

Religiosity, Gender, and the Double Standard

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ABSTRACT. Scottish teenagers ($N = 690$) participated in a survey concerning the relationship between religiosity, gender, and social judgments of sexual activity. Respondents estimated the number of sexual partners of 20-year-old men and women and made evaluative judgments of sexually active men and women on positive and negative dimensions. On both tasks, evidence was obtained for the operation of a double standard. Women were expected to have fewer sexual partners than men, and their sexual activity was judged more negatively on evaluatively negative dimensions. Contrary to findings of previous studies in this area, gender differences in endorsement of the double standard were not found. Only moderate support was found for the view that religiosity contributes to different standards of sexual behavior for men and women, although religiosity had significantly greater influence on judgments made by women than on judgments made by men.

EHRMANN (1959, p. 188) DEFINED "THE DOUBLE STANDARD" as "one code of conduct for one sex and a different one for the other" and used this term to characterize findings showing less permissive attitudes toward women's sexual behavior than toward the sexual behavior of men. Results of recent research suggest that different sexual standards still operate for men and women (Spears, Abrams, Sheeran, Abraham, & Marks, 1991; Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbach, 1987). There are relatively few studies regarding factors predicting the double standard. In a recent meta-analytic review, however, Oliver and Hyde (1993) sug-

gested that gender may be an important predictor. Their findings showed that women were more likely to endorse the double standard than men ($d = -0.29$).

Oliver and Hyde (1993) noted several caveats that suggest caution in interpreting this finding. Their review included just seven studies of the double standard, and data for the most recent study were collected in 1977. Partial correlations showed that the magnitude of the gender difference decreased between 1966 and 1977 ($d = -0.42$). There was also a significant association between respondents' age and the effect size for gender ($d = -0.41$). Respondents under 18 years of age showed a small gender difference in the double standard ($d = -0.06$), whereas respondents over 18 years of age showed a moderate gender difference ($d = -0.33$). In the present study we investigated whether gender differences in the double standard would remain evident among a sample of 16- to 18-year-olds during the late 1980s. On the basis of Oliver and Hyde's review, we anticipated small gender differences among younger, more recent samples.

Of interest also were possible causes of gender differences in the double standard. In their review, Oliver and Hyde (1993) examined five theoretical accounts of gender differences in sexuality: neoanalytic theories (Chodorow, 1978), sociobiology theory (Symons, 1987), social learning theory (Mischel, 1966), social role theory (Eagly, 1987), and script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Greatest support was found for social role theory and script theory. Both of these accounts underscore the importance of the sources of individuals' sex roles and sexual scripts. In this study, we investigated one possible source of sexual standards that may be important in explaining gender differences in the double standard, namely, religiosity.

Research has shown that attitudes toward the role and status of women are affected by religiosity and that religiosity is strongly associated with traditional sex role attitudes (Baker & Terpstra, 1986; Fine-Davis, 1979). Psychologists of religion have also suggested that Christian theology may, perhaps inadvertently, distinguish between the acceptability of male and female sexual behavior and could therefore contribute to the maintenance of the double standard (Farley, 1976; Flanagan, 1975). Farley (1976), for example, argued that there is an enormous emphasis on the "dangers" of female sexuality, whereas the same emphasis is not placed on male sexuality (see Nicolson, 1993, for a similar analysis of women's sexuality in the sexology literature). Interpretations of women's sexuality present women as temptresses and frequently use images of contamination or defilement, whereas male sexuality is relatively ignored. Although Farley's (1976) analysis is suggestive, no empirical research has been conducted on this issue.

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We present two hypotheses regarding the association between religiosity and the double standard. First, a significant relationship between these variables was predicted. Religious respondents of both sexes were expected to endorse the double standard to a greater extent than their nonreligious counterparts. Second, we predicted that respondents' gender would interact with religiosity such that religious women would endorse the double standard to a greater extent than religious men. This prediction is consistent with Farley's (1976) suggestion that Christianity is particularly concerned with female sexuality and that religiosity should therefore have greater self-relevance or salience (Kuiper & Derry, 1981) for women's judgments than for judgments made by men.

