Promoting Theory-Based Perspectives in Sexual Double Standard Research

Yuliana Zaikman ¹ · Michael J. Marks ¹

Abstract The sexual double standard (SDS) has been a focus of research for several decades. Numerous anecdotal accounts of the double standard exist, detailing its consequences and impact on women’s, as well as men’s, sexual behavior and identities. Empirical research, however, has yet to completely corroborate the degree to which the double standard pervades everyday life. The disparity between anecdotal accounts and empirical evidence related to the SDS may be the result of the partially atheoretical approach with which the SDS has traditionally been examined. The goal of the present paper is to encourage researchers to take a more theory-oriented approach to understanding the double standard. Our goal is not to provide another comprehensive literature review or an argument for the “best” theory, but rather to promote theory-based perspectives in future SDS research. In the current paper, three theoretical perspectives—evolutionary theory, social role theory, and cognitive social learning theory—and their relevance to the SDS are discussed. We discuss four hypotheses, one related to the core tenet of the SDS itself, and three related to moderating factors, including characteristics of evaluators (i.e., gender, gender roles beliefs, and sexual history), characteristics of targets (i.e., relationship type engaged in, sexual activities participated in, and power status), and social factors (i.e., cultural background, historical era, and socialization agents). Existing research is also interpreted in light of one or more of the theoretical perspectives in the hopes of guiding future research.

Keywords Sexual double standard · Evolutionary theory · Social role theory · Cognitive social learning theory · Sex differences · Sexual behavior · Gender roles

The sexual double standard (SDS) is the phenomenon whereby heterosexual men and women are evaluated differently regarding sex and sexuality (Marks and Fraley 2005; all cited empirical studies are based on U.S. samples unless noted). According to the traditional double standard, women are more restricted in their sexual freedom, and they are evaluated more negatively than are men for engaging in sexual behavior or expressing sexual agency. The way sexually active women are perceived has potentially important implications for women’s sexual health and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (Williamson et al. 2009, with Sub-Saharan African & South-East Asian samples), sexual identity (Katz and Farrow 2000), portrayal in popular media (Aubrey 2004; Waggett 1989), sexual satisfaction (Higgins et al. 2010; Muehlenhard 1988), and perception by others after a sexual assault (L’Armand and Pepitone 1982).

Detecting the SDS empirically, however, has proven to be difficult. Contrary to anecdotal evidence, empirical research suggests that the SDS is not as robust or pervasive as it appears. Some research suggests there is a lack of clear evidence of a SDS (e.g., Gentry 1998; Jacoby and Williams 1985; Marks and Fraley 2005; Oliver and Sedikides 1992; O’Sullivan 1995; Sprecher 1989; Sprecher et al. 1988, 1997), whereas other research on heterosexual relationships suggests the double standard exists in several contexts (e.g., Marks 2008; Marks and Fraley 2007; Zaikman and Marks 2014).

Furthermore, some recent research revealed evidence not only for the traditional double standard, but also for a reversed double standard (e.g., Howell et al. 2011; Zaikman and Marks

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According to the reversed double standard, women are evaluated more positively than are men who engage in identical sexual behavior (Milhausen and Herold 1999, with a Canadian sample). As the reversed double standard becomes more apparent in empirical studies, it is important to examine previously proposed theories that were used to explain the existence of the SDS and to determine whether these theories can explain the diversity of research findings in today’s literature.

One possible explanation for the difficulty of documenting the SDS is that many empirical studies on the topic have not been theoretically based. In other words, researchers often set out to document the SDS without considering the phenomenon from a theoretical viewpoint and, instead, base predictions on anecdotal evidence. This approach can oversimplify the SDS, which is far more complex than men being rewarded for their sexuality and women being derogated for theirs (Hird and Jackson 2001). Without theoretical consideration of the mechanisms underlying the SDS, researchers may be destined to fruitless searching for evidence of the phenomenon. Instead of adding to the number of literature reviews on this topic, our goal is to provoke and inspire future researchers to take on a more theoretical approach to the SDS. Examining the SDS from a theoretical viewpoint is important for three reasons. First, theory-based predictions allow for better and more rigorous experimental design. Second, it allows for greater integration with other areas of psychology. Finally, theoretically based studies will allow for a greater understanding of how and why the SDS operates. This last point is perhaps the most important; without understanding the mechanisms underlying the SDS, it will be very difficult to make any progress in lessening its impact on individuals and our society as a whole.

### Three Theoretical Perspectives

In the present paper we will focus on three theories that allow for predictions about evaluations of sexually active men and women: evolutionary theory, social role theory, and cognitive social learning theory (CSLT). We begin by providing a brief overview of these three theories. Next, we present four hypotheses, and then discuss relevant theoretical explanations and empirical evidence related to each hypothesis.

#### Evolutionary Theory

Evolutionary theory posits the SDS occurs because evolutionary adaptations influence how we view our own and others’ sexual behavior. According to evolutionary theory, certain traits or attributes confer a survival or reproductive advantage to some members of a species, increasing the likelihood that the genes responsible for those traits or attributes will be passed on to future generations. There are several adaptations related to reproductive success, including mate preferences, strategies for acquiring and keeping a mate, and attributes that render one desirable as a mate, which may have shaped current attitudes about sexually active men and women.

The amount of investment required for reproduction is one such relevant adaptation. According to the theory of parental investment (Trivers 1972), the sex of a species which invests the most in producing and raising offspring is the sex that will be more selective with respect to choosing mates. The differences in the investment and reproductive strategies between men and women arise for several reasons. First, in humans, men constantly generate millions of sperm per day over the course of their lives, whereas women release approximately 400 ova, at the rate of one per month, over the course of their lives (Oliver and Hyde 1993). Second, the outcomes of successful fertilization are different for men and women. After men contribute sperm to the reproductive process, their necessary role in the biological process is over, and further commitment is voluntary (albeit extremely helpful). Women, on the other hand, must carry the child to term, survive parturition, and then nurse, rear, and protect the child until it reaches maturity (Buss 2003).

