

Study investigates variability in men's recall of sexual cues

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Even if a woman is perfectly clear in expressing sexual interest or rejection, young men vary in their ability to remember the cues, a new University of Iowa study shows.

Overall, college-age [men](#) were quite good at recalling whether their female peers – in this case, represented through photos – showed interest. Their memories were especially sharp if the model happened to be good looking, dressed more provocatively, and conveyed interest through an inviting expression or posture.

But as researchers examined variations in sexual-cue recall, they found two noteworthy correlations: men with a history of more frequent serious relationships did a better job remembering the cues, while men who scored higher on a sexual aggression survey performed worse.

"Tracking and remembering a partner's emotions may play a role in the initiation and maintenance of a serious romantic relationship," said lead author Teresa Treat, a psychologist in the UI College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. "Likewise, misremembering a woman's level of sexual interest could prompt some men to make unwanted sexual advances and become frustrated when a woman doesn't respond as anticipated."

Published this month in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, the study by Treat and colleagues at Indiana University involved 232 men with an average age of 19. The men viewed full-body photos of models who varied in attractiveness, attire and whether they were expressing

interest. A short time later, the men were presented with the previously viewed photos, along with new photos of the same women communicating the opposite cue. They were asked which exact photos they'd seen before.

Researchers relied on extensive rating data from undergraduate men and women to determine level of attractiveness, provocativeness of dress, and whether each model's body language indicated sexual interest or [rejection](#) – for example, a "come hither" gaze versus a scowl. The men completed surveys about their relationship history and the level to which they endorsed sexually aggressive attitudes.

It's important to note, Treat says, that misremembering a woman's cue is not an excuse for an unwanted advance. Department of Justice statistics show that nearly one in four women experience an attempted or completed rape in college, and the goal of this type of research is to develop better prevention strategies.

"Finding that risk for sexual aggression is associated with processing patterns in no way minimizes the responsibility of potential perpetrators to attend to potential victims' interest levels and consent cues," she said. "But if we can better understand how women's cues might be misinterpreted, we'll be better able to address the difficulties of some young men that can result in such negative consequences."

While the study suggests that there may be a link between memory for women's sexual interest and both positive and negative sexual experiences, the long-term significance of the findings depends on whether memory proves to play a causal role in the experiences, and whether the link remains when the cues of sexual interest are presented in a more lifelike manner. It's also important to remember that numerous factors other than memory for a partner's emotions can affect young adults' sexual experiences.

"In this study, the information young men had about the women was restricted to a photo," Treat said. "In the real world, they'd be able to see how the woman responds. We'll need to see whether similar patterns emerge when men receive more information on women, perhaps through video or audio, or in structured interactions."

Provided by University of Iowa

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