	.73	3.63	.73	

Table IV. Descriptive Statistics for the Student Sample

Table III. Results for the Student Sample

*Note:* \*p < .05.

research, traditional accounts of the sexual double standard do not appear to characterize the manner in which sexually active men and women are evaluated. This raises the question of whether the sexual double standard is more a cultural illusion than an actual phenomenon. If the double standard does not accurately characterize the manner in which people evaluate sexually active others, why does belief in it persist?

One possibility is that people are sensitive to our culture's "sexual lexicon." Many writers have observed that there are more slang terms in our language that degrade sexually active women than sexually active men (e.g., Richardson, 1997; Tanenbaum, 2000). On the basis of such observations, people may conclude that a sexual double standard exists. However, one must be cautious when citing sexual slang as evidence of a double standard. It may be more valuable to consider the relative frequency of the use of slang terms than to consider solely the number of slang terms that exist. When Milhausen and Herold (2001) analyzed the frequency of sexual slang used to describe men and women in actual discourse, they found that the majority of men and women used negative terms to describe both sexually experienced men *and* women. They reported that a minority of men (25%) and women (8%) actually used words such as "stud" to describe sexually active men. Moreover, sexually active men were frequently described with words that fall into the category of *sexual predator* (e.g., "womanizer") or *promiscuous* (e.g., "slut," "dirty"). So although a difference exists in the *number* of sexual slang terms to describe men and women, it is not nearly analogous to the difference in the frequency of their *use* for men and women.

The confirmation bias (Gilovich, 1993; Snyder, 1981), may also help to explain why people believe that the sexual double standard exists. Confirmation bias refers to a type of selective thinking in which one tends to notice evidence that confirms one's beliefs and to ignore or undervalue evidence that contradicts one's beliefs. Confirmation biases may lead people to notice cases that are consistent with the double standard (e.g., a woman being referred to as a "slut") and fail to notice cases inconsistent with the double standard (e.g., a man being referred to as a "whore"). Because the vast majority of people believe that a sexual double standard exists (Marks, 2002; Milhausen & Herold, 1999, 2001), it is likely that people will process social information that seemingly corroborates the sexual double standard and will ignore information that refutes it. In short, although men and women may have an equal probability of being derogated (or rewarded) for having had many sexual partners, people may tend to notice only the instances in which women are derogated and men are rewarded. Attending to cases that are consistent with the double standard while ignoring cases inconsistent with it may create the illusion that the sexual double standard is more pervasive than it really is.

#### Limitations of the Present Study

Although we sought to correct some limitations of past research, other limitations remain. First, the statistical power of the student sample was low because of the relatively small sample size. The results of the student sample may therefore be less stable than those of the Internet sample. The reliability coefficients for the student sample were also lower than those for the Internet sample, which again may have undermined our statistical power. This relatively low power in the student sample may be one reason for the divergence in the results between the two samples in some domains.

Second, the results reported here may not generalize to populations outside of Western culture. Culture can be a powerful sculptor of sexual attitudes and behavior (e.g., Okazaki, 2002); the double standard may exist in one culture, but be absent from another. For instance, a review of the anthropological literature on sex and sexuality in Africa reveals much evidence of a double standard in African culture (Njikam-Savage & Tchombe, 1994).

Third, this study, like much previous research, employs an experimental person perception paradigm. Studying the double standard in more naturalistic settings may reveal dynamics not otherwise tapped by more artificial methodologies. For example, observing "hot spots" where social interactions are possibly centered on sex (e.g., bars, locker rooms) may offer insight to the kinds of attitudes expressed concerning the sexual activity of men and women.

Finally, the present research is relatively atheoretical, partly because we believe that it is necessary to document the phenomenon of the double standard systematically (if it exists) before bringing theoretical perspectives to bear on it. Nonetheless, there may be theoretical perspectives that would help guide us in a more effective search for this phenomenon. For example, social psychological theory suggests that people tend to conform to social norms in the presence of others (Asch, 1952; Sherif, 1936; Turner, 1991). Because there are strong gender norms concerning the appropriate sexual behavior of men and women (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Oliver & Hyde, 1993), people may behave in accordance with these norms in social situations. Our study, like other studies on the double standard, only focused on individuals in nongroup situations. Social psychological theory suggests that social interaction in group contexts may be a necessary precondition for the emergence of the double standard.

# CONCLUSIONS

In an effort to denounce the sexual double standard, contemporary authors, critics, and the media may actually be *perpetuating* it by unintentionally providing confirming evidence for the double standard while ignoring disconfirming evidence. Most accounts from these sources cite numerous cases of women being derogated for sexual activity, perhaps in an effort to elicit empathy from the audience. Empathy is a commendable (and desirable) goal, but these writings may also serve to embed the double standard in our collective conscious. Suggesting that a societal double standard is the basis of the derogation of women shifts focus away from those who are truly at fault-those who are engaging in or permitting sexual harassment and other forms of derogation.

In closing, we believe that it may be beneficial to shift the emphasis of sexual double standard research from the question of *whether* the double standard exists to *why* the double standard appears to be such a pervasive phenomenon when it really is not. By addressing this question, future researchers should be able to elucidate the disparity between popular intuitions and the research literature and open doors to novel avenues for our understanding of attitudes toward sexuality.

# APPENDIX

#### **Subscale 1: Values**

This person is trustworthy.

This person is respectful.

This person would make someone a good boyfriend/ girlfriend.

This person would make someone a good husband/ wife.

This person is immoral.

This person is dishonest.

This person is careless.\*

I could be friends with this person.

I would not like to know this person.

#### Subscale 2: Popularity with Peers

This person is popular.

This person has lots of friends. This person is fun at parties. People like this person. This person would be fun to hang out with.\* This person is physically attractive. People listen to this person.\*

No one likes this person.

#### Subscale 3: Power/Success

This person makes a lot of money. This person will hold a job with lots of power. This person is in charge of many people. This person has a good job. This person would make a good leader. This person is successful. This person often takes control of situations.\* This person influences others.

# Subscale 4: Intelligence

This person is intelligent.

This person is a failure.

This person performs well in everything he/she does.

This person makes a lot of mistakes.

This person did well in school.

\*Item was dropped in the student sample.

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