

# Gender Differences in Receptivity to Sexual Offers

Russell D. Clark III, PhD  
Elaine Hatfield, PhD

**ABSTRACT.** According to cultural stereotypes, men are more eager for sex than are women; women are more likely to set limits on such activity. In this paper, we review the work of theorists who have argued in favor of this proposition and review the interview and correlational data which support this contention. Finally, we report two experimental tests of this hypothesis.

In these experiments, conducted in 1978 and 1982, male and female confederates of average attractiveness approached potential partners with one of three requests: "Would you go out tonight?" "Will you come over to my apartment?" or "Would you go to bed with me?" The great majority of men were willing to have a sexual liaison with the women who approached them. Women were not. Not one woman agreed to a sexual liaison. Many possible reasons for this marked gender difference were discussed.

These studies were run in 1978 and 1982. It has since become important to track how the threat of AIDS is affecting men and women's willingness to date, come to an apartment, or to engage in casual sexual relations.

## **GENERAL BACKGROUND**

According to cultural stereotypes, men are eager for sexual intercourse; it is women who set limits on such activity (see McCormick, 1979; Hatfield, 1982; and Peplau, 1983). Theorists from a variety of perspectives have agreed with this observation. What

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Dr. Russell Clark is Professor of Psychology at The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1051. Dr. Elaine Hatfield is Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Requests for reprints may be sent to Dr. Clark.

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they disagree about is *why* such gender differences exist. Researchers have collected an abundance of interview and correlational data which provide some support for this contention. No experimental support for this hypothesis exists, however. In this research, we report an experimental test of this proposition.

Let us begin by reviewing existing theory and data.

### ***The Sociobiological Perspective***

Traditionally, biological determinists such as Sigmund Freud argued that biology is destiny and that interest in sexual activities is determined primarily by genes, anatomy, and hormones. Early sociobiologists assumed that men and women are genetically programmed to be differentially interested in sexual experience/restraint (see Hagen, 1979; Kenrick, 1987; Symons, 1979; or Wilson, 1975). Symons (1979) stated that "the comparison of males and females is perhaps the most powerful available means of ordering the diversity of data on human sexuality" (p. 4). His sociobiological argument proceeded as follows: according to evolutionary biology, animals inherit those characteristics which insure that they will transmit as many of their genes to the next generation as possible. It is to both men's and women's advantage to produce as many surviving children as possible. But men and women differ in one critical respect—in order to produce a child, men need only to invest a trivial amount of energy; a single man can conceivably father an almost unlimited number of children. Conversely, a woman can give birth to and raise only a limited number of children; it is to her advantage to insure those few children she does conceive survive. Symons observed: "The enormous sex differences in minimum parental investment and in reproductive opportunities and constraints explain why *Homo Sapiens*, a species with only moderate sex differences in structure, exhibit profound sex differences in psyche" (p. 27).

Among the differences Symons cited are: (1) men desire a variety of sex partners; women do not; (2) for men, "sexual attractiveness" equals "youth." For women, "sexual attractiveness" equals "political and economic power"; (3) men have every reason to actively pursue women (they are genetically programmed to impregnate as

many women as possible. Women have every reason to be "coy.") It takes time to decide if a man is a good genetic risk—is likely to be nurturant, protective and productive. In all societies, women copulate as a service to men, not vice versa.

