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Carolyn VanderMolen

DePaul University, carolynvandermolengmail.com

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Acknowledgements

Faculty Advisor: Nicholas Herrera, Department of Psychology Author contact:
carolynvandermol@gmail.com

Flirting Style and Sexual Orientation

Carolyn VanderMolen*
Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT The present study examined the association between flirting style and sexual orientation. Previous research on flirting has emphasized the importance of evolutionary factors. Given the focus of the present study, gender-role theory, which tends to emphasize the importance of cultural and social factors, may offer a better explanation for any differences that might be found. The present study sought to explore the relative importance of these two theories. Surprisingly, the relationship between these variables has not been previously studied. Participants (271 heterosexual and 177 nonheterosexual) completed an online survey. Perhaps the most interesting finding was a significant interaction between flirting style and sexual orientation. In general, heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants differed in the extent to which they identified with the five flirting styles. For example, heterosexual participants scored higher on the traditional style than nonheterosexual participants. These findings might suggest ways that people can flirt more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Flirting is an important social behavior that is influenced by both evolutionary and cultural factors. For example, men and women flirt in different ways (Moore, 2010). Women use 52 different courtship behaviors to attract attention, whereas men use fewer (Renninger, Wade, & Grammer, 2004). Differences such as these are probably due to both different reproductive constraints associated with being female or male, as well as culturally-defined gender roles. Given this logic, it stands to reason that people with different sexual orientations may flirt in different ways. The present study examined the association between flirting style (Hall, Carter, Cody, & Albright, 2010) and sexual orientation.

Hall et al. (2010) argued that how flirting behaviors are performed depends on a person's communication style

and intent. Consequently, he examined and identified five different flirting styles. These flirting styles are: traditional, physical, sincere, playful, and polite. The traditional style of flirting emphasizes a person's loyalty to upholding traditional gender-specific roles. For example, a person who expresses this style might indicate that it is the man's job to initiate verbal contact and the woman's job to follow the leader. The physical style involves touching and behaviors that communicate sexual interest. For example, a person who scores high on this style emphasizes their interest in sex or a one-night stand. People that tend to use this style display sexual desire. The sincere flirting style involves a focus on emotionality and connection with another person. People who score high on the playful flirting style flirt for fun and not necessarily because they want a serious relationship. Finally, the polite style involves more cautious behavior with less emphasis on sexual activity and more on traditional courtship rules (Hall et al., 2010). Participants in Hall et al's (2010) study were heterosexual

* Faculty Advisor: Nicholas Herrera, Department of Psychology
Author contact: carolynvandermolengmail.com

males and females. Nonheterosexual participants were not included.

Some psychologists argue that the way a person flirts may depend on biological constraints described by evolutionary theory (Moore, 2010). For example, evolutionary psychologists have described differences in mating strategies between men and women due to differing reproductive constraints (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Because women become pregnant and give birth, they may be more heavily invested in the survival of their offspring and, because offspring with better genes are more likely to survive, they tend to be more selective when choosing a sexual partner. Because men do not become pregnant or give birth, and their investment in the reproductive process is physically minimal, they tend to be less selective when choosing a sexual partner. Men and women also differ in what they desire in a mate. Men want physically attractive, young women while women want a mature, high status man (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In the case of nonheterosexual individuals, procreation may not be as important. Although nonheterosexual individuals tend to prefer mate preferences similar to heterosexual males and females, there are differences in offspring investment. For example, nonheterosexual males tend to be less concerned with the age of their partner and value sexual encounters more than long-term relationships (Gobrogge et al., 2007). This variation in relationship type could also affect nonheterosexual females as well.

On the other hand, gender role theory emphasizes the importance of contemporary cultural and social factors with regard to topics such as attraction, courtship, and flirting. This theory proposes that males and females tend to conform to societal expectations regarding gender-appropriate behaviors (Eagly & Chvala, 1986). Heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals might differ with regard to flirting behaviors because of social roles and expectations. For example, heterosexual individuals tend to favor a traditional approach when it comes to dating (Frisby et al., 2010).

However nonheterosexual individuals might deviate from traditional gender roles regarding flirting. Nonheterosexual individuals are able to create new gender scripts for themselves, thus straying from societal gender expectations (Riggle et al., 2008). Given these theories, it was hypothesized that a person's biological sex might influence their flirting style to a lesser extent than their sexual orientation. It was also predicted that there would be a difference among nonheterosexual participants in that males and females would differ in flirting style.

METHOD

Four hundred eighty-eight participants completed an online survey hosted by Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Students in Introductory Psychology at DePaul University also participated for partial course credit. Participants included 301 females and 147 males. Of these participants, 271 identified as heterosexual and 177 as nonheterosexual. The mean age was 24 years ($SD = 7.4$).

