



Sexual Double Standards: People's Perception of Unintended Pregnancies in Different Commitments to Relationships

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Abstract. This research proposal aims to investigate people's endorsement of sexual double standards (SDS) when they perceive unintended pregnancies in different commitments to relationships. 400 male and female heterosexual students (age: 18-22) from Nanjing Vocational University of Industry Technology in China will be recruited for this study. The experiment will adopt a 2 (gender of the target: males and females) x 2 (scenarios of unintended pregnancies: casual relationships and committed relationships) x 4 (evaluation: value, likability, success, intelligence) mixed design. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the two scenarios. After reading the scenarios, they will rate both the male and female targets using the Modified Evaluation of People's Scale from Marks and Fraley (2005). The paired samples t-test will be conducted to compare the male and female targets' mean scores in each scenario. To see the impact of relationship types, independent samples t-test will also be used to compare the mean difference scores in casual and committed relationships. We expect that people endorse SDS when the targets are in a casual relationship but not in a committed one. The expected results will support the sexual strategies theory and help promote gender equality in contemporary society.

Keywords: Sexual Double Standards, Person Perception, Gender, Unintended Pregnancy

1 Introduction

The overturn of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court has triggered many protests in recent days. The opponents hold that the new abortion law poses more physical and mental challenges to those who have unintended pregnancies. Even though premarital sexual activities have become more acceptable in contemporary society, women are still judged more harshly for having unintended pregnancies before marriage. Men, on the other hand, are often not criticized for leading to pregnancies. This tendency to endorse different standards of male and female sexual activities is named sexual double standards [1]. The existence of a double standard, accompanied by the new abortion laws, makes women experience more challenges and pressure. Therefore, continuing

the research on SDS is critical for helping women remove their stigma and promoting gender equality in society.

One explanation for SDS is the sexual strategies theory [2]. It states that men and women develop different mating strategies because they face different adaptive problems. Due to the physiological differences, women have to carry more burdens, including gestation and lactation after birth. Therefore, they need to be more selective of with whom they have sexual activities [3].

This idea is also reflected in Oliver and Sedikides, who examined how commitment to relationships affects people's perception of their partners [4]. In their experiments, they asked participants to indicate the desired sexual permissiveness of their partners and later rated their perceptions of partners in casual and serious relationships. The results demonstrated that women desired sexually nonpermissive partners in both casual and committed relationships because they always wanted their children to receive the maximal care from both parents. Men prefer sexually nonpermissive partners only in serious relationships. This study provided evidence that SDS exists in partner perception and is influenced by the types of relationships that they engage in.

However, several improvements can be made to this study. First, the generalizability of this study to non-student populations was limited. Because this study only recruited students from the University of Wisconsin, people from other cultural or educational backgrounds and age groups were not considered. In addition, the researchers identified other variables that might affect people's perceptions of their partners in real life, such as attractiveness, attitudes, and sociocultural status. Therefore, solely investigating sexual permissiveness lacked ecological validity.

The research also analyzed SDS concerning female contraceptive uses. Women who provide condoms are viewed more negatively because condoms indicate that they are more prepared to engage in casual sexual activities [5]. In the study, female participants read two diary entries from the female target. They received one of the three scenarios in the second entry, which described male condom use, female condom use, or no condom use conditions [6]. After reading the diaries, the participants were asked to rate the target's behaviors and personality and assume others' perceptions of her. The results supported the hypothesis that people would view women who provide condoms least positively.

Although this study was critical in explaining why women are indifferent to contraceptive uses, it had some limitations. This study only analyzed women's perceptions of female contraceptive behavior and their assumptions about men's beliefs. It failed to investigate whether men truly endorse SDS in a condom-provided condition. In addition, the diaries were constructed from a female perspective so that pre-existing gender bias might influence the results.

Kelly and Bazzini modified the design of this experiment by adding male participants to the study. They also used a sociosexual orientation scale to collect participants' sexual experiences [6]. This study provided different results as women who provided condoms were rated more positively than those who did not use condoms. Men also agreed that women who offered condoms were more positive and mature. Further, sexual experience positively correlated to the evaluation of female contraceptive behaviors. Thus, this study gave researchers new insights into the existence of SDS in female

contraceptive uses. However, this study did not test people's ratings of the male target's behaviors. Collecting participants' perceptions of the male target is critical to compare the standards for men and women and to see if SDS exists.

Research has recently shown that SDS and gender differences are only reflected on implicit levels [7]. Explicit SDS seems to disappear as people are more aware of gender equality promoted in society. Yet, other researchers argued the existence of two sexual double standards among young adults, which is that people would rate the targets of the same gender more positively for engaging in sexual activities. They explained it by more liberal attitudes toward sexual behaviors today.

In conclusion, the existence of explicit and implicit SDS in contemporary society is still in debate. Previous research on SDS generally lacked cross-cultural validity. In addition, there should be more research about other real-life instances where SDS might occur, such as unintended pregnancies. Lastly, commitment to relationships seems closely related to SDS, so it is also significant to consider the influence of relationship types on people's perceptions and evaluations of sexual behaviors.

2 The Current Study

The current study attempts to investigate whether women and men are perceived differently for having or leading to unintended pregnancies in casual and committed relationships before marriage. This research question examines the existence of explicit SDS but adds to the research by exploring SDS under different relationship types from the instance of unintended pregnancies. It will also modify the experimental designs. It will recruit male and female participants and ask them to rate both the male and female targets. The scenarios will be described using a subjective voice so that gender bias can be limited.

This research expects that women who have unintended pregnancies will be viewed less positively in casual relationships than men who lead to unintended pregnancies (H1) due to SDS. In serious relationships, women and men who have or lead to unintended pregnancies will not be viewed differently (H2). It is because men and women were both expected to be prepared to invest equal parental care for their children. The intensity of SDS in casual and committed relationships will be significantly different (H3), as commitments to relationships are shown to affect people's perceptions of their partners' sexual permissiveness.

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 Participants

The sample will consist of 500 male and female heterosexual undergraduate students from Nanjing Vocational University of Industry Technology, which is a junior college in China. This sample size will generate a statistical power of 0.95 with an effect size of 0.4 and allow any invalid or incomplete to be excluded. Participants have to be at least 18 years old to take part in the study. The ages of the participants will vary from

18 to 22 because SDS and sexual scripts are shown to be most salient among young adults [8]. The target population of this experiment is Chinese population because they are not thoroughly studied in extant research. This population represent people who preserve a more conservative belief towards premarital sexual behaviors. Considering that previous experiments recruited university students with middle or high educational background and socioeconomic status, this study decides to sample students from a junior college, who enables the researchers of this paper to examine the existence of SDS in a population with different educational levels.

3.2 Design

The design of this experiment will be a 2 (gender of the targets: male and female) \times 2 (relationship types: casual and committed) \times 4 (evaluations: value, likability, success, intelligence) mixed design. A within-subject design will be used to collect participants' evaluations of male and female targets, and a between-subject design will be adopted to investigate the influence of relationship types on their endorsement of SDS.

3.3 Procedure

After completing the informed consent sheets, briefing statements, and demographics questionnaires, participants will be randomly given one of the two scenarios (casual or committed relationships) to read. Both scenarios introduce the male and female targets (Daniel and Jenny), their encounter, and the unintended pregnancy, but they only differ in the types of relationships the targets engage in. After reading the scenarios, participants will use a Modified Evaluation of People Scale to evaluate both the male and female targets [9]. The participants will then complete a memory test to assess whether they pay attention to the scenarios throughout the study. The memory test will contain three multiple choice questions about the targets' names and majors and how they met each other. One question will also ask the participants to identify the type of relationship described in each scenario. After the memory test, they will be asked to answer an open-ended question, "What do you think the aim of the study is?" to assess if they have already known the aim of the study. At last, the participants will be debriefed and released.

3.4 Materials

The primary materials used in this study include briefing and debriefing statements, informed consent sheets, demographics questionnaires, printed versions of casual and committed scenarios, the Modified Evaluation of People Scale, and the memory test[9].

Scenarios.

