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Perceptions of Sexual Script Deviation in Women and Men

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Abstract

Traditional sexual scripts are characterized by a gendered power inequality (male dominance versus female submission) (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012). Although gender differences in a variety of sexual behaviors have been decreasing, research into sexual scripts provides some support for the existence of traditional sexual scripts adherence. Studies 1a and 1b focused on men's evaluations of sexual script deviation in women (i.e., sexually assertive behavior) and the possible disapproval of these behaviors (backlash effects). Participants (381 and 382 self-identified heterosexual men) were presented with a randomly assigned vignette describing a hypothetical sexual scenario in which a woman behaved either sexually assertive or sexually timid. Both studies indicated that men to some extent expressed disapproval of sexually assertive women. With the aim to assess if backlash effects were due to women's sexual script deviation or if there was an overall negative evaluation of sexually assertive behavior irrespective of the target's gender, in Study 2 we focused on the perception of sexually assertive behavior in both women and men ($N = 268$). Although we found that gender role conformity was held for women, but not for men, the results suggest that the negative evaluation of sexual assertiveness was not due to script deviation, but that there is an overall conservative attitude towards sexually assertive behavior. Our study provides some insight into the motives of traditional sexual script adherence particularly for women.

Keywords: sexual scripts, backlash effects, sexual double standard, sexual assertiveness, sexual script deviation

INTRODUCTION

Recent research indicates that gender differences in many patterns of sexual behavior have been steadily decreasing (Hyde, 2005; Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011). Although gender role conceptions have seen a considerable change following the women's movement and the sexual revolution (Bryant, 2003), cultural norms and sociosexual standards still seem to differ with regard to male and female sexuality.¹ The sexual double standard (SDS), in fact, "implies that male and female sexual behaviors should be judged by different standards, such as the belief that casual sex is an acceptable for men but not for women" (Petersen & Hyde, 2010, p. 26). To date, however, studies investigating the endorsement of the SDS have produced equivocal results (for a review, see Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Crawford & Popp, 2003). Whereas some studies report that sexually assertive men are judged differently than sexually assertive women (e.g., Jonason, 2008; Jonason & Fisher, 2009; Marks, 2008; Sprecher, Treger, & Sakaluk, 2013), other research provides no support for the SDS (e.g., Allison & Risman, 2013; Marks & Fraley, 2005).

Even if the research on the evidence of the endorsement of the sexual double standard reveals inconsistent results, studies have shown that most people believe that the SDS still exists in society (Milhausen & Herold, 1999, 2002; Rudman, Fetterolf, & Sanchez, 2013). Accordingly, one area of the SDS that seems to indicate consistent gender-specific differences is that of the attitudes towards and the reported engagement in casual sex (Peplau, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010, 2011). In this regard, SDS influences individual decision-making in sexuality and restricts women's sexual pleasure, making women more likely to reject an engagement in a desired sexual activity or an offer of casual sex for the fear of being stigmatized (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2013; Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991). On the other hand, young men are much more likely than young women to be encouraged to engage in casual sex with multiple partners and to receive more approval of their sexual behavior (e.g.,

Morgan, Thorne, & Zurbriggen, 2010). Accordingly, social desirability and gender norms related to the SDS also impact the self-reported sexual behavior in women, who tend to underreport the number of past sexual partners or autoerotic behaviors (Alexander & Fisher, 2003). These described gender-specific presumptions are consistent with culturally dictated sexual scripts which shape sexual behaviors.

Sexual Scripting Theory

In sex research, the sexual scripting theory (SST) is a well-established framework for the understanding of sexual interactions and scenarios (Gagnon, 1990; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). SST emphasizes that sexual scripts interact and operate on three hierarchical levels and guide sexual behavior. These are cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. *Cultural scenarios* reflect the shared cultural norms and values about sexuality that are “derived from social institutions and media to shape appropriate sexual conduct at a societal level” (Morrison et al., 2015, p. 656), but may also shape both the interpersonal and the intrapsychic scripts. *Interpersonal scripts* refer to the sexual partner’s interpretation of cultural scenarios and appropriate sexual interaction between individuals, whereas *intrapsychic scripts* designate the construction of individual sexual desire, sexual motives, and the arousal pattern (Bowleg et al., 2015; Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

SST provides a useful account of the reasons why heterosexual women and men might interact differently in sexual situations, because scripts profoundly relate to exceptions from gender roles, sexual roles and relationship norms (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Ortiz-Torres, Williams, & Ehrhardt, 2003; Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012; Wiederman, 2005). The traditional female sexual script assumes submissive behavior (e.g., restriction of sexual advances, gate-keeping, lower sexual desire) within heterosexual interactions, whereas the traditional male sexual script assumes a dominant behavior and sexual agency (e.g.,

initiation of sexual activity and high sex drive). Furthermore, women are expected to have a relationship-centered view of sexuality, which defines both the context in which sexuality occurs (stable, monogamous relationship) and the purpose of sexuality (enhancement of intimacy and partnership bonding) (Levant, Rankin, Hall, Smalley, & Williams, 2012). Men, on the other hand, are perceived to be willing and at all times ready for sex, sexually skilled and experienced, as well as initiating and being in charge of the sexual encounter (e.g., Byers, 1996; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Wiederman, 2005). In short, although traditional sexual scripts frame both male and female sexuality, for women they are focused on relational characteristics, whereas for men they emphasize recreational aspects of sex (Alksnis, Desmarais, & Wood, 1996). Moreover, sexual scripts are characterized by a gendered power inequality (i.e., male dominance versus female submission; Lammers & Imhoff, 2016): Enactment of traditional sexual scripts encourages men to express themselves sexually, while reducing women's sexual autonomy (for a review, see Sanchez et al., 2012).

Traditional Sexual Scripts: Change and Adherence

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in studying adherence to and change of heterosexual sexual scripts (e.g., Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013; Morrison et al., 2015; Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, Lachowsky, & Undergraduate Research Group in Sex, 2014). Despite a development away from traditional towards more egalitarian and permissive scripts, there is some support for continuity of traditional cultural scenarios. These are most pronounced in the media (Kim et al., 2007) and they still seem to guide initial states of dating (Eaton & Rose, 2011) as well as sexual behavior within heterosexual interactions (e.g., Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann, 2004; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007; Ortiz-Torres et al., 2003; Sanchez et al., 2012). Interestingly, some researchers have highlighted individual differences in the extent to which people incorporated cultural scenarios in their individual sexual scripts (Masters et al., 2013). Whereas the way people talk about sexuality is often in line with

gendered stereotypes, individual sexual experiences and relationships do not necessarily match these cultural scenarios (McCabe, Tanner, & Heiman, 2010).

Although cultural scenarios are less malleable, they do change over time. Sexual scripts are becoming more egalitarian and, consequently, they are starting to challenge the sexual power disadvantage of women (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Suvivuo, Tossavainen, & Kontula, 2010). For example, some men report a desire for less conventional scripts (e.g., encourage more sexual initiation from women), although they remain aware of and enact expectations related to the traditional male script (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). Similarly, another study reported that young heterosexual men endorsed both the traditional male sexual script and the less conventional "sex-positive woman script," which emphasizes mutual enjoyment and sexual pleasure for the female partner (Morrison et al., 2015). Focusing on sexual hook-up scenarios, other researchers have demonstrated variability in young men's hook-up scripts, suggesting a challenge to the traditional male script that emphasizes a preference for non-relational sexuality (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009).

Heterosexual Men's Perception of Women's Sexual Assertiveness

Only a few studies have assessed heterosexual men's perception of women's sexual script deviation. Much of this literature is qualitative and to a large extent focused on sexual intention patterns, with the results indicating either negative or ambivalent attitudes towards women initiating sexual activity (at the early stage of dating) (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). This may be because female-dominated sexual patterns increase the fear of being rejected or could lead to higher performance anxiety (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). Other research has suggested that women high in sexual assertiveness are desirable sexual partners (Conley, 2011; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Oliver & Sedikides, 1992). One study using an experimental design explored the perception of sexual agency in dating profiles (Fetterolf &

Sanchez, 2015). Overall, men and women were judged similarly for sexually agentic behavior: Study participants evaluated both male and female targets with high sexual agency as more desirable, but also as more selfish and riskier sexual partners (e.g., as having a higher number of previous sexual partners).

Script Uncertainty

Due to changes in social circumstances, gender norms, and masculinity concepts, some researchers point to the growing uncertainty surrounding the choice of sexual script behavior (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). Established traditional sexual scripts, therefore, can provide guidance and predictability and consequently reduce anxiety at the individual level (Wiederman, 2005). Offering a familiar and mutual social agreement, scripts decrease uncertainty in unknown situations. Since people tend to conform more closely to cultural scenarios in unpredictable situations (e.g., in interactions with an unknown person) engagement in traditional scripts is more present in early stages of dating than in long-term heterosexual relationships (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Accordingly, men initiate sexual activity more often at the beginning of a new relationship, whereas in established relationships sexual initiation occurs more mutually (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993; Seal, Smith, Coley, Perry, & Gamez, 2008; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2011). Not surprisingly, men feel more comfortable in the role of the initiator of sexual activity and tend to find this scenario easier to imagine (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999).

What happens when individuals deviate from traditional scripts and challenge the gendered power inequality (male dominance versus female submission)? While sexual scripts might safeguard against uncertainty, it is possible that script deviation might provoke uncertainty. Pointing to gender-specific differences, previous research indicates that manhood, in contrast to womanhood, can be considered as a precarious state requiring frequent social proof and confirmation. As a result, men might feel threatened if their

masculinity is challenged (e.g., Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008) or if they “fail to live up to [the] internalized manhood ideal, which may closely approximate traditional norms” (Levant, 2011, p. 771). Given the precarious nature of masculinity, men may show particularly pronounced backlash against sexual script deviance.

In social psychology, evidence suggests that violating or disconfirming gender stereotypes may result in backlash effects, defined as social and economic sanctioning of the behavior that is counter to the expected gender stereotypes (e.g., Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For example, participants who deviated from gender role expectations were more likely to experience social penalization and disapproval. As consequence, people tend to hide gender deviance and show gender role conformity to avoid those backlash effects. In addition, sanctioning of counterstereotypical behavior may also function as a self-esteem maintenance mechanism. Specifically, social disapproval sometimes results in increased self-esteem in the perceiver, in particular in the case of self-esteem threat or threat to social identity (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). A couple of studies indicate that backlash effects are also salient in the sexual domain (Conley et al., 2013; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015).

However, it remains unclear what motivates the expression of backlash effects in situations when women deviate from traditional sexual script. On the one hand, disapproval of sexual script deviation may just be an expression of cognitive (“cold”) penalization of nonconformity. On the other hand, backlash against women’s sexual script deviation may also be defensively motivated. In other words, in interactions with women who deviate from the traditional sexual script, men may experience anxiety. As a means to manage provoked anxiety, men may be motivated to sanction women’s nonconforming behavior.

