



**Episode 6 – Who wants sex more?**  
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**Music and audio by Jeremy Dahl**

Note: This is the script used to create the episode with references added. It has typos. It is not a transcript, but the audio sticks pretty close to the writing.

### **Intro**

Welcome to Do We Know Things? A podcast where we examine things we think we know about sex.

Content warning: This podcast will include discussions about sex and sexual violence. And some ranting about the patriarchy.

Hi everyone! I am Dr. Lisa Dawn Hamilton, professor of psychology and sex educator. Today on Do We Know Things, who wants sex more – men or women?

It's a widely-endorsed stererotype you'll find everywhere: from great literature to teen romantic-comedies. Men of all sexual orientations being complete lust monsters that can't control themselves while women are vanguards of purity blocking men's advances or tragically succumbing to lesbian bed death. But like everything rooted in gender stererotypes, the reality is much complicated than horny dudes and prudish women. This time on "Do We Know Things?" we'll dive into the research on gender and lust, check our cultural biases, and see what we can learn from the animal kingdom.

But first!

### **Feedback on Episode 5**

On the last episode I talked about the relationship between testosterone and sexual desire. In that episode, I referred to a book by Patrick Califa in which he talks about the effects of taking testosterone. In the episode I said it was in the book "Sex Changes" but it is actually from Patrick Califa's book "Speaking Sex to Power." I have posted an edited version of the episode, so anyone who downloads it now will get the corrected version, but I wanted to mention the error for those who heard the original version.

I also had a listener question that I wanted to discuss on today's episode as well. The question was about the link between poly-cystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) and sexual desire. PCOS is a disorder that involves a dysregulation of ovarian hormones and often involves elevated levels of testosterone. To talk about this question, I have the question-asker here in the studio.

LD and Elizabeth discuss PCOS.

## **Do men want more sex?**

Back to today's episode where I answer the question: Do men have higher sexual desire than women? Most, if not all, studies done in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. show that men report wanting more sex, having more sex, and thinking more about sex (Meana, 2010; Mercer et al., 2013). And that's the end of the podcast everyone, thanks for listening! Kidding obviously. I am clearly going to dig more into the research to talk about what these numbers mean and what influences them.

I also want to put a caveat in here about this research and almost all research on gender differences in psychology: the studies I am talking about refer to cisgender men and cisgender women.

So let's start with the numbers. I will take a concrete example of just one question. It's a bit hard to explain without visuals, but I will do my best. Imagine you ask 10,000 people 'on a scale of 1-10, how much have you desired sex with a partner over the last week?' And say you get an average of 5 for women and 7 for men. On average, men are reporting higher levels of sexual desire for a partner. But, there is likely a bell curve distribution of the scores. So a few people (men and women) will say 1 out of 10, some more will say 2 out of 10, and so on and so on. The majority of the men will hover around 7 and the majority of the women will hover around 5. But there will be a lot of overlap! Lots of women will have higher desire than lots of men. And lots will be close to the same.

Another concrete way to think about this is to think about gender differences in height. On average, men are taller than women, but there are plenty of women taller than plenty of men!

When we focus on this idea of men saying they desire sex more than women by relying on the average, we erase the wide range of variability that exists for both genders. I talk a bit more about why this is a problem later in the episode.

Another issue with this research is that we are immersed in so much cultural baggage and stereotypes around sexuality that it's hard to know what is actually the case. Women are so heavily shamed for sexuality in a patriarchal society created around a religion that says women are either virgins or whores. The messages women and girls get both subtly and overtly is that we should not be sexual or we should only express our sexuality in specific ways defined by men. In addition to not being sexual ourselves, it is our job to be the gate-keepers for men's sexuality. In hetero-land, men demand sex and women have to block them from it.

In a culture where sex is framed almost exclusively from a heterosexual male perspective, where there is an orgasm and pleasure gap between men and women, we wonder why women might be less enthusiastic to have sex that is likely to be focused on men's pleasure. Where unacceptably high numbers of women, femmes and nonbinary people are sexually assaulted and then asked "What were you wearing? Why were you alone with him?" it is a wonder why anyone wants to have sex with men at all.

