

Sex Differences in Sexuality Among Medical Students: Effects of Increasing Socioeconomic Status

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Research has consistently shown that, compared to men, women are more cautious and selective and maintain greater marital aspirations in entering and maintaining sexual relationships. One explanation of this sex difference is that women have traditionally had inferior access to earning power and social status and consequently were forced to acquire socioeconomic status (SES) through their choice of marriage partners. A contrasting view is that this difference is a component of the basic sex difference identified in the Kinsey studies: Men are more likely than women to dissociate coitus from emotional attachment and to desire and seek coitus with a variety of partners. These two explanations were explored in open-ended interviews with matched samples of 20 male and 20 female medical students. The results were more consistent with the perspective of basic sex differences than with the differential resources explanation. Increasing female SES does not appear to eliminate or even substantially reduce this sex difference. Increasing SES tends to enlarge the pool of acceptable, available sexual and marital partners for men while it tends to reduce the pool for women. Increasing SES thus tends to have different effects on men and women and may cause sex differences in the tendency to associate coitus with emotional attachments and marital aspirations to be more, rather than less, apparent. Extensive case data with verbatim quotations are presented to reveal the emotions and desires underlying subjects' overt behavior.

KEY WORDS: sex differences; sexual behavior; socioeconomic status; nonmarital coitus.

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INTRODUCTION

Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) identified the following sex differences in sexuality: Men are more easily aroused, especially visually, and more easily conditioned to respond to a greater variety of stimuli. Male sexuality is more focused on the genitals and orgasm and is more continuous and appetitive. Men show a greater tendency to desire and seek sexual relations with a variety of partners. In comparison, women's sexuality is more discontinuous, less easily aroused, less focused on the genitals, more dependent on the emotional content of a relationship, and women are less likely to desire and seek coitus with a variety of partners. Kinsey et al. referred to these sex differences as *basic*; hereafter I use this term in referring to these differences.

A generation later, Blumstein and Schwartz' study (1983) of over 5000 couples produced results remarkably similar to those of the Kinsey studies. Men tend to have more sexual partners than women and fewer emotional attachments. Men tend to seek a variety of sexual partners for the sake of variety and are more oriented toward genital sex and less toward affection and cuddling than are women. In contrast, women prefer sex within emotional, stable, monogamous relationships because they want sex to function as a strong emotional as well as physical bond (p. 302). Studies of gay males and lesbians have shown that these basic sex differences are even more apparent when these groups are compared than when heterosexual men and women are compared (Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Symons, 1979; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983, Singer, 1985b).

Kinsey et al. found that factors like class background and early religious and moral training were poor predictors of current sexual behavior. Much better predictors were sex of subject, attained or future social class, and current sexual opportunities (Kinsey et al., 1948; Pomeroy, 1972). Subsequent studies have tended to confirm these findings (Spanier, 1976; Edwards and Booth, 1976). These findings suggest that although basic sex differences are mediated by social factors, these differences are remarkably pervasive and persistent and tend to appear whenever opportunities and restrictions allow them to emerge. A corollary of this principle is that basic sex differences are often compromised in heterosexual relations. Because male and female sexual desires and capacities differ in fundamental respects, most men and women find it necessary to modify their sexual behavior in order to accommodate the opposite sex's basic desires and capacities (Kinsey et al., 1953):

The possibility of reconciling the different sexual interests and capacities of females and males, the possibility of working out sexual adjustment in marriage, and the possibility of adjusting social concepts to allow for these differences between females and males, will depend upon our willingness to accept the realities which the available data seem to indicate. (pp. 688-689)