

# Sex Rules: Emerging Adults' Perceptions of Gender's Impact on Sexuality

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Published online: 9 April 2015  
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**Abstract** Past research often explains gender differences in sexual behavior according to differences in social norms for men and women. Yet, individuals' perceptions and internalizations of current social norms are not well understood. This study aimed to examine emerging adults' perceptions of how being male or female impacts their sexuality and how their perceptions would differ if they were another gender. Participants ( $N = 205$ ) were college students, 61 % female, and ranged from age 18 to 25 ( $M = 20.5$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ). Participants answered open-ended questions about gender and responses were coded for content, positive tone, and negative tone. In describing how being female affected their sexual thoughts and feelings, women were more likely than men to focus on reputation concerns and describe limits and contexts in which sexual behavior was acceptable. In describing how being male affected their sexual thoughts and feelings, men were more likely than women to focus on issues of desire. Women's perceptions about how their sexual thoughts and feelings would differ if they were male were consistent with men's perceptions of their own gender's actual impact on sexuality, and vice versa. Women's descriptions of their own gender's impact on sexuality were more

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emotionally laden than men's. Finally, being older was associated with less negative and more positive emotional tone in men's and women's responses respectively.

**Keywords** Gender · Sexuality · Emerging adults · Stereotypes

## Introduction

Although prior research has demonstrated consistent gender differences in heterosexual experiences and behaviors (Petersen and Hyde 2011), what underlies those differences remains unclear. Focusing on perceptions of gender's impact on sexuality may shed light on internalized gender socialization (Fagot et al. 2000), which indicates that gender differences in sexual experiences develop as a result of learning gender roles. Due to the entrenchment of gender roles, they could be a potentially important area for sexual health programming to target depending upon their link to sexual health behaviors.

Within the United States, gender differences in heterosexual behavior begin early and persist across the lifespan, but interpreting gender differences is complex. Male adolescents typically report initiating intercourse at younger ages than do female adolescents (Mosher et al. 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck and Helfand 2008), and although gender differences in sexual behaviors may narrow as people age, they remain a consistent theme across studies of adult sexual behavior (Petersen and Hyde 2011). For example, men report more experience with a variety of sexual behaviors, more frequent sex, and more consistent condom use than women do (Petersen and Hyde 2011). Yet, when it comes to heterosexual behavior, men's and women's experiences are interdependent. Thus, gender differences may reflect differences in reporting rather than actual behavioral differences (Lefkowitz and Gillen 2006), either due to social desirability or selective memory. In addition to reporting more frequent and casual sexual behaviors, men also tend to report more permissive sexual attitudes than do women. In general, meta-analytic findings reveal that men are more approving of sexual behaviors such as casual sex, sex without commitment, and sex with multiple partners than women were (Petersen and Hyde 2011). Yet, if individuals perceive that their gender largely governs their sexuality, then gender socialization could be linked with sexual health behaviors that are inherently gendered (e.g., wearing a male condom or asking a male partner to wear a condom) and therefore would offer another area to intervene. Thus, understanding how men and women *perceive* gender to impact their sexuality is important for the development of sexual health programming.

## Explanations of Gender Differences in Sexual Behavior

One way to understand differences in men's and women's sexual behavior is through the social norms that govern appropriate behavior for men and women. Sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon 1986), for example, points to differences in men's and women's sexual scripts as explanation for gender differences. Sexual scripts are implicit rules that individuals develop in the context

of social and cultural norms about appropriate sexual behavior (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Reflecting social norms and stereotypes, women's sexual scripts emphasize relationship quality whereas men's sexual scripts emphasize individual pleasure (Masters et al. 2013).

Sexual scripts play an important role in men's and women's contraceptive behavior, such as condom use. For instance, women who endorse relational (stereotypically feminine) sexual scripts have less positive attitudes toward condoms and a lower likelihood of condom use than less stereotypically feminine women do (Hynie et al. 1998). Additionally, women's exposure to traditional romance scripts in romance novels is associated with more negative attitudes toward condoms and a lower intention to use condoms (Diekman et al. 2000). Much of this work, however, has focused on women's sexual scripts and not men's. Given that within heterosexual relationships, men's and women's sexual behaviors are interdependent, research examining both men's and women's sexual scripts could better explain gender differences in sexual behavior. Furthermore, a better understanding of sexual scripts would inform sexual health programs that seek to improve sexual health. Although feminine sexual scripts have been linked with poorer sexual health behaviors, less is known about masculine sexual scripts and their implications for sexual health.

Current sexual health programming that addresses gender differences in sexual health behavior, such as *It's All One* (Skaer and Brundage 2009) and FLASH (2011) focus on gender differences in experiences of teen pregnancy and sexual violence. However, these programs do not teach participants how gender roles impact behavior and how to become aware of gender's potential role in sexual decision making. The current study could inform the content of such programming by identifying potentially malleable perceptions of the role gender plays in sexual decision making.