Third, because women have a far more limited maximum of genetic offspring they can produce, compared to men, the way to ensure genetic continuation is to ensure the survival of those offspring by investing time and effort into their survival (Petersen and Hyde 2010). These reproductive adaptations can lead to certain mate preferences (e.g., women preferring mates for the long-term because they presumably will provide for them and their offspring) and, as we describe later, can impact evaluations of men and women that are sensitive to sexual information.

#### Social Role Theory

Another theory commonly used to explain the SDS is social role theory, which posits that the SDS occurs because society expects different behaviors from men and women. According to social role theory, gendered attitudinal differences exist due to the different roles men and women occupy in a society (Eagly and Wood 1999), which is applicable to the SDS. Gender roles are formed as a consequence of the expectations and the preferred characteristics attributed to each gender (Eagly and Wood 1999).

Gender—as perceived by both actors and observers—plays a large role in social interactions; it influences both how a person is treated and treats others. People’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by gender and by what they think is appropriate for that gender. Gender expectations are normative in the sense that they describe qualities and behaviors that are desirable or appropriate for each gender. Awareness of gender differences is pervasive (Williams and Best 1982), which forms the basis of gender roles. People are judged according to their adherence to gender roles; they also...
internalize these roles as a significant part of their identity. Gender roles are likely to exert a strong influence on behavior when there is wide agreement of the stereotype or a strong cultural expectation of gendered behavior (Anselmi and Law 1998). Moreover, because conformity to role expectations usually occurs when these expectations are salient, social contexts that increase the salience of gender-role expectations should lead to stereotypical gender differences (Eagly 1987).

In addition to expectations and social contexts, these gender differences originated due to physical differences between men and women. Men are physically stronger, and women play the main role in childbearing and nursing their children. These physical differences, in combination with social and ecological conditions, resulted in men and women being responsible for different activities (Eagly and Wood 1999). Men’s activities typically involved more status and power yielding more dominant behavior, whereas women’s activities usually involved more domestic activities yielding more submissive behavior. In the more recent eras, women are more concentrated in different occupations, represented less in managerial positions, and are paid lower wages compared to men. According to social role theory, men and women’s sexual behavior that adheres to, or that violates, gender roles is evaluated positively or negatively, respectively. In other words, adherence to or violation of gender roles contributes to the manifestation of the SDS.

Cognitive Social Learning Theory

Cognitive social learning theory (CSLT; Bandura 1986) posits that the SDS exists due to reinforcement of behaviors that are consistent with gender roles as well as punishment of behaviors that are inconsistent with gender roles. Our attitudes and behaviors about sex and gender are patterned after social and cultural expectations and observations of their reinforcement (Kohlberg 1966). According to CSLT, learning is facilitated by observing and modeling the behavior of others, specifically by imitating behaviors that result in social rewards and by avoiding behaviors that result in social sanctions (Bandura and Walters 1963). Direct rewards or punishments are not necessary to increase or decrease a certain behavior, but rather expectations of a reward or punishment are sufficient for behavioral modification to occur (Hogben and Byrne 1998). Indirect learning can occur as well, whereby observations of others receiving rewards or sanctions for certain behaviors can alter the observer’s behavior. In all these cases, learning occurs via cognitive processes of deciding whether a certain behavior should be imitated or not (Petersen and Hyde 2010). This learning can be controlled by both internal and external stimuli (Mischel 1966). If a behavior is rewarded, it is more likely to be imitated and repeated, whereas a behavior that is punished is less likely to be imitated.

Core Tenet of the SDS

Evaluations of Women and Men

Hypothesis 1 predicts that highly sexually active heterosexual men will be evaluated more positively than highly sexually active heterosexual women. Testing this hypothesis serves to uncover basic empirical evidence of the core tenet of the SDS.

Evolutionary Theory's Explanation

In terms of reproductive fitness, men benefit more than do women from frequent sex and having numerous sexual partners (Petersen and Hyde 2010; Buss and Schmitt 1993). In contrast, women benefit more than do men from conservative mate selection, choosing those who can provide optimum genetic quality and resources for their offspring (Oliver and Hyde 1993) and willingness to assist in raising their offspring (Wiederman and Allgeier 1992). Thus, men would benefit from having higher numbers of sexual partners, whereas women would benefit from having fewer numbers of sexual partners (Petersen and Hyde 2010).

These sex differences in reproductive strategies are related to mate selection and personal evaluation. Individuals seek partners showing signs of health and reproductive fitness, such as facial symmetry (Zaidel et al. 2005), low body mass index, and optimal waist-to-hip ratios (Goodwin 2001; Wilson et al. 2005, with a Canadian sample). Moreover, people tend to attribute positive characteristics to attractive individuals and to evaluate them positively (i.e., the beautiful-is-good effect; Dion et al. 1972). Individuals with symmetrical faces are perceived as more attractive and healthy and are also attributed more positive personality characteristics (Fink et al. 2006, with an Austrian sample). In sum, because of these links, people may attribute positive personality characteristics to those exhibiting physical and behavioral signs of fitness. By contrast, individuals displaying reproductively disadvantageous traits and behaviors may be evaluated negatively. For example, high levels of female sexual activity can lead to paternity uncertainty and depletion of women’s resources, outcomes optimally to be avoided. Thus, those who exhibit physical or behavioral traits indicating a lack of fitness might be evaluated negatively (Milhausen and Herold 2001).

Social Role Theory's Explanation

Power disparities between the genders led to different gender roles and consequently to differences in sexual attitudes (Fugère et al. 2008; Petersen and Hyde 2010). Men are afforded more sexual agency because they hold more power and dominance in patriarchal cultures, whereas women lack sexual agency because they are afforded less power (Eagly and Wood 1999). Men and women are expected to behave
according to their gender roles. Adherence to men’s and women’s roles as agentic and communal (respectively) can yield social rewards and acceptance, whereas violation of these roles can lead to punishments and social sanctions (Blashill and Powlishta 2009; Gaunt 2012).

