Sexual Vocabulary: Methodological Implications for Gender Effects

An Honors Thesis (PSYSC 499)

by

Brittany L. Stiles

Thesis Advisor

Dr. George Gaither

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April 2007

Expected Graduation Date: May 2007
Abstract

An ever-growing body of research has focused on gender differences in the use of sexual vocabulary between men and women. Since past studies have asked for all the genitalia words the participant could provide without the variable of context being measured or for only one genitalia word that would be used across interpersonal contexts, different results may be found when combining both methods. The present study tested whether gender differences in sexual vocabularies across different interpersonal contexts may be due to methodological issues, rather than actual significant gender effects. Significant results were found supporting the proposed hypothesis.
Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. George Gaither for his insight, support, and encouragement in guiding me through the process of writing my thesis. His patience and intelligence in working with me as an undergraduate has helped shape me as a researcher, a fact I am forever grateful for. I would also like to thank Dr. Thomas Holtgraves for his advice and input in the development of this project.
Sexual Vocabulary: Methodological Implications for Gender Effects

Gender differences have always been of great interest to researchers within the field of psychology. For example, Costa and McCrae (2001) have shown that women and men differ on many personality traits, which have been attributed to both biological and social factors. Differences between males and females have also been found in the function of the brain, specifically within communication (Saucier & Elias, 2001). An ever-growing body of more specific research has focused on gender differences within the area of human sexuality.

One specific research topic that has been studied is that of differences in sexual communication between men and women, particularly their sexual vocabulary. One main reason this area of study is of considerable importance is that individuals’ sexual vocabulary may reflect their efforts to communicate in a socially acceptable way, therefore any gender differences are greatly representative of communication differences in a broader context (Sanders & Robinson, 1979). These male and female communication discrepancies could have even further implications for the areas of sexual dysfunction, sexual assault, wording and interpretation of sexuality questionnaires, and feminist social constructionist theories (Bogart, 2000; Murnen, 2000; Sawyer, Desmond, & Lucke, 1993; Simkins & Rinck, 1982; Solomon & Williams, 1997).

Although many studies have reported gender differences within sexual communication, there is a possibility that these findings could be misrepresented due to methodological limitations. Therefore the main goal of the present study was to observe how results concerning gender differences in sexual vocabularies across interpersonal contexts may be affected by certain changes in methodology.
Gender effects in provided words

In studying sexual vocabulary, one main method used is to allow participants to supply all the terms they would use for male or female genitalia. One significant study that used this methodology regarding gender effects on sexual vocabulary was completed by Braun & Kitzinger (2001), in which 281 college students in Great Britain were asked to write down as many terms for male and female genitalia as they could. A main result of this study showed that males produced significantly more terms than females for both penis and vagina words, which was consistent with results from similar studies (e.g., Grossman & Tucker, 1997; Kutner & Brogan, 1974; Walsh & Leonard, 1974). Males also produced significantly more penis terms than vagina terms, though females produced these terms equally. Euphemisms (vague indications of a body location) were also found to be used more often for female genitalia than male genitalia among both sexes, possibly implicating a taboo against discussing these terms (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001).

Gender effects across contexts

Although the results found by Braun & Kitzinger's (2001) study are of great importance, they lacked the inclusion of the effects produced across interpersonal contexts. This fