


Backlash From the Bedroom: Stigma Mediates Gender Differences in Acceptance of Casual Sex Offers

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Abstract

Harsher judgments toward women (relative to men) for engaging in similar heterosexual sexual activity have been termed the sexual double standard. Within heterosexual casual sex scenarios, we examined whether the sexual double standard can be explained by desire to avoid counterstereotypical behaviors for fear of social repercussions (i.e., backlash effects). Study 1a showed that female casual sex accepters received more opprobrium than male accepters. Study 1b demonstrated that women were less likely to accept casual sex offers than men and that the gender difference was partially mediated by the more negative judgments women anticipated for accepting the casual sex offer. In Study 2a, participants recalled real-life sexual proposals; women expected to be perceived more negatively than men for accepting an offer of casual sex. Finally, in Study 2b, we demonstrated that fear of stigma mediates gender differences in acceptance of actual recalled casual sex offers. Across the four studies and nearly 3,000 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 74, we examined the role of stigma in men and women's reactions to casual sex and successfully integrated two relatively independent research domains: that of sexuality on one hand, and research on the backlash effects on the other. We were also able to extend the concept of backlash to help us understand a wider range of social choices.

Keywords

sexuality, stigma, human sex differences, sexual risk taking, sexual attitudes, sexual double standard, casual sex, backlash effect

Gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors are common, and among these, gender differences in preferences for casual sex are among the largest and best documented (see Peplau, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010, for reviews). Current explanations of gender differences in casual sex focus largely on evolutionary-based mating strategies (Buss & Schmitt, 1993) or the role that anticipated pleasure from the sexual interaction may play in decisions about whether to engage in casual sex encounters (Conley, 2011).

Sexual strategies theory posits that women on average are less likely than men to accept a casual sex offer because they have relatively fewer ova than men have sperm and thus must be choosier about mates (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). However, Conley (2011) demonstrated that perceived sexual ability of the casual sex proposer was the strongest predictor of accepting a casual sex offer for both women and men. More importantly, pleasure partially mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of a casual sex offer. Additionally, other factors that Conley examined, including fear of physical harm (i.e., robbery, mugging, or sexual assault), were also significant predictors of rejection of a casual sex offer for women. But factors related to sexual strategies theory (e.g., good earning prospects, status, and inclination to give gifts to partner) were not significant predictors of responses to a casual sex offer for women or men, across a

wide variety of contexts.¹ Thus, Conley demonstrated new routes toward understanding gender differences in this domain (i.e., proposer's sexual capability, proposer's potential to harm). However, given that mediation was only partial in Conley's research, other explanations are needed.

The current research provides an additional, much-needed explanation for these differences that incorporates central tenets of social psychology: stigma and backlash. The role that stigma plays in promoting gender differences has not been widely considered, which is puzzling given that psychologists have demonstrated the vast impact of stigma in a wide variety of social settings (see Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000, for a review). In the current research, we integrated research on sexual double standards (see Crawford & Popp, 2003, for a review) and the backlash effect (e.g., Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004) to provide a theoretical explanation for gender differences among heterosexuals in casual sex that has not been well represented in psychological literature. Specifically,

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we aimed to demonstrate how the sexual double standard and the backlash effect can help explain gender differences in acceptance of casual sex.

Avoiding Stigmatized Behaviors

To understand gender differences in casual sex, we draw on stigma research. Contemporary definitions of stigma conceptualize it as a social construction: Society recognizes some distinguishing attribute of an individual and, consequently, devalues an individual for possessing this norm-violating characteristic (Dovidio et al., 2000). A stigmatized individual “is a person whose social identity, or membership in some social category, call into question his or her full humanity—the person is devalued, spoiled, or flawed in the eyes of others” (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998, p. 504; see also Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). Stigma research has focused on stigmatized social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation).

In the current research, we focus on stigmatized *behaviors*, rather than stigma at the individual or group level. Research has demonstrated that stigma associated with certain behaviors can reduce the likelihood that individuals will engage in those behaviors. For example, stigma associated with condom use reduces intent to engage in safer sexual behaviors (Helweg-Larsen & Collins, 1994); perceptions of stigma surrounding psychological counseling predict avoidance of psychotherapy (Deane & Chamberlain, 1994; Deane & Todd, 1996; Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000); and stigma surrounding the use of antidepressants is associated with less adherence to a medication regimen (Sirey et al., 2001). Taken together, this body of research suggests that people avoid engaging in behaviors they may otherwise want to pursue (e.g., condom use, seeking mental health services) because of the stigmatization of those behaviors. Thus, we have ample evidence to suggest that if casual sex is differentially stigmatized for women, this stigma could lead women to reject casual sex offers, even if women would otherwise prefer to engage in that behavior.

The Backlash Effect

The well-documented phenomenon known as the backlash effect (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001) provides additional evidence that stigma can influence behaviors. Backlash refers to the violation of prescriptive stereotypes or the enactment of proscriptive stereotypes (i.e., how men and women are supposed to act or not act) that typically result in social and/or economic sanctions for counterstereotypical behavior (Rudman, 1998; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Research by Rudman and colleagues on the backlash effect has shown that when both female and male manager applicants described themselves as competitive and gave strong examples of their leadership, men were viewed as more likable and were more likely to be hired than women;

thus, women incur a risk from acting “manly” (i.e., agentic). Furthermore, Amanatullah and Morris (2010) found that women decreased their levels of assertiveness when negotiating on their own behalf for fear of violating stereotypes of femininity; however, women were more successful at bargaining on behalf of others because they did not expect this behavior to be perceived as unfeminine. These findings illustrate how women avoid behaving in counterstereotypical (or masculine) ways to avoid being perceived negatively.

According to Rudman and Glick (1999), fear of backlash plays a significant role in the performance of gender, by keeping men masculine (i.e., agentic) and women feminine (i.e., communal). We suggest that fear of backlash also extends to more personal and intimate contexts, such as accepting casual sex offers. Women may fear social repercussions for acting with agency not only in the workplace but also in the context of expressing interest in casual sex.

Correspondingly, gender norms are particularly salient in the context of sexual relations (Rohlinger, 2002; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006), making departures from gender norms in sexual situations more obvious and especially prone to eliciting backlash. Rudman and Fairchild (2004) proposed a working model of the role of the threat of backlash in stereotype maintenance processes. This model posits that those who fear backlash may hide their deviance (i.e., counterstereotypical behaviors) and conform to stereotypes to avoid social rejection and maintain their self-esteem. Rudman and Fairchild suggest that their model may extend outside the instances of backlash they measure and could include occasions “whenever normative expectancies loom large” (p. 173). On these occasions, “actors who fear backlash may respond defensively in ways that support cultural stereotypes” (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004, p. 173).

We suggest that sexual interactions provide another context in which backlash plays out. A wealth of research exists concerning the restrictive views people hold about women’s sexuality as compared to men’s sexuality, that is, the sexual double standard (see Crawford & Popp, 2003, for a review). In heterosexual sexual contexts, women are stereotypically expected to be generally uninterested in sexuality outside relationships, protective of their sexual “honor,” and interested in sex in relationships only to please the man involved (Byers, 1996). Thus, based on the backlash effect, we predicted harsh outcomes for violation of sexuality-related gender stereotypes; we expected that for women, but not for men, fear of stigma associated with violating gender norms would lead to more rejection of offers of casual sex. In sum, we predicted that backlash effects surrounding casual sex for women decrease the likelihood of women accepting casual sex offers.

