

## THE SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD: HAS IT DISAPPEARED?

A sexual double standard exists when the sexual behaviours of men and women are judged by different societal expectations and standards (Crawford & Popp, 2003). It is seen, for example, in the belief that it's OK for men but not for women to have lots of sexual experience before settling down in a long-term relationship. When sexually experienced women are characterized as "sluts", while men with similar sexual experience are considered to be "studs" or "players", we can also see a sexual double standard at work.

They (boys) have a one-night stand and nothing happens. We're more in fear of getting labeled like a tart or a slut or something. Whereas the boys if they have it they don't get labeled...and we're ashamed of it if we do. (Female, cited in Crawford & Popp, p. 21).

### EARLY RESEARCH ON THE SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD

Researchers have studied the existence of a sexual double standard for heterosexual men and women since the 1960s. Sociologist Ira Reiss developed the Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale which consisted of a series of statements about sexual involvement before marriage. For example, as shown in the box below, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement to "full sexual relations" (e.g., sexual intercourse) for men and then for women.

I believe that full sexual relations are acceptable for the male/female before marriage:

- a) When he/she is engaged to be married
- b) When he/she is in love
- c) When he/she feels strong affection for his/her partner
- d) Even if he/she does not feel particularly affectionate toward his/her partner

Source: Adapted from Reiss, I., in Davis, C.M. et al. (Eds.). (1998).

When the scale was first used on groups of male and female university students in the early 1960s, the results showed that 42% did not support the idea of sex before marriage for either men or women under any circumstances (Reiss, 1964 cited in Crawford & Popp, 2003). However, among those who did accept premarital sexual intercourse, the majority agreed that it was acceptable for males but not for females (Reiss, 1964 cited in Kreager & Staff, 2009).

As more women entered the paid workforce, attitudes towards sexuality became more liberal, and access to contraception became more widespread, it was assumed that the sexual double standard would gradually disappear. But has that happened? Let's check the research.

### RECENT RESEARCH: QUANTITATIVE VS. QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Many studies that attempt to measure the prevalence of a sexual double standard rely on quantitative data gathered from questionnaires and surveys. Quantitative studies use numbers and statistical analysis to present their findings. In contrast, research based on interviews and discussion groups that focuses on personal insights, experiences and attitudes is known as qualitative research. Quantitative research is more likely to indicate that the sexual double standard is decreasing over time. However, qualitative research often reveals that the sexual double standard is still very much with us. How can we explain these seemingly contradictory conclusions?



Part of the answer is that survey questionnaires ask about general attitudes and hypothetical situations, while face-to-face discussions can bring out more personal attitudes and feelings about sexual experiences. Qualitative studies may use smaller sample sizes, but they tend to represent a broader range of ages, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic status. When individuals talk about their personal experiences, their friends and family, and their communities, they may provide information that cannot always be captured by multiple-choice questionnaires.

## THE INFLUENCE OF SEXUAL EXPERIENCE ON STUDENTS' POPULARITY

Kreager and Staff (2009) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to determine if the popularity of adolescents was affected by their level of sexual experience. This study surveyed over 12,000 adolescents in grades 7 to 12 from across the United States. Students filled out questionnaires that asked about various aspects of their social lives, including the number of sexual partners they had. They were also asked to nominate their five best male and five best female friends from their school. The researchers were able to determine which students were considered the most popular, and what qualities and characteristics were common to these popular individuals.

Popular students tended to be athletic, physically attractive, academically successful and involved in school activities. However, the results also showed that the popularity level of boys increased with their number of sexual partners, while the popularity of girls decreased if they reported the same number of sexual partners. These results suggest that the sexual double-standard is clearly still in place.

There have been similar studies that use both quantitative and qualitative techniques to examine the relationship between peer group popularity and sexual experience. Lyons, Giordano, Manning and Longmore (2010) examined data from a survey asking over 600 American girls to rate how popular they thought they were and their level of self-esteem and also to indicate how many sexual partners they had.

Results showed that neither popularity nor self-esteem was affected by the number of sexual partners reported by the girls. These findings seem to indicate that girls did not experience a sexual double standard. However, when the researchers added a qualitative component to their study the results supported a different conclusion.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: PERSONAL VIEWS ON THE SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD

Lyons et al. (2010) also interviewed a smaller subgroup of young women and asked whether they thought there was a sexual double standard for males and females. Many agreed that a double standard existed, and that men and women were judged by different standards. They noted that while this was unfair, it was also just the way society functioned.

I mean, [girls have] gotten a bad rap ever since Eve took the apple...People can break it down all the way back then. (18 year old female cited in Lyons et al., p. 8)

The interviews also revealed that the young women tended to have friends who shared their attitudes towards sex and relationships. Therefore, they did not feel judged or socially excluded based on their sexual choices. Yet, even among sexually experienced girls there was evidence of a double standard, and some judged girls outside their circle of friends very harshly for sexual behaviour they termed "nasty" or inappropriate.



Shoveller, Johnson, Langille, & Mitchell (2004) interviewed 40 youth (aged 18 to 24) in Amherst, Nova Scotia and Vancouver, British Columbia. All participants noted that the sexual double standard was a well-known fact of their adolescence. Both male and female participants agreed that girls were judged by stricter rules governing their sexual behaviour than were boys. Girls were more likely to be negatively labeled by their peers for the same behaviour for which boys were admired.

Growing up, girls were the only people to get labeled...I mean there were more sexually active guys...but [they weren't] really looked down upon or labeled as much as girls...when there are girls who want to have sex just as much as the guys do, it tends to be a little weird. So they [the girls] get labels put on them and stuff (Male cited in Shoveller et al.).

## WHAT IS THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

The research shows that a sexual double standard still exists. Qualitative studies in particular show how the double standard is perceived and experienced by both males and females. Many individuals recognize that, on a very basic level, the sexual double standard is unfair. However the research also shows that some people feel that they must live with it as an unfortunate fact of life.

Aside from being fundamentally unfair because it does not treat men and women equitably, the sexual double standard has other consequences. The sexual double standard can force both women and men to adopt stereotypical patterns of behaviour that they don't personally feel comfortable with. Ultimately, both men and women suffer when the sexual behaviour of men is judged by one set of rules and the behaviour of women is judged by another.

## REFERENCES

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