6 Myths About Men, Women, and Relationships

Research shows that we're a lot more alike than most of us think.

Posted Oct 01, 2014

Source: Mantsevych/Shutterstock

When it comes to the behavior of men and women in relationships, almost everyone has an opinion—and usually, it's about how the sexes are different. But what does the research tell us about how men and women *really* behave in [romantic relationships](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships)? Often, that they're more alike than we think, and that our common assumptions are wrong.

Let’s examine six common myths:

**1. Women are more romantic than men.**

Since most romance novels and romantic comedies are pitched to female audiences, this may be hard to believe (as I detailed in an earlier post), [men actually have a more romantic outlook on love than women do](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201408/know-hopeless-romantic-it-s-probably-man). A much-used measure of romanticism, the Romantic Beliefs Scale, asks people to rate the extent to which they agree with statements like, “There will only be one real love for me,” and, “If I love someone, I know I can make the relationship work, despite any obstacles."But it turns out that men typically outscore women on this measure.1Men are also more likely than women to believe in the romantic notion of “love at first sight.”2,3

**2. A mate’s physical attractiveness is far more important to men than it is to women.**

This myth is based on a kernel of truth: Many studies have shown that when men and women are asked which characteristics they prefer in a mate, men rate physical appearance as more important than women do.4 However, closer examination of this data reveals that *both* men and women think looks are important, with men rating it somewhat higher than women. In one seminal study, men and women ranked a series of characteristics for potential mates.5 Men ranked looks, on average, as the fourth-most-important trait; women ranked it about sixth. So both genders ranked it highly, but not at the top.

But this data only speaks to what men and women *claim* they are looking for. What does research say about the people that men and women *actually choose* to date? In a classic study on interpersonal attraction, college students were randomly matched with blind dates, and for both men and women, physical attractiveness was the main characteristic that predicted whether or not someone was interested in a second date.6  In a more recent study, researchers examined the preferences of college students participating in a speed-dating event. Prior to their speed-dates, the students rated how important different characteristics would be in making their selections, and the expected [gender](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender) differences emerged, with women rating physical attractiveness as less important than men. But when the researchers examined who participants *actually chose* during the event, the gender difference disappeared: Both men and women preferred physically attractive partners, with no gender difference in how much looks influenced their choices.7

So, both men and women claim to value attractiveness, and men *do* value it more—but not a lot more—and examination of actual dating choices suggests that both genders are equally enamored by looks.

**3. Women aren’t interested in casual sex.**

Much early research on gender differences in [mating](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mating)actually supports this myth.8,9 While, overall, men are more interested in—and more willing to accept offers for—casual sexual encounters, women’s interest in casual sex has been underestimated.

This has occurred for two reasons:

* It is socially unacceptable for women to admit to an interest in casual sex. Therefore, in surveys asking men and women how many sexual partners they’ve had, many researchers have speculated that men tend to exaggerate and women tend to underestimate the number of partners they’ve had, making it falsely appear that men have more sexual partners.10In one study, researchers hooked some participants up to a phony lie detector, and asked them about their sexual history.11 Participants not hooked up to the lie detector offered the typical, socially desirable responses, with men reporting more partners than women. But for those who thought their [deception](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/deception" \o "Psychology Today looks at deception)might be detected, women actually reported slightly *more* partners than men.
* For women to be interested in casual sex, the circumstances need to be right; it’s not that women are uninterested, but that they are pickier about whom they choose for trysts. Conley examined how specific situational features can affect women’s willingness to engage in casual sex.12When she asked subjects to consider hypothetical situations—like a one-time sexual offer from a celebrity or from a friend rumored to be "good in bed"—women were*just as likely as men* to indicate a willingness to take such highly attractive partners up on their offers. She also asked people about their actual past experiences receiving offers for casual sex. She found that, consistent with past research, women were more likely than men to report having rejected those offers, but that the best predictor of whether or not women accepted such an offer was the perceived sexual prowess of the man. Just as in the hypothetical scenarios, women demonstrated a willingness to engage in a casual encounter...with someone who was worth it.

