

Is there a sexual double standard?

A sexual double standard refers to the conceptualization that men and women are judged differently relative to the same behaviors. The perception that society holds a view of evaluating women and men differently for similar behaviors (a double standard) appears to be widespread in the research literature. This implies that society holds different standards for what behaviors are appropriate for men and these differ from the behaviors that are viewed as appropriate for women. Perceptions that individuals have as to what is appropriate behavior for men and women are shaped by social norms.

Typically, women are judged more negatively for engaging in various types of sexual behaviors and men are viewed more positively for participation in the same sexual activities. Consequently, men are allowed greater sexual freedom and agency. The specific behaviors that invoke judgement against women have shifted over time. For example, a review of 30 studies published since 1980 found evidence for the continued existence of sexual double standards; however, the sexual revolution has instilled more permissive attitudes and made sex before marriage more normative for both men and women.

Research findings relative to the sexual double standard are varied. Men are usually allowed more sexual leniency and are evaluated with more acceptance and tolerance relative to sexual behaviors and number of sexual partners when compared to women who engage in the same behaviors. Behavior patterns that potentially have substantial risks for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy include the potential risky sexual behavior of “hooking-up,” or participation in sexual activities without commitment or emotional attachment. Both men and women have reported hooking-up to be an enjoyable sexual experience which fulfills their sexual desires outside of a committed relationship, allowing them to focus their time on academic and career goals. Some research has indicated that hooking-up can be beneficial and empowering to women and their sexuality. Conversely, some literature reveals women are more likely to experience negative social, physical, and emotional consequences associated with hooking-up compared to their male counterparts.

A double standard has been found to exist when researchers have examined male and female condom use. Study participants typically rate the woman’s behavior more negatively and as more inappropriate when she provided the condom than when her male partner provided the condom. Sexual double standards and inaccurate stereotypes or misperceptions about wanting to use condoms may be a barrier to condom negotiation. These perceptions can have serious negative health consequences, such as STIs or unwanted pregnancies.

Sexual double standards are no longer approached in such an orthodox fashion as when women were just harshly judged for participating in premarital sex. Sexual double standards in today’s society may be more influenced by media outlets, body image, and sexual identity. The sexual double standard serves to disadvantage women; however, both sexes experience their own form of

general social roles within our society. Some scholars reveal the hook-up culture may actually empower women by allowing them freedom of sexual expression; while other researchers provide data showing that women continue to be shamed and experience regret following hooking-up.

Double standards can have significant negative influences on attitudes and health behaviors. Societal views of masculinity and femininity still exist; however, some views have changed and paradigms will continue to change over time. Double-standards place women at greater risk than men if it influences their preventative health behaviors, which helps protect against unwanted pregnancies and STIs. It is essential to promote awareness and develop educational interventions to prevent the stereotypes and the sexual double standards which may prevail in society that could provide barriers to engaging in healthy behaviors.

Tina M. Penhollow

*Department of Exercise Science & Health Promotion,
Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA*

Publication

[Alcohol Use, Hooking-Up, Condom Use: Is There a Sexual Double Standard?](#)

Penhollow TM, Young M, Nnaka T

Am J Health Behav. 2017 Jan