The Sexual Double Standard and Casual Sex

We argue that engaging in casual sex differentially stigmatizes women (just as agentic behaviors in occupational settings differentially stigmatize women); therefore, gender

differences in acceptance of casual sex may be explained, at least in part, by stigma associated with casual sex for women. Although ample research has examined the sexual double standard (Reiss, 1960, 1964), we are aware of no research that experimentally examined how casual-sex-related *behaviors* are altered for fear of social ramifications.

The sexual double standard is demonstrated when people endorse notions that women should express their sexuality less freely than men and when women are perceived more negatively for engaging in the same sexual behaviors as men (see Crawford & Popp, 2003, for a review). Although some researchers suggest that the sexual double standard has narrowed or, in some cases, disappeared entirely (Mark & Miller, 1986; Marks & Fraley, 2005), others suggest that this is an artifact of the specific sexual behaviors studied (Jonason & Marks, 2009) or problematic research designs (see Crawford & Popp, 2003, for further discussion).

The plausibility of the existence of the sexual double standard is clearer in some cases than others. Experiments comparing women to men targets of varying levels of sexual activity are less likely to demonstrate sexual double standard effects (Mark & Miller, 1986; Marks & Fraley, 2005). That is, sexual standards are viewed as more equitable by college students when a woman is compared to a man with the same level of sexual experience in an experimental design. More common sexual behaviors (e.g., premarital sex), for which women were once judged more harshly than men (Reiss, 1960), no longer show much, if any, support for the sexual double standard (DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979). Therefore, some researchers have concluded that perceptions of sexually active women and men are more equitable than would be expected by the sexual double standard perspective (Mark & Miller, 1986; Marks & Fraley, 2005).

However, when people are explicitly asked whether the sexual double standard exists, clear agreement emerges that it does. The vast majority of people (85% in one study) report its existence (Marks, 2002, as cited in Marks & Fraley, 2005). Further, consistent with social-cognitive approaches to person perception, experimental effects of the double standard do surface when participants' attention is divided, specifically when cognitive resources are taxed (Marks, 2008). That is, under cognitive load, participants are more likely to show differences in their perceptions of women versus men with equivalent sexual histories. Because people's attention is usually divided when making social judgments, this finding suggests a greater prevalence of sexual double standards than earlier experimental work on the topic suggests. Furthermore, research has consistently shown that women are judged more harshly than men for engaging in extradyadic sexual behaviors (Mark & Miller, 1986; Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996). Thus, women might be less easily "forgiven" for engaging in casual sex because it occurs outside the confines of an established relationship. Additionally, Crawford and Popp (2003) make a compelling case that the sexual double standard exists within understudied populations and among

participants who can less easily be subjected to experimental or traditional survey methodologies (i.e., younger, less formally educated, and more ethnically diverse populations).

Finally, women seem to be more aware of the existence of double standards than men are (Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988), which could heighten gender differences in sexuality. That is, because of women's greater awareness of the sexual double standard, they may be especially likely to let it guide their behaviors and, specifically, may be especially likely to avoid engaging in casual sex for fear of stigmatization. This reasoning also seems consistent given the backlash avoidance model, or the idea that women's fear of backlash may interfere with their ability to self-promote (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010).

Research Overview

The well-known sexual double standard suggests that women and men are differentially stigmatized for their sexual behaviors. Shedding light on the ways in which particular stigmas differentially impact social groups may be a useful means for explaining group-based differences in behaviors. We seek both to document the existence of the sexual double standard in a particular domain and to demonstrate the effects of that double standard on sexual decision making among heterosexual women and men. This research has three theoretical goals: (a) to provide an explanation of gender differences in acceptance of casual sex based on differential expectations of stigma, (b) to expand the application and understanding of the backlash effect to encompass more personal and intimate contexts, and (c) to extend and integrate the theoretical frameworks of the sexual double standard and the backlash effect. Specifically, we examined whether women would receive greater social stigmatization as a result of their acceptance of a sexual offer than men would, as predicted by research on sexual double standards. Moreover, we ascertained whether this perceived social opprobrium mediated gender differences in acceptance of a casual sex offer.

Study I

What are the social consequences for a woman who accepts a casual sexual offer? How does an individual who accepts a casual sex offer expect to be perceived? In Study 1a and 1b, we considered these questions by presenting undergraduates with scenarios about accepting or rejecting a sexual proposal. The sexual double standard (Reiss, 1960, 1964) suggests that if a woman and a man engage in the same sexual behavior, the woman will be perceived more negatively than the man.

We utilized a paradigm that has been influential in documenting women's reluctance to have casual sex (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Conley, 2011). In research conducted by Clark and Hatfield (1989), confederates approached unsuspecting other-sex students on a college campus and asked

them, “Would you go to bed with me tonight?” We will refer to this as the Clark and Hatfield Sexual Proposal (CHSP). The study was repeated at three time points over 25 years (Clark, 1990; Clark & Hatfield, 1989). Not a single female participant agreed to the CHSP at any time point, whereas the majority of men (around 70%), at each of three different time points, agreed to the offer. Conley (2011) demonstrated results similar to those of Clark and Hatfield (1989) with a person perception procedure and documented that this approach represents a reasonable working model of gender dynamics in the context of casual sex while avoiding logistic and ethical problems surrounding an actual proposal. Therefore, we used the CHSP person perception paradigm to assess reactions to casual sex in the current studies.

Study 1a

To fully understand why women are less likely to accept a sexual offer from a stranger, it is crucial to assess the social ramifications of this behavior for women versus men (i.e., to determine whether a sexual double standard exists surrounding casual sex). In Study 1a, undergraduates read a scenario about a woman or a man who accepts a casual sex offer from a member of the other sex. If double standard effects are operating, we would expect women who accepted a sexual offer to be perceived more negatively (that is, as less intelligent, less psychologically well adjusted, and more promiscuous) than men who engaged in the same behavior.

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate research assistants approached participants in public places on a large, U.S. urban university campus and asked them to complete a survey. Participants completed surveys on the spot and returned them to experimenters in sealed envelopes. The sample included 195 participants (109; 56% women). Ethnically, the sample was predominantly European American (139; 71%) and African American (27; 14%), with the remainder identifying as other ethnicities or declining to list an ethnicity. The mean age was 22 (range 18–30). Our institutional review board approval did not allow us to collect information about participants’ sexual orientation; however, given that we were soliciting participants’ impressions of, not potential responses to, a heterosexual proposal, we believe that our goals are independent of participants’ sexual orientation.

Materials

We designed a scenario that would closely parallel that of the original CHSP utilizing a person perception paradigm. The language we used for the proposal was exactly what the confederates in the original Clark and Hatfield (1989) studies said, and the situation in which the proposal occurred for the participants in the Clark and Hatfield studies (a college campus) was maintained. Thus, participants read the following scenario:

Table 1. Correlations Among Dependent Variables, Study 1a

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Intelligence Scale	—				
2 Promiscuity Scale	-.35**	—			
3 Mental Health Scale	.60**	-.22**	—		
4 Physical Attractiveness Scale	.23**	-.12	.26**	—	
5 Riskiness (Item)	-.18**	.60**	-.22**	-.09	—
6 Competence (Item)	.53**	-.16*	.54**	.21**	-.16**

* $p < .05$, two tailed. ** $p < .01$, two tailed.

Mark is a student at [your university]. One day, a woman approached him on campus and said “I have been noticing you around campus and I find you to be very attractive. Would you go to bed with me tonight?” Mark was quite surprised, but he quickly replied, “Sure, where and what time?”

