

## Sexual Stigmatization

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**Synonyms:** The sexual double standard, sexual injustice, sexism.

**Definition:** A form of sexism where men and women are judged differently for engaging in the same sexual behavior (with women carrying the stigma).

### Introduction

Sexual stigmatization refers to a sexual double standard within sexuality, where men and women engaging in the same sexual conduct are judged differently – with women carrying the stigma. The idea comes from traditional concepts of heterosexuality, where male and female sexuality are understood differently. Here, open and expressive female sexuality is disparaged, whereas desirous male sexuality is sanctioned and celebrated. Although the norms of western heterosexuality are shifting – the sexual double standard remains powerful in shaping heterosexuality in various domains. In this entry, the history, norms and current context of the sexual double standard in the west are covered.

### Main Text

The sexual double standard is a form of sexism within heterosexuality where the same sexual behavior enacted by men and women are judged differently. For example, men who have many sexual partners are positively deemed as a ‘stud’ or ‘player’; and women negatively judged as a ‘slut’, ‘skank’ or ‘whore’ (Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017, p. 544-545, see also: Crawford & Popp, 2003; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Lai & Hynie, 2010; Lees, 1993; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013; Ronen, 2010; Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015). One of the explanations typically given for this phenomena is that men are raised to value sexual experience, where women are taught to focus on emotional aspects of sex and committed relationships. Furthermore, the reason the sexual double standard is seen as a sexual injustice, is because men are given more sexual freedom while women are socially stigmatised for engaging in the same behaviour and hence have their sexual expression curtailed (Lyons, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011).

The sexual double standard creates a narrow ideal of male sexuality as well – requiring men to demonstrate overt sexual interest and prowess (Kettrey, 2016). Such ideals stem from traditional concepts of male and female sexuality as identified by the seminal work of Wendy Hollway and Michelle Fine. Hollway’s (1984, 1989) work was able to showcase a widespread cultural acceptance that male sexuality is biologically needy and uncontrollable, whereas Fine’s (1988) work elucidated how sexual desire and pleasure is absent when it comes female sexuality. These dominant cultural tropes, or sex-role stereotyping, position men as active sexual agents and women as passive and responsive, creating a social and cultural climate where something like the sexual double standard can exist (Milnes, 2010).

## Historical context

The expression of the sexual double standard has varied across time. For example, in the Victorian Era, women were desexualized and the enjoyment of sex was seen as exclusively a male domain (Gordon, 1994). There were different gendered ideas of sexual purity – were men engaging in adultery or prostitution were dealt with more leniently socially and legally than women. Women were required to be chaste and moral and only engage in sex to bear off springs, otherwise there were ‘fallen’ women who had sex outside of marriage, for pleasure, or for money. Even being out in public without a chaperon might relegate a women to the status of ‘prostitute’.

The work of early sexologists such as Sigmund Freud and Richard von Krafft-Ebing in the late 1800s and early 1900s created a different model of sexuality, focused on science (description and categorization) rather than religion (morality and regulation) (Farvid, 2012). This, along with increasing discussion and display of sexuality allowed for more liberalizing attitudes about sex to gather traction. The ‘roaring twenties’, for example, is referred to by some historians as revolutionary in relation to sex (Dean, 1996). By the 1960s and 1970s, this had culminated in fully fledged sexual permissiveness in various sectors of western society (Allyn, 2000).

Permissive sexuality situates both men and women as desiring agents who can have consenting sex in any context: ‘anything goes, as long as no one gets hurt’ (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003, p. 238). Based on this model, sex is positioned as inherently good and the right of men *and* women to enjoy. While permissive attitudes toward sex spread and pre-marital sex were on the rise (Reiss, 1960, 1967), the experience and outcomes of permissiveness were often very different for men and women in this period. For example, women still carried the stigma of being considered ‘loose’ or ‘easy’ as well as having to deal with contraception and unwanted pregnancies (B. Campbell, 1980).