On the other side, men are stereotyped to be hypersexual. To be a man, gay or straight, is to want sex constantly and with anyone. A "real man" would never not want sex. If a man doesn't feel

like sex, sometimes the response is to shame him for not being manly enough, especially for straight men. I have heard women question whether a straight man is really straight if he does not want to have sex with them. Or women in long term relationships who feel completely rejected if their partner is not feeling up to sex because there is this stereotype that men should want it all the time.

Humans are complex beasts. And being brought up in the soup of all this cultural baggage makes getting at what might be people's true desires (if there is even such a thing) pretty tricky.

Some people look to animal research as a way to get beyond the social influences that humans have.

Animal research on sexual behavior actually helps give insight to the role that stereotypes play in studying human sexuality. Even when studying animals who aren't themselves affected by human belief systems, the humans observing them are still steeped in their own biases. If we look at research on lab rats, for decades it was assumed that female rats were passive, much like female humans were expected to be passive sexually. When rats mate, females engage in a reflex posture called lordosis where they arch their backs and present their genitals. It looks like they are kind of paralyzed, so the researchers assumed it meant the male rats were controlling the mating process. It made sense that since we culturally see males as active and females as passive that it would translate to rats.

The research on rat sex used to be done by dropping a female rat into a male's cage and then watching what happened. This is not how things work in the wild. Once researchers designed more elaborate structures that allowed female rats to have agency and come and go, they found that, in fact, much of the sex was driven by the females. Female rats signal their interest in sex by running and hopping and darting around the males. Sort of like, "hey boy, look at me!" Once the male is interested, she allows him to mount her briefly, and then runs away. This happens a few times until finally the female allows the male to finish. So there is clear evidence of female rats seeking out sex, initiating sex, and controlling sex. Of course, humans aren't rats, but this is just one example where researcher bias got in the way of understanding how sex actually works.

With humans, we really can't strip away the social influences, but we can design studies that try to get at human behavior and ask why we might see differences in men's and women's sexuality.

### **Studies on wanting sex in humans**

There is a classic study in psychology that is often referred to when talking about the differences in desire between men and women. In this set of two studies, conducted in the late 70s/early 80s, researchers Russell Clark and Elaine Hatfield had male and female students go up to people on their campus to test whether men or women were more willing to have sex (Clark & Hatfield, 1989). In psychology, people who are working with researchers to influence study participants are called "confederates". So, these confederates hung out in various locations around their campus and approached people of the other sex, one at a time. They would say "I have been noticing you around campus. I find you very attractive" followed by one of three things: would you go out with me tonight, would you come to my apartment tonight, or would you go to bed with me tonight?

The results of this study showed a large gender difference with none of the women agreeing to go to bed with any of the men and around 70% of men agreeing to go to bed with women. For both men and women, the response was around 50% saying yes to going on a date. Clark and Hatfield suggested these results could be because of the traditional gendered perspective that men want sex and women want love, but also noted that women were at much higher risk of violence if they went back to a strange man's house. They also note there is a sexual double standard that could influence people's responses as well.

Although the authors themselves were careful to say they didn't know why there was a difference, many other people since then have taken this as definitive proof that men are horny lust monsters and women are just less interested in sex. It's also a highly unnatural study. People don't just go around in the middle of the day on college campuses asking other people to have sex with them. Obviously women are going to assume someone engaging in this highly inappropriate behavior is clearly a serial killer.

In 2013, a researcher by the name of Terri Conley published a series of studies on the potential "why" of the gender differences in wanting sex with a stranger. In her paper, Conley pointed out a few of the reasons why women might be more reluctant to accept the approach of a random stranger wanting to have sex with them. These included fear of violence and doubt that the sex would be any good. She also noted that men were all responding to women and women were all responding to men, so the stimuli itself was different. So we don't know if the lack of interest was because of the gender of the asker or the gender of the askee (Conley, 2011).

Conley had to approach her studies a little differently since in this day and age we can't just unethically approach strangers and ask them to have sex with us for research. That is kind of cruel, especially if the person says yes and then you are like, "Just kidding! This is a study! I would never have sex with you!" Just thinking about that makes me shudder. I hate prank shows and practical jokes, and this gives me the creeps in the same way.

