

Running head: SEX DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Sex Differences in Relationships: Comparing Stereotypes to Self-reports

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### Abstract

This study was designed to examine the accuracy of people's stereotypes about sex differences in relationship attitudes and behaviors. Men and women ( $N = 133$ ) who were in dating relationships self-reported on their attitudes toward marriage, levels of commitment, and fidelity. To examine stereotypes about sex differences, participants completed the questionnaires a second time, responding as they believed a typical member of the opposite sex would. Discrepancies between actual sex differences (as garnered from self-reports) and stereotyped sex differences were examined. Men and women did not differ in their self-reported attitudes toward marriage, commitment, or fidelity. Consistent with stereotypes, however, women viewed men as having more negative attitudes toward marriage, lower levels of commitment, and higher levels of infidelity than men themselves reported. Men were somewhat more accurate in their perceptions. That is, men's perceptions of women's attitudes toward marriage and commitment matched women's self-reports. Surprisingly, men perceived women as being less faithful in relationships than women themselves reported. These findings are discussed in light of Hyde's (1995) suggestion that stereotype inflation can lead to relationship problems.

### Sex Differences in Relationships: Comparing Stereotypes to Self-reports

Browsing the self-help section of any bookstore, one is likely to find many titles aimed at solving relationship problems. Look closely, and many of these books will have to do with men who fear intimate relationships and cannot commit [e.g. Carter and Sokol's (1987) "Men Who Can't Love", and Weinberg's (2002) "Why Men Won't Commit"]. This is representative of how popular culture has embraced the idea that there are distinct differences between men and women. Consistent with these messages, men and women tend to perceive each other in ways that fall in line with common gender stereotypes (Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, & Madon, 2003). For example, men are viewed as having stronger sex drives and as being more accepting of extramarital sex (Oliver & Hyde, 1993). Women are seen as more likely to want commitment because they will benefit more from being in a committed relationship rather than being single (Peplau & Spalding, 2000).

A variety of theoretical perspectives have been employed to explain the causes of what have typically been considered robust sex differences in relationship attitudes and behaviors. Some theories focus on evolutionary reasons for differences, while others focus on the ways in which socialization might contribute to sex differences (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Researchers who espouse the evolutionary perspective suggest that sex differences in relationship behaviors and attitudes result from different obstacles to reproductive success that men and women faced in their ancestral past (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Sprecher, Regan, & McKinney, 1998). For example, sex differences in infidelity might be explained by sex differences in the "minimum parental investment" required to raise a child to maturity. The costs of infidelity for men are relatively low. Men can cheat and potentially walk away from any resulting offspring or they can decide to care for multiple partners at once and thereby increase

the likelihood that they will have viable offspring. The costs for women are much higher. Should the infidelity result in pregnancy, women will, at minimum, face a nine-month gestation period, the considerable risks of childbirth, and the demands of breast-feeding.

An alternative perspective, social role theory, suggests that men and women conform to gender stereotypes because they are acting in conjunction with their expected social roles (Eagly, 1987). In adapting to these roles, they become psychologically different in ways that facilitate the roles they are filling. Similar to evolutionary theory, social role theory suggests that men and women are adjusting to environmental conditions. However, the two theories differ insofar as social role theory suggests that men and women are responding to existing social contexts rather than biological influences. Historically, men in the United States have worked outside of the home, while women have traditionally worked inside of the home. In their role, men have learned to be dominant, independent, sexually controlling, autocratic, and less committed to relational issues (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Women, in contrast, have learned to be more committed to interpersonal relationships, less driven, and more cooperative. According to social role theory, these different roles have led men and women to behave differently in and to think differently about romantic relationships. For example, because men are used to being independent and it is familiar, they tend to be more resistant to marriage where they would have to be in a codependent state. Women, on the other hand, are more concerned with developing intimacy in their relationships and exhibit an overall concern for personal relationships. Therefore, women are more committed to intimate relationships than are men (Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, & Madon, 2003).

Consistent with these theoretical perspectives, considerable empirical research has suggested that men *are* more concerned with maintaining their autonomy (Vogel, Wester,

Heesacker, & Madon, 2003), that men *do* tend to avoid commitment and have lower expectations for intimacy (Tornstam, 1992), and that men *are* more likely than women to cheat on their intimate partners (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994).