The scenarios will introduce the basic information of the male and female targets (Daniel and Jenny). The only difference between the scenarios is whether the unintended pregnancy is due to casual sexual activities or not. This enables the study of SDS within

each scenario and whether relationship types influence people's evaluations of both genders. An example of casual relationship scenario is as follows.

Daniel and Jenny were both college students who graduated last year. Daniel majored in computer science, while Jenny was a finance major. They both got employed after graduation. Daniel and Jenny met each other at a party one night. They really hit it off! They not only found that they were from the same college but also discovered similar hobbies. They talked a lot and stayed until the party ended. Daniel offered to walk Jenny home. He tarried because neither he nor Jenny wanted to end the conversation. Under the dim light, they kept talking and started to make out. Things had gotten carried away since that night. Jenny found that she was pregnant because they had sex on the night Daniel stayed. They were planning what they should do next.

Demographics Questionnaire.

The demographics questionnaire will ask about participants' gender, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Modified Evaluation of People Scale.

The participants will use the Evaluation of People Scale adapted from Marks & Fraley (2005) for target evaluations. After reading one of the two scenarios, the participants will assess the male and female targets on four subscales (values, likability, success, and intelligence). The questionnaire contains a total of 20 statements. Participants will indicate their levels of agreement using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) for each statement. A strong correlation was revealed between the four subscales' means (range: .62-.77) and high internal consistency ($\alpha=.95$) [10]. Therefore, the mean score of the four subscales' means will be calculated to produce a final score for male and female targets' in each scenario.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 Statistical Procedures

Two t-tests will be conducted using SPSS for data analysis. To detect the existence of SDS within each scenario, the researchers will calculate the mean score that the participants rate the male and female targets and use a paired samples t-test to compare their mean scores. The independent variable in this analysis will be the gender of the targets, and the dependent variable will be the evaluation score they receive. The second analysis is set up to determine whether the significance of SDS varies among different relationship types. An independent samples t-test will be employed to compare the average difference score (difference score = male target's mean score - female target's mean score) between male and female targets in casual and committed scenarios. The independent variable will be the levels of commitment to relationships, and the dependent variable will be the difference score.

4.2 Data exclusion

Participants' data should meet specific criteria before being included in the data analysis. Participants will be excluded if they do not consent to participate in the study, do not complete the questionnaire (<80%), do not identify the relationship type described in their scenario, or do not pass the memory test (<60%).

4.3 Expected Results of Analysis I

The result is expected to be consistent with H1. When unintended pregnancies happen in a casual relationship, the female target who has an unintended pregnancy will be evaluated significantly less positively than the male target ($p < 0.05$). This prediction is based on the findings that women have to be more selective in casual relationships because they have more parental investment [2,3]. Figure 1 demonstrates the significant difference between the scores of male and female targets in a casual relationship.

When committed relationships are indicated, the male and female targets' scores will not differ significantly ($p > 0.05$). The result is shown in Figure 1. This predicted result is based on the findings that both males and females in committed relationships would have equal parental investments because males would also be dedicated to supporting their own offspring [4].

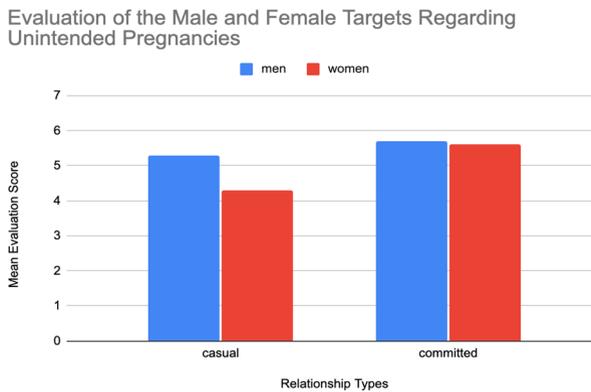


Fig. 1. Evaluation of the Male and Female Targets Regarding Unintended Pregnancies in Casual and Committed Relationships(self-painted)

4.4 Expected Results in Analysis II

Figure 2 illustrates that the difference score in the casual relationship will be significantly larger than that in the committed relationship ($p < 0.05$). This demonstrates that relationship types will affect people's endorsement of double standards for sexual behaviors. The larger different score in the casual relationship will also provide evidence for the first two hypotheses, as it will demonstrate that SDS is significant in casual relationships but not in committed relationships.