The Present Research

Only a few studies so far have explored current traditional sexual script adherence versus change in an experimental design. In addition to providing mixed results, most of the

available studies are also limited by their use of only college-aged population. Therefore, aiming to experimentally explore attitudes towards women's sexual assertiveness in heterosexual casual sex scenarios using a more diverse sample, we were guided by the following research questions: (1) Is sexual assertiveness (assessed by different sexual script facets) in women considered to be a deviation from the traditional female sexual script? (2) Does women's sexual assertiveness provoke anxiety in men? (3) Does women's sexual assertiveness cause social penalties (backlash effects)?²

In Study 1a, we examined the perception and evaluation of a hypothetical scenario that described sexual assertiveness vs. sexual timidity vs. control condition. Given that sexual assertiveness contradicts the traditional female sexual script, we were interested in exploring whether heterosexual men perceive women's sexual assertiveness as script deviating behavior. Our starting point was the hypothesis that following the dominant cultural norms regarding gender-appropriate behavior in sexual encounters, sexually assertive targets would be evaluated more negatively than sexually timid targets (backlash effects) (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we hypothesized that sexually assertive behavior in women would have an ambivalent effect on heterosexual men. On the one hand, they might find the expressed sexual desire attractive (and therefore see the target as a highly desirable sexual partner), while on the other hand sexual assertiveness might also provoke anxiety and worry regarding men's performance in the hypothetical scenario. Based on previous research results, we hypothesized that sexually assertive targets would be less desirable as romantic, but more desirable as sexual partners (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we wanted to test if this behavioral pattern provokes state anxiety in men. We, therefore, hypothesized that men confronted with a sexually assertive female partner will score higher on state anxiety (Hypothesis 3). In order to test the robustness of Study 1a findings, using the same sampling strategy, hypothetical scenarios, materials, and procedure we conducted Study 1b. Expanding on the findings from

the first study, and aiming to test the effect of gender in the perception of sexually assertive behavior, we then conducted Study 2. Focusing on the perception of sexually assertive behavior in both women and men, we aimed to test whether backlash effects are motivated by script deviation or if the negative evaluation of assertive sexual behavior is, in fact, independent of the target's gender.

Men's Evaluation of Sexual Assertiveness (Study 1a)

Using an online sample of heterosexual men, in Study 1a we examined the relationship between sexual assertiveness vs. timidity in women vs. no information and the following heterosexual men's perceptions (dependent variables): (1) men's evaluation of the female sexual partner, (2) men's willingness to engage in sexual activity with the female target, (3) men's willingness to engage in a serious long-term relationship with the female target, (4) men's willingness to become friends with the female target, and e) provoked state anxiety in men.

METHOD

Participants

Self-identified heterosexual men were invited to participate in an experiment on "sexuality and emotions" via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which was shown to be a reliable data collection platform (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Of the 396 men who took part in the experiment, 15 were excluded because they failed the attention check.³ Therefore, the final analytical sample included 381 self-identified heterosexual men ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.38$ years, $SD = 12.74$). Among them, 295 (77.4%) were White, 33 (8.7%) were Black, 26 (6.8%) were Asian, 22 (5.8%) were Hispanic, 3 (.8%) were biracial, and 2 (.5%) said they were of another ethnicity. Half of the participants reported being single ($n = 193$, 50.7%), 144 were married (37.8%), 27 were divorced (7.1%), and 13 were separated (3.4%). Most participants had a bachelor's degree ($n = 193$, 50.7%) as highest level of education, 96

reported some college (25.2%), 38 had an associate degree (10%), 38 had a high school diploma (10%), 44 participants had a master's degree (11.5%), and 14 reported having a professional degree (3.7%). Almost all (98.4%) were American citizens.

Procedure and Materials⁴

After providing informed consent, participants were instructed to imagine they were single (Hornsey, Wellauer, McIntyre, & Barlow, 2015) and they were given the following instruction: "Please imagine yourself in the following situation: One night you are sitting alone in a bar. Suddenly, you make eye contact with a woman." Following this, we presented a vignette describing (1) assertive ($n = 132$), (2) timid ($n = 126$), or control ($n = 123$) women's sexual behavior in a hypothetical casual sex scenario. Vignettes (see Appendix) describing assertive or timid behavior were designed to encompass different facets of gendered sexual script behavior which have been reported in previous research (Sakaluk et al., 2014). The following aspects of the imagined scenario were included: (1) initiation vs. gate-keeping; (2) physical vs. emotional sexual motivation; (3) performance script (experienced vs. inexperienced and sexual self-efficacy/knowledge about sexual likes present vs. not present); and (4) high vs. low sex desire. In this study, sexual assertiveness was considered to contradict and sexual timidity was considered to be consistent with the traditional female sexual script enactment. Participants in the control condition were told only that they have sex with the woman they meet in the bar, without being given further information about the woman's script-related sexual behavior. The utility of the vignettes was already tested in a pilot study (see Supplements). The Ethics Committee of the Hamburg Psychotherapeutic Chamber approved the study protocol.

After reading the vignette, using a 4-point ordinal scale, participants were asked to evaluate the target with regard to: (1) how positive they perceived the target ("Please think of the woman that you were about to imagine: I perceive her as positive"; (2) their sexual

interest in the target (“I want to have sex with the woman”); (3) their romantic interest in the target (“I want a serious long-term relationship with the woman”); and (4) their willingness to become friends with the target (“I want to be friends with this woman”). All evaluation items were analyzed separately.

