

## The impact of gender expectations on meanings of sex and sexuality: Results from a cognitive interview study.

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McCabe, J. M., [Tanner, A. E.](#), & Heiman, J. (2010). The impact of gender expectations on meanings of sex and sexuality: Results from a cognitive interview study. *Sex Roles*, 63(2), 252-263.

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### **Abstract:**

This study uses cognitive interviewing to examine individuals' interpretations of sexuality-related questions and meanings of sex and sexuality. The sample includes 20 adults (12 women and 8 men) who were randomly selected university staff in the Midwestern United States. Using a sexual script and symbolic interactionist framework, we identify two themes in individuals' understandings of sex and sexuality: (1) people's talk about sexuality at the cultural level typically corresponds to traditional gender arrangements and stereotypes; however, personal experiences elicit more contradictions and (2) our relatively small sample revealed a wide range of understandings of sex and sexuality, including how gender expectations influenced their meanings. Implications for theoretical work on gender and sexuality as well as future empirical studies are discussed.

**Keywords:** gender | sexuality | sexual scripts | cognitive interviewing | gender perceptions | sex roles

### **Article:**

#### Introduction

How do understandings of gender impact meanings of sex and sexuality? Scholars have argued that these terms—gender, sex, and sexuality—are complex and difficult to define and operationalize (e.g., Few 1997; Levine 1995; Levitt and Hiestand 2004; Lorber 1996; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987). Research has documented the conflation of these terms (Kimmel et al. 2005) and has begun to explore how individuals conceptualize some related terms, such as “sexual health” or what it means to “have sex” (Edwards and Coleman 2004; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; Sanders and Reinisch 1999). Yet, little is

known about how lay people interpret other key terms, such as sex and sexuality (see Levine [1995] for an exploration of the clinical meaning of “sexuality”). The cognitive interviewing approach, which refers to techniques to elicit verbal feedback about questions, responses, or terms to evaluate and improve the quality and content of surveys, is particularly useful for understanding the criteria individuals use to process and answer sexuality-related questions (Beatty and Willis 2007; Kennedy 1997).

In the present study, we used cognitive interviews to investigate individuals’ meanings of sex and sexuality and their interpretations of sexuality-related questions within a specific cultural context (i.e., a university town in the Midwestern U.S.). During interviewing and analysis, themes emerged regarding how gender impacted meanings of sex and sexuality and how gender is presented differently in cultural-level versus personal discussions of sexuality. In this paper, we investigated two related research questions: (1) To what extent do our participants discuss women and men as having similar or different (i.e., gendered) meanings of sex and sexuality; and (2) To what extent are meanings of sex and sexuality similar or different according to the sexual scripting levels? Our findings have implications for sexuality and gender researchers who might do well to strive for better operationalization and clarification of their key concepts.

### The Gendered Organization of Sexuality

Past research, conducted primarily in the United States, has highlighted the impact of gender on sexual behavior and socialization processes as well as the power of gender to organize social systems, including politics, work, law, education, and sex (Schwartz and Rutter 1998). In relation to sexuality, it is suggested that “gender centrally organizes almost all aspects of sexual behavior and crosscuts all the other social categories. Not only do women and men engage in different sexual behaviors they also experience sexual practices differently and understand their actions often from contrasting normative positions” (Laumann and Mahay 2002, p.43). Indeed, gender differences have been reported in many aspects of sexuality. These differences have been reported in sexual behaviors (e.g., Kinsey et al. 1953; Laumann and Mahay 2002), number of sexual partners (e.g., Laumann and Mahay 2002; Vohs et al. 2004), sexual interest and drive (e.g., Vohs et al. 2004), sexual attitudes (e.g., Kinsey et al. 1953; Loftus 2001), and significance of virginity loss (e.g., Carpenter 2002). Reasons and motivations for participating in sex also differ by gender, with men endorsing status enhancement and physical reasons (e.g., pleasure-focused) more frequently while women more commonly endorse emotional reasons (e.g., love) (Hill and Preston 1996; Meston and Buss 2007). In addition, individuals’ self reports of their endorsement of gender norms have implications for aspects of sexuality, including overall sexual satisfaction (Sanchez et al. 2005) and condom use (Shearer et al. 2005). In sum, the social construction of gender contributes to the social construction of appropriate sexual behaviors which differ for men and women (Butler 2004).

However, there is also some reason to expect that we might not find gender differences, or at least not stark differences, between women and men. Despite much research highlighting gender differences in sexuality in the U.S., some recent work indicates that gender differences in sexual behavior are decreasing, usually due to women's sexuality moving increasingly closer to that of men (Crawford and Popp 2003; Kimmel 2005; Longmore 1998).

### Sexual Scripting and Symbolic Interactionist Approaches to Sexuality

Sexual scripting theory (Gagnon and Simon 1987) and symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1974; Longmore 1998; Mead and Morris 1934) are useful theories for understanding the ways in which individuals conceptualize sexual meanings and motivations for participating in sexual behaviors. Sexual scripts exist at three different levels: intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural scenarios and allow individuals to determine an appropriate sequence of sexual interactions (Gagnon 1990). Intrapsychic scripts refer to people's thoughts and desires; interpersonal scripts refer to interactions between people; cultural scripts refer to messages at the societal or cultural level, such as those from the media. A sexual scripts approach lends itself to analyzing the relationship between culture, interactions, and individuals' meanings of sexuality (Whittier and Melendez 2007). These scripts are gendered, with differences between men's and women's scripts (e.g., Clark and Carroll 2008; Frith and Kitzinger 2001; Kim et al. 2007; Rose and Frieze 1993). Symbolic interactionism addresses the connection between meaning, the internalized interpretations of experience, and the external interpersonal behavior which can be used as a frame for understanding how people create symbolic worlds which influence sexual behavior (Longmore 1998). Both theories encourage attention to the interplay between the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels. Our focus on cultural scripts and global meanings of sexuality allows for a consideration of the ways in which they inform and influence the enactment of individual and relational scripts.

### Method

#### Participants

Our sample consisted of 20 individuals between the ages of 28 and 76 ( $M = 46.5$ ,  $SD = 14.1$ ) who worked at a large, research university in a medium-sized town in the Midwestern United States. Of these participants, 12 were women and 8 were men. They all had at least a high school degree, with 15 (75%) attaining a bachelor's degree and 10 (50%) also receiving an advanced graduate degree. Eighteen (90%) identified themselves as Euro-American, one (5%) as African American, and one (5%) as Mexican-American. In terms of their political views, most

individuals reported being 'liberal' (n = 12, 60%), with three (15%) reporting 'extremely liberal.' One (5%) person reported being 'conservative,' another (5%) identified as 'slightly conservative,' and three (15%) identified as 'moderate.'

As our intention was to recruit only 20 participants, we were particularly aware of the need to reach out to as diverse a group as possible. Thus, a primary concern was that we not only interview people who were comfortable discussing sexuality. We considered recruiting using flyers, but were concerned that individuals who would volunteer in this way would be considerably more open and comfortable talking about sexuality issues than those who would not. To minimize these concerns, we used a random sample of staff members at the campus of a large Midwestern university. We chose to recruit university staff in order to assemble a more diverse sample with respect to age and class background compared to other possible sampling sites. In total, 67 individuals were contacted and invited to participate in an interview for the project. Individuals were sent an initial recruitment email and if they did not respond within a week, we followed up by phone or email. From these 67 contacts, we interviewed 20 staff members and had 27 refusals. The remaining 20 people did not refuse but did not complete an interview as once we had reached our goal of 20 interviews, we concluded recruitment and did not schedule further interviews.

### Interview Procedures

In this study, face-to-face cognitive interviewing procedures were used to evaluate the criteria and quality of responses to survey questions and to clarify key terms, including sex and sexuality, used in questionnaires. Cognitive interviewing refers to a range of techniques designed to evaluate the quality and content of survey responses through soliciting verbal feedback about the questions, responses, or terms used in the survey (Beatty and Willis 2007; Kennedy 1997) and has been used in preparation for sex surveys, including the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann et al. 1994). Cognitive interviewing increases validity through investigating the extent to which questions generate the type of information intended by the researchers and how these questions and response categories could be improved (Beatty and Willis 2007). Through these cognitive interviews we explored the meanings that individuals attribute to sexuality and sex—key terms in some research, particularly sex research.

Our cognitive interviewing consisted of asking participants a variety of global questions related to sex and sexuality and asking them to describe what these key terms meant to them. We began the interview with open-ended questions about the importance and purposes of sex in people's lives. We asked participants to talk through the criteria used to answer questions included in previous sex surveys, such as evaluations of people's sexual relationship and own sexuality. We prompted participants to reflect on the criteria people use to judge their own and others' sexual attractiveness and experiences of sexual desire. We also asked participants to discuss the impact

on sexuality of moods, religion and spirituality, politics, social movements, the Internet and other media. Before we concluded the interview, if they had not already defined them, we asked participants to explain what they meant by sex and sexuality when they used these terms throughout the interview. The interview questions are listed in the Appendix. Participants also answered a short survey providing demographic information about their gender, education, age, race, and political views.

When participants were recruited, they were told, “We are not interested in asking you about your personal sexual experiences or behavior, but in finding out about what you think are important parts of sexual life today and what you think is important to know about sexuality” in order to help improve future research on sexuality. Although they were instructed to not answer the questions about themselves, nearly all ( $n = 18$ ) of our participants discussed personal aspects of their sexuality in their responses to our questions. Through our analysis, we discovered contrasts between our participants’ general discussions and personal experiences of sexuality.

The first two authors, both young women, completed these 20 cognitive interviews from March 1, 2005 to May 5, 2005. The interviews were scheduled at a location convenient for the respondents, including the interviewers’ offices, the respondents’ workplaces, and a local restaurant. Interviews ranged in length from 34 to 104 min, with an average of 60 min ( $SD = 16$ ). Respondents received a \$20 gift card to a retail store for their participation.