### **The Sexual Double Standard**

The sexual double standard posits that men are allowed greater sexual freedom than women (Crawford and Popp 2003). This difference in freedom of sexual expression is central in defining male and female sexual scripts and continues to exist in American culture (Bordini and Sperb 2013; Kreager and Staff 2009; Petersen and Hyde 2011). However, the meaning of the sexual double standard varies between cultural groups and has evolved over time to include more subtle distinctions (Crawford and Popp 2003), such as pressures for women to not only participate in fewer sexual behaviors and avoid sex outside of a committed relationship, but also to be sexually attractive and prove sexual worth through aesthetic expression of sexuality (Shibley-Hyde and Durik 2000). There is variability in how individuals endorse the sexual double standard, with some individuals rejecting the sexual double standard, others endorsing it in certain contexts, and others still fully endorsing it (Crawford and Popp 2003). Endorsement of the sexual double standard has been linked with risky attitudes and behaviors such as drinking alcohol before or during sexual encounters (Boone and Lefkowitz 2004), having more sexual partners (Lefkowitz et al. 2014), and perceiving women's condom use negatively (Kelly and

Bazzini 2001). Given the evolution of the sexual double standard and variation in endorsement of it, it is important to understand how individuals perceive their own gender's impact on their sexuality and how their sexuality might be different if they were another gender. This research on perceptions of gender and sex could inform effective safe-sex interventions that would target sexual double standard beliefs.

## Gender and Sex During Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a developmental period during which exploration of gender and sexuality is normative for many individuals (Lefkowitz and Gillen 2006). Indeed, emerging adults are more likely to be sexually active and have sex outside of the context of a committed romantic relationship than adolescents are (Stinson 2010), and less likely to have long-term partners than are individuals at later stages of development (Noller et al. 2013). Further, in college, students' sexual views become more open (Lefkowitz 2005) and the formation of gender roles becomes linked with dating (Zimmer-Gembeck and Petherick 2006). Young people may be exposed to traditional gender stereotypes in new domains and contexts (e.g., dating relationships) as well as to more progressive perspectives on gender roles and sexuality in new settings such as university classes (Rogers et al. 2009). This combination of sexual and gender exploration offers an opportune developmental period for understanding how gender socialization and stereotyping are linked with sexual behavior. The sexual exploration and experience that occur during this period suggest that younger emerging adults who are just entering college likely have different perceptions of sexuality than older emerging adults who have already experienced a few years of exploration. Therefore, it is important to understand not only how emerging adults perceive gender's impact on sexuality, but also how these perceptions vary by age.

## Internalization of Gender Stereotypes

Individuals may be developing new perceptions about gender during emerging adulthood, but the internalization or application of these gender ideologies to one's self is a distinct process that can give rise to gender differences in sexual thoughts and behaviors. *Stereotype threat* arises when one is reminded of one's group membership during a situation in which a negative stereotype about one's group applies (Steele 1997). An individual who has internalized the stereotypes of his/her group is more susceptible to stereotype threat, and thus more likely to succumb to behaviors consistent with the stereotypes of one's group (Steele 1997). The concept of stereotype threat has been applied most often to gender stereotypes in the context of mathematics and spatial skills, showing that girls and women who are reminded of their gender perform more poorly on mathematical or spatial skills tests than girls and women who are not reminded of their gender (Johns et al. 2005). However, less is known about how stereotype threat functions with gender and sexuality.

Young men and women frequently receive gender cues from peers and media that remind young women to be feminine and young men to be masculine. Therefore, consistent with stereotype threat, it is possible that someone who has

internalized his/her gender's stereotypes would be more likely to conform to gender stereotypic roles in a sexual scenario and would in turn be less likely to practice sexual health behaviors that are counter to the gender stereotype. For instance, if a young woman has internalized the female gender stereotype, she may be less likely to insist on using a condom during sexual intercourse, as the female gender stereotype is to be submissive in sexual situations (Diekman et al. 2000). In contrast, a young man may be more likely to pressure a resistant female partner into having sex, as the male gender stereotype is more aggressive in sexual situations (Abbey et al. 2011). Despite the stereotype of women as submissive, it's also possible that, given women's sexual script as sexual gatekeepers, they may be more likely to insist on condom use than men (Gavey et al. 2001).

Internalization of gender stereotypes is a potential barrier to sexual health behaviors. Someone who believes his/her sexual decisions and behaviors are constricted by gender has more of an external locus of control and would be less likely to take responsibility for his/her sexual health than someone with an internal locus of control, who attributes sexual decisions and behaviors to him/herself (Wallston et al. 1978). Therefore, an individual who has internalized gender stereotypes might be more likely to act in accordance with that stereotype in a situation that is highly gendered (e.g., a heterosexual experience) with an external locus of control, which could inhibit efficaciousness for sexual health behaviors.

## The Current Study

Previous studies of sexual attitudes cannot fully address how emerging adults in the United States perceive gender norms of sexual behavior or internalize those norms. Standardized measures (e.g., items that participants rate using Likert scales) often reflect specific views of gender norms, predetermined during instrument design. These instruments cannot adequately capture nuances in the perception of sexual double standards and sexual scripts. Open-ended questions about gender and sex may afford a more thorough understanding of young men's and women's views (Lefkowitz and Gillen 2006) because the method allows respondents more freedom in response than closed-ended assessments. Further, responses to open-ended questions provide researchers with an opportunity to learn from study participants what issues are salient to them, rather than assessing participants' ratings of specific constructs predetermined by the researchers. Open-ended questions can also elicit distinct responses from participants compared to in-person interviews because there is less social desirability bias in responses.