CSLT’s Explanation

Mischel (1966) defined gender-typed behaviors as those that typically elicit different rewards for one gender than for the other. In other words, gender-typed behaviors have consequences (administered by others or the self) that vary according to the gender of the performer. Because of these differential consequences, gender-typed behaviors tend to be valued differently and to occur with different frequencies for the two genders. Early on, children discover (both through their behavior and by observing the behavior of others) that the consequences of performing such behaviors are contingent on their gender, and therefore they increase or decrease their behaviors accordingly. Because sexual agency is typically assigned as a male trait and sexual passivity as a female trait, CSLT predicts that a highly sexually agentic woman will be evaluated more negatively than a highly sexually agentic man will be because she does not adhere to her gender-typed behavior of being sexually passive.

Empirical Evidence

Researchers found support for the existence of the SDS with respect to premarital sexual intercourse (Reiss 1960, 1964) and first sexual experience (Sprecher et al. 1987). More recently, however, Marks and Fraley (2005) did not find strong support for its existence. Nonetheless, because all three theories predict the traditional double standard (albeit due to different reasons), it is unclear which of the theories can best explain it. Moreover, all of these studies are either outdated or examine people’s evaluations of sexual behavior without taking into account other factors (Oliver and Sedikides 1992). Most contemporary examinations of the SDS have involved various moderating factors, and these less simplistic models are what we will examine in the following section.

Moderated Hypotheses Relevant to the SDS

The SDS is most commonly tested not through simple gender comparisons focused on the core tenet itself, but rather through moderated analyses grounded in appropriate theory(ies). In this section, we outline three commonly generated moderated hypotheses. Our goal is to bring theory to these hypotheses in an effort to motivate researchers to conduct new research on the SDS. In some cases, we present predictions derived from individual theories. In other cases, we present competing hypotheses generated from different theoretical perspectives. Again, the goal is not to choose a single perspective that is best suited to explain the SDS, but rather to suggest that drawing from multiple theoretical perspectives will allow researchers to best explain it. Furthermore, we note only three main hypotheses, but those are not necessarily the only ones available. We chose these specific hypotheses as illustrations of the variety of potential hypotheses. See Table 1 for a breakdown of hypotheses related to the SDS and the predictions various theories make about them.

Gender, Gender Roles, and Sexual History

Hypothesis 2 focuses on three potential moderators of SDS related to characteristics of the respondents. (a) Gender (Hypothesis 2a): Male and female respondents will evaluate highly sexually active individuals of the same sex more negatively than less sexually active individuals. On the other hand, male respondents will evaluate highly sexually active women more positively than less sexually active women, whereas female respondents will evaluate highly sexually active men less positively than less sexually active men. (b) Personal endorsement of gender roles (Hypothesis 2b): Respondents who endorse traditional gender role beliefs will evaluate highly sexually active male targets more positively than highly sexually active female targets, whereas respondents who endorse egalitarian gender role beliefs will evaluate highly sexually active male and female targets similarly. (c) Personal sexual history (Hypothesis 2c): Highly sexually experienced respondents will be more likely to endorse the SDS compared to respondents with less sexual experience.

Gender: Evolutionary Theory’s Explanation and Empirical Evidence

Regarding Hypothesis 2a, evolutionary theory predicts that the gender of the evaluator will impact the emergence of the SDS. Specifically, intrasexual competition or intersexual attraction can influence whether highly sexually active men and women are evaluated differently. An adaptation related to parental investment is that, due to the disparity between the reproductive investments required of the two sexes, the sex that invests more becomes a resource sought after by the sex that invests less (Trivers 1972). This adaptation can explain sex differences with respect to the SDS: For men, highly sexually active fellow men hamper reproductive fitness via a larger mating pool, whereas highly sexually active women could be considered potential mates. For women, highly sexually active fellow women cheapen their reproductive value to men by creating a greater pool of resources for which to compete, whereas highly sexually active men could be considered potential mates. In other words, according to evolutionary
Table 1  Hypotheses related to the SDS and their degree of theoretical and empirical support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Hypothesis</th>
<th>Evolutionary theory explanation</th>
<th>Social role theory explanation</th>
<th>CSLT explanation</th>
<th>Empirical evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Double Standard: Highly sexually active heterosexual men will be evaluated more positively than highly sexually active heterosexual women</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Further research is needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Male and female respondents will evaluate highly sexually active individuals of the same sex more negatively than less sexually active individuals. On the other hand, male respondents will evaluate highly sexually active women more positively than less sexually active women, whereas female respondents will evaluate highly sexually active men less positively than less sexually active men.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Some support for evolutionary theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Respondents who endorse traditional gender role beliefs will evaluate highly sexually active male targets more positively than highly sexually active female targets, whereas respondents who endorse egalitarian gender role beliefs will evaluate highly sexually active male and female targets similarly.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Support for social role theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Highly sexually experienced respondents will be more likely to endorse and exhibit the SDS compared to respondents with less sexual experience.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Further research is needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) When a respondent considers an opposite gender target individual for a long-term relationship, he/she will evaluate the highly sexually active target more positively. When a respondent considers an opposite gender individual for a short-term relationship, he/she will evaluate the highly sexually active target more positively.</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Support for evolutionary theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) According to evolutionary theory, the SDS will be evident regarding a target's sexual activities that can lead to reproduction, but will not be evident or evident to a lesser degree when considering a target's sexual activities that cannot lead to reproduction. According to social role theory, the SDS will be evident even when considering targets' sexual activities that cannot lead to reproduction.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Support for social role theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) The SDS will be evident when there are power differences between male and female target individuals, but it will not be evident, or evident to a lesser degree when there are no power differences.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Support for social role theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) According to evolutionary theory, the SDS will be evident across cultures in a similar fashion, whereas according to social role theory, the SDS will be dependent on the cultural variation of sexual attitudes. Specifically, the SDS will be more evident in patriarchal societies and less evident in more egalitarian societies.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Support for social role theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) According to evolutionary theory, the SDS will be evident across eras in a similar fashion, whereas according to social role theory, the SDS will vary throughout historical eras, depending on changes in gender roles.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Support for social role theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Respondents who have parents or peers who endorse the SDS, are heavy media consumers, and are aware of rewards and punishments for sexual behavior will be more likely to endorse the SDS compared to respondents whose parents or peers do not endorse the SDS, are light media consumers and are less aware of rewards and punishments for sexual behavior.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Some support for CSLT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The + sign indicates that an explanation from a theory supports the specific hypothesis. The − sign indicates that an explanation from a theory does not support or contradicts the specific hypothesis. The N/A indicates that there are no relevant explanations from a theory for the specific hypothesis. It is important to use this table as a guide to the more nuanced discussion in the text and not as a scorecard that pits theories against each other.
theory, men and women should evaluate highly sexually active individuals of the same sex more negatively than less sexually active individuals because they pose as mate competition. On the other hand, men should evaluate highly sexually active women more positively than less sexually active women, whereas women should evaluate highly sexually active men less positively than less sexually active men. Social role theory and CSLT do not yield any predictions associated with Hypothesis 2a.