#### Data Analysis and Reporting of Results

The interviewers wrote extensive field notes following each interview, then reviewed and discussed each others’ field notes to maximize reliability in interviewing procedures and experiences. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the interviews were transcribed, the interviewers listened to the interview recording while proofreading each transcript. The interviewers read over the transcripts and fieldnotes several times and entered the transcripts into Atlas.ti 5.2, a qualitative data analysis software package (Muhr 2004).

During and after data collection, we used the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to analyze the interview transcripts. This approach is particularly well-suited for systematically uncovering participants’ meanings and furthering interpretive understandings (Charmaz 2008). We first used Atlas.ti to code transcripts into categories corresponding to the interview questions and to participants’ Definitions of Sex and Definitions of Sexuality. From these initial comparisons of how people spoke about sexuality, we discovered contrasts between our participants’ general discussions and their discussions of personal sexual experiences. This coding also helped us to see that gender was a key theme in participants’ discussions of sexuality. We subsequently used the qualitative data analysis program to code interview transcripts for discussions of Gender (e.g., the respondent’s discussions of similarities or differences between men and women’s sexual understandings, expectations or actions) and

discussions of the Self (e.g., the respondent's personal experiences or attitudes). Comparisons were also made across respondents' gender to assess patterns between men and women's responses; any substantial differences are noted in the results. Following procedures of the constant comparative method, we then searched for negative cases to see if there were exceptions to the general themes we found, modifying and developing the themes as needed, and returning to the data to make more comparisons (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We constructed memos on these themes, discussed the memos, and refined the memos based on these discussions of the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Inter-coder reliability was determined using standard procedures (e.g., Krippendorff 2004). One author and a trained secondary coder independently coded all references to these themes (i.e., Gender, Self, Definitions of Sex, and Definitions of Sexuality) in a random sample of the interview transcripts ( $n = 7$ , 35%). Inter-coder reliability was .85, which is good, especially considering the large amount of possible material (e.g., entire interview transcripts) to which the codes could have been applied (Krippendorff 2004; Perreault and Leigh 1989).

After reviewing multiple potential quotations for relevance and clarity, quotes that best represented these themes were selected to present in the paper. Quotations presented here have been edited for readability and clarity, and all names have been removed to maintain participant confidentiality. Gender and age characteristics are reported for the sake of data transparency and to illustrate the differences and similarities between respondents.

## Results and Discussion

In this paper we highlight the two most salient themes that emerged from our research questions: (1) When people talk about sexuality in the abstract, it is generally in ways that correspond to traditional gender arrangements and stereotypes; however, personal experiences elicit more contradictions; and (2) Our small sample revealed a wide range of understandings of sex and sexuality, including how meanings of gender influenced those of sex and sexuality. We use a sexual scripting theory and symbolic interactionist framework to discuss gender differences and similarities in the meanings people hold of the terms sex and sexuality and how such meanings are tied to the level of sexual script considered (i.e., cultural, interpersonal or intrapsychic).

### Gendered Talk About Sex and Sexuality

Sexuality was often discussed in gendered ways. Our respondents frequently articulated gender differences in how men and women approach and experience sexuality. For example, in response to questions about what criteria people would use to assess their sexuality (see Question 3 in the Appendix) one woman (age 44) told us, "I think that men would maybe look at it one way and

women would look at it another way,” while another woman (age 57) said, “I think men and women do have different ideas of what they want out of sex.”

Overall, when talking about people in general, our respondents described women and men as fundamentally different and drew on stereotypical notions of gender when discussing these differences. The gender differences they described centered on four sub-themes: a) sex as physical for men, emotional for women; b) sex as very important for men; c) women’s physical appearance as very important and their bodies as objectified; and d) attention rarely given to women’s sexual desire or pleasure. The interview questions were not focused on gender differences or similarities in sexuality. Only at a few points in the interview for some respondents did we ask about whether certain behaviors, such as sexual problems, would be experienced the same or differently for men and women. Despite not directly asking for respondents’ views on gender, these themes emerged through analysis of responses to a range of questions asked throughout the interview. We briefly explain these four sub-themes below before discussing the nuances that came out when people spoke about their own experiences.

### Physical vs. Emotional

The majority of respondents (n = 16) reported an essential difference between how men and women conceptualize sexuality. In the words of one woman (age 53), “I think for men it’s more physical and for women it’s more mental.” In addition to being described as mental, sometimes sex was described as “more emotional” or “psychological” for women, while sex is more “about the actual physical act” for men, as one respondent put it (woman, age 57). One man (age 33) explained these differences: “Well, frankly put, sometimes men may not put enough effort in pleasing their partner. Does their wife have an orgasm? Maybe more than one?...Many men aren’t sensitive to the needs of their partners.” According to this man, men may be focused on satisfying themselves physically and overlook the emotional (and physical) needs of their female partners.

### Importance of Sex for Men

At some point during the interview, most respondents (n = 15) mentioned that sex is more important for men than women. We heard from our respondents that men think about sex often, from an average of once every 6 seconds to once every 15 seconds. Since sex is more important to men, it becomes necessary for them to express concern if they do not desire sex “enough”: one man (age 45) explained that men are “brought up to say that he’s ready to go at the drop of a hat, twenty-four [hours], seven days a week; otherwise, he’s not a man.” Sex was viewed as an important part of masculinity for men. The expectation reported by our male and female

respondents is that sex should be important to a man and he should always desire and be ready to engage in sex (i.e., “twenty-four/seven”); if not, “he’s not a man.”

