

Heterosexual Men's Sexual Desire: Supported by, or Deviating from, Traditional Masculinity Norms and Sexual Scripts?

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Abstract Sexual script theory and masculinity theory suggest that men should demonstrate high levels of desire in order to abide by social norms and expectations. The current study explored the degree to which men's descriptions of their sexual desire supported or deviated from these theories' propositions. Thirty men between the ages of 30 and 65 ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.83$) in heterosexual long-term relationships ($M_{\text{duration}} = 13$ years, 4 months, range = 2 years, 11 months – 39 years, 4 months) were interviewed about their experience of sexual desire. Grounded theory methodology from an interpretivist perspective was used to analyze the data. The majority of participants described having high and constant levels of sexual desire and just over half reported never turning down an opportunity to engage in a sexual encounter. However, most men also indicated that their sexual desire was sometimes feigned in order to appear more masculine or to prevent upsetting their female partner. It is suggested that researchers, therapists, and sex educators be mindful that men face pressures to exhibit sexual desire in stereotypically masculine ways and that outward demonstrations of sexual interest may not always be accurate representations of men's true experiences.

Keywords Sexual desire · Men · Sexual scripts · Masculinity · Sexology · Psychology of men

Sexual script theorists suggest that sexual behaviour is a result of social constructions about appropriate sexual behaviours for men and women across the lifespan (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003). *Scripts* are shared beliefs about sexual behaviour that are experienced at a cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic (or intrapersonal) level (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003). Culturally, they are comprised of a collective of established norms about appropriate sexual behaviour and expressions of one's sexuality. These norms are found to change, at least to a degree, over the course of time (Masters et al. 2012; Milhausen and Herold 1999). At the interpersonal level, these norms are learned and reinforced through social interactions. At the intrapsychic level, knowledge of socially, sexually appropriate behaviour is experienced at the individual level and contributes to a person's understanding of their sexual identity (McCormick 2010). Through their adolescent and adult lives, men are positively reinforced for seeking out multiple female partners, expressing high desire, and initiating sexual activity. Thus, sexual script theory posits that men are ultimately groomed by social norms to experience and express higher levels of sexual desire. Sexual scripts for men, at least in the Western world, dictate that heterosexual men should always be the initiators of sexual activity, are the ones to desire sex (not to be desirable), want to push to the next level of physical intimacy, and are required to be highly sexually skilled in order to impress their female partner (Wiederman 2005).

Masculinity theory is another social constructionist perspective that acknowledges a collective social ruling regarding how men should act and behave, specifically regarding their sexuality (Masters et al. 2012). With regard to sexual desire, masculinity theory posits that low sexual desire is considered

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a feminine characteristic so that men should avoid demonstrating anything other than a high level of interest in sexual activity (Masters et al. 2012). Men are encouraged to follow society's normative discourse of men's sexuality, which suggests men should always be ready for, and interested in, sexual activity (Courtenay 2000). A traditional masculine approach to sexuality also prescribes sexual activity with multiple sexual partners whereas sexual inexperience or failure to actively pursue courtship with women is stigmatized (Kimmel 2005; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003). Failing to initiate sexual activity or show a strong interest in women can call into question a heterosexual man's masculinity and sexual orientation (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003; Wiederman 2005).

Research on men's sexual desire generally supports the previous theories' propositions that men's desire is high (or at least higher than women's sexual desire; Levine 2002, 2003). For example, in a meta-analysis of men's and women's sexual desire, Baumeister et al. (2001) found that men reported more sexual fantasies, more frequent engagement in masturbation, and more sexual initiation than did women. Researchers have also reported that although women's sexual desire appears to decrease over the course of an intimate relationship, men report the same level of sexual desire regardless of their relationship duration, at least among college-aged samples (Klusmann 2002; Murray and Milhausen 2012a). In one cross-sectional study of university students (18–25 years-old) who were in relationships ranging from 1 month to 10 years, men reported high desire regardless of their relationship length, whereas women reported lower levels of sexual desire the longer the length of their relationship (Murray and Milhausen 2012a).

Some research focusing on men's endorsement of traditional sexual scripts also supports the aforementioned theories. For example, in a qualitative study of a culturally diverse group of young (18–25 years-old) heterosexual men's (and women's) endorsement of sexual scripts, Masters et al. (2012) found that the majority of men endorsed sexual scripts that were in line with traditional masculine roles. Specifically, of the 26 men interviewed, they determined that 16 (61.5%) men described experiences that conformed to characteristics of traditional gender roles (Masters et al. 2012). The endorsement of traditional male gender roles included the following characteristics: desiring sex without being desired, having high sexual desire, initiating sexual activity, feeling pressure to be sexually skilled, preferring recreational sex, valuing sex over relationships, seeking multiple partners, and wanting no-strings attached sex (Masters et al. 2012). It is noteworthy that 10 (38.5%) of the men in their study did not actively endorse traditional male sexual scripts. However, the researchers indicated that those men departing from the norm displayed some unease and uncertainty about not meeting cultural expectations, demonstrating the prevalence and power of sexual scripts at the cultural level (Masters et al. 2012).