At the turn of the Twenty-first Century, norms about sexuality and men’s and women’s sexual behavior are arguably at their most liberal, particularly when it comes to female sexuality. As Farvid and Braun (2006) noted, we are very much in the midst of a “pro-sex” cultural climate, characterized by a sexualisation (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010) and pornification of culture (Mulholland, 2015) and a mediatization of sexuality (Coudry & Hepp, 2016). For example, an active, desiring and pleasure-focused female sexuality is depicted in women’s magazines, online and in popular television shows (e.g., *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, *Broad City*) and movies (i.e., *How to be Single*, *Trainwreck*). Yet, sexuality continues to be a tenuous terrain for heterosexual women – who must now walk a tightrope between being an over-sexed slut, or an uptight prude. Women need to embody a sexually ‘liberated’, desiring and active sexuality, while at the same time avoiding activities or behaviors that may tarnish their sexual reputation.

## Early sexual double standard research

Seminal work on the sexual double standard was carried out by sociologist Ira Reiss in the 1950s and 1960s. He examined attitudes related to “premarital sexual intercourse” – where it was typically seen as wrong for women but acceptable or even desired for men (Reiss, 1956, 1960, 1967). Towards the end of the 1960s he identified a loosening of the premarital sexual standard, where pre-marital sexual activity was accepted among both men and women, as

long as it was in the context of an affectionate or loving relationship (Reiss, 1967). Indeed research in the 1970s indicated that premarital sex was no longer subjected to a sexual double standard (King, Balswick, & Robinson, 1977) – but the sexual double standard did not disappear.

Research in the 1980s and 1990s produced mixed results – but clearly indicated a shift in how the sexual double standard manifested and in relation to what sorts of behaviors. In their review of this material (between 1981-2001), Crawford and Popp (2003) noted that although sexual attitudes and norms had become more egalitarian – men and women were still judged differently with regards to specific sexual *behaviors*. For example, women were judged more harshly for having sex at a younger age, for having sex outside of committed relationships (casual sex, infidelity) and for having sex with many partners (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Furthermore, carrying condoms, wearing certain types of clothing, or acting flirtatious or in a sexual manner could also garner negative reactions and labeling (Hillier, Harrison, & Warr, 1998; Lees, 1993). In addition, women were judged more harshly for being the initiators of sex or dates, and if there were negative outcomes in a dating or sexual situation, women were seen as more culpable if they were initiators.

Hence, there was a more subtle ‘fine line’ that girls/women may cross when it came to the sexual double standard in this period but concerns about negative sexual reputation were evident (Kitzinger, 1995). Furthermore, the sexual double standard, concerns regarding negative social judgments or a sexual reputation had negative health outcomes. There were more negative individual, emotional and social consequences for women (for example, women were less likely to carry condoms or initiating condom use due to the concern of being deemed a ‘slut’).

### **More recent work**

From the early 2000s until now, a plethora of diverse work on the sexual double standard has continued to be published (Bordini & Sperb, 2013). Such work has been able to map the changing nature of the sexual double standard, examining the complex and contradictory ways it manifests in the contemporary context. Before discussing this work – it is useful to outline the different theoretical approaches typically utilised in such research.

### ***Theoretical frameworks***

There are three major theoretical clusters used to make sense of the sexual double standard. These are the biological/evolutionary approach (Buss, 1994), sociocultural/social role theories (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), and cognitive social learning (Bandura, 1986). Biological theories tend to stem from evolutionary perspectives and posit that the sexual double standard stems from adaptive survival tendencies related to reproductive success. Men need only to invest a small amount in the biological aspect of reproduction, and it is women who carry and give birth to a child. Here woman become more selective about how much sex they have and with which partners, as they prefer long-term mates who will help raise any off-spring that may be born as a result of sexual activity. Whereas men can be less discriminate and may seek to spread their seeds far and wide to garner as many offsprings as possible. Although this theory seems plausible, direct scientific evidence that captures prehistoric dives is

impossible to gather. Attitudes and behaviors explained by this approach, are also explainable by the following theories.