### Physical Appearance and Objectification

In contrast to their descriptions of men’s sexuality as active and full of desire, some participants (n = 7) discussed women’s sexuality primarily through a focus on women’s physical attractiveness. Participants’ understandings of women’s sexuality emerged at many points throughout the interviews, but most frequently in response to questions about how people judge their own or others’ sexual attractiveness and about the influence of media on sexual activity. Many respondents (n = 9), and more women than men (n = 7 women; n = 2 men), directly implicated the media for society’s focus on women’s physical appearance. Respondents bluntly stated that the media “objectifies women in particular” (man, age 55) and shows “young girls as objects to be used” (woman, age 68). Both men and women described women’s sexual attractiveness to men as based on women’s “physical appearance,” as one man (age 47) described, “I go visit my parents down at the beach in Virginia during the summer and see young women walking by in bikinis and it’s like, Whoa, it’s difficult not to be sexually attracted.”

### Women’s Sexual Pleasure and Desire

A number of respondents (n = 9) spoke about how women are expected not to talk about sexual pleasure and to limit their sexual desire. Moreover, a couple of respondents (n = 2) specifically contrasted these pervasive messages with the limited sexual information and education provided to women and girls. One woman (age 38) exclaimed, “I always tell my mother [that] she’s old school. I’m still waiting for her to tell me about the sex talk. We don’t talk about stuff like that.” A few times (n = 5), respondents contrasted contemporary views of women’s sexuality with those of the past, for example, a woman (age 36) explained:

People were shocked when that Kinsey Report came out, you know, that women take pleasure in sex, [that] women do all these things. That is much less shocking to anyone now and has a great deal to do with the Kinsey Report but also with the women’s movement.

Comments, such as these, that contradict the pervasiveness and continuation of the belief that women do not think about or desire sex were relatively rare in our data (n = 2). In general, respondents described women as sexual objects rather than subjects. All four of these themes reflect participants’ understandings of cultural scripts, the “authorized” norms, attitudes and beliefs of U.S. society.

### Complexities Between Levels of Scripting

Although we specifically told our respondents that this interview would not be about their personal sexual experiences or behavior, the vast majority (n = 18) mentioned personal aspects of their sexuality during the interviews. All of the men and ten of the twelve women interviewees discussed personal sexual experiences or behavior. Our respondents were most likely to talk about themselves in response to our question about how important sex is in people's lives (n = 10). They were least likely to talk about themselves in response to our questions about the influence of politics (n = 0) and mental health (n = 1) on sexual activity. Discussions of their personal sexual experiences reflect interpersonal and intrapsychic sexual scripts.

In addition to the general tendency to talk about their personal sexual experiences or behavior during the interview, we also noted that how respondents spoke about themselves and their relationships sometimes violated the gendered patterns they described in cultural scripts, discussed above. For example, one man (age 47) described how sex is physical for men and emotional for women, yet he also explained:

Mood has a lot to do with sexuality, I think. Again through personal experience, if I'm in a bad mood and especially if I'm mad at my partner, the last thing I want to do is want to have sex or be intimate at all. There have been a number of times [that] I'm pissed off at my wife and she'll try to initiate something and I'll just roll over and go to sleep. Typical man [chuckles].

This quote suggests that sex is not just physical to men, it is also emotional and related to moods. Because it is at the level of personal experience, this quote represents the man's intrapsychic script and his recounting of the interpersonal script between his wife and him. The ideas expressed in this quote contradict ideas (discussed above) about women's lack of sexual desire and about women being viewed simply as sexual objects. Although earlier in the interview this respondent stated that sex is more physical and important to men, he then suggested that his wife may want sex while he does not because his mood and emotions are impediments to his sexual desire. The contrast between this man's dialogue about sexuality in general compared to his personal experiences reflects a general tendency that we noted for our respondents to hold onto stereotypical notions of sexuality even when they did not fit with their experiences. Cultural scripts tended to be more traditional with respect to gender relations than interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts.

Although the man above did not appear cognizant that his experiences contrasted with those he described characterizing people in general, some participants deliberately contrasted themselves with others sexually. For example, one man (age 45) stated:

The whole study of women being more sexually active in their forties and men peaking in their twenties...I think that puts some detrimental concern on some men, not myself, but some men that would then think that once they get over thirty-nine [or] forty, they're like, Well, the ship's left the harbor! This is the way it's supposed to be.

This man discussed society's expectations about the importance of sex for men and the pressure that can come from this expectation for aging men; however, he stated that he did not personally experience this as a concern ("not myself"). Thus, this man described his intrapsychic script as differing from the larger cultural script for men.

While men contrasted themselves with the "typical man" who would see sex as important, women's discussions of their personal wishes also, at times, contradicted the cultural scripts they articulated. For example, a woman (age 68) stated:

I see it in the sexual relationships with people on TV today. In many ways, I think I wish I had some of those freedoms: to be that open, to be able to talk openly about sexuality or their desire, you know. I never had that because...desire was only acceptable if it was from the male that wanted the female. If it went the other way, it was deemed to be inappropriate.