Recent evidence suggests, however, that despite the theoretical and empirical attention paid to sex differences in relationships attitudes and behaviors, the magnitude of sex differences is actually quite small. Supporting this view is a meta-analysis of sex differences conducted by Oliver and Hyde (1993). The results of this meta-analysis confirm the widely-reported finding that men have more sexual partners than women. However, the authors point out that, with an effect size of just .25, sex accounts for less than 2% of the variability among individuals in number of sexual partners. Similarly, while a sex difference in infidelity was also found, the size of the effect was again very small with an effect size of .29. To help readers understand just how small these differences are, the authors present a graph, reproduced here (see Figure 1), that shows the degree of overlap in the distributions of men and women given effect sizes in the .2 range. As can be seen, effect sizes in the .2 range indicate that the distributions of men and women show 80% to 85% overlap (2005).

Results like these have led researchers like Hyde away from a *gender differences hypothesis* (i.e., where men and women are viewed as psychologically vastly different) to a *gender similarities hypothesis* (i.e., where men and women are viewed as much more similar than different). These researchers contend that stereotypes inflate differences between men and women when, in fact, men and women think and behave similarly most of the time.

If men and women are so similar, one might wonder about the factors that lead stereotypes about vast sex differences to persist. Belle suggests that we tend to focus on the

differences when we are faced with two of *anything* (1985). This explains why stereotypes remain or take over when the differences are, in fact, very small.

The purpose of the present study, then, was to compare men's and women's self-reports of their relationship behaviors and attitudes to the stereotypes ascribed to them by the opposite sex. Specifically, questionnaires were used to assess how men and women self report their attitudes towards marriage, levels of commitment, and fidelity. Participants were then asked to complete the same questionnaires as they imagined a member of the opposite sex would respond. These responses represented the perceptions or stereotypes that men and women hold about the opposite sex. It was hypothesized that stereotypes reflected by participants' responses as the opposite sex would be inconsistent with the actual attitudes represented by the self reports. For example, it was hypothesized the women would perceive men as deeply ambivalent about marriage, while men (like women) would self-report positive attitudes toward marriage.

Consistent with the gender similarities hypothesis, we hypothesize that men and women will not differ in their self-reported attitudes towards marriage, commitment, or fidelity. If they do differ, the differences will be very small. However, we believe that people will still hold these stereotypes and that women will perceive men as having more negative attitudes toward marriage, lower commitment, and lower levels of fidelity than men themselves report. In addition, men will perceive women as having more positive attitudes toward marriage, higher commitment, and higher levels of fidelity than women themselves report.

To date, the question of stereotype accuracy has gone largely unexplored. Only a handful of studies have looked in depth at the extent to which people's stereotyped perceptions of men and women match reality or, instead, overestimate sex differences (Hall and Carter, 1999). The few studies that have been done suggest that people may *not* overestimate sex

differences. For example, Hall and Carter (1999) found that men and women are incredibly accurate in predicting the magnitude of sex differences in a wide variety of domains. In addition, Swim found that college-aged students do not consistently overestimate the differences between men and women (1994). However, both of these studies collapsed over a large number of traits and behaviors (e.g., 77 in the case of Hall and Carter, 1999) to reach their conclusion that people's gender stereotypes are accurate. This is problematic because it is likely that people hold accurate stereotypes for some traits, but not for others. These studies did not specifically focus on sex differences in relationship issues (i.e., attitudes toward marriage, commitment, and infidelity). One might expect less accuracy with regard to the extent of sex differences on these variables given the large number of popular culture publications being targeted to young adults suggesting that sex differences do exist in these areas.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants (N=133) completed questionnaires online. The participants were required to be in a dating or engaged heterosexual relationship. The age range of the participants was 18-47 with a mean age of 21.5 years ( $SD = 4.32$ ). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (80%), though 7 % were African American, and 3% were Hispanic.

### *Materials*

The researchers developed an 18-item questionnaire designed to measure an individual's attitudes toward marriage, attitudes toward commitment, and fidelity (See Appendix A). This scale was created using parts of Wallin's (1954) Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale and Lund's (1985) Commitment scale and some of the researchers own questions. Participants were asked

to respond to attitudes toward marriage and commitment items using six point Likert scales. One example question to assess attitudes toward marriage is, “To what extent do you worry that you will have to give up your personal freedom when you marry? “One example statement from the commitment scale is, “I would rather spend my free time with my partner than doing other things or seeing other people.” Participants were asked to respond to questions regarding fidelity based on the number of times they had been unfaithful in particular ways: never, once, twice, and more than twice. An example from the fidelity scale is, “I have had a purely physical relationship with someone other than my partner.” Items on this scale were reverse scored so that higher number indicated more fidelity.