Another version of the scenario was identical except that the female protagonist (Lisa) was approached by a man with an offer for sex. Each participant saw only one scenario.

An initial set of themes (including suggestions for specific items) were generated by undergraduate research assistants to address ways in which people who do or do not engage in casual sex may be perceived. Based on these themes, the first author developed semantic differential items to address the target’s intelligence (*unintelligent–intelligent* and *smart–dumb*; reverse-scored; $\alpha = .75$), promiscuity (*promiscuous–monogamous*, *sleeps with one person–sleeps with many people*, and *sexually liberal–sexually conservative*; $\alpha = .63$), mental health (*psychologically unhealthy–psychologically healthy* and *mentally stable–mentally unstable*; $\alpha = .62$), and physical attractiveness (*ugly–gorgeous* and *physically attractive–physically unattractive*; $\alpha = .62$). In addition, two single-item measures were included: *incompetent–competent* and *cautious–risky*. All items were reverse-scored as appropriate and participants responded on 6-point scales where higher averaged numbers indicated stronger endorsement of the scale.

Results

To examine the sexual double standard in Study 1a, we analyzed the results using a 2 (Gender of Participant) \times 2 (Gender of Proposer) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The dependent variables utilized for the MANOVAs presented throughout our article were normally distributed. No outliers emerged and thus all data were retained. The dependent variables in the analysis were the scales listed above, as well as the items addressing competence and risk. (See Table 1 for correlations among the dependent variables.) This MANOVA yielded a significant main effect of target gender, $F(6, 184) = 3.49$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Likewise, a main effect of participant gender emerged, $F(6, 184) = 5.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$. No

Table 2. Mean Target and Rater Differences in Perceptions of Women and Men Who Agree to a Casual Sexual Encounter, Study 1a

Dependent Variable	Female <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Male <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender of target					
Intelligence Scale	2.26 (1.06)	2.80 (1.30)	22.03	(1, 191)	.001
Promiscuity Scale	5.35 (.71)	5.16 (.93)	4.86	(1, 191)	.03
Mental Health Scale	3.10 (1.06)	3.54 (1.02)	10.89	(1, 191)	.002
Physical Attractiveness Scale	3.88 (1.04)	4.06 (.93)	2.32	(1, 190)	.13
Riskiness (Item)	5.40 (1.03)	5.18 (1.26)	8.65	(1, 190)	.005
Competence (Item)	3.16 (1.18)	3.53 (1.33)	7.26	(1, 190)	.009
Gender of rater					
Intelligence Scale	2.23 (.94)	2.92 (1.40)	16.16	(1, 191)	.001
Promiscuity Scale	5.36 (.83)	5.12 (.84)	4.13	(1, 191)	.05
Mental Health Scale	3.19 (.93)	3.50 (1.19)	5.86	(1, 191)	.02
Physical Attractiveness Scale	3.89 (1.03)	4.09 (.93)	2.46	(1, 191)	.12
Riskiness (Item)	5.54 (1.10)	5.10 (1.29)	4.32	(1, 190)	.08
Competence (Item)	3.28 (1.26)	3.53 (1.33)	2.65	(1, 190)	.11

significant interaction was found. Simple effects were analyzed with *t*-tests.

Overall, our results were consistent with the existence of a sexual double standard for casual sex (see Table 2). Participants perceived Lisa to be less intelligent, less mentally healthy, more promiscuous, less competent, and more risky than Mark—even though Mark and Lisa both accepted the sexual offer. No target differences emerged with regard to attractiveness. Turning to gender differences between raters, women rated the targets as less intelligent, less mentally healthy, and more promiscuous than men did (see Table 2).

Summary

Participants of both sexes rated the female target more negatively than the male target, indicating that negative social ramifications of accepting casual sexual offers are in fact greater for women than for men, consistent with the hypothesis that sexual double standards exist. In addition, women were harsher in their judgments of people (of either sex) who would accept such a sexual offer, consistent with prior research (Sprecher, 1989; Sprecher et al., 1988).

Study 1b

In this phase of Study 1, we examined a parallel question to that posed in Study 1a. Specifically, we were interested in how participants expected to be perceived if they themselves accepted or rejected a sexual offer and in how these expectations for women and men might differ. By focusing on expectations for their own behavior, we made this part of Study 1 more self-relevant for participants. We also examined two potentially opposite predictions for women and men wherein women might anticipate negative consequences for accepting an offer of casual sex; men, for rejecting it. Men may receive

social opprobrium for *declining* a casual sexual offer, which would provide a partial explanation for their greater likelihood of accepting the offer.

Participants and Procedure

The sample ($n = 174$) was 62% ($n = 108$) female and included 17% ($n = 30$) African Americans and 71% ($n = 123$) European Americans, with the remainder listing other ethnicities or not listing an ethnicity. The sample was 98% ($n = 171$) heterosexual and 2% ($n = 3$) bisexual. The mean age was 24.8 (range 18–54). The procedure was fundamentally the same as Study 1a.

Materials

The scenario was worded to be as similar as possible to the script utilized by confederates in the CHSP. First participants were asked to “please imagine the following situation.” The scenario read: “An attractive member of the opposite sex approaches you on campus and says ‘I have been noticing you around campus and I find you to be very attractive. Would you go to bed with me tonight?’”

First participants answered questions about their reaction to this offer. Participants were asked, “Assuming you were free that night, how likely would you be to accept the sexual offer?” Participants answered this question on a 7-point scale (higher numbers indicated greater agreement).² Next, half of the participants were randomly assigned to imagine that they agreed to the encounter; the other half imagined that they refused the sexual offer. Social stigma measures were designed to assess how participants expected to be perceived when they (hypothetically) agreed to or refused the sexual proposal.

For this study, we developed a somewhat broader set of dependent variables. First, undergraduate research assistants

Table 3. Correlations Among Dependent Variables, Studies 1b and 2a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 General Evaluation		.88**	-.84**	.85**	.40**	.23**	-.85**	-.82**
2 Intelligence	.82**		-.83**	.83**	.49**	.13	-.89**	-.79**
3 Promiscuity	-.73**	-.58**		-.74**	-.31**	-.25**	.77**	.85**
4 Mental Health	.64**	.67**	-.44**		.49**	.13	-.81**	-.73**
5 Physical Attractiveness	.39**	.42**	-.20**	.39**		-.21**	-.46**	-.29**
6 Gay	.05*	-.04	-.14**	-.11**	-.14**		-.05	-.27**
7 Social Inappropriateness	-.69**	-.72**	.50**	-.64**	-.41**	.07**		.74**
8 Sexually Desperate	-.70**	-.65**	.65**	-.65**	-.38**	-.08**	.56**	
9 Sexual Adjustment	.40**	.47**	-.16**	.54**	.47**	-.21**	-.49**	-.34**

Note. Correlations below the diagonal are for Study 1b; above, Study 2a.

