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Doing It Differently: Men's and Women's Estimates of Their Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners

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Sex Matters

The Sexuality and Society Reader

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Doing It Differently: Women's and Men's Estimates of Their Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners

Mindy Stomblor and Dawn M. Baunach

A recent national survey of sexual practices found that men report having more than three times as many sexual partners as women over the course of their lifetimes (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2006). Theoretically, heterosexual men's and women's estimates should be the same because for each new female partner a man adds to his "lifetime account," a woman adds a new male partner to her "lifetime account." The discrepancy between women's and men's estimates remains even when researchers define *sexual partners* very specifically and account for possible sampling problems (such as undersampling female sex workers). What explains the gender gap in claims people make about numbers of sexual partners?

One possibility is that women and men misrepresent their number of lifetime sexual partners to others. Our society tends to hold a double standard regarding the sexual behavior of women and men. Men who have a great deal of sexual experience generally are not subject to shame (and in some circles their behavior is lauded), whereas women with "too many" lifetime partners are stigmatized. Attempts to give interviewers the socially approved response (called *social desirability bias*) may lead women to intentionally underreport their numbers or men to inflate theirs.

Another possibility is that people misrepresent their behaviors to themselves. If women discount partners for whom they feel little affection, such partners could slip from memory, thereby erroneously lowering their reported lifetime account. Women and men also rely on different estimation strategies. Women tend to enumerate (actually count), whereas men tend to give rough estimates (Brown and Sinclair 1999; Weiderman 1997). Weiderman (1997) notes a clear tendency for men reporting larger numbers of lifetime sexual partners to

choose numbers that end in 0 or 5. Men prefer "round" numbers rather than exact counts.

The number of sexual partners that women and men report does become more similar when researchers shorten the time frame for estimation to the past year or the past five years (see the table below), indicating that both men and women estimate more accurately over a shorter period of time. In addition, the cultural meaning that we attach to our accumulated lifetime number of sexual partners carries more weight than, say, the number of partners we might have in a year. Taking the double standard into account, it might be in women's best interest to carefully consider their number of lifetime sexual partners and in men's best interest to round up.

	MEAN NUMBER OF SEXUAL PARTNERS		RATIO
	Women (n = 1,325)	Men (n = 1,005)	Men: Women
Last Five Years	1.94	4.02	2.07
Last Year	.88	1.58	1.80

Source: General Social Survey, 2006.

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SEX MATTERS

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FOURTH EDITION

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MEAN NUMBER OF
SEXUAL PARTNERS

	Women (n=1,153)	Men (n=891)	Difference Men - Women
Last Five Years	1.64	2.10	0.46
Last Year	0.96	1.28	0.32

Source: General Social Survey, 2010.