To understand emerging adults' perceptions of gender norms of sexual behavior, we asked a sample of college students at one U.S. university open-ended questions about how their gender affected their sexual thoughts and feelings. Further, we asked them to imagine how their sexual thoughts and feelings might differ if they were the other gender. We intentionally kept the questions open-ended, as close-ended questions could trigger gender stereotypes, skewing the responses. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we did not make specific predictions about what themes would emerge. However, in general, we expected that women's and men's responses would differ in ways that reflect sexual double standards, with women

more sexually restricted and men having more sexual freedom. The goals of the current study were (1) to describe how young men and women perceive their gender to affect their thoughts and feelings about sexual behavior, (2) to describe how young men and women believe their thoughts and feelings would differ if they were the other gender, (3) to examine differences in the content, positive tone, and negative tone of men's and women's responses, and, (4) to explore how age is associated with how positively and negatively young men and women perceive the impact of gender on their thoughts and feelings about sexual behavior.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 220 students at a U.S. university recruited to participate in a study of college student attitudes and behaviors. Flyers were distributed in predominantly general education summer session classes as well as in high traffic areas around campus. Paper and pencil surveys were administered in group (classroom-based) sessions and included questions about gender and sexuality. Consent was obtained at the beginning of each session and students received \$10 for their participation.

Fifteen participants were excluded from analyses because they did not meet all study criteria (i.e., they were older than 25 or graduate students). Of the remaining 205 participants, 61 % were female. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 25 ( $M = 20.5$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ). Participants ranged from first-year students (31 %) to those who had completed 4 or more years of university (24 %). The majority of the sample was European American (78 %), with 9 % African American, 9 % Asian American, 2 % Latino American, and 3 % of mixed ethnicity/race. Ninety-five percent of the sample identified as heterosexual, 2 % as gay or lesbian, 2 % as bisexual, and 1 % identified as "other" (e.g., "curious"; "no label").

### Measures

#### *Demographic Information*

Participants completed a questionnaire that asked about their background characteristics, including gender, birth date and ethnicity/race.

#### *Gender's Impact on Sexuality*

Participants answered 2 open-ended questions about the role of gender in their thoughts and feelings about sex as part of a larger study on the role of gender in sexual behaviors and attitudes. Because the survey included a number of close-ended, Likert-type questionnaires, we designed these questions to be open-ended in order to assess participants' personal views about how gender shapes their own sexuality. These questions appeared at the beginning of the survey to avoid contaminating participants' responses with attitudinal or sexual behavior scales.

There were two versions (male and female) of the questionnaire. The female (male) version asked "How does being female (male) affect your thoughts and feelings about sex?" and "How would your thoughts and feelings about sex be different if you were male (female)?" It should be noted that, although our questions ask about the influence of being male or female (biological sex), we refer to this categorization as "gender" in order to avoid confusion with the term "sex" which we use to refer to sexuality.

### *Coding of Themes*

The second and fourth authors examined responses and developed a list of major themes and sub-themes applicable to both questions, representing ways in which one's gender might affect one's thoughts and feelings about sex. These themes were then used to develop a coding scheme applicable to both questions, with 12 major themes and 36 subthemes. The first major theme was "no effect," coded if the participant explicitly stated that being male/female had no effect on his/her thoughts and feelings about sex. The rest of the major themes described categories of change (e.g., emotional/reputation protection), whereas sub-themes described more specific changes that would fall under the major category (e.g., worry about reputation). We used the same coding scheme for both questions to facilitate comparisons of participants' responses to the two questions.

The third author and 2 undergraduate students served as coders. Coders were instructed not to code responses that described general feelings about sex without answering the question (e.g., "I am very serious about sex.") Coders first indicated the presence/absence of each major theme, then coded the presence of each sub-theme within a major theme, if any were identified. Major themes and sub-themes were not mutually exclusive; a single response could be coded as containing multiple themes. Coding was done over one academic semester (15 weeks). All responses were coded by all 3 coders. Coders met with the second author twice a week for an hour on average to discuss any discrepancies and make final decisions about which themes were present in each response (codes based on these final decisions are used in all analyses). Kappas were performed to assess inter-rater reliability for major and sub-themes. Two major themes (Influences on Sexual Behavior, with the subthemes "peers" and "societal" and Performance Concerns, with the subtheme "pressure to perform well") and 1 additional subtheme ("sex is self-esteem", a subtheme of "Meaning of Sex"), did not achieve acceptable levels of reliability ( $\kappa < .50$ ) and were therefore dropped from further analyses. Thus, all analyses focus on the 10 remaining major themes and their 32 subthemes. The average kappa was .76 (range .67–.97) for major themes and .71 (range .50–1.00) for subthemes.

### *Ratings of Positive and Negative Tone*

Coders also rated the positive and negative tone of the responses on two separate 5-point Likert-type scales from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very." Separate scales were chosen because it is possible to have a response that portrays both positive and

negative influences of gender on sexuality. Intra-class correlations were performed to examine inter-rater reliability (.83 positive tone and .84 negative tone).

## Results

Table 1 presents the proportions of respondents who mentioned each of the themes in their responses. Note that sample size varies because fewer respondents had codeable responses to our second question than to our first. Responses that were not coded either did not answer the question, left the question blank, or merely referred the reader back to the first question (for example, some respondents wrote simply, “same as above”).