Sociocultural/social role theories tend to better contextualise why the sexual double standard might occur by highlighting dominant constructions of male and female sexuality and the way in which society expects different behaviours from men and women. For example, the sexual double standard is perpetuated by socially produced gender ideals or *scripts* that determine the norms regarding how men and women ought to behave, sexually (Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Lai & Hynie, 2010). Gender roles and gender role expectations play a huge role in how both actors and observers – interpret and respond to the sexual behaviour of men and women (Zaikman & Marks, 2017). We respond more positively to behaviours that reinforce our gender specific expectations, and vice versa. In this context, female sexuality is monitored and scrutinised in a way that male sexuality is not, because of the restrictive ways female sexuality has been constructed. Feminist and gender theorists have used this approach to highlight the sexist ways dominant heterosexuality operates, with a view to challenging and disrupting the sexual double standard.

Cognitive social learning theory posits that the sexual double standard exists because behaviours that are gender-role specific are reinforced within our society, and those that are inconsistent are punished (Zaikman & Marks, 2017). Although similar to behavioural theories, there is an element of modelling in this theory. It posts that individuals imitate the behaviours of others that result in social rewards, avoiding those that result in social punishments – however subtle or overt (Zaikman & Marks, 2017). For example, boys and men are usually evaluated positively for having many sexual encounters, and are judged harshly if they fail to express overt sexual success yet, the situation is reversed for girls and women (Bordini & Sperb, 2013). Among teenagers, the popularity of girls decreases with the number of sexual partners she has (regardless whether this occurs within the context of a relationship or not), while the popularity of boys increases with the more sexual partners they have (Kreager & Staff, 2009).

Although various researchers utilise these theories separately, Zaikman and Marks (2017) argue that each theory mostly likely has some predictive power when explaining the sexual double standard:

First, evolutionary theory is a likely explanation for the origins of the traditional double standard. Second, social role theory can explain more proximate manifestations of the sexual double standard through considering the influence of context, culture, and historical era. Finally, cognitive social learning theory can explain the manner in which the SDS is perpetuated (p. 418).

## **Current research**

The prevalence of a sexual double standard continues to be documented, both in quantitative (Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Lyons et al., 2011; Marks & Fraley, 2006; Zaikman, Marks, Young, & Zeiber, 2016) and qualitative investigations (Farvid et al., 2017; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Marks & Farley, 2007; Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011). Although the nature and expression of the sexual double standard has shifted, at its core, the sexual double standard invokes traditional discourses of heterosexuality, such as the Madonna/whore binary (virtuous versus promiscuous), to negatively construct women's desire for, and participation

in what is socially, culturally or morally defined as ‘too much’ sex (Ussher, 1989). Research in the last decade has garnered some interesting insights into the morphing, yet persistent, nature of the sexual double standard, which affects women’s and men’s expression of sexuality differently.

For example, women but not men, still report more shame and guilt after having casual sex due to the way this behavior can still garner negative judgment from others towards them (Campbell, 2008; Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009). Female university students also report engaging in less hookups or coital casual sex, to avoid garnering a negative sexual reputation or pejorative labelling (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009).

Although there have been shifts in sexual norms, and pre-marital sex and sex in relationships is now acceptable for women, showing explicit sexual desire and engaging in “unconventional” sexual behaviors that are considered out of the norm for feminine sexuality can still be risky for women (Bordini & Sperb, 2013). For example, women are judged more harshly than men for engaging in threesomes, having multiple sexual partners and having sex with a much younger partner (Kreager & Staff, 2009). Sexting is another arena where the sexual double standard is identified. Research indicates that teenage girls who are asked to produce specific forms of sexual display by teenage boys, face moral condemnation and ‘slut shaming’ (by peers, parents and adults) (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013).

‘Slut shaming’ is new phrased that names (and critiques) the act of openly criticizing people, usually girls and women, for transgressing the boundaries of what is perceived appropriate conduct in relation to sexuality. Recently, a ‘reverse’ sexual double standard has also been identified – where men are judged more harshly for engaging in overtly sexual conduct (Thompson, Hart, Stefaniak, & Harvey, 2017), as well as a backlash to individuals who openly “slut shame” (Papp et al., 2015). Such shift indicate that stereotypical and open expressions of the sexual double standard are becoming less socially acceptable. Yet, the sexual double standard has definitely not disappeared.

