

The Impact of Male Sexual Request Style on Perceptions of Sexual Interactions: The Mediational Role of Beliefs About Female Sexual Desire

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The sexual interactions of young adults are characterized by a surprising amount of coercion and aggression. Assumptions about the causal antecedents of sexual desire may contribute to sexual miscommunication and the failed negotiations that result in sexual harassment and date rape. I examined the impact of one presumed cause of female desire (i.e., romantic love or romantic events) on perceptions of a heterosexual, sexual interaction. Results indicated that the perceived level of sexual desire felt by a female target and the extent to which she is believed to want sex mediated the relation between a male target's sexual request style (romantic vs. sexual) and the extent to which their sexual interaction was viewed as consensual. Neither gender nor previous experience with harassment or assault moderated this result; however, main effects for gender were found such that men attributed greater sexual desire to the female target than did women, and women perceived the female target as less responsible for the occurrence of intercourse than did men.

The sexual interactions of young adults are characterized by a surprising amount of coercion, aggression, and violence. An early study of unmarried undergraduate men, for example, revealed that 26% had made a forceful attempt at intercourse while on a date that had, in turn, prompted a fighting, crying, or screaming response from their partners (Kanin, 1967). Similarly, 25% of the men in a national survey of college students conducted by Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) reported using some form of sexual aggression on a partner, with 4% revealing that they had raped another individual. Over half of the women surveyed had experienced some type of sexual victimization, and 15% had been raped (also see Koss, 1983; Koss,

Leonard, Beezley, & Oros, 1985; Lewin, 1985; Mahoney, Shively, & Traw, 1986; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). Contrary to popular belief (e.g., Matlin, 1987), many victims know their assailants, who may range from casual acquaintances to dates to steady romantic partners (e.g., Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988; Lewin, 1985; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rabkin, 1979; Russell, 1982, 1984). Finkelhor and Yllo (1985) surveyed 323 Boston area women and reported that 10% of their sample had been sexually assaulted by dates, as opposed to 3% who had been assaulted by strangers.

The recognition that sexual coercion and aggression occur with some frequency within close relationships has created an interest in delineating the variables that may influence perceptions of nonconsensual sexual interactions and contribute to sexual violence. Some researchers and theorists have explored social environmental factors, including sex role scripts or stereotypes associated with heterosexual dating situations (e.g., women really mean "yes" when they say "no"; for discussion see Check & Malamuth, 1983); beliefs about the nature of close relationships (e.g., relationships should be sexual, private, and controlled by the male partner; for discussion see Muehlenhard, Goggins, Jones, & Satterfield, 1991); socialization processes that foster the acquisition of rape myths (e.g., Burt, 1980; Campbell, 1975); and peer group norms that support and promote exploitative attitudes toward women and the use of coercive sexual strategies (e.g., Kanin, 1983, 1984, 1985; Martin & Hummer, 1989).

Other researchers have focused on intraindividual variables or perceiver attributes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religiosity, personality). For example, boys and men generally perceive greater sexual interest or attraction on the part of others, particularly female others, than do girls and women (e.g., Abbey, 1982, 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Shotland & Craig, 1988; Zellman & Goodchilds, 1983). This gender difference also obtains when individuals are asked to evaluate date rape scenarios; men continue to perceive a higher degree of sexual willingness on the part of the female target than women, and, in addition, men assign greater responsibility to the female target for the assault and perceive greater justification for the male target's sexually coercive behavior (e.g., Feltey, Ainslie, & Geib, 1991; Kowalski, 1992; Muehlenhard, 1988; Proite, Dannells, & Benton, 1993; but see Bostwick & DeLucia, 1992). Personality characteristics also are associated with rape perceptions. Hypermasculine men experience less negative affect to rape depictions and are more likely to have engaged in sexually aggressive behavior than men low on this attribute (e.g., Beaver, Gold, & Prisco, 1992; Mosher & Anderson, 1986). Similarly, highly sex-role stereotyped individuals of each gender attribute greater responsibility for an assault to the victim than their less traditional counterparts (e.g., Burt, 1980; Coller & Resick, 1987; Muehlenhard, 1988; Muehlenhard, Friedman, & Thomas, 1985; Proite et al., 1993; Shotland & Goodstein, 1983).

