
Late adolescents' perception of their peers who report a large number of sex partners

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Abstract: What is the reason for gender discrepancy in reporting lifetime sex partners (SPs) when people are asked for the number of SPs they have had? Based on the idea of the sexual double standard, men might over-report while women might under-report the number of SPs. The purpose of this study was to identify whether this gender discrepancy could be explained by the sexual double standard or not. Late adolescents were asked to report the number of their lifetime SPs and to assess how they perceive sexual behaviors of an imaginary peer who reports a large number of SPs. Data were collected through a one-to-one interview sessions (over 90% of the sample). The lifetime number of SPs for men was almost 6 times higher than that for women. Men showed more envious attitudes and assessed the peer's report as less factual when the peer man had more SPs. Women were not willing to accept the man as their prospective partner if he had many SPs. Also, the sexual behavior of the peer woman with many SPs was deemed undesirable by women. The findings imply that men might inflate their reports of the number of lifetime SPs, supporting the old sexual double standard. The findings also imply that women might under-report their lifetime SPs, and seemed to be somewhat ambivalent about the topic of the sexual double standard.

Keywords: Sexual Double Standard, Sex Partner, Casual Sex, Over-Reporting, Under-Reporting

1. Introduction

In population-based surveys on sexual behavior, heterosexual men and women should theoretically report the same number of sex partners (SPs) when they are asked for the number of SPs they have had so far [1,2]. However, men were shown to consistently report a greater number of SPs than women do in most studies [3,4]. Men are more approving of casual sex, more inclined to engage in sexual behavior outside of committed relationships, and report a higher incidence of intercourse than women. On the contrary, women report more sexual caution and are more discriminating with regard to quality and quantity of SPs than men [5,6].

What is the reason for such gender discrepancy in reporting SPs? Sociobiologists may account for this discrepancy by addressing the existence of the double standard, that is, more permissive attitudes towards male promiscuity and greater intolerance for female promiscuity by society. Thus, men should be more approving of casual sex and should have a larger number of different SPs, whereas women should be less approving of casual sex and

should have a smaller number of different SPs [6].

In terms of social learning, the double standard indicates that women are punished for sexual activities such as having numerous SPs or engaging in casual sex, whereas men are not likely to be punished, or may even be rewarded (through admiration or increased social status) for such behaviors. Therefore, social learning theory predicts a lower average number of SPs for women than for men. Compared to women, men are significantly more likely to report having had several partners, and less likely to report no SPs or only one [5,6]. The theory also predicts that women will hold more negative attitudes about casual sex than men [6].

The discrepancy is also explained by social role or script theory. Sexual behaviors are governed by gender roles and scripts or gender-typed expectations [6]. Many people still accept some forms of the sexual double standard, in which men are afforded more sexual freedom than women, and women are expected to be more reluctant than men to acknowledge their desire for sex [7, 8]. Women and men can anticipate different consequences when their behaviors are

deviated from prescribed behaviors: Men are likely to find their sexual potential questioned, while women risk being “deviants,” “criminals,” “sluts,” or “whores.” As a result, men may be motivated to be approving of sexual behaviors and to exaggerate the frequency and variability of their sexual encounters, whereas women may be motivated to understate it [9-11].

No matter what theory is used to explain such phenomenon, the discrepancy can be explained by the sexual double standard. Sexual intercourse outside marriage was acceptable for men but not for women according to the old, traditional double standard, whereas sex outside of marriage is somewhat tolerated for both men and women according to a new, conditional double standard [12]. With this in mind, the question is now concerned with the extent of the idea of the double standard followed by young people of today. Knowing the answer to this question would be helpful in predicting the sexual behavior of young people. Thus, in this study, late adolescents were asked to report the number of their lifetime SPs as well as to assess how they perceive sexual behaviors of an imaginary peer who reports a large number of premarital casual SPs.

2. Methods

2.1. Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants included 227 men aged 18.6 to 28.9 years ($M=23.6$, $SD=2.6$) and 204 women aged 18.4 to 28.7 years ($M=22.5$, $SD=2.8$). They all were heterosexual, never married, and volunteers who were not reluctant to take a sex survey. They responded to the measures anonymously either in small, same-sex groups of 2 to 5 (less than 10% of the sample), or through a one-to-one interview (over 90% of the sample). The purpose of the study was explained and verbal consent was obtained prior to the interview. Data were collected during the period from early 2011 to early 2012 in Korea.

2.2. Measures

Eighteen items [9 items on enviousness and 9 items on factualness of the sexual behavior of an imaginary man (IM)] were asked to men. A sample item on *enviousness* (*factualness*) was “If a 27-year-old unmarried IM reported having had 50 SPs so far, *I am envious of him* (and *I believe his report*.” The IM’s age of 27 in the item was replaced with 23 or 19 in the other items, and the SPs’ number of 50 was also replaced with 20 or 10 in the other items.

