

The effects of gender norms on gender differences in sexual response

K. Suschinsky¹ and M. Chivers¹

¹ Department of Psychology, Queen's University, Canada

Summary Limited understanding of gender differences in sexual response patterns restricts our abilities to understand and treat women's sexual difficulties. We studied a long-known gender difference in sexual response patterns (sexual concordance) using a novel pairing of sexual psychophysiology and social psychology methods to elucidate factors that influence women's and men's sexual responses.

1. Relevance

Sexual concordance – the agreement between genital and emotional sexual arousal – is, on average, substantially lower in women than men (Chivers et al., 2010). After 40 years of research, this gender difference remains unexplained. The gender difference may exist because social norms dictate that women be sexually demure, whereas men are encouraged to be sexually assertive and responsive to sexual stimuli (Conley et al., 2011).

2. Aims & Objectives

We investigated whether a testing condition that discourages conformity to gendered social norms (a bogus pipeline; Alexander & Fisher, 2003) influences self-reported sexual responses, genital responses, and the relationship between genital and self-reported sexual responses.

3. Methods

Fifty women and 50 men reported their feelings of sexual arousal during a sexual film while their genital (penile circumference, vaginal vasocongestion), heart rate (HR), and galvanic skin (GS) responses were recorded. Half of the participants were instructed that their self-reported sexual arousal was being monitored for veracity using their HR and GS responses (bogus pipeline condition; BPC); the remaining participants were told that these measures were recorded for a comprehensive measure of sexual response (typical testing condition; TTC).

4. Results

Participants in the BPC reported significantly higher sexual arousal ($M = 55.3$, $SD = 22.5$) than those in the TTC ($M = 48.9$, $SD = 21.2$), regardless of gender. Genital responses did not vary with testing condition. Women's sexual concordance was greater in the BPC (Pearson $r(22) = .42$) versus TTC (Pearson $r(23) = .20$); men's sexual concordance was more similar between conditions (Pearson $r(23) = .87$ for the BPC and Pearson $r(23) = .81$ for the TTC).

5. Conclusions

Gender norms and other social factors must be considered when interpreting gender differences in sexual response. Recognizing the role of social factors in women's sexualities shifts the focus from the individual to interactions between individuals, and between society and the individual. Reframing research on women's sexuality in this manner may result in more satisfying and healthy sexual relationships, as well as more effective treatments for sexual difficulties.

6. Contact details: Kelly Suschinsky; kelly.suschinsky@gmail.com