

Sex, gender roles and sexual attitudes in university students

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Abstract

Background: Previous studies usually refer to a greater repertoire of sexual behaviors and a higher level of erotophilia in men than in women. The main goal of this work is to relate sex, gender roles and sexual attitudes to sexual behavior. **Method:** 411 undergraduate students (218 women and 193 men) at the University of Oviedo (Spain) completed the following instruments: the Bem Sex Roles Inventory to operationalize the variable gender, the Sexual Inventory which reflects sexual behaviors, and the Sexual Opinion Survey about sexual attitudes. **Results:** 27% of the sample was typified as androgynous. There were no differences in attitudes, either by sex ($p = .50$) or by gender ($p = .77$). Sexual behaviors depended on the degree of erotophilia ($p = .000$). **Conclusions:** the results suggest that, although regarding sex, the fact that women's erotophilic attitudes have increased their erotophilic attitudes, although they refer to more conventional sexual behaviors than men's attitudes. With regard to gender, a tendency towards androgyny is observed, androgynous women and men report positive attitudes towards sexuality. Gender could act as a mediator of sexual behavior through the attitudinal component.

Keywords: sexual behavior, gender, erotophilia, erotophobia.

Resumen

Sexo, roles de género y actitudes sexuales en estudiantes universitarios. **Antecedentes:** la literatura especializada refleja un mayor repertorio de conductas sexuales y un mayor nivel de erotofilia en hombres que en mujeres. El objetivo central de este trabajo es analizar las relaciones entre el sexo de las personas, los roles de género y las actitudes sexuales hacia el comportamiento sexual. **Método:** 411 estudiantes universitarios (218 mujeres, 193 hombres) cumplieron los instrumentos: Inventario de Roles Sexuales de Bem, Inventario sobre conductas sexuales y Sexual Opinion Survey sobre actitudes sexuales. **Resultados:** un 27% de la muestra se tipificó como andrógina. No se encontraron diferencias en las actitudes, ni por sexo ($p = .50$) ni por género ($p = .77$). Los comportamientos sexuales dependían del grado de erotofilia ($p = .000$). **Conclusiones:** los resultados sugieren que, respecto del sexo, aunque las mujeres han incrementado sus actitudes erotofílicas, si bien refieren un comportamiento sexual más convencional que los varones. Respecto al género, se observa una tendencia hacia la androginia, las mujeres y hombres andróginos refieren actitudes más positivas hacia la sexualidad. Se concluye que el género podría actuar como un mediador del comportamiento sexual a través del componente actitudinal.

Palabras clave: comportamiento sexual, género, erotofilia, erotofobia.

Although in recent years the study of psychosocial aspects of sexual behavior has increased and the importance of gender in the organization of women's and men's sexual behavior has received growing support, most studies carry out a dual analysis only using two genders (feminine and masculine) which correspond to women and men with no exceptions (Delgado, Estrada, & López, 2015; Fernández, Quiroga, Escorial, & Privado, 2016; Gili et al., 2016). Building gender role identity (i.e., such identity that picks the must of being a man or a woman) is a complex process involving biological, social, cultural and psychosocial factors. However, almost no studies assesses gender empirically in any way. This assumption of gender in sex is problematic because it lacks scientific precision and external validity (Coyote & Sharma, 2011).

Relating gender roles to young people's sexuality may be a good way to determine which sexual behaviors have little to do

with being a man or a woman (biological sex), but rather involve the stereotypes that each society establishes at certain times, although such behaviors do occur more in one sex than in the other. In contrast, it could be an explanatory variable of the greater homogeneity of sexual behavior in boys and girls. In this context, the need to consider gender as a variable of analysis is proposed (Bem, 1981; Fisher & Walters, 2003; García-Vega, Menéndez Robledo, Fernández, & Rico, 2010; Rammsayer, Bortner, & Troche, 2016).