A variety of additional factors may alter or influence perceptions of coercive, aggressive, or violent sexual interactions. For example, attributions about date rape appear to be a function of aspects of the victim-assailant relationship, including the

level of involvement (e.g., first date vs. steady date; e.g., Bridges, 1991; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Gerdes, Dammann, & Heilig, 1988; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Tetreault & Barnett, 1987) and whether there exists a prior history of consensual sex (e.g., Shotland & Goodstein, 1992). L'Armand and Pepitone (1982) report that both men and women attributed progressively greater blame to the (female) victim than to her (male) assailant as the relationship moved from strangers to dating partners to dating partners with a history of prior consensual intercourse. Such victim characteristics as physical attractiveness (e.g., Calhoun, Selby, Cann, & Keller, 1978; Seligman, Brickman, & Koulack, 1977), use of "suggestive" nonverbal behaviors (e.g., Kowalski, 1992), and degree of resistance or type of response made to the male partner's sexual initiation (e.g., Calhoun & Townsley, 1990; Krulewitz & Nash, 1979; Kowalski, 1992) also appear to influence date rape perceptions. For example, Calhoun and colleagues (e.g., Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Cann, Calhoun, & Selby, 1979) report that individuals tend to attribute greater responsibility for the occurrence of forcible intercourse to sexually experienced as opposed to inexperienced women.

GOAL OF THIS STUDY

In addition to the aforementioned variables, some researchers hypothesize that beliefs and assumptions about the causal antecedents of sexual desire may contribute to sexual miscommunication and the failed negotiations that result in sexual harassment and date rape (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1995, 1996; Shotland, 1989). For example, a man who believes that female sexual desire is triggered by certain causal conditions (e.g., romantic love, emotional intimacy) may infer that once these conditions have been met (e.g., he has verbally expressed feelings of love, intimacy, and closeness) his partner must be experiencing the desire to engage in sexual activity with him; if his beliefs are incorrect, sexually inappropriate behavior and interpersonal conflict may result. Indeed, research indicates that men who misjudge their partners' level of sexual desire sometimes persist in their attempts to initiate sexual intercourse, and may engage in increasingly aggressive and forceful behavior (Christopher, 1988; also see Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993; Muehlenhard et al., 1991).

I wished to experimentally explore the notion that beliefs about the causes of sexual desire may affect perceptions of a couple's sexual interaction. Previous descriptive research has identified normative beliefs about the causes of male and female sexual desire; for example, female sexual desire is believed by both men and women to be excited by interpersonal, romantic phenomena (e.g., expressions of romantic love and commitment, "romantic" music and settings; Regan & Berscheid, 1995). This exploratory work has not, however, delineated the potential consequences of such normative beliefs. The present study was designed to examine the impact of one presumed cause of female desire—expressions of romantic love—on perceptions of a sexual interaction involving a heterosexual couple.

I had several hypotheses. First, the nature or style of a male target's sexual request (i.e., romantic vs. sexual) was predicted to affect subsequent perceptions of both the male and female target and their interaction; in particular, a woman who received a sexual request accompanied by an expression of romantic love was expected to be viewed as experiencing significantly more sexual desire and as wanting to have sexual intercourse more than a woman who received a request couched in sexual (as opposed to romantic) terms. Second, perceptions of the female and male target (e.g., extent to which each experienced sexual desire, was responsible for the occurrence of intercourse) were expected to correlate with the perceived likelihood that their sexual activity was consensual; for example, the perceived level of the female target's sexual desire is predicted to be positively associated with the extent to which the couple's interaction is viewed as consensual. Finally, the central hypothesis of this article is that the perceived level of sexual desire felt by a female target and extent to which she is believed to want sex will mediate (i.e., account for) the relationship between the male target's sexual request style (romantic vs. sexual) and the perceived likelihood of consensual sex.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 80 (40 women, 40 men, mean age = 18.46 years) students in introductory psychology classes who volunteered in exchange for course credit. The majority were Caucasian (97.5%), followed by Latino (1.3%) and Asian (1.3%). In addition, 63.8% were currently involved in a romantic, dating relationship, and 67.5% were sexually experienced. Men and women did not differ on these measures. However, a series of z tests for proportions revealed that significantly more women than men had been sexually harassed (57.5% vs. 12.5%, $z = 4.22$, $p < .001$) and sexually assaulted (20.0% vs. 0.0%, $z = 2.48$, $p < .01$), and had engaged in unwanted sexual activities (55.0% vs. 22.5%, $z = 2.98$, $p < .01$). In addition, more women than men reported knowing someone who had been sexually harassed (77.5% vs. 40.0%, $z = 3.41$, $p < .001$) or sexually assaulted (62.5% vs. 35.0%, $z = 2.46$, $p < .01$). An equal number of women and men claimed to know someone who had sexually assaulted another individual (30.0% vs. 27.5%).