After completing the first 18 items, participants were asked to respond to the same statements as they felt a member of the opposite sex would. The order of the questionnaires was counterbalanced (some participants responded as the opposite sex before answering as themselves).

Reliability was calculated for all scales. Reliabilities were acceptable for both self-reports and perception-of-opposite-sex reports, with alphas ranging from .79 to .88.

#### *Procedure*

After reading an overview of the study, participants gave informed consent (See Appendix B). The participants then completed a few demographic items and the survey. Finally, participants received a written debriefing (See Appendix C), and were provided contact information to address any questions to the researchers.

#### Results

The data were analyzed using 2 (sex of participant: male vs. female) by 2 (ratee: self-reports vs. perceptions of opposite sex reports) mixed model ANOVAs with sex as a between-

subjects variable and ratee as a within-subjects variable. Three comparisons were of interest. By comparing men's self-reports to women's self-reports, we examined the degree to which men and women differ in their attitudes toward marriage, commitment, and fidelity. By comparing women's perceptions of men with men's self-reports and by comparing men's perceptions of women with women's self reports, we determined the degree to stereotyped perceptions match (or fail to match) self-reports.

### *Attitudes toward Marriage*

The mixed model ANOVA for attitudes toward marriage yielded a significant ratee by sex interaction,  $F(1, 131) = 16.77, p < .001$ . Follow-up dependent t-tests were used to examine the three planned contrasts described above (see Figure 2). Consistent with our hypotheses, men and women did not differ significantly in their self reported attitudes toward marriage. Both men ( $M = 4.49, SD = .85$ ) and women ( $M = 4.57, SD = .88$ ) reported relatively positive attitudes toward marriage,  $t(131) = -.427, ns$ . Also consistent with our hypotheses, women perceived men as having more negative attitudes toward marriage ( $M = 3.54, SD = .97$ ) than men themselves reported,  $t(131) = 5.22, p < .001$ . However, in contrast to our hypotheses, men were relatively accurate in their perceptions of women's attitudes toward marriage. There was no significant difference between women's self reports ( $M = 4.57, SD = .88$ ) and men's perceptions of women's attitudes ( $M = 4.23, SD = .832$ ),  $t(131) = -1.94, ns$ .

### *Commitment*

The mixed model ANOVA for commitment also yielded a significant ratee by sex interaction,  $F(1, 131) = 6.58, p < .01$ . Follow-up dependent t-tests were used to examine the three planned contrasts described above (see Figure 3). Once again, men and women did not differ significantly in their self reported commitment levels. Both men ( $M = 4.96, SD = .78$ ) and

women ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = .88$ ) reported relatively high commitment levels,  $t(131) = .49$ , *ns*. Also as hypothesized, women perceived men as having lower levels of commitment ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = .88$ ) than men themselves reported ( $M = 4.96$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) is this right; should match mean in prior sentence,  $t(131) = -4.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, men were relatively accurate in their perceptions of women's levels of commitment. There was no significant difference between women's self reports ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = .88$ ) and men's perceptions of women's commitment levels ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = .78$ ),  $t(131) = -.86$ , *ns*).

### *Fidelity*

The mixed model ANOVA for fidelity yielded a significant ratee by sex interaction,  $F(1, 131) = 4.13$ ,  $p < .05$ . Follow-up dependent t-tests were used to examine the three planned contrasts described above (see Figure 4). Consistent with our other findings, men and women did not differ significantly in their self reported levels of faithfulness. Both men ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) and women ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) reported relatively high levels of faithfulness,  $t(131) = .78$ , *ns*. As we expected women perceived men as having lower levels of fidelity ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) than men themselves reported ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .52$ ),  $t(131) = -3.13$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, men ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) also perceived women as being less faithful than women themselves reported being ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = .45$ ),  $t(131) = 2.99$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### Discussion

Consistent with Hyde's (2005) "gender similarities hypothesis", men and women in our study did not differ in their self-reported attitudes toward marriage, levels of commitment, or fidelity. Specifically, men and women reported relatively positive attitudes toward and marriage and commitment and relatively low levels of infidelity.

