

Love knows no gender difference

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Small study of married couples found both sexes openly affectionate.

(HealthDay) -- Think married men and women show their love in vastly different ways? Not necessarily.

Although [popular culture](#) reinforces the [stereotype](#) that there's a [gender gap](#) when it comes to expressing [affection](#), few studies have actually tested the notion.

A small new study suggests, however, that men are just as likely as women to be openly affectionate. The study, which also identified some differences between the [sexes](#), was published recently in the journal [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#).

"Men and women are actually more similar in the ways they express [love](#) than they are different," said study author Elizabeth Schoenfeld, a

researcher at the University of Texas in Austin. "But we also learned that, even in the wake of [feminism](#), wives express love by being less assertive and more accommodating, while husbands show love by initiating sex or sharing activities together."

The study involved 168 couples in first marriages living in rural central Pennsylvania. Data was collected in initial interviews, followed by telephone interviews in which husbands and wives separately reported activities and interactions. The interviews occurred within two months of when each couple was married and then annually, with a final set of interviews conducted after 13 years of marriage.

At the conclusion of the study, 105 of the original couples were still married, three were widowed and 56 were divorced. Almost all of the participants were white, and more than half had a [high school education](#).

Contrary to some common gender stereotypes, the research showed that the more men loved their wives, the more likely they were to be affectionate. They were also more likely to involve their spouses in their leisure activities and in household chores. Love did not, however, mean a husband did more chores around the house or was more eager to relieve his wife of the chores for which she was responsible.

The researchers found, in general, that a husband's love may create an environment in which the couple does a variety of things together. The more husbands loved their wives, the more likely they were to initiate sex. For wives, though, increased love for their husbands meant they were actually less likely to make the first move.

Why would that be? "If a wife is feeling unloved, it could be that she is attempting to kick-start the marriage," Schoenfeld said.

Wives' love was less associated with interest in joint activities, and relied

more on expressions of love. More love also was associated with greater accommodation to husbands' moods and needs.

"Biting their tongues, letting men initiate sex more often, showing a willingness to allow men to assert themselves a little more -- this is what we saw when women were more in love," Schoenfeld explained.

Some experts believe differences between men and women in marriage are typically overemphasized.

"There aren't too many real gender and sex differences between men and women on the whole," said Stevie Yap, a researcher in the department of psychology at Michigan State University in East Lansing. "If you look at the overall research, gender differences don't usually hold up."

Yap, who recently published research on happiness and marriage in the *Journal of Research and Personality*, found that although matrimony doesn't tend to make people happier than they were when they were single, it appears to protect against declines in happiness that can occur in adulthood.

Yap said only a few gender differences actually have been shown by research to be real: men tend to be physically stronger and more sexually active, and have a greater tendency toward aggression. He said that even these three characteristics, however, can be affected by socialization and experience.

Schoenfeld, too, thinks differences between the sexes have been exaggerated.

"Don't be fooled by popular stereotypes," she said. "[Men](#) are not from Mars and [women](#) are not from Venus. We are all on planet Earth."

More information: For more on marriage, visit the [National Healthy Marriage Resource Center](#).

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