Procedure

To avoid potentially biasing the experimental manipulation, demographic information (including sexual history) was collected 9 weeks prior to participation. Specifically, at the beginning of the academic term, each introductory psychology student (and potential participant) was provided with a randomly selected, 5-digit code number, and was asked to complete a "pretest" that included a number of relationship and sexual history items. Participants were aware that this code number

would be used to document all experimental participation for the term. This pretest code-number system reduces the possibility that responses to demographic questions will influence responses to experimental measures (and vice versa), and allows researchers to match demographic information with individual responses while ensuring the continued anonymity of participants. Sexual history information is given above.

Nine weeks after completing the pretest, participants arrived individually at the lab, ostensibly to test their “skills in person perception.” The researcher explained that participants would read a scenario depicting an interaction between two individuals, and then would evaluate the individuals and aspects of their interaction. She urged participants to be as careful and as accurate as possible both when reading the scenario and when making their evaluations.

Scenarios. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two versions of a scenario that depicted an interaction between a heterosexual student couple (“Bob” and “Cathy”), who were in a dating relationship of one month’s duration. In each scenario, the couple has rented a movie and returned to the male partner’s room to view the video. Halfway through the movie, the male partner expresses an interest in sexual activity to the female partner. In the “love” condition, this request is romantically phrased; in the “sex” condition, the sexual request is simply stated as such. In both scenarios, the female partner refuses the request, the male partner persists, and the date ends in intercourse. Specifically,

Bob and Cathy have been dating for a month. They have returned to Bob’s room after going out to dinner and are about to watch the movie they rented. About halfway through the video, Bob leans over to Cathy and says:

[“Cathy, I really love you. I just can’t put into words how much I love you. I’d like to show you how I feel by making love to you.”]

[“Cathy, I really want you. I just can’t put into words how much I want you. I’d like to show you how I feel by having sex with you.”]

Cathy says, “I don’t think we should. I don’t think I’m ready for that. Let’s wait a while and take things a little more slowly. Can’t you just try to tell me how you feel?”

[Bob replies, “You know how bad I am with words. I would be much better at showing you. I think we’ve waited long enough. Please let me.”]

[Bob replies, “You know how bad I am with words. I would be much better at showing you. I don’t think I can wait. I’ve waited long enough.”]

Bob and Cathy’s date ended in sexual intercourse.

After reading the scenario, participants made 9 inferences about the partners and their relationship using 9-point, Likert-type scales. Specifically, they indicated the likelihood that the male and female partner each experienced sexual desire, wanted sexual intercourse, was sexually frustrated, and was responsible for the occurrence

of sexual intercourse; and the likelihood that the partners' sexual activity was consensual. Participants were then debriefed, thanked, and excused.

RESULTS

Impact of Sexual Request Style, Participant Gender, and Participant Experiences on Perceptions of the Targets and Their Interaction

It was hypothesized that the nature of a male target's sexual request would affect subsequent perceptions of the male and female target and their interaction. This hypothesis was tested via a 2 (request style: love, sex) \times 2 (participant gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the inferences made by participants. Significant multivariate main effects for request style—Pillai's $V = .37$, $F(9, 68) = 4.52$, $p < .001$ —and participant gender—Pillai's $V = .38$, $F(9, 68) = 4.66$, $p < .001$ —were found. There were no significant multivariate or univariate interactions. Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs), controlled via the Bonferroni procedure and using a familywise error rate of .05, revealed that when "Bob" expressed his feelings of romantic love for "Cathy," he was perceived as less responsible for the occurrence of intercourse, 4.97 vs. 6.55, $F(1, 76) = 8.94$, $p < .01$, than when he expressed his sexual interest in her. When "Cathy" received a verbal declaration of love from "Bob," she was viewed as more likely to have experienced sexual desire, 6.05 vs. 3.70, $F(1, 76) = 30.16$, $p < .001$, and to have wanted sexual intercourse, 4.20 vs. 2.30, $F(1, 76) = 18.83$, $p < .001$, than when she received an expression of sexual interest. Finally, the sexual interaction was perceived as significantly more consensual (i.e., reflecting the mutual desires of the partners) when "Bob" professed love than when he professed sexual intent; 4.88 vs. 3.40, $F(1, 76) = 9.32$, $p < .01$.