A number of studies seem to support this hypothesis. Bell (1966) reported that "religious intensity appears to be particularly important to the sex life of the female" (p. 44). Libby, Gray, and White (1978) found that the variation accounted for by religiosity in permissiveness scores was 6.5% higher for women than for men. Fine-Davis (1979) also obtained a significant interaction between gender and religiosity. Religiosity was related to perceptions of women as "inferior" among the women in her sample, but not among the men. Although there is evidence that religiosity has greater influence on women's social judgments than on men's, religiosity has not been examined as a factor contributing to gender differences in endorsement of the double standard.

The manner in which both religiosity and the double standard are operationalized must be considered. It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the effects of non-Christian religious orientations on endorsement of the double standard. Thus, findings obtained here can be cautiously generalized to Judeo-Christian cultures only. Our operational definition of religiosity draws upon Sheeran, Abrams, Abraham, and Spears's (1993) comparative study, in which they found that asking people whether they would describe themselves as religious was the best predictor of sexual attitudes and behaviors.

A study by Sprecher, McKinney, and Orbuch (1987) showed how the double standard has subtly changed over the last 20 years. Sprecher et al. found that the old double standard, in which sexual intercourse outside marriage was acceptable for men but not for women (Reiss, 1960), has been replaced by a conditional double standard in which intercourse outside marriage is accepted for both sexes but under more restrictive circumstances, such as love or engagement for women.

One implication of these findings is that a subtle measure of the double standard is required to reduce the possibility of social desirability bias. In the present study we used two measures. In the first, respondents were asked to estimate the number of sexual partners of 20-year-old men and women. If the double standard no longer operates, then no significant differences in the estimated numbers of sexual partners of men and women should be obtained. The second measure was more explicitly evaluative; respondents were asked to attribute positive and negative characteristics to men and women who have had identical levels of sexual

activity. This measure accessed concern about sexual reputations and was a less abstract task than rating the acceptability of different sexual behaviors for men and women. It tapped the manner in which the double standard is evidenced in everyday discourse (Crawford, Kippax, & Waldby, 1993).

In this study, then, we addressed three questions:

1. Will gender differences in endorsement of the double standard be found in a sample of adolescents during the late 1980s?
2. Are religious individuals more likely to endorse the double standard than nonreligious individuals?
3. Is religiosity a factor in explaining gender differences in the double standard? Answers to this question were determined by examining whether religious women were more likely to endorse the double standard than religious men were.

Method

Sample and Data Collection

The data for the present study were collected in April and May 1988 as part of a larger investigation into young people's AIDS-relevant cognitions (Abraham, Sheeran, Abrams, & Spears, 1991; Abrams, Abraham, Spears, & Marks, 1990). Names and addresses of 5th-year pupils and individuals who had been 5th-year pupils 2 years previously were drawn from state school lists in Dundee and Kirkcaldy, Scotland. Respondents received a permission letter, followed, where appropriate, by a confidential questionnaire. A response rate of 64% resulted in 690 returns; 277 respondents were male and 405 were female. Eight respondents did not indicate their sex and were therefore excluded from the study. Ages ranged from 15 to 20 years; the mean age was 16.78 years.

Measures

Religiosity. Religiosity was measured by a yes/no response to the question "Would you say that, personally, you are religious?" This measure has previously been shown to be a better predictor of sexual attitudes and behavior than church attendance, denominational background, or salience of religious identity (Sheeran et al., 1993). The validity of single-item religiosity measures is, moreover, well established (Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972).

Social judgments of sexual activity. Respondents completed two judgment tasks. The first was an estimation of the number of sexual partners of men and women at 20 years of age ("How many people, if any, do you think most 20-year-old men/women will have had sex with?"). The second task involved evaluative judg-