Recently, socio-biologists and social psychologists have discovered that the process is a bit more complicated than was initially thought. Kurt Freund and his colleagues (1983 and 1986) observe that courtship normally consists of four phases: (a) initial appraisal and location of a potential partner, (b) pretactile interaction (for example, smiling at someone, laughing, flirting, talking), (c) tactile interaction (touching, embracing), and (d) bringing about genital union. A number of authors have found that women have a far more active role in the first three stages of courtship than the early sociobiologists thought. They do far more than serve as "gatekeepers" who stop action (see Gaulier, Travis, & Allgeier, 1986; Moore, 1985; and Perper, 1985). For example, Moore (1985) found that in a singles bar, it is women who initiate interaction. They signal their interest in a variety of ways—by smiling, laughing, tossing their heads, or hiking up their skirts. Sometimes they "parade" (they walk across the room with an exaggerated swing of their hips, stomach held in, head held high, back arched, so their breasts are pushed out). They then "approach"—they go up to men and position themselves within two feet of them. The next move is up to the men. If the men are interested, the two begin to talk. Eventually, however, it is the men who must "formally" initiate sexual relations, especially the first time sexual intercourse occurs. After that, although men generally initiate sexual relations, women are freer to share initiation.

### ***The Cultural-Contingency Perspective***

At the other end of the spectrum are those who argue that sexual behavior is learned (see Bernard, 1973; Byrne & Byrne, 1977; Firestone, 1970; Foucault, 1978; Griffitt & Hatfield, 1984; Rubin, 1973; Tavis & Offir, 1977; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977; or Hatfield & Walster, 1978). According to this model, men and women simply learn the "scripts" that are appropriate for initiating sexual encounters and responding to sexual offers. They simply learn to be as

sexually adventuresome or cautious as their culture expects them to be. Cultural rewards and punishments shape behavior. Thus, if men are more adventuresome than women, it is simply because the culture encourages them to be so.

In the late 1970s, when this study was planned, a number of feminist and Marxist scholars were speculating that the socio-political context might shape societal rewards and punishments. Socio-political pressures might have at least some impact on who is supposed to be sexual/who is forbidden to be, who is punished/who is not for violating sexual rules, and even what kinds of foreplay and sexual positions are considered to be "normal." Since this is a male-dominated society, they continued, perhaps existing sexual norms tend to meet the needs of men. Perhaps it is men who are encouraged to express themselves sexually, women who are punished for doing so. It is the style of intercourse men prefer (e.g., the "missionary" position) that is considered normal; the activities that women prefer (e.g., "cuddling," cunnilingus) that are neglected. No wonder then that men find sex in its common forms more appealing than do women (see Firestone, 1970 and Allgeier & McCormick, 1983). (In the 1980s, of course, the power of "socio-political pressures" pales before the threat of AIDS, which makes sexual behavior equally risky for both men and women. One might predict, then, that from the late 1980s into the 1990s, men and women will become far more conservative about engaging in sexual activity. Thus, gender differences in receptivity to sexual offers may soon disappear.)

Regardless of theorists' debates as to *why* men and women may differ in their enthusiasm for sex versus their tendencies to set limits on sexual activity, there is some evidence suggesting that their observations may be correct—even at the present moment, men and women still seem to be differentially interested in sexual activities. Let us review some of these data.

### ***Gender Differences in Interest in Erotic Literature and Tapes***

Traditionally, erotica has been written for men. The assumption has been that women are not interested in such things. Kinsey (1948

and 1953) found that the women in his sample were considerably less likely than men to have ever been exposed to erotica, and even when both sexes were familiar with such literature, men reported being more aroused by it than did women. For example, 47% of the men reported having been aroused by erotic stories. Only 14% of the women reported similar levels of arousal. Izard and Caplan (1974), too, found that more men than women reported interest in and arousal in response to erotic passages.

Recently, however, researchers have begun to ask both men and women about their feelings *and* to get objective measures of their psychological arousal in response to erotica. (To do this they generally use two instruments: a penile strain-gauge and a photo-plethysmograph.) In such studies, researchers generally find that although men and women often *report* differential interest in erotica, the objective evidence suggests that both are equally aroused. For example, Veitch and Griffitt (1980) found no gender differences in response to literary erotica. In fact, some data suggest that explicit portrayals of sexual activity may evoke equal or greater erotic responsiveness in women than in men. Jakobovits (1965) found that women consistently rated "hard core" erotic stories as more interesting and sexually stimulating than did men. Heiman (1977) found that both men and women judged audiotapes of exclusively "romantic" encounters less arousing than audiotapes describing either romantic *and* erotic or exclusively erotic sexual encounters. Women actually rated the explicit erotic audiotapes as more arousing than did men. Heiman found no sex differences on the physiological measures of sexual arousal.