* $p < .05$, two tailed. ** $p < .01$, two tailed.

helped generate a pool of items addressing how people who accept or reject a casual sex proposal may be received. Then the first author chose items for predetermined scales. Specifically, participants completed the following sentence, "If I AGREED to [REFUSED] a sexual encounter with this person, most people would perceive me as:" The measures were divided into nine semantic differential scales (items were reverse-scored as appropriate): general evaluation (*bad-good* and *dirty-clean*, $\alpha = .89$), intelligence (*stupid-intelligent* and *dumb-smart*, $\alpha = .90$), promiscuity (*sleeps with only one person-sleeps with many people*, *someone who does not have a sexual disease-someone who has a sexual disease*, and *someone who has low sex drive-someone who has high sex drive*, $\alpha = .83$), mental health (*mentally unstable-mentally stable* and *psychologically disturbed-psychologically healthy*, $\alpha = .85$), physical attractiveness, (*ugly-gorgeous* and *physically unattractive-physically attractive*, $\alpha = .74$), gay (*heterosexual-homosexual* and *straight-gay*, $\alpha = .86$), social inappropriateness (*appropriate-inappropriate* and *a typical person-an odd person*, $\alpha = .76$), sexually desperate (*sexually discriminating-sexually desperate* and *picky-not picky*, $\alpha = .84$), and sexual adjustment (*someone who has sexual problems-someone who is sexually normal* and *sexually maladjusted-sexually healthy*, $\alpha = .81$). All items were rated on 6-point scales; higher averaged numbers indicated greater amounts of the second trait of the pair.³

Results

We first conducted *t*-tests to assess gender differences in likelihood of acceptance of the sexual offer. Next, MANOVA was conducted to ascertain the relative impact of acceptance or rejection of an offer on expected perceptions of the female and male participants. Simple effects in the MANOVA were analyzed with *t*-tests. Next hierarchical linear regressions determined which social stigma variables predicted acceptance (or rejection) of the offer. Finally, mediational analyses determined whether perceptions of stigma mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the sexual offer.

Acceptance Rates and Impact

Consistent with sexual double standard effects, men ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 2.28$) were more likely to accept the offer than were women ($M = 1.37$; $SD = .96$), $t(79.4) = 7.78$, $p < .001$.⁴ We then conducted a 2 (Imagined Reaction to Offer: Accept, Refuse) \times 2 (Participant Gender) MANOVA, where the dependent variables were each of the scales listed above (see correlations in Table 3). As predicted, the MANOVA revealed an interaction between acceptance or rejection of the offer and gender, $F(9, 161) = 11.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. The pattern of effects suggested that women expected to be perceived more positively than men for rejecting the offer and more negatively than men for accepting the offer (see Table 4 for the analysis of variance for each scale and *t*-tests to determine simple main effects). Below we discuss simple main effects first for accepting the CHSP and then for rejecting the offer.

Women believed that they would be perceived more negatively overall and as less intelligent than men did if they accepted the sexual offer (see Table 4). Also, women who imagined agreeing to the sexual offer thought that they would be perceived as significantly more promiscuous, socially inappropriate, and sexually desperate (relative to men) if they agreed to the sexual offer. Conversely, women (relative to men) believed that they would be perceived as more intelligent, mentally healthy, physically attractive, socially appropriate, sexually well adjusted, and more positively overall if they refused the sexual offer. Finally, relative to women, men thought that others would be more likely to perceive them as gay if they refused the heterosexual sex proposal. This finding is especially relevant from an impression management point of view; many studies suggest that being called "gay" is the most serious insult experienced by heterosexual men (see Murphy, 2004; Thurlow, 2001).

Women who imagined that they had accepted the casual sex offer believed that they would be perceived more negatively on many dimensions than did men. Conversely, women who imagined that they rejected the sexual proposal thought that they would be perceived more positively than men did. Because consequences of accepting (and rewards for

Table 4. Participant Gender \times Responses to the Sexual Offer, Study 1b

Dependent Variable	Accepted		Refused		$F(df = 170)$	p	Accepted			Refused		
	Women M (SD)	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)	Men M (SD)			t	df	P	t	df	p
General Evaluation	1.83 (.79)	2.89 (1.02)	5.65 (.61)	4.62 (1.28)	55.56	.001	5.20	65.7	.001	4.11	34.2	.001
Intelligence	1.82 (.87)	2.70 (1.01)	5.65 (.50)	4.16 (1.28)	56.95	.001	4.30	83	.001	6.09	32.20	.001
Promiscuity	5.18 (.82)	4.79 (.88)	2.23 (.78)	2.61 (1.06)	8.04	.005	2.10	83	.039	1.73	43.12	.09
Mental Health	2.55 (1.13)	2.73 (.84)	5.32 (.84)	4.40 (1.10)	12.93	.001	.80	83	.42	3.99	44.37	.001
Physical Attractiveness	3.48 (1.28)	3.85 (1.05)	4.43 (1.11)	3.86 (1.10)	6.82	.01	1.43	83	.16	2.28	87	.025
Gay	1.48 (.88)	1.53 (.86)	2.08 (1.24)	2.74 (1.63)	9.56	.002	.25	83	.80	2.12	87	.037
Socially Inappropriate	4.85 (.99)	4.01 (1.37)	1.55 (.71)	2.52 (1.12)	31.47	.001	3.28	83	.002	4.25	39.04	.001
Sexually Desperate	5.32 (.82)	4.68 (1.06)	2.13 (.94)	2.28 (1.10)	6.82	.01	3.19	83	.002	.53	87	.53
Sexual Adjustment	2.86 (1.44)	4.05 (.98)	3.23 (1.27)	4.78 (1.04)	8.27	.005	1.22	83	.23	3.14	86	.002

rejecting) a casual sexual offer are stronger for women, they have a greater motivation to reject casual sexual offers than men do. This could be one reason that women were so much less likely to accept the CHSP than men: Women who accept such sexual offers are perceived more negatively than men, which may provide a disincentive for women to accept.

Predicting acceptance

We examined the relationships between perceived stigma associated with accepting or rejecting the offer via hierarchical linear regression. To avoid an excessively complicated regression equation and to ease interpretation of the results, we conducted separate regressions for the two conditions of acceptance and rejection of the sexual offer.⁵ For each of these two equations, the outcome variable was the participant's likelihood of accepting the casual sex offer. In Step 1, we entered participant gender; at Step 2, we entered the general evaluation scale; and at Step 3, we entered the product of participant gender and general evaluation.⁶ All variables in all the studies presented here were centered before being entered into the regression equation. The results of the regressions are presented in Table 5. Recall that participants were first asked whether they would actually accept the sexual offer. Then they were assigned to a condition in which they imagined they accepted or rejected the sexual offer, and answered questions about how they would expect to be perceived if they accepted/rejected the offer. In the following analyses, the likelihood that the participant would accept the offer is the outcome variable and the expectations of how they would be perceived (by condition) for accepting/rejecting the offer are predictor variables.

In the imagined *rejection* condition, gender was the strongest predictor of whether participants would accept the offer (see Table 5a). The general evaluation scale was an additional significant predictor in the second step of the equation. People who thought that they would be perceived negatively if they rejected the offer were more likely to accept the offer. At Step 3, the cross product of gender and general evaluation

was not significant. This non-finding suggests that concerns about being perceived negatively affected both women's and men's likelihood of accepting casual sexual offers. Thus, being perceived negatively for imagining *rejection* of the offer was associated with greater *acceptance* of the offer, for both women and men. Although women receive greater positive responses to rejection of the offer, positive social feedback for rejecting an offer appears to equally motivate women and men to accept the sexual offer.

In the imagined *acceptance* condition, gender also emerged as a significant predictor at Step 1 (see Table 5b). As in the prior analyses, in Step 2, general evaluation was a significant predictor of accepting the offer. Those who believed that they would be perceived negatively if they accepted the offer were less likely to accept the offer. In Step 3, the interaction of gender and general evaluation was significant. Inspection of the simple slopes revealed that women's choices about agreeing to a casual sex offer are more likely to be influenced by how they expect to be perceived than men's are. This finding is consistent with ample research and theory addressing women's socialization to be communal; that is, women are more likely than men to consider how others would feel if they accepted the casual sex offer. Thus, women receive more social opprobrium for accepting a casual sex offer and that social opprobrium influences women's decisions more so than it does men's.