For example, in the liberated context of Norwegian high school graduation celebration, researchers have found that while overt slut shaming was rare among young adults, women who were perceived as engaging in sex and casual sex in specific ways, were subjected to subtle moral judgments (Fjær, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2015). In this context, a slut was always positioned as “other” and seen as someone who did not value physical and sexual safety or lacked self-control when it came to sex. Hence the sexual double standard was still identified, but the boundaries of what constituted problematic sexual conduct, for women, had shifted.

Similarly, research by Farvid and colleagues (2017) with women who explicitly identified as engaging in and enjoying casual sex identified that:

At the outset, casual sex was framed as being pleasurable and acceptable for women to engage in and a sexual double standard in relation to casual sex was directly challenged by all the women... The threat of garnering a negative sexual reputation however, was linked to the women’s silence around their casual sex experiences and overt displays of sexuality... [yet] certain types of casual sex display were talked about as not acceptable and rightly procuring someone (although, never them) a negative sexual reputation (p. 556).

Women who engage in what was considered ‘too much’ casual sex (e.g., every night or every weekend) and for the ‘wrong’ reasons (e.g., feel better about themselves or to get attention, or address emotional or psychological issues), were stigmatized in this context. We know that not only men, but women evaluate other women based on the sexual double standard (Zaikman & Marks, 2014). A phenomena called ‘defensive othering’ has been used to explain how women who endorse the sexual double standard, do so to distance themselves from what is perceived as a lower status women; conversely, men who endorse a reverse sexual double standard distance themselves from the dominant group (Kettrey, 2016).

The sexual double standard has been identified as operating on multiple layers. For example, is a difference between identifying a societal level sexual double standard, the larger peer group and the standards by which women themselves buy into or adhere to (Farvid et al., 2017). In one study, teenage girls identified a societal and school level prevalence of the sexual double standard, but support from close friends and peers was a buffer to such ideals being fully accepted or affecting the girls negatively (Lyons et al., 2011).

Other studies of adult women and men have indicated that an active and desiring sexuality for women is, overall, supported or validated (Farvid, 2014; Reid et al., 2011), yet explanations of men’s and women’s behavior in specific contexts can produce double standards (Beres & Farvid, 2010). For example, in a study looking at a hookup scenario followed by a “sexless” date indicated that while men and women were not judged differently for engaging in a hookup or desiring a date, the explanations given for the sexless date were imbued with a double standard (Reid et al., 2011). Women were described as seeking to remain chaste (on the date) in order to regain any loss of their sexual reputation (during the one-night stand), and the men were seen as going on a date in order to make the woman feel better about the hookup (i.e., a ‘pity date’) (Reid et al., 2011).

While some research indicates that the sexual double standard is being openly challenged (Allen, 2003; Farvid et al., 2017; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Milnes, 2010), deep analyses indicate that it has not fully lost its grip on how we understand, interpret and judge sexual behavior. Beyond general sexism, the sexual double still results in more negative outcomes for women. Girls and women spend a considerable amount of energy negotiating the risks of expressing an unfettered sexuality, with reports of worry, anxiety and shame in this context (Ringrose et al., 2013). Furthermore, women who endorse the sexual double standard are more likely to refrain from sex altogether and leave sexual safety measures in the hands of men (Danube et al., 2016). Lastly, the sexual double standard still affects how women judge other women (Farvid et al., 2017; Lyons et al., 2011). The sexual double standard is hard to escape, even for individuals who are aware and critical of it (Farvid et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The sexual double standard represents a gender-specific dilemma when it comes to sexual conduct, which affects girls and women much more negatively. The expression and contours of the sexual double standard have varied historically, with liberalizing attitudes towards sex and female sexuality softening its expression. Yet, as the entry has demonstrated, while the boundaries of the sexual double standard have shifted, it remains a powerful force in contemporary culture, in shaping male and female sexuality, as well as how sexual behavior by men and women is understood and interpreted. It seems that a radical reworking of heterosexuality is still needed if the sexual double standard is to ever lose traction.

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