In order to assess the state effects (state anxiety) of the experimental manipulation (the imagined assertive vs. timid vs. control sexual behavior of the woman), study participants completed the State scale of the *State Trait Anxiety Inventory* (STAI; Spielberger, 1989), which consists of 20 items rated on a 4-point scale. The State scale of the STAI showed sufficient internal consistency in this study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .69$). Finally, in order to test whether assertive sexual behavior was perceived as deviating from the traditional sexual script, participants completed a 2-item manipulation check. Using a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants were asked to rate how sexually nonconformist and how dominant they thought women in the vignettes were.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Correlation matrix of dependent variables is shown in Table 1. The manipulation of sexual scripting behavior was successful: The assertive targets were perceived as significantly more non-conformist ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.50$) than both the targets in the control ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.42$), $t(253) = 4.82, p < .001, d = 0.61$, and in the timidity condition ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.35$), $t(256) = 6.10, p < .001, d = 0.76$. The assertive targets were also perceived to be significantly more dominant ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.29$) than the sexually timid targets ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.55$), $t(256) = 8.69, p < .001, d = 1.08$.

In order to test whether there was a difference between the three groups regarding our hypothesized dependent variables, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results indicated a significant main effect of sexual script behavior on all evaluation items (see Table 2). Men perceived sexually assertive women as less positive than both women in

the control, $t_{target}(253) = 5.07, p < .001, d = 0.63$, and in the sexual timidity condition, $t_{target}(256) = 3.45, p = .001, d = 0.43$. In addition, as hypothesized, romantic intention was significantly lower among the sexually assertive targets, compared to both targets in the control condition, $t(253) = 4.87, p < .001, d = 0.61$, and targets in the timidity condition, $t(256) = 7.34, p < .001, d = 0.91$. Sexual intention, however, was the highest in the control condition. Control targets were perceived as sexually more attractive compared to sexually assertive, $t(253) = -4.11, p < .001, d = 0.51$, and sexually timid targets, $t(247) = -4.77, p < .001, d = 0.60$. Finally, compared to sexually timid targets, sexually assertive targets also received lower ratings on the friendship item, $t(256) = 3.11, p = .002, d = 0.38$. Contrary to Hypothesis 3, no significant differences between the three conditions were found with regard to state anxiety, suggesting that women's sexual script deviation did not provoke anxiety among male participants (Table 2).⁵

Women's sexual assertiveness was indeed perceived as sexual script deviation. These results were not in line with the notion that there is a development away from traditional sexual scripts (e.g., men desire sexual behavior that deviates from the cultural norm) as suggested by recent research (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Masters et al., 2013). Participants instead expressed to some extent backlash toward the sexually assertive woman who was perceived less positively than women in the timid or control condition (Hypothesis 1). Consequently, men in the assertiveness condition reported a significantly lower interest in a long-term serious relationship and in a friendship with the sexually assertive target. However, contrary to our expectation, the assertive target was not rated as a more desirable sexual partner (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, results of Study 1a indicate that, contrary to our expectations, the assertive female sexual partner in the hypothetical scenario did not provoke higher levels of state anxiety (Hypothesis 3).

Replicating Men's Evaluation of Sexual Assertiveness (Study 1b)

Study 1b was conducted to replicate and extend the findings observed in Study 1a. In Study 1b, we again hypothesized that sexually assertive targets would be perceived more negatively (Hypothesis 1). We further hypothesized that sexually timid targets would be preferred as romantic partners, whereas assertive targets would be preferred as sexual partners (Hypothesis 2). Finally, in Study 1a, differences in state anxiety between the conditions were not detected, suggesting that the assertive target did not provoke state anxiety in men (Hypothesis 3). To replicate this observation, Study 1b was conducted.

METHOD

Participants

Among 408 self-identified heterosexual men recruited via MTurk, 26 were excluded from the study because they failed the attention check. Therefore, the final analytical sample consisted of 382 men ($M_{age} = 35.3$ years, $SD = 12.58$). Among them, 79% were White ($n = 303$), 6.8% were Black ($n = 26$), 6% were Hispanic ($n = 23$), 6% were Asian ($n = 22$), and 2% identified as biracial ($n = 8$). Most participants were singles ($n = 220, 57.6$), 137 participants were married (35.9%), 19 reported being divorced (5%), and 4 were separated (1%). Around one third of participants had a bachelor's degree ($n = 129, 33.8\%$), 111 reported some college (29.1%), 40 had an associate degree (10.5%), 38 had a high school diploma (9.2%), 48 participants had a master's degree (12.6%), and 14 reported a professional degree (3.7%). Almost all (99%) were American citizens.

Procedure and Materials

As in Study 1a, in Study 1b participants were presented with a randomly assigned vignette describing women's assertive ($n = 127$), timid ($n = 126$) or control ($n = 129$) sexual behavior in a hypothetical casual sex scenario. The dependent variables were the same as in Study 1a, because Study 1b aimed to replicate the results of Study 1a. The State scale of the

STAI (Cronbach's $\alpha = .67$) was presented after the vignettes and followed by the evaluation items.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manipulation of the sexual script behavior was successful: Participants in the assertive target condition rated the female sexual partner as more non-conformist ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.35$) compared to the participants in the timidity ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(251) = 7.18$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.90$, and in the control condition ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(254) = 5.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.68$. Again, sexually assertive targets were perceived as significantly more dominant ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.26$) than timid targets ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(251) = 18.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.31$.

We found a main effect for sexual script behavior on all but one of the evaluation items (perception of the target, intention to engage in sex, romantic interest), and provoked state anxiety); a significant between-group difference was not found for the willingness to become friends with the target (see Table 3).

