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Power Affects Sexual Assertiveness and Sexual Esteem Equally in Women and Men

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Abstract

Common stereotypes hold that men and women differ strongly in their attitudes toward sex and that such differences are amplified by social power. In contrast, an emerging literature suggests that social power affects both sexes similarly, thus potentially attenuating differences between the sexes. Four samples obtained in the Netherlands, the U.S., Britain, and South-East Asia (total $N = 1985$) test the effect of social power (operationalized as self-reported amount of power over others at the work place) on validated self-report measures of sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem. Across all samples, power was associated with greater sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem—equally for men and women. Furthermore, effects of power were larger and more consistent than differences between men and women. These findings add to an emerging literature, suggesting that often-observed differences between male and female sexuality actually reflect power differences. This suggests that such differences decrease with greater social equality.

Keywords Power · Sexuality · Gender differences · Gender equality

Introduction

One of the strongest cultural stereotypes about powerful men is that they often are more assertive and confident in pursuing their sexual goals. For example, it is well known that Presidents Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy were assertive and confident in pursuing sexual relations—and, although less well known, the same was the case of former Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt (Watson, 2012). What is less clear is whether such effects of power are limited to men or also affect women's sexuality. Clearly, all these anecdotes concern men being affected in their sexual assertiveness and confidence by their power. But anecdote is not science. We therefore test here systematically the effects of power on assertiveness and confidence in pursuing sexual goals—and whether such effects are moderated by gender.

There is certainly some evidence that the effects of power on sexual assertiveness and confidence are limited to men. For

example, primatologists have found that among chimpanzees, macaques, and other primates, powerful alpha-males are more sexually active than other males, while this link is weaker or absent among females (De Waal, 1982; Samuels, Silk, & Rodman, 1984). Similarly, anthropologists have found that in many primitive societies men with powerful positions display greater confidence in their sexual relations with women, while power does not appear to have such effects on women's sexual activity (Symons, 1979).

But there is also evidence that power produces similar, parallel effects on both genders' sex-related cognition and behavior.¹ Although no research has tested the effect of power and gender on sexual assertiveness and confidence, recent social psychological findings have consistently found parallel effects of power on male and female sexual cognition and behavior. For example, some research has linked power to increased perceptions of sexual interest from subordinates—without any sign of moderation by gender (Kunstman & Maner, 2011). Other research has linked power to an increased likelihood that both men and women romantically betray their partner (Lammers & Maner, 2015; Lammers, Stoker, Jordan, Pollmann, & Stapel, 2011). As a final example, power has been linked to an

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¹ We use the word gender to refer to a difference in identification with the two sexes. In our study, we only include participants who identify as male or female and exclude participants who identify as both or none.

increased likelihood that people express dormant paraphilic fantasies, across both genders (Lammers & Imhoff, 2016).

These findings are important because if power produces similar effects for sex-related cognition and behavior among men and women, then it suggests that (at least some of the) often-observed gender differences in sexual behavior, which rank among the largest in psychology (Hyde, 2005), may actually reflect differences in power. Specifically, if power affects sex-related cognition and behavior in a certain direction, then differences between the group that typically holds most powerful positions (men) and the group that holds less (women) may actually be due to differences in power and not to gender per se.

Of course, it is entirely possible that some sex-related constructs, such as betrayal or the expression of paraphilic fantasies are affected by power, while others are not. For example, power has diverging effects on the perceived attractiveness of women and men (Dunn & Hill, 2014; Dunn & Searle, 2010). This makes it important to test the effects of power on a wider set of sex-related cognition and behavior.

Furthermore, a significant limitation to this literature is that much of it focuses on specific, relatively unconventional, and potentially problematic sexual behaviors such as infidelity or paraphilia. A first problem of this is that this yields skewed data. For example, 74% of participants in Lammers et al.'s (2011) sample indicated to never have been sexually unfaithful. And most participants in Lammers and Imhoff (2016) indicated to have none or only weak paraphilic desires. As a result, the few observations where people admit having been unfaithful or having strong paraphilic desires may have disproportionately strongly influenced the results. Second, and even more importantly, by focusing only on such unconventional sexual behaviors, literature has overlooked any more general effects of power on mainstream, conventional sex-related cognition and behavior.