Anyway, so in the new studies, participants had to just read scenarios and respond to them on paper. In addition to having them say how they would respond to the scenarios, the participants also answered questions about the scenario, like, "how much pleasure do you think you would get in this scenario?" "How much risk is there in this scenario?" This way we are able to get a bit more at the "why" of any gender differences.

Comparing men and women in heterosexual scenarios, Conley found that women definitely thought that agreeing to have sex with a stranger was risky and thought they would not get much pleasure, while men felt the women were low risk and the experience would be pleasurable. One of the studies included only bisexual women, and they were more likely to accept offers of sex from women than they were for men. Some of the studies also looked at factors that might make men and women more equal in terms of wanting sex. My favorite study of this set was when participants were asked if they would want to have sex with an attractive or unattractive celebrity. For women who were asked if they would have sex with Jonny Depp if he asked them, the numbers were the same as for men asked if they would have sex with Angelina Jolie if she asked them. So when the opportunity for sex with a stranger is someone you desire, there is no gender difference.

What these studies show is that the context for men and women responding to a random stranger asking them for sex is different. Men assume sex will be good with a random stranger, women assume it won't be. People having sex with women are also less likely to have to worry about violence. And finally, with a hot celebrity, women are just as likely to want sex as men.

So although the question sounds the same, it's actually different: Men are being asked "Do you want to have awesome sex with an attractive woman?" and women are being asked "Do you want to have sex that doesn't provide much pleasure and maybe you will get murdered?" Conley's studies are a clever way at pointing out these discrepancies.

### **Who has more sex?**

Related to who wants more sex is the question of who has more sex. Study after study reports that heterosexual men have more sexual partners than heterosexual women. Mathematically, though, that's actually impossible. In a closed system where all men's partners are women and all women's partners are men, the averages need to be the same. Sure, a study that didn't include female sex workers could skew the average a bit, but likely not by much. What research has shown is that because of the stereotypes - men are supposed to have lots of sex and women are not - men and women both interpret and answer the question differently. For example, men might count having oral sex as a sex partner and women might not when answering a question on how many partners you have had. Also, the more anonymous a survey is, the more close the numbers are.

A particularly clever way to study number of sexual partners is to use what's called a bogus pipeline, which is basically a fake lie detector. Participants are led to believe that they are hooked up to a lie detector or not when answering questions about their sexual experiences. When people thought they were hooked up to a fake lie detector, the number of sexual partners reported by men and women end up the same (Alexander & Fisher, 2003)!

Research also shows, on average that gay men tend to have the most sexual partners and sex, followed by heterosexual people, followed by lesbian women. This is also used as an argument to say, "see, if you don't have women as gatekeepers, men, the horny lust-monsters have unlimited sex." Of course, this doesn't take into account all of the previously discussed factors that might influence women and men's sexual behaviors. Also anyone who has ever been to a queer sex party can tell you that women are DEFINITELY into sex. But perhaps for women in long term relationships, on component that can dampen their desire is actually a lack of variety.

### **Monogamy and boredom**

So far I have mostly been talking about casual sex or number of partners, but a lot of the talk about differences in desire comes from people in long term relationships. In many relationships there is what therapists call a desire discrepancy. This is where one partner desires sex more than another partner. On average, in heterosexual relationships, men are more likely to desire sex more than their female partners, but that is definitely not always the case. As I discussed in my last episode, there are a lot of things that influence desire. Stress at work, relationship tension, having young children paw at you all the time, being exhausted. All of these things can lower desire for sex. But in a long term relationship, what increases desire?

At the first ever clinical sex conference I went to in 2004, hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) was all the rage. HSDD is a diagnosis for people who have low levels of sexual desire and are distressed about it. Drug companies were really excited about being able to “fix” women’s low sexual desire in long term relationships. They wanted to find the magic pill or patch that would solve this “problem.” One of the things that I remember so clearly from this conference was the pathologizing of women’s low desire, and saying it wasn’t normal, and then saying that 40%-50% of women have this issue. As a lowly undergraduate I remember thinking that if half of women had this supposed problem, was it actually a problem or was it just the way things were supposed to be? The next revelation I had, which was a lightbulb moment for me, was when one of the researchers was presenting her data on some drug for women’s low desire and said something to the effect of “Well we know that if women get into a new relationship, their hypoactive sexual desire disorder tends to go away completely, but we can’t tell our patients that!” I remember thinking, “Why not?!?!” The solution to low desire is nonmonogamy!