Mediational Analyses

Next, to further determine whether the stigma associated with casual sex was actually influencing participants' likelihood of accepting the casual sex offer, we conducted mediational analyses following Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines. Sobel tests were used to determine whether perceived stigma of casual sex mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer. In the design of our experiment, we asked participants to indicate the stigma they would anticipate if they either (a) rejected the casual sex offer or (b) accepted the casual sex offer. In a separate set of questions,

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Acceptance of a Casual Sexual Offer, Study 1b

Variable	B	SE B	β	R ²	ΔR^2
(a) Imagined rejection condition					
Step 1: Gender**	2.21	.36	.55	.30	.30
Step 2: General Evaluation Scale**	-.72	.18	-.38	.41	.11
Step 3: General Evaluation \times Gender	-.25	.39	-.10	.41	.00
(b) Imagined acceptance condition					
Step 1: Gender***	2.42	.35	.61	.37	.37
Step 2: General Evaluation Scale***	.74	.18	.39	.48	.11
Step 3: General Evaluation \times Gender*	.86	.35	.32	.52	.04

Note. The values of B and β are at step entry. The value of R² is cumulative. The value of ΔR^2 represents the change with the addition of the step.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

we asked participants how they would *actually* respond to the casual sex offer (independent of whether they were assigned to the acceptance or rejection condition).

We conducted the following analyses separately by experimental condition because the direction of causation should vary by condition. That is, among participants who imagined accepting the sexual offer, we assessed whether anticipated social stigma because of acceptance of the sexual offer was associated with less acceptance of the hypothetical offer. Then we separately examined participants who responded to questions about how they would be perceived if they rejected the sexual offer. We tested whether the anticipated social stigma associated with rejection of the sexual offer mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the hypothetical sexual offer. In these analyses, we once again utilized general perceptions of stigma (i.e., the general evaluation scale), because the general perceptions appeared to be closely associated with the other social stigma variables.

We utilized the Sobel (1982) test macro for statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) provided by Preacher and Hayes (2004). This macro estimates indirect effects using both the Sobel test and the bootstrapping techniques (i.e., a nonparametric approach, which means that it does not rely on assumptions of normality in the raw or sampling distributions). Bootstrap results and Sobel test results had similar coefficient estimates and standard errors. We report the results of the Sobel test.

First, we considered whether stigma mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer among participants who imagined how people would react if they knew the participant had *rejected* the casual sex offer. In this condition, we would expect that participants who believed they would be perceived more *positively* for refusing the offer would be *less* likely to accept the offer (and, conversely, that participants who believed that they will be perceived more *negatively* for refusing the offer would be *more* likely to accept the offer). In all mediational analyses, women were coded as 0 and men were coded as 1.

The relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer was significant on its own ($b = 2.21$, $SE = 0.36$,

$p < .001$). When we included stigma as a mediator, participant gender significantly predicted stigma ($b = -1.03$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .00005$), which is consistent with the idea that women perceive more stigma than men do. Lack of anticipated stigma in rejecting the sexual offer, in turn, predicted acceptance of the sexual offer ($b = -.72$, $SE = .18$, $p < .0002$). The relationship between gender and acceptance of the sexual offer ($b = 1.47$, $SE = .39$, $p < .0003$) was weakened with the addition of this mediator. The Sobel coefficient was statistically significant at $.74$ ($SE = .24$, $p < .002$). Thus, these results indicate that anticipated stigma partially mediates the relationship between participant gender and acceptance of a casual sex offer when participants were considering stigma associated with *not* accepting the sexual offer.

Next, we considered whether stigma mediates the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer among participants who imagined how people would react if the participant had *accepted* the casual sex offer. In this condition, we expected that participants who believed they would be perceived more negatively for refusing the offer would be more likely to accept the offer.

Once again, the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer was significant on its own ($b = 2.42$, $SE = 0.35$, $p < .00005$). When we included stigma as a mediator, participant gender significantly predicted the mediator (anticipated stigma; $b = 1.06$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .00005$). This finding is consistent with the idea that women perceive more stigma than men do. Anticipated stigma in accepting the sexual offer, as expected, predicted rejection of the sexual offer ($b = .74$, $SE = .18$, $p < .0001$). The relationship between gender and acceptance of the sexual offer ($b = 1.64$, $SE = .37$, $p < .00005$) was weakened with the addition of this mediator. The Sobel coefficient was again significant at $.78$ ($SE = .24$, $p < .001$). Thus, the results from this condition also indicate that anticipated stigma partially mediates the relationship between participant gender and acceptance of a casual sex offer.

Summary

Two sets of mediational analyses (one for participants who imagined rejecting a casual sex offer and one for participants who imagined accepting a casual sex offer) confirmed our hypothesis: Part of the reason that women are less likely to accept casual offers than men is that women perceive that they will be evaluated more negatively for accepting the offer (or more positively for rejecting the offer) than men do. These findings demonstrate that the backlash effect appears to be regulating casual sex behaviors, at least in this hypothetical context.

Study 2

In Study 1b, we demonstrated differences in how people expected to be perceived, showed that these differences

helped predict acceptance of the hypothetical offer, and demonstrated that concerns about being poorly evaluated by others partially mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the hypothetical sexual proposal. However, Study 1 relied on hypothetical techniques. It is possible that participants would be less motivated by social stigma in real situations that they encounter in their day-to-day lives. For example, if women experience a real casual sex proposal, they may respond differently or not be as concerned with stigma. Therefore, to further consider whether the backlash effect can explain gender differences in reactions to casual sex, we conducted a second set of studies in which participants reported on actual heterosexual casual sex proposals that they have previously experienced in their own lives. In Study 2a, we assessed social reactions to acceptance or rejection of an actual casual sex offer. In Study 2b, we examined whether perceived stigma of accepting an actual sexual offer mediates the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer. In both studies, the most recent heterosexual casual sexual encounter that a participant experienced was assessed because research has shown that people have difficulty remembering the details of less recent sexual acts (e.g., Wiederman, 2001).

Study 2a

In Study 2a, participants considered a time in which they had experienced a casual sex offer. They indicated whether or not they accepted the offer and indicated how they expected to be perceived for their response to the offer.

Participants

Participants were respondents to an online survey. We included only heterosexual participants who had experienced a heterosexual proposal (i.e., a man being proposed to by a woman or a woman being proposed to by a man). The final sample ($n = 2,059$) was 71% ($n = 1,455$) female, as well as 79% ($n = 1,630$) White and 9% ($n = 178$) African American. The mean age was 22.5 (range 18–74). All participants in this study were heterosexual. Nonheterosexual participants were directed to a study investigating casual sex among lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via online classified advertisements (craigslist.org) and by student experimenters posting links to the survey on their social networking sites. Participants were told that the study was geared toward individuals who had been approached for casual sex, whether or not they actually accepted the offer. Participants recalled the most recent time that they had been propositioned for casual sex. Participants described the casual sexual proposals that they had experienced via several open-ended questions; these

questions were reviewed to assure that participants were utilizing a reasonably similar interpretation of a casual sex proposal and to screen out any inauthentic responses. None of these problems emerged, however; all responses were retained. Example responses include: “The person asked if I was busy and if I wanted to get together to ‘have a good time,’” and “She put her hand down my pants.” Then participants indicated whether they accepted the offer and responded to social stigma items.