Elsewhere in the interview, as is reflected in the second part of her quote, she stated that sex is viewed as more important for men than women and that women are not expected to desire sex. However, when she spoke about herself, she revealed that she wished she had "some of those [sexual] freedoms." This example and the one above both suggest that participants, while recognizing social expectations, can construct intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts that differ from cultural scripts.

Despite general talk about the media objectifying women (discussed earlier), a couple of female respondents ( $n = 2$ ) highlighted the media's role in helping them feel personally sexually empowered or "comfortable with your sexuality." For example, a woman (age 33) explained that the media has the:

Ability to reach out to certain populations and share information in a way that is so powerful and so positive. I'm thinking about *The L-Word*, and even *Sex and the City* was really helpful. I mean how powerful to see four women sitting around talking about penises! I mean that was just amazing!

The media in this case is seen as a positive contributor to female sexuality. While the cultural level script provided by the media was typically viewed in a negative light for how it perpetuates and encourages the objectification of women, it was occasionally viewed in a positive manner for its ability to personally empower our female respondents or to initiate discussions about these issues.

Symbolic interactionist theory is useful for understanding the contrast between respondents' general talk about sex and sexuality, which typically followed gender stereotypes, and their discussions of their personal sexuality, which often did not. For example, the man (discussed earlier) who labeled himself a "typical man" when he rolled over in bed and would not engage in sexual activity with his wife because he was mad at her contradicted his descriptions of men, in general, as fueled by constant desire for sex and women as largely asexual. As symbolic

interactionism suggests (Goffman 1974), this man seems to be framing his personal experiences to fit with the general viewpoint that he holds about how sexuality is gendered. By declaring himself to be a “typical man,” he can hold onto his beliefs about the “nature” of men’s and women’s sexualities in general and of himself as a “typical man.” By “rolling over,” his narrative suggests that women desire sex and men are not purely physical in their sexual engagement, but may also be mental and emotional. This experience may have been dissonant for this man. In stating “typical man,” at the end of his recollection of the event, he reframes his experience so that he remains a “typical man.” This example also illustrates that women are not always void of sexual desire while still suggesting that men have more control in sexual interactions (Phillips 2000; Tolman 2002), underscoring the complexity of these issues. Thus, the results suggest that cultural sex scripts may be held but are filtered into the sociocultural context as individuals negotiate their sexual behaviors at the individual and relationship (i.e., intrapsychic and interpersonal) levels. The differences in how people spoke about sexuality in general (i.e., cultural scripts) and how they spoke about their personal sexuality (i.e., interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts) may be linked to the ambiguous meanings of sexuality-related terms discussed in the next section.

### Gendered Meanings of Sex and Sexuality

During the course of the interview, we asked our participants to discuss what they meant by key terms used in our questionnaire and in other sex research. In particular, we were interested in better understanding their meanings of the terms “sex” and “sexuality.” We found a wide variety of meanings associated with these terms and ways that understandings of gender influenced their meanings.

Moreover, without our prompting, some participants ( $n = 5$ ) themselves noted that the lack of terms and the imprecise way that they are used can be problematic. For example, one respondent (man, age 33) reflected on the multiple meanings of sex: “Is sex a particular act, or is it a way of interacting?” Another respondent (woman, age 33) articulated the issue as the “very limited definition of sex in the society — Yeah, that’s a problem!...So you end up using the same words over and over again to describe very, very different things. There is not a good set of terms.” Several times ( $n = 4$ ), even before we asked respondents for their definitions of sex or sexuality, they asked what these terms meant, saying that they could not answer a particular question until understanding our meaning of the term. For example, in response to a question about rating one’s own sexuality, one respondent (man, age 47) stated, “Well, see I have a tough time, like what’s the definition of sexuality? That’s what I need to know before I can get at what this question is asking.” Other participants ( $n = 7$ ) spontaneously defined what they saw as unclear terms during the interview, without our having to ask for their definitions.

### Meanings of “Sex”

Most participants viewed sex as an act or activity. When we asked what type of activities it could include, a substantial minority (n = 6) of people, and more women (n = 5) than men (n = 1), said that sex was broader than genital contact and could include touch, like a hug or kiss. In response to our question of how she defines the term sex, one participant (woman, age 33) summarized this range quite well: she defined sex as “the physical act of sex, intercourse with someone; touching, kissing, hugging, snuggling, all that business; oral, anal, penile, vaginal, vaginal/penile, all that business.” Respondents, women in particular, characterized a range of activities as constituting sex.

Thirty-five percent of our respondents (n = 7; one man and six women) defined sex as not just being about physical activities but also about the emotions or thoughts attached to these activities. For example, in addition to sex being a physical act, it was described as “a way of interacting” (man, age 33), “your feelings for your partner,” (woman, age 44), “a mind thing” (woman, age 41), and “verbalizing things that you wouldn’t normally say” (woman, age 57). Women respondents more frequently defined sex as having a psychological or affective component than did men.