According to evolutionary theory, men find sexually experienced women more desirable than sexually inexperienced women when considering a short-term mate (Buss and Schmitt 1993). Moreover, men find sexually experienced women less desirable than sexually inexperienced women when considering long-term mates (Buss and Schmitt 1993; Oliver and Sedikides 1992). On the other hand, and contrary to evolutionary theory predictions, when considering long-term partners, women tend to seek sexual restraint in both long- and short-term mates (Buss and Schmitt 1993). SDS research also found inconsistent results regarding participants’ gender. Male participants were more likely than female participants to endorse the SDS (Sprecher et al. 2013). Furthermore, when considering attitudes towards hooking up (engaging in casual sex) in college, male participants were more likely to endorse the traditional double standard (e.g., lose respect for women but not for men), whereas female participants were more likely to endorse more egalitarian conservative attitudes (e.g., lose respect for women and men; Allison and Risman 2013). Other SDS studies did not reveal specific participant gender differences, but did reveal that female participants evaluated highly sexually active women more negatively than their male counterparts (consistent with the traditional double standard), whereas male participants evaluated highly sexually active men more negatively than their female counterparts (consistent with the reversed double standard; Zaikman and Marks 2014). These patterns of results are consistent with intrasexual competition explanations, and consequently they provide some empirical support for evolutionary theory.

**Gender Roles: Social Role Theory’s Explanation and Empirical Evidence**

Regarding Hypothesis 2b (personal endorsement of gender roles), individuals may hold intrapsychic sexual scripts containing their personal desires, thoughts, motives, and self-conceptions concerning sexual activity. For example, gender roles can be internalized by individuals, thus affecting their perceptions of external gender roles (e.g., traditional vs. egalitarian; Eagly and Wood 1999). Consequentially, these perceptions can impact the expression of the SDS. Individuals who endorse the idea of men being the breadwinners and possessors of greater sexual freedom tend to endorse traditional gender roles, whereas those who endorse a more equal distribution of roles, power, and sexual freedom tend to endorse egalitarian gender roles. Thus, whether an individual endorses the SDS should depend on what type of gender role beliefs he or she holds. If individuals hold more traditional gender role beliefs, they should be more likely to evaluate target individuals in accordance with the traditional double standard. Alternatively, if individuals hold stronger egalitarian gender role beliefs, they should evaluate highly sexually active men and women more equally. Evolutionary theory and CSLT do not yield any predictions about Hypothesis 2b.

Individuals’ personal beliefs about social roles (traditional vs. egalitarian) related to the expression of the SDS: Men and women higher in both benevolent (positive prejudice) and hostile (negative prejudice) sexism (indicating higher belief in traditional gender roles) held attitudes consistent with the traditional double standard, whereas those who scored lower on the sexism scales (indicative of higher belief in egalitarian gender roles) held attitudes consistent with the reversed double standard (Zaikman and Marks 2014). It is possible that those endorsing egalitarian beliefs, in an attempt to evaluate men and women equally despite knowledge that women are traditionally viewed negatively, overcorrected their positive evaluations of women, resulting in a reversed double standard. Nevertheless, these findings provide support for social role theory.

**Sexual History: CSLT’s Explanation and Empirical Evidence**

Regarding Hypothesis 2c, there are several ways that a behavior related to the SDS can be learned, modeled, and reinforced. Consequences and rewards related to sexual activity can be experienced directly. Men and women whose sexual behaviors (or even reputations based on purported behaviors) become known to others may directly experience gains or losses of status, inclusion or ostracism from groups, praise or insults, and increases or decreases in self-esteem as a result of their actions or reputations. By experiencing these consequences firsthand, the actor learns directly which behaviors result in which outcomes, and subsequently that actor has a higher or lower probability of engaging in (or giving the appearance he or she is or is not engaging in) repeated instances of that behavior. Thus, individuals, who have directly experienced consequences and rewards associated with certain sexual behaviors will be more likely to endorse the SDS compared to individuals who have not experienced such consequences and rewards, or experienced them to a lesser degree. Evolutionary theory and social role theory do not yield any predictions about Hypothesis 2c.

Previous research examined the relationship between an individual’s number of sexual partners and the endorsement of the SDS (Zaikman et al. 2016b). No relationship emerged between participants’ previous number of sexual partners and their evaluations of highly sexually active targets.
Nonetheless, it is possible that such a relationship was not observed due to the relatively low numbers of sexual partners of the participants (female participants: $M = 3.44, SD = 3.95$, range = 0–22; male participants: $M = 4.61, SD = 6.15$, range = 0–20). SDS researchers often use 12 sexual partners as a high number of sexual partners, thus participants possibly did not identify with the highly sexually active targets and did not reward or punish them for their sexual activity. It is possible that recruiting older individuals with a greater number of lifetime sexual partners (comparable to that of the highly sexually active targets), or changing the target’s number of sexual partners presented in the vignette to a number comparable to the experimental sample means, could shed additional light on the influence of personal sexual history on endorsement of the SDS.

