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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL INTENT: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW AND INTEGRATION

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Abstract

Men appear to interpret people's behaviors more sexually than do women. This finding, which has been replicated in scores of studies using a variety of methodological approaches, has been linked to important social concerns, including sexual assault and sexual harassment. This article provides a critical review of the published literature on gender differences in sexual intent perception, using selective examples to illustrate and summarize the field's major constructs, methodologies, and empirical findings. Theoretical explanations for gender differences in sexual intent perceptions are reviewed. Finally, we highlight the field's remaining issues and make several recommendations for future research directions.

Assessing sexual intentions, in particular assessing whether another person has sexual interest in you, is an important, yet difficult, task. Most people consider sexual activity an essential component of their lives, and sexual activity is critical for the perpetuation of the human species. Thus, identifying reciprocated sexual intentions is of fundamental importance. People are often reluctant to reveal their intentions overtly (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992; Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). Instead, people may engage in behaviors that hint at their sexual intentions but could easily be interpreted as friendly (Fichten et al., 1992; Henningsen, 2004; Metts & Spitzberg, 1996; Perper & Weis, 1987). Using such behaviors provides people with some protection from embarrassment or rejection, but also allows for multiple interpretations of sexual intent and can lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings. As a result, making accurate sexual intent assessments is often challenging.

Central to the study of sexual intent perception is the well-established phenomenon of gender differences in perceived intent. Empirically, men and women have been shown to misunderstand or misperceive one another's sexual intentions (Abbey, 1987; Haselton, 2003), with men appearing to perceive more sexuality in their own, other men's, and women's behavior (Abbey, 1982). Gender incongruities in sexual intent perception have been implicated in a range of adverse outcomes, including sexual assault (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Donat & Bondurant, 2003; Malamuth & Brown, 1994). However, the range of consequences of misperception is broad, and consequences are not always severe (Abbey, 1987; Haselton,

2003). For example, consequences of misperception also include embarrassment or minor discomfort, and it is possible that a misperception might, eventually, become a source of humor (Abbey, 1987).

Given the accumulating breadth of empirical studies documenting gender differences in sexual intent perception, and the possible adverse consequences of this phenomenon, it is an opportune moment to summarize existing research findings and recommend future directions. This article aims to provide a qualitative review and integration of findings pertaining to gender differences in sexual intent perception. To this end, we will (a) define and critique key constructs and typical research methodologies, (b) summarize findings, (c) review theoretical explanations for gender differences, and (d) propose future directions. We intend our treatment to represent the breadth and depth of the field, and we will rely on selective studies for illustration. With the exception of providing a description of the first published sexual intent study, the review is organized conceptually rather than historically to enable readers to grasp quickly the field's major themes and remaining issues.

KEY CONSTRUCTS AND METHODOLOGIES

We begin our discussion of sexual intent constructs and methods by describing the first published sexual intent study. In this study, Abbey (1982) began with the hypothesis that men, as compared to women, perceive more sexuality in female targets. This hypothesis was tested using an experimental paradigm in which unacquainted male–female dyads of White college students had 5-minute conversations with the goal of getting to know one another. The conversation session was observed by a second, unacquainted, male–female dyad. Thus, members of the first dyad served as interactants (e.g., they were both raters and targets), and members of the second dyad served as raters only. Following the session, the raters and interactants gave estimates of targets' behaviors that were conceptualized to be related to sexual intentions (e.g., how flirtatious, promiscuous, and seductive the targets were trying to be) and also estimated targets' reciprocal sexual and relationship intentions, including how sexually attracted to each other and how interested in dating they were.

Abbey (1982) found that male raters and interactants perceived higher sexual intent in female targets than did female raters and interactants. In addition, male raters and interactants were more sexually attracted to the female targets than female raters and interactants were to the male targets. There were no gender differences in ratings of the female targets' friendliness; thus, it appeared that judgments related to sexuality were the critical distinction between men and women's judgments of the female targets. Abbey (1982) also found that male raters and interactants saw more sexuality in male targets than did the female raters and interactants. Because of this unexpected finding, Abbey (1982) concluded that men have a general bias toward overperception of sexual intent in behaviors, not one limited to female targets.

Consistent with Abbey (1982), the prototypical sexual intent study is a laboratory-based investigation in which participants are asked to provide estimates of sexual intentions in response to a given stimulus or scenario. To help the reader understand this methodology, this section provides the working definitions of sexual intentions, perceptions of sexual intentions, and their conceptual overlap with related constructs. Finally, we define several terms that will be used throughout the article in discussing methodological characteristics of sexual intent perception studies. The section concludes with a critical analysis of the strengths and limitations of existing construct definitions and measurement approaches for studying sexual intent perceptions.

Sexual Intent and Related Constructs: Definitions

Sexual intentions—We suggest that sexual intentions or sexual intent is best understood as one person's subjective interest in pursuing some type of sexual activity. The word subjective is intended to connote cognitive and affective appraisals, but not necessarily physiological sexual arousal; sexual activity includes sexual behaviors that range from touching and kissing to intercourse. We propose that sexual intentions are not fixed, but in fact vary; they will change in response to introspection or new information, whether about a potential partner or situation. This constitutes a working definition, due to both the lack of a clearly specified definition in the existing literature and the lack of empirical investigation into several aspects of the construct.

Perceptions of sexual intentions or *sexual intent perceptions*, then, refer to the assessment of one person's interest in pursuing sexual activity. These judgments may reflect one's assessment of another person's interest in pursuing sexual activity with (a) oneself or (b) a third party. Sexual intent perceptions also include assessment of one's own intentions toward another. Although the latter instance could arguably be described as actual sexual intentions (vs. one's perception of one's intentions), we include this category in our definition of perceptions, given the extensive literature regarding cognitive biases related to judgments and explanations for both one's own and other people's behavior (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Differences in perception versus misperception—The phenomenon of one person perceiving another person's behavior as more sexual than was intended has been termed "misperception of sexual intent" (Abbey, 1982). Other researchers have extended Abbey's definition and noted that the term misperception could convey two separate meanings, that is, interpreting another person's behaviors as more *or* less sexual than intended (Haselton, 2003). In addition, the term misperception implies that a person's behaviors were interpreted incorrectly and that people are aware of this error or discrepancy. However, it is inherently difficult to characterize sexual intent perceptions on the basis of accuracy and/or awareness. For example, either one or both parties may be unaware of a discrepancy in perceptions. Accordingly, the term *differences in perception*, as opposed to misperception, is better suited for describing the general phenomenon of two people having differing perceptions in that it connotes a divergence in interpretation without invoking questions of accuracy and/or awareness. Therefore, throughout this article, we use the term differences in perception to describe instances in which people have varying appraisals or interpretations of a person's sexual intentions. The use of the term misperception is limited to situations in which people are specifically asked about instances in which their sexual intentions have been misunderstood and/or they have misunderstood another person's sexual intentions.

Related constructs—Sexual intentions should be distinguished from overlapping, but not synonymous, constructs, such as sexual interest, romantic intentions, and flirting. Perceptions of sexual interest, as defined and operationalized in the human sexuality literature, directly concern perceptions of another person's sexual excitement or arousal (e.g., Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997; Wilson, Holm, Bishop, & Borowiak, 2002). *Romantic intentions*, as defined and operationalized in the interpersonal relationship literature, center on perceptions of another person's interest in pursuing a romantic or intimate relationship (e.g., Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes, & Pearce, 2003; Vorauer & Ratner, 1996). Finally, *flirting* consists of specific, overt behaviors (e.g., complimenting, hair tossing, making eye contact) that may or may not indicate sexual intentions (see Henningsen, 2004, for a discussion and empirical investigation of various motivations for flirting).

We liken the distinctions between the aforementioned terms and sexual intentions to the distinctions between unique versus shared variance in multiple regression models. These terms overlap with the construct of sexual intent, with each generally suggesting an appetitive or approach-based orientation with regard to pursuing intimate, whether sexual or romantic, activity. They also have unique connotations with respect to physiological sexual arousal (sexual interest), romantic relationships (romantic intent), and/or overt behavior (vs. subjective, internal experiences; flirting) that make them distinct from sexual intentions. Stated from the opposite perspective, sexual intentions are distinctive because they may or may not co-occur with physiological sexual arousal or interest in having a romantic relationship and are not necessarily manifested in overt behavior.

Research participants—The vast majority of research on sexual perception focuses on a very narrow population: male and female heterosexual college students, the majority of whom are White, middle class, and live in the United States. For brevity, we use the terms *men* and *women* to refer to these respective groups of research participants. Any exceptions are explicitly noted.

Sexual Intent and Related Constructs: Method

Experimental stimuli and paradigms—The objects of sexual intent ratings and the means by which they are presented to participants vary considerably across studies. A stimulus may consist of a person (real or hypothetical), an individual behavior (e.g., touching someone's leg or smiling; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Kowalski, 1993), or an entire social interaction (Abbey, 1982; Shotland & Craig, 1988). Stimuli can also range from being entirely scripted, in which behaviors or situations are fully specified beforehand (e.g., Johnson, Stockdale, & Saal, 1991; Koukounas & Letch, 2001), to entirely unscripted, in which people are asked to behave as they, presumably, would naturally (e.g., Abbey, 1982; Saal, Johnson, & Weber, 1989).

The contexts in which stimuli are presented also vary widely. In some studies, stimuli are delivered via live paradigms, in which a behavior or interaction transpires between people in the moment (Abbey, 1982; Shea, 1993). For example, participants may observe or partake in a 15-minute conversation. Stimuli are also commonly presented via written (George, Gournic, & McAfee, 1988; Willan & Pollard, 2003), photographic (Abbey, Cozzarelli, McLaughlin, & Harnish, 1987; Abbey & Melby, 1986), videotaped (Johnson et al., 1991; Koukounas & Letch, 2001), or audiotaped (Koralewski & Conger, 1992) methods. Paradigms can be interactive, as was the case in a study that allowed participants to make choices about their "next move" in a scenario about a sexual encounter; these choices were then reflected in the next portion of the scenario (Leigh & Aramburu, 1996).

Ratings—Sexual intent perceptions are typically measured in the form of ratings that evaluate one or more of the following types of variables: (1) the degree to which the target possesses or expresses particular dispositional traits (e.g., sexy, friendly); (2) the degree to which the target exhibits particular behaviors (e.g., touching, eye contact); (3) the target's intent, willingness, or likelihood to engage in particular behaviors (e.g., to have intercourse); (4) a rater's or interactant's interest in the target (e.g., sexual, friendly); and (5) the nature of the relationship between targets or interactants (e.g., sexual and/or romantic partners). Thus, measures of sexual intent perceptions rely almost exclusively on self-report ratings (for further discussion and an exception, see Lindgren, Shoda, & George, 2007). Generally, these ratings are made using anchored Likert scales.

Published studies range both in the number and type of ratings of sexual intent and in their analytic strategies. The majority of studies include multiple measures, but the precise ratings and the methods by which they are analyzed often differ across studies. For example, Abbey's

original study (1982) included various ratings that were analyzed individually. In contrast, a study by DeSouza and Hutz (1996) included six measures of targets' perceived willingness, expectation, and desire for sexual intercourse, which were ultimately combined into and analyzed as a single composite variable. With some exceptions (Leigh & Aramburu, 1996; Willan & Pollard, 2003), most published studies about perceptions of sexual intent obtain participant ratings of target(s) at only one point in time.

Construct Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

There are both general strengths and limitations to the construct of sexual intentions and methodology used to assess them. We discuss each in turn and, in our discussion of limitations, propose future directions for refining the conceptualization of these constructions.

First and foremost, sexual intent and sexual intent perceptions focus on a unique aspect of social cognition and interpersonal relationships, namely, interest in pursuing some form of sexual activity. Because sexual activity can and does occur both within and outside of the context of a romantic relationship, it appears important and useful to isolate, as a concept, the notion of an individual's interest in pursuing sexual activity from an individual's interest in pursuing a romantic relationship. Further, by focusing on an individual's subjective interest, one can potentially disentangle subjective interest in pursuing sexual activity (e.g., thoughts and emotions) from physiological sexual arousal. Finally, by characterizing assessments of sexual intentions as perceptions, one is reminded that assessments can be biased, inaccurate, and influenced by a multitude of factors.

Despite the strengths of these constructs, there are notable limitations, particularly with respect to operationalization. Much of the early research on gender differences in perceptions (e.g., Abbey, 1982) included items that were characterized as examinations of a target's personality (e.g., how flirtatious/promiscuous/seductive is the target?). The use of some of these terms may be problematic. There are empirical concerns related to the extent to which these terms (a) truly represent dispositions and (b) are more typically applied to women than to men (Shotland & Craig, 1988). There are also critical socio-political concerns about the use of these terms as proxies for sexual intent—for example, the implication that a woman is interested in sexual activity simply because she is flirtatious or has a reputation for being flirtatious. Given the importance of these concerns, it is important to note that findings of gender differences in sexual intent perceptions extend to multiple types of ratings and/or measures beyond dispositional terms. Despite our concern about the ramifications of using some of these terms as proxies for sexual intent, there is empirical evidence that flirting and sexual intentions are correlated and that lay people endorse beliefs that flirting is a form of genuine sexual invitation (Koepfel, Montagne-Miller, O'Hair, & Cody, 1993). Thus, because of the overall pattern of findings and the empirical relationship between flirting beliefs and sexual intent ratings, there appears to be some utility and empirical support for considering personality dispositions as a type of sexual perception measure.

A second limitation concerns the lack of formal definitions and formal construct validation. It should be emphasized that our definitions of sexual intentions and perceptions of sexual intentions are working definitions; they do not necessarily reflect historical or common operationalizations in the literature. For example, in the extant literature, perceptions of intentions related to having sexual intercourse receive primary emphasis (but see Leigh & Aramburu, 1996; Willan & Pollard, 2003), but we suggest that intentions apply to a much broader range of sexual activities. Similarly, perceptions of sexual intentions are typically measured once and only once; the possibilities that one's own, a target's, or one's perceptions of a target's intentions could change are rarely investigated (but see Leigh & Aramburu, 1996; Willan & Pollard, 2003). Finally, sexual intentions are typically operationalized as a unidimensional construct, ranging in magnitude from having no sexual intentions to having

strong sexual intentions. Whether they are unidimensional, bidimensional, or multidimensional (the latter two implying that one could have mixed feelings about one's sexual intentions) has never been investigated and is a significant limitation. Thus, multiple aspects of these constructs require empirical attention.

In addition to limitations in how sexual intentions have been studied in isolation, there are also limitations with respect to our understanding of the relations between sexual intentions and other constructs. Although we have provided a discussion of the distinctions and similarities between sexual intentions and romantic intentions, sexual interest, and flirting, our discussion is based primarily on philosophical rather than empirical grounds. These constructs are covered, for the most part, in separate literatures and have rarely been studied simultaneously. As a result, it is unclear to what extent they overlap and what factors might moderate the relations among them. For example, although subjective assessments of sexual interest and physiological sexual arousal are viewed as overlapping but distinct in our conceptualization, it is possible that physiological sexual arousal is a critical factor underlying sexual intentions.