It may be that outward, observable actions (i.e., frequency of engaging in sexual activity, initiating sex) are not always representative of men's internal experiences. In one qualitative study of 63 young adults, researchers interviewed men and women about instances of sexual compliance (i.e., the act of willingly engaging in sexual activity without desire) in the context of committed heterosexual relationships (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010). Over a 3-week period, almost half (46%) of participants reported at least one experience of sexual compliance with 17.2% of all sexual activity rated as sexually compliant. Although there was no gender difference in the frequency of reported sexual compliance, men (but not women) also reported initiating sexual activity even when they themselves were not feeling desire (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010). Men indicated that they engaged in sexual compliance because they did not want to hurt their female partner's feelings. Some men reported doing so in the hopes that their partner might be more likely to reciprocate the gesture at a later point in time (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010). These findings suggest that men do not always experience sexual desire when engaging in sexual activity and, thus, that men's sexual desire may not always be high (or higher than their female partner's), at least in the context of a romantic relationship.

Although sexual scripts stipulate the ways in which men and women should interact during a sexual encounter, not all men and women abide by these scripts. Dworkin and O'Sullivan (2005) interviewed men about their engagement in, and preference for, various patterns of sexual initiation. In common with much of the research on men's sexual desire, participants were a college-aged sample. The findings from their study suggested that whereas male-dominated sexual initiation is the most common pattern of initiation, the majority of the men reporting this script (72.2%) indicated a preference for more egalitarian pattern (i.e., equal amounts of initiation between the male and female partner). Men who wanted a more egalitarian pattern of sexual initiation indicated that they found initiating regularly was too demanding, and they rejected the idea of a dichotomous male/female script. Further, some men reported that they wanted to be seen as an object of desire, in contrast to previous findings which have found men prefer to see their partner as an object of desire (Masters et al. 2012). It appears that creating space for a dialogue that diverts from traditional norms allows for a different picture of men's sexual desire experiences to emerge.

Although much of the research on men's sexual desire has found that men have higher levels of sexual desire than do women on average, research at the dyadic level in heterosexual couples appears to tell a different story (Davies et al. 1999; Mark and Murray 2012). Desire discrepancy describes the relative differences in desire for sexual activity between partners (Zilbergeld and Ellison 1980). Based on the theoretical assumptions previously discussed, it could be presumed that, in a heterosexual relationship, men would have higher levels

of desire than their female counterparts do. In contrast, in one study of 72 undergraduate, heterosexual couples in relationship lengths of 26.9 months on average, men and women were *equally* likely to be the individual in the relationship with lower levels of desire (Davies et al. 1999). Specifically, although roughly half (48.6%) of the couples reported experiencing no desire discrepancy, when desire discrepancy was present, it was almost evenly split between women (23.6%) and men (27.8%) having lower desire (Davies et al. 1999). Similarly, in a more recent study of desire discrepancy in a similar sample (133 heterosexual, college-aged couples in relationship lengths of 4.32 years on average), it was also found that men were no more likely to have the higher level of sexual desire than their female partner did (Mark and Murray 2012).

The limited research on men's sexual desire has almost entirely focused on university-aged men or men in later life seeking treatment for sexual problems (Brotto 2010). In fact, a majority of the studies I described focused on men between the ages of 18–25 who were university students (Davies et al. 1999; Dworkin and O'Sullivan 2005; Klusmann 2002; Mark and Murray 2012; Masters et al. 2012; Murray and Milhausen 2012a; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010), making it difficult to determine whether these findings would also be applicable to middle-aged men. Thus, an exploration of men's experiences outside a college-aged sample is needed. The current study was part of a larger study conducted with the purpose of better understanding the ways middle-aged men in committed, long-term heterosexual relationships experience and understand their sexual desire (Murray et al. 2016). The current study was guided by the following question: "To what degree do men's descriptions of sexual desire support, or deviate from, traditional masculinity norms and sexual scripts?"

Method

Participants' Inclusion Criteria

Men between the ages of 30 and 65 who were in heterosexual long-term relationships of at least 2.5 years duration were eligible to participate. Age 30 represents a widely understood and accepted transition into adulthood (Arnett 2000; Lowe et al. 2013), and the cutoff of 65 years of age has been used in previous studies of men's sexual desire (Helgason et al. 1996; Traeen et al. 2007) in which men over the age of 65 were considered elderly. My criterion related to relationship duration (relationships longer than 2.5 years) was chosen because research suggests that passionate love, associated with high levels of sexual desire, gives way to companionate love around this time (Hatfield and Walster 1978).

Men in my study were required to be in heterosexual relationships. Although gay men and heterosexual men may be

more similar than different in their experiences of sexual desire (Holmberg and Blair 2009), there are additional social challenges which impact the ways gay men interpret and express their desire, including stigmatization and negative stereotypes (Pope et al. 2007). Thus, although gay and bisexual men's experiences and understandings of their sexual desire is of equal importance to that of heterosexual men, past research suggests that the separate exploration of sexual desire in gay, bisexual, and straight men may be of value.

Participants were recruited from two Prairie cities in Canada: Saskatoon, Saskatchewan ($n = 14$) and Winnipeg, Manitoba ($n = 16$). The primary form of recruitment was electronic based through the website Kijiji (2017), a free, local online classified advertisement service. In addition, posters and flyers were placed in the downtown core of both cities. Each form of recruitment included the heading: "Men Needed for Sexuality and Relationship Study" followed by the sub-heading: "How do men in long-term relationships experience sexual desire? Participate in a one-hour interview and contribute to exciting new research in human sexuality!"