To address our first two goals, we outline the content of women’s and men’s responses. Given the open-ended nature of our data, we provide examples as illustrations of typical responses. For each of the questions (two for women, two for men), we describe and provide examples of responses that were coded in the three most common major theme categories for each question, including any subthemes that were coded in at least 5 % of responses. For each question, we also provide examples of responses that described gender as having no effect on sexuality. We retain participants’ exact wording, including any spelling or grammatical errors.

### Women’s Perceptions of How Being Female Affected Their Thoughts and Feelings About Sex

A small proportion of women indicated that being female had no effect on their thoughts and feelings about sex (7 %). For example, one young woman stated “sex is not affected by my gender.”

Most frequently, however, young women stated that being female affected their thoughts and feelings about sex by causing them to worry about their reputation and emotional well-being (38 %). Specifically, 27 % of women indicated that being female made them concerned about their sexual reputations. For example, one woman wrote: “I feel that when girls sleep around they are branded sluts, whores, hos...so I don’t do actions that would make people feel that way about me.” Similarly, another woman wrote, “When I think about anything that has to do with sex I always am conscious of what others may think. (I) Try not to be a slut about or act like I’m a pro or something. Girls shouldn’t act like that.” Another 16 % of women indicated that being female caused worries about their emotional well-being in sexual situations. For example, one woman explained: “A lot of times I feel very cautious about relationships. I feel like a lot of guys try to take advantage of girls. I feel like most guys initially are out to just have sex with a girl; not to have a relationship with a girl, especially at this age.”

The second most common theme (30 %) in women’s responses was about promiscuity, monogamy, and/or abstinence. Most commonly these responses reflected the subthemes that sex should be reserved for loving, monogamous relationships (12 %) or that women should not have casual sex (12 %). With regard to the former subtheme, one woman stated: “Even if I wanted sex before marriage



**Table 1** Proportions of respondents who mentioned themes in responses to open-ended questions

Theme	How own gender affects thoughts and feelings about sex			How thoughts and feelings would differ if other gender			
	Proportion of total sample (N = 187)	Men	Women	Proportion of total sample (N = 174)	Men	Women	t
No effect	.09	.12	.07	.13	.12	.13	1.21
Emotional/reputation protection	.27	.10	.38	.16	.15	.17	.26
Worry about reputation	.19	.06	.27	.01	.02	.01	.35
Worry emotional well-being	.11	.03	.16	.04	.09	.01	2.70**
Not worry about reputation	.01	.01	.00	.06	.02	.09	2.05*
Not worry emotional well-being	.00	.00	.00	.06	.02	.09	2.05*
Control of sexual activity	.24	.25	.23	.13	.18	.09	1.72
Need to be less aggressive	.05	.01	.07	.02	.06	.00	2.62**
Not supposed to initiate	.03	.03	.03	.01	.03	.00	1.83
Need to be more aggressive	.02	.06	.00	.02	.00	.03	1.37
Pressure to be initiator	.02	.04	.00	.01	.00	.02	1.11
Need partner's consent	.02	.06	.00	.01	.00	.01	.78
Promiscuity/monogamy/abstinence	.23	.13	.30	.21	.08	.29	3.43***
Sex in monogamous relationship	.09	.03	.12	.01	.03	.00	1.82
Should not have casual sex	.09	.03	.12	.00	.00	.00	—
Should remain abstinent	.03	.01	.03	.02	.03	.01	1.03
Casual sex is okay	.01	.03	.01	.16	.00	.25	4.66***
Desire	.19	.35	.10	.16	.27	.08	3.44***
Think about sex a lot/all the time	.10	.25	.00	.03	.00	.05	1.78
Must stifle sexual desire/feelings	.04	.04	.03	.01	.02	.00	1.28
Do not think about sex much	.02	.01	.02	.07	.18	.00	4.87***
Physical protection	.18	.01	.29	.12	.08	.15	1.42
Worry about pregnancy	.14	.00	.23	.03	.06	.01	1.98*

Table 1 continued

Theme	How own gender affects thoughts and feelings about sex			How thoughts and feelings would differ if other gender				
	Proportion of total sample (N = 187)	Men	Women	t	Proportion of total sample (N = 174)	Men	Women	t
Worry about STDs	.04	.00	.06	2.15*	.01	.00	.02	1.11
Worry about rape	.02	.00	.03	1.38	.00	.00	.00	—
Don't worry about pregnancy	.00	.00	.00	—	.08	.00	.13	3.12**
Don't worry about STDs	.00	.00	.00	—	.01	.00	.01	.78
Don't worry about rape	.00	.00	.00	—	.01	.00	.01	.78
Meaning of sex	.18	.11	.22	1.86	.13	.08	.16	1.58
Sex is emotional	.07	.01	.11	2.54*	.02	.06	.00	2.62**
Sex is sacred	.02	.01	.02	.19	.00	.00	.00	—
Sex is physical	.02	.04	.01	1.52	.02	.00	.03	1.37
Sex is recreational	.01	.01	.00	1.27	.01	.00	.01	.78
Attitudes	.13	.13	.14	.28	.13	.09	.16	1.26
More liberal/open	.04	.04	.03	.24	.05	.02	.06	1.52
More conservative/reserved	.03	.00	.04	1.80	.02	.05	.00	2.26*
Number of partners	.08	.03	.11	2.10*	.10	.02	.15	2.92**
Should not have too many partners	.07	.00	.11	3.01**	.00	.00	.00	—
Okay/expected to have many partners	.01	.03	.00	1.80	.09	.00	.15	3.37***
Unspecified protection	.07	.03	.10	1.78	.11	.18	.07	2.18*
More protection	.07	.03	.10	1.78	.07	.17	.02	3.73***
Less protection	.00	.00	.00	—	.04	.02	.06	1.32

