

Sexual attitudes differ whether one is in or outside of a relationship

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So long, Venus and Mars: Once they become a couple, men and women are from the same planet, a new University of Florida study finds.

The study confirms that men are more preoccupied with sex than women are, but both genders get in touch with their inner feelings when they bond in an intimate relationship.

“Men experience a lot of pressure in our society to have sex with a number of different partners, the opposite of what women experience as kind of the gatekeepers of sexuality,” said Paul Perrin, a UF graduate student in psychology and one of the study’s researchers. “Once they enter a relationship, however, the pressure on men to have sex is not as strong and the pressure on women to not have sex goes away.”

Expected gender roles give way to partners’ romantic feelings for each other, which turn out to be a lot stronger than society’s roles for them, he said.

“People in romantic relationships give more importance to their own feelings and their partners’ than they do to social expectations about sexual behavior,” he said.

The study, titled ‘My Place or Yours?’ published in the April edition of the journal Sex Roles, found that men are much more likely than women to find sex personally and physically pleasurable, while women are more inclined to think sex violates social taboos. Too often, these sexually

restrictive gender roles become self-fulfilling prophecies, he said.

But the study also found that men and women can change when it comes to conforming to prescribed gender roles. Although men showed significantly greater interest in sex as measured by three of the four categories, when sex was examined in an intimate relationship, men and women were more alike than different, he said.

“One example might be the typical stereotype of a guy in a fraternity who is pressured by his fraternity brothers to sleep with a lot of different women and move on,” Perrin said. “If he were in a romantic relationship, he wouldn’t feel as much pressure to have sex with multiple partners. Whereas a woman feels freer to engage in sex within a relationship than outside of one because she runs less risk of being called derogatory names and being viewed negatively by a larger society.”

The study involved 219 women and 161 men in an introductory psychology course at UF. They answered 160 questions about sexual behavior and attitudes relating to four different areas: whether they considered sex to be personally and physically pleasurable, a benefit in creating positive feelings about oneself, a violation of social injunctions and personally costly in terms of having negative emotional, psychological or physical consequences.

The biggest gender difference was that men were much more likely to find sex personally and physically pleasurable, the study found. “Though not as frequently talked about, gender roles also restrict men to a narrow range of acceptable sexual behavior in the sense that others deem him immature and unmasculine if he doesn’t have frequent sex,” Perrin said. “Witness the popular 2005 film comedy ‘The 40-Year-Old Virgin.’ ”

Men also were more likely to consider sex to be personally costly, perhaps because they engage in more risky sexual behavior, Perrin said.

The more partners and the more sex one has, the more likely one is to see the consequences of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, he said.

“Men in our sample appear to walk a fine line between wanting the risky sex that society says they should have and paying the price for having had it,” he said.

Not surprisingly, women were more likely to believe that being sexually active had negative social ramifications, Perrin said. “Women endorsed at higher rates waiting longer to have sex and not engaging in premarital sex, consistent with the notion of women as sexual gatekeepers,” he said. “Perhaps women are more interested than men are in waiting for the right person and the right moment to have sex.”

But attitudes both for men and women changed when attention shifted to how they felt once they were in a relationship. “Because gender roles have existed for hundreds and hundreds of years, we kind of take them for granted and assume this is the way society is and the way men and women should act,” he said. “The biggest implication of this study is that we aren’t slave to the gender roles that society imposes on us but have a lot more freedom, especially sexually.”

Jim O’Neil, a University of Connecticut professor of family studies and educational psychology, praised the study. “How refreshing to review important empirical research that dispels myths, common stereotypes and casual impressions about men’s and women’s sexual values and relations,” he said.

Source: University of Florida

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