Double Standards in Relationships

In its general form, a double standard is a set of rules, guidelines, restrictions, or a moral code that is applied more strongly to one group than another. Double standards typically emerge in areas characterized by stereotypes or different value systems, such as race, religion, or gender.

One type of double standard, which may be called an “actor-observer” double standard, can occur in romantic relationships. The name “actor-observer” comes from the actor-observer bias, which is the tendency for people to interpret other people’s negative actions based on their personality rather than the situation, while basing their own actions on the situation rather than their personality (e.g., “I act the way I do because of the situation I am in, while he acts the way he does because of the way he is.”). A person in a relationship may consider his or her own actions to be normal, harmless, or nonthreatening, while considering those same actions by the other partner to be very troubling. Some examples include going out with friends of the opposite sex, forgetting to call on the phone, or being unresponsive. For instance, if a wife tells her husband that she will call him at eight o’clock but does not do it, he may attribute her behavior to something threatening, such as not wanting to call him, ignoring him, or cheating on him, and may become quite upset. It may be the case that her cell phone battery died, she got a flat tire, or she simply forgot. If, however, the man fails to call his wife, he attributes his behavior to his situation (e.g., forgetting, flat tire), not to his personality.

This double standard may be especially common when one partner in the relationship has a “preoccupied” attachment style. A person with this type of attachment style is very concerned with closeness and is worried about being abandoned. Preoccupied people have chronic accessibility to thoughts about abandonment and closeness seeking, so many types of behavior, no matter how innocent, are often interpreted by them as a threat to the relationship. In summary,
people may hold relational double standards such that what is appropriate behavior for them is not appropriate for their partner.

Perhaps the most common domain characterized by a double standard is that of sexual behavior. In Western society, it is widely believed that a *sexual double standard* (sometimes known as *the* double standard) exists, such that more rigorous standards exist for sexually active women than men. Sometimes this is given the “studs vs. sluts” designation; when a man is purported to have slept with many women, he is given nicknames like, “stud” or “player,” which are considered to be compliments. However, women who have purportedly slept with many men are often given derogatory nicknames, such as “slut” or “ho.”

Although this type of double standard seems quite prominent to most people, quite a bit of research suggests that a sexual double standard may not be as common today as it once was in the 1950’s and 60’s, when some research indicated that women were perceived more negatively than men for engaging in high levels of sexual activity. Contemporary research by Michael Marks and his colleagues sheds some light on this disparity. One study shows that people in a social situation are likely to display a sexual double standard. This is because when people are in a social situation, they are more likely to act in a way they believe to be consistent with social norms. For instance, the researcher Solomon Asch found that people tended to do very well in a matching task when alone, but when in the presence of others tended to go along with the group, even when the group was wrong. Because many people believe the sexual norms surrounding the double standard to be true, they may act in accordance with them in order to appear consistent with social norms and avoid punishment (e.g., insults, teasing).

Another reason why a sexual double standard may seem prominent is the use of stereotypes in judging sexually active men and women. When a person is in a laboratory (which
is generally a very quiet, socially isolated room) evaluating a sexually active person, it is very easy for that person to focus all of his or her mental resources to evaluating and thinking about that person. This makes it likely that the target person is evaluated on things like personality than on how much sex that person has had. In true social situations, however, it is much harder to think about individual people because there so much information to attend to. We have to pay attention to our own behaviors and interpret signals from others. This means we have less mental energy to devote to person perception, and therefore need to take “mental shortcuts” such as stereotyping. If this is the case, then the target person may be evaluated based on things like how much sex that person has had (or is perceived to have had based on rumors, gossip, etc.) instead of their personal attributes.

Finally, it may be the case that people have a bias towards information that supports a sexual double standard. In other words, people remember more information that is consistent than inconsistent with stereotypes. Thus, it may be easier for people to notice and remember women being derogated and men being rewarded for sexual behavior than vice versa. Therefore, even if men and women are treated equally based on their sexual behavior, the instances that are noticed and remembered by people are the ones that are consistent with the double standard, giving rise to the appearance of its existence.

As a closing note, it is important to point out that holding or endorsing a double standard is not necessarily the same thing as hypocrisy. A double standard is holding different sets of rules for different people, whereas a hypocrite is someone who acts differently from what he or she says or believes. For example, if a person believes it is his or her right to have an extramarital affair but does not allow his or her spouse that right, the person holds a double
standard. A person who claims extramarital affairs are immoral and wrong while maintaining one is a hypocrite.

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Further readings