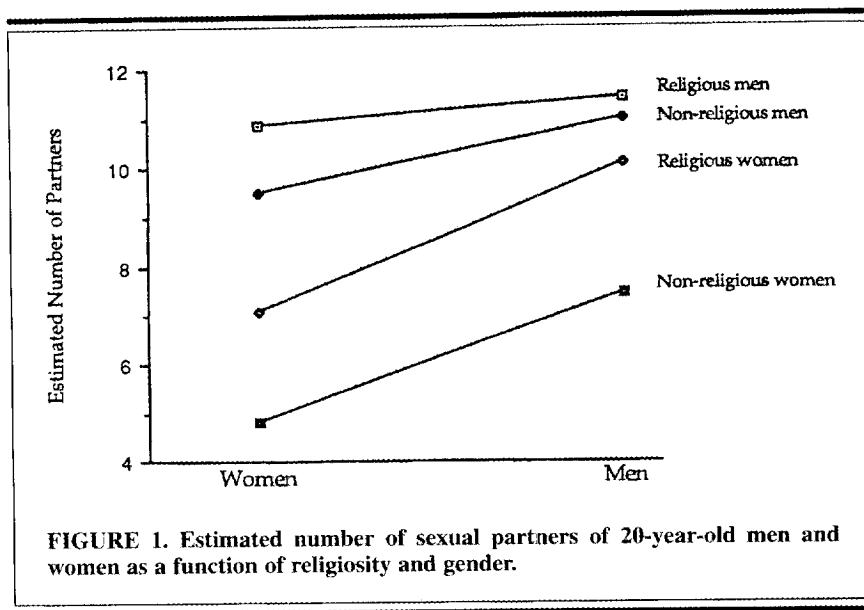
ments of sexually active men and women. Respondents rated both “a young woman who changes her male partner a number of times during the year” and “a young man who changes his female partner a number of times during the year” on four dimensions. Two positive dimensions, “attractive to the opposite sex in general” and “generally popular among both sexes,” and two negative dimensions, “irresponsible” and “lacking in self-respect,” were used. The response alternatives were *not at all*, *slightly*, *moderately*, *very*, and *extremely*.

Results

On the religiosity measure, 42% of the sample reported that they were brought up according to a religion; 16% were brought up in the Catholic tradition and 18% in the Protestant tradition. An additional 6% indicated that their denominational background was “Christian.” In addition, 16.8% of the sample reported that they were personally religious, and 46.7% reported that they had never had sexual intercourse.

Estimation of Partner Numbers

Figure 1 shows the mean perceived number of sexual partners of men and women for religious and nonreligious male and female respondents. Although a number of outliers were found, they were distributed among all respondent cate-



gories except religious women. The median values for each cell revealed a pattern similar to that obtained for means. Parametric statistical analyses were therefore undertaken.

A three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with respondent gender and religiosity as the between-subjects variables and target gender as the within-subject variable was used to analyze these data. A significant interaction between respondent gender and target gender was found, $F(1, 607) = 5.56, p < .05$. Tests of simple main effects showed that the men believed that women have more sexual partners than the women believed women have, $F(1, 607) = 13.43, p < .001$, and that the men believed that men have more sexual partners than the women believed men have, $F(1, 607) = 3.72, p < .05$. Both men and women believed that men have more partners than women, $F_s(1, 607) = 9.53$ and 66.15 , respectively, $p_s < .01$.

Thus, although there was consensus that men are more sexually active than women, the male respondents in the present study believed that both sexes have a greater number of sexual partners than the female respondents believed. These results are consistent with previous findings demonstrating a double standard in sexual activity levels. The present study extends previous analyses, however, by showing a double standard in *perceived* levels of sexual activity. Gender differences in estimates of partner numbers were not consistent with Oliver and Hyde's (1993) analysis, however, because the women underestimated the numbers of sexual partners of *both* women and men relative to the male respondents. Contrary to predictions, religiosity did not have significant main effects, nor did it interact with gender.

Evaluative Judgments of Sexual Activity

Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for judgments of sexually active men and women along four dimensions for each group. Three-way ANOVAs were again used to analyze these data. For the evaluatively positive dimensions, a significant main effect was found for respondent gender in the case of "attractive to the opposite sex in general," $F(1, 645) = 4.03, p < .05$. Thus, the men thought that sexually active people of both sexes were more attractive than the women did. There was no effect of target gender, $F(1, 645) = 0.64, ns$. Similarly, religiosity did not influence judgments of attractiveness, $F(1, 645) = 0.78, ns$, and none of the first-order or the second-order interactions were significant.