The lack of significant interactions at the multivariate and univariate level indicates that participant gender did not moderate the relation between the independent and the dependent variables. However, in addition to the multivariate main effect, this analysis revealed several univariate main effects for participant gender. Specifically, men believed that the male partner wanted to have sexual intercourse more than did women, 8.88 vs. 8.05, $F(1, 76) = 22.91$, $p < .001$, and men attributed greater sexual desire, 5.57 vs. 4.18, $F(1, 76) = 10.70$, $p < .01$, and responsibility for the occurrence of intercourse, 4.18 vs. 2.35, $F(1, 76) = 16.64$, $p < .01$, to Cathy than did women. Women perceived Bob as more likely to be sexually frustrated, 6.53 vs. 5.33, $F(1, 76) = 9.02$, $p < .01$, than did men.

Participants' personal experiences with sexual harassment, coercion, or assault were not related to their perceptions of the scenario involving Bob and Cathy. A series of Bonferroni-protected ANOVAs revealed that responses on the dependent measures did not differ as a function of any of the aforementioned personal history

variables. In addition, a summary score was created for each participant that represented his or her total personal experience with sexual assault, harassment, and coercion (i.e., a participant received 1 point for every affirmative answer, and 0 points for every negative answer, on the personal history questionnaire). These summary scores were correlated with responses to each dependent measure, for the total sample and for men and women separately; no significant results were revealed.

Beliefs About the Male and Female Target and Perceived Likelihood of Consensual Sex: Correlational Analyses

The second hypothesis was that perceptions of the male and female target would be associated with the perceived likelihood of consensual sex. As illustrated in Table 1, a series of correlational analyses revealed that three beliefs about the female target—the likelihood that she experienced sexual desire, wanted to engage in intercourse with the male target, and was responsible for the occurrence of intercourse—were positively correlated with the perceived likelihood that the couple's sexual activity was consensual. One belief about the male target—the likelihood that he was responsible for the occurrence of intercourse—was negatively associated with the perception that the couple's sexual activity was consensual.

Tests of Mediation

To test whether the female target's perceived level of sexual desire and the extent to which she was viewed as wanting sexual intercourse mediated the effect of the male target's sexual request style (romantic vs. sexual) on the perceived likelihood of consensual sex, I used Baron and Kenny's (1986) analytic approach. First, the

TABLE 1
Correlations Between Beliefs About Male and Female Target and
Perceived Likelihood of Consensual Sex

<i>Beliefs</i>	<i>Likelihood of Consensual Sex</i>
Male Partner ("Bob")	
Experienced sexual desire	-.04
Wanted sexual intercourse	-.09
Is sexually frustrated	-.17
Is responsible for the occurrence of sex	-.58*
Female Target ("Cathy")	
Experienced sexual desire	.68*
Wanted sexual intercourse	.58*
Is sexually frustrated	.09
Is responsible for the occurrence of sex	.46*

* $p < .001$.

independent variable (style of Bob's sexual request; REQUEST) was found to be correlated with the dependent variable (perceived likelihood of consensual sex; CONSENT), $r = .32$, $p < .01$, as well as with the proposed mediators (perceived likelihood that Cathy experienced sexual desire, $r = .51$, $p < .001$; perceived likelihood that Cathy wanted to engage in sexual intercourse, $r = .43$, $p < .001$; CDESIRE, CWANTSEX). Second, three regression equations were estimated. In Equation 1, the presumed mediators (CDESIRE, CWANTSEX) were each regressed on the independent variable (REQUEST); this analysis revealed that request style significantly predicted perceived likelihood that Cathy felt sexual desire, $\beta = .51$, $p < .001$, and perceived likelihood that Cathy wanted to engage in sex, $\beta = .43$, $p < .001$. Equation 2 involved regressing the dependent variable (CONSENT) on the independent variable (REQUEST); request style did significantly predict perceived likelihood of consensual sex, $\beta = .32$, $p < .005$. Finally, in Equation 3 the dependent variable (CONSENT) was regressed on both the independent (REQUEST) and mediator (CDESIRE, CWANTSEX) variables; this analysis revealed that the effect of request style on perceived likelihood of consensual sex ($\beta = .32$, $p < .005$; Equation 2) dropped to nonsignificance ($\beta = -.07$) when CDESIRE and CWANTSEX were added into the equation. This change in beta was significant; the R^2 of the overall model increased significantly from .10 to .50 (F for change in $R^2 = 30.31$, $p < .001$). The results from these three equations establish mediation according to Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines. Table 2 presents the results from Equations 2 and 3. These effects were not altered by participant gender. Specifically, although participant gender significantly predicted the mediator variables ($\beta = .30$, $p < .01$ for CDESIRE; $\beta = .21$, $p < .05$ for CWANTSEX; Equation 1), gender did not significantly predict the perceived likelihood of consensual sex ($\beta = .18$, $p = ns$; Equation 2).

