

Confirmation Bias and the Sexual Double Standard

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In contemporary Western societies it is widely believed that there is a sexual double standard such that men are rewarded for sexual activity, whereas women are derogated for sexual activity. This pervasive belief may result in a confirmation bias such that people tend to notice information that confirms the double standard and fail to notice information that refutes it. Two studies were conducted to test this hypothesis. In both studies, participants read vignettes about a target man or a woman that contained an equal number of positive and negative comments regarding the target's sexuality. Participants recalled more information consistent with the double standard than inconsistent with it.

KEY WORDS: confirmation bias; double standard; gender norms; promiscuity; sex differences; sex partners; sexual activity; sexuality.

In contemporary Western society it is widely believed that sexual behavior is evaluated differently depending on whether a man or a woman engages in it (Milhausen & Herold, 2001). This view, known as the *sexual double standard*, suggests that for men, sexual behavior brings praise and respect, whereas for women, identical sexual behavior brings derogation and disrepute. Although the general public's belief in the sexual double standard is pervasive, (Marks, 2002; Milhausen & Herold, 1999), the research literature paints a different picture. Person perception studies, which feature men and women engaged in identical levels of sexual activity, are widely used to assess how sexual behavior is evaluated depending on the sex of the person engaging in it. To date, these studies show limited empirical support for the double standard (e.g., Gentry, 1998; Jacoby & Williams, 1985; Mark & Miller, 1986; Marks & Fraley, 2005a; Oliver & Sedikides, 1992; O'Sullivan, 1995; Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988). These findings are surprising considering the preponderance of anecdotal evidence for the existence of a double standard.

Why is there a disparity between anecdotal evidence and the empirical literature? One possibility is that people selectively notice information that is consistent with the double standard and ignore or undervalue information that is not. For example, a situation in which a woman is derogated for sexual behavior may be more readily noticed than one in which a man is derogated for sexual behavior. Moreover, when people are asked if they believe a double standard exists, they may recall episodes that are compatible with the double standard (e.g., an episode in which a man was praised for sexual behavior) and not recall episodes that are incompatible with it (e.g., one in which a woman was praised for sexual behavior). In short, there may be a *confirmation bias*, or a tendency to attend to and recall information that confirms the double standard. The purpose of the present studies was to determine if there are confirmation biases in the way people process sexual information about men and women.

Sexual Double Standard Research

The sexual double standard has received much attention from scholars, journalists, and the media. For example, Tanenbaum (2000) and White (2002) chronicled the experiences of adolescent girls who had been labeled "sluts" and the harassment and

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derogation that comes with that label. Talk shows and television specials have focused on the topic of the double standard (e.g., *Busting the Double Standard*; MTV Networks Music, 2003). It is also a popular subject on the Internet: a May 2005 search on google.com returned over 8,000 results that contained the phrase “sexual double standard.” Research does indeed show that there is a pervasive belief that a sexual double standard exists. In a survey of university women, Milhausen and Herold (1999) found that 93% agreed that women are judged more harshly than men for having many sexual partners. Also, a recent survey conducted on the Internet showed that 85% of respondents believed that, in Western societies, women were allowed less sexual freedom than men (Marks, 2002). In sum, the sexual double standard is widely held to be a genuine phenomenon; its existence is “obvious” to the vast majority of individuals in our society.

Although the sexual double standard seems self-evident, person perception studies generally fail to show that people actually evaluate sexually active men and women differently. For example, Gentry (1998) conducted a person perception task in which participants evaluated male and female targets with varied levels of sexual experience. Evaluations were based on level of sexual experience and relationship type (casual or committed), but not on target gender. O’Sullivan (1995) followed a similar protocol and found that targets were rated based on the amount of sexual experience they reported, but ratings did not vary as a function of target gender. We (Marks & Fraley, 2005a) conducted a person perception study designed to rectify some methodological concerns of previous double standard studies, yet we found little evidence of a double standard.

Although some researchers have reported evidence of a double standard, comparable findings frequently fail to emerge in later studies. For instance, Sprecher, McKinney, and Orbuch (1987) conducted a person perception study and found evidence of a double standard that was conditional on age and the context (committed or casual) in which the loss of virginity occurred. However, data from other studies have failed to corroborate either the age effect (Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1988) or the context effect (O’Sullivan, 1995).