Is used where no *t* test was performed because proportions were .00 for both men and women. Sample size varies because fewer participants provided codeable responses to our second question (regarding how sexual thoughts and feelings would differ if the other gender) than to our first question

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

or with some random guy, then I feel like it would be looked down on and wrong.” Reflecting the notion that women should not have casual sex, one woman wrote, “Since I am a female, I feel that it is wrong to have casual sex with as many partners as I like. I have to control my urges when it comes to different men I am attracted to, but not interested in marrying.”

Women's third most common theme was concern about physical protection from pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (29 %). Pregnancy worries represented the most commonly coded subtheme (23 %). For example, one woman stated, “It makes me more cautious because if someone gets pregnant it will be me. It's a lot easier for guys to run from a relationship if there are children involved.” Another woman echoed her concern over the responsibility of childbearing, “...Though I feel everyone [males and females] are equally responsible for their actions, I am careful to not get pregnant. I take a lot of responsibility for contraceptives because I can't afford a baby.” Another somewhat commonly coded subtheme reflected concerns about sexually transmitted diseases (6 %). In most of these cases, however, young women described being concerned about both STDs and pregnancy. For instance, one participant wrote, “I definitely think first about protection—from STDs and pregnancy.”

Overall, young women's responses to this question were rated as being “somewhat” to “pretty much” negative ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 1.1$  on a 5 point scale) and “not at all” to “a little” positive ( $M = 1.5$ ;  $SD = 0.8$ ). For instance, in a response rated as highly negative a participant wrote, “Damned if you do, damned if you don't. If you do experiment sexually, you are a slut, if you don't you are a prude.” In contrast, much less common were positive sentiments such as, “Sometimes sex makes me feel more feminine and more beautiful...”

### **How Women Believed Their Thoughts and Feelings About Sex Would be Different if They Were Male**

When asked how their thoughts and feelings about sex would differ if they were male, 13 % of women reported that their thoughts and feelings about sex would not differ. For example, one respondent wrote, “They would probably be about the same. My sexual beliefs are more morally-based than gender-based.”

Most commonly, however, women described issues of promiscuity, monogamy, and abstinence (29 %), and in particular, the subtheme that casual sex would be okay if they were male (25 %). For example, one young woman stated, “...being promiscuous would be seen as normal and healthy.”

The second most common theme in women's responses was that differences would occur in their worries about emotions and their reputations (17 %). Most frequently, their responses reflected the subthemes that they would not worry about their reputations (9 %) or their emotional well-being (9 %) if they were male. One young woman summed up both concerns, “I don't think I would be as concerned about my own reputation if I were sleeping with someone, nor would I be worried about being taken advantage of.” Specific to emotional concerns, one young woman explained, “I'd probably not worry about the consequences nearly as much. It [sex] would be much more physical than emotional.”

Women's third most common responses were that the meaning of sex would be different if they were male (16 %) or that their sexual attitudes might be different (16 %). With regard to the meaning of sex, none of the subthemes represented at least 5 % of responses. Rather, women tended to describe more general changes in the meaning of sex. For example, one young woman stated, "I probably would take sex more lightly and have it be not as big a deal as I do now." With regard to sexual attitudes, the most commonly coded subtheme reflected the notion that their attitudes would be more liberal or open if they were male. For example, one woman wrote, "I would be much less inhibited and less embarrassed"; another wrote, "a little bit more liberal and less sensitive."

Overall, young women's responses were rated as being "not at all" to "a little" negative ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) and "not at all" to "a little" positive ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ). For instance, in a response rated as highly negative, a female participant wrote, "I probably would be a chauvinist pig, just to prove my masculinity just like any other male...I can see biologically why we need to differ, it's just the social changes that I really don't understand." In contrast, in a response that was rated as positive, one young woman wrote, "I think I'd be more open about sex and sexual fantasies."

### **Men's Perceptions of How Being Male Affected Their Thoughts and Feelings About Sex**

A modest proportion of men indicated that being male had no effect on their thoughts and feelings about sex (13 %). For example, one young man stated, "In my eyes being male does not change my ideas about sex, it is the way that I have been raised and experiences that I had that determined my views."

Young men most commonly mentioned that being male affected their sexual desire (35 %). In most cases (25 %), men's responses were coded under the subtheme "think about sex a lot or all of the time." For example, one young man stated, "I feel that being a guy makes you think about sex all the time. Women are everywhere...how can you not think about it?" Another man echoed, "My thoughts and feelings about sex as a male is that I'm always looking and thinking about sex, 24/7..."

