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# Gender Differences in Sexuality: Perceptions, Myths, and Realities

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*Couples and family counselors may be faced with cases of sexual and relationship difficulties that are caused, or at least exacerbated, by client perceptions and beliefs as to how men and women differ with regard to sexuality. Some such perceptions and beliefs may be consistent with findings from empirical research, whereas others may be based on cultural myths. This article briefly addresses one of the most prevalent and potentially harmful such myths in our culture: Men and women differ in their respective sexual peaks. The article concludes by describing a way clients might be presented with data on gender differences in sexuality that leads to a greater appreciation for the diversity within each gender as well as between the genders.*

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Certainly there are some marked male-female differences with regard to sexuality, and everyone seems to know that. Simply ask people how men and women differ when it comes to sex and folks readily provide their assessment. Clients in therapy also hold beliefs regarding how men and women differ sexually, and examining those beliefs can be an important part of therapy when the problem under consideration is sexual. Why? Because what we believe about males and females influences what we expect of ourselves and our partners. To the extent that those perceptions and beliefs do not match reality, there is the risk of disappointment, hurt, and conflict.

Suppose the members of a male-female couple expect that men desire sex more than do women (a common belief in our culture). How might each member of the couple react to the realization that in their case the male is less interested in sex than is the female? Of course, the answer to that question depends on a variety of factors, including whether it has always been that way within their relationship. However, underlying beliefs about male-female differences in sexuality may lead to a conclusion that something is wrong with the male (too little interest in sex), the female (too much interest in sex), or the couple (he no longer finds her attractive or is cheating on her).

Examining couples' perceptions and beliefs about male-female differences in sexuality may be fruitful for understanding their current sexual difficulties. However, examination of such beliefs begs the question as to whether particular beliefs are myths or are based in reality. Also, for those client perceptions and beliefs that are congruent with findings from sound empirical research, there is the potential problem of clients having an exaggerated view of how different men and women are (we might refer to this as the "men are from Mars, women are from Venus" myth). This article briefly discusses one of the most common myths we hold in our culture regarding male-female differences in sexuality. The article concludes by discussing a way that male-female differences in sexuality might be presented so as to keep such differences in context.

## THE MYTH OF SEXUAL PEAKS

It seems that everyone has heard the following truism: Men reach their sexual peak in their late teens (roughly age 18?) whereas women reach their sexual peak in their 30s (or older?). I have witnessed this knowledge claim being hauled out to explain everything from a particular woman's sexual interest in a younger man to women's general sexual dissatisfaction within marriage to parents' concern over the teenage boy their daughter is dating. This knowledge claim implies some inherent or biological difference between the sexes such that men's libido, or sex drive, has cooled by the time their female peers' libido is revving up and reaching its highest point. In reality, however, there is no evidence for such a biological sex difference (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997).

So, how did this myth get started? The notion of men's and women's sexual peaks derives from data Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) collected a half century ago. These researchers tabulated the total number of self-reported "sexual outlets" for each respondent per year—that is, the total number of orgasms or ejaculations each individual

experienced through any means (e.g., masturbation, oral stimulation, vaginal or anal intercourse, erotic dreams). When these researchers graphed the total number of sexual outlets as a function of the age of the respondent, the line on the graph peaked (was highest) for men among those respondents who were in their late teens. For women, the graph peaked among those who were in their 30s.

It appears that the best explanation for this apparent sex difference has much more to do with what it meant to be a male or female raised in the United States during the early part of the 20th century than it does any physiological, hormonal, or anatomical sex difference. That is, the apparent difference in men's versus women's timing of the frequency of sexual outlets was probably the result of greater social prohibitions placed on women compared with men with regard to being a "sexual" person, stimulating one's own genitals, and having sexual relationships other than within marriage (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997). Much more recent data indicate that the frequency of sexual activity declines over the life span for both men and women, and men and women report very similar levels of sexual activity within each age group (Jasso, 1985; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Also, note that the original graphs on which the knowledge claim was based were constructed to summarize data on a large group of people surveyed at one point in time; they did not represent the life course or changes over time for any particular research participant. So the data peaks did not necessarily correspond to peaks in sexual interest within any individual's life.