### ***Gender Differences in Responsiveness to Erotic Films***

Men seem to be more interested in erotica than are women. Kenrick and his colleagues (1980) gave men and women the chance to sign up for an experiment involving erotica. Men were more likely to sign up for such an experiment than were women. Sex-typed women were especially reluctant to participate in such experiments.

Several studies have documented that men may well be more

responsive to erotic films than are women, as well (see, for example, Abelson, 1970; Berger, Gagnon, & Simon, 1970; Byrne & Lamberth, 1970; Griffitt, 1975; Heiman, 1977; Izard & Caplan, 1974; Jakobovits, 1965; Kinsey et al., 1953; Mosher, 1973; Schmidt & Segush, 1970; Steele & Walker, 1974). Typical of these findings are those of Abelson et al. (1970) who found that only 7% of women but 20% of men reported that they become aroused when viewing explicit pictures and stag films.

Hatfield et al. (1978) showed 614 men and women sexually explicit films of males and females masturbating or engaged in homosexual or heterosexual acts. They asked two questions: First, do men and women differ in how easily they become aroused by sexually explicit films? The answer to this first question was "No." The authors measured sexual arousal in two ways: via the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale and via Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale. On both these measures, men's and women's level of arousal was virtually identical. Secondly, they asked whether men and women differ in their perceptions of how arousing the male versus female actors were. Here the answer is "Yes." Both men and women were most sexually aroused by seeing a person of the opposite sex masturbating or having intercourse. They were least aroused by seeing someone of their own sex engaged in these same activities.

### *Gender Differences in Sexual Activity*

Traditionally, theorists have assumed that sex is far more important for men than for women.

Kinsey and his colleagues (1948 and 1953) tried to assess the sexual activity of men compared with women throughout their lives. They asked men and women how often they had an orgasm during a typical week—regardless of whether they achieved it by way of sex dreams, petting, masturbation, sexual intercourse, homosexual encounters, or contacts with animals.

They found that: (1) indeed, men did seem to engage in more sexual activity than women; and (2) men and women had strikingly different sexual histories. At 18, it was usually the men who pushed to have sex. Most men were as sexually expressive at 15 as they

would ever be. In fact, according to Masters and Johnson (1966 and 1970) 25% of men are impotent by age sixty-five and 50% are impotent by age seventy-five. Women's experience was markedly different. Most women are slow to begin sexual activity. At 15, most women are quite inactive. Sometime between the ages of 16 and 20, they begin to be more sexually active. Their sexual interest seems to remain high until their late 40s. In commenting on women's sexual histories, Kinsey (1953) observed:

One of the tragedies which appears in a number of the marriages originates in the fact that the male may be most desirous of sexual contact in his early years, while the responses of the females are still underdeveloped and while she is still struggling to free herself from the acquired inhibitions which prevent her from participating freely in the marital activity. But over the years most females become less inhibited and develop an interest in sexual relations, which they may maintain until they are in their fifties or even sixties. But by then the responses of the average male may have dropped so considerably that his interest in coitus, and especially in coitus with a wife who had previously objected to the frequencies of his requests, may have sharply declined. (pp. 353-354)

In Kinsey's day, a double standard existed. Men were allowed, if not encouraged, to get sex whenever and wherever they could. Women were supposed to save themselves for marriage (see Baker, 1974; Ehrmann, 1959; Kaats & Davis, 1970; Reiss, 1967; Schofield, 1965; or Sorenson, 1973). In light of the double standard, it was not surprising that Ehrmann (1959) found that both men and women college students reported that it was the man who was more likely to initiate sex and it was the woman who was more likely to resist sexual advances.