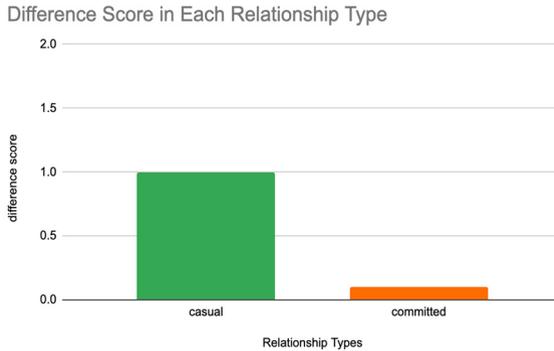


Fig. 2. Difference Scores in Casual and Committed Relationships(self-painted)

5 Conclusion

Overall, the results indicate that explicit SDS still exists in contemporary society and varies between casual and committed relationships. In casual relationships, women will be rated more negatively than men for having unintended pregnancies. In contrast, women and men will not be viewed differently for unintended pregnancies in committed relationships. These results will provide evidence for SDS and the social strategies theory. Alternatively, the existence of SDS could also be explained by the social learning theory [11]. The researchers posit that men are usually rewarded as they do not carry burdens, such as pregnancies, after having casual sexual activities. However, women receive several punishments for casual sexual activities, including unintended pregnancies, unplanned birth, and insufficient parental care for their children. Due to the different consequences that men and women receive after engaging in sexual behaviors, people gradually form a double standard for each gender [12].

5.1 Limitations

Although this paper addresses some methodological limitations of previous literature, it has some limitations. First, the questionnaire that participants use to evaluate the targets is a type of explicit measure of SDS. Using self-report questionnaires makes it more likely that participants will be subject to social desirability bias [13]. On the other hand, implicit measures such as Implicit Association Test (IAT) will minimize people's awareness and bias and thus reflect the actual perceptions of gender and sexuality [7]. This suggests that future research should use a more implicit method to measure people's endorsement of SDS.

Additionally, this experiment fails to control the sexual experience of the participants. It has demonstrated that participants' sexual experience positively correlates with their evaluation of women engaging in sexual behaviors [6]. Further research should consider or control the sexual experience and its influence people's endorsement of SDS.

Another limitation of our study is its generalizability. Since this experiment will only collect a sample from the Nanjing Vocational University of Industry Technology in China, the results can hardly be generalized to a population from another cultural and educational background. In addition, the experiment will be conducted in an artificial environment. It means that the generalizability of the results to natural settings is limited since there are other confounding variables in real life that might affect people's endorsement of SDS. Considering that people's attitudes toward unintended pregnancies and abortion vary between regions, age groups, economic status, educational levels, and cultural backgrounds, it is crucial for researchers to investigate this issue in different populations in the future.

5.2 Implications

This paper will advance the literature on SDS in various aspects. The research question explores the endorsement of SDS in the instance of unintended pregnancies, on which research about SDS is limited. The two statistical analyses conducted illustrate that the research question focuses on both different perceptions of men and women engaging in sexual activities and the impact of the relationship type. By manipulating the levels of commitment to relationships and asking participants to rate targets of both genders, researchers will be able to understand in which conditions people endorse SDS more significantly.

The study of SDS in unintended pregnancies also provides practical implications. According to statistics, "Eighty-five million pregnancies, representing 40 percent of all pregnancies, were unintended in 2012. Of these, 50 percent ended in abortion, 13 percent ended in miscarriage, and 38 percent resulted in an unplanned birth." Unintended pregnancies could produce adverse health, social, and psychological consequences for women and their children [14,15]. Studying SDS and unintended pregnancies is thus critical as it allows more people to recognize the harsh judgments and social pressure that women face in contemporary society. Further, educators and governments could also utilize the results to promote gender equality in the education and law systems. With a more normative and fair view of gender and sexual behaviors, people will be more likely to treat men and women equitably [7].

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