Second, men frequently mentioned issues related to the control of sexual activity (e.g., pressure to initiate, needing partner's consent, 25 %). The most commonly coded subthemes in this category centered on the topic of consent (6 %) and the need to be sexually aggressive (6 %). As an example of consent, one young man stated, "...I feel I must be careful not to do anything without the proper consent. It is easy for a girl to call rape." Another stated, "I think being male makes me feel that sex is ok if consensual, and not random." With regard to needing to be sexually aggressive, one man stated simply, "Makes me feel like I should be the aggressor."

The third most common themes in men's responses were about promiscuity, monogamy, and abstinence (13 %), and men's sexual attitudes (13 %). However, none of the subthemes in either of these categories represented at least 5 % of young men's responses. Instead, the responses in the first category addressed the issues of promiscuity, monogamy, and abstinence generally. For example, one man wrote,

“Society makes it seem as though sexual promiscuity is not bad for males, but horrible for females.” With regard to sexual attitudes, men tended to describe attitudes in general. For example, one young man stated, “...I feel that it’s manly to have many partners and to have a crude and degrading attitude towards females, even while I know this isn’t the true way I feel about the situation.”

Overall, young men’s responses to this question were rated as “not at all” to “a little” negative ( $M = 1.6$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) and “not at all” to “a little” positive ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). For instance, in a response that was rated as highly negative, one young man wrote, “It makes me feel like other guys expect me to put on a certain image regarding sex...Basically it discourages me from having sex or at least making it public because people can’t mind their own business.” In contrast, a young man who was rated as portraying a lot of positivity in his response wrote simply, “I feel close to my feminine side but as a male I love sex!”

### **How Men Believed Their Thoughts and Feelings About Sex Would be Different if They Were Female**

When asked how their thoughts and feelings about sex would differ if they were female, 12 % of men reported that things would not differ. For example, one young man stated, “I don’t think they should be any different. Sex is supposed to be physical.”

Most commonly, however, young men focused on issues of desire (27 %). These responses frequently reflected the subtheme that they would not think about sex as much if they were female (18 %). For example, one young man stated, “I probably wouldn’t think about it as much or be as driven to want it.”

Young men’s second most common theme was the control of sexual activity (18 %). Some of these responses reflected the subtheme that they would be less aggressive (6 %). For example, one young man wrote, “I wouldn’t be the aggressor.” Another stated, “I must be passive.”

Finally, young men mentioned needing to be more cautious or use more protection. In these responses they generally did not specify why they felt they would need protection, thus coded as “Unspecified Protection” (18 %). Most of these responses reflected the subtheme that as a woman they would need to take more general precaution (17 %). For example, one young man stated, “I might be a little more cautious, more careful.” Similarly, another wrote, “I may feel as though I should be careful when I know someone is sexually attracted to me.”

Overall, men’s responses were rated as “not at all” to “a little” negative ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) and “not at all” to “a little” positive ( $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ). For instance, in a response rated as highly negative, a man wrote, “I would question the sincerity of the male to say anything they could to get what they wanted. Would the guy leave me if I had sex with him or I was pregnant?” In contrast, in a response rated as positive, one young man wrote, “I think I would feel less in control and more relaxed knowing that I would have less pressure to start things.”

## Gender Differences in Perceptions of Gender's Impact on Sexuality

In order to address the third goal, determining how perceptions of gender's impact on sexuality differed by participant gender, we performed a series of *t* tests. There were significant gender differences for 5 out of 10 major themes and 12 out of 32 subthemes in responses about how gender affects individuals' sexual thoughts and feelings (see Table 1). Women were more likely than men to describe that: being female caused them to worry about their reputation and emotional well-being; being female meant they needed to remain abstinent, only have sex in a monogamous relationship, or avoid casual partners; being female caused them to worry about physical consequences such as pregnancy or STDs; as a woman they saw sex as having an emotional meaning; and being female meant they should not have too many partners. In contrast, men were more likely than women to describe that: being male meant they need to be sexually aggressive, initiate sex, or need a partner's consent; and being male caused them to think about sex a lot or all of the time.

Gender differences were found for 4 out of 10 major themes and 12 out of 32 subthemes in describing how their thoughts and feelings about sex would be different if they were the other gender (see Table 1). Women were more likely than men to describe that if they were the other gender: they would not have to worry about their reputations and emotional well-being; casual sex would be okay; they would not have to worry about pregnancy; and it would be okay or they would be expected to have many sexual partners. In contrast, men were more likely than women to describe that if they were the other gender: they would have to worry about their emotional well-being; they would need to be less aggressive in sexual situations; they would not think about sex as much; they would worry about pregnancy; they would see sex as having an emotional meaning; they would be conservative or reserved about sex; and they would need to protect themselves more.

## Gender Differences in Positive and Negative Tone of Responses

We performed two 2 (gender-between)  $\times$  2 (question-within) mixed model ANOVAs to examine differences in the positive and negative tone of young women's and men's responses. A main effect of gender was found for negative tone,  $F(1, 161) = 15.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . Pooling across question, women's responses were rated as more negative ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) than men's ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ). An interaction between gender and question, however, also emerged,  $F(1, 161) = 30.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . To follow up this interaction, paired sample *t* tests were conducted for men and women separately. No significant differences were found between the two questions for men. For women, however, responses to the first question were more negative ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) than responses to the second question ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ;  $t(1, 102) = 8.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ). That is, women's perceptions about how being female affected their thoughts and feelings about sex were more negative than their perceptions about how their thoughts and feelings would be different if they were male.