More recent evidence suggests that traditional standards, although changing, are not dead. For example, the most recent data indicate that it is almost always men who initiate a sexual relationship. While research indicates that contemporary college students reject a sexual double standard (Hopkins, 1977; Komarovskiy, 1976; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1976), this new single standard does

not seem to have changed the cultural stereotype of male as sexual initiator and female as limit setter (McCormick, 1979). In a recent study, Peplau et al. (1977) found that, among unmarried students, the woman serves as the "gatekeeper"; she has the power to veto sexual activity. Once the couple begins to have sexual relations, however, the man has more to say about the type and frequency of sexual activity.

There is some compelling evidence that a single standard is emerging with regard to sexual *experience*, however. Following Kinsey, researchers (Ehrmann, 1959; Schofield, 1965; Reiss, 1967; Sorenson, 1972; and DeLameter & MacCorquodale, 1979) interviewed samples of young people about their sexual behavior: Had they ever necked? At what age did they begin? Have they french kissed? fondled their lover's breasts or genitals? had their own genitals fondled? had intercourse? engaged in oral-genital sex? When we compare the data from these studies, we find that, indeed, a sexual revolution *is* occurring. In the early study, men were, in general, far more experienced than were women. By the 1980s, these differences have virtually disappeared. As DeLameter and MacCorquodale (1980) observe:

. . . there are virtually no differences in the incidence of each of the behaviors. Unlike most earlier studies which generally reported lower frequencies of more intimate activities among females, we find that women are as likely as men to have ever engaged in these behaviors. The only exception occurs with coitus, which women . . . are less likely to have experienced. (*Among students*, 75% of the men and 60% of women had had intercourse. *Among non-students*, 79% of men and 72% of women had had intercourse.)

DeLameter and MacCorquodale continue:

Thus, the gender differences in lifetime behavior which were consistently found in studies conducted in the 1950's and 1960's have narrowed considerably. This is also an important finding; it suggests that those models which have emphasized gender as an explanatory variable are no longer valid. (p. 58)

## BACKGROUND OF THIS RESEARCH

In most areas of social psychology, the experimental paradigm has been *the* paradigm. It is only recently that a "crisis in social psychology" occurred, and social psychologists have begun to urge one another to supplement laboratory findings with naturalistic observations of people engaged in complex social interactions. Only in the area of human sexuality has the social-psychological tradition been reversed. Until recently, studies of love and sex were taboo (see Berscheid & Hatfield [Walster], 1978). Until recently, scientists have had to rely almost exclusively on interviews and naturalistic studies for their information. Only recently have researchers begun to conduct laboratory experiments (see Byrne & Byrne, 1977).

This laboratory research has paid off. It has had a dramatic impact on our thinking about human sexuality. For example, in 1953 Kinsey et al. (1953) took it for granted that males and females were very different in their potential to respond to erotic literature, tapes, and films. "So different . . . that they might be considered different species." By 1978, the experimental research, although far from conclusive, had convinced most investigators that men and women were very similar if not identical in their ability to become aroused by erotica (see Hyde, 1979; Byrne & Byrne, 1977).

To date, there have been few, if any, *experimental* studies of men and women caught up in the sexual initiation/rejection process. In real life, the intimacy process is obviously a complex ballet. Officially, the man is supposed to initiate sexual encounters. But how overt can he be? Can he be fairly blunt? Or must he be indirect to be effective (see McCormick, 1979)? Surely, before most men extend a proposition to a woman, they look for some kind of evidence of interest on her part. If, in real life interactions, the man waits until the woman is receptive before issuing an invitation, who is inviting whom? How blunt can the woman be in accepting an invitation? Are most men upset by too much enthusiasm? Would such norm violations lead them to say "No"? Would most men be delighted? Such are the questions that can only be answered by careful experimentation.