Also consistent with our hypotheses, women seemed to view men in stereotyped ways. Specifically, women viewed men as having more negative attitudes toward marriage, lower levels of commitment, and higher levels of infidelity than men themselves reported. Interestingly, and contrary to our predictions, men did not seem to view women in stereotyped ways. With regard to both attitudes toward marriage and commitment, men's perceptions of women were consistent with women's self-reports. With regard to fidelity, men actually viewed women as being *less* faithful than women themselves reported (rather than as more faithful, as would be predicted if men were relying on gender stereotypes). We address each of these findings in turn.

First, why might men be more accurate in their perceptions of women than women are of men? One possibility is that women are relying on stereotypes of men that are produced by the media. One reason for this greater reliance on stereotypes among women is that the vast majority of relationship self-help books are targeted toward women. These books tend to make sweeping generalizations of both genders (e.g., Barron's "She Wants a Ring, and I Don't Wanna Change a Thing", 2001) that could contribute to stereotyping. Another possibility is that women may be communicating their thoughts on these matters more than men are (Brody & Hall, 1993). If men aren't talking, women are using these stereotypes as their alternative resource. This explanation is consistent with work by Aries (1996) which suggests that men and women have distinct communication rules. Aries found that, "women work to sustain conversation, are responsive and supportive, and value equality. Their talk is personal. Talk for men is oriented toward solving problems and maintaining dominance and assertiveness."

Second, why might men view women as being less faithful than women reported themselves to be, rather than putting women on a pedestal of morality and purity? One

explanation for this finding comes from work by Epley and Dunning (2000) who found that both women and men perceive themselves more positively than the opposite sex because we tend to see others in a more negative light than we see ourselves. Individuals do not want to perceive themselves as “cheaters”; this would cause one to have a negative self-concept. Perceiving the opposite sex as more likely to cheat, however, may help to boost self-concept. It is not entirely clear why this result held only for fidelity and not for attitudes toward marriage or commitment. One possibility is that being unfaithful is much more damaging to one’s self-concept than having negative attitudes towards marriage and commitment. One would, in turn, disparage the faithfulness of the opposite sex in order to protect the self. However, future research will be needed to replicate this finding.

Overall, then, our findings suggest that the stereotypes women hold of men are exaggerated. Hyde (2005) suggests that this stereotype inflation is a problem when it comes to relationships. It can cause conflict within relationships when partners believe themselves to be different, when they are actually quite similar. The media’s exaggeration of these differences is also presenting a problem. It is influencing the way couples communicate in fundamental way. Self-help books and magazine articles are telling us that we “speak a different language” or that we are even “from different planets” (*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, John Gray, 1992) which can cause men and women to give up on trying to solve problems through better communication. We are convinced that we cannot understand each other, so we don’t even attempt to understand each other. Canary, Emmers-Sommer, and Faulkner suggest that when we rely on the stereotypes they start to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (1997). The stereotypes then become standards for behavior (Canary, Emmers-Sommer, & Faulkner, 1997).

Relying on stereotypes can, certainly, make dealing with the opposite sex seem simpler. However, it is an inadequate solution because people do not reliably conform to the conventional sex stereotypes portrayed in the media (Aries, 1996). Although this problem seems to be a long-lasting issue that couples within our society face, there are steps that can be taken to dispel the stereotypes. Deaux and Lewis suggest that the solution to this problem is to learn more specific details about one another in order to become closer (1984). Taking a step back and really getting to know the person you are with can reduce the gap that stereotypes have created. However, the danger of continuing to polarize the sexes is that our relationships with each other will suffer.

This study is intended to begin a new conversation about sex stereotypes that exist in our society. If people begin to realize that they are quite similar, communication will become much easier. As a result, relationships between men and women will benefit. The findings of this study help further Hyde's gender similarities hypothesis (2005). As this type of research grows, it will begin to counter the overwhelming amount of information available on sex differences. In turn, the stereotypes may change to better reflect what attitudes and behaviors individuals are actually operating on.