Participants

Participants' ages spanned the full range of the study criteria, from 30 to 65 years old, with an average age of 42.83 years old ($SD = 10.65$). The length of these 30 men's relationships ranged from 2 years, 11 months to 39 years, 4 months ($M = 13$ years, 4 months, $SD = 10$ years, 0 months). Regarding relationship status, 25 men (83.3%) reported being married, 3 (10.0%) being in common-law relationships and 2 (6.7%) seriously dating their current partner only. The majority of men in my study reported having children: 23 (76.7%) men reported having one or more children, 6 (20.0%) no children, and 1 (3.3%) participant's female partner was pregnant at the time of the study.

There was little variation in the reported ethnicity of men. The majority of men were Caucasian ($n = 25$; 83.3%), whereas 3 (10.0%) men identified as Aboriginal or Metis, and 2 (6.7%) men identified as Asian. There was a range of educational backgrounds among the study sample. Regarding the highest level of education obtained, 4 (13.3%) men reported having a high school diploma, 4 (13.3%) men had some college education, 8 (26.7%) men had a college diploma, 1 (3.3%) participant had some undergraduate education, 7 (23.3%) men had an undergraduate degree, 1 (3.3%) participant had some graduate education, and 5 (16.7%) men had a graduate degree.

Procedures and Measures

Participants arrived at pre-arranged study rooms in public libraries. They were greeted by the primary researcher and were asked to read and sign a study consent form that described the

study as involving the completion of a brief demographics questionnaire and a one-hour interview about how the participant experienced sexual desire. Participants' real names were removed during the transcribing process, and interviewer-assigned pseudonyms are used when presenting the results. Once consent was obtained, the men completed a brief demographics questionnaire and then were interviewed using semi-structured questions. The demographics questionnaire consisted of questions that asked about participants' age, sex, sexual orientation, relationship status and duration, education level, perception of physical health, degree of religiosity and/or spirituality, and body image.

All interviews were conducted by the lead author of the current study. As a cis-gender female in my early thirties, I do not share a predominant demographic of the participants in this study who all identified as male. I also have a research background in women's sexual desire (Murray and Milhausen 2012b; Murray et al. 2012, 2014), and I work as a couple and relationship therapist. My gender identification and professional background provide a particular lens and approach that impacted how I conducted the research interviews. Notably, research has shown that men do in fact respond well to being interviewed by a woman (Bancroft 1997) and, when I asked about their experience being interviewed by a woman, most men in the current study reported that this dynamic made them feel more comfortable about the interview process. However, the mixed-sex interview may have brought about different conversations than would have arisen with a matched-sex interviewee and interviewer (Daly 2007).

To facilitate rapport between the interviewer and participant (Charmaz 2006; Fontana and Frey 1994), the interview began with some questions regarding the men's demographic background and romantic relationship before addressing the questions addressing sexual desire. Following questions asked more directly about awareness of masculine norms and sexual scripts. Over the course of the interviews some of the questions were revisited and adjusted to ensure the topics of interest were being adequately addressed. The author met with a larger research team five times throughout the interviews. At each of the consultations, we discussed and questioned the emerging categories developed by the primary researcher. When questions about the emerging categories could not be answered using the current data, we determined additional questions that could ask more directly about those gaps in our understandings of men's experiences.

For example, we determined that although the majority of men described never saying "no" to sex, we were unsure about what assumptions and beliefs might be behind men's experience of "pressure." The later interviews included questions about men's perceptions of what their female partner might feel, or how they might react, if they said

no to their sexual advances. The complete interview guide (available as an [online supplement](#)) included questions such: "Is it okay for men to not have desire?," "Can you tell me about a time when you did not have sexual desire when you thought maybe you should?," and "What do you think about other men's sexual desire? What do you think impacts other men's sexual desire?" Because the interviews were semi-structured, many of the follow-up questions were determined at the time of the interview, such as asking participants to expand on an idea, asking for clarification, or following up on relevant comments. The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour (54 min on average). The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Following the interview, participants were debriefed, asked their thoughts about the study questions, and received a \$10 gift card.

Data Analysis

The question guiding the current study was: "To what degree do men's descriptions of sexual desire support, or deviate from, traditional masculinity norms and sexual scripts?" This question was explored in two ways. First, at various points throughout the interviews, men described their experiences of desire in ways that indirectly addressed theoretical propositions about men's sexuality. Second, men were directly asked about their awareness of any social/masculine scripts regarding men's sexual desire and whether or not they abided by these "rules."

Data collected in my study were analyzed using grounded theory methodology (GTM) from the interpretivist perspective. Interpretivist theory emphasizes the value in understanding a phenomenon and gives priority to showing patterns and connections, rather than prediction and linear reasoning (Charmaz 2006). Analysis for GTM includes the simultaneous collection of data and the data analysis (Charmaz 2006; Daly 2007). Because the first interviews were conducted and transcribed, the data analysis process commenced. The prominent component of GTM is coding: describing or defining what is happening in the data. Coding data occurred through four distinct phases: open-coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2006; LaRossa 2005). During open coding, words and phrases were selected to describe the data (Daly 2007). The use of code names at this stage attempted to portray meaning and actions in the participants' stories and to stick closely to the data and not yet focus on interpretation (Charmaz 2006). For example, at this stage I noted when a participant was describing his desire as high or strong, or was describing a situation in which he initiated sexual activity.