We began simply in the following experiment. We asked a straightforward question: *How receptive are men versus women to*

*sexual invitations?* If a reasonably attractive man or woman approached members of the opposite sex and asked them for a date or a sexual encounter, how would men and women respond? We could envision two very different possibilities:

1. *The traditional hypothesis:* Men and women will respond as the sociobiologists, cultural contingency theorists, and social stereotypes predict they should—women wanting love, men wanting sex from a relationship. Men will readily agree to sexual encounters; women will not. Much of the research we have cited in Section 1 provides support for such a hypothesis.

2. *The androgyny hypothesis:* It may be, however, that men and women are not so different as social stereotypes suggest. Again and again, researchers have found that while men and women *expect* the sexes to respond in very different ways, when real men and real women find themselves caught up in naturalistic settings they respond in much the same way (see Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Griffith & Hatfield, 1984). It may be that *both* men and women turn out to be more receptive to sexual invitations than one might expect. (Data such as DeLameter & MacCorquodale's, 1979, might suggest such an outcome.)

Or, both men and women might be far less receptive than one might expect. Traditionally, men are expected to jump at sexual offers. Women are supposed to turn them down. But some investigators have suggested that both men and women might be afraid of casual sex. For example, Hatfield (Walster) et al. (1973), in a study of men's reactions to "easy to get women," found that men are very uneasy about dating an "easy" woman. They saw such encounters as very risky. Such a woman might be easy to get, but hard to get rid of. She might get serious. Perhaps she would be so oversexed or over-affectionate or "hard-up" in public that she would embarrass you. Your buddies might snicker when they saw you together. After all, they would know perfectly well why you were dating her. And, you might get a disease. (The recent epidemics of herpes and AIDS make these concerns especially salient now and into the future. See Baum, 1987.) These were all reservations that men voiced.

In order to secure an answer to our question, we conducted the following experiments.

## METHOD

*Confederates.* Study #1 was conducted in 1978 and Study #2 was conducted in 1982. In both studies, five college women and four college men from an experimental social psychology class served as experimenters. All had volunteered to approach subjects who were alone at five different locations on campus. The confederates were approximately 22 years of age and were neatly dressed in casual attire. The physical attractiveness of *both* the female and male confederates varied from slightly unattractive to moderately attractive. Ratings of the confederates' attractiveness were found to have no effect on the results and thus we will not discuss this variable further.

*Subjects.* In both Study #1 and Study #2, subjects were 48 men and 48 women who were on the campus of Florida State University. Sixteen subjects were randomly assigned to each of the six conditions.

*Procedure.* The confederates stood on one of five college quadrangles, and approached members of the opposite sex, who were total strangers. Only one requestor made a request in each area at any one time. The requestors were instructed to approach only subjects who were attractive enough that they would be willing to actually sleep with them, if given the opportunity (assuming, of course, that they were appropriate on other grounds as well). On a scale of 1 to 9 (1 = "Very unattractive"; 9 = "Very attractive"), female confederates rated the male subjects  $\bar{M} = 7.30$ . Male confederates rated female subjects  $\bar{M} = 7.70$ . (These ratings were not significantly different;  $t < 1.00$ .) The confederates' ratings make it clear that they only selected "moderately" to "very attractive" male and female subjects.

Once a subject was selected, the requestor approached him/her and said: "I have been noticing you around campus. I find you to be very attractive." The confederate then asked subjects one of three questions: "Would you go out with me tonight?" "Would you come over to my apartment tonight?" or "Would you go to bed with me tonight?" Thus, this procedure resulted in a  $2 \times 3$  factorial design [Sex of requestor (2 levels)  $\times$  Type of request (3 levels)].

The requestor carried a notebook which had one of the three re

quests written on a separate page. The type of request was randomly determined for each requestor. After the selection of a subject, each requestor flipped a page in the notebook to see what type of request was to be made.

The requests were made during weekdays to decrease the probability of subjects refusing because they had dates or other social obligations. Subjects were not approached between class periods or during rainy weather.