Another area that has not been explored is that of self-sanctioning for sexual activity. As discussed earlier, CSLT predicts that women would administer more self-sanctioning (in the form of guilt, shame, or concealment of sexual activity), than would men; men may even reward themselves by feeling proud or bragging about sexual activity. Examining how people feel after engaging in sexual activity could shed light on the feasibility of social learning as a source of the SDS.

**Relationship Type, Sexual Activities, and Power**

Hypothesis 3 focuses on three potential moderators of the SDS related to characteristics of the target. (a) Target’s relationship type (Hypothesis 3a): When a respondent considers an opposite-gender target individual for a long-term relationship, he/she will evaluate the highly sexually active target more negatively. When a respondent considers an opposite-gender individual for a short-term relationship, he/she will evaluate the highly sexually active target more positively. (b) Sexual activities in which the target has engaged (Hypothesis 3b): According to evolutionary theory, the SDS will be evident regarding a target’s sexual activities that can lead to reproduction, but will not be evident, or evident to a lesser degree, when considering a target’s sexual activities that cannot lead to reproduction. According to social role theory, the SDS will be evident even when considering targets’ sexual activities that cannot lead to reproduction. (c) Power differences between target individuals (Hypothesis 3c): The SDS will be evident when there are power differences between male and female target individuals, but it will not be evident, or will be evident to a lesser degree, when there are no power differences.

**Relationship Type: Evolutionary Theory’s Explanation and Empirical Evidence**

Regarding Hypothesis 3a, evolutionary theory presupposes that, in terms of reproductive fitness, men benefit more from short-term relationships, whereas women benefit more from long-term relationships. Nonetheless, there are situations where men’s fitness can be enhanced by long-term relationships and women’s by short-term relationships (Buss and Schmitt 1993). Long-term relationships offer men exclusive access to higher quality mates and economic cooperation between partners (Buss and Schmitt 1993), and short-term relationships offer women immediate access to their mate’s resources, an opportunity to assess the mate’s long-term potential, and greater protection from the mate (Buss and Schmitt 1993). Because men and women can desire both short- and long-term relationships, their evaluation of others depends on whether they consider these others as possible short- or long-term mates.

Women considering a potential long-term mate might perceive a highly sexually active man as a womanizer who has neither the ability nor the desire to sustain a long-term relationship (Buss 2003), who has poor prospects for investing in the woman and the offspring (Buss and Schmitt 1993), and who interferes with women’s long-term goals (Buss 2003). In this case, a man’s promiscuity may serve as a signal that his resources are channeled into several different mates, leaving a smaller (if any) allocation to any one woman. On the other hand, women considering a potential short-term mate might perceive the highly sexually active man as possessing some important or positive characteristics that regularly attract women (e.g., economic capacity, intelligence, social status), and thus evaluate him positively.

Although male promiscuity can pose a problem in the form of potential lost resources for women considering the man as long-term mate, female promiscuity presents an even greater evolutionary problem for men in the form of paternity uncertainty. If a man considers a woman for a long-term relationship, a highly sexually active woman can be perceived as presenting a cuckoldry risk, possessing an inability to be faithful, and being unable to find a high quality long-term mate (Buss and Schmitt 1993). In other words, the man cannot be certain that his genes are being propagated and his resources allocated to his own offspring, and thus he may evaluate the highly sexually active woman negatively. Nonetheless, if the man considers a woman as a potential short-term mate, the highly sexually active woman can be viewed as sexually accessible short-term mate (Buss and Schmitt 1993), and thus he may evaluate her positively. Therefore, men’s and women’s perceptions of highly sexually active women and men, respectively, depend in part on whether they perceive them as long- or short-term mates. Social role theory and CSLT do not yield any predictions regarding Hypothesis 3a.

Relationship type is related to acceptability of sexual activity (Sprecher et al. 1991). When the target individual was evaluated as a friend or a potential marriage partner, low sexual activity was preferred, whereas when the target individual was evaluated as a dating partner, moderate or high sexual
activity was preferred. Gender differences include male participants preferring moderate sexual activity, and female participants preferring high sexual activity (Sprecher et al. 1991). Thus, there is empirical support for evolutionary theory.

**Sexual Activities: Evolutionary Theory’s Explanation**

Regarding Hypothesis 3b, evolutionary theory focuses on reproductive strategies, thus, the SDS is more likely to emerge when considering sexual activities that can actually lead to reproduction, as opposed to sexual activities that are less likely to lead to reproduction (e.g., kissing or heavy petting). In other words, the SDS should not be evident, or should be evident to a lesser degree, when considering the targets’ sexual activities that cannot lead to reproduction (e.g., oral sex or intercourse between same-sex individuals). Nonetheless, it is important to note that sexual behaviors are not limited to the context of reproduction, but rather they can be viewed as general tendencies.

**Sexual Activities: Social Role Theory’s Explanation**

Regarding Hypothesis 3b, social role theory posits that the SDS will be evident when considering the targets’ sexual activities, whether or not they can lead to reproduction. This will occur because violation or adherence to gender roles does not have to relate to actual sexual intercourse. Thus, social role theory would predict that the SDS will be evident even when considering a target’s sexual activities that cannot lead to reproduction. CSLT does not yield any predictions regarding Hypothesis 3b.

**Sexual Activities: Empirical Evidence**

Because evolutionary theory focuses on reproductive strategies, the SDS may be more evident when considering actual sexual intercourse and less evident for other sexual activities that do not directly result in reproduction. Nonetheless, women are subjected to scrutiny and derogation even when engaging in permissive non-intercourse sexual behaviors or behaviors that cannot lead to reproduction. For example, women, compared to men, were blamed more for sexual assault (regardless if they were victims or perpetrators) when the sexual activity described was either oral sex or sexual intercourse (i.e., there were no significant differences between the two types of sexual activity; Koon-Magnin and Ruback 2012). Moreover, female adolescents were blamed and shamed for “sexting” (sending sexual images of themselves as text messages) by being labeled negatively, whereas male adolescents used these types of images as a type of currency for status (Ringrose et al. 2013, with a British sample). It is possible that individuals might view these “sexting” and oral sex activities as precursors to actual sexual intercourse and thus evaluate those who engage in such behaviors accordingly.