Recall that the correlational analysis revealed that two other perceptions (perceived likelihood that Cathy was responsible for the occurrence of intercourse, CRESP; perceived likelihood that Bob was responsible, BRESP) were significantly

TABLE 2
Regression Results:
Dependent Variable = Perceived Likelihood of Consensual Sex

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Equation 2</i>	<i>Equation 3</i>
Request style (Independent Variable)	-.32*	-.07
Woman feels sexual desire (Mediator 1)		.54**
Woman wants sex (Mediator 2)		.27*
R^2	.10	.50
F for R^2	9.07*	25.51***
Change in R^2		.40
F for change in R^2		30.31***

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$.

correlated with the dependent variable (perceived consent). This suggests that these variables might also function as mediators. Therefore, additional regression analyses were conducted to explore whether these perceptions mediated the relation between request style and perceived consent. Request style did not significantly predict CRESP ($\beta = .13$; Equation 1), and request style continued to significantly predict perceived consent ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$; Equation 3) when that presumed mediator was entered into the equation. Therefore, perceived responsibility of the female target does not mediate the request style–consensual sex relation. However, request style did predict the perceived responsibility of the male target ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .01$; Equation 1); moreover, the effect of request style was significantly attenuated (from $\beta = .32$, $p < .005$, Equation 2, to $\beta = .15$, p ns, Equation 3) when BRESP was entered into the equation. This variable, then, appears to also meet the requirements for mediation. However, a final regression analysis revealed that BRESP did not significantly contribute to the equation after the effect of the other two mediators (CDESIRE, CWANTSEX) was statistically controlled; the beta value associated with the independent variable (REQUEST) did not change, and the R^2 of the overall model increased only marginally from .50 to .52 (F for change in $R^2 = 3.52$, $p = .06$).

DISCUSSION

The central premise of this article is that beliefs about the causal antecedents of (female) sexual desire may contribute to sexual miscommunication and poorly coordinated sexual interactions. It is important to recognize at the outset that the methodology and mediational analysis utilized in the present study provide only an indirect test of this hypothesis. Specifically, the results demonstrate that, by providing perceivers with varied information about a male target's sexual request style (i.e., romantic vs. sexual), their perception of a female target's level of sexual desire was altered, and as a result, their beliefs about the nature of the targets' sexual interaction (i.e., consensual vs. nonconsensual) also were altered.

These results validate earlier descriptive research on the perceived causes of female sexual desire. For example, Regan and Berscheid (1995) asked a sample of 95 college-aged adults to list the causes of female (and male) sexual desire and reported that female sexual desire was assumed to be largely dependent upon interpersonal phenomena. According to their respondents, romantic love is the single most important cause of sexual desire in women; one participant stated, "Often the words 'I love you' will cause sexual desire in a woman" (p. 353). Indeed, in the present study, both men and women attributed a stronger wish for intercourse and greater sexual desire to a woman target who had presumably experienced this particular cause of female desire (i.e., an expression of romantic love). These results also provide indirect support for the existence of sociosexual norms that closely

associate female sexuality with interpersonal phenomena (for discussion, see Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Reiss, 1981; Richgels, 1992; Tolman, 1991).