Subjects were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A  $2 \times 3 \times 2$  multidimensional chi-square analysis was used to analyze the date (Winer, 1971). In Study #1, conducted in 1978, the results indicated that men were more likely to say yes to each type of invitation than were women (65% versus 21%,  $\chi^2(1) = 18.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, as can be clearly seen in Table 1, Sex of requestor/Sex of subject interacted with the Type of invitation,  $\chi^2(2) = 29.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . Whereas, both males and females were willing to go out on a date, it was only the males who agreed to go to the female's apartment and go to bed with her,  $\chi^2(1) = 9.30$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $\chi^2 12.52$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively.

In Study #2, conducted in 1982, we secured results that were

**Table 1: Study #1, 1978**  
Percentage of Compliance With Each Request

| Sex of Requestor | Type of Request |           |     |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----|
|                  | Date            | Apartment | Bed |
| Male             | 56%             | 6%        | 0%  |
| Female           | 50%             | 69%       | 75% |

almost identical with those described above. Once again, men were more likely to respond positively to each type of request than were women (63% versus 17%,  $\chi^2(1) = 21.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, once again, as can be seen in Table 2, Sex of requestor/Sex of subject interacted with the Type of request,  $\chi^2(2) = 23.65$ ,  $p < .001$ . Whereas, both males and females were equally willing to accept a date,  $\chi^2(1) = 0$ , n. s., it was only males who agreed to go to the female's apartment ( $\chi^2(1) = 16.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or to go to bed with her ( $\chi^2(1) = 16.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

In both studies, we found then that men and women responded as *traditionalists* would expect them to. Men readily accepted a sexual invitation. Women were extremely reluctant to do so.

We now know that this is so. We are not quite sure *why* this is so. It may be that, as sociobiologists suggest, women are eager for love and commitment. Men are eager for sexual activity. Such theorizing is consistent with the data. Both men and women were willing to date a total stranger. (When one goes out on a date, one has the opportunity to assess the probability that a loving relationship could occur.) Women were unwilling to go to a man's apartment or to have sexual relations. Men, on the other hand, were surprisingly willing to go to a strange woman's apartment or to bed. (In fact, they were less willing to accept an invitation to date than to have sexual relations!)

Consistent with this interpretation were the subjects' reactions to

**Table 2: Study #2, 1982**  
Percentage of Compliance With Each Request

| Sex of Requestor | Type of Request |           |     |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----|
|                  | Date            | Apartment | Bed |
| Male             | 50%             | 0%        | 0%  |
| Female           | 50%             | 69%       | 69% |

the requests. In general, the female experimenters reported that men were at ease with the request. They would say "Why do we have to wait until tonight?" or "I cannot tonight, but tomorrow would be fine." The men that said "No" even gave apologies, i.e., "I'm married" or "I'm going with someone." In contrast, the women's response to the intimate requests from males was "You've got to be kidding," or "What is wrong with you? Leave me alone."

Of course, the sociological interpretation—that women are interested in love while men are interested in sex—is not the only possible interpretation of these data. It may be, of course, that *both* men and women were equally interested in sex, but that men associated fewer risks with accepting a sexual invitation than did women. Men may be more confident of their ability to fight back a physical assault than are women. Also, the remnants of the double standard may make women afraid to accept the man's invitation.

Regardless of *why* we secured these data, however, the existence of these pronounced gender differences is interesting.

Researchers may well choose to replicate this study sometime in the next five years to ascertain what impact the AIDS epidemic has on the preceding patterns of results. There is some anecdotal evidence that in such major cities as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc. both men and women have become extremely wary of casual sex (see Baum, 1987). This should, of course, markedly alter the preceding pattern of results. On the other hand, some researchers (Weinstein, 1980 and 1984) have found that young people still underestimate the riskiness of their "unsafe" sexual practices and that most young people tend to see themselves as invulnerable to negative events. In that case, the preceding pattern of results might be expected to continue into the future.

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