In addition, sexual behaviors are influenced by sexual attitudes, in which differences are also observed (Meston & Ahrold, 2010; Petersen & Hyde, 2010). "Attitude" is a complex concept; in this research we focus on the attitude toward sexuality, understood as erotophilia-erotophobia, referring to the presence of pleasant (or unpleasant) ideas and cognitions as some sort of positive (or negative) predisposition towards sexuality. Fisher (1986) and Fisher, Byrne, White, and Kelley (1988) found that erotophobic subjects feel unpleasant emotional reactions towards sexual stimuli, assessing them negatively, whereas erotophiles express favorable emotions towards and assessments of sexual stimulation, which leads them to seek sexual stimuli.

Some sexual patterns seem more consistent, and so studies generally report that boys are more erotophilic and show greater

interest in a larger variety of sexual behaviors and fantasies than girls, although there is evidence of a decrease in these differences (García-Vega et al., 2010; Injuve, 2010; Larrañaga, Yubero, & Yubero, 2012). In addition, stereotyped masculinity, rather than femininity, is related to a wide range of positive aspects of sexuality (Kurpisz et al., 2011).

The main aim of this study is to relate sex, gender roles, and sexual attitudes to sexual behavior in a population of university students. The first objective is to examine the relationship between sex as a subject variable (woman-man), gender (masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undifferentiated) and sexual attitudes; the second objective is to examine the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual behaviors; and the third objective is to identify whether sexual attitudes really have any relationship with sexual behavior, on the assumption that attitudes predispose one to act.

Method

Participants

The University of Oviedo (Spain) has about 22,000 students. The sample of this study initially comprised 440 (2%) university students, but 29 were removed due to missing data so the final sample was composed of 411 students. Of these, 53% ($n= 218$) were women (M age = 20.61 years old; $SD = 3.54$) and 47% ($n= 193$) were men (M age = 20.09; $SD = 3.21$). The mean age of the overall sample was 20.35 ($SD = 3.37$), ranging from 18 to 24. Participants were studying different disciplines: 38 % Social sciences ($n=156$); 9% Arts and humanities ($n= 36$); 10% Experimental sciences ($n= 41$); 10% Health sciences ($n= 43$) and 31% engineering and architecture ($n= 127$).

Instruments

Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974). A reduced version adapted to the study population (BSRIr) by Fernández et al. (2008) was used. It consists of 22 adjectives, 11 are stereotypically masculine, and 11 are feminine. Once the inventory is completed, the sample can be classified into four categories: masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undifferentiated. To estimate internal consistency of the BSRIr, the alpha coefficient was computed for the total sample, and separately by masculinity (.79) and femininity (.73), and by sex (.79 and .75 for men; .79 and .72 for women, respectively). The authors reported high convergent validity for the BSRIr and the BSRI (masculinity items = .854 and femininity items = .804).

Sexual Opinion Survey (SOS; Carpintero & Fuertes, 1994). This scale measures sexual attitudes. It has 21 items and participants choose their degree of agreement or disagreement on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .84 for women and .86 for men; the total alpha was .85. It has an acceptable degree of convergent and discriminant validity.

Sexual Behaviors Inventory (Hsu et al., 1994). This is an adapted version made up of 66 items, in which the respondent is asked to indicate the frequency with which they engage in each behavior, on a scale, where 1 represents never, 2 is occasionally, and 3 is frequently. The reliability is .96. This questionnaire has three factors: the first factor "conventional sex", related items include the most common sexual behaviors; the second factor is

"Not very conventional and solitary sex" and the third factor "non-conventional and/or violent sex".

Procedure

After informing and obtaining permission from the corresponding university departments, one of the researchers delivered the pen and paper questionnaires to the students in each participating class. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, answers would be anonymous and respondents had to provide only their sex and age. All the attending students were willing to participate, although 29 of them left a number of questions blank. The average time required to complete the questionnaires was 45 minutes.

Data analysis

Multivariate analysis of variance (Wilks' Lambda), univariate analysis (ANOVA Fisher and Student T) and multiple comparisons (Sheffé and Bonferroni) were carried out. In cases where the size of the groups was unequal, we observed that variances were heterogeneous and non-normally distributed. In these cases, we chose to perform the analysis by nonparametric statistics (Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis).