As shown in Table 3, study participants perceived the sexually assertive women less positively than the control target, $t(254) = 3.41$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.44$. Significant differences were also found with regard to romantic intention: The sexually assertive target was rated as a less desirable romantic partner compared to both the control, $t(254) = 4.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$, and the timid target $t(251) = 4.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$. Contrary to our hypothesis, sexually assertive targets were not rated as more desirable sexual partner. Again, participants in the control condition reported higher scores on sexual intention than participants in the other two conditions. Sexually assertive, $t(254) = 3.88$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.49$ as well as sexually timid targets, $t(253) = 3.26$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.41$, were perceived as less sexually attractive compared to controls. Finally, in contrast to Study 1a, we found a main effect of sexual script behavior on state anxiety. Participants in the timidity condition scored significantly higher on state anxiety than those in the control condition $t(253) = 3.04$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.38$, although a

significant difference was not found between participants in the sexually timid and sexually assertive conditions, $t(251) = 1.76, p = .079$.⁶

Overall, the response patterns were similar to the results of Study 1a. In line with our assumptions regarding backlash effects, we found that men judged the sexually assertive female target as a less desirable romantic partner, as a friend, and they perceived her less positively overall (Hypothesis 1 and 2). Again, sexually assertive women were not perceived as a more desirable sexual partner (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, sexually assertive target again did not provoke higher levels of state anxiety than the timid target (Hypothesis 3). Therefore, this result provides the first evidence that backlash effects towards sexual script deviation among women cannot be understood as a way of coping with anxiety provoked by sexually assertive behavior.

A Matter of Sexual Assertiveness? Evaluation of Male and Women's Sexual Assertiveness (Study 2)

Study 1a and 1b demonstrated that, overall, sexually assertive women were perceived less positively than sexually timid women and controls. Expanding on these findings and with the aim to assess the role of gender in the evaluation of sexually assertive behavior, in Study 2 we focused on the perception of sexually assertive behavior in both women and men. We wanted to ensure if it is really script deviation which leads to backlash effects or rather an overall negative evaluation of high sexual activity and assertive sexual behavior independent of target's gender. A pilot study (see Supplements) that tested the vignettes demonstrated that women judged sexually conformist men (those characterized by assertive sexual behavior) more negatively than sexually non-conformist men (those characterized by sexual timidity). This result indicates that sexual assertiveness itself may be perceived more negatively among both women and men (see Supplements). Following this finding, Study 2 involved a 2 (Target Gender) x 2 (Participant Gender) x 3 (Sexual Script Behavior: Timid vs. Assertive vs.

Control) design. In particular, we aimed to explore whether the effects observed in Study 1a and 1b were due to (1) an overall negative evaluation of sexual assertiveness; (2) script violation (i.e., script violators are negatively assessed irrespective of their gender: sexually assertive women and sexually timid men are perceived negatively) or (3) if they were due to the interaction of power and script violation in such a way that women who deviate from the traditional script are perceived more negatively than men (i.e., double standard).

METHOD

Participants

Among 293 men and women who were recruited via MTurk to participate in an experiment, 25 participants failed the attention check and were excluded. The final sample therefore consisted of 142 men and 126 women ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.2$, $SD = 13.75$). Of these, 221 (82.5%) were White, 13 (4.9%) were Asian, 13 (4.9%) were Black, 12 (4.5%) were Hispanic, 7 (2.6%) were biracial, and 2 (0.7%) said they were of another ethnicity. Most participants lived in a relationship ($n = 167$, 62.3%), 101 participants reported being single (37.7%). Around on third of participants had a bachelor's degree ($n = 98$, 36.6%), 73 reported some college (27.2%), 34 had an associate degree (12.7%), 29 had a high school diploma (10.8%), 31 participants had a master's degree (11.6%), and 3 reported having a professional degree (1.1%). Most (98.5%) were American citizens.

Procedure and Materials

To accommodate for the inclusion of male targets, the vignettes used in Study 1a/b were adapted for gender. In addition, unlike the previously used vignettes that were narrated in the second person, for this study participants themselves did not have an active role in the scenario. In other words, vignettes described a sexual encounter between the target and a sexually assertive vs. timid vs. control sexual partner.

Participants were randomly assigned to the 2 x 2 x 3 design. Again, participants were instructed to read the vignette, after which they were presented with the evaluation items used in Study 1a and 1b. Those who were presented with the same-sex target were asked to indicate what they believed the average man/woman would think about the target (Sanchez & Fetterolf, 2015), whereas participants who were presented with the other-sex target were asked to indicate what they themselves think about the target. As before, two items were included as manipulation check. Participants rated how sexually non-conformist and how dominant they thought the targets in the vignettes were on a 4-point scale. In Study 2, we included one additional item. Specifically, given that the traditional male sexual script is highly associated with sexually coercive behavior (Byers, 1996), we asked participants to rate how aggressive they thought sexual partners in the vignettes were.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The manipulation of the sexual script behavior was successful: Participants in the assertive target condition rated the sexual partner as more non-conformist ($M_{assertiveness} = 2.86$, $SD = 1.02$; $M_{timidity} = 2.12$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(173) = 5.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.76$, and as more dominant than timid targets ($M_{assertiveness} = 3.33$, $SD = 0.78$; $M_{timidity} = 1.35$, $SD = 0.59$), $t(173) = 18.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.85$.

We then conducted a 2 x 2 x 3 ANOVA for each dependent variable (Table 4).⁷ Results demonstrated a main effect of sexual behavior on all but one dependent variable (intention to engage in sex). Means, SD, and F -values for the main effect of sexual behavior are shown in Table 4. Participants were significantly more willing to become friends and start a long-term serious relationship with the sexually timid target compared to the assertive target, $t_{friendship}(173) = 4.39$, $p < .001$; $d = 0.66$, $t_{relationship}(173) = 5.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.79$. Furthermore, participants evaluated the sexually timid target significantly more positive than the target in the assertiveness condition, $t(173) = 5.47$, $p < .001$; $d = 0.83$.