A final problem is that the constructs of sexual intent and perceptions of sexual intent may be conflated with other constructs such as sexual consent. Arguing from a feminist perspective, we hold that being interested in pursuing sex or perceiving someone as interested in pursuing sex is not synonymous with agreeing to or consenting to engage in sex. However, we also hold that whether individuals actually view them as distinct is an empirical question that, if addressed, would provide important information regarding the constructs of sexual intentions and perceptions of sexual intentions. In sum, sexual intentions represent a unique, useful, and important construct that is worthy of greater empirical attention.

SEXUAL INTENT FINDINGS

We turn next to our discussion of sexual intent findings. In particular, we provide an overview of factors that have been studied in relation to sexual intent perceptions and highlight consistencies and inconsistencies across studies. We begin by discussing replications and extension of Abbey's (1982) original findings of gender differences and then turn to potential moderators of those gender differences. Moderators are broadly classified into three domains: target influences, rater influences, and situational influences.

Gender Differences in Sexual Intentions

As discussed above, Abbey (1982) found that men saw more sexuality in male and female targets than did women. Subsequent sexual intent studies have typically included an investigation of some aspect of rater and target gender differences. Collectively, findings suggest that the reliability of rater gender differences in sexual intent perception varies based on target gender. There has been consistent support for Abbey's (1982) finding that men, compared to women, infer more sexuality in female targets (see, e.g., Abbey & Melby, 1986; Bostwick & Delucia, 1992; George et al., 2006; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Koepfel et al., 1993; Shea, 1993). Moreover, this finding extends across studies that varied across multiple stimuli and paradigms (e.g., live interactions: Shea, 1993; written vignettes: Willan & Pollard, 2003; photographs: Abbey et al., 1987) and utilized different types of ratings (e.g., personality dispositions: Abbey & Melby, 1986; target's behavioral intentions: Willan & Pollard, 2003; participant's interest in the target: Haselton & Buss, 2000).

Despite a stream of studies supporting the finding that men, compared to women, infer more sexuality in female targets, there have been some exceptions (see Cahoon & Edmonds, 1989; Quackenbush, 1987; Sigal, Gibbs, Adams, & Derfler, 1988). These studies have had methodological characteristics that may account for the discrepant findings. For example, Quackenbush (1987) surveyed participants using similar adjectives to Abbey (1982) and did

not find that men inferred more sexuality than women in female targets. However, the sample size (60) and study design may have limited the power to detect differences. Men were split into three groups of 10 based on their responses to the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (sex-typed, undifferentiated, or androgynous), and then each of these groups was compared to a single control group of women. In another study, Sigal et al. (1988) compiled a list of friendly and seductive nonverbal behaviors that were then used in a scripted interaction between a man and a woman. They found only a main effect for type of interaction but no effect for gender: male and female participants rated targets more sexually in the seductive versus friendly condition. The lack of gender differences may be explained by the finding that men and women have been found to perceive friendly behaviors and seductive behaviors similarly; it is behaviors that fall in the middle zone between friendliness and seductiveness that tend to yield gender differences in perceptions. Finally, Cahoon and Edmonds (1989) also found little evidence of gender differences in perceptions of a female target. They found that both men and women rated a photograph of a woman wearing “provocative” or sexy clothing as being more flirtatious and more sexually provocative than a photograph of the same woman wearing conservative clothing. This finding may also reflect the similarity of men’s and women’s perceptions of friendly and seductive behaviors. Given these three studies’ differences from more typical sexual intent studies, we suggest that their findings are exceptions and may be attributable to methodological limitations.

The direction of rater gender differences in sexual perceptions appears less consistent in the case of male targets than female targets. Some studies using live discussion paradigms found that female interactants saw less sexuality in male interactants than the male interactants saw in their own behavior (Abbey, 1982; Saal et al., 1989; Shea, 1993). However, other studies have found that male targets’ behaviors were perceived more sexually by women than by men. Generally, these studies have tended to include scenarios that had obvious possibilities for sex to occur (e.g., being out on a date rather than having a 5-minute get-acquainted conversation in a laboratory) and stimuli that consisted of specific individual behaviors and/or clearly defined relationships among targets (e.g., Abbey et al., 1987; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Johnson et al., 1991). Interestingly, what accounts for this variability in rater gender differences in assessments of male targets has never been the focus of a published sexual intent study.

Target Influences

Studies of sexual intent perception commonly include manipulations of one or more target attributes. Three target attributes that have frequently been examined as moderators are discussed here: target gender, target behaviors, and target identity.

Target gender—Several studies have examined sexual intent perceptions as a function of target gender, focusing on whether male or female targets are perceived more sexually. When the gender of a target engaging in a behavior is manipulated, researchers typically find that the behavior is interpreted more sexually when the target is female. For example, studies that varied the gender of the target that initiated a date (Bostwick & Delucia, 1992; Koeppel et al., 1993), paid for a date (Bostwick & Delucia, 1992), or dressed in revealing clothing (Abbey et al., 1987) found that male and female raters attributed more sexuality to a female target than to a male target.

Target behaviors—The influence of target behaviors has been examined in several studies using a variety of methods. Typically, researchers have examined the influence of particular behaviors by varying their intensity levels either individually or collectively. Two sets of studies examined how manipulating individual nonverbal behavioral cues influenced sexual intent ratings (Abbey & Melby, 1986; Abbey et al., 1987). These studies examined the effect of manipulating the intensity of a single nonverbal behavioral cue (Abbey & Melby, 1986:

interpersonal distance, eye contact, touch; Abbey et al., 1987: dress) using photographs of dyads. With the exception of dress, in which female targets were perceived more sexually when wearing more- versus less-revealing clothing, main effects for and interactions with behavioral cue manipulations were inconsistent. Generally, the perceived potential of the targets' and rater's interest in pursuing a relationship with opposite-sex targets increased as behavioral cues intensified.

Studies have also examined the influence of an unexpected and/or nonnormative behavior by manipulating target behaviors. In a study using written vignettes, Hynie, Schuller, and Couperthwaite (2003) examined the effect of varying the gender of a character who carried a condom. Hynie and colleagues (2003) suggested that it is nonnormative, and thus informative, for females to carry condoms in comparison to males, and findings suggested that the gender of the target person possessing a condom was indeed critical. Specifically, female targets who carried a condom were rated higher in sexual intentions and sexual willingness than female targets who did not carry a condom. Whether male targets carried a condom had no effect on sexual intent ratings, and gender differences in raters' estimates were not found.

Whereas the aforementioned studies manipulated one cue at a time, other studies have manipulated several non-verbal cues simultaneously. Although the influence of these cues would likely depend on both the specific behaviors being manipulated and the degree to which they were manipulated, studies have shown that, when stimuli are manipulated to create interactions of increasing intensity (e.g., by increasing the amount of touch and eye contact and decreasing the amount of space between interactants), ratings of male and female targets tend to increase in sexuality across conditions (Koeppel et al., 1993; Koukounas & Letch, 2001; Shotland & Craig, 1988; Sigal et al., 1988). Some studies have found that sexual intent ratings increased as cue levels increased in intensity, regardless of raters' gender (e.g., Koeppel et al., 1993), whereas others have found interactions between cue level and rater gender, with the increase in sexual intent ratings being more pronounced among male raters (e.g., Koukounas & Letch, 2001). Methodological differences likely account for this discrepancy. For example, even the most intense level of cues in Koukounas and Letch's study (2001) consisted of behaviors that occur in the context of friendly, familial, and/or sexual relationships—the very type of behaviors that in other studies have been shown to produce the most pronounced rater gender differences (e.g., Feravich, Abbey, & McAuslan, 2000; Kowalski, 1993). In contrast, the specific nonverbal behaviors used to represent different levels of intensity were not identified in Koeppel et al. (1993), and they also manipulated another factor, the gender of the target who initiated the interaction. This manipulation yielded significant effects (ratings were generally more sexualized when female targets initiated), and it is possible that this manipulation may have suppressed or masked potential interactions between rater gender and intensity level.