Focused coding is more directive, selective, and conceptual (Charmaz 2006). At this stage, I determined which codes created during the open-coding process were the most

significant, meaningful, and made the most analytic sense to categorize data. Some codes were considered significant in terms of addressing the current study questions, whereas other codes did not have enough substance to hold up as a separate category or were determined to fall outside the scope of the current study or (e.g., men's descriptions of women's sexual desire). Axial coding followed focused coding and consisted of intense analysis done around one category at a time (Charmaz 2006). To begin the process of arriving at an interpretivist theoretical explanation, axial coding required making connections between categories and within a category (Daly 2007). At this stage, some similar ideas were absorbed by larger themes. For example, previously coded categories of "pressure to initiate" and "pressure to say yes to sex" were combined to create a larger theme of "social pressures to appear to have high desire."

During the last stage of coding, theoretical coding, the categories were condensed to arrive at the main story underlying the analysis (Charmaz 2002). This stage of coding requires identifying the core or central category that exists within all the categories (Daly 2007). The core category acts as an explanation for the data and can generate a central explanation that relates to all other categories in some way. As will be outlined below in the results and discussion, the core, underlying story of the current study was the finding that men face pressures to demonstrate a high interest in sex that is not always in line with their actual interests.

Results

The question guiding the current study was: "To what degree do men's descriptions of sexual desire support, or deviate from, traditional masculinity norms and sexual scripts?" The majority of men in my study reported experiencing sexual desire that was, in some ways, in keeping with sexual scripts related to men's sexual desire being high and unwavering. However, most men described an awareness of social pressures to portray or feign a high interest in sexual activity, as well as the damaging impact of societal expectations regarding male sexuality and a wish to deviate from traditional sexual scripts. Table 1 provides additional information about each participant quoted here, and Table 2 lists the two themes and their sub-themes, as well as their definitions and prototypical examples that emerged from my analysis.

Support for Masculine Norms

There were a variety of ways that men described their experience of sexual desire that supported theoretical stereotypes about men having consistently high levels of sexual desire. Specifically, the vast majority of men reported experiencing high and constant levels of sexual desire and a slight majority

of men described never saying no to a sexual opportunity with a woman.

High and Constant Levels of Sexual Desire

When describing their sexual desire, a large majority of the 30 men in my study ($n = 23$; 77%) indicated they experienced desire in a high and constant capacity. It was not uncommon for these men to describe their desire as "strong" or discuss their high interest in sexual activity repeatedly during the interview. For example, one participant simply stated: "I'm probably of a fairly high level of desire. I love being intimate" (Tony, age 52). Another participant said that he often found himself thinking about sex, even when there were no opportunities to engage in sexual activity. He said: "I think about [sex] multiple times a day. Even days when you're not having sex at all I'm still constantly thinking about it" (Brian, age 40). One participant in his early-sixties indicated that his desire had started strong as a teenager and was still as steady and constant now as it was in the earlier years of his life. He said: "I think for me it's been very consistent all the way through. I've always had a very strong drive" (Larry, age 63).

When talking about their strong sexual desire, participants often described that they believed their experience fit into the "normal" male experience. When asked about his sexual desire, one participant in his early thirties discussed men's sexual desire generally, and indicated that he felt similarly to "most guys." He said: "My level of desire, in my opinion, has always been, it's pretty high. I have a pretty high sex drive I think. But I think most guys do" (Ryan, age 34). Another participant suggested that all men experience fairly high levels of desire: "For me, male sexual desire is a strong desire that is pretty much constant" (Hudson, age 30). Three participants described their high desire in biological, evolutionary terms. For example, the following participant indicated that he felt all men had evolved to experience a higher level of sexual desire in order to pass on their genes. He said:

I'm pretty much ready all the time. So maybe men, maybe we do have this biological system and maybe out in the wild we're like animals and stuff. Males will have multiple partners to provide for babies or whatever. So it could be a long, evolved system, a long system that we have to be ready when it's time. (Michael, age 33)

Never say No to Sexual Activity

During the interviews, men were asked whether it would be acceptable to say no to sexual activity or if they could remember a time where they had said no to sex with a woman.