In addition, sex was viewed not only through the physical actions that were done, but also through the framework of how socially or personally unacceptable the activity is contextually. A woman (age 33) noted that her definition of sex would not include “violence or horror or rape or assault, or anything like that.” She continued:

Some people think that that is included in that range of definition [of sex], which makes me ill, but sadly that’s the case. Because nine times out of ten a woman would never say, “Well, he raped me.” She would say, “He had sex with me and I didn’t want to.” The really horrible part of that is that that’s gotten all mixed up in their definition.

Not only does her definition of sex include only socially or personally acceptable activities, it also includes gendered meanings of sexual behaviors, related to those discussed earlier. Interestingly, her example is of a man who actively controls sex and a woman who is an object of the man’s actions. The woman in this example is unable to define this activity as “violence” rather than “sex.” Not only did participants define sex in different ways, their definitions included a wide range of meanings and gender imbued these meanings.

### Meanings of “Sexuality”

None of our respondents restricted the meaning of sexuality to being physical or encompassing only acts or activities. They described sexuality as a “feeling” or a “state.” More specifically, seven respondents defined sexuality as how one views oneself or feels about oneself, what one

woman (age 28) described as “sexual self-awareness.” Another woman (age 33) defined sexuality:

In terms of how I feel about myself as a sexual being: Do I feel sexy? Do I not feel sexy? Do I feel confident and pleasurable pleasuring myself? Do I feel comfortable enough to talk with other people about their sexuality? Do I have a good sense of what is attractive to me and what is not?

Several respondents (n = 4) took questions about their ‘own sexuality’ to refer to what we saw as their gender. For example, one woman (age 76) described ‘own sexuality’ as “all the things that might define you as a woman or a man” while another (woman, age 68) said, “My personhood, where I’m at as a female...” Similarly, a man (age 70) reflected, “Am I manly? How do I feel about that?...Am I comfortable with myself as a male?” Rather than having to do with their own gender, other respondents saw their sexual partners’ gender as being an important part of the meaning of their own sexuality. A woman (age 36) described her personal meaning of ‘own sexuality’ as, “Do you think it’s good that you like to have sex with men or women? Like, sexuality means to me, are you heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual?” Her definition is not only related to gender but is marked by sexual preference.

One respondent clearly articulated the confusion we found among many of our respondents’ understandings of gender compared to sex and sexuality. She explained, “A lot of times I think we mix up sexuality and gender, so I think probably [own sexuality is] the idea of whether or not I feel that I am a good example of what a woman should be” (woman, age 33). This respondent described the conflation of gender and sexuality typical in many respondents’ descriptions, as discussed above. Our analyses uncovered the same pattern identified by this respondent: sexuality and gender, along with sex, were used in different ways at different times and their meanings were often ambiguous. This quote also hints at another pattern seen in responses: understandings of the terms sex and sexuality are tied to social expectations about how one should conduct one’s self or what is expected, rather than being just an internal, individual idea about what is appropriate sexual conduct.

Respondents’ definitions of sex and sexuality and sexual relationships, as illustrated above, are imbued with gender. They understood these key terms in sex research in a variety of ways. Although they were used in different ways at different times, meanings of these terms were often based on beliefs about appropriate sexual scripts, reflecting cultural rather than just individual ideas about sexuality, and often conflated gender and sexuality.

## Conclusions and Implications

Overall, we found that gender permeated respondents’ meanings, understandings, and discussions of sex and sexuality. Nevertheless, differences existed in how people talked about

sexuality in general—reflecting cultural-level scripts—and how they described their personal sexuality—reflecting intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts. These differences likely reflect the ambiguous meanings associated with sexuality-related terms. In fact, even among our small sample, we found that people held a wide range of meanings of the terms sex and sexuality. The results highlighted how gender influenced these understandings, including the way traditional gender norms imbued abstract discussions of sexuality while personal experiences elicited more complex perceptions.

At the cultural level, our respondents described a social order in which men and women are expected to approach sex and enact sexuality differently. The media was seen as a basis for reinforcing the gendered stereotypes, for instance promoting the objectification of women's bodies. Our respondents' focus on the media parallels academic research which also finds that gendered power dynamics are reflected in a heterosexual, cultural level script that is pervasive in popular television programs (Kim et al. 2007) and music (Stephens and Phillips 2003). Research has highlighted a few exceptions to these patterns, some of the same programs our participants mentioned, such as *Sex and the City*, for portraying women with sexual agency, thus, defying this cultural script (Kim et al. 2007). While our respondents saw the media as promoting the objectification of women, they also viewed it as an agent of personal social change by encouraging dialogue around these complex issues at the interpersonal level. This illustrates another connection between cultural and interpersonal scripts. These results concede a changing sexual environment, which is consistent with existing research suggesting that while gender differences may still exist in terms of the meaning and value placed on sexual interactions, these differences are becoming less distinct in the U.S. (Carpenter 2002; Longmore 1998; Tanner et al. 2009). Therefore, the study results suggest the intersection of gender and sexuality may influence the enactment of sexual scripts in a more complex manner than previous research has indicated.