The Current Research

In the current research, we therefore test the effect of power, defined as one's amount of influence over other people in the social environment of one's occupation or other professional work (Dépret & Fiske, 1993; Emerson, 1962), on sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem. In doing so, we have a particular focus on testing for potential moderation by gender. Consistent with earlier approaches (Lammers & Imhoff, 2016; Lammers & Maner, 2015; Lammers et al., 2011), we focus on power at work, because people's occupation ranks among the most important sources of power, for most people (Fiske, 1993). We do so by using established and validated measures to measure two important aspects of mainstream sex-related cognition.

Sexual Assertiveness

First, we focus on the initiation of sex. Sexual assertiveness refers to an inter-individual difference in the perceived generalized ability to control one's level of physical intimacy with others (Morokoff, Quina, & Harlow, 1997). High levels of sexual assertiveness facilitate the pursuit of romantic goals, by making people more vocal when to initiate intimacy and when not (Laws & Schwartz, 1977). High levels of sexual assertiveness also help people to control how they have sex, by making them more vocal in communicating their desires and avoiding a submissive role, where the person mainly responds to the wishes of their sexual partner (Rickert, Sanghvi, & Wiemann, 2002).

Power may increase sexual assertiveness, because social-cognitive research has repeatedly shown that positions and feelings of power generally increase assertiveness in goal pursuit (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Guinote, 2007, 2010; Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2010b; Maner, Kaschak, & Jones, 2010; Slabu & Guinote, 2010). For example, the powerful are more assertive in negotiations (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007) and more assertive in violating moral rules for selfish goals (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010a). The few findings in that literature that tested for possible moderation by gender consistently failed to find any evidence for such moderation (Guinote, 2007, 2010; Lammers et al., 2010a, b; Magee et al., 2007; Slabu & Guinote, 2010), suggesting that the effect of power on sexual assertiveness may also not depend on gender.

Sexual Esteem

Second, we focus on the perceived ability to have good, fulfilling, and satisfying sex—an ability referred to in the literature as sexual esteem (Snell & Papini, 1989). People with high levels of sexual esteem have more positive views on their relative worth as a sexual partner. They also consider themselves as more physically attractive, independent of their objective body size or of experimenter-rated attractiveness (Wiederman & Hurst, 1998). People with high sexual esteem approach sex with confidence, while those who suffer from a lack of sexual esteem are more likely to experience doubts, depression, and sexual dysfunction (Snell & Papini, 1989; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993).

Power may increase sexual esteem, because the social-cognitive literature on the effects of power has repeatedly found that positions of power boost the confidence and self-assurance that people display in their cognition and actions (Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007; Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2011; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007).

For example, powerful people are more confident in assessing risks (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), are less influenced by the opinions of others and stick more to their own ideas (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Kraus, Chen, & Keltner, 2011), and express more confidence in writing and speech when applying for a vacancy (Lammers, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2013). Again, among those studies that tested for moderation by gender, none found any (Briñol et al., 2007; Fast et al., 2011; Galinsky et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2011), suggesting again no gender moderation.

Overview

In summary, we test the effect of power (at one's work) and its moderation by gender, on established measures of sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem. One prediction holds that the effects of power are different for both genders; an alternative prediction is that they are the same. We tested these two predictions against each other in four samples, obtained in The Netherlands, the U.S., South-East Asia, and the British Isles (Great Britain and Ireland). We followed this approach to collect the same idea in different samples, guided by the notion that conceptual replications across different cultures offer the strongest proof for a hypothesis (Crandall & Sherman, 2016). We report how we determined our sample size, all measures, and all data exclusions. Data are available at <https://osf.io/q25rb/>.

Method

Participants

All participants took part in return for monetary compensation (total $N = 1985$; $N_{\text{Netherlands}} = 576$, $N_{\text{USA}} = 500$, $N_{\text{British Isles}} = 496$, $N_{\text{South-East-Asia}} = 413$). Overall, the sample was near-equally divided across gender (45.9% female, 54.1% male) and had a mean age of 35.9 years. Overall, the sample was predominantly heterosexual (90.6%; homosexual 5.1%, bisexual 4.0%, other .3%). Overall, a plurality of participants was married (46.1%), while others were dating (26.4%), or single (26.1%). The rest category consists of those widowed or other (1.4%). See Table 1 for characteristics of the four samples separately. The American sample consisted of 502 Amazon Mechanical Turk users who were paid \$0.50, the British and Irish sample consisted of 498 Prolific Academic users who were paid £0.60 (about \$0.80), the Dutch sample consisted of 576 Dutch individuals who took part in a lottery for one of five €50 (about \$60) online store vouchers, and the Asian sample consists of 413 users of Amazon Mechanical Turk and Prolific Academic, who were paid \$0.25 and £0.50 (about \$0.65), respectively.