A significant three-way interaction between religiosity, respondent gender, and target gender was found for judgments of popularity, $F(1, 639) = 5.13, p < .05$. Tests on simple main effects showed that sexually active women were believed to be more popular by nonreligious men than by either religious men, $F(1, 639) = 9.22, p < .01$, or by nonreligious women, $F(1, 639) = 5.70, p < .05$. There were no differences in the perceived popularity of sexually active women between religious men and women or between religious and nonreligious

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Judgments of Sexually Active Men and Women, by Religious and Nonreligious Men and Women

Target	Men				Women			
	Religious		Nonreligious		Religious		Nonreligious	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Attractive to the opposite sex in general</i>								
Women	3.29	1.14	3.39	0.98	3.05	1.11	3.12	1.00
Men	3.29	1.14	3.35	1.02	3.10	1.19	3.24	1.00
<i>Generally popular among both sexes</i>								
Women	2.36	1.19	2.72	1.06	2.36	1.08	2.50	1.03
Men	2.67	1.27	2.79	1.06	2.46	1.09	2.70	0.98
<i>Irresponsible</i>								
Women	2.84	1.41	2.65	1.19	3.20	1.20	2.50	1.16
Men	2.73	1.47	2.46	1.16	3.16	1.15	2.46	1.16
<i>Lacking in self-respect</i>								
Women	2.41	1.37	2.53	1.40	3.06	1.36	2.59	1.35
Men	2.27	1.42	2.24	1.25	2.73	1.30	2.23	1.23

women, $F_s(1, 639) = 0.14$ and 0.21 , *ns*, respectively. None of the four groups differed in their perceptions of the popularity of men who changed their partners a number of times during the year, $F_s(1, 639) = 1.75, 0.70, 2.45, 1.55$, *ns*, respectively.

The perceived popularity of sexually active targets was also significantly affected by the gender of the target in the responses of the religious men, $F(1, 639) = 7.91$, $p < .01$, and the nonreligious women, $F(1, 639) = 27.46$, $p < .001$. For both of these groups, sexually active women were considered less popular than sexually active men. In sum, the findings on evaluatively positive dimensions do not provide evidence of a double standard in perceptions of men's and women's sexual activity or of gender differences in those perceptions. The only difference in the perceptions of sexually active men compared with sexually active women as a function of the respondents' religiosity was confined to the popularity dimension and to male respondents.

For the evaluatively negative dimension "irresponsible," a significant main effect was found for target gender, $F(1, 648) = 6.59$, $p < .01$, reflecting the perception that women who frequently change their sexual partners are more irre-

sponsible than men who engage in the same behavior. Neither religiosity nor respondent gender influenced this differential assessment, $F_s(1, 648) = 0.15$ and 2.42 , *ns*, respectively. Religiosity and gender produced a statistically significant interaction, $F(1, 648) = 3.74$, $p < .05$. Tests on simple main effects showed that the religious women considered targets more irresponsible than the religious men did, $F(1, 648) = 6.70$, $p < .01$, whereas the nonreligious men and women did not differ on this dimension, $F(1, 648) = 1.03$, *ns*. Consistent with the prediction that religiosity would contribute to the double standard, the religious men and religious women attributed greater irresponsibility to targets than their nonreligious counterparts did, $F_s(1, 648) = 5.12$ and 19.88 , $p_s < .05$, respectively.

The pattern of results found for judgments concerning lack of self-respect among sexually active men and women was similar to that characterizing attributions of irresponsibility. Greater lack of self-respect was attributed to women who change their sexual partners a number of times during the year than to men who change their partners, $F(1, 643) = 28.17$, $p < .001$. Target gender did not interact with religiosity or respondent gender, $F_s(1, 643) = 0.72$ and 1.50 , *ns*, respectively. Again, religiosity had greater influence on the female respondents' judgments than on the males' judgments. The religious women perceived greater lack of self-respect among targets than the religious men did, $F(1, 643) = 7.48$, $p < .01$, whereas the nonreligious men and women did not differ in their judgments, $F(1, 643) = 0.01$, *ns*. The "lacking in self-respect" dimension showed no discernible differences in the judgments made by the religious and nonreligious men, $F(1, 643) = 1.19$, *ns*, although a difference between religious and nonreligious women was found in the predicted direction, $F(1, 643) = 5.09$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Sprecher et al., 1987), in the present study we found evidence of the double standard. Even among a sample of young people in the late 1980s, different sexual standards continued to operate for men and women. Respondents of both sexes expected women to have fewer sexual partners at age 20 than they expected for men. This finding suggests that the number of partners considered normative for men and for women is perceived as being different. Changing one's partner frequently might therefore be seen to be more norm-violating for women than for men. Consistent with this interpretation, in the present study, women who changed their sexual partners a number of times during the year were perceived as more irresponsible and more lacking in self-respect than their male counterparts.