We used a contingency table and two associated statistics associated: the Pearson chi-squared test, to test the independence between two variables (sex and gender); and the coefficient of contingency, to test the degree of association between the two variables. Pearson's correlation ($p < .05$) between sexual attitudes and behaviors was considered significant in this study.

Results

Relation between sex, gender, and sexual attitudes

The first objective was to examine the relationship between sex (woman-man), gender (masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undifferentiated) and sexual attitudes. Related to Regarding *sexual attitudes as a function of sex* (Table 1), the multivariate analysis of variance yielded no significant sex differences ($p = .50$; $\eta^2 = .001$; $1-\beta = .103$) when analyzing the total score of the Erotophobia-Erotophilia scale (mean score in Sexual Opinion Survey).

Table 1
Percentage of participants in terms of gender roles, sex and percentile on the Sexual Opinion Survey

	Erotophobia >69 % (N)	Mean scores 69-96 % (N)	Erotophilia>96 % (N)
Gender (N)			
Masculine (107)	22.4 (24)	50.5 (54)	27.1 (29)
Feminine (109)	27.5 (30)	47.7 (52)	24.8 (27)
Androgynous (111)	28.2 (31)	42.7 (47)	29.1 (32)
Undifferentiated (84)	20.2 (17)	60.7 (51)	19 (16)
Sex (N)			
Women (218)	28.4 (62)	45.4 (99)	26.1 (57)
Men (193)	21.2 (41)	54.4 (105)	24.3 (47)
Total (411)	24,8 (103)	49.9 (204)	25,2 (104)

Concerning to *sexual attitudes as a function of gender* (Table 2), nonparametric analysis yielded statistically significant differences in the distribution ($\chi^2_{(3)} = 55.55, p = .000$), with women being more feminine and androgynous, and men more masculine and undifferentiated. The multivariate analysis of variance yielded no significant gender differences in the mean scores of the SOS ($p = .77, \eta^2 = .003, 1-\beta = .122$).

In relation to sexual attitudes as a function of sex and gender (Table 3), the multivariate analysis of variance yielded no significant differences in the mean scores of the SOS; that is, neither between women ($p = .278, \eta^2 = .018, 1-\beta = .035$) nor men ($p = .081, \eta^2 = .342, 1-\beta = .568$), classified in the four categories. We analyzed SOS items by sex, by gender and by sex/gender.

In the previous analysis, the total scores of the SOS scale were taken into account. Next, we focused on the items of the questionnaire by sex. Firstly, we analyzed the items concurrently (multivariate analysis) and then, item by item (univariate analysis). In the multivariate analysis of variance, sex differences were found in the questionnaire items ($p = .000$); sex was responsible for 29% of the variability found in the sample ($\eta^2 = .29$). The Fisher's ANOVA of each of the SOS items revealed statistically significant differences between the sexes in ten items of the questionnaire, with small and moderate effect sizes (Table 4).

The multivariate analysis of variance yielded gender differences for the items of the SOS items by gender ($p = .000, \eta^2 = .10, 1-\beta = 1.000$); however, gender was only responsible for 10% of the variability of the sample. In Table 5, the Fisher's ANOVA of each one of the SOS items reveals the existence of significant differences in seven survey items, with small effect sizes.

Significant gender differences for each sex were found in the multivariate analysis of SOS items (women: $p = .019, \eta^2 = .13, 1-\beta = 1.000$; men: $p = .05, \eta^2 = .14, 1-\beta = .999$). Table 6 shows the existence of four significant differences (Fisher's ANOVA) in the gender typologies of women, and three differences in men, none of which coincide. The effect sizes were small and/or moderate.