Twenty-one items [9 items on acceptance of the sexual behavior of an IM, and 12 items on desirability of the sexual behavior of an imaginary woman (IW)] were asked to women. A sample item on *acceptance* was “If a 27-year-old unmarried IM reported having had 50 SPs initiated a date, I would like to accept him as my prospective dating partner.” A sample item on *desirability* was “If a 27-year-old unmarried IW reported having had 50 SPs so far, I consider her sexual activity desirable. The IW’s age of 27 in the item was replaced with 23 or 19 in the other items, and the SPs’

number of 50 was also replaced with 20, 10 or 0 in the other items.

The responses to all the above-mentioned items for both genders were rated on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*).

All respondents were asked to report the number of their total lifetime SPs.

3. Results

3.1. Self-Reported Number of SPs

The reported lifetime SPs are shown in the Table 1. Only 9 (4.4%) women and 19 (8.4%) men did not respond to the question on lifetime SPs. Above all, age was not associated with the number of SPs among men [$r(208)=0.19$, $p>.05$], but was strongly associated among women [$r(195)=0.51$, $p<.01$]. Overall, men ($Mean=10.3$, $Median=4.0$, $Range=0-145$) reported substantially more SPs than women ($Mean=1.7$, $Median=1$, $Range=0-14$). About 23.1% of men reported no SP, while about 49.7% of women did. Almost 28% of men reported 10 or more lifetime SPs, compared with slightly over 2% of women.

Table 1. Number of reported lifetime SPs by gender

No. of SPs	Men (N=208*)	Women (N=195*)
None	48 (23.1%)	97 (49.7%)
1	17 (8.2%)	31 (15.9%)
2-3	35 (16.8%)	38 (19.5%)
4-5	22 (10.6%)	12 (6.2%)
6-9	28 (13.5%)	13 (6.7%)
10-19	31 (14.9%)	4 (2.1%)
20+	27 (13.0%)	0

* 19 men and 9 women did not respond.

3.2. Men’s Enviousness and Factualness

The mean ratings for enviousness and factualness are presented in Table 2. The ratings of the 9 items on enviousness were entered simultaneously into a 3x3 repeated measures ANOVA (i.e., 3 ages of IM by 3 numbers of SPs design). The ANOVA showed a significant main effect of SPs’ number [$F(2,450)=12.51$, $p<.001$], and a follow-up analysis showed a linear trend [$F(1,225)=18.23$, $p<.001$], indicating that greater enviousness was felt to toward men with a greater number of SPs. The ANOVA also showed a significant main effect of the IM’s age, $F(2,450)=3.12$, $p<.05$, but no linear function, $F(1,225)=3.00$, $p>.05$. No significant interaction between the SPs’ number and IM’s age was observed [$F(4,900)=1.53$, *n.s.*].

The ratings of the 9 items on factualness were also entered into a 3x3 repeated measures ANOVA (i.e., 3 ages of IM by 3 numbers of SPs design). The ANOVA showed a significant main effect of SPs’ number [$F(2,448)=61.23$, $p<.001$], and a

linear trend in the follow-up analysis [$F(1,224)=93.32$, $p<.001$]. The ANOVA also showed a significant main effect of the IM's age [$F(2,448)=210.71$, $p<.001$] with a linear trend in the follow-up analysis [$F(1,224)=226.22$, $p<.001$]. That is, the participants perceived the IM's report as more factual when the IM reported less SPs and when the IM's age was younger. A significant interaction between the SPs' number and IM's age was observed [$F(4,896)=3.33$, $p<.05$], but interpretation of the effect of interaction was inadequate for the purpose of this study.

Table 2. Statistics for enviousness and factualness [M (SD)]

Measure	IM's age	Number of SPs		
		10	20	50
Enviousness	19 yrs	3.45 (3.51)	3.82 (3.69)	4.20 (3.89)
	23 yrs	3.74 (3.06)	4.13 (3.22)	4.50 (3.45)
	27 yrs	3.93 (3.34)	4.26 (3.39)	4.37 (3.55)
Factualness	19 yrs	3.90 (3.12)	2.92 (2.91)	2.35 (2.82)
	23 yrs	5.57 (2.74)	4.68 (2.76)	3.85 (2.53)
	27 yrs	6.56 (3.09)	6.02 (3.04)	5.30 (2.95)

Note. Response range: 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

3.3. Women's Acceptance and Desirability

The mean ratings for acceptance are presented in Table 3. The ratings of the 9 items on acceptance were entered simultaneously into a 3x3 repeated measures ANOVA (i.e., 3 ages of IM by 3 numbers of SPs design). The ANOVA showed a significant main effect of SPs' number [$F(2,406)=82.13$, $p<.001$], and a follow-up analysis showed a linear trend [$F(1,203)=101.16$, $p<.001$], indicating a greater acceptance of a man with less SPs as a prospective partner. The ANOVA also showed a significant main effect of the IM's age, $F(2,406)=144.99$, $p<.001$, with a linear trend in the follow-up analysis, $F(1,203)=198.60$, $p<.001$, showing less acceptance of the IM as a partner with younger age. A significant interaction between the SPs' number and IM's age emerged [$F(4,812)=44.89$, $p<.001$], but interpretation of the effect of interaction was inadequate for the purpose of this study.