Table 1 Participants' demographics by Pseudonym

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship duration	Relationship status	Child ^a <i>n</i>	Ethnicity	Highest education level
Brian	40	12 yrs., 1 mo	Married	1	Caucasian	Graduate
Carl	31	9 yrs., 10 mo	Married	2	Caucasian	High School
Cody	65	13 yrs., 4 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Some Graduate
Craig	33	4 yrs., 11 mo	Common-law	0	Caucasian	Undergrad
Daniel	38	14 yrs., 0 mo	Married	2	Aboriginal	College Diploma
Hudson	30	9 yrs., 0 mo	Married	1	Caucasian	Graduate
Jack	54	16 yrs., 10 mo	Married	0	Aboriginal	College Diploma
James	37	9 yrs., 0 mo	Common-law	0	Caucasian	College Diploma
Jeffrey	43	20 yrs., 0 mo	Married	2	Caucasian	Undergrad
John	52	15 yrs., 8 mo	Common-law	2	Caucasian	College Diploma
Joseph	37	8 yrs., 4 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Undergrad
Joshua	33	5 yrs., 6 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Undergrad
Justin	30	6 yrs., 11 mo	Married	2	Caucasian	Graduate
Kyle	38	5 yrs., 2 mo	Married	0	Asian	Undergrad
Larry	63	39 yrs., 4 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Graduate
Mark	51	30 yrs., 8 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Some College
Michael	33	2 yrs., 11 mo	Dating	0	Caucasian	Some Undergrad
Owen	59	36 yrs., 0 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Undergrad
Richard	51	31 yrs., 2 mo	Married	3	Caucasian	College Diploma
Robert	40	11 yrs., 9 mo	Married	2	Caucasian	Undergrad
Ryan	34	9 yrs., 0 mo	Married	2	Caucasian	College Diploma
Scott	42	10 yrs., 6 mo	Married	1	Caucasian	High School
Steven	47	8 yrs., 9 mo	Married	1	Caucasian	College Diploma
Tim	32	5 yrs., 6 mo	Married	1	Caucasian	Some College
Thomas	55	19 yrs., 0 mo	Married	1	Caucasian	High School
Tony	52	3 yrs., 0 mo	Dating	0	Caucasian	Some College
Tyson	33	4 yrs., 6 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	Some College
Warren	59	7 yrs., 4 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	High School
William	46	27 yrs., 2 mo	Married	0	Caucasian	College Diploma
Vihaan	33	3 yrs., 11 mo	Married	0	Asian	Graduate

^a Dependent children

Slightly over half of the male participants ($n = 16$, 53%) struggled to answer this question, often because they indicated they could not recall a time they said no to sex. One participant responded to this question by simply stating that if sex was available, he would say yes: “If it’s there, you’ll probably take it” (Mark, age 51). Another made a comparison between himself and his wife. He said that whereas she will turn down sex, he would very rarely do so: “She is 99% of the time saying no. I very rarely say no” (Scott, age 42). A third male participant expanded, indicating that he felt it was not in men’s “nature” to turn down a sexual opportunity. He said:

I think it’s how guys are built. Their metabolism or whatever... Guys will not say no as often as the ladies will... More of a guy thing, no matter what we’ll say yes... A guy will more like, in general again, will not

say no. It’s not in their habit, their nature. Again that red-blooded Canadian boy just wouldn’t... would more likely not say no. (Thomas, age 55)

Social Pressures to Appear to Have High Desire

Although many men talked about their desire in ways that fit with theoretical stereotypes about men’s desire, it was highly common for men to talk about pressures to *appear* to have high interest in sexual activity at all times. In fact, there was some overlap between men who described their desire as high, and then later talked about social pressures to display a high interest in sex. Most men acknowledged social pressures regarding men’s sexuality and described being affected by these cultural sexual scripts to some

Table 2 Definitions and examples of themes

Sub-themes	Definition	Example quotes	Frequency <i>n</i> (%)
Theme 1: Support for masculine norms			
High and constant levels of sexual desire	An episode in which men explicitly state, or implicitly suggest, that their sexual desire is very strong and/or stronger than their female partner's sexual desire.	"I've never met a woman who wanted to have sex more often. I think usually it's been the reverse probably." (John)	23 (77%)
Never say no to sexual activity	Men's descriptions of never turning down a sexual advance from their female partner.	"You wouldn't hear a guy say I have a headache... More of a guy thing. No matter what we'll say yes." (Thomas)	16 (53%)
Theme 2: Social pressure to appear to have high desire			
Awareness of social pressures	An episode in which men discuss their awareness of pressures that exist in society to behave "manly."	"Men think that they're supposed to be making comments to a girl when they pass by, so they do. And I get the impression that a lot of that is forced." (Brian)	26 (87%)
Pressure to say yes to sexual opportunities	An episode in which men indicate they may have otherwise wanted to say no to sex but felt it would not bring about a favourable response from their female partner.	"I think because she knows that my desire level is a lot higher than hers, typically, that she would be upset. She would think something is wrong... she would think something weird was going on if I said no I don't want to." (Hudson)	12 (40%)
Pressure to initiate sexual activity	An episode in which men describe initiating sexual activity for reasons other than their own spontaneous sexual interest.	"I feel a little bit like the onus is on me to initiate. Even if my partner lets me know when she's feeling sexual or horny. She'll be like 'I'm burning to do this.' And I'll be like 'Cool.' But I feel like that's where it ends." (Tim)	9 (30%)

degree. Specifically, men talked about their awareness of social pressures, feeling pressure to say yes to sexual opportunities, and pressure to initiate sexual activity.

