

Who is only about that thing?

Assessing gender differences in promiscuity

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify whether there is a difference between men and woman regarding their own promiscuity and the evaluation of the promiscuity of others. We investigate how socially accepted promiscuous behavior is amongst men and woman and to what extent they are willing to display promiscuous behavior. We conducted a questionnaire-based cross sectional study on Dutch UvA Students, aged 17 to 23. Results show that only 6 propositions demonstrated a clear gender difference. Men, more often than woman, found promiscuous behavior as something to be proud of, but judged affairs more severely. The opinions of men and woman differed little regarding “uncommitted sex” and neither men nor woman thought negatively of people who are know to have many sexual partners within a short period of time.

Who is only about that thing?

Investigating gender differences in promiscuity

There is a large body of scientific literature on the existence of several significant gender differences in human sexuality, or human mating strategies (Peplau, 2003). Surbey and Conohan (2000) found that men express a greater willingness than women to engage in sexual intercourse, regardless of the mate's quality or whether the intercourse will lead to a relationship or not. The willingness to engage in sexual intercourse increases for both men and women when a long-term relationship might be the result, as opposed to a short-term relationship, yet the increase is more significant among women (Surbey & Conohan, 2000). Furthermore, men express a higher level of sexual desire, and experience sexual desire more often than women do (Regan & Atkins, 2007). Men show more interest in sex than women do, and also have a stronger sex drive (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001).

It has been argued that these gender differences are displays of a culture in which men and women are encouraged to behave in a certain manner, a view consistent with feminist ideas on the nature of gender and of society. It does not explain, however, why these gender roles are inherent to so many different cultures. In fact, the International Sexuality Description Project found that gender differences in terms of sexual restriction were the same in all 48 nations where the research had been conducted (Schmitt, 2005).

Evolutionary psychology views the different mating strategies as adaptations, and explains these adaptations by examining the potential offspring production of both of the genders (Clutton-Brock and Vincent, 1991). Women are able to bear only one child at a time, whereas men can just 'fire

away', and produce more offspring over the same period. Furthermore, women produce far less gametes than men. This means that women, or more specifically, a woman's genes, have more to lose by not choosing a mate critically, and can gain very little by having many mates (Clutton-Brock and Vincent, 1991).

The fact that dissimilarities in sexuality are pan-cultural does not count as evidence for the evolutionary view, but it is indeed highly consistent with this view (Schmitt, 2005). We will seek further confirmation of the prevalence of gender differences in sexuality within all cultures. Our research is aimed at finding whether there is a difference between men and women regarding promiscuity and the evaluation of the promiscuity of others, among Dutch students in Amsterdam.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This was a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted at different campus locations of the Universiteit van Amsterdam. Data were collected throughout the first week of November 2010.

Study Population

The population addressed were Dutch students enrolled at the UVA, between 17 and 23 years of age. Participants were regarded as Dutch when they held a Dutch passport.

Data Collection

To collect data we used a questionnaire (App. 1) constituted of 24 propositions in two sections, as well as fields for age and gender. The first section encompassed 18 propositions regarding three distinct categories of sexual behavior.¹ These each included both affirmative and negative propositions. For answers we used a bounded continuous scale of 5 levels, ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement, and including a “no opinion” option. The second section asked participants to read a short fictional story about an encounter between a man and a woman. Students were subsequently asked to rate the probability of a set of propositions referring to the story. The scale we delineated was again a bounded continuous scale of 6 levels ranging from “very likely” to “very unlikely”, without a “no opinion” option.

We approached students at different campuses of the UVA, asking them to fill out the questionnaire and collecting the answers after completion.

Different campuses were chosen to include faculties from the sciences, social sciences and humanities.

We aimed at equal inclusion of male and female participants.

Data analysis

We applied a chi-square test (Baldi & Moore, 2009) in order to find whether there are differences in the answer patterns of male and female participant, for each individual question. For answers where the chi-squared test showed a significant difference between men and woman at the 5% level,

1 1. Having uncommitted sex with someone (without being in a relationship with that person, or expecting to have a relationship with the person later);

2. Having many different sexual relationships within a short time;

3. Having several sexual relationships simultaneously.

we used a detailed analysis of median and mean in order to identify a general trend in the differences.

Results

Answers were received from 56 individuals, 31 of which were woman and 25 were men (App. 2).

The chi-square test showed a significant difference between men and woman in 6 questions, all of which were in the first section of the questionnaire². The remaining distributions had insignificant P-values that ranged from 0.0624 to 0.8741. Overall the average P-value was 0.3572, thus indicating that there was no significant difference (App. 3).

Although the questions that were found to show a significant difference were unevenly distributed across the for parts of the test, there was no clear pattern which would indicate that one of the parts had a stronger distribution difference between male and female.³

When comparing the medians for male and female of the 6 questions found to be significantly different in the two genders, no clear trend could be observed. In both the negative and affirmative propositions, woman tended more toward agreement in 2 out of 3 cases.