The most famous research establishing women’s purported lack of interest in casual sex relied on a situation in which they were propositioned by a stranger for a one-night stand. But research has shown that [one-night stands are actually the *least common* type of casual sex](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/strictly-casual/201408/what-type-casual-sex-are-people-having). These encounters are most likely to take place in the context of casual dating relationships, friendships, or hook-ups with exes.13,14

**4. Men and women have fundamentally different personalities and orientations toward relationships.**

This myth is often perpetuated by the popular media. In his best-selling book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, John Gray argues that men and women are *so*different they might as well come from difference planets. The truth is that sex differences in most areas are relatively small, and there is much more variation *between individual people* than there is between genders.15 And just because a gender difference is “statically significant” doesn’t mean it’s *large*, simply that there is a *reliable* difference, on average. For example, men are taller than women, on average, but there is also plenty of overlap in men’s and women’s heights—and many women who are taller than many men. And most gender differences in [personality](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality) are a lot smaller than gender differences in height. There is, in fact, a great deal of *similarity* in what men and women want from relationships: Both men and women rate kindness, an exciting personality, and[intelligence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intelligence) as the three most important characteristics in a partner, for example.5

Focusing only on gender differences when dealing with our partners tends to oversimplify things and exaggerate the truth, leading to *less*, not *more*, [understanding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) of one another.16

**5. Men and women have fundamentally different ways of handling conflict.**

Most research suggests that men and women do not differ significantly in their responses to relationship conflict.17 But there is a kernel of truth to this myth: Some couples engage in a destructive “demand/withdraw” pattern of conflict, in which one person, the *demander*, presses an issue and insists on discussing it, while the other *withdraws* and avoids the debate. The more a demander pushes an issue, the more a withdrawer retreats, only causing the demander to become more intent on discussing the issue, and creating a vicious cycle that leaves both partners frustrated.18 And when this pattern occurs, it is much more likely that a *woman* is the demander.19

But even this exception may have more to do with power dynamics than gender differences. In some studies, couples have been asked to discuss an issue in their relationship. Sometimes, they've been asked to discuss something the *woman* wants to change; other times they are asked to do the reverse. Some researchers have discovered that the main determinant of who demands and who withdraws isn’t *gender*, it's who *wants*the change. When the issue under discussion is a change the *woman* wants, the woman is likely to take the demander role; when the issue is one that the man wants to change, the roles reverse,20 or we see the pattern only when the issue is something the woman wants to change.21

So, why the consistent gender difference in previous research? The person who wants change is typically the person who has less power in the relationship, while his or her partner is motivated to simply maintain the status quo. In our society, men have traditionally had more power in relationships than women, so women often found themselves as the ones pressing for change. This dynamic is changing, of course. But even when power is not uneven, women are choosing to press issues because they want changes, not because they handle *conflict* differently than men.

**6. Physical abuse in relationships is almost always committed by men.**

When people think of a [domestic violence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/domestic-violence) victim, most immediately visualize a woman. And it is true that the injuries suffered by female domestic violence victims tend to be more serious than those suffered by male victims, and that the abuses inflicted by men are likely to be more frequent and severe.22,23,24. Nonetheless, males are also frequently the victims of domestic violence. In a recent survey of British adults, it was found that about 40% of domestic violence victims were male.25 In one national survey in the United States, it was found that 12.1% women and 11.3% of men reported that they had committed a violent act against their spouse in the past year.26 Other studies have found that women are just as likely as men to initiate violent encounters with spouses.27It's the stereotype that men can’t be victims of domestic violence, and fears of being stigmatized, that often discourage men from reporting abuse or seeking help.28But men are quite likely to be victims of physical abuse, even if it is less severe.

*It’s destructive to base decisions about your relationships on gender*[*stereotypes*](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias)*. Some are flat out wrong, but even if there is a kernel of truth to them, they tend to exaggerate that truth, and are not constructive in dealing with the unique individuals with whom we have relationships.*

***Gwendolyn Seidman, Ph.D. is an associate professor of psychology at Albright College, who studies relationships and cyberpsychology. Follow her on***[***Twitter***(link is external)](https://twitter.com/GSeidmanPhD)***for updates about social psychology, relationships, and online behavior.***