Years later, clinical psychologist Marianne Brandon wrote a paper that argued just that. If you want to solve women’s low desire, they need to be able to have sex with other people. Or at least THINK about the possibility of sex with other people (Brandon, 2011).

In 2013, journalist Daniel Bergner wrote a book called “What Women Want” and he argued that, contrary to popular belief, women were the ones who needed more novelty and variety in their sex lives (Bergner, 2013). He argued that, in fact, women were more negatively affected by monogamy. This statement, that women need more variety than men is part of the reason I wanted to do this episode. It is one of those things that I have heard and repeated, but haven’t actually looked into where the data on that actually come from.

I have had Bergner’s book since 2013 when it came out, but didn’t actually read it until I was working on this episode! In the book it is clear there is no direct evidence that women’s sexual desire is more negatively affected by monogamy, but there is sure a lot of circumstantial evidence. And anyone who has ever experienced the desire that often comes along with new relationship energy (NRE), can certainly confirm the shifts in desire that occur with a new partner.

Novelty is helpful for increasing desire for everyone. And if breaking up with your partner to find a new one or engaging in nonmonogamy aren’t the right choices for you, there are lots of ways to increase novelty within a monogamous relationship. This can include sharing sexual stories or videos you like or perhaps making your own sexual stories and videos. Incorporating sexting into your day while you are apart is another option. Role play is also a great way to increase novelty. If you don’t want to have sex with a new person, you can at least pretend you are!

Of course, for some people role play can be embarrassing or feel too vulnerable, and that’s understandable. If it is something you are interested in but don’t feel comfortable doing, you can take it slowly. Perhaps just pretending you are strangers having sex for the first time. It might seem awkward and you might laugh, but sex should be something that is fun and sometimes funny. Perhaps a massage fantasy, where one partner gives the other a sensual massage, but pretends they are a client and a professional. Getting vulnerable in sex can improve the sex and

the desire for it, but to be able to do that people need to feel emotionally safe. If you fear your partner will mock you or shame you, this approach will not work.

In reflecting on this idea of women needing more variety, I do wonder if the root of it is that men, on average, have higher levels of desire and because of that, are able to desire sex in monogamous relationships more. Perhaps, on average, women's desire needs more of a jump start. This is just speculation on my part and tells me that there is a lot more research to do in this area.

## **Conclusion**

Do men have higher levels of sexual desire than women? On average, probably yes. But as I hope you understand after this episode, it's hard to know the truth in a patriarchal society that is set up to privilege male sexual needs. Human sexuality is hard to study. We have so much baggage attached to it!

We have seen in some research that there are ways to eradicate the sex differences by changing the context. I think in a world where women felt emotionally and physically safe to have sex freely, there likely wouldn't be any differences. Or if anything, women would show higher levels of desire. After all, women don't have orgasmic refractory periods. We can have unlimited orgasms, which is likely why women's sex is so heavily regulated in the first place. Our unlimited ability for pleasure is scary to those who want to control us. That's why slut-shaming was invented a couple of millennia ago. It wasn't called that, but it had been there all along. There are some cultures that revere women's unlimited sexual capacity, but most male-dominated cultures want to shut it down!

I'd like to think that one day we'll get to a place where we can recognize that all genders have the capacity enjoy and desire sex. For now, it's something to think about every time you pick up a book or go see a comedy. You can recognize these stereotypes at work and think about how it influences your sexuality.

That's all for this week's episode. If you have any feedback or peer review of this episode, I am always excited to hear from you. You send me a voice memo recorded on your phone or just a written email to [doweknowthings@gmail.com](mailto:doweknowthings@gmail.com)

You can find a script for this episode with references and extra info on the website at [doweknowthings.com](http://doweknowthings.com)

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Of course, I would love it if you could subscribe and rate and review the podcast on iTunes. Thanks for listening. I will talk to you next time on Do We Know Things?



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