Awareness of Social Pressures

Nearly all men in my study ($n = 26, 87\%$) described various social pressures they felt as men, and they described how cultural sexual scripts and expectations affected their display of sexual desire. For example, one participant indicated his awareness of the media, specifically music videos, and the impact these images can have on some young men:

Look at the TV shows and the music videos, YouTube and stuff. Guys are supposed to be surrounded by women. Women aren't supposed to have their clothes on around them. Even that message speaks to... all guys want is naked women all around them all the time, right? (Tim, age 32)

Another participant talked about being influenced by hearing other men talk about sexual conquests and experiences. Mark described comparing himself and his sexual experiences to sexual stories described by his peers. If he felt his experiences were less frequent or exciting than what his peers were

experiencing, he said he might be more likely to initiate sex with his wife at home that night. He said:

Guys can listen to what's going on at work, listen to their buddies claim what they did last night and everything else, and their thoughts are like...I should be doing that too...group mentality I guess. It seems to be the norm. And if you don't have that norm you try to get to that norm. And like I said...it's like he's getting some so I better be getting some too. (Mark, age 51)

However, participants suggested that men's high and incessant interest in sex was a cultural stereotype and men were not as simple as the media or other social norms might suggest. One man said: "The whole thing that men think about [sex] every seven and a half seconds is crap. I mean, we'd literally get nothing done. It's just insane. Like we wouldn't be able to cook anything proper. We'd depend on the microwave" (Joseph, age 37). Robert similarly suggested that stereotypes about men's sexuality are incorrect and damaging. He stated that men are being "shortchanged" by society to appear or assumed to be much simpler than they really were. He said:

I think it's more about the stereotype than it is about the norm. Because I think there is much that is not understood about men's internal life. And I think in large part

men are being shortchanged as being very simple creatures. And so I would use the word stereotypically as opposed to the norm because I don't think norm, like anything I think men exist on a spectrum. So you can have hypermasculine men that need sex all the time and you can have much less masculine men who don't need it as much, or aren't defined by it. And there is going to be everything else in the middle. (Robert, age 40)

Carl described knowing other men whom he felt were influenced by these expectations, even though he felt he did not abide by the cultural sexual scripts himself. He said:

I think it's just the whole masculinity thing. It's guys not wanting to seem, almost, they think if they don't want it all the time they're somehow inferior or they're not going to look like a masculine male in front of their buddies or potentially in front of women as well. They want to show that they're like a young stallion or whatever. (Carl, age 31)

Another participant acknowledged that he was frustrated by narrow cultural stereotypes about men's sexuality; something he was aware of but not something he abided by. He said:

I do feel a societal pressure that I, as a man, if I'm being a "real man," should always want any sex that is available. And I should only say no to sex for two reasons. One is that I'm being honorable and the assumption is I actually want the sex but I'm choosing not to because it would be cheating. The other type is, you're allowed to say no to sex if the person who is conventionally much less desirable than you. Which is another one I have trouble with because I am in a relationship with a severely physically disabled person. (Joshua, age 33)

The awareness of masculine norms and stereotypes were also described as damaging and limiting by the following participant:

There is a strong stereotype on men that they should want every time and maybe be able to perform three times in one night and stuff like that. And I think this is stupid and makes them really suffer. Act unnaturally. But they do not realize it, they would never confess, admit it. They say no this is what I want. It's stupid. (Kyle, age 38)

Pressure to Say Yes to Sexual Opportunities

A large minority of men in my study ($n = 12$, 40%) spoke about social pressures and pressures within their relationship to say yes to sex. Thus, being open to sexual encounters was

sometimes a result of it being unacceptable to say no, rather than because of a high interest in sex. One participant described a cultural expectation that men be constantly interested in sexual activity: "The culturally expected norm is that [men] always want it and they're always ready for it" (Hudson, age 30). Another participant noted that because men were perceived to want sex all the time, if they ever said no to sex it could look suspicious. He said: "They tell us men that we think about sex all the time, so when we have somebody instigating it from the outside, now is the time to take advantage. It's allegedly what's more foremost in your mind" (Warren, age 59). A third participant also perceived that it would be problematic for him to say no to sexual activity because men normally initiate. He believed saying no could lead to his wife questioning his masculinity: "Because we're always complaining that we're not getting enough sex; if they initiate it, and then all of the sudden we're saying no to them? Then it's like what's your problem? You're not a real man, type of thing" (Scott, age 42).

In other words, these men described feeling that traditional norms around men's sexual desire were present and influential at an interpersonal, or relational, level. Out of desire to appear manly or "normal" to his female partner, another participant talked about feigning an interest in sex, or having sex without desire, in order to keep up appearances. He described:

It's keeping up appearances for my wife at least. Because to some extent I think she buys into the stereotype that men are more sexually active or have more sexual desire. So if I'm not doing that, I think she feels sexually inadequate? So sometimes I'll feign sexual desire even if I'm not into it just so she feels good about herself. (Justin, age 30)

Scott spoke further about worrying that if he said no to sex, this would offend his wife on some level. Because he wanted to make her happy, or at least to avoid causing any strain in the relationship, he described saying yes to sexual activity to avoid any negative consequences:

My wife has very low self-esteem. She is very self-conscious about her body. She's a little overweight. I don't care. So if I was to say no to her, it's happened before, so I know what happens. She thinks that she's not desirable, she's not attractive or whatever. So it's one of those things where I have to think of her feelings. If I'm going to say no, what's going to happen to her, like, what her feeling is going to be like afterward. (Scott, age 42)

Finally, Michael described saying yes to sex as a more strategic way to avoid losing out on a future sexual opportunity. Saying no to a sexual advance at one point in time was described as being potentially costly because he could

envision a future time when he might want to have sex and his partner might not. He said:

It's not necessarily that we want to have sex all the time, but if it's offered to us we'll take it. I do think most men aren't thinking about it all the time, but it's offered the desire, it's, they are always ready to go and it might be a cultural thing or, I don't know, maybe we just don't want to miss an opportunity. (Michael, age 33)

Another man similarly discussed a time when he had said no to sex and regretted it later. He said: "I regretted it after... because then I think she'll say well you said no so it's okay if I say no, it always seems like you have to work for it" (Steven, age 41).