Furthermore, empirical research indicates that differences in evaluations of sexually active individuals are driven by evaluations of the female targets. For example, highly sexually active women were evaluated more negatively than less sexually active women were; however, there were no differences between highly and less sexually active men (Zaikman and Marks 2014, 2016). If the SDS was driven primarily by reproductive strategies (as evolutionary theory suggests), we would expect to see highly sexually active men evaluated more positively than less sexually active men because the former group engages in “optimal” male reproductive strategies.

In addition, previous research found evidence of the SDS for non-heterosexual targets (Zaikman et al. 2016a). Specifically, highly sexually active gay male targets were evaluated more positively than were highly sexually active lesbian targets. Due to the fact that same-gender sexual activities do not result in reproduction, evolutionary theory would predict that we would not see this SDS pattern for same-gender partners. Thus, these empirical results seem to provide greater support for social role theory than for evolutionary theory.

**Power: Social Role Theory’s Explanation and Empirical Evidence**

Regarding Hypothesis 3c, social role theory takes into account the existence of power differences between men and women. Even though there is a power deferential between men and women, members of these two groups experience common situational constraints (i.e., cultural scripts). These scripts delineate how, when, and with whom sexual activity is appropriate, and they are propagated by such outlets as the media or authority figures (Wiederman 2005). These scripts, however, do not operate in isolation. There exist intrapersonal scripts that operate within social interaction contexts, which contain information about others’ sexual behavior as well as others’ responses or reactions to sexual behavior. Thus, power differences between men and women are more likely to lead to SDS endorsement. Evolutionary theory and CSLT do not yield any predictions regarding Hypothesis 3c.

Previous research indicates that the reversed double standard is evident when the sexual behavior in question is conducted between two individuals of different perceived power and status (Howell et al. 2011; Sahl and Keene 2010; Canadian sample; Mohipp and Senn 2008). In student-teacher sexual relationships, male teachers were evaluated more negatively than the female teachers were, but only when the teacher initiated the relationship (Howell et al. 2011). This pattern was explained in terms of male teachers exploiting their assumed power and status for personal sexual benefit,
whereas female teachers were not viewed as having enough positional power (relative to male teachers) to do the same. On the other hand, when the relationship was initiated by the student, there were similar evaluations of both male and female teachers (Howell et al. 2011). The evolutionary perspective predicts that both the female student and the female teacher would be evaluated more negatively than their male counterparts would be. Also, according to evolutionary theory, the initiator of the relationship is irrelevant to evaluations. Thus, with respect to power differentiations, there is support for social role theory.

Cultural Background, Historical Era, and Socialization Agents

Hypothesis 4 focuses on three potential moderators of the SDS related to social factors. (a) Cultural background (Hypothesis 4a): According to evolutionary theory, the SDS will be evident across cultures in a similar fashion, whereas according to social role theory, the SDS will be dependent on the cultural variation of sexual attitudes. Specifically, the SDS will be more evident in rigidly patriarchal societies and less evident in more egalitarian societies. (b) Historical era (Hypothesis 4b): According to evolutionary theory, the SDS will be evident across eras in a similar fashion whereas, according to social role theory, the SDS will vary throughout historical eras, depending on changes in gender roles. (c) Agents of socialization (Hypothesis 4c): Respondents who have parents or peers who endorse the SDS, are heavy media consumers, and/or are aware of rewards and punishments for sexual behavior will be more likely to endorse the SDS compared to respondents whose parents or peers do not endorse the SDS, are light media consumers, and/or are less aware of rewards and punishments for sexual behavior.

Cultural Background: Evolutionary Theory's Explanation

Regarding Hypothesis 4a, cultural variation of sexual attitudes is another important factor to consider. If attitudes toward sexuality are evolved adaptations to threats of reproductive fitness, then similar patterns of attitudes toward sexuality should be present across cultures. Conversely, if sexual attitudes are largely products of culture, there should be more variability in the patterns of cross-cultural sexual attitudes. In other words, observation of similar patterns of the SDS across cultures would support evolutionary theory. On the other hand, observation of divergent patterns of the SDS across cultures might indicate that evolutionary theory on its own cannot adequately explain the existence of the SDS.

Cultural Background: Social Role Theory's Explanation

Regarding Hypothesis 4a, unlike evolutionary theory, social role theory acknowledges differences in social roles across cultures (Eagly and Wood 1999). According to social role theory, the different social roles and power men and women possess across different cultures will lead to differences in the expression of the SDS. In a more traditional society where men possess more power than women do, the traditional double standard should be evident, whereas in a more egalitarian society, where men and women possess more similar societal power and sexual freedom, the SDS should be less evident. Moreover, in a society where women possess more power than men do, the reversed double standard should be evident. CSTL does not yield predictions regarding Hypothesis 4a.

Cultural Background: Empirical Evidence

Culture plays a role for both evolutionary theory and social role theory. According to evolutionary theory, reproductive strategies are relatively consistent across different cultures (Schmitt 2005), whereas social role theory “treats gender roles as a dynamic aspect of culture” (Eagly et al. 2000, p.125). Thus, according to social role theory, the influence of culture should produce different results (assuming the different cultures have different social roles). Research found significant cultural influences on sexual standards (Iwawaki and Eysenck 1978, with British and Japanese samples; Sprecher and Hatfield 1996, with U.S., Russian, and Japanese samples). Power distribution differences between genders across different cultures relate to the extent men control women’s sexual freedom (Whyte 1978) and the exhibition of the SDS (Shapurian and Hojat 1985, with an Iranian sample). The more power men have relative to women in a society, the more likely the traditional double standard will be expressed. Sprecher and Hatfield (1996) conducted a cross-cultural comparison of the SDS and found that a Russian sample was more likely to endorse the traditional double standard than was a U.S. sample. There were also gender differences in their U.S. sample, but not in their Russian or Japanese samples: men from the U.S. sample endorsed the double standard to a greater degree compared to women from the same sample, a pattern not seen in the other two samples (Sprecher and Hatfield 1996). Thus, the more culturally sensitive approach taken by social role theory is supported.