In summary, although it appears that people *do* evaluate others according to the amount of sexual activity they report, person perception re-

search rarely shows that people evaluate men and women differently as a function of their sexual activity. Even when an interaction between target gender and sexual activity has been found, it is often found only in highly circumscribed situations (see Crawford & Popp, 2003, for a review). If the sexual double standard is as pervasive and powerful as many people believe, empirical evidence for its role in person evaluation should be less elusive.

Confirmation Bias

Because belief in the double standard is so prevalent, people may seek out, notice, recall, and process information that confirms its existence. Moreover, people may tend to ignore, fail to encode, forget, or undervalue information that goes against or disconfirms the double standard. For instance, when people are asked if they believe a double standard exists, they may find it easy to remember an instance that supports the double standard, but find it more difficult to recall an instance that fails to support it. Specifically, there may be a confirmation bias toward information that is consistent with a sexual double standard.

Although the term “confirmation bias” has been applied to many phenomena in the psychological literature (see Nickerson, 1998), we apply it here as a general tendency to seek or interpret information in a manner that is consistent with existing beliefs or expectations. One way that people seek confirming information is by giving precedence to information that supports existing beliefs. For example, research has shown that people give greater weight to information that supports their beliefs than to information that is counter to them (Baron, 1991). Another way the confirmation bias is exhibited is when people seek “positive” cases to test hypotheses. That is, if instructed to evaluate a hypothesis, people tend to select evidence or ask questions that confirm rather than disconfirm it (Skov & Sherman, 1986). Snyder and his colleagues have shown that this is a very robust effect, as people tend to seek confirming information even when the source of the hypothesis is not credible (Snyder & Swann, 1978, Experiment 1), when people are offered incentives for accuracy (Snyder & Swann, 1978, Experiment 4), when people are supplied with alternative hypotheses (Snyder & Swann, 1977), and even when people are provided with hypothesis-disconfirming evidence (Snyder & Campbell, 1980).

Moreover, people also tend to ignore or avoid information that counters or contradicts beliefs (Koriat, Lichtenstein, & Fischhoff, 1980). This may be why the vast majority of people are likely to answer in the affirmative when asked if there is a sexual double standard.

The overweighting of confirming information is another factor in confirmation bias. Studies have shown that people tend to overweight confirming information and underweight disconfirming information (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). This results in people generally requiring less confirming evidence to accept a hypothesis than they would disconfirming evidence to reject that same hypothesis. Thus, one instance of a woman being derogated for sexual activity may strengthen people's belief in the sexual double standard, whereas numerous instances of women being rewarded or treated with impunity for sexual activity may fail to weaken their belief in it.

Overview of the Present Studies

In summary, confirmation bias may lead people to process information in a manner that is consistent with the double standard. In this article we report two studies that were designed to test the hypothesis that people are more likely to notice information that is consistent rather than information that is inconsistent with the sexual double standard. We constructed a vignette that describes a highly sexually active man or woman discussing his or her history of sexual activity. During the discussion, the target mentions several instances of being treated both positively and negatively for his or her sexual activity. The vignette was constructed such that there were an equal number of positive and negative comments about the target. After participants read the vignette, they were asked to recall the comments that had been made about the target. We hypothesized that participants would recall more information consistent with the double standard (i.e., men rewarded and women derogated) than they would information inconsistent with the double standard (i.e., men derogated and women rewarded). In Study 1, participants were asked to estimate how many positive and negative comments were made about the person. In Study 2 we used the same basic procedure, but asked participants to write down all the comments that were made about the person, without reference to the valence of those comments.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

A priori power analyses revealed that in order to have a statistical power of at least .80, 65 participants would be needed to detect a medium sized effect (i.e., Cohen's $d = .50$) and 200 participants to detect a small effect (i.e., Cohen's $d = .20$). Based on these calculations, we recruited 223 students (80 men, 143 women) from a large midwestern university who participated for credit in their introductory psychology class. The average participant's age was 19.89 years ($SD = 3.14$, range 17–45). Approximately 33.7% of the participants were European American, 22.0% Asian American, 12.4% Hispanic American, 9.7% African American, and 22.2% of other ethnicities or who did not specify their ethnicity.

Materials and Procedure

We constructed a one-page vignette of a fictitious male or female target person's "journal entry" concerning his or her sexual history. In the vignette, the target person reported five positive reactions or comments made by others regarding his or her sexual behavior and five negative reactions or comments made by others regarding his or her sexual behavior. A sample paragraph from a vignette purportedly written by a man is reproduced below:

A few months later, I met a girl named Renee. She was a girl I knew from school who was in my American History class. We tried to study together a few times, but we'd usually end up talking the whole time. We got along well, and started dating. We were together for a few months, and of course we were sleeping together. Even after we broke up, we still had sex a few times. One of my friends was like "Wow, you keep her coming back, huh?" However, another friend told me I shouldn't be sleeping with somebody that I wasn't in a relationship with.