Furthermore, we found a main effect of participant gender on the romantic intention $F(2, 255) = 7.64, p < .001$, in which women ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.87$) rated targets in general as less likable for a long-term relationship than did men ($M = 1.63, SD = 0.86$). However, pairwise comparison yielded no significant difference between the ratings $t(265) = 1.31, p = .193$. Apart from that, participant gender had no influence on target's evaluation items.

A main effect of target gender was identified, indicating that participants perceived female targets ($M = 2.48, SD = 0.93$) overall as more positive than male targets ($M = 2.24, SD = 0.98$), $t(266) = 2.14, p = .034, d = 0.25$. Participants also reported a higher intention to engage in sex with the female target ($M = 2.24, SD = 1.13$) than with male targets ($M = 1.52, SD = 0.81$), $t(266) = 6.03, p < .001, d = 0.73$. Finally, we found an interaction effect between target gender x sexual script behavior, $F(2, 255) = 3.71, p = .026$. In the assertiveness condition, men ($M = 1.71, SD = 0.82$) were viewed less positively than women, ($M = 2.40, SD = 0.99$), $t(88) = 3.64, p < .001, d = 0.76$. In contrast, in the timidity condition no significant difference was found: Male ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.89$) and female targets were judged similarly for sexually timid behavior, ($M = 2.81, SD = 0.76$), $t(85) = 0.42, p = .673$. Interestingly, gender role conformity was held for women, but not for men: Sexually assertive women ($M = 2.40, SD = 0.99$) were rated as less positive compared to sexually timid women ($M = 2.91, SD = 0.76$), $t(85) = 2.14, p = .036, d = 0.58$. As opposed to this result, script deviating men (i.e., who behaved sexually timid, $M = 2.74, SD = 0.89$) were perceived more positive than sexually assertive men ($M = 1.71, SD = 0.82$), $t(90) = -5.71, p < .001, d = -1.21$.

As expected, study participants viewed sexually assertive male targets ($M = 3.40, SD = 0.89$) as more aggressive than timid male targets ($M = 1.38, SD = 0.62$), $t(88) = 12.24, p < .001, d = 2.60$. Interestingly, the same was also true for female targets ($M_{assertiveness} = 3.21, SD = 0.78, M_{timidity} = 1.21, SD = 0.64$), $t(83) = 12.96, p < .001, d = 2.81$.

In sum, considering that backlash effects toward sexual script non-conformist men (i.e., towards sexual timidity among men) was not found, Study 2 results indicate that sexual assertiveness, and not script deviation, is perceived negatively among both men and women. With respect to sexual script behavior, results indicated further that gender role conformity was held for women, but not for men.

DISCUSSION

With the aim to explore men's perception of women's sexual script deviation/sexual assertiveness, we conducted three vignette studies. In the first two studies, we assessed men's evaluations of sexually assertive behavior in women. In line with Hypothesis 1, our results suggested that women who diverged from the traditional female sexual script are at higher risk to experience backlash effects. Overall, men perceived women who behaved sexually assertive as non-conformist and they judged them less positively than women who expressed sexual timidity or controls. In order to assess if the backlash effect was due to women's sexual script deviation or due to a negative evaluation of sexually assertive behavior in general, in Study 2 we assessed perceptions of sexually assertive behavior in both women and men. Given that in Study 2 sexually assertive targets were evaluated more negatively than sexually timid targets, our results suggest that it is sexual assertiveness and not script deviation that is perceived negatively. This conservative shift in judging sexual behaviors has also been recently described in the literature (Allison & Risman, 2013; Sakaluk et al., 2014) suggesting that "less is more" at least in the sexual domain (O'Sullivan, 1995; Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbuch, 1991).

Furthermore, sexually assertive men were judged more negatively than sexually assertive women, suggesting that the negative attitude towards sexual assertiveness is not entirely independent of gender. It is important to note that although sexually assertive behavior was perceived negatively among both men and women, the traditional sexual double

standard (negative judgement of sexually assertive women) and the reverse double standard (negative judgement of sexually assertive men) may have different origins and implications. From an historical perspective, the SDS has functioned to control women's sexual behavior (Crawford & Popp, 2003). The reverse double standard, on the other hand, may be seen as a reaction to the sexual empowerment of women and it is connected to concerns about sexual harassment and violence, as sexually assertive behavior among men can be interpreted as particularly exploitative (Kettrey, 2016; Milhausen & Herold, 2002). It is therefore likely that in our study sexually assertive men were perceived negatively in part due to the overlapping characteristics of behavior related to the traditional male sexual script and coercive sexual behavior (Byers, 1996; Milhausen & Herold, 2002).

Backlash Effects and Its Impact on Sexual Script Adherence in Intimate Relationships

In the sexual situation, the traditional script encourages women to take on a submissive role whereas men are expected to express their sexual autonomy and dominance (Sanchez et al., 2012; Wiederman, 2005). But what happens when women deviate from the expected standard of behavior? Previous research already assumed that script deviation for women seems to be more risky because the traditional male sexual script per definition emphasizes more sexual autonomy (e.g., Masters et al., 2013; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2012). Complementing previous research (e.g., Oliver & Sedikides, 1992; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Sprecher et al., 1991), our results offer further evidence that women suffer high costs when they express sexual autonomy and that gender role conformity is still held for women. There is substantial research evidence supporting the contention that women face backlash effects for displaying assertive behaviors also outside the sexual domain (e.g., Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Backlash against women's sexually assertive behavior, consequently, creates societal pressure for women, more so than for men, to suppress displays of those behaviors.