In addition to understanding the impact of increasing or decreasing the intensity of a specific behavior or set of behaviors, others (e.g., Feravich et al., 2000; Kowalski, 1993) have (a) identified and grouped the individual behaviors that are perceived as conveying more or less sexual intent and (b) investigated which group of behaviors is more likely to be perceived differently by men and women. For example, Kowalski (1993) asked participants to imagine various behaviors that occurred on a date and estimate the degree to which those behaviors reflected an interest in having sexual intercourse, thereby assessing each behavior's "sexual connotativeness." Two sets of ratings were made: one for male targets engaging the behaviors and one for female targets. Men's ratings of female targets were higher than women's for 20 of 27 behaviors, and men's rating of male targets were higher than women's for 12 of 27 behaviors (there were no gender differences in male target ratings for 13 of the 27 behaviors). Using factor analysis, Kowalski (1993) identified three factors of increasing sexually connotative behaviors—mundane, romantic, and sexual behaviors. The largest rater gender

differences within both male and female targets were found for the mundane behaviors (e.g., maintaining eye contact, having dinner, complimenting), and the smallest gender differences were found for sexual behaviors (e.g., touching a person's breasts, touching a person's genitals). Notably, many of these mundane behaviors have been identified in the communication literature as behaviors that can be interpreted as expressions of platonic affection as well as intimations of romantic and/or sexual intentions (see Fichten et al., 1992). Multiple studies have replicated these effects using both identical (Bondurant & Donat, 1999; Donat & Bondurant, 2003; Fisher & Walters, 2003; Flores, 1999) and different (Feravich et al., 2000) lists of stimulus behaviors, demonstrating that behaviors categorized as mundane are the ones most likely to yield gender differences.

Target identity—Another variable frequently studied is target identity. A few studies have manipulated the identity of opposite-sex targets (e.g., stranger, opposite-sex friend, sibling, etc.) while obtaining sexual intent ratings for behavioral cues in social interactions (e.g., smiling at an opposite-sex person at a party). Haselton and Buss (2000) found that male raters perceived their sisters' hypothetical interactions with other men as less sexual than those of a hypothetical woman engaging in the same interactions. Women showed a similar reduction when rating their brothers as compared to a hypothetical man. Adapting Haselton and Buss's (2000) measures, Lindgren and colleagues (2007) replicated this finding and also found that participants rated both a close opposite-sex friend and a recent opposite-sex acquaintance lower in sexual intentions than a hypothetical opposite-sex other (Lindgren, George et al., 2007). These findings suggest that facets of a target's identity, such as familiarity or being a real (vs. hypothetical) person, may influence raters' assessments.

Rater Influences

The influence of rater attributes on sexual intent perceptions has also received considerable attention. Findings concerning the most commonly studied rater attribute, gender, are discussed throughout the article and are, therefore, not emphasized in this section. Two other groups of commonly studied rater attributes, self-reported attitudes and experiences, will be discussed. Four constellations of rater attitudes have been studied: attitudes about gender roles, sexual violence, sex and heterosexual relationships, and general social interactions.

Self-reported attitudes—Self-reported personality characteristics stereotypically associated with masculinity or femininity have not been consistently predictive of men's or women's sexual intent perceptions. For example, Koukounas and Letch (2001) reported correlations of .00 between Bem's Sex Role Inventory (1981) and an index of sexual intent perceptions, and researchers (e.g., Bostwick & Delucia, 1992; Levesque, Nave, & Lowe, 2006) who used median splits to classify participants' "gender identity type" generally found no significant differences in sexual intent ratings as a function of type. Those studies that reported significant effects typically found small, positive relations between the endorsement of personality characteristics associated with more traditional gender roles and increased sexual intent ratings (Fisher & Walters, 2003; Koralewski & Conger, 1992; Kowalski, 1993). Method differences make it difficult to compare findings across studies: Some studies examined these relations as a function of a combined sexual intent index score for ratings of male and female targets (e.g., Fisher & Walters, 2003), whereas other studies examined ratings as a function of target gender (e.g., Kowalski, 1993). Studies also varied in the inventories used (e.g., Bem's Sex Role Inventory; Bostwick & Delucia, 1992; Burt's Sex Role Stereotyping Scale; Kowalski, 1993) and whether they examined observed relations as a function of participants' gender. Kowalski (1993) provides the most comprehensive analysis, and her results indicated that the strongest effect for sex role stereotypes was an R^2_{change} of .02 in predicting the variance accounted for in ratings of a male target engaged in mundane behaviors.

In contrast, attitudes supportive of sexual violence have predicted increased sexual intent ratings more consistently (Abbey et al., 1998; Bondurant & Donat, 1999; Koralewski & Conger, 1992; Kowalski, 1993; Vrij & Kirby, 2002; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003). Studies indicated that those attitudes, in particular the degree to which individuals endorse myths about acquaintance rape, positively predicted sexuality ratings of male and female targets independently of raters' gender (Koralewski & Conger, 1992; Kowalski, 1993; Vrij & Kirby, 2002). Finally, among men, supportive attitudes toward sexual violence were positively correlated with the number of real-life instances of misperceiving a woman's intentions (Abbey et al., 1998; Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill, & Zawacki, 2007; Zawacki et al., 2003).

Notably, measuring the number of instances of misperception is difficult: Some men may be particularly attuned to when they have misperceived a woman's intentions and consequently report a larger number of misperception instances, whereas others may be less skilled at such detection and consequently report very few instances of misperceptions. It may be that men who are moderately skilled at detecting a woman's intentions may be most likely to report the highest number of such instances because they accurately and frequently recognize instances of misperception. Moreover, instances of misperception are typically measured using a single self-report item that assesses how often one has misunderstood another person's intentions to be sexual when they actually were not, an item that requires a person to be aware of another person's actual or true intentions. Unsurprisingly, many have questioned the validity of such a measure, and recent research has addressed this issue (see Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007).

Attitudes related to consensual sex and dating relationships are also related to sexual intent perceptions. People with more positive attitudes about casual sex or who are more preoccupied with thoughts about sex perceived targets more sexually (Bostwick & Delucia, 1992; Koukounas & Letch, 2001) and reported misperceiving a woman's sexual intentions more often (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007). Similarly, beliefs about flirting are related to sexual intent perceptions. In particular, participants who reported believing that flirting was a sexual invitation rated male and female targets as more sexual than did other participants. This relation was strongest for situations in which the female target initiated the encounter, $r = .32$ to $.35$, versus when the male target initiated the encounter, $r = .11$ to $.16$ (Koeppel et al., 1993).