One man described that despite knowing and critically thinking about the masculine norms, he still found himself thinking about them when having sex with this wife:

Even in my own relationship when I say no to sex, and I do, it's not always her, there is a part of me that feels guilt. Like, you know, if she wants to have sex and I don't and I say no I feel guilty. Even though she doesn't expect me to and she tries to stop me from feeling that way, I feel it anyway...that comes from a big social construct that says I should want to have sex with anyone that wants to have sex with me. (Joshua, age 33)

Pressure to Initiate Sexual Activity

Although approximately three quarters of men in this study explicitly described themselves as being the one in their relationship to initiate sexual activity, which, on the surface, suggested that they were interested in sex, just under one third of men ($n = 9$, 30%) reported feeling pressured to initiate sex for their partner's sake. These descriptions again highlighted the impact of interpersonal level sexual scripts that were impacting men's expressions of their sexual desire. Specifically, one participant said that if he did not initiate sex with his wife each night she would think something was wrong because it went against the norm. After describing that he would initiate sex with his wife every night, even if he wasn't in the mood, he explained:

She'd notice if I wasn't doing it that way. I almost have to do it to kind of keep up appearances to some extent. She would think something was wrong if I wasn't desiring her...that I wasn't acting like myself or I was upset with her. (Justin, age 30)

The same participant went on to say that he wished this was not always the case and that he could go to bed without initiating activity. He stated: "For once I would like to not have to

show interest" (Justin, age 30). Another participant similarly stated that even when his female partner was the one who wanted to have sex, or suggested it in some subtle way, he was still expected to initiate. He described that this was confusing because he could not always pick up on her signals:

Even when she wants sex she'll still expect me to initiate....I'll get home and give her a kiss and she'd say "why didn't we have sex in the morning? We can't have it now" and I'm like "well why didn't you roll over and...if you really wanted sex why didn't you let me know?" (Ryan, age 34)

These men indicated that they wished the pressure they experienced to initiate sex could be alleviated. In this sense, some men did say they might initiate sexual activity even when they were not feeling desire, perhaps giving the impression their desire was higher than it was experienced.

Discussion

Sexual script theory and masculinity theory posit that rather than having an inherently high level of sexual desire, men are encouraged by society to express a high interest in sexuality in order to abide by social scripts and expectations (Courtenay 2000; Frith and Kitzinger 2001; Kimmel 2005; Masters et al. 2012; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003; Wiederman 2005). A majority of participants described having high and constant levels of sexual desire, and over half reported never turning down an opportunity to engage in a sexual encounter. However, most men also indicated that their sexual desire was sometimes feigned in order to appear more masculine or reduce the chance of upsetting their female partner. In that sense, some men admitted that their sexual desire was not always high and constant, but rather sometimes appeared that way as a result of a perceived social pressure to demonstrate certain actions and behaviours that were consistent with traditional sexual scripts and norms. Many men were critical of these scripts and norms, indicating they wished they did not have to "play by the rules." Other participants reported an awareness of male sexual norms but did not describe their own experiences as being affected by social scripts or pressures.

Sexual script theory suggests that men should experience and express a high level of interest in sexual activity to abide by social norms and expectations regarding sexual interactions, particularly through initiating sexual activity with female partners (Frith and Kitzinger 2001; Masters et al. 2012; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003). Sexual scripts are theorized to exist at intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural levels (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003). Men in my study explicitly described their awareness of sexual scripts regarding men's expressions of sexual desire at cultural and interpersonal

levels. In fact, men appeared to be most impacted by how they believed their female partner would respond if they turned down her sexual advances or did not show an interest in having sex through the regular initiation of sexual activity. As a result, some men described initiating sexual activity out of pressure or obligation, rather than because of their own need or interest. The presence of sexual scripts at the intrapsychic level was not described explicitly, however it may have been present implicitly. Specifically, many men initially described their sexual desire as high, followed by more nuanced descriptions of times they felt little or no desire, or pressures to feign desire. This pattern suggests that men could have internalized messages about what men *should* experience with regard to their level of interest in sexuality. Future research that explores sexual scripting with regards to men's experience of sexual desire is encouraged.

Previous research suggests that many men conform to characteristics of traditional sexually related gender roles (Masters et al. 2012). Most men in the current study similarly acknowledged that they sometimes demonstrated an interest in having sex (through initiation or not saying no to sexual advances from their partner based on fear of appearing “unmanly”). Although sexual scripts appear to have wide social acceptance, findings from a qualitative study of emerging adults between the ages of 18–25 also found that some men expressed a desire to deviate from sexual script norms (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010). The current study, which included men between the ages of 30 and 65 years-old, not only supports Vannier and O'Sullivan's (2010) findings, but also expands on them by suggesting that the desire to deviate from social scripts among emerging adult male participants is also present among an older sample of men.