Measures

First participants were asked, “Did you agree to the sexual offer?” and then “If people knew how you responded to this casual sex offer, how do you think they would perceive you?” As in Study 1b, participants responded to this question using the social stigma variables. These included the following scales: general evaluation ($\alpha = .82$), intelligence ($\alpha = .85$), promiscuity ($\alpha = .80$), mental health ($\alpha = .74$), physical attractiveness ($\alpha = .73$), gay ($\alpha = .78$), social inappropriateness ($\alpha = .43$),⁷ sexually desperate ($\alpha = .76$), and sexual adjustment ($\alpha = .68$). Averaged higher numbers indicated higher levels of these traits, rated on 6-point scales.

Results

First we assessed frequencies of acceptance or rejection of the offer based on gender, and then, using a MANOVA, we considered how women and men expected to be perceived in terms of social stigma (depending upon whether they accepted or rejected the casual sex proposal). To analyze simple effects, we utilized *t*-tests. Next, using a logistic regression, we determined whether the social stigma variables predicted acceptance of the casual sex offer.

Offer Acceptance

Men were more likely to accept (63%) the offer than to reject the offer, and women were more likely to reject than to accept (30%) the offer. Therefore, these results correspond to responses to experimentally derived sexual offers, but the magnitude of the gender differences is smaller. A slightly smaller percentage of men agreed to the offer in these real encounters than in the original CHSP (where rates of agreement hovered around 70%; Clark, 1990; Clark & Hatfield, 1989). Moreover, though no women agreed to the CHSP in any of their three studies, in the current studies, nearly a third agreed to the offers that they encountered in their own lives. These findings suggest that the Clark and Hatfield paradigm of the 1980s was unusual and that aspects of that particular situation may have led to an especially low level of acceptance among women (see Conley, 2011).

Table 6. Gender Differences in Expectations for Being Perceived Negatively After Accepting or Rejecting the Actual Casual Sexual Proposal, Study 2a

Dependent Variable	Accepted		Refused		F	df	p	Accepted		Refused		t	df	p
	Women M (SD)	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)	Men M (SD)				t	df	p	t			
General Evaluation	3.19 (1.18)	3.61 (1.30)	5.05 (1.42)	4.85 (1.18)	20.75	2055	.001	4.78	779.2	.001	2.20	371.3	.03	
Intelligence	3.26 (1.21)	4.11 (1.30)	5.02 (1.40)	4.23 (1.38)	144.97	2055	.001	9.76	785.7	.001	7.60	1,233	.001	
Promiscuity	4.51 (.99)	4.59 (.98)	2.55 (1.42)	2.63 (1.33)	.00	2046	.99	1.18	817	.24	.80	1,229	.42	
Mental Health	4.55 (1.22)	4.91 (1.15)	5.27 (1.14)	5.02 (1.11)	26.61	2054	.001	4.35	816.1	.001	3.99	1,233	.004	
Physical Attractiveness	4.57 (.98)	4.76 (.95)	4.71 (1.11)	4.67 (.95)	4.56	2038	.04	2.69	812	.008	.44	1,226	.66	
Gay	1.05 (.29)	1.09 (.34)	1.17 (.52)	1.58 (1.07)	47.58	2054	.001	1.71	755.5	.09	5.69	242.7	.001	
Socially Inappropriate	3.18 (1.13)	2.89 (1.20)	2.21 (1.25)	2.55 (1.14)	27.60	2054	.001	3.66	821	.001	4.03	344.2	.001	
Sexually Desperate	3.42 (1.11)	3.37 (1.11)	2.32 (1.35)	2.27 (1.17)	.002	2051	.967	.66	820	.51	.57	1,231	.57	
Sexual Adjustment	4.75 (1.07)	4.95 (1.09)	4.83 (1.18)	4.46 (1.27)	23.72	2035	.001	2.67	815	.009	4.16	1,220	.001	

Perceptions of Social Stigma

Next we conducted a 2 (Reaction to Offer: Accept, Reject) \times 2 (Participant Gender) MANOVA to address whether women and men expected to be perceived differently for accepting or rejecting the casual sex offer. The dependent variables in the MANOVA were each of the nine scales listed above (see Table 3 for correlations among dependent variables). Because we are interested in how people expect to be perceived based on how they responded, we used their reaction to the offer as an independent variable and how they expected to be perceived as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed an interaction between reaction to the offer and participant gender, $F(9, 2014) = 31.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$.

In general, inspection of individual measures suggests that women expected to be perceived more positively than men did for *refusing* the casual sex offer, whereas men expected to be perceived relatively more positively for *accepting* the offer. As shown in Table 6, men expected to be evaluated more positively on the general evaluation scale than women did when they accepted the casual sex offer. By contrast, women expected to be evaluated more positively than men did when they rejected the offer. This pattern emerged on a variety of other social stigma variables. Women (relative to men) expected to be perceived as more intelligent, mentally healthy, and sexually well adjusted for rejecting the offer; men (relative to women) expected to be perceived as more intelligent, mentally healthy, and sexually well adjusted for accepting the offer. Likewise, women expected to be perceived as more inappropriate (relative to men) for accepting the offer, whereas men expected to be perceived more socially inappropriate (relative to women) for rejecting the offer. Finally, men expected to be perceived as more likely to be gay than women did if they rejected the offer.

Predicting Acceptance of the Sexual Offer

Next a logistic regression was conducted to determine the effects of the social stigma variables on likelihood of

Table 7. Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Acceptance of the Actual Casual Sex Offer, Study 2a

Variable	B	SE B	Exp (B)	Wald	p
Step 1: Gender	1.11	.11	3.05	92.87	.001
Step 2: General Evaluation scale	.58	.04	1.79	190.25	.001
Step 3: General Evaluation \times Gender	.35	.10	1.43	13.01	.001

accepting the sexual offer (see Table 7). Because participants were asked how they expected to be perceived if people knew their response to the sexual offer (and because some participants reported accepting the sexual offer and some participants reported rejecting the sexual offer), the responses to the general evaluation scale were re-coded. After the re-code, higher values on the general evaluation scale were associated with more positive responses to acceptance of the sexual offer (or less negative responses to rejecting the sexual offer). This provided consistency across the two conditions. Also, female gender was coded as 0 and male gender was coded as 1; rejection of the offer was coded as 0 and acceptance of the offer was coded as 1.

As in Study 1b, acceptance of the sexual offer was the outcome variable. Gender was entered at the first step, general evaluation at the second step, and the cross-product of gender and general evaluation at the third step. Both gender and general evaluation, as well as the cross-product, were significant, indicating that the odds of predicting whether an individual accepts a sexual offer are significantly improved by knowing an individual's gender and score on the general evaluation scale. Likewise, all effects were in the expected direction.

Discussion

Note that we could not conduct mediational analyses with these data because we asked participants how they would be perceived if people knew how they responded to the offer.

Thus, those who accepted the offer were responding to a different basis for stigma than those who rejected the offer. This procedure was useful in helping us determine stigma dynamics in the context of acceptance or rejection of an actual offer, but to conduct meditational analyses concerning stigma, it is necessary to elicit all participants' reactions to *acceptance* of a casual sex offer—an issue we address in the next study.

These analyses are consistent with the findings from Study 1b and provide further support for the idea that stigma surrounding the acceptance of casual sex for women predicts acceptance of the casual sex offer. In a final study, we considered whether perceived negative responses to *accepting* the offer would be associated with higher rates of *rejecting* the offer.