Table 1 Key demographics per sample

<i>n</i>	Age		Gender (%)		Sexual orientation (%)				Relationship status (%)			Education (%)			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	Heterosexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Asexual	Single/widow	Dating	Married	HS	BA	MA	
USA	500	34.0	9.9	37.0	63.3	93.0	2.6	4.2	.2	33.0	25.4	41.6	29.0	56.4	14.6
British Isles	496	34.2	10.7	59.5	40.5	88.9	4.8	6.0	.2	26.8	26.4	46.8	29.4	48.4	22.1
Netherlands	576	42.4	12.7	53.8	46.2	90.8	5.7	2.8	.7	26.4	34.2	39.4	11.8	34.5	53.7
Asian	413	31.3	7.9	29.3	70.7	89.3	7.7	2.9	.0	22.7	16.9	60.3	8.5	55.7	35.9

HS includes high school and lower education. Given the theoretical interest in the moderating effects of gender, participants who indicated a different gender than male or female were excluded from analyses

Procedure

All participants completed the study online, using Qualtrics survey software. Three of the samples were recruited on a commercial platform. In particular, we used Amazon Mechanical Turk to draw the American sample, Prolific Academic to draw the sample from the British Isles, and both services combined to draw the Asian sample (to maximize sample size, given difficulties in recruitment). The Dutch sample was recruited using a link published in a newsletter aimed at businesspeople. Given our independent variable power, measured as the position at work, only employed respondents were asked to participate. In order to gain a stable estimate of the relations between power and sex-related cognition, the target sample size of each sample was set at 500 (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). We gained a few participants less in the British sample. In the case of the South-East Asian sample, we failed to reach the target sample size before expiry of the study, even after adding a second method of recruitment. We did not inspect data prior to finishing data collection in any sample.

All participants completed all measures below. In all cases, the data were collected as part of a larger package testing unrelated questions of different principal investigators. Specifically, all four samples completed measures of the need to belong and feelings of loneliness. In addition, the Dutch sample completed questions about leadership style and management decisions. These are not discussed. Participants in the American sample spent on average 5 min and 42 s to complete the survey, while the British and Irish spent 5 min and 34 s, the Dutch spent 10 min and 35 s, and participants in the Asian sample spent 6 min and 40 s.

Measures

All participants indicated how much power they have in their professional organization at work, between no power (1), and very much power (5), overall $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.02$. This is a reliable and validated measure of power that correlates strongly with multiple-item indices (Lammers et al., 2010a, b). In none of the samples did, both gender differ significantly from each other in their degree of professional power, all t s < 1.6 and all p s > .13.

All participants completed the five-item Sexual Assertiveness and the five-item Sexual Esteem subscales of the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (Snell, Fisher, & Walters, 1993). The MSQ is a validated self-report instrument to measure different psychological tendencies associated with sex. The five items measuring sexual assertiveness are “When it comes to sex, I usually ask for what I want,” “I am somewhat passive about expressing my sexual desires” (recoded), “I am very assertive about the sexual aspects of my life,” “I do not hesitate to ask for what I want in a sexual relationship,” and “I am not very direct about voicing my sexual preferences” (recoded).

The five items measuring sexual esteem are “I would rate myself pretty favorable as a sexual partner,” “I am better at sex than most people,” “I am a pretty good sexual partner,” “I am confident about myself as a sexual partner,” and “I would be very confident in a sexual encounter.” Due to translation issues, we used only the first four items of each subscale in the Dutch sample. Internal reliability of both subscales was high in all four samples, all α 's > .76, except for the sexual assertiveness subscale in the Asian sample, $\alpha = .38$. We therefore dropped the two negatively coded items in that sample, which yielded a more satisfactory reliability, $\alpha = .78$. Analyses on all five items, however, led to the same results.²

Results

We first focus on the effects on sexual assertiveness and after that discuss the effects on sexual esteem. Given that results were highly similar in each of the four samples, we first present the results for the combined sample. Specifically, we test for the effect of gender, power, and their interaction, while controlling for age and sample. After presenting overall results, we discuss similarities and small differences between samples. Results per individual sample are summarized in Table 2.