The survey included questions about demographic information and flirting style. The Flirting Styles Inventory (Hall et al., 2010), consists of 26 statements requiring participants to indicate the amount to which they agree with each statement. Each statement corresponds to one of the five flirting styles (traditional, physical, playful, sincere, and polite) defined by attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. The 7-point Likert-type scale ranged from "1," indicating "disagree strongly," to "7," indicating "agree strongly".

Participants first answered questions about demographic information, such as sex, age, race, and sexual orientation. Next, participants indicated their level of agreement with statements associated with the five flirting styles. Finally, participants were debriefed.

RESULTS

A 2 (sex: male vs. female) x 2 (sexual orientation: heterosexual vs. nonheterosexual) x 5 (flirting style)

repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to test what effect sex and sexual orientation had on flirting style. The dependent variable, a within-subjects factor, was the ratings of the five flirting styles (traditional, physical, playful, sincere, and polite).

There was not a significant main effect of sex, $F(1, 444) = .76, p = .38$, but there was a significant difference between heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants, $F(1, 444) = 37.37, p = .00$. Heterosexual participants ($M = 4.68, SE = .04$) scored higher on flirting styles than nonheterosexual participants ($M = 4.33, SE = .04$). There was also a significant main effect of flirting style, $F(4, 1776) = 300.87, p = .00$. In other words, the five flirting styles were rated differently

There was not a significant interaction between sex and flirting style, $F(4, 1776) = 2.01, p = .089$. However, there was a significant interaction between sexual orientation and flirting style, $F(4, 1776) = 6.65, p < .001$. This means that heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants rated the flirting styles differently. As can be seen in Figure 1, heterosexual participants scored higher on the traditional style ($M = 3.65, SE = .08$) than nonheterosexual participants ($M = 2.87, SE = .08$). The sincere style followed with $M = 5.90, SE = .06$ for heterosexuals and $M = 5.60, SE = .06$ for nonheterosexuals. The three-way interaction between sex, sexual orientation, and flirting styles, approached significance, $F(4, 1776) = 2.16, p = .071$.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, men and women did not differ, in general, in flirting styles, whereas heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants did. In general, heterosexual participants indicated higher levels of agreement than nonheterosexual participants. In addition, heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants differed in how they scored on the five flirting styles. Although post-hoc comparisons were not examined, it can be seen in Figure 1, which include standard error bars, that, for example, heterosexual participants scored higher on the traditional style than nonheterosexual participants.

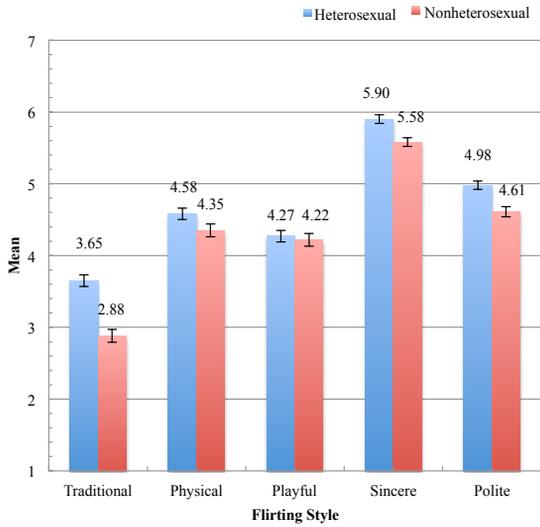
The prediction that there would be a difference between male and female nonheterosexual participants was not supported. These findings may reflect the importance of cultural norms and social factors that indicate how different people are expected to flirt (Eagly & Chvala, 1986; Frisby, et al., 2010).

Consistent with the importance of cultural factors, is the fact that heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants differed most in their ratings of the traditional style. This difference can be explained in the participant's identity defined through traditional gender roles as seen in gender role theory. Nonheterosexual participants may not identify with heterosexual gender roles and therefore may not adopt the traditional style of flirting, which reflects cultural ideals regarding heterosexual courtship. There was at least one important problem with the methodology of the present study. Sex differences in flirting styles might be due to who approaches whom rather than biological sex (Finkel & Eastwick, 2009). This is not likely to be a problem in the present study, however, because the main effect of sex was not significant, the interaction between sex and flirting style was not significant, and the three-way interaction was not significant. However, future studies might take into account, for both heterosexual and nonheterosexual participants, who tends to approach.

The present study is one of the first to examine the effect of sexual orientation on flirting styles, and there do appear to be interesting differences. An awareness of such differences might allow people to tailor their flirting strategies, depending on the specific person with whom they are flirting. To the extent that they flirt using a style that matches their partner's expectations, they might have greater success at relationship initiation.

FIGURE 1

Flirting Style Means and Standard Error
of the Mean for Heterosexual and
Nonheterosexual Participants



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