Historical Era: Evolutionary Theory's Explanation

Regarding Hypothesis 4b, evolutionary theory postulates that historical era should not matter for evaluations of sexuality. In other words, there should be no changes across eras in evaluations and perceptions of highly sexually active men and women.
Regarding Hypothesis 4b, social role theory is able to explain changes in gender roles that occur with time. The Victorian ideal for women was to be chaste and for men to be sexually experienced (Petersen and Hyde 2010): Men’s role was to actively initiate relationships, whereas women’s role was to assume the reactive role (Klinkenberg and Rose 1994). Even though a gender hierarchy still exists, women’s social status has increased in Western society (Eagly and Wood 1999), which could have led to more sexual freedom for women. According to social role theory, the traditional double standard should be more pronounced in Western society in the past when the social roles of men and women were more traditional. The traditional double standard, however, should be less pronounced at present because of the more equal status women possess in Western societies. Nonetheless, the SDS will be still evident because there are still power differences between men and women. CSLT does not yield predictions regarding Hypothesis 4b.

### Historical Era: Social Role Theory’s Explanation

**Historical Era: Empirical Evidence**

Unlike evolutionary theory, social role theory can account for changes in egalitarian and traditional beliefs and power distribution. During 1960–1980 in the United States, due to social power changes, there was an increase in people’s egalitarian beliefs, followed by a leveling off of this trend in the 20th century, followed by a small reversal in people’s egalitarian beliefs in the last decade (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Such changes are also evident regarding attitudes towards sexuality; meta-analysis of 177 different studies revealed convergence in men’s and women’s attitudes towards premarital sex from the 1960s to 1980s (Oliver and Hyde 1993). At first, there was acceptance of a traditional double standard (premarital intercourse was allowed for men, but not for women; Reiss 1967). With the emergence of the sexual revolution in the 60s, men’s and women’s attitudes became more permissive (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), such that a similar standard was exhibited for men and women (Peplau et al. 1977). Thus, documented historical shifts are more congruent with predictions from social role theory than those from evolutionary theory.

**Socialization Agents: CSLT Explanation**

Regarding Hypothesis 4c, CSLT posits that socialization agents can influence the learning and the expression of the SDS. Indirect learning is accomplished through the observation of others experiencing rewards or punishments as an outcome of socially appropriate or inappropriate behavior. For example, a man who brags about a sexual encounter may be rewarded by receiving higher status in his peer group, whereas a man who fails to be “successful” with women may be ridiculed by his peers. A person observing this behavior may thus associate male sexuality with positive outcomes. Likewise, female sexuality may become associated with negative consequences upon repeated instances of sexually active women being derogated.

Both direct and indirect learning are influenced by socialization agents, entities which govern the behavior of individuals in any given society (Bandura 1986). Powerful socializing agents include, but are not limited to, parents, teachers, peers, and the media. These agents teach people what is and is not acceptable, normal, appropriate, and fundamental in a given society. Early socialization is largely impacted by parenting. Parents may impart sexual ideologies to their children through modeling, as well as reinforce or punish their children’s behavior. For example, parents may admonish young girls for dressing provocatively or wearing makeup, or be more protective of their adolescent daughters than their sons in situations involving dating. Additional socialization agents are one’s peers. In efforts to appear consistent with peer-group norms or to avoid punishment from one’s peer group, people may act in accordance with what they perceive to be appropriate behavior. Male adolescents, thinking that they are not supposed to be virgins, might spin tales of sexual conquests or nod in agreement with others discussing sexual activity. Female adolescents, thinking that they are not supposed to be engaging in sex, might hide their sexual activities. In other words, bragging men and secretive women may be normatively complying with expectations. These actions serve to reinforce and perpetuate the SDS. Thus, individuals who have parents or peers who strongly endorse and practice the SDS will be more likely to endorse and adhere to the SDS, compared to individuals whose parents and peers endorse and practice the SDS to a lesser degree or not at all.

In addition to the influence of parents and peers, media are a powerful conveyor of sexual norms (Reinholtz et al. 1995; see Ward 2003, for a review). Magazines, movies, music, and television shows bombard young people with images and portrayals of female sexuality as dirty, dangerous, or taboo, and male sexuality as normal, proper or good. For example, “reality shows” (programs where people have their everyday lives taped and broadcasted to the public) have enjoyed a surge in popularity since the mid-1990s. The “reality” of these shows, however, is questionable. These shows are highly edited to show the most interesting segments of footage, and these segments often feature sexual activity (Escoffery 2006). Either by design or by chance, many of these segments feature people expressing attitudes consistent with the SDS. The very nature of reality shows may lead them to be an even stronger force than fictional movies or television shows: Viewers believe that they are seeing actual examples of behavior that is portrayed as normal, and they may internalize norms, behavior, and attitudes espoused in the show. Because media often portray...
societal ideals, including the behavior of the culturally ideal man and woman, we would expect that individuals who are heavy media consumers (e.g., television, magazines, the Internet) to be more likely to endorse the traditional double standard than are those who are exposed less or not at all to the media.

Another salient purveyor of the SDS is the English language (Richardson 1997). Sexual slang terms generally suggest that promiscuity is unfavorable for women and favorable for men, and observational learning of the labeling of behaviors with respect to their appropriateness or inappropriateness for the genders may occur. For example, terms with negative valence (e.g., “slut” and “whore”) are associated with female sexuality, whereas terms with positive valence (e.g., “stud” or “player”) are associated with male sexuality. Tanenbaum (2000) listed all the positive and negative expressions associated with sexually active men and women in the English language. She was able to identify 12 positive expressions for sexually active men, whereas only two for women, and 28 negative expressions for sexually active women, whereas only three for men. After years of exposure, these associations may lead to implicit associations of negativity and positivity to female and male sexuality, respectively.