Partially confirming Hypothesis 2, sexually assertive targets were judged neither as desirable partner for a long-term romantic relationship nor for a short-term sexual encounter. Although it contradicts previous findings suggesting that women high in sexual assertiveness are desirable sexual partners (Conley, 2011; Fetterolf & Sanchez; 2015, Oliver & Dedikides, 1992), given the ambivalent perception of sexual assertiveness (e.g., sexually assertive women may be seen as promiscuous and selfish) this result is not entirely surprising (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015). Our results are, however, disillusioning given that sexual assertiveness and autonomy, expressed through the ability to seek and achieve pleasurable sexual experiences, is important for the development of healthy sexual relationships (Tevlin & Leiblum, 1983), leading to higher levels of sexual well-being (Sanchez et al., 2012). Sexual submission and focus on the partner's pleasure, on the other hand, negatively impact sexual functioning and satisfaction. Extending these findings to sexual partnership, our study's results call for a further and focused evaluation of both short- and long-term implications of sexually assertive behavior. Future studies should explore individual contributions of different aspects of sexual assertiveness. Currently, we can only assume that consciously or non-consciously (Kiefer, Sanchez, Kalinka, & Ybarra, 2006) women adhere to traditional sexual scripts because the potentially negative aspects of sexual assertiveness (e.g., selfishness, aggression, and sexual experience) outweigh its positive contributions to sexual and relational well-being.

Moving in this direction, in an attempt to conceptualize the adherence of traditional scripts within sexual relationships, Sanchez et al. (2012) have proposed a preliminary sexual cognition model of gender-role conformity. They hypothesized that a sex prime leads to the activation of goals to appear desirable for a sexual partner. Goal activation results in a pursuit of approval, mediated by the person's perception of the cultural standard about appropriate sexual conduct and partner's preferences, and finally leads to traditional gender role

conformity. Our study's results match the proposed theoretical framework and show that women whose behavior contradicts traditional sexual scripts are perceived less positively and are considered less romantically and sexually attractive.

Therefore, motivated by a desire to be an attractive partner and to avoid backlash effects, women are likely to enact the traditional sexual script even when it may not match their own sexual desire. As such then, the backlash effect serves to control female sexuality by limiting women's potential for communicating their sexual desires and preferences and achieving pleasurable sexual experiences. A shift away from traditional sexual scripts still seems to be challenging, as the social context framing women's sexuality significantly contributes to the sexual script adherence in women.

Interestingly, gender role conformity was not held for men in the current research. As a consequence, the explanation how traditional sexual scripts are followed presented earlier makes sense for our findings on women but not for our findings on male targets. The fact that men who behave "sexual script conformist" are at risk to experience backlash effects is challenging and points to precarious manhood ideals in the sexual domain. Further research should address the question how men deal with prevailed uncertainty surrounding appropriate sexual script behavior and conflicting masculinity concepts.

Male Reaction to Women's Sexual Script Deviation

Contrary to expectations the description of women's sexual script deviation did not induce state anxiety among male participants (Studies 1a and 1b). This result provides first evidence that backlash effects towards script deviating women cannot be understood as a strategy to deal with provoked state anxiety. Instead, incurred penalties to be more likely cognition driven than defensive motivated (as anxiety buffer). Nevertheless, the present study relied on self-report measurement of the outcome state anxiety and as a consequence may not have been sufficiently sensitive to detect difference between conditions. It is unclear whether

these self-reports accurately reflect feelings of provoked anxiety. Lack of anxiety provoked in men is possibly explained by the circumstance that a real-life scenario might be more anxiety provoking and that reading a vignette is simply not strong enough to elicit an anxiety response. Future research will have to find improved manipulations or more fine-grained measures (e.g., physiological measures) to address this shortcoming.

As the sexually assertive woman was characterized by sexual arousability and orgasm experiences, it is conceivable that these attributed to participant's sexual skills as lover. Accordingly, the male sexual performance script emphasizes that men should be responsible for their own and their partner's sexual satisfaction (Wiederman, 2005). Providing the female sexual counterpart an orgasm can be seen as good indicator and expression of his sexual success and skills (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), and masculinity achievement (Chadwick & van Anders, 2017). It is, therefore, possible that men in awareness of the expectations associated with the traditional male script enact the performance script to buffer induced uncertainty states.

Future Directions and Study's Limitations

The present results add to the existing evidence that sexually assertive people are judged negatively. To date, little is known what motivates the negative view of sexually assertive people. It is possible that they are perceived as particularly susceptible to infidelity and lacking in the capacity for romantic commitment and intimacy. Future studies should examine the underlying motivation of the marginalization of sexually assertive people. Examine the degree to which members of a target group threaten cherished social values (such as monogamy) would be an interesting task for future research.

Several limitations need to be considered. First, aspects of the traditional male sexual script such as being always ready for sex are considered as manifestation of men's self-objectification (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010). To what

extent participants might have felt pressure to behave in a sexually conformist manner in the hypothetical scenario or even fear backlash effects by not doing so was not addressed in the present study. Given that most research on sexual scripts as well as the sexual double standard has been conducted in samples of young adults, a key strength of the present study was that the sample included participants who were on average older. As a consequence, our results contribute to a better understanding of sexual script endorsement and the perception of script deviation in adulthood. On the other side, one has to keep in mind the fact that participants were on average older, and this may have had some effect on the perceptions of casual sex scenarios. Moreover, even though effect sizes of the manipulation checks were large, the effects on the dependent variables were rather small to moderate. The replication of the observed patterns of effect sizes can, however, be seen as indicator of a relatively stable effect.

While different facets of sexual scripts (sex drive, performance, gate keeping, etc.) were presented and included in the vignettes used in the present study, it remains unclear which factors were most important in influencing the participant's reaction (whether a singular script violation, multiple script violation, or some combination of script violations). It cannot be ruled out if sexual assertiveness is the factor that elicits slightly more negative ratings or the thought of the target having many sexual partners. It is recommended that future research should examine these different script features separately in an experiment. The manipulation check, however, showed that sexually assertive targets were indeed perceived as less conformist in the sexual context.