Self-reported experiences—Rater experiences examined in relation to sexual intent include nonconsensual sexual experiences, consensual sexual experiences, and dating experiences, all of which appear to be related to perceptions of sexual intent. With regard to the first, the majority of published research that has investigated nonconsensual sexual experiences and sexual perceptions has focused on male participants. Findings indicate that sexually coercive men attribute more sexuality to a female target than do nonsexually coercive men (e.g., Bondurant & Donat, 1999), with some types of sexually coercive men being more likely to do so (e.g., men likely to initiate versus persist in sexually coercive behaviors; Flores, 1999). Only one study has not found differences among male raters based on self-reported sexual assault experience (e.g., Koralewski & Conger, 1992), and the implications of that finding are unclear. Koralewski and Conger (1992) assessed men's sexual intent perceptions of male and female targets using a series of 1-minute videotaped interactions, but did not test for target gender differences. Such information is critical because other studies that reported differences based on men's sexually coercive experiences (e.g., Bondurant & Donat, 1999; Flores, 1999) found them only with respect to perceptions of a female target's behaviors. In addition, one study has tested for and demonstrated a relation between sexual assault and increased sexual intent ratings in women. Women who reported being sexually assaulted (by force or threat of force) perceived more sexuality in a male target's behaviors than did women who either reported never having been assaulted or who were coerced to have sex by being given drugs or alcohol (Donat & Bondurant, 2003). Finally, links between nonconsensual

sexual experiences and misperceptions of sexual intentions have also been established. Specifically, women with a history of sexual victimization reported being misperceived by a man more often than women without a history of sexual victimization (Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996). Similarly, men with a history of sexual assault perpetration reported misperceiving a woman's friendliness more often than men without a history of sexual assault perpetration (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Zawacki et al., 2003).

Consensual sexual experiences and dating experiences have also been linked to sexual intent perceptions. However, the direction of this relation has been inconsistent in research findings. Fisher and Walters (2003) found that having less variety in sexual experiences as well as having a higher number of partners were both positively correlated with women's sexual intent judgments of hypothetical same-sex and opposite-sex targets. In contrast, Lindgren and colleagues (2007) found that the frequency of consensual sexual and dating experiences was positively correlated with both women and men's sexual intent perceptions (Lindgren, George et al., 2007). Because the two groups of investigators used (a) different indices of sexual experiences, (b) different targets, and (c) different behaviors, a variety of mechanisms may account for their disparate findings. The importance of sexual and dating experiences extends to real-life experiences with misperception as well (Abbey et al., 1996, 1998; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Zawacki et al., 2003). For example, Abbey et al. (1998) and Jacques-Tiura et al. (2007) demonstrated through structural equation modeling that the greater the number of men's consensual sexual experiences and dating experiences, the more often they reported misperceiving a woman's sexual intentions.

Research assessing the relationship between (a) nonconsensual sexual experience, consensual sexual experiences, or dating experiences and (b) sexual intent perceptions suggests that they are related. However, inconsistent findings exist. In addition, published studies relied on cross-sectional and retrospective research designs, making the direction and etiology of reported relationships among these variables unclear. Moreover, it is unclear which types of experiences (e.g., sexual vs. dating experiences, variety vs. frequency of sexual experience) are more important in the prediction of sexual intent perceptions and which, if any, may moderate gender differences in perceptions.

Race and Ethnicity Influences

A critical aspect of target and rater identity is the target or rater's ethnicity and/or race. The majority of research on sexual intent focuses on White, U.S. college students. Only a handful of studies have compared U.S. ethnic groups, contrasted U.S. and non-U.S. samples, or focused exclusively on non-U.S. samples (e.g., Abbey, Zawacki, & Buck, 2005; Abbey, Zawacki, & McAuslan, 2000; DeSouza & Hutz, 1996; DeSouza, Pierce, Zanelli, & Hutz, 1992; Koukounas & Letch, 2001). Such studies have, for sound reasons, matched target persons and raters on race and/or ethnicity. An unfortunate consequence of this decision is that target and rater's race become confounded, and it is impossible to distinguish race of rater effects from race of target effects. Thus, our discussion of racial and/or ethnicity factors will consider both rater and target effects simultaneously.

Abbey and colleagues (2000; 2005) tested for differences in sexual intent perceptions in all-Black and all-White dyads who engaged in live, unscripted interactions. In the latter study, the female member of the dyad was a confederate. In the former study, Abbey and colleagues tested for ethnicity differences on 10 different dependent variables; only one finding was significant: Black men, compared to White men, reported more sexual attraction to their female partners. In the latter study, no ethnic group differences were found. These largely null findings may partially stem from matching the dyads by race. It may be that target and rater influences on sexual intent perceptions become apparent only when they are disentangled from one another. Preliminary evidence from one study supports this premise. Using a sample of

European American and Asian American college men, Stephens and George (2002) asked participants to read about a first date, in which the ethnicity of both the male and the female target was manipulated (Black vs. White). Findings indicated that Black male targets were perceived as more sexually available than were White male targets. Furthermore, there was an interaction between the male target's race and participants' race: Compared to European Americans, Asian Americans perceived more sexual availability in Black male targets than White male targets. Similarly, a recent study on a related construct, sexual arousal, indicated that a sample of White participants rated pictures of Black female targets as more sexually aroused than White female targets (Maner et al., 2005). Because there were multiple, additional manipulations in the study, its ultimate implications for sexual intent perceptions are unclear. Collectively, these findings provide evidence that race and/or ethnicity are critical factors deserving of concentrated attention in sexuality research and that they must be studied with samples of male and female participants.

In addition to studies using strictly U.S. samples, several studies have either compared U.S. samples to those in other countries or have had exclusively non-U.S. samples. DeSouza and colleagues compared Brazilian and U.S. samples (DeSouza et al., 1992; DeSouza & Hutz, 1996). These studies found two nationality effects: Brazilians' sexual intent ratings were higher than Americans', and Americans considered a female target who consistently resisted a man's sexual overtures as having less interest and less sexual willingness than did Brazilians. Rater gender differences were also observed and did not interact with nationality, indicating that, regardless of nationality, male raters interpreted a female target's intentions as being more sexual compared to female raters. Finally, studies of English and Australian participants found that both English and Australian men perceived a female target's intentions more sexually than did women (Australian: Koukounas & Letch, 2001; English: Willan & Pollard, 2003).

Situational Influences

Two situational influences, alcohol and priming, have received some attention in the sexual intent literature. Each is reviewed in turn.

Alcohol—Situational alcohol variables, including the presence of alcohol, raters' acute alcohol consumption (or the belief that they had consumed alcohol), and raters' a priori beliefs about the effects of alcohol have been investigated in vignette and dyadic interaction studies. In prototypical studies, participants read vignettes depicting drinking or nondrinking target persons and then rated the targets' sexual intentions. Multiple studies using this paradigm have found that male and female raters perceived a drinking female target as more sexual, sexually available, and willing to engage in foreplay and intercourse than a nondrinking female target (Garcia & Kushner, 1987; George et al., 1988; George, Cue, Lopez, Crowe, & Norris, 1995; George et al., 1997). A drinking man has been rated similarly (Corcoran & Bell, 1990; George et al., 1997). With minor exceptions (George et al., 1995, 1997), vignette studies revealed little evidence of gender differences, that is, men and women generally exhibit equivalence in rating drinking targets higher in sexual intent than nondrinking targets. Finally, in the aforementioned studies, raters did not consume alcohol. Thus, it can be said that among sober raters, drinking targets are rated higher in sexual intent than nondrinking targets.

The effects of rater's alcohol consumption on sexual intent perceptions have been investigated using dyadic interaction studies with alcohol administration. Abbey and colleagues (2000) employed a balanced-placebo design in which male interactants' expectation about beverage content (alcohol vs. placebo) was fully crossed with actual beverage content (alcoholic vs. nonalcoholic). In male–female dyads where alcohol was consumed, whether expected or not expected, interactants rated their behaviors and their partner's behaviors more sexually than

interactants in dyads where alcohol was not consumed. There were no significant effects or interactions associated with the expectancy that one consumed alcohol.