Why is perpetuation of this myth harmful? It implies that through a cruel twist of biology, men and women are destined to be sexually frustrated, as each gender is sexually primed at different points in the life cycle. When any individual couple experiences such a discrepancy in sex drive, the myth of gender differences in sexual peaks could be hauled out to explain it, thereby curtailing further consideration of the dynamics within that particular relationship. Taken to an extreme, belief in the myth could be used to justify sexual coercion among young men and extramarital affairs among 30-something or 40-something women.

Myths are most likely to be perpetuated when they seem to fit with experience, which may explain the persistence of this myth. Why does the myth of gender differences in sexual peaks seem to fit reality in so many cases? The answer may have to do with another, more realistic set of gender differences. First, parents, educators, and others are frequently more concerned about controlling the sexuality of teenage girls than they are of stifling the sexuality of teenage boys. Indeed, the traditional double standard is reflective of the greater attempted control of female sexuality compared with male sexuality. Perhaps it is not surprising that teen boys are more desirous of sexual activity, especially casual sexual activity with a variety of partners, than are teen girls (Chara & Kuennen, 1994; Taris & Semin, 1997). Then there is the scar-

city principle (Cialdini, 1993). This robust psychological principle states that when our access to something is limited, that thing becomes even more attractive to us. For teen boys, the relative scarcity of willing sexual partners makes sexual activity even more enticing.

Why would the tables turn by the time couples are in their 30s and 40s? Again there may be another gender difference at work. It appears that compared with women, men are more likely to objectify sexual partners, focusing on the partner's physical appearance as a sexual object (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is probably this dynamic that explains why women's weight gain in marriage results in decreased sexual interest on the part of her husband, whereas men's weight gain appears unrelated to women's sexual interest in their husbands (Margolin & White, 1987). Also, men seem to be more sexually stimulated by variety with regard to different sexual partners, whereas women seem to be more aroused by variety with regard to different experiences with their steady sexual partner (Kelley & Musialowski, 1986). Add to this the phenomenon of some men viewing their partners as less "sexy" after motherhood, a phenomenon women apparently do not experience with regard to their mate's new fatherhood.

What all of this means is that by the time a couple has been married for several years, the male may be much less interested in his partner sexually compared with the early days of the marriage. In contrast, the woman's sexual interest may not have waned to the same extent, and she may even be more comfortable with her body image compared to young adulthood (Heatherton, Mahamedi, Striepe, Field, & Keel, 1997). She may be ready to seek new sexual adventures with her steady mate at a time when his sexual interest in her is at an all-time low (for the reasons described above). To the extent that these phenomena coalesce during the woman's 30s or 40s, we have apparent support for the myth of the gender difference in sexual peaks. It is important to note, however, that such a gender difference in biological sexual peaks (if it existed) cannot be rectified, but all of the other phenomena described here are open to intervention.

### THE RESEARCH SAYS . . .

There is, of course, a body of empirical research on gender differences in sexuality, including such topics as sexual experience (Lauman et al., 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993), characteristics in an ideal sexual partner (McGuirl & Wiederman, 2000), and beliefs about the causes of male and female sexual desire (Regan & Berscheid, 1995). In several instances, researchers have found inaccuracies or distortions in men's and women's perceptions of the sexuality of the other gender. For example, McGuirl and Wiederman found that college women tended to underestimate college men's desire for a sexual partner who is open to discussing sex and clearly communicating desires. College women overestimated the extent to which college men desired partners who paid compliments

during sex, were easily sexually aroused, and viewed sexually explicit media. In contrast, college men overestimated the extent to which college women desired a sexual partner who was physically attractive and could delay ejaculation.