Relationship between sexual behaviors by sex, by gender, and by sex/gender

The second objective was to examine the relationship between sexual behaviors by sex, by gender, and by sex/gender. Concerning to Looking at sexual behaviors as a function of sex (Table 7), the MANOVA yielded significant sex differences in the first factor ($p = .000, \eta^2 = .284, 1-\beta = .100$), although the effect sizes were

Table 2
Sample distribution according to sex and gender roles (BSRIr)

	Masculine gender % (N)	Feminine gender % (N)	Androgynous gender % (N)	Undifferentiated gender % (N)	Total % (N)
Women	15.1 (33)	39 (85)	30.3 (66)	15.6 (34)	100 (218)
Men	38.3 (74)	12.4 (24)	23.3 (45)	25.9 (50)	100 (193)
Total	26 (107)	26.5 (109)	27 (111)	20.4 (84)	100 (411)
Pearson chi-squared: $\chi^2_{(gl)}$			55.55 (3)		$p = .000$
Contingency coefficient: C.cg			.368		$p = .000$

Table 3
Distribution of the sample segregated by sex, according to gender roles and the percentile in the Sexual Opinion Survey

Gender	Women (N) Men (N)	Erotophobia % (N)	Mean scores % (N)	Erotophilia % (N)
Masculine	Women (33)	39.4 (13)	39.4 (13)	21.2 (7)
	Men (74)	14.9 (11)	55.4 (41)	29.7 (22)
Feminine	Women (85)	29.4 (25)	43.5 (37)	27.1 (23)
	Men (24)	20.8 (5)	62.5 (15)	16.7 (4)
Androgynous	Women (65)	23.1 (15)	46.2 (30)	30.8 (20)
	Men (45)	35.6 (16)	37.8 (17)	26.7 (12)
Undifferentiated	Women (34)	23.5 (8)	55.9 (19)	20.6 (7)
	Men (50)	18 (9)	64 (32)	18 (9)

Table 4
Anova for sex differences in the items of the Sexual Opinion Survey

Sexual Attitudes Scale items	F	η^2	1- β	(D)
5. If I found out that a close friend of mine was homosexual, it would annoy me (A close friend of mine is heterosexual)	38.80**	.087	1	W
7. Engaging in group sex is an entertaining idea	38.33**	.086	1	M
9. Seeing an erotic movie would be sexually arousing to me	27.93**	.064	1	M
10. Thoughts that I might have homosexual tendencies would not worry me at all (thoughts I might have heterosexual tendencies)	22.12**	.051	.997	W
11. The idea of my being physically attracted to members of the same sex is not depressing (Gender I am NOT attracted to)	45.13**	.100	1	W
12. Almost all erotic material is nauseating	5.08*	.012	.614	M
15. I would not enjoy seeing an erotic movie	15.58**	.037	.976	M
16. When I think about seeing pictures showing someone of the same sex as myself masturbating, it nauseates me (Of the sex opposite my attraction)	23.23**	.054	.998	W
20. I am not curious about explicit erotica	8.37*	.020	.823	M
21. The thought of having long-term sexual relations with more than one sex partner is not disgusting to me	9.71*	.023	.875	M

Note: degrees of freedom (1.40) for all contrast
* $p < .05$; ** $p \leq .001$
(D): W women more erotophile; M men more erotophile

Table 5
Anova for gender differences in the items of the scale of Sexual Opinion Survey

Sexual Attitudes Scale items	F	η^2	1- β	(D)
5. If I found out that a close friend of mine was homosexual, it would annoy me (A close friend of mine is heterosexual)	5.44**	.039	.937	A>M
7. Engaging in group sex is an entertaining idea	4.94*	.035	.911	M>F
10. Thoughts that I might have homosexual tendencies would not worry me at all. (thoughts I might have heterosexual tendencies)	5.38**	.038	.934	A>M
11. The idea of my being physically attracted to members of the same sex is not depressing. (gender I am NOT attracted to)	4.79*	.034	.902	A>M
12. Almost all erotic material is nauseating	3.86*	.028	.822	M> F/ U
14. Watching a stripper of the opposite sex would not be very exciting. (gender I am attracted to)	5.03*	.036	.916	M>F
21. The thought of having long-term sexual relations with more than one sex partner is not disgusting to me	3.44*	.025	.771	M>F

Note: degrees of freedom (3.40) for all contrast. * p<.05; ** p<.001
(D): M: masculine, F: feminine, A: androgynous & U: undifferentiated. More erotophile the first letter of the comparison in the mean difference

Table 6
Differences between genders in the scale of Sexual Opinion Survey in the sample segregated by sex