Participants' alcohol expectancies (a priori beliefs about alcohol's effects) have also been linked to sexual intent perceptions. In both dating (George et al., 1995) and date rape (Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, & Saenz, 2003) vignettes, raters' endorsement of sex-related alcohol expectancies was associated with attributing more sexuality to a drinking female target. Further, in a study in which male raters' alcohol expectancy set (whether or not they expected to receive alcohol) was manipulated, George, Stoner, Norris, Lopez, and Lehman (2000) found that endorsing sex-related alcohol expectancies moderated the effects of alcohol expectancy set on attribution of sexuality. In particular, strong believers in alcohol's power to increase sexual feeling who also expected to receive alcohol attributed more sexuality to targets.

Research suggests that alcohol cues can influence sexual perceptions even when presented outside of conscious awareness. In a pair of studies, men received priming via suboptimal exposure to either alcohol-related or control words, and then rated photographs of unfamiliar female targets on dimensions of attractiveness and intelligence (Friedman, McCarthy, Förster, & Denzler, 2005). Raters also completed a measure of sex-related alcohol expectancies. Among men with stronger beliefs that alcohol enhances sexual desire, those exposed to subliminal alcohol cues rated targets as higher in attractiveness (but not intelligence) compared to those exposed to control primes. This effect was not observed among participants with weaker sex-related alcohol expectancies. These findings suggest not only that the influence of contextual factors can circumvent conscious awareness but that these factors may interact with raters' dispositional characteristics to influence sexual perceptions.

Not only is one's judgment of sexual intention related to alcohol consumption and alcohol expectancy in the situation, it is also related to one's general drinking behaviors (Abbey et al., 1998; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Zawacki et al., 2003). For example, one study using 356 college men found that stereotypes about drinking women and usual alcohol consumption both significantly predicted alcohol consumption specific to dating and sexual situations, which then predicted the number of times the man had misperceived a woman's sexual intentions (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007).

Priming influences—In addition to the Friedman et al. (2005) study discussed above, other studies have similarly examined priming influences on sexual perceptions. For example, Sigal and colleagues (1988) examined whether priming raters with either a romantic or nonromantic 5-minute film clip would influence perceptions of a subsequent videotaped stimulus. Contrary to the authors' hypothesis, participants did not rate male or female targets more sexually after viewing a romantic clip. In fact, participants who viewed a romantic film clip perceived the female's intentions as less sexual compared to those who viewed a nonromantic film clip. Lindgren, Shoda, and George (2007) exposed participants to a written vignette about a date and found that participants' automatic associations (i.e., cognitive associations that occur spontaneously, effortlessly, and possibly nonconsciously) about sex and various targets were affected. In particular, after reading about the date, women's associations about themselves and about men became more sexualized, whereas men's associations about themselves became more sexualized, but their associations about men became less sexualized.

These findings collectively suggest that situational factors can influence sexual intent perceptions. The presence of alcohol, whether administered to participants or contextually embedded by other means, appears to increase perceptions of sexuality. As yet, there are too few studies to speak to gender differences in alcohol's effects on sexual intent perception per se. The relatively small number of studies that examine other situational influences, such as priming, makes it difficult to make general statements about the role of raters' gender as a

moderator of these influences. Additional research is necessary to replicate and extend these findings and to examine possible explanatory mechanisms.

EXPLANATIONS FOR GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SEXUAL INTENT PERCEPTIONS

Two types of explanations for gender differences in sexual intent perceptions have been offered: those that focus on ultimate or distal causes and those that emphasize more immediate or proximal causes. We will review both types and will begin with proximal explanations, which focus on specific, immediate mechanisms that might underlie gender differences in sexual perceptions. Proximal explanations include information-processing biases, social skills deficits, and self-presentation. Distal explanations include those related to socialization, evolution, or biology.

Proximal Explanations

Social-Information Processing—Four explanations for gender differences in sexual intent perception stem from social-information-processing models. Social-information-processing models (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) focus on how individuals encode information about a situation, interpret it, and, after several intervening stages, behave in the situation.

Lower threshold: Some researchers have suggested that men, as compared to women, have a lower threshold for labeling behaviors as sexual (e.g., Abbey et al., 1987; Johnson et al., 1991; Shotland & Craig, 1988). Translated into social-information-processing terms, it is possible that men and women perceive and decode the same behavior in targets but that they label the targets differently due to a difference in their thresholds for labeling a target as sexually interested rather than friendly only. For example, a man and a woman might both view a female target's interaction that comprises 20% sexual behavior and 80% friendly behavior. They may both judge that 20% of the female target's behavior is sexual in nature. Where they may differ is with respect to labeling the female target's behavior. That is, if the man's threshold for labeling a person as sexually interested is that the person must display 10% sexual behavior, and the woman's threshold for labeling a person as interested is that the person must display 30% sexual behavior, the man and woman will make different judgments about the female target; the man will label the target as sexually interested, and the woman will label the target as simply friendly.

The hypothesis that men have lower thresholds for labeling behavior as sexual is consistent with findings that mundane behaviors are the ones most likely to be viewed more sexually by men as compared to women (Feravich et al., 2000; Fisher & Walters, 2003; Kowalski, 1993). Borrowing from Kowalski's classification scheme, it may be that the mundane class of behaviors is the only class of behaviors in which threshold differences are apparent. That is, the friendly class of behaviors may not reach the threshold of being labeled sexual for men or for women, and the strongly sexual class of behaviors may reach the threshold of being labeled sexual for both men and women. In contrast, the mundane class of behaviors may reach the threshold for being labeled sexual by men but not by women. However, these findings can support alternate explanations. For instance, men and women might require the same percentage of sexual behavior to label a person as sexually interested, but men might decide to pursue sexual outcomes more quickly. Thus, gender differences may be found in decisional or behavioral thresholds rather than in perception thresholds alone.

Automatic activation: A recent study by Lindgren, Shoda et al. (2007) found that sexual interpretations may be activated automatically in men and women and that those interpretations

may be activated more rapidly in men. Using the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), a measure of the associative strength of mental constructs, Lindgren and colleagues found that, compared to women, men were faster at associating female targets with sexual versus friendly words. There was no evidence of gender differences with respect to self or male targets. These findings provide initial support that associations between women and sex may be faster and/or stronger in men. Further, it would suggest that men and women perceive and encode situations with a female target differently. Among men, the concept of sex would be activated rapidly, creating a perception of a higher percentage of sex in a female target's behavior, and men would ultimately label the female target as sexually interested. Among women, the concept of sex would not be activated as rapidly, women would perceive a lower percentage of sex in a behavior, and they would not label the female target as sexually interested. However, additional theory-based research is necessary to (a) replicate this finding, (b) test whether such associations are linked to behavioral outcomes, and (c) rule out alternative hypotheses.

Sexualized schemata: Abbey (1982) suggested that men, compared to women, may have more sexualized expectancies in general and more sexualized schemas about women in particular. Compared to theories suggesting that sexual thoughts are activated more quickly in men, sexualized schemata explanations suggest that the schematic content for men and women may differ and that men's schemas may be more sexualized than women's schemas. Two hypotheses follow from the sexualized schemata theory. To the extent that men have sexualized schemas, (1) events and behaviors that can be used to indicate both friendly and sexual intentions are likely to be interpreted in such a way that it confirms a sexualized schema and (2) events and behaviors that fit with this schema, such as women behaving in a sexualized manner, should be remembered better than those that do not (see Abbey, 1991). Providing support for the former hypothesis, findings indicate that men perceive mundane behaviors, but not clearly friendly or clearly seductive behaviors, more sexually than do women (e.g., Feravich et al., 2000; Kowalski, 1993). Regarding the latter, two studies (Lenton & Bryan, 2005; Strachman & Gable, 2006) provide some support for men having better and/or more selective memories for sexualized information than women. In particular, both studies reported findings that men, compared to women, were more likely to have a false memory bias for statements that conveyed sexual interest. A separate study (Bartolucci & Zeichner, 2003) found no evidence of a false memory bias in men, but marked methodological differences (e.g., their stimulus situation lacked sexual cues) would suggest that this study is not an adequate test of the memory bias hypothesis.