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## Appendix A

Age:

## Ethnicity:

**Gender:** Male Female

**Highest Level of Education Completed (or current status)** \_\_\_\_\_

## Occupation

**Relationship Status:**  Dating  Engaged **Length of Relationship:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please respond to the following questions by circling your response.**



**Please respond to the following questions by circling your response. Please base your responses on your CURRENT relationship.**

1. I would rather spend my free time with my partner than doing other things or seeing other people.

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5	6 Very true
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2. It is important to share personal feelings, problems, and beliefs with my partner.

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5	6 Very true
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3. It is important to develop interests and activities in common with my partner.

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5	6 Very true
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4. It is important to integrate my partner into my family.

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5	6 Very true
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5. It is important to put effort into seeing my partner.

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5	6 Very true
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6. I would be willing to change my career plans to continue my relationship.

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5	6 Very true
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**Please respond based on any previous or current relationships.**

1. While in a relationship, I have had an online relationship with a member of the opposite sex who was (is) not my partner.

Never	Once	Twice	More than twice
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2. I have had an emotionally intimate relationship with someone other than my partner during that relationship.

Never	Once	Twice	More than twice
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3. While in a relationship, I have had a purely physical relationship with someone other than my partner.

Never	Once	Twice	More than twice
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4. I have had a one-night stand while I was in a relationship.

Never	Once	Twice	More than twice
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5. While in a relationship, I have had an emotionally and physically involved relationship with someone other than my partner.

Never	Once	Twice	More than twice
-------	------	-------	-----------------

**Please respond to the following questions as you feel a typical member of the opposite sex would.**

**Please respond to the following questions by circling your response.**



**Please respond to the following questions as you feel a typical member of the opposite sex would.**

**Please respond to the following questions by circling your response.**

1. I would rather spend my free time with my partner than doing other things or seeing other people.
- |            |   |   |   |   |           |
|------------|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6         |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   | Very true |
2. It is important to share personal feelings, problems, and beliefs with my partner.
- |            |   |   |   |   |           |
|------------|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6         |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   | Very true |
3. It is important to develop interests and activities in common with my partner.
- |            |   |   |   |   |           |
|------------|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6         |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   | Very true |
4. It is important to integrate my partner into my family.
- |            |   |   |   |   |           |
|------------|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6         |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   | Very true |
5. It is important to put effort into seeing my partner.
- |            |   |   |   |   |           |
|------------|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6         |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   | Very true |
6. I would be willing to change my career plans to continue my relationship.
- |            |   |   |   |   |           |
|------------|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6         |
| Not at all |   |   |   |   | Very true |

**Please respond to the following questions as you feel a typical member of the opposite sex would.**

**Please respond to the following questions by circling your response.**

**Please respond based on any previous or current relationships.**

1. While in a relationship, I have had an online relationship with a member of the opposite sex who was (is) not my partner.
- |       |      |       |                 |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
| Never | Once | Twice | More than twice |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
2. I have had an emotionally intimate relationship with someone other than my partner during that relationship.
- |       |      |       |                 |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
| Never | Once | Twice | More than twice |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
3. While in a relationship, I have had a purely physical relationship with someone other than my partner.
- |       |      |       |                 |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
| Never | Once | Twice | More than twice |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
4. I have had a one-night stand while I was in a relationship.
- |       |      |       |                 |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
| Never | Once | Twice | More than twice |
|-------|------|-------|-----------------|

5. While in a relationship, I have had an emotionally and physically involved relationship with someone other than my partner.

Never              Once              Twice              More than twice

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent

This research is being conducted by Elizabeth Broady and Sarah Jane Hickman, psychology students at Hanover College. The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine attitudes toward marriage, commitment, and infidelity. You will complete a questionnaire. After you have finished answering all the questions, you will be debriefed.

The entire experiment will not take more than 30 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the experiment is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give. If you have any questions about what you will be doing in the study or about the study itself, feel free to ask them now or at any other time during your participation.

If you have any questions after the study please contact Elizabeth Broady at [broadye@hanover.edu](mailto:broadye@hanover.edu) x7936, Sarah Jane Hickman x7952 at [hickmans@hanover.edu](mailto:hickmans@hanover.edu) or Professor Ellen Altermatt at [altermattel@hanover.edu](mailto:altermattel@hanover.edu) x7317 in SCC 152.