Table 3. Statistics for acceptance [M (SD)]

IM's age	Number of SPs		
	10	20	50
19 yrs	0.65 (1.56)	0.48 (1.21)	0.41 (1.21)
23 yrs	2.34 (2.48)	1.68 (2.19)	1.40 (2.19)
27 yrs	3.74 (2.97)	2.55 (2.59)	1.92 (2.48)

Note. Response range: 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

The mean ratings for desirability are presented in Table 4. The ratings of the 12 items on desirability were entered simultaneously into a 3x4 repeated measures ANOVA (i.e., 3 ages of IW by 4 numbers of SPs design). The ANOVA revealed significant main effects of both SPs' number

[$F(3,609)=495.22$, $p<.001$] and the IW's age [$F(2,406)=89.36$, $p<.001$], with a significant interaction effect [$F(6,1218)=259.55$, $p<.001$]. For the interaction, analyses of simple effects on the IW's age revealed that a linear trend was appropriate for the IW's age 27 [$F(1,203)=174.44$, $p<.001$] while quadratic trends were better for the IW's age 23 [$F(1,203)=154.50$, $p<.001$] and 19 [$F(1,203)=1201.62$, $p<.001$].

For the interaction, analyses of simple effects for number of SPs revealed that linear trends were shown for four conditions of SPs' number but implied different meanings. As for the three conditions of 50, 20, and 10 SPs, the female participants perceives that the younger the IW is, the less desirable the IW is [$F(1,203)=121.35$, $p<.001$ for 50 SPs; $F(1,203)=221.85$, $p<.001$ for 20 SPs; $F(1,203)=367.99$, $p<.001$ for 10 SPs]. However, they perceived that the older the IW is, the less desirable the IW is, as for the 0 SP condition [$F(1,203)=223.08$, $p<.001$].

Table 4. Statistics for desirability [M (SD)]

IM's age	Number of SPs			
	0	10	20	50
19 yrs	8.69 (2.56)	0.50 (1.30)	0.32 (1.00)	0.23 (0.89)
23 yrs	6.94 (2.71)	2.46 (2.21)	1.57 (1.96)	1.08 (1.77)
27 yrs	5.39 (3.03)	4.17 (2.83)	2.80 (2.63)	1.83 (2.33)

Note. Response range: 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

4. Discussion

This study asked late adolescents to report their lifetime number of SPs as well as to assess sexual behaviors of an imaginary person. Participants in this study were volunteers who were not reluctant to participate in a sex survey, and thus they might have had more SPs than those who did not participate. Nevertheless, the reported number of lifetime SPs for men ($M=10.3$) was almost six times higher than that for women ($M=1.7$). What may be a possible explanation for such large discrepancy?

First, let's look at the response patterns of men. Male participants showed more envious attitudes toward the IM (imaginary man) with more SPs. At the same time, they thought that the IM's report on the number of SPs was less factual when the IM had more SPs. These findings imply that male participants might inflate their reports when they are asked to report the number of lifetime SPs. The findings also suggest that male participants would still follow the idea of the old sexual double standard.

On the other hand, the response patterns of women were different. They were not willing to accept the IM as their prospective dating partner if he has had many SPs. In general, they showed less acceptance for the IM who was younger and who has had more SPs. Contrary to the favorable response received by male participants, the IM with many SPs was in disfavor with female participants. Then, how did the female participants respond to the sexual behavior of the

IW (imaginary woman) who reported as having had many SPs? They in general assessed the sexual behavior of the IW as undesirable, but there were big differences in their assessment of desirability depending on the IW's age. They assessed the younger IW as a more undesirable person. For instance, female participants assessed the sexual behavior of the 27-year-old IW with 10 SPs as somewhat neutral, although the mean number of their reported lifetime SPs was only 1.7. This kind of response pattern was more conspicuous when they responded to the IW with no SP. They assessed her as almost neutral when the IW was 27 years old, while they assessed her as quite desirable when the IW was 19 years old.

Almost half of the female participants reported their SPs as none, but many women assessed the IW with no SP as undesirable. This means that women might under-report their lifetime SPs in this study. On the basis of the old double standard, females should show negative attitudes toward women's premarital sex. However, as gender roles have changed since the second half of the 20th century, the gender standard has been also changing over time [3]. The findings from the female participants imply that they are not complying with the old double sexual standard but they are with the new one.

In conclusion, the young generation in Korea might still follow the idea of the double standard. Although there have been changes in the gender roles or gender-typed expectations since the late 20th century, young men in Korea still comply with the old sexual double standard. Therefore, they could not conceal their envy of the person with many SPs. For this reason, they are likely to inflate their reports on the number of SPs because men who have many SPs had been traditionally treated as great persons, even though the reported values were often assessed as untrue. However, women seemed to be somewhat ambivalent on the double standard. Some women followed the old sexual double standard and thus assessed the woman with many SPs as undesirable, while some other women followed the new double standard and thus assessed the woman with no SP as undesirable. Nevertheless, women were assumed to under-report the number of their lifetime SPs.

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