Sexual Assertiveness

A regression analysis of the effects of gender ($-1 = \text{male}$, $1 = \text{female}$), power (studentized), and their interaction on sexual assertiveness, while controlling for age (studentized) and sample (using three dummy variables), showed a significant (though weak) main effect of gender, meaning that women were somewhat less sexually assertive than men, $B = -.055$, $SE = .028$, $\beta = -.045$, $t(1947) = -1.98$, $p = .048$, 95% $CI_B [-.109; -.000]$. This replicates earlier research (Rickert et al., 2002). More importantly, we also found a large positive effect of social power on sexual assertiveness, $B = .156$, $SE = .027$, $\beta = .128$, $t(1947) = 5.72$, $p < .0001$, 95% $CI_B [+ .103 + .210]$, that—importantly—was not moderated by gender, $B = -.018$, $SE = .027$, $\beta = -.015$, $t(1947) = -.66$, $p = .513$.

As can be seen in Table 2, we found this same positive main effect of power on sexual assertiveness, not moderated by gender, in all four individual samples. Also note that although we found overall (across all samples) that women showed less sexual assertiveness than men, this effect varied between samples. Specifically, although men reported higher sexual assertiveness in the South-East Asian and British

² An analysis using all five sexual assertiveness items (despite its low alpha) showed a significant main effect of power, $B = .126$, $SE = .047$, $\beta = .144$, $t(408) = 2.72$, $p = .007$, 95% $CI_B [+ .035 + .218]$, that was not moderated by gender, $B = .056$, $SE = .046$, $\beta = .064$, $t(408) = 1.21$, $p = .228$.

Table 2 Effects of age, gender, power, and the power $\times$ gender interaction on sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem, across all four samples

	USA		British Isles		Netherlands		South and East Asia	
	Sexual asser- tiveness	Sexual esteem	Sexual asser- tiveness	Sexual esteem	Sexual asser- tiveness	Sexual esteem	Sexual asser- tiveness	Sexual esteem
Age	.063	.069	-.144*	-.158**	-.052	-.122*	.038	.108
Gender	-.013	-.001	-.160**	-.326***	.104*	-.076	-.311***	-.164*
Power	.234***	.188**	.180**	.225***	.133*	.207***	.353***	.449***
Power $\times$ gen- der	-.009	-.068	-.013	-.038	-.046	.038	.066	.108
R^2	.037	.031	.043	.098	.020	.036	.100	.122

Values indicate B s and asterisks indicate associated p s, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, in regression analysis. Lowest line lists total explained variance. Power and gender are studentized, and gender is coded as male -1 and female 1

samples, we did not find that effect in the American sample, $t(494) = -.22$, $p = .83$, and even found the opposite effect in the Dutch sample, where women reported higher sexual assertiveness ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.22$) than men ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(543) = 2.05$, $p = .041$, 95% $CI_{\Delta} [- .001 + .398]$. Furthermore, the effect of power was also descriptively stronger than the effect of gender in each of the four samples.

Sexual Esteem

A similar regression analysis on sexual esteem found a main effect of gender, meaning that women had less sexual esteem than men, $B = -.131$, $SE = .030$, $\beta = -.096$, $t(1950) = -4.35$, $p < .0001$, 95% $CI_B [- .189 - .072]$, also consistent with earlier work (Snell et al., 1993). More importantly, we also found a positive effect of social power on sexual esteem, $B = .248$, $SE = .030$, $\beta = .182$, $t(1950) = 8.37$, $p < .0001$, 95% $CI_B [+ .190 + .306]$, that—importantly—was not moderated by gender, $B = -.021$, $SE = .029$, $\beta = -.015$, $t(1950) = -.70$, $p = .484$.