For positive tone, a between-subjects main effect emerged for participant gender,  $F(1, 161) = 5.84$ ,  $p < .05$ . Pooling across question, women's responses were rated as more positive ( $M = 1.6$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) than men's ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ).

## Associations Between Age and Positive and Negative Tone of Responses

To address our fourth goal, examining whether age was associated with positive and negative perceptions of gender's impact on thoughts and feelings about sex, we performed a series of regression analyses with each of the four positive and negative ratings as dependent variables (see Table 2). Predictors were gender (coded 0 = male; 1 = female), age (centered around the mean to reduce multicollinearity), and the gender  $\times$  age interaction term. The interaction between gender and age was significant in two out of four regressions. Age was significantly associated with women's but not men's negative tone, and with men's but not women's positive tone. Younger women tended to have more negative perceptions about how their gender affects their thoughts and feelings about sex than older women did. In contrast, older men tended to have more positive perceptions about how being the other gender would affect their thoughts and feelings about sex than younger men did.

## Discussion

The present study sought to describe young men's and women's perceptions about gender's impact on sexuality. In explaining how being female affected their thoughts and feelings about sex, women were more likely than men to focus on

**Table 2** Standardized regression coefficients predicting positivity and negativity in perceptions of gender's impact on sexuality

	$\beta$
Dependent variable: positivity regarding own gender's impact on sexuality (N = 187, $R^2 = .01$ )	
Gender	.02
Age	.13
Gender $\times$ age	-.07
Dependent variable: negativity regarding own gender's impact on sexuality (N = 187, $R^2 = .19^{***}$ )	
Gender	.38***
Age	.08
Gender $\times$ age	-.24*
Dependent variable: positivity regarding other gender's impact on sexuality (N = 174, $R^2 = .10^{***}$ )	
Gender	.24***
Age	.19
Gender $\times$ age	-.27*
Dependent variable: negativity regarding other gender's impact on sexuality (N = 174, $R^2 = .01$ )	
Gender	-.07
Age	.01
Gender $\times$ age	.02

Sample size varies because fewer participants provided codeable responses to our second question (regarding how sexual thoughts and feelings differ for the other gender) than to our first question

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

emotional and reputation concerns. For example, many young women felt that being female limited the relationship contexts in which they could engage in sexual behavior, a finding consistent with social norms that place greater constraints on the contexts in which sexual behavior can occur for women more than for men (Masters et al. 2013). Further, women were more likely than men to describe worrying about the physical risks associated with sexual behavior, whereas men were more likely to refer to sexual desire. These findings reflect differences in sexual scripts, with masculine sexual scripts focused more on individual pleasure, and feminine scripts emphasizing relationship quality (Masters et al. 2013). Our findings also corroborate sociocultural theories that suggest men are more sexually privileged and therefore can focus on desire and libido instead of sexual contexts and consequences (Shibley-Hyde and Durik 2000). Some men—but no women—stated concerns about gaining partners' consent for sexual behavior. The finding that men are worried about gaining consent is somewhat alarming, as concerns about gaining consent are associated with hostile masculinity and sexually aggressive behavior (Abbey et al. 2011). Yet, it is also possible that their responses reflect a high level of caution in obtaining consent before engaging in sexual experiences with women. Finally, consistent with research on gender differences in attitudes about casual sex (Okami and Shackelford 2001), more men stated that being male was associated with casual sex being an "okay" or even expected behavior than women did.

### **Gender Differences in Perception of Own Gender's Impact on Sexuality**

Several gender differences emerged that are consistent with prior work. For example, previous research has documented higher rates of sexual guilt and anxiety among women than among men (Higgins et al. 2011; Petersen and Hyde 2011), and more permissive sexual attitudes, more favorable views of casual sex, and higher rates of engaging in casual sex among men (Petersen and Hyde 2011). Further, the sexual double standard places greater constraints on the contexts in which it is appropriate for women to engage in premarital sex (Crawford and Popp 2003; Petersen and Hyde 2011). Consistent with these findings, women were more likely than men to report sexually-related worries about reputation or physical issues. Women were also more likely to believe that they should not have casual sex, or that sex is only acceptable in the context of a loving, monogamous relationship. These results are corroborated by other research which suggests that men who engage in risky or casual sex tend to have more positive sexual esteem and fewer depressive symptoms, whereas women who engage in risky or casual sex tend to have lower sexual esteem and more depressive symptoms (Grello et al. 2006; Maas and Lefkowitz 2014). Thus, risky or casual sex is generally experienced in more positive ways for young men than young women.

Gender differences also emerged in the tone of participants' responses. Women's responses were both more positive and more negative than men's, perhaps because women are socialized to attach more emotional meaning to sexual issues (Fagot et al. 2000). This finding is supported by research on women's sexual scripts, which has shown that women's scripts are more focused on relationships and intimacy than are men's (Masters et al. 2013). Thus, women may have more expectations about



how sexual experiences should play out and what should manifest after a sexual experience, creating more emotion prior to and after sexual experiences.

### **Perceptions of Social Norms for the Other Gender**

One goal of the current study was to understand men's and women's perceptions of social norms governing the other gender's sexual actions. In general, men's and women's responses complimented each other well. That is, women's perceptions about how their sexual thoughts and feelings would differ if they were male were consistent with men's perceptions of their own gender's impact on sexuality, and vice versa. Responses support the idea that both men and women have internalized societal norms which provide men more freedom to engage in risky behaviors such as having multiple partners (Crawford and Popp 2003), and burden women with the responsibility of physical protection, thereby limiting women's sexual behavior more than men's.