Masculinity theory posits that men should avoid demonstrating anything other than a high level of interest in sexual activity (Masters et al. 2012) because failing to initiate sexual activity or show a strong interest in women calls into question a heterosexual man's masculinity and sexual orientation (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003; Wiederman 2005). True to this proposition, most men in my study described being aware of masculinity norms, suggesting they should always be interested in having sex and initiate sexual activity. Men discussed expectations around men's sexuality as damaging and something that limited their true expression of sexual desire. In the context of long-term heterosexual relationships, men did not express a worry that they would appear gay, but rather that they might appear less “manly” in their female partner's eyes. However, the findings from the current study indicate that although the *desire* to deviate from traditional masculine norms may be present for some men, masculine (and feminine) norms still appear to be quite deeply held in many heterosexual relationships. This conclusion supports past research suggesting that masculinity norms can be harmful and difficult to abide by, and it also suggests that masculine

norms may be changing, albeit slowly, over time (Masters et al. 2012; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003).

Men have traditionally been socially rewarded for conforming to masculine norms and expectations, including demonstrating their high interest in having sex (Kimmel 2005). Yet, many participants in the current study described how traditional sexual scripts and masculine norms oversimplified men's expressions of sexual desire. Further, some men expressed concerns when their sexual desire did not align with these norms. Researchers Glick and Fiske (2001, p. 109) define benevolent sexism as “a subjectively favorable, chivalrous ideology that offers protection and affection to women who embrace conventional roles” (such as holding the belief that women require physical protection from men). Although this definition describes sexism towards women, the findings from the current study suggest that benevolent sexism may be also be present in the realm of men's sexual desire. Specifically, although having high sexual desire is generally considered a socially positive male characteristic, some men in my study felt that showing anything other than a high interest in having sex would be challenging, if not unacceptable. Thus, traditional social norms that reward men for demonstrating high desire may be hurting (and reducing) men by only allowing for one, limited, version of men's expression of sexual desire. Future research that explores benevolent sexism with regard to men's sexual desire is encouraged to help elucidate the potential presence of this phenomenon.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study has several notable strengths. The study expands on a relatively small body of literature on men's sexual desire (Brotto 2010) and helps to elucidate men's experience of desire, particularly in the context of long-term relationships. Additionally, the sample size meets recently proposed rigorous standards (Dworkin 2012) and included an older demographic not often represented in research on sexual desire.

However, my study is not without limitations and certain contextual considerations. There was a gender discrepancy between the interviewer and the participants (specifically, the interviewer was a cis-gender female whereas the participants were male). This may have brought about different conversations and findings than if the interviewer was also a man. Specifically, because most men in my study described masculine and social pressures around men's sexual desire, participants may have been more likely to “play into” these roles if talking to a male interviewer. Alternatively, men may have held back on some topics thinking it inappropriate to discuss with a woman (e.g., pornography use, interest in women outside their relationship). Of note, many participants reported participating in the study because there was a female interviewer, which made them feel more comfortable; also, when asked, many said that they did not think the gender of the

interviewer would have changed their responses. However, it is recommended that future research with a male interviewer be conducted to compare and contrast information men share with interviewers of different genders.

Additionally, recruitment strategies clearly targeted men who were in long-term relationships to talk about sexual desire. My advertisements may have recruited a particular group of men who were already relationally focused or were primed to talk about more relational aspects of desire. Finally, the men in the current study were all in long-term heterosexual relationships—a sample which only represents a subset of men. It is recommended that further research be conducted with men who identify as gay and bisexual, men who are not in relationships, men younger than 30 and older than 65, as well as smaller age ranges of men between age 30 and 65.

Practice Implications

Theoretical propositions about men's sexuality may be limited in their presumptions about men's sexual desire being high and unwavering (Courtenay 2000; Frith and Kitzinger 2001; Kimmel 2005; Masters et al. 2012; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003; Simon and Gagnon 1986, 2003; Wiederman 2005). Thus my findings may have significant implications for therapists. For example, I recommend that therapists working with men in longer-term heterosexual relationships be aware of the potential influence of traditional masculine norms on men's expression of sexual desire as well as the stress these social pressures may create for men. Therapists may help reassure men who are concerned about not meeting stereotypical male sexual norms that these standards could be more a function of stereotypes than men's actual lived experiences. I also recommend that women who are in intimate heterosexual relationships be wary that their male partner may feel pressured by masculinity norms and act upon desires they don't necessarily have. Although some men may appear to have a high interest in sexual activity, there is a value in being aware of pressures to initiate versus actual interest. Awareness of these trends may help couples be better at communicating and understanding each other's actual desires. Additionally, reducing pressure for men to initiate could help prevent men from being pigeon-holed into initiating all, or most, sexual activity as well as leave space for women to be more assertive in heterosexual sexual encounters.

Conclusion

Sexual script theory and masculinity theory suggest that men should experience a high and constant interest in sex. Although the findings from the current study suggest that some men's sexual desire may align with these prescribed social norms, it also appears that at least some men feel pressure to demonstrate an unwavering interest in sexual activity that is not

always in line with their true experiences. Thus, the findings suggest that men sometimes express their sexual desire in ways that are dictated by social norms and expectations and that the notion of men's sexual desire being high and constant may be more socially constructed rather than accurate.

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