Clients may encounter research findings on sexuality and gender, typically as covered in popular media such as magazines, and incorporate these findings into their perceptions and beliefs about gender differences in sexuality. A potential problem is that people tend to hear statements such as "Men were more this way and women were more this way" as indicating that all men, most men, or the typical man is a certain way whereas all women, most women, or the typical woman is a certain other way. Of course, the gender differences reported were based on statistically significant differences between men and women, which does not tell us anything about the size or magnitude of those differences (Wiederman, 2001). A statistically significant difference simply indicates that it is unlikely (although not impossible) that given the difference the researcher found in this particular sample, in reality there is absolutely no difference between men and women in the larger population. However, the words *statistically significant* rarely, if ever, appear in popular media presentations of research findings, and I suspect that the public would interpret those words as indicating a large or important difference even if such a phrase was included.

Another common misinterpretation of findings is that the average reported by men and women represents what the average, or typical, man or woman experiences. Averages, however, are based on addition and division with data for the entire sample, so it is quite possible that no individual in the entire sample experienced what turned out to be the average for the group. So is there something that can be done to avoid potential misunderstandings regarding research findings on gender differences in sexuality?

One potential solution is to educate clients for whom these perceptions and beliefs are problematic and to do so by presenting research findings in a way that makes more intuitive sense. For example, some researchers have called for use of a "common language effect size statistic" (McGraw & Wong, 1992). Through a few computations, research findings on gender differences in sexuality can be expressed as the likelihood that a man in any given male-female pairing would hold the greater level of experience or attitude or whatever. In other words, the question is: If a male and female were randomly and repeatedly selected from the population, in what proportion of these pairings would the man (or the woman) hold the greater "score" or level of experience? For example, consider experience with masturbation, which is the one aspect of sexual behavior that appears to display the largest gender difference (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). In 75% of these theoretical pairings, the male would indicate having had greater experience compared with the female (based on calculations from data supplied by Oliver & Hyde).

**TABLE 1**  
**Patterns of Male and Female Preferences**  
**for Certain Sexual Activities**

Sexual Activity	Man Yes, Woman No (%)	Woman Yes, Man No (%)	Both No (%)	Both Yes (%)
Vaginal intercourse	19	12	4	64
Giving oral sex	28	11	56	6
Receiving oral sex	32	16	39	13
Watching partner undress	35	14	38	13

NOTE: Data are based on results from the nationally representative sample of adults reported on by Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels (1994). The percentages represent respondents who reported finding that particular sexual activity "very appealing," and the degree of match or mismatch is based on the assumption of random pairings of males and females. Percentages within each row may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Along these same lines, it is possible to compute the proportion of times males and females would agree on some sexual experience, attitude, or preference, assuming they were randomly paired. For example, based on nationally representative data from Laumann et al. (1994), in 37% of male-female pairings the man masturbated during the previous year whereas the woman did not. In 15% of pairings the woman masturbated whereas the man did not. In 21% of pairings neither person masturbated, and in the remaining 27% of pairings both the man and woman masturbated. Table 1 shows the pattern of preferences for certain sexual activities as a function of gender and the degree of expected agreement and disagreement if men and women were randomly paired.

Note that in the majority of cases there would be agreement, but when there is not, it is more likely that the male would prefer the activity whereas the female would not. However, it is clear that there would also be some instances in which the woman would prefer the activity whereas the man would not. Of course, men and women are not randomly paired to form lasting relationships, and there is likely to be greater similarity among actual couples because they select partners who are more likely to share sexual values and preferences. Still, sharing information such as Table 1 with particular clients may help them understand the degree of variation that exists within as well as between the genders, thereby dissuading them of the belief that men are a certain way whereas women are a different way.

## CONCLUSION

Client perceptions and beliefs about gender differences in sexuality are but one potential aspect of sexual and relationship difficulties that may need to be addressed. Still, it may be an important aspect in certain cases, whereby a therapist needs to confront harmful myths, educate as to potentially

accurate gender differences, and provide a context in which clients can appreciate that there is a great deal of diversity within each gender as well as between the genders. In an era in which clients are bombarded with media messages and men are frequently seen as “from Mars” and women “from Venus,” tackling overly simplistic generalizations regarding male-female differences in sexuality may be more relevant than ever.

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