More importantly, this study suggests at least a partial explanation for how external events (e.g., male sexual request style, victim–assailant relationship, degree of resistance to male’s sexual initiation) come to take on psychological significance and thereby affect subsequent assumptions about the nature of a sexual interaction. An expression of romantic love by a male target significantly increases the likelihood that a subsequent sexual interaction with an unwilling partner is labeled “consensual” *because perceivers assume that this expression has caused sexual desire in that partner* (and not because they attribute greater responsibility to the male or female partner, for instance). These results thus provide a useful framework from within which to interpret previous findings. For example, Check and Malamuth (1983) report that observers perceived a more favorable reaction, including desire and pleasure, on the part of date rape victims than stranger rape victims; Tetreault and Barnett (1987) find that adults are less likely to view forced intercourse by an acquaintance, compared to a stranger, as rape. It is possible that the knowledge that a sexual episode involved someone with whom the victim has had a prior relationship (i.e., a date or acquaintance as opposed to a stranger) triggers or primes beliefs about the antecedents of female desire—specifically, that sexual desire in women is caused by interpersonal events—which in turn decreases the likelihood that the sexual episode is interpreted and labeled as rape.

Gender did not moderate the impact of request style on perceptions of the targets and their sexual interaction, and gender did not affect the results of the mediational analysis; however, a number of gender differences (i.e., main effects) were found. Specifically, in accord with previous research that indicates that men perceive other individuals and their interactions in a more sexualized manner than do women (e.g., Abbey, 1982, 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Shotland & Craig, 1988), the male participants in this study believed that the male partner wanted to have sexual intercourse more than did female participants, and men also attributed greater sexual desire to the female target than did women. Women viewed the male target as more sexually frustrated than did men, and attributed less responsibility for the occurrence of intercourse to the female target. The women in this sample had experienced significantly more sexual harassment and coercion than had the men, and although these experiences did not differentially affect perceptions of the scenarios employed in the present study, it is possible that women concluded that Cathy was less responsible for the sexual episode than men partly as a function of their own personal history. Whatever the explanation, the latter result is similar to those reported by previous researchers, who find that women tend to have more positive reactions to female assault victims than do men (e.g., perceive them as more credible, less responsible; Bridges, 1991; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Krulewitz & Nash, 1979; Krulewitz & Payne, 1978; Swim, Borgida, & McCoy, 1993).

As with all research, a number of limitations and future directions must be mentioned. First, there are some general considerations to address concerning

mediational analyses. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the use of multiple regression to estimate a mediational model requires that there be no measurement error in the mediator. One way of reducing the effect of such error is to employ multiple measures of the mediator; consequently, two measures of perceived sexual desire were utilized in this study (i.e., perceived likelihood that the female target experienced sexual desire and perceived likelihood that she wanted to engage in sex; both operationalizations adequately reflect the construct of sexual desire; Regan & Berscheid, 1996). The second requirement is that the mediator not be caused by the dependent variable. It is possible that the dependent variable (perceived consent) is actually the mediator and that the presumed mediators (the female sexual desire variables) are in actuality the dependent variables. Although in the present study there were solid *a priori* reasons (and empirical precedent) for treating perceived consent as the dependent variable and perceived desire as the mediator, further research employing structural modeling or two-stage least-squares procedures in which both a presumed cause of only the mediator(s) and a presumed cause of only the dependent variable are manipulated is necessary to eliminate the feedback problem (for examples of these techniques, see Judd & Kenny, 1981; Smith, 1982).

Second, a primary assumption was that the participants believed the male target's declaration of love. However, a "romantic" request for sex may only affect perceptions of female sexual desire (and, in turn, influence whether or not the sexual episode is labeled as consensual) when it is viewed as genuinely reflecting the male target's true feelings of romantic love. I did not measure the perceived sincerity of the male target's expression of love; future researchers might manipulate "sincerity" and examine how perceptions differ when participants are evaluating a man who sincerely expresses love vs. a man who (insincerely) expresses love in an attempt to sexually manipulate his partner versus a man who does not express love but merely indicates sexual interest.¹ Additional manipulations (e.g., varying the relationship between the targets) also might yield informative results.

A final consideration concerns the sample. Researchers who have investigated beliefs about sexual desire and rape and the factors that affect perceptions of sexual interactions have utilized almost exclusively a young, college-educated participant population; this study is no exception. The fact that I chose to rely on a similar population has the advantage of making these results comparable to those of previous research, but it also places an important caveat on the generalizability of these and others' results insofar as this population may be the only one in which such associations hold. For example, beliefs about female sexual desire may not have the same impact were this study to be replicated with other (e.g., older, more or less sexually experienced, homosexual) populations.

¹The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this research possibility.

These caveats notwithstanding, the beliefs that individuals hold about sexual desire have direct implications for the labels that they place upon sexual interactions and may help to explain, for example, why a sexual episode between a man and an unwilling woman can be perceived as rape on one hand and consensual sex on the other. In short, beliefs matter.

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