The order in which the positive and negative comments were presented was counterbalanced. The independent variables in this experiment were target gender and the valence of the comments presented. The dependent variable was the number of comments recalled by the participants.

Participants signed up for a nondescript study that was identified by a number. Upon arrival to

the experiment, participants were told they would be participating in a “journal study,” and would read a person’s journal entry and answer questions about it. To avoid demand characteristics, no mention was made of the sexual nature of the study. Participants were randomly assigned to read about a male or a female target. After they read the vignette, participants were given a questionnaire that contained several questions about the vignette. Among several mundane items were two items that concerned the comments made about the target’s sexual behavior. One item asked how many positive comments or reactions others had made about the target; the other asked how many negative comments or reactions others had made about the target. The order in which these two questions appeared was counterbalanced across participants.

Results and Discussion

Exploratory analysis revealed no interaction between participant gender and any other variables in either study, thus participant gender was not included in the analyses reported below. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with comment valence as a within-participants factor and target gender as a between-subjects factor. There was a significant main effect for comment valence, $F(1, 221) = 14.5$, $p < .05$. Overall, participants reported having read a greater number of negative comments ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.25$) than positive comments ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.40$). There was no main effect of target gender, $F(1, 221) = 1.81$, ns , but there was an interaction between target gender and comment valence, $F(1, 221) = 9.99$, $p < .05$ (see Fig. 1). Post hoc comparisons revealed that participants estimated having read slightly more negative comments about the female target ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.28$) than about the male target ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(221) = 1.13$, $p = .18$, $d = .18$. Participants estimated having read significantly more positive comments about the male target ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.48$) than about the female target ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.26$, respectively), $t(221) = -3.04$, $p < .05$, $d = -.40$.

Within-sex post hoc comparisons revealed that participants estimated that they had read more negative comments ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.28$) than positive comments ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.26$) about the female target, $t(110) = 4.99$, $p < .05$, $d = .68$. There was no difference between the number of negative and positive comments estimated about the male target ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.23$; $M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.48$, respectively),

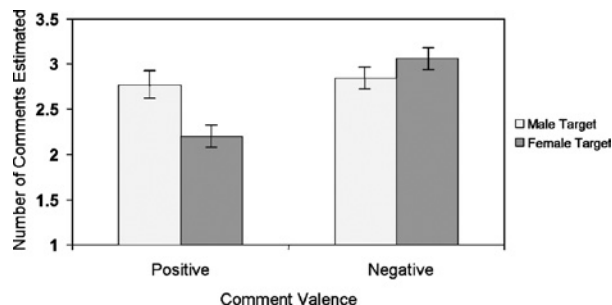


Fig. 1. Number of positive and negative comments estimated for male and female targets. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

$t(111) = .45$, ns , $d = .06$. See Table I for all descriptive statistics.

In summary, Study 1 showed that participants estimated that they had read slightly more negative comments about the female target than about the male target and significantly more positive comments about the male target than about the female target. However, because we only asked participants to recall the valence of the comments, it is unclear whether participants actually remembered the comments from the vignette or were basing their estimates on conjecture. Moreover, by asking participants to recall the number of positive and negative comments, we may have inadvertently primed norms that are compatible with the sexual double standard. In order to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1, another study was conducted in which participants were asked explicitly to recall the comments made about the target without regard to valence.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants and Design

On the basis of the power calculations and effect sizes from Study 1, we recruited 99 students (39 men,

Table I. Descriptive Statistics From Study 1

Target gender	Comment valence	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Man	Positive	112	2.76	1.48	2.50	3.02
	Negative	112	2.84	1.23	2.61	3.07
Woman	Positive	111	2.20	1.26	1.94	2.46
	Negative	111	3.06	1.28	2.83	3.30

60 women) from a different midwestern university who participated for credit in their introductory psychology class. The average participant's age was 18.79 years ($SD = 1.58$, range 17–28). Approximately 66.7% of the participants were European American, 12.1% Asian American, 8.1% Hispanic American, 6.1% African American, and 7.0% of other ethnicities who did not specify their ethnicity.