Discussion

Conclusions

2 Questions F, I, K, M, O and Q in the questionnaire.

3 The average p-values of the 4 parts were: 0.36; 0.3; 0.38 and 0.39.

Men and women had significantly different opinions on only six of the 18 propositions in our research. This could be due to sampling, but might also truly reflect the attitude at the University of Amsterdam. Although our propositions were largely adapted versions of propositions used in previous research, our questionnaire was still not an established means of measurement. Assuming that the questionnaire was a good way to measure the opinions of the participants, we can draw several conclusions:

1. The views of men and women differ little on the subject of having uncommitted sex (uncommitted sex has been defined earlier in this report).
2. Men more often than women evaluated promiscuous behavior as something to be proud of, and a type of behavior to strive for. Contrary to women, they did not care about what others might think of their promiscuous behavior.
3. Neither men, nor women think negatively of other people who are known to have many sexual contacts within a short time.
4. Although both men and women believe having an affair is wrong, men judge more severely than women do.

Shortcomings

The assumption that our questionnaire was without fault, is not one that can be easily defended, as will be explained in the following.

Our choice for hypothetical propositions as opposed to questions regarding the private life of the subject was motivated by our research into established literature on the topic, in which this method was observed, as well

as our own expectations on the honesty of the response. It was our belief that by eliminating questions and propositions that concerned any personal experience, respondents would feel less inhibited to state their true opinions and feelings on what could be viewed as a sensitive subject. However, this approach can also be criticized, for although we have measured the subjects' opinions on the matter, we have no evidence on the correlation between these opinions and the actual behavior of the subjects. Researchers Surbey and Conohan (2000), on the other hand, contend this view and suggest that behavior is influenced by many external factors, which makes the measurement of behavior less valuable, assuming honest answers were given in the first place. We believe both views can be defended, and that a challenge for further research lies in obtaining data on behavior concerning human mating strategies.

Other critique regarding the questionnaire could include that the propositions are too abstract. The first proposition on the questionnaire "Relationships do not have to be monogamous", for instance, does not address the question whether the subject would find such a relationship desirable for him- or herself to be in, but whether such a relationship is permissible in general. A better understanding of the participants' views might have been obtained by asking about the intentions or expectations of the participants, regarding sexual contacts in the future. However, it might still be interesting to compare the views of men and women on an abstract moral concept, and see whether they would differ in their judgments.

There was no distinction made in the questions on whether they concerned one's personal behavior or the behavior of others, until after the results had been acquired. Consequently, the questionnaire included both

types of questions, but not the same amount for each type. This aspect of our research appeared to be especially problematic in the case of having several relationships simultaneously, as evolutionary psychology shows that men would judge their own affairs in a less severe manner than they would judge the affair of their partners, because of the uncertainty of paternity in the latter case. We did not consider this knowledge when we constituted our questionnaire. Further research could aim at establishing on whether the evaluation of one's own behavior differs from the evaluation of the behavior of others, and whether the latter would be determined by the gender of the agent.

We recognize these shortcomings in our research, but not because our results are not what we expected them to be. The results might very well be true in the case of our population, and our research might be instigation for further research to shed light on this issue.

References

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Appendix

App. 1: The full questionnaire used in this survey can be retrieved online :

<http://www.simoncolumbus.com/wp->

[content/2010/11/Onderzoek_naar_normen_binnen_de_seksualiteit.pdf](http://www.simoncolumbus.com/wp-content/2010/11/Onderzoek_naar_normen_binnen_de_seksualiteit.pdf)

App. 2: Observed values for the distribution of answers on the questionnaire, for men and women.

Observed Values

Question	Male						25	Total	Female						31	Total	Sum
	1	2	3	4	5	6			1	2	3	4	5	6			
Section 1																	
A	4	7	4	9	1		25	6	8	5	7	5		31	56		
B		5		14	6		25		7	2	17	5		31	56		
C	6	8	2	8	1		25	3	6	4	12	6		31	56		
D	3	10	8	2	2		25	4	10	6	7	4		31	56		
E	7	12	4	2			25	12	9	2	3	5		31	56		
F		4	8	11	1		24		13	1	13	4		31	55		
G	2	6	4	9	4		25	2	5	8	12	4		31	56		
H	6	12	4	3			25	5	12	8	6			31	56		
I	1	8	10	6			25	9	13	3	2	4		31	56		
J	2	6	6	10	1		25		8	7	7	9		31	56		
K	1	2	5	13	4		25		2	1	12	16		31	56		
L	4	8	3	7	3		25	3	18	6	1	3		31	56		
M	2	9	5	9			25		2	10	13	6		31	56		
N		4	5	11	5		25	1	9	5	12	4		31	56		
O	3	11	8	3			25	17	13	1				31	56		
P		1	3	15	6		25		2	7	15	7		31	56		
Q	1	10	10	4			25	10	15	5	1			31	56		
R	5	11	2	7			25	3	15	2	10	1		31	56		
Section 2																	
A	1	9	13		1	1	25	2	12	12	2	2		30	55		
B	3	10	9	2	1		25		12	12	4	2		30	55		
C	1	4	10	6	4		25		8	10	9	3		30	55		
D	1	7	16	1			25	1	5	17	4	3		30	55		
E	3	2	10	7	3		25		6	11	10	3		30	55		
F	1	11	11		1	1	25	3	12	10	3	2		30	55		

App. 3: Chi-square statistic for the values given in App. 1. Questions (A-R)

colored in red refer to promiscuity, those colored in green refer to demure.