Conclusion

The present study's results indicate that both sexually assertive women and men were perceived more negatively. Our findings make, however, several contributions to the current knowledge on the understanding of social penalties towards gender role nonconformity which

challenge a change in traditional sexual script behaviors particularly for women. Results reflect, even if no evidence for the SDS was detected, a marginalization of women's sexual assertiveness. Acting traditional sexual scripts might protect women, not men, against social penalties and the risk to be perceived as less desirable. Given that a decrease in traditional gender role adherence in the sexual context might have benefits for both genders in terms of possible pleasurable, authentic sexual expressions beside the traditional male dominance-female submissive script (Sanchez et al., 2012), our results are challenging. Society, clinicians and scholars should still be aware of social influences and circumstances surrounding women's sexuality, which might restrict sexual pleasure.

Appendix 1: Vignettes Describing Women's Sexual Behavior

Sexually timid behavior. Please imagine yourself in the following situation. Please try to imagine the situation being as real as possible.

You are single. One night you are sitting alone in a bar. Suddenly, you make eye contact with a woman. You go up to her and start talking to her. After a while you suggest that you both leave the bar. She behaves hesitantly. You arrive at your place and you start kissing her. She doesn't become sexually aroused easily. Overall, she seems to be sexually inexperienced and to have no idea what turns her on so you take control of the encounter. After you have engaged in sexual intercourse she says that for her the sole purpose of sex is to getting attached and forming an emotional connection through sex. She doesn't seem to have casual sex on a regular basis.

Sexually assertive behavior. Please imagine yourself in the following situation. Please try to imagine the situation being as real as possible.

You are single. One night you are sitting alone in a bar. Suddenly, you make eye contact with a woman. The woman comes up to you and starts talking to you. After a while she suggests that both of you leave the bar. She doesn't behave hesitantly. You arrive at her place and she starts kissing you. She becomes sexually aroused easily. Overall, she seems to be sexually experienced and to know what turns her on so she takes control of the encounter. After you have engaged in sexual intercourse she says that for her the sole purpose of sex is to have an orgasm. She seems to have casual sex on a regular basis.

Control sexual behavior. Please imagine yourself in the following situation. Please try to imagine the situation being as real as possible.

You are single. One night you are sitting alone in a bar. Suddenly, you make eye contact with a woman. This evening you engage in sexual intercourse with this woman.

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Footnotes

¹Over 40 years ago, the novelist Erica Jong (1973) wrote: “The zipless fuck is absolutely pure. It is free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not ‘taking’ and the woman is not ‘giving.’ No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone. The zipless fuck is the purest thing there is. And it is rarer than the unicorn. And I have never had one.”

²A casual sex scenario was chosen for two reasons: First, traditional scripts are especially prevalent in initial states of dating. Accordingly, sexual script deviation might provoke anxiety/ emotional reaction rather in a less committed constellation (e.g., casual sex encounter) than in an established relationship. Further, the sexual double standard, as further theoretical construct used in the present study, refers also to the context in which the target behaviors occur (e.g., level of commitment or affection between partners) (Muehlenhard, Sakaluk, & Esterline, 2015)

³The attention check consisted of two items. The first item assessed whether participants were focused (“I was focused while filling out this survey.”). Responses were anchored on an ordinal scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Only those participants who answered six or seven were included in the analyses. The second item indirectly assessed whether participants were focused: “People vary in the amount they pay attention to these kinds of surveys. Some take them seriously and read each question, whereas others go very quickly and barely read the questions at all. If you have read this question carefully, please write the word yes in the blank box below labeled other. There is no need for you to respond to the scale below.” Participants were again presented with an ordinal scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* and with a blank text box labeled “Other.” Only those participants who wrote “Yes” into the text box were included in the analyses.

⁴Although in order to explore the possible effect of uncertainty on the evaluation of women's sexual (non)-assertiveness we tried to experimentally induce uncertainty by adapting van den Bos' (2001) procedure to the sexual domain, the manipulation was not successful. Therefore, we focused on the sexual script vignettes' main effects.

⁵ When including age, ethnicity, and marital status into the UNIANOVAs with the respective significant dependent variables (i.e., exclusive state anxiety), the experimental condition remained as significant predictor ($ps \leq .01$). Except for ethnicity, the control variables themselves did not significantly predict the dependent variables within these UNIANOVAs (with regard to age: $ps \geq .230$, with regard to relationship status: $ps \geq .088$). Ethnicity, in contrast, predicted friendship intention ($p = .025$), regarding the other dependent variables: $ps \geq .064$.

⁶ When including age, ethnicity, and marital status into the UNIANOVAs with the respective significant dependent variables (i.e., exclusive the friendship item), the experimental condition remained as significant predictor ($ps \leq .01$). In contrast to age and ethnicity, relationship status did not significantly predict the dependent variables within these UNIANOVAs ($ps \geq .090$). However, age predicted the positive target perception item ($p = .018$) and ethnicity predicted state anxiety ($p = .003$), regarding the other dependent variables: $ps \geq .118$.

⁷ When including age, ethnicity, and marital status into the UNIANOVAs with the respective significant dependent variables (i.e., exclusive the sexual intention item), the experimental condition remained as significant predictor ($ps \leq .05$). In contrast to relationship status, age and ethnicity did not significantly predict the dependent variables within these UNIANOVAs ($ps \geq .113$). However, relationship status predicted the romantic interest evaluation item ($p = .015$), regarding the other dependent variables: $ps \geq .498$.