Sexual Attitudes Scale items	F	η^2	1- β	(D)
3. Swimming in the nude with a member of the opposite sex would be an exciting experience (With a member of my sexual interest)	5.09*	.067	.917	F>M
5. If I found out that a close friend of mine was homosexual, it would annoy me	4.15*	.055	.848	F>M
7. Engaging in group sex is an entertaining idea	3.21*	.043	.736	A>I
12. Almost all erotic material is nauseating	5.20*	.076	.922	M>F
14. Watching a stripper of the opposite sex would not be very exciting (Gender I am attracted to)	4.13*	.062	.846	M>A
15. I would not enjoy seeing an erotic movie	3.93*	.059	.825	M>A
20. I am not curious about explicit erotica	4.38*	.058	.869	A>M

Note: degrees of freedom were (3.21) for women and (3.18) for men. * p<.05;
(D): M: masculine, F: feminine, A: androgynous & U: undifferentiated. More erotophile the first letter of the comparison in the mean difference. Score in bold for men

small. The average was higher for women in the first factor of conventional sexual behaviors (F1), and higher for men in the other factors (F2 & F3).

With respect to *sexual behaviors as a function of gender*, there were many differences in the first factor, but again the effect

sizes were small to moderate. Androgynous people practiced conventional sexual behavior more often than feminine, masculine, or undifferentiated people. In the second and third factor, the differences were smaller than in the first factor. Masculine people practiced the second and third factor behaviors more (Table 7).

Table 7
Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for factor scores for each of the three factors of sexual behavior questionnaire. Grouping variables Sex (2) x Gender (4)

Reject H ₀	W	F (df)	η^2	1- β	DV	(D)
SEX	.370	(6.272)=26.64*	.37	.99	F1* F2* F3*	+ - -
GENDER	.144	(18.822)=2.297*	.05	.99	F1* F3*	M-A: - A-U: + M-F: + M-U: +
GENDER and SEX	WOMAN MEN	(3.214)=3.869** (3.189)= 5.473*	.051 .080	.81 .93	F1*	A-F + A-I+

* sig. p<.01 ** sig. p<.05
 η^2 : effect size; W: Wilks' lambda; 1- β : power of a test; F(df): F and degree of freedom; DV: dependent variables
(D): direction of the differences:
+ average is > for the woman or for the first (M=masculine, F=feminine, A=androgynous, U= undifferentiated)
- average is > for the man or for the second (M=masculine, F=feminine, A=androgynous, U=undifferentiated)
F1: Conventional sex; F2: Not very conventional sex; F3: Nonconventional and/or violent sex

In relation to *sexual behaviors as a function of sex and gender*, both androgynous women and androgynous men had engaged in more sexual behaviors in the first factor than the other genders. In the second and third sexual behaviour factors, there were almost no gender differences between men and women. Effect sizes were small to moderate in all sexual behaviors, but higher for men than for women (Table 7).

Relationship between sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors

Finally, the third objective was to analyze the relationship between sexual attitudes (SOS) and sexual behaviors (Sexual behaviors inventory). Concerning Regarding to *Sexual Attitudes and Sexual Behaviors*, each and every one of the sexual behaviors in the Sexual Inventory was engaged in more frequently by erotophiles when compared to people who tend toward the erotophobia pole. In the MANOVA of Sexual Inventory items, significant differences were found ($p = .000, \eta^2 = .225, 1-\beta = 1,000$).

In order to study the relationship between attitudes and sexual behaviors, we carried out univariate analyses and bivariate correlations. Statistically significant differences were found in all three factors of behaviors and in the means of all the sexual behaviors, with higher means for the erotophiles in the sample. The effect sizes indicate that the variability of the sample due to sexual attitudes is moderate for the second and third factors, but it is important for the first factor. However, sexual attitudes correlate significantly and positively with all the factors of sexual behaviors, as shown in Table 8.

Discussion

The main goal of this work is to relate sex, gender roles and sexual attitudes to sexual behavior in a population of university students. The first objective is to examine the relationship between sex, gender and sexual attitudes. We have not confirmed the initial hypothesis that men have a greater repertoire of sexual behavior and a more erotophilic attitude.