Materials and Procedure

The vignette and procedures used in Study 2 were the same as those used in Study 1. However, instead of being asked to report the number of positive and negative comments that people made about the target in the vignette, participants were asked to write out *all* the comments that people made about the target, without reference to the valence of the comment.³ Specifically, participants were told, "In [his/her] journal, [Donald/Donna] mentioned several comments or reactions (from other people) regarding [his/her] sexual activity. In the space below, please write all the comments or reactions that were made about [Donald/Donna]."

Results and Discussion

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with comment valence as a within-subjects factor and target gender as a between-subjects factor. There was no main effect of comment valence, $F(1, 97) = 0.48$, *ns*. There was a marginal effect of target gender, $F(1, 97) = 3.31$, $p = .07$, such that participants tended to recall more comments about the female target ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.39$) than about the male target ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.59$). This main effect was qualified by a marginal interaction between target gender and comment valence, $F(1, 97) = 2.53$, $p = .11$ (see Fig. 2). Post hoc comparisons revealed that participants remembered more negative comments about the female target ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.71$) than about the male target ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(97) = 2.59$, $p < .05$, $d = .53$. There was no

³Because the paradigm employed in Study 2 required participants to write out the positive and negative comments, there were some instances in which participants reported comments that were not present in the vignette or misreported comments as being of the opposite valence (e.g., the comment "He said more experience is better" was erroneously recalled as "More experience doesn't mean better sex"). There were no differences in the mean number of false positives or false negatives for either target gender.

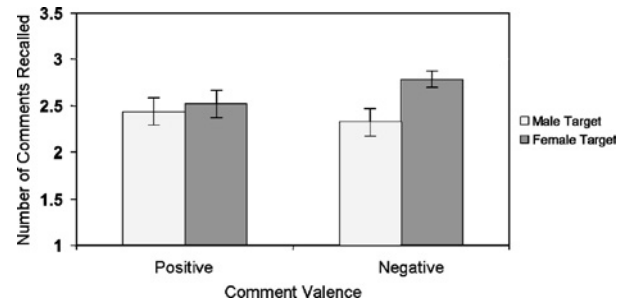


Fig. 2. Number of positive and negative comments recalled for male and female targets. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

difference between the number of positive comments remembered about the male target and about the female target ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.00$; $M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.99$, respectively), $t(97) = 0.46$, *ns*, $d = .09$.

Within-sex post hoc comparisons revealed that participants remembered more negative comments ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .71$) than positive comments ($M = 2.52$, $SD = .99$) about the female target, $t(49) = 1.79$, $p < .05$, one tailed test, $d = .30$.⁴ There was no difference between the number of negative and positive comments recalled about the male target ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.00$; $M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.00$, respectively), $t(48) = -.58$, *ns*, $d = -.10$. See Table II for all descriptive statistics. In summary, the results from Study 1 replicated fairly well. Moreover, these results emerged even when we did not ask participants to recall positive and negative comments per se.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to elucidate some of the cognitive mechanisms that underlie the sexual double standard. We did so by examining the effect of confirmation bias on the sexual double standard. As hypothesized, people tended to recall information that was consistent with a sexual double standard. These results suggest that people are more likely to attend to evidence in which women are derogated as opposed to rewarded for sexual activity. In other words, people's belief in the sexual double standard may lead them to be vigilant to information consistent with the double standard. If this is the case, a

⁴We also examined the proportion of negative comments recalled for male and female targets to rule out the possibility that participants were simply more likely to recall a higher frequency of comments (positive *and* negative) for women as opposed to men. The proportion of negative comments was higher for women (.54) than for men (.48), $t(97) = 1.89$, $p < .05$, one-tailed test.

Table II. Descriptive Statistics From Study 2

Target gender	Comment valence	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Man	Positive	49	2.43	1.00	2.14	2.72
	Negative	49	2.33	1.00	2.04	2.62
Woman	Positive	50	2.52	0.99	2.24	2.80
	Negative	50	2.78	0.71	2.58	2.98

cycle may occur such that people notice information that corroborates a double standard, which solidifies their belief in its existence, thereby making it all the more likely that they will continue to notice information that corroborates the double standard.

Implications of the Present Studies

The present results have several important implications for understanding the sexual double standard. First, researchers, authors, and journalists should take care to procure and present some information that disconfirms the sexual double standard. Generally, literature aimed at the general public almost exclusively features situations, experiences, anecdotes, or attitudes that confirm the double standard. Although these works are crucial to understanding the impact of the double standard, they may also over-represent the prevalence of situations in which female sexuality is derogated. It should be possible to remedy this situation by changing the way that questions are phrased or by asking women to describe instances where they were both rewarded and derogated for sexual behavior.