Fields with background color red in the “P” column indicate a significant

difference between men's and women's answer at the 5% level.

Chi-Square Statistics

Question	Male						Total	Female						Total	X ²	P
	1	2	3	4	5	6		1	2	3	4	5	6			
Having uncommitted sex with someone																0.36391
A	0.048	0.014	0.000	0.483	1.052		1.59689	0.039	0.011	0.000	0.389	0.848		1.28781	2.88470	0.57730
B	0	0.024	0.893	0.002	0.242		1.16016	DIV/0!	0.019	0.720	0.002	0.195		0.93561	2.09577	0.71815
C	0.978	0.49	0.172	0.097	1.445		3.18133	0.789	0.395	0.139	0.078	1.165		2.56559	5.74692	0.21886
D	0.005	0.129	0.49	1.013	0.172		1.80889	0.004	0.104	0.395	0.817	0.139		1.45878	3.26767	0.51407
E	0.259	0.735	0.652	0.024	2.232		3.90218	0.209	0.593	0.526	0.019	1.800		3.14692	7.04909	0.13332
F	0	1.575	4.224	0.027	0.640		6.46531	DIV/0!	1.219	3.270	0.021	0.496		5.00540	11.4707	0.02175
Having several sexual relationships simultaneously																0.30213
G	0.026	0.242	0.344	0.015	0.051		0.67758	0.021	0.195	0.277	0.012	0.041		0.54643	1.22401	0.87413
H	0.242	0.154	0.344	0.258	0		0.99758	0.195	0.124	0.277	0.208	DIV/0!		0.80450	1.80207	0.77210
I	2.688	0.202	3.034	1.651	1.786		9.36144	2.168	0.163	2.447	1.332	1.440		7.54955	16.9110	0.00201
J	1.373	0.01	0.007	0.766	2.688		4.84355	1.107	0.008	0.005	0.618	2.168		3.90609	8.74963	0.06767
K	0.686	0.026	2.012	0.303	2.721		5.74773	0.554	0.021	1.623	0.244	2.194		4.63527	10.3830	0.03445
L	0.245	1.121	0.258	3.291	0.039		4.95385	0.198	0.904	0.208	2.654	0.031		3.99504	8.94888	0.06239
Having many different sexual relationships within a short time																0.37669
M	1.373	3.405	0.430	0.069	2.679		7.95515	1.107	2.746	0.347	0.055	2.160		6.41544	14.3706	0.00620
N	0.446	0.560	0.064	0.052	0.240		1.36349	0.360	0.452	0.052	0.042	0.194		1.09959	2.46308	0.65126
O	3.937	0.008	3.947	2.059	0		9.95022	3.175	0.006	3.183	1.661	DIV/0!		8.02437	17.9746	0.00125
P	0	0.086	0.480	0.193	0.007		0.76574	DIV/0!	0.069	0.387	0.156	0.005		0.61754	1.38328	0.84710
Q	3.114	0.121	1.630	1.400	0		6.26497	2.512	0.097	1.314	1.129	DIV/0!		5.05239	11.3174	0.02322
R	0.571	0.032	0.026	0.046	0.446		1.12109	0.461	0.026	0.021	0.037	0.360		0.90410	2.02519	0.73113
Section 2																0.38624
A	0.097	0.031	0.236	0.909	0.097	0.655	2.02438	0.081	0.026	0.196	0.758	0.081	0.545	1.68698	3.71137	0.44648
B	1.964	0	0.031	0.194	0.097	DIV/0!	2.28571	1.636	0	0.026	0.162	0.081	DIV/0!	1.90476	4.19048	0.38084
C	0.655	0.388	0.091	0.098	0.210	DIV/0!	1.44190	0.545	0.323	0.076	0.082	0.175	DIV/0!	1.20159	2.64349	0.61914
D	0.009	0.438	0.067	0.713	1.364	DIV/0!	2.59	0.008	0.365	0.056	0.594	1.136	DIV/0!	2.15833	4.74833	0.31411
E	1.964	0.736	0.022	0.068	0.027	DIV/0!	2.81737	1.636	0.614	0.018	0.057	0.023	DIV/0!	2.34781	5.16517	0.27077
F	0.368	0.028	0.222	1.364	0.097	0.655	2.73344	0.307	0.024	0.185	1.136	0.081	0.545	2.27786	5.01130	0.28614