The study's focus on cultural scripts and global meanings of sexuality allowed for a consideration of the ways in which they inform but do not dictate the enactment of individual and relational scripts (Gagnon 1990). The results suggest that gendered stereotypes have persisted over time; yet, our respondents' discussions of sexuality at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels did not always fit into this traditional framework. This is consistent with the idea that gender differences in sexual attitudes and behavior are diminishing in the U.S. (e.g., Crawford and Popp 2003; Kimmel 2005). In cultures with less distinct gender differences, it is possible that the gap between the cultural-level scripts and those at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels will be less pronounced; future research is needed to test this proposition. While previous research has highlighted differences in sexual behaviors among women and men (e.g., Laumann and Mahay 2002; Vohs et al. 2004), less research has focused on how gendered assumptions about sexuality influence people's global understandings about sexuality and relational and individual sexual script enactment.

Although the conflation of sexuality and gender has been documented (Kimmel et al. 2005), we extend these findings here by illustrating the implications of the conflation of key terms for

sexuality-related research. Others have noted that there is often confusion related to key terms in sex research, such as what it means to “have sex” (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; Sanders and Reinisch 1999) or what is meant by “sexual health” (Edwards and Coleman 2004) or “sexuality” (Few 1997; Levine 1995). For example, Levine (1995, pp. 1–2) contrasts the imprecise, nonprofessional use of sexuality (i.e., “sexual identity, sexual behaviors, sexual capacities, or, less frequently, anatomy or physiology”) with professional meanings of the term, which are more often tied to context and include such things as identity, sexual function, “an emotional response system,” and “a perceptual, affective, and behavioral resource.” In addition, some research has examined people’s definitions of words, such as dating or virgin (Crawford and Popp 2003), and the differences between how researchers and lay people understand terms such as sexual desire and arousal (Beck et al. 1991). Our research suggests that not only are there multiple and unclear meanings of the terms sex and sexuality, but that they are impacted by cultural level scripts and gender expectations.

The results suggest that, in the U.S. (and likely elsewhere), underlying assumptions about the meaning of terms will impact responses to survey questions. Particularly important is that researchers either assess or define respondents’ understandings of key terms and make space for them to report behaviors, feelings or attitudes that do not correspond with gender stereotypes and cultural scripts about sexuality, which will allow for variations that may exist across cultural and regional contexts. Cognitive interviewing techniques may be particularly helpful in examining and clarifying individuals’ meanings and interpretations of terms, questions and responses in sex research. As one goal of surveys is to minimize error, questions must be clear and unambiguous so that they are understood in the same way by all respondents. Therefore, future survey research containing the terms sex and sexuality in their questions should be careful to offer an explanation of these terms so that participants understand them in the same way, therefore minimizing error and maximizing reliability. For example, we found that participants’ meanings of sexuality were often quite specific; therefore, if a researcher is interested in a broad understanding he or she may want to define the term by asking respondents to “please think about sexuality broadly, including not only your physical satisfaction, but also your emotional satisfaction and your overall sense of your sexual self.” As far as sex, our research suggests that one possible definition could be to tell participants, “By sex we mean any genital contact and/or stimulation” and remind them of this definition in subsequent questions (i.e., “sex here means any genital contact and/or stimulation”). Given the range of meanings that participants in the cognitive interviews held about these terms, offering definitions of key terms is an important step towards meeting the goals of minimizing error and maximizing reliability.

The results also have implications for the measurement of specific activities and experiences. Researchers might do well to allow participants to report behaviors, feelings or attitudes that do not correspond with gender stereotypes and cultural scripts about sexuality. As we work to systematically and scientifically study sexuality-related topics, it may be useful to acknowledge the existing gender stereotypes to reduce socially-desirable responding, thereby increasing the

validity of the results. Cognitive interviewing allowed us to better understand the process through which individuals understand and respond to questions about sexuality. Larger scale, future research employing similar designs would also be useful.

It is important to note some limitations to this study. By design, the sample consists of only English-speaking residents working in a medium-sized Midwestern city in the U.S. While our sample is diverse in terms of age and gender, whites, individuals with bachelors and advanced degrees, and politically-liberal individuals are over-represented compared to the overall U.S. public (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). In addition, although we purposefully did not ask any questions about respondents' personal sexual life, interview transcripts and field notes show that our sample included individuals who were married, single, and divorced, with and without children, and heterosexual and homosexual (although their discussions of personal experiences suggest that most were heterosexual). This sample does not allow explorations of how race, class and gender, as intersecting identities, impact sexual scripts (Mahay et al. 2000) and sexual behaviors (e.g., Weinberg and Williams 1988) and is not meant to be generalizable.

Second, despite our attempts to recruit people not comfortable discussing sexuality by using a random sample, it is likely that we are not capturing the full range of views, including those who refused to participate in an interview. There may be something unique about the views of individuals unwilling to talk "publicly" about sexuality. We do, however, note considerable variation in how comfortable, open and articulate our respondents appeared to be in answering our questions based both on their self-reports at the end of the interview and on the impressions the interviewers noted in their fieldnotes.