The positively phrased items "attractive to the opposite sex in general" and "generally popular among both sexes," however, did not produce differential assessments of men's and women's sexual behavior. This finding is particularly significant in the light of evidence suggesting that negative information is more diagnostic than positive information and is given more weight in impression for-

mation (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), underscoring the subtlety of social judgments in this area (Itzen, 1986).

No evidence of gender differences in endorsement of the double standard was found. Female respondents did not have different expectations of the relative numbers of partners of men and women and did not evaluate sexually active women more negatively than male respondents did. These results are consistent with Oliver and Hyde's (1993) findings that gender differences in the double standard diminished from 1966 to 1977 and were smaller among younger samples. Unfortunately, from the present data we cannot determine which of these factors—historical changes in cultural standards or respondent age—were important in determining our results. Further research with samples of both younger and older people is needed to clarify this point.

Although there were no gender differences in endorsement of the double standard, Oliver and Hyde's (1993) finding that men are more permissive than women received some support in the present study. Men's estimates of the number of sexual partners of both male and female targets were greater than the estimates given by women. Similarly, the only gender differences in evaluative judgments of sexual activity showed that men perceived targets as more sexually attractive than women.

Only moderate support was found for the hypothesis that religiosity contributes to the double standard (Flanagan, 1975). Religiosity was not associated with estimates of sexual partners or with judgments of sexually active targets on evaluatively positive dimensions. However, the religious men and women were more likely to characterize sexually active women as irresponsible than were their nonreligious counterparts.

Two possible explanations might be offered for this weak association between religiosity and the double standard. First, although researchers of the psychology of religion (e.g., Farley, 1976; Flanagan, 1975) have asserted that, in Christian theology, female sexuality is regarded more negatively than male sexuality, it is uncertain how strongly this view is actually communicated to congregations or that religious individuals perceive the Christian view of sexuality in this way. A second explanation is that religious respondents in the present study focused on the level of sexual activity of the targets and did not differentiate between the sexual activity of men and women. Previous research has demonstrated that people may not make distinctions within categories that are perceived as undesirable (see Abrams, Jackson, & St. Claire, 1990). If this explanation is correct, then a more sophisticated design using a greater range of sexual behaviors might tap the influence of religiosity in this area.

One explanation of the gender differences in endorsement of the double standard obtained in previous research examined here was that religiosity has greater influence on women's judgments than on similar judgments made by men. The results showed that the religious women perceived sexually active targets of both sexes as more irresponsible and lacking in self-respect than the reli-

gious men did, whereas the nonreligious men and women did not differ in their judgments on these dimensions.

These findings suggest that religiosity affects women's sexual standards regarding both sexes to a greater extent than it affects men's sexual standards, but that religiosity does not contribute to greater endorsement of the double standard among women. These findings confirm previous research showing that religiosity contributes to gender differences in permissiveness (e.g., Libby et al., 1978) and are consistent with social-role theory and sexual-script theory explanations of gender differences in sexuality (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). One implication of these results is that greater attention should be paid in future research to the effects of religiosity on gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors (Sheeran et al., 1993).

Clearly, in the era of AIDS, the private and public meanings of sexual activity are undergoing considerable reappraisal. It is important, in the context of this reappraisal, for researchers to identify those variables that support a double standard for male and female sexual activity and design educational interventions to reduce this discrimination. Such research would be a valuable contribution to a goal of equality of sexual pleasure in heterosexual intercourse (Crawford, Kippax, & Waldby, 1993). Such knowledge also would have practical benefits for pregnancy prevention and AIDS-risk reduction efforts, because research has shown that different sexual norms for men and women militate against contraceptive and safer sex practices among women (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1990; Richardson, 1990).

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