Study 2b

Participants and Procedure

Recruitment and inclusion criteria were the same as Study 1a. The final sample ($n = 369$) was 79% ($n = 293$) female and predominantly White (77%), African American (40; 11%), and Latina/Latino (27; 7%), with the remaining participants identifying as other ethnicities or declining to state an ethnicity. The mean age of 30 (range 18–72) was somewhat older than prior samples. Once again, all participants were heterosexual with sexual minority participants being directed to a different study. The procedure was the same as Study 1a.

Measures

Participants were asked to remember the most recent casual sexual proposal they had experienced and asked, “Did you agree to the sexual offer?” To assess stigma associated with accepting a casual sex offer, we asked participants to imagine reactions people might have to them if they accepted the offer. This procedure was necessary to ascertain whether perceived stigma associated with *accepting* the offer led people to be more likely to *reject* the offer. Specifically, we asked participants to: “Please imagine that you accepted the casual sex offer, regardless of how you actually responded. If people knew you accepted the casual sex offer, how do you think they would perceive you?”

Participants responded to three general evaluation items as in prior studies, using a 6-point scale: bad–good, dirty–clean, and a good person–a bad person ($\alpha = .87$). To provide an additional measure of stigma, we asked participants to address items that more directly concerned how society perceives women and men who engage in casual sex. Specifically we asked participants to consider “what society would think of a woman (man) who accepts an offer of casual sex? Society in general believes that a woman (man) who accepts a casual sex offer is:” They responded to the same

three general evaluation items listed above ($\alpha = .91$). Men were asked about how men are perceived and women were asked about how women are perceived, so that we could effectively determine whether people believe that their own gender is stigmatized for accepting casual sex offers.

Results

First we assessed frequencies of acceptance or rejection of the offer based on gender and considered if there were differences in how men and women expected to be perceived if they accepted the casual sex offer. Then, using Sobel tests, we examined whether anticipated stigma of accepting the proposal mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the actual casual sex proposal.

Offer Acceptance and Stigma

Consistent with Study 2a, men were more likely to accept (71%) the offer than to reject the offer, and women were more likely to reject than to accept (33%) the offer. As predicted, women ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.21$) expected to be perceived more negatively for accepting a casual sex offer than did men ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(367) = 6.40$, $p = .001$, $d = .80$. Likewise, women ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.04$) thought that society perceived their gender more negatively for accepting a casual sex offer than men ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.13$), $d = 1.48$.

Mediational Analyses

To determine whether the stigma mediated gender differences in acceptance of an actual casual sex offer, we again used Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines and conducted Sobel tests. We assessed whether perceived personal stigma (i.e., the participants' beliefs that they would be perceived negatively for accepting the offer) mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the casual sex offer. Once again, the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer was significant on its own ($b = -0.38$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .00005$). After including stigma as a mediator, participant gender significantly predicted stigma ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .00005$); thus, women anticipated more stigma for accepting a casual sex offer than men did. Anticipated stigma of accepting the sexual offer, in turn, predicted rejection of the sexual offer ($b = -1.01$, $SE = 0.16$, $p < .00005$). The relationship between gender and acceptance of the sexual offer ($b = -0.29$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .00005$) was weakened with the addition of this mediator. Sobel was statistically significant: .09 ($SE = 0.02$, $p < .002$). Thus, these results indicate that anticipated stigma surrounding the acceptance of a casual sex offer partially mediates the relationship between participant gender and acceptance of a casual sex offer. We then considered whether stigma mediated the relationship between gender and acceptance of the offer when considering responses to questions about general stigma toward women

or men for accepting a casual sex offer and the findings replicated; full results are available from the first author.

Summary

Mediational analyses confirmed our hypotheses: Part of the reason that women are less likely to accept casual sex offers than men is that women perceive that they will be evaluated more negatively for accepting the offer. Correspondingly, these findings demonstrate that the backlash effect appears to be operating in the context of (remembered) actual casual sex offers, in addition to the hypothetical offers of the earlier studies that we presented.

General Discussion

Our research was designed to determine whether sexual double standards exist in the domain of casual heterosexual sex, to fuse research on sexual double standards and backlash effects in order to investigate whether casual sex stigma promotes backlash effects among women, and to ascertain an alternative to evolutionary accounts of gender differences in casual sex (Buss & Schmitt, 1993, also see Conley, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Valentine, 2011, for further discussion of evolutionary approaches to gender differences). The current research dovetails with other research on casual sex behaviors, which demonstrated that the perceived sexual skills of the proposer mediated gender differences in decisions to have casual sex (Conley, 2011). In addition, we identified an additional factor, fear of stigma, that mediated gender differences in casual sex.

Sexual Double Standards: Fact or Fiction?

Although debate continues about whether sexual double standards are “fact or fiction” (see Crawford & Popp, 2003; Marks & Fraley, 2005), our results strongly support the existence of a sexual double standard, at least regarding casual sex. Specifically, Study 1a demonstrated that a woman is perceived more negatively for accepting a casual sex offer than a man. Women who accepted a casual sex offer were viewed as more promiscuous, less intelligent, less mentally healthy, less competent, and more risky than men who accepted the same offer.

Study 1b used hypothetical scenarios in which women and men imagined either accepting or rejecting a casual sex offer. Women expected to be perceived more negatively if they accepted the offer, whereas men expected to be perceived more negatively if they rejected the offer. Studies 2a and b conceptually replicated these effects with self-reported actual casual sex offers. Consistent with the sexual double standard, these findings suggest that men are granted more sexual freedom to engage in sexual activity than women.

Our results not only support the idea that casual sex is differentially stigmatized for women but also advance the study

of sexual double standards by demonstrating that sexual double standards affect people’s decision making about sex. That is, women’s concern about stigma makes them less likely to accept a casual sex offer. To our knowledge, this is the first research project to demonstrate that sexual double standards influence people’s actual sexual choices.

Backlash in the Bedroom

The current research also integrates two relatively independent research domains: that of sexuality (and specifically the sexual double standard) on one hand and research on backlash effects (and stigma more generally) on the other. Although these domains are not often explicitly connected, the current research shows the direct relationship between anticipated stigma and sexuality. Thus, we extended the concept of backlash (Rudman, 1998) to help us understand a wider range of social choices. In particular, stigma associated with engaging in casual sex behavior inhibited women’s acceptance of offers for casual sex. Moreover, the findings suggest that the backlash effect, which has typically been examined in the context of public, professional, workplace behaviors, extends to the more personal and intimate context of sexuality.

The integration of these concepts helps clarify the gender difference in rates of acceptance of sexual offers in Clark and Hatfield (1989). That is, mediational analyses suggested that women were less likely to accept the CHSP because they anticipated that they would be stigmatized for accepting the offer. Based on the backlash effect, people are less likely to engage in certain behaviors for fear of social consequences. We applied the tenets of the backlash effect to the context of casual sex and demonstrated that women change their behavior for fear of being judged negatively in casual sex contexts. By fusing these two lines of research, we demonstrated in the current research that one reason for women’s lesser acceptance of casual sex offers is their fear of stigmatization.

Women’s Agency and Well-Being

Whereas stigma plays a role in both men’s and women’s sexual behaviors, it is women who are more strongly influenced by fear of stigma. Although the current findings address casual sex, they call into question whether women’s sexuality is restricted in other ways. A lack of sexual autonomy may not only predict women’s decreased sexual pleasure (Kiefer, Sanchez, Kalinka, & Ybarra, 2006) but may also interfere with sexual safety; sexual autonomy is linked to the ability to negotiate desired sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and safer sex behaviors (Morokoff et al., 1997; Tolman, 2002). Thus, increasing women’s sexual agency could potentially reduce sexual assault, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies.