Second, it is possible that researchers, like our participants, may exhibit a confirmation bias to seek and report negative information about female sexuality. By describing the pain, shame, and sense of injustice felt by women who are derogated for their (actual or implied) sexual behavior, researchers do us a service by allowing others to understand the experiences of victims of the double standard. However, by only reporting data or anecdotes that confirm the double standard, researchers may inadvertently serve to entrench the double standard further in our culture's collective consciousness. In other words, the very act of bringing the double standard to people's attention may serve to reinforce it (see Wegner, Wenzlaff, Kerker, & Beattie, 1981, for an example in a related context).

Third, the present results shed some light on the person perception paradigm's failure to produce consistent findings concerning the double standard.

Generally, person perception studies are constructed so as to not lead participants to give positive or negative evaluations of sexually active people. The target persons in person perception studies are usually presented in a neutral or unvalenced manner, in hopes that participants will evaluate the target based solely on his or her sexual behavior. In real life situations, however, discussion of sexual activity is usually valenced to some degree, whether positive (e.g., bragging, praising) or negative (e.g., gossip, name calling). These valenced comments may be more likely to be incorporated into people's perceptions of sexual activity if they match salient prototypes of sexually active people (e.g., "slut" or "stud"). Therefore, person perception studies may fail to capture accurately the manner in which people really learn about and evaluate sexually active men and women.

Finally, the present results suggest that female sexuality may suffer a "double whammy" such that, not only are sexually active women likely to be evaluated negatively, but these instances may be highly salient to people in contemporary Western societies. To provide a compelling example, Aubrey (2004) showed that the negative consequences of female characters' sexual activity are overrepresented in television programming directed at adolescents, and the present results suggest that these consequences may be highly perceptible by the programs' intended audience. In other words, Aubrey's (2004) results show that women in television shows are likely to be portrayed as suffering the consequences of sexual activity, and the present results show that people are more attuned to the negative aspects of female than male sexuality. Taken together, these findings suggest that television programming aimed at adolescents may be one of the prime mechanisms that generate and sustain the sexual double standard.

Limitations of the Present Studies

Although the present results suggest that people recall information consistent with the sexual double standard, they do not speak to the specific social-cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for this phenomenon. It may be the case that people *encode* more information consistent with the double standard than inconsistent with it. It may also be the case that people encode equal amounts of consistent and inconsistent information, but *remember* more consistent information. Finally, both processes may also

be at work; people may both encode and remember more consistent than inconsistent information. A study with a varied time delay between encoding and reporting would allow researchers to tease these possibilities apart (e.g., Fraley, Garner, & Shaver, 2000).

Conclusions

Confirmation bias appears to be one of the mechanisms that sustain belief in the sexual double standard. Before coming to a firm conclusion regarding the existence of the double standard, however, a radical shift in sexual double standard paradigms needs to take place. In addition to exploring further the effect of confirmation bias on the double standard, other mechanisms that generate or sustain it should be identified and studied. Moreover, research that closely replicates contexts experienced in everyday life should be conducted, as an isolated laboratory setting may not prove to be an adequate context in which to study the double standard. We demonstrated the usefulness of this approach in an earlier study (Marks & Fraley, 2005b). We suggested that because the double standard is a powerful social norm, attempts to elicit it in a context of social isolation (i.e., by having research participants evaluate targets on a computer in an isolated lab room) may prove fruitless. We addressed this possibility by introducing a social context to the popular person perception paradigm widely employed in double standard research and found that participants failed to exhibit a double standard when evaluating targets on their own, but exhibited a double standard when they evaluated targets collaboratively with other participants.

Another shift that needs to occur concerns the hypotheses formulated in research on the sexual double standard. It is imperative that researchers begin to form and test theoretically derived hypotheses, as opposed to hypotheses based on anecdotal evidence. Evolutionary theory, social role theory, and social learning theory may all provide useful frameworks in which to study the sexual double standard. Judging from the dearth of robust evidence for the double standard in the empirical literature, it may be the case that the “men rewarded, women derogated” view of sexuality may be quite oversimplified (Hird & Jackson, 2001). The adoption of a specific theoretical perspective should allow researchers to make more refined predictions about the conditions under which the double standard arises.

In closing, future researchers should continue to explore the social and cognitive mechanisms that underlie the sexual double standard. Doing so should lead to a better understanding of the attitudes that people hold toward sexually active men and women, as well as the social and cognitive processes that sustain those attitudes.

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