Many women reported that if they were male, casual sex and having many sexual partners would be more accepted. In addition, some women mentioned that sex would take on a different or less serious meaning if they were male. Men, on the other hand, were more likely than women to focus on issues of sexual desire, reporting that they would have less desire for sex if they were female. Further, echoing women's descriptions of their own thoughts and feelings about sex, men were more likely than women to think that being female would result in a greater need to protect themselves in sexual situations. These views are consistent with research describing men as more permissive toward sex and more favorable toward casual sex than women (Petersen and Hyde 2011). Men's perceptions are also consistent with research on that has suggested that men experience more sexual desire than do women (Shibley-Hyde and Durik 2000). These findings are an important contribution to the current literature, because they represent women's and men's views of the social norms governing not only their own gender but the other gender's sexual behavior as well. Women and men may carry their perceptions of the other gender's sexuality into sexual encounters and may expect their partner to behave in ways consistent with the gendered norms of sexual behavior. These gendered expectations may contribute to miscommunications about sexual decisions such as consent to different types of sexual behaviors or use of condoms.

Findings also provided evidence of internalization of gender norms around sexual violence (Rudman et al. 2013). In our sample, women were more likely to perceive that being female makes them susceptible to sexual danger and men were more likely to perceive that if they were female they would be more susceptible to sexual dangers. In addition, men were more likely to describe that their gender makes them have a higher sex drive, whereas women were more likely to believe that if they were male, they would have more sexual drive. These perceptions could lead to riskier sexual decision making for men and women in line with each gender's stereotype. For example, not asking for consent prior to engaging in a sexual behavior for men, or complying with an unwanted sexual behavior for women are gender stereotypes that play a role in sexual assault. These findings are of particular concern because they suggest an external locus of control for sexual safety

behaviors, by identifying gender as something that is attributable to inevitable sexual danger. These findings could be applied to the development of sex education programs that target reduction of sexual assault and sexual victimization, by adding content that reflects the gender norms linked with nonconsensual sex as internalization of gendered norms may be driving some of the behavior.

### **The Role of Age in Perceptions of Gender's Impact on Sexuality**

For women, being older was associated with less negative perceptions of gender's role in their own sexual thoughts and feelings. For men, being older was associated with more positive perceptions of how their sexual thoughts and feelings would differ if they were female. In general, cultural norms and stereotypes about women's sexuality are more restrictive than stereotypes about men's sexuality (Masters et al. 2013). However, prior work has found that age is associated with a number of processes that may decrease negative perceptions about the female sexual gender role. For instance, experience in romantic and sexual relationships, which likely increases with age (Montgomery 2005), may contribute to the development of sexual agency or lessen women's felt pressure to adhere to social norms and decrease men's expectations that female partners should adhere to feminine social norms. Further, knowledge about human sexuality also likely increases with age (Herbenick et al. 2010), and may serve to diminish negative views of female sexuality as individuals learn through experience and information that women can be just as sexual as men. Therefore, with age or sexual experience, individuals may be able to better understand how restrictions on female expression of sexuality are socially constructed, and be less likely to internalize those standards.

### **Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions**

It is important to note some limitations of the current study. First, our sample was predominately European American and heterosexual. Although gendered sexual scripts are particularly salient for this group (Simon and Gagnon 1986), attitudes toward sex and sexual behaviors vary across ethnic/racial groups (Ahrold and Meston 2010) and sexual orientations (Herek 2004). Thus, generalizability of findings is limited. Second, our sample consisted of college students from a residential university and therefore results cannot be generalized to non-college attending individuals, or college students attending religious institutions or commuter campuses. Third, we purposefully used open-ended questions to avoid influencing responses with specific items or response options. However, this method elicits only the most salient themes, because it relies on recall rather than recognition. Future research could use findings from our study to develop a questionnaire based upon themes identified through participant responses. Finally, the wording of our questions may have prompted some participants to report an anticipated difference in sexual thoughts and feelings if they were the other gender, even if these beliefs were not salient. As a result, the proportion of people who said there would be no difference may have been higher with different wording.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature on gender and sexuality in several ways. First, it provides a description of young men's and women's perceptions of current social norms for sex. Using open-ended questions provided respondents with an opportunity for individual expression in a way that forced choice questions could not have. Further, the current study provides evidence that the sexual double standard still exists for young men and women. Men and women had differing perceptions of how their own gender affects their sexual thoughts and behaviors, and complimentary perceptions about how being the other gender might impact sexual thoughts and behaviors. It is important to understand how individuals internalize or apply these norms to their own sexual behavior, as well as to the sexual behavior of others, in order for sexuality education programs to challenge entrenched and often problematic attitudes toward sex.

**Acknowledgments** This research was supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to Eva S. Lefkowitz (R-01 HD 41720) and the National Institute of Drug Abuse (T32 DA017629). We are grateful to Tanya Boone, Shelley Hosterman, Eric Loken, Susan McHale, and Lisa Meyer for their help with study design, data collection, coding, and statistical analyses.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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