Sadly, gender discrimination among high school students, including slut-bashing, is not adequately addressed, and it is

often perpetuated by media and adults, as is evidenced by recent news coverage pointing out female promiscuity (e.g., Zernike, 2011). Women take many precautions to avoid such labels and stigmatization, such as feigning ignorance related to sex and contraceptives and refusing to carry condoms (Marston & King, 2006). Clearly, these “precautions” can actually be quite harmful to one’s physical health. If we can remove the stigmatization of the sexual behaviors of women during adolescence and emerging adulthood, we can potentially help reduce the bullying, harassment, and violence that occurs against women for engaging in (or accusations of engaging in) these activities (Eder, 1997; Tanenbaum, 2000).

In summary, social scientists have found evidence for the impact of social factors on people’s sexual behavior. A recent review of the literature on young people’s sexual behavior worldwide (Marston & King, 2006) highlighted the importance of looking beyond traditional reasons people engage in unsafe sex (e.g., lack of access to condoms) to consider instead social factors—such as differential social pressures on men and women and young peoples’ notions of stigma and risk—that influence sexual choices.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although our research provides strong support for a sexual double standard regarding casual sex and for the idea that women recognize this standard and that it influences their decisions about casual sex, future studies could provide additional support for these hypotheses by addressing some of the limitations of the current studies. First, the current studies in some cases lacked comparison conditions that would make it easier to address alternative interpretations. Additional studies that included conditions in which a male and a female target turn down offers for casual sex or accept or turn down a date, rather than a sexual offer (Study 1a), would allow us to better hone in on the casual sex double standard. Having a comparison condition in which participants responded about people who rejected the offer would make it more clear if people were rating the targets more poorly because of their gender or because they were behaving in ways that were inconsistent with the sexual double standard.

Second, it would be useful to obtain a broader set of casual encounters than the single (hypothetical and actual) encounters that the current study addressed. In particular, a prospective study in which participants are followed over time would allow us to assess multiple instances of casual sex and in particular to assess feelings about casual sex stigma both before and after the encounters. A prospective design would also allow us to determine the reactions of people who had not yet received a casual sex offer.

Third, it would be useful to collect more information about the participants’ history of casual sex (i.e., if they have engaged in it in the past). Moreover, it would be especially useful to know whether participants experienced (or at least perceived) stigma

associated with accepting offers of casual sex. We would predict that those who have experienced more stigma for casual sex in the past would be more likely to let the desire to avoid stigma guide their decision making about casual sex. Similarly, it may be useful to explore whether sexually active participants differed from those who are not sexually active. However, we did not include that information here because, in a similar set of studies, Conley (2011) found no evidence that sexual history changed the pattern of responses to hypothetical or actual remembered casual sex proposals.

Additionally, as of yet, it is not fully understood why women are stigmatized in sexual situations. For this purpose, it would be helpful for future research to investigate why women are stigmatized and consider the possibility that maintenance of the gender hierarchy plays a part in these stigmatization processes (see Rudman et al., 2012). Finally, it would be useful to replicate these findings with a representative sample and to address potential ethnic differences in reactions to casual sex offers. Future research should be conducted that addresses the question of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals’ responses to casual sex, which could further elucidate the meanings of these gender differences.

Practice Implications

The results of the present studies suggest that there can be considerable stigma associated with expressing a woman’s sexuality and engaging in sex; thus, health care practitioners and mental health professionals need to be prepared to adequately address these issues. Practitioners should be informed about the common assumptions of female sexuality, and in particular, the myth of female sexual purity. In order to most appropriately relate to and assist female clients, particularly the ones who have specific concerns regarding sexuality, practitioners need to be aware of the stigma that heterosexual women may receive as a result of the expression of sexuality within the United States. This may be of particular importance when dealing with clients who may experience high levels of sex-related guilt and shame.

Conclusion

The current research suggests that women are differentially stigmatized for engaging in casual heterosexual sex and that anticipation of this backlash influences their sexual decision making. These findings contribute to our understanding of backlash effects, stigma, and sexual double standards, and they add to the body of literature explaining gender differences in sexuality. By elucidating this phenomenon, we hope to draw attention to the power of stigma to explain gender differences in a variety of contexts, in addition to this backlash in the bedroom.

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Notes

1. This study could have included sexual strategies theories variables; however, given that sexual strategies theory variables were not predictive in any of the studies by Conley (2011), they seemed unlikely to be predictive in this context. Sexual strategies researchers may contend that their theory does not predict outcomes for short-term encounters, only long-term encounters. However, in their original theoretical statement, Buss and Schmitt (1993) cited Clark and Hatfield (1989) in support of sexual strategies theory. See Conley for a fuller discussion of these issues.
2. Conley (2011) also included an item that addressed how partnered participants would respond to a casual sex offer if they were *not* partnered. This allowed for the creation of a new variable in which single participants indicated how they would respond and partnered participants indicate how they would respond if they were not in a relationship. However, Conley found that participants who were partnered responded substantially similarly to the offer regardless of whether they were involved with a partner, and in particular, the pattern of predictors was the same regardless of which response was utilized. Having different types of participants respond to different questions poses methodological problems of its own, of course. Therefore, in the current research we simply asked both partnered and single participants the same question.
3. Although a 6-point scale without a middle point was used, very similar results were found using 7-point scales (Conley, 2011). Participants were given a 6-point scale because it reduces thoughtless answers (such as selecting only the midpoint of the scale for each item) in online data collection (Conley, 2011).
4. Because of restricted variance for women on this item in previous studies on the topic (see Conley, 2011), we developed an additional measure of perceptions of the offer including the following additional items: "How likely would you be to accept a short-term relationship (fling, affair) with this person?" "Regardless of whether you would accept this offer, how much would you *like* to accept the offer?" and "How appealing is the offer?" These items were combined to form a scale ($\alpha = .85$). There were a greater range of responses for women on this scale, but men still found the offer more appealing ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.63$) than did women ($M = 2.44, SD = 1.39$), $t(172) = 8.96, p < .001$. Subsequent regressions and mediational analyses produced identical results utilizing this scale as an outcome variable. To maintain simplicity, we retained only the single-item response. Note that the variance is not equal because the effects are very large. For this reason, we used the unpooled *t*-value (and hence, degrees of freedom are represented by numbers with decimals).
5. The alternative analytical approach would be to enter three-way interactions among gender, each of the social stigma variables and condition—whether participants imagined accepting or rejecting the offer—into the regression equation. We do not have sufficient statistical power in to support this analysis and such a design would be difficult to interpret.

6. We included only the general evaluation scale, because it was strongly correlated with most of the other social stigma scales and is broader than any one of the other scales. Moreover, we lack sufficient power to test all the additional social stigma variables.
7. Notably, this item had low reliability in this sample. However, the scale was retained for purposes of comparison to the prior study in which it did attain an acceptable α . It is likely that the item had low reliability because the scale had only 2 items. Notably, conducting analyses with low reliability scales actually makes it more difficult to find effects; thus, utilizing the lower-reliability scale does not provide us with any statistical advantage (See Ponterotto & Ruckdeschel, 2007 for further discussion of these issues). However, we also did conduct the analyses utilizing the individual items in this scale separately and found an identical pattern of results.

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