Third, while there are significant strengths of cognitive interviewing, the broadness of the questions may have inadvertently encouraged an initial focus on the existing stereotypes; therefore, the openness of the questions could be a factor contributing to the evocation of gender stereotypes by our respondents.

Fourth, not only the broadness of the questions but the setting—interviews conducted at a university by young women—may have made it difficult for participants to feel comfortable speaking about sex in a non-stereotypical way. However, it is also possible that the interviewers' age and gender and the university setting may have made it more likely that participants would approach sex in a non-traditional manner, as a way to appear more liberal and in line with the interviewers' perceived values.

Finally, research has noted cultural differences in how sexuality is expressed (e.g., Herdt 1999; Schalet 2007); therefore, future research is needed that explores how gender impacts meanings of sex and sexuality in other social and cultural contexts. These limitations suggest that our data may underestimate the degree to which individuals hold varied understandings of key terms; a larger sample focusing on different groups would likely uncover additional meanings of these terms, thus, further reinforcing our finding that individuals' understandings vary greatly. This

study is not meant to be generalizable and we suggest that future research explore the patterns we identify using a larger, representative sample.

In conclusion, the study results suggest that gender differences in sexuality persist in specific contexts, highlighting the complexity of conducting sex research. While past research has explored the relationship between gender and sexuality, it typically has focused on behaviors and motivations rather than the meanings behind them. Our findings illustrate that existing stereotypes and expectations about gender imbue individuals' meanings, understandings, and discussions about sexuality, its importance, and its functions. While our respondents' general talk reinforced gender proscriptions at the cultural level, more variations and deviations were reported in personal examples (i.e., at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels). This contradiction suggests that cultural gender stereotypes impact responses but are negotiated and filtered into individual and relational scripts in a complex manner. These gendered meanings impact individuals' understandings of key terms in sex research, such as sex and sexuality, and have implications for their responses on questionnaires. Therefore, to reach clearer understandings of sexual behaviors, experiences and attitudes, it is imperative that we, as researchers, recognize individuals' meanings of these terms and the extent to which cultural-level scripts and gender expectations impact these meanings.

#### Acknowledgement

This research was supported by a grant from an anonymous private foundation. During manuscript preparation Amanda Tanner was supported by a W.K. Kellogg Community Scholars fellowship at Johns Hopkins University and by the Section of Adolescent Medicine at Indiana University School of Medicine. We thank John Bancroft, Brian Powell, Doug Schrock, and Sarah A. Smith for helpful comments on previous drafts, Orit Fisher for research assistance, and J. Scott Long and Jack K. Martin for their assistance with the research design.

#### Appendix

##### Interview Questions

1. One thing that we are interested in is finding out about how important sex is in people's lives and how it compares to other important aspects of people's lives. How important do you think sex is in people's lives today?
2. Another topic that we are interested in is the role sex plays in people's lives. What purposes do you think sex serves in people's lives?
3. Now, we'd like to ask you to reflect on a couple of questions that are often used in studies about sexuality. After I read each question, I am interested in what you think the question is

getting at and in what criteria you would use to answer it, not in your personal answer to this question. [Switch Question Order Each Time]

The first question is: “In general, would you say your current sexual relationship is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” What do you think the question is asking (or getting at)? What things do you think people would think about when answering this question?

The second question is: “In general, would you say your own sexuality is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” What do you think the question is asking (or getting at)? What things do you think people would think about when answering this question?

4. In designing the survey, we want to include questions about a range of sexual topics that reflect the parts of sexual life that people find important. What are some parts of sexual life that we should be sure to ask about?

5. What criteria would someone use to judge his/her own sexual attractiveness?

6. What criteria would someone use to judge another person’s sexual attractiveness?

7. How do you think people know when they experience sexual desire?

8. How do you think people can tell if their partner is experiencing sexual desire?

9. In what ways is sex a problem in other people’s lives?

10. What are some kinds of risky sexual behavior that you think people engage in?

11. In what ways do you think someone’s physical health might influence their sexual activity?

12. In what ways do you think someone’s mental health might influence their sexual activity?

13. Do you think people’s positive or negative moods influence their sexuality? If so, how?

14. In what ways do you think religion and spirituality matters for sexuality?

15. How do you think people’s politics influence their sexuality?

16. How do you think that social movements such as the feminist and gay-rights movements have influenced people sexually?

17. In what ways do you think the internet is an influence on sexuality?

18. In what ways do you think other media (such as television, movies, magazines, and music) is an important influence on sexuality?

19. Throughout the interview in the questions about sexual behavior and relationships, when you mentioned “having sex,” I’m curious as to what that term means to you. What does it include? In

other words, how have you defined “sex” in our discussion today? [e.g., intercourse only, oral sex, kissing, etc.] What about “sexuality”?

20. Towards the beginning of the interview, I asked for your opinion on important parts of sexual life that we should be sure to ask about in our survey? You mentioned [list respondent’s responses to question 4]. Now that we’ve been talking about this topic for a while longer, I wondered if you would make any changes to this list.

21. Is there anything that we have not talked about that you think would be important for us to consider or to develop questions about for our surveys on sexuality?

22. Were there some topics here that you felt more or less comfortable talking about? Which one(s)?

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