Social Skills—Social skill deficits have also been posited as an explanation for gender differences in sexual intent perceptions. A study by Koukounas and Letch (2001) is the only published study to investigate both men's and women's social skills and sexual intent perceptions. Not only did they find that men were less socially skilled than women, they also found that social skills were negatively related to ratings of a female target's sexual intentions. This relation, however, was small ($r = -.15$). Because this relation was not analyzed for men and women separately and because ratings were made only for a female target, it is unclear if there are gender differences—be they rater and/or target-related—in the relation between social skills and sexual intent perceptions. Thus, research regarding the potential for social skills deficits to be implicated in gender differences in sexual intent perceptions is inconclusive, and further studies will be necessary to resolve this issue. Moreover, because findings from some studies suggest that women may underestimate men's sexual intentions (e.g., Abbey, 1982; Shea, 1993), it is possible that social skills deficits affect women's sexual intent perceptions as well.

Self-Presentation—Gender differences in sexual intent perceptions could also be explained by self-presentational factors. For example, women may be less comfortable reporting their own sexual intentions or assessing other people's (Abbey, 1982), or men may be prone to exaggerate their own. Within sexuality research more broadly, there is some support for this notion (see Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Catania, Gibson, Chitwood, & Coates, 1990). However, this idea has not been supported by the sexual intent studies that have directly examined this issue. Shea (1993) found no evidence of gender differences in participants' willingness to report sexual feelings, and Abbey (1982) found that women and men were equally likely to mention sexual attraction as a factor when asked about why they would/would not want to date their experiment partners (Abbey, 1982). Thus, it does not appear that women were reluctant to discuss sexual perceptions. Similarly, Harnish, Abbey, and DeBono (1990) and Shea (1993) found no significant differences in sexual intent ratings as a function of participants' dispositional tendencies toward socially desirable responding, with the exception of high self-monitors rating themselves as more flirtatious and seductive as compared to low self-monitors (Harnish et al., 1990). Interestingly, the only study that entered social desirability as a predictor variable in a hierarchical regression (Fisher & Walters, 2003) found that it was a significant negative, albeit small, predictor for men's ratings ($\beta = -.22$) but not women's ratings ($\beta = .04$). Thus, the self-presentation hypothesis does not appear to be a satisfactory explanation for gender differences in sexual intent perceptions.

Distal Explanations

Among the distal explanations offered for gender differences in sexual intent perceptions are those related to socialization, evolution, and biology.

Socialization—Abbey (1982) ascribed gender differences to the differential socialization of men and women. In particular, she noted the trend that men are portrayed as having more interest in sexual matters than women (Abbey, 1982). Furthermore, cultural expectations dictate that men should initiate sexual encounters and be "forceful, aggressive, and dominant" lovers (Abbey, 1991, p. 102). Thus, Abbey (1982) suggested that men, compared to women, may have more sexualized expectancies in general and more sexualized schemas about women in particular. As discussed earlier, there is support for hypotheses that stem from the sexual schemata theory. However, it is far from clear that gender differences in perceptions arise from sexualized schemata and/or from socialization, per se, as neither construct has been systematically measured. As reviewed earlier, studies that have examined a potential proxy variable for socialization, such as the endorsement of gender roles, have found, at best, small links with sexual perceptions. Moreover, because published sexual intent studies have not (a) measured variables specific and unique to socialization (e.g., exposure to media, endorsement of cultural norms), (b) measured the content of men's and women's sexual schemata, (c) established a link between (a) and (b), or (d) established a link between (a) and (b) and sexual intent perceptions, the claim that these tendencies result from more sexualized schemas or socialization is tenuous.

Evolutionary Psychology—Drawing from evolutionary theory, Haselton and Buss (2000) argued that men and women have a propensity for different types of errors in assessing sexual intentions because of differing natural selection pressures. From a strictly evolutionary point of view, men do not have to make any parental investment to pass on their genes; therefore, it is advantageous for men to have many mates (Trivers, 1972). Haselton and Buss (2000) hypothesized that, because men look to maximize their mating opportunities, they will "possess intention-reading adaptations" that will make them prone to interpret women's behavior as demonstrative of more sexual intent. Over the long term, they argue that it is less costly in terms of men's genetic fitness to have a bias that perceives women as more sexually interested than as less so. It should be noted that testing evolutionary explanations for current

behaviors is generally done in a post hoc fashion. Because the behavior has already evolved, researchers must, in essence, go back in time to evaluate why a behavior evolved. However, proponents of evolutionary explanations can somewhat circumvent this problem by positing novel hypotheses based on their theories, as was the case in a subsequent study by Haselton and Buss (2000).

Haselton and Buss (2000) noted that sisters are not reproductively appropriate and, by ensuring his sister's survival, a man would also ensure that a quarter of his own genes are passed on to future generations—the key outcome for evolutionary success. Thus, Haselton and Buss (2000) proposed an additional “intention reading adaptation” that enabled men to correct their “oversexualization bias” and read their sisters' intentions accurately so that men could better protect and help care for their sisters. Haselton and Buss (2000) found that men's perceptions of their sisters' sexual intentions were reduced in magnitude in comparison to men's perceptions of another woman and characterized their findings as supporting their hypothesis. However, reductions in the magnitude of sexual intent perceptions are not necessarily indicative of having more accurate perceptions.¹ Such findings are also consistent with socio-cultural taboos regarding incest and/or familiarity explanations. That is, it may be inappropriate or less comfortable to perceive sex interest in a sibling. Another possibility is that the findings reflect methodological effects, specifically that there is something phenomenologically different about one's perceptions about a real versus hypothetical person. Along these lines, Lindgren, George, et al. (2007) found a similar pattern of reduction in sexual perceptions of opposite-sex friends and recent opposite-sex acquaintances compared to hypothetical opposite-sex others. Thus, it appears that, although evolutionary psychology explanations, at least as currently proposed, appear logical, they are ultimately not provable.

Biology—A biological explanation has also been offered for gender differences in sexual intent perceptions. Shotland and Craig (1988) speculated that gender differences in baseline sexual arousal might account for differences in perceptions. They noted that men have higher baseline sexual arousal levels and suggested that this sex difference could yield differences in sexual intent thresholds. In support of their hypothesis, they noted that sexual arousal has been induced in the laboratory (e.g., Istvan, Griffit, & Weidner, 1983; Stephan, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971) and was linked to subsequent “sexually related social perceptions.” Shotland and Craig (1988) suggested that men may assume that men and women have similar “sexual appetites” and may simply project their own desires onto women. Ultimately, they suggested that testosterone might be the mechanism for these differences. They cited research by Dabbs, Ruback, and Besch (1987) that “demonstrated that free testosterone increases over baseline when a man interacts socially with either a man or a woman, although the increase is greater when the subject converses with a woman” and stated that “this change in testosterone . . . could be either a cause or a consequence of male perception of sexual intent” (p. 72). Although this hypothesis is intriguing, no published studies have tested it. It also is unclear whether findings based on situations in which men were interacting live with other people would generalize to situations in which men were observers.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN SEXUAL INTENT RESEARCH

Noteworthy methodological limitations persist in sexual intent research. We conclude by considering limitations to current methods and proposing additional methods that could supplement existing methods and enable investigation of new questions.