As can be seen in Table 2, we found this same positive main effect of power on sexual esteem, not moderated by gender, in all four individual samples. Also note that the observed effect of gender (women reporting lower sexual esteem than men) only replicated in two of the four samples, while two other samples did not replicate it. In any case, we found the effect of gender on sexual esteem to be descriptively weaker than the effect of power on sexual esteem in three of the four samples. Only in the British sample did we find that men showed higher sexual esteem than women, $t(494) = 5.46$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The current results show how one of the most fundamental aspects of social structure—power (Cartwright, 1959; Dahl, 1957; Weber, 1978) relates to people's pursuit of one of the

most fundamental human desires—sex (Hull, 1943; Meston & Buss, 2007; Murray, 1938). Across four samples, obtained from four countries across three different continents, we consistently found that social power, measured as relative position at one's work (Fiske, 1993; Lammers et al., 2010a, b), was associated with greater self-reported assertiveness in pursuing sexual goals and with increased perceptions of one's ability to have satisfying and fulfilling sex. Most importantly, this effect of power was not moderated by gender. Power was equally strongly related to sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem for women as it was for men.

We believe that this finding is surprising, because sex is one of the few domains in human behavior with relatively large gender differences—right after physical differences such as running speed and throwing ability (Hyde, 2005). Furthermore, we believe there is a deeply rooted stereotype of a male-specific effect of power on sex. Most notably, the popular media often repeats the idea that power has a particularly strong effect on men's sexuality (e.g., Diamond, 2012; Von Bredow, 2011). In contrast, the here-observed effects of gender were weaker and less consistent than those of social power. Our findings fit in an emerging literature in sex research that gender differences in sexuality are often less strong than many people think (Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Petersen & Hyde, 2011).

The findings further beg the question to what degree gender differences in sexuality may give way to the pressure of the slowly but steadily increasing socioeconomic equality between the genders. Earlier research that looked for gender differences in sex-related cognition and behavior did not distinguish between gender and power and collected data in a society where men (still) hold, on average, more powerful positions than women do. Therefore, earlier research may have confounded the effects of gender and power—and any observed effect of gender may actually have reflected (at least partially) an effect of power.

Indeed, the current findings fit in an emerging literature that shows that social power affects men and women equally and that produces sex-related cognitions and behaviors that are traditionally associated with men. Specifically, power is associated with increased perceptions of sexual interest of others (Kunstman & Maner, 2011), with an increased likelihood of betraying one's romantic partner (Lammers et al., 2011; Lammers & Maner, 2015), and with an likelihood of expressing sexual fantasies (Lammers & Imhoff, 2016)—for both genders. Consistent with a social-role interpretation of gender differences, such findings suggest that gender differences in sexuality may eventually be attenuated or even disappear when women gain an equally dominant position in society as men (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 1999). In support of that idea, meta-analytic findings show that gender differences in sexuality are smaller in countries with greater gender equality in socioeconomic positions in power. Further supporting that idea, gender differences in sexuality have strongly decreased over the past decades—a period in which women made considerable, albeit incomplete, advances toward gender equality in power (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010).

At the same time, we do note that more research is needed to get a more complete understanding of the relation between power, gender, and sex-related cognition and behavior. For example, a very strong test of the hypothesis that gender differences in sexuality are reduced after taking into account power would be to focus on preferences for short- versus long-term relations. Specifically, based on the evolutionary principle that men and women differ in parental investment (Trivers, 1972), it has been argued that a dominant strategy among men is to look for many young and attractive women and avoid commitment, while women are more focused on finding a committed, high-status partner who can provide wealth and other resources. Indeed, findings across all continents support this economic principle (Buss, 1989, 1995; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005). At the same time, comparisons between countries show that women have a less traditional partner selection preference in modern, Western countries where women are less unequal in power, than in other countries (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Kasser & Sharma, 1999). Therefore, it would be interesting to test whether on the individual level (as in the current analysis) differences in power also relate to differences in partner selection preference. Another limitation is that we focused here exclusively on people's view on how they behave sexually “between the sheets.” More research is needed—in part also to better understand the examples of American presidents listed in our introduction—to test how power affects behavior at earlier stages, for example, when flirting or propositioning.

Conclusion

Across four countries and three continents, power was associated with increased sexual assertiveness and sexual esteem. This finding contributes to an emerging literature that shows how a highly private behavior (sex) can be strongly affected by a very public psychological variable (power). Importantly, however, the results also show that this relation is not moderated by gender and apply equally to men and women. Furthermore, the effects of power were more robust and consistent than those of gender. These findings suggest that when it comes to these aspects of sex, it makes at least as much sense to talk about differences between people who have and people who lack power than it is to talk about differences between men and women.

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