The attitudes of the university population studied were generally positive, tending towards erotophilia; only 24.9% were classified at the erotophobia pole. In this study, no statistical differences between sexes were observed in their on the erotophobia-erotophilia poles of the SOS, whereas in samples studied in Spain some years ago by Carpintero and Fuertes (1994) and Lameiras (1997), differences were found. We confirm that there has been a change in attitudes towards sexuality because the increase in erotophilic attitudes is observed in women. We point out that women displayed attitudes that up until now had been considered masculine, such as items that dissociate sex and affect or items

about self-stimulation; both aspects have traditionally been more widely accepted by men. This convergence of men and women's sexual attitudes indicated by our data is in accordance with the trend of women approaching this masculine model of sexuality. In any event, in the item analysis, we did find some sex differences in certain sexual experiences. Women have more positive attitudes towards homosexuality and men towards pornography and group sex; these attitudes are consistent with the results found in sexual behaviors (García-Vega, Fernández, & Rico, 2004; Geer & Robertson, 2005; Humphrey & Newby, 2007).

With regard to gender, a large number of university students consider themselves to be androgynous (27%), although gender stereotypes seem to be maintained. Most of the boys are classified as masculine and undifferentiated, and the girls as feminine and androgynous.

We were unable to confirm the gender differences in the erotophobia-erotophilia scale; however, we did observe some small differences in the sexual attitudes of people of different genders in specific experiences. Thus, androgynous people are more tolerant than masculine people about homosexuality-related aspects; and masculine people have more positive attitudes than feminine people towards group sex, long-lasting relationships with more than one person, and the use of pornography.

In the case of gender differences in men and women taken separately, there were again no differences between the sexes. However, masculine men are more erotophilic and feminine men are more erotophobic. We can hypothesize that the masculine model of sexuality measures gender differences better in men than in women.

The results of the second objective reveal that androgynous people engage in more sexual behaviors. Finally, the third objective is to identify whether sexual attitudes really have any relationship to sexual behavior, on the assumption that attitudes predispose one to act. With regard to sexual behavior, erotophiles engage in a greater number of behaviors, and the effect sizes indicate that the variability of the sample due to sexual attitudes is moderate for the second and third factor (not very conventional sex and solitary sex, and unconventional and/or violent sex) but it is important for the first factor (conventional sex). Thus, women are still more romantic and emotional, and men have a larger sexual repertoire. Although it is important to note that there are not many behaviors with differences; in other words, women and men choose and engage in many sexual behaviors similarly. Overall, erotophilia was a better predictor of sexual behavior than the sex of the participant.

Lastly, we note that it is evident that sociocultural aspects affect attitudes and sexual behavior, as also seen in this study. Gender could act as a mediator of sexual behavior through the attitudinal

Sexual behaviors	F	η^2	(1- β)	(D))
1. Conventional sex	37.62**	.156	1	Philia>Phobia	.255**
2. Not very conventional sex	25.13**	.110	.999	Philia>Phobia	.263**
3. Nonconventional and violent sex	10.35**	.048	.893	Philia>Phobia	.184**
Means	41.31**	.073	1	Philia>Phobia	.284**

Note: Degree of freedom (1,20) for all contrast.)= Pearson correlation between attitudes and sexual behavior; ** $p < .001$

component, androgynous people are more erotophile. But the weak relationship found could be due to the limitations of the study, such as the type of sample (the higher the educational level, the lower the variability of gender), the fact that it was non probability sampling, typical limitations of self-reporting, or limitations of the measurement instruments (Choi, Fuqua, & Newman, 2008). In any event, assuming the above, it seems necessary to include gender as a variable of analysis, and to go beyond the dichotomy

of feminine women and masculine men, especially when studying sexual behavior. This study suggests that men and women might not be as far apart in sexual attitudes and behaviors as previous research had shown. However, the results show there are still some gender differences and that these differences need to be taken into account in sexuality education programs. Future research should review and delve into the relationship between attitudes and sexual behavior, and its independence from the the sex variable.

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