¹Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this fact.

Recommendation 1: Include Diverse Populations

As stated throughout this article, the scope of the populations studied in sexual intent research is exceedingly narrow. There are no studies that examine sexual intent perceptions among gay, lesbian, or bisexual populations or about gay, lesbian, or bisexual targets. Similarly, with the exception of Goodchilds and Zellman's (1984) study of adolescents' perceptions, there are no studies of populations beyond the very limited age range of college students. Third, only a few studies have examined participants from ethnic and/or racial groups and/or countries beyond White people living in the United States, and the majority of studies have confounded rater demographic characteristics and target demographic characteristics. Moreover, the existing literature on sexual intent perception appears weighted toward a focus on the male perspective because many studies have focused exclusively on men. Even in studies including both men and women, researchers have tended to interpret or discuss findings in the context of men's sexual tendencies. Because most studies cannot speak to whether differences in sexual intent perception are attributable to characteristics of men, women, or both, interpretations that focus primarily on male attributes are problematic. Research that focuses on or considers female-specific explanations could shed more light on the phenomenon and on female sexuality more generally. It is imperative to expand the populations studied in all of the aforementioned areas and to devote efforts to understanding women's perceptions of sexual intent. In doing so, we will not only better understand the degree to which current findings generalize, but we will also better understand the mechanisms that underlie and account for differences in sexual intent perceptions, as well as the developmental trajectory of sexual perceptions.

Recommendation 2: Maximize Experimental Realism and Control by Combining Methodologies

This field of study could benefit considerably from combining methodologies, thereby maximizing experimental realism and control. Short, verbal descriptors of situations are not the most realistic proxies of real-world experiences. Scripted, videotaped interactions may bring more realism, yet because they are scripted, they may under- or over-sample particular behavioral cues that occur in real-life social encounters. Moreover, although it is becoming clearer that mundane behaviors and situations are more likely to yield gender differences in sexual intent perceptions, it is possible that some critical features of behavioral cues or situations remain unknown. Face-to-face live interactions are even more realistic; however, they also introduce a certain lack of control into empirical studies. Technological advances and changes in mechanisms of social interaction suggest novel, innovative possibilities for integrating methodologies. Online chat rooms, instant messaging programs, and/or Internet dating services provide intriguing opportunities to create an environment in which people can have live interactions with a high degree of realism and experimental control. In addition, because participants typically do not see each other when communicating online, features such as physical attractiveness could be controlled and/or easily manipulated.

Recommendation 3: Investigate Mechanisms by Assessing Chronic and Temporarily Activated Processes

Study designs would benefit by considering both chronic and temporarily activated cognitive processes. Prior research has focused largely on chronic attitudes and beliefs rather than temporarily activated ones. Because certain cognitions will be activated in some situations more often than others and will likely be activated to a different degree in different people, it is important to understand how such temporarily activated cognitions might influence sexual intent judgments. For example, both dispositional and temporarily activated tendencies to perceive women as sexual objects increased the likelihood that men asked a female confederate more sexualized questions in a mock job interview (Rudman & Borgida, 1995). Likewise, Johnson, Jackson, and Smith (1989) found that men exposed to stimuli that made them aware

of gender inequality judged a female sexual assault victim to be less responsible for having been assaulted than did men who were exposed to stimuli that did not make gender inequality salient. Studies that consider both types of processes might be able to identify conditions in which men's perceptions are like women's (i.e., less sexualized) and/or women's are more like men's (i.e., more sexualized). Such experimentation can enable us to pinpoint causal linkages and begin crafting viable explanatory models that integrate both distal and proximal determinants of sexual intent perception. The advance of such models may be useful in sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and education efforts.

Recommendation 4: Investigate the Development of Sexual Intent Perceptions as They Unfold

Sexual intent research typically assesses perceptions at one and only one point in time (Abbey, 1982; Kowalski, 1993; Fisher & Walters, 2003). Although this is a reasonable way to assess sexual intent perception, this approach to assessing sexual intent has a perhaps unwitting consequence: Sexual intent perceptions are captured (and potentially conceived of) as static or invariant. Yet, people commonly describe shifts in their own evaluations of another person's sexual intent in real-life situations. For example, a male college student described a situation in which he, initially, was sure that a woman was sexually interested. Yet over the course of their encounter, he attended to her behaviors, began to question whether or not this was the case, became increasingly less certain that she was interested, and ultimately concluded that she was not (Lindgren, 2003). The student's ultimate or summary judgment that the woman had little to no sexual interest in him would likely be the judgment reported in a typical sexual intent study. However, it does not adequately capture the unfolding nature of the student's experience. Unfolding perceptions in a social situation are meaningful, and this notion has been reflected empirically. Leigh and Aramburu (1996) found that men made behavioral choices, as a situation unfolded, that increased the likelihood of sex occurring and that men rated women's intentions as much more sexual than women did. Leigh and Aramburu's (1996) analyses did not specifically evaluate the effect of time (and/or rater gender) on sexual intent ratings, but it appears that men's and women's ratings of their own and their partner's interest in having sex increased over the course of the encounter. In addition, Willan and Pollard's (2003) study, which sampled sexual intent perceptions up to four times over the course of a date (as participants read the account), found that participants' initial (Time 1) judgments of a female target's sexual desire were the most divergent between men and women. In addition, Time 1 judgments were the most divergent between men who did and did not express a willingness to engage in sexual assault.

Dynamic social psychological theory (Nowak & Vallacher, 1998) conceptualizes personality and person perceptions as changing and interactive rather than static and employs techniques that allow one to assess unfolding judgments and perceptions. Techniques in which nearly continuous ratings of subjective experiences are sampled and recorded could readily be applied to sexual intent perception (see Vallacher, Nowak, & Kaufman, 1994). Thus, it would be possible to investigate how individuals' sexual intent perceptions develop throughout an interaction and to address questions about how sexual intent perceptions change or develop as people receive and encode more information about another person and/or about a social interaction.

Recommendation 5: Incorporate Implicit Measures

People's real-life sexual intentions are often difficult to articulate or measure (Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Catania et al, 1990), yet sexual intent research is largely based on explicit self-report measures. Implicit measures may prove helpful in investigating aspects of sexual perception that may occur spontaneously, that may be difficult to articulate, and/or that may occur unconsciously. For example, a pair of studies using an implicit measure found that, at

the automatic level, male participants, compared to female participants, had more sexual associations about women but found no evidence of gender differences in sexual associations about men (Lindgren, Shoda et al., 2007). Implicit measures that assess selective recall (Geer & McGlone, 1990) or the association between constructs through priming (e.g., Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Devine, 1989) could be used to investigate whether friendly behaviors or words facilitate and/or activate sexual behaviors or words for men but not women. Implicit measures may provide an additional benefit because they are less subject to social desirability and may be better predictors of more automatic or spontaneous behaviors than explicit measures.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that gender-based differences in sexual intent perceptions are reliable and are somewhat responsive to situational, target, and/or rater influences. Furthermore, they are most pronounced when the target is female; the target's behaviors are mundane; the situation has the possibility of friendly or sexual outcomes; and the rater has pejorative attitudes about women, sex, and heterosexual relationships. Because there are no prospective, longitudinal studies, and nearly no cross-sectional research on populations of different ages, ethnicities, cultures, and/or sexual orientations, it is extremely difficult to understand how gender differences in sexual intent develop and change and the degree to which they are universal or generalizable. Therefore, to advance the field, research that explicitly focuses on wider samples, takes a prospective approach, considers both chronic and temporarily activated processes, and investigates explanatory mechanisms is imperative.

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