## Appendix C

### Debriefing

The study in which you just participated was designed to measure gender differences in relationship issues. You have just completed a survey that assessed your attitudes towards marriage, commitment, and infidelity. In addition, you were asked to respond as a typical member of the opposite sex would. This helps us to assess the stereotypes held by the general population in regards to gender differences. We predict that the stereotypes reflected by participants' responses as the opposite sex will be inconsistent with the actual attitudes represented by the self reports. We hope to show that the gap between the sexes isn't as large as it appears.

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants until the semester is over. If people know what we're testing before the study begins, they may respond differently, jeopardizing our results.

As soon as the results from this study, we will make the results available for your viewing.

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact Elizabeth Broady at [broadye@hanover.edu](mailto:broadye@hanover.edu) x7936, Sarah Jane Hickman at [hickmans@hanover.edu](mailto:hickmans@hanover.edu) x7952, or Ellen Altermatt at [altermattel@hanover.edu](mailto:altermattel@hanover.edu) x 7317.

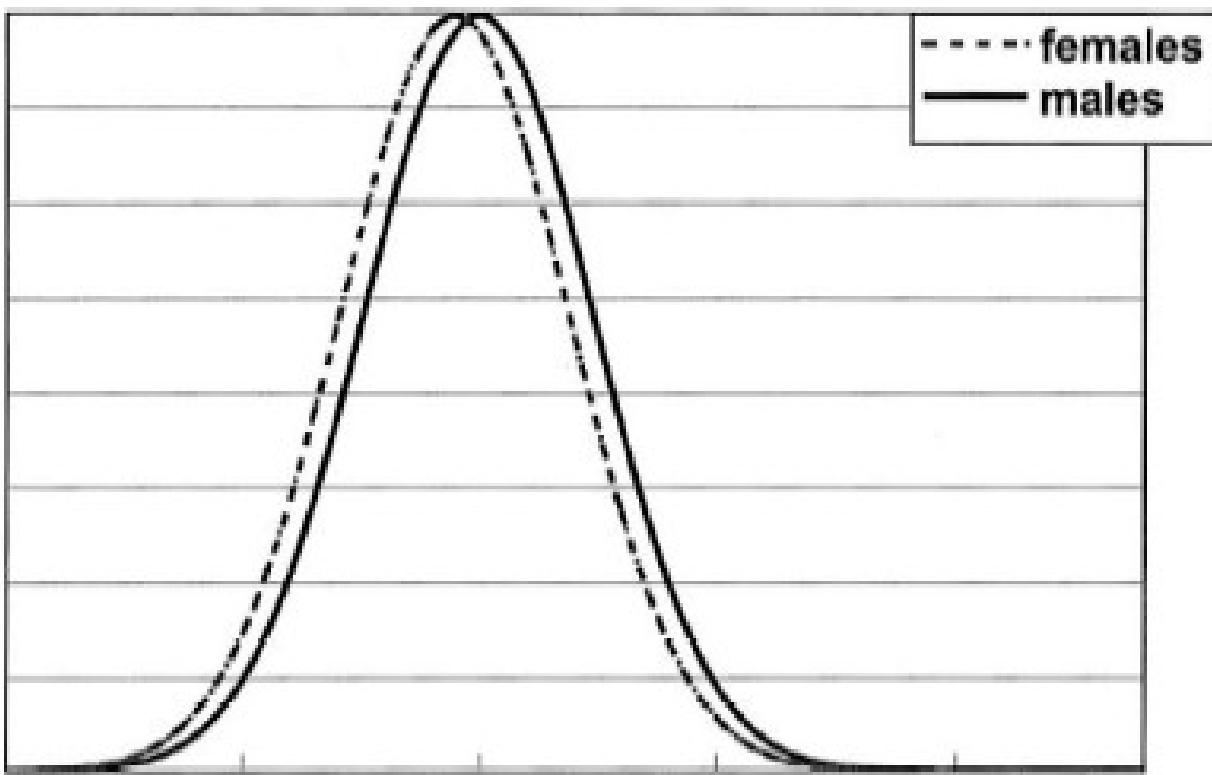
Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Graphical representation of effect sizes in the 0.2 range.

*Figure 2.* Mean level responses on attitudes toward marriage scale.

*Figure 3.* Mean level responses on commitment scale.

*Figure 4.* Mean level responses on fidelity scale.



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