A final factor is modeling. There are various conditions needed for effective modeling (Bandura 1977). First, the observer must pay attention to the model. If the observer is not paying attention to the model’s behavior, it is unlikely he or she will make the connection between the model’s behavior and its consequences. Importantly, the degree of attention a behavior receives in part depends on the salience of the behavior performed. The phenomenon of confirmation bias suggests that people are likely to notice and remember information that is consistent with their beliefs and ignore or undervalue information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. Because the SDS is widely believed to exist, people should notice and attend to behavior that is consistent with it, as well as fail to notice behavior that is inconsistent with it. Moreover, salient events tend to persist in memory longer than less salient events, which leads to the hypothesis that people will remember information that is consistent with the SDS longer than information inconsistent with it.

Second, the expectations one holds impact the probability of replicating observed behavior. Expectancy is the subjective probability that a behavior will lead to a particular outcome. Having high expectancies means the individual is confident the behavior will result in the outcome. Having low expectancies means the individual believes it is unlikely that his or her behavior will result in the outcome. Expectancies are formed based on past experience. The more often a behavior has led to reinforcement in the past, the stronger the person’s expectancy that the behavior will result in that outcome in the present situation. It is important to note that expectancy is a subjective probability. There may be no correlation between an actor’s or observer’s subjective assessment of how likely a reinforcement will be and the actual probability of the outcome occurring. Nonetheless, men and women might expect to experience different rewards or punishments for engaging in certain patterns of sexual behavior, especially among those who have experienced them previously.

Third, the observer must be motivated to demonstrate what he or she has learned. If a person is motivated to receive rewards (e.g., acceptance, respect) or avoid punishment (e.g., ostracism, ridicule), it is likely that person will engage in behavior that will elicit those results. Hence, we should observe men being motivated to exhibit sexual behavior resulting in rewards (e.g., telling others about their sexual experiences) and women being motivated to exhibit sexual behavior resulting in lack of punishments (e.g., keeping their sexual experiences private).

Therefore, if sexual attitudes are shaped by reinforcement and punishment of sexual behavior, then we should observe higher levels of self-sanctioning for engaging in non-normative sexual behavior. For example, women might report feeling shame for engaging in uncommitted casual sex, whereas men may feel embarrassed for failing to behave in a sexually assertive manner. According to CSLT, the SDS should be more likely to arise in situations where rewards or punishments are salient. For example, if one is surrounded by peers, one may expect punishment for behavior that goes against the norms or standards of the peer group, or expect rewards for behavior that reinforces or supports those standards.

In summary, social forces act upon people every day, teaching us the standards of our given society. Included are standards related to appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior for men and women. People internalize these standards, and they behave according to them in order to receive rewards or avoid punishments. CSLT allows us to make predictions about attitudes towards sexual behavior in social contexts in which the SDS would emerge, with the exceptions of culture and historical era. Evolutionary theory and social role theory do not make any predications regarding Hypothesis 4c.

Socialization Agents: Empirical Evidence

CSLT can explain how the SDS is perpetuated, but it does not explain its origin, or why the rewards and punishments are associated with a specific gender. It relies on social role theory to explain why the sexual behaviors are conditioned differentially between the genders. Without taking into account other theoretical predictions or assumptions, there is no reason to assume why women are the ones being punished and not rewarded for their sexual behavior.

One study examined influence of attention levels on people’s recall of consistent and inconsistent information (Marks and Fraley 2006). Participants were presented with equal number of positive and negative comments about a target’s
sexual behavior. Results indicate that participants were more likely to recall positive information associated with the male target’s sexual behavior and negative information associated with the female target’s sexual behavior. Finally, although very little empirical evidence specifically tested for the consequences of the SDS based on CSLT assumptions, a content analysis of major TV dramas featuring adolescent characters revealed more negative consequences portrayed when female characters initiate sex compared to male characters (Aubrey 2004). To date, however, researchers have not examined how these media portrayals influence people’s adherence to the SDS. It appears there is some evidence to support the claim that agents of socialization (e.g., the media) influence the expression of the SDS, however, future research should continue investigating other agents of socialization.

**Conclusion**

Our goal for the present paper was to suggest a more theoretically oriented approach to researching the SDS by outlining three theoretical perspectives (evolutionary, social role, and cognitive social learning theories) relevant to understanding the SDS. Our goal was not to provide a SDS literature review, but rather to provoke more theoretically driven research by highlighting both the strengths and limitations of evolutionary, social role, and cognitive social learning theories. Rather than pit the various theories against each other, our goal was to highlight where each theory may or may not contribute to further understandings of the SDS. Each of the three theories contains predictive power of the SDS. First, evolutionary theory is a likely explanation for the origins of the traditional double standard. Second, social role theory can explain more proximate manifestations of the SDS through considering the influence of context, culture, and historical era. Finally, CSLT can explain the manner in which the SDS is perpetuated. In sum, the consideration of sexual theoretical approaches can yield a more comprehensive picture of how, when, and why the SDS exists. Our paper is meant to be more provocative and inspiring for future researchers than conclusive and definitive.

Although we focused on three major theories, there are many other theoretical perspectives that may be useful for understanding the SDS as well. Theoretical perspectives such as the theory of gender and power (Connell 1987), sexual economics (Baumeister and Vohs 2004), male control theory (Rudman et al. 2013), sexism (Zaikman and Marks 2014), and various social psychological frameworks (see Marks 2008; Marks and Fraley 2006, for examples). Moreover, we only noted four main hypotheses as an illustration of the variety of potential hypotheses. Future researchers should continue taking a theory-oriented approach because it will allow for new discoveries about the distal and proximal causes of why heterosexual men and women are evaluated differently for engaging in similar sexual behavior. Once a more complete picture of the SDS has been formed, researchers, writers, authors, social pundits, and other commentators will hopefully intensify efforts to combat the negative effects it has for both men and women.

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