

Men, women lie about sex to match gender expectations

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People will lie about their sexual behavior to match cultural expectations about how men or women should act – even though they wouldn't distort other gender-related behaviors, new research suggests.

The study found that men were willing to admit that they sometimes engaged in behaviors seen by college students as more appropriate for women, such as writing poetry. The same was true for women, who didn't hide the fact that they told obscene jokes, or sometimes participated in other "male-type" deeds.

But when it came to sex, men wanted to be seen as "real men:" the kind who had many partners and a lot of sexual experience. Women, on the other hand, wanted to be seen as having less [sexual experience](#) than they actually had, to match what is expected of women.

"There is something unique about sexuality that led people to care more about matching the [stereotypes](#) for their gender," said Terri Fisher, author of the study and professor of psychology at The Ohio State University's Mansfield campus.

"Sexuality seemed to be the one area where people felt some concern if they didn't meet the stereotypes of a typical man or a typical woman."

Fisher discovered how people would honestly respond to questions about [sexuality](#) and other gender-role behaviors by asking some [study participants](#) questions when they thought they were hooked up to a [lie](#)

[detector](#) machine.

The study appears in a recent issue of the journal *Sex Roles*.

Participants were 293 [college students](#) between the ages of 18 and 25.

The students completed a questionnaire that asked how often they engaged in 124 different behaviors (from never to a few times a day). People in a previous study had identified all the behaviors to be typical of either males (such as wearing dirty clothes, telling obscene jokes) or females (such as writing poetry, lying about your weight). Other behaviors were identified as more negative for males (singing in the shower) or more negative for females (poking fun at others).

But some people filled out the questionnaire while they were attached to what they were told was a working polygraph machine or lie detector. (It was actually not working.)

The others were connected to the apparatus before the study began, supposedly to measure anxiety, but the machine was removed before they completed the questionnaire.

In general, the results showed that both men and women tended to act as would be expected for their gender. Men reported more typical-male behaviors and women reported more typical-female behaviors, regardless of whether they were attached to the lie detector or not.

But for non-sexual behaviors, the participants didn't seem to feel any added pressure to respond in stereotypical ways for their gender.

In other words, women who were hooked up to the lie detector and those who weren't were equally likely to admit to bench pressing weights – a stereotypical male activity.

"Men and women didn't feel compelled to report what they did in ways that matched the stereotypes for their gender for the non-sexual behaviors," Fisher said.

The one exception was [sexual behavior](#), where, for example, men reported more sexual partners when they weren't hooked up to the lie detector than when they were. Women reported fewer partners when they were not hooked up to the lie detector than when they were. A similar pattern was found for reports of ever having experienced sexual intercourse.

"Men and women had different answers about their sexual [behavior](#) when they thought they had to be truthful," Fisher said.

This result confirms what Fisher found in an earlier study, back in 2003 – with one important difference.

Back in 2003, women went from having fewer sexual partners than men (when not hooked up to a lie detector) to being essentially even to men (when hooked up to the lie detector.)

In this new study, women actually reported more [sexual partners](#) than men when they were both hooked up to a lie detector and thought they had to be truthful.

"Society has changed, even in the past 10 years, and a variety of researchers have found that differences between men and [women](#) in some areas of sexual behavior have essentially disappeared," she said.

Fisher said the results of the study may actually be stronger than what was found here. Although half the participants were not hooked up to the lie detector while completing the questionnaire, they had been hooked up before they started.

"Some of the participants may have been made uncomfortable by being attached to the lie detector at first, and that may have led them to be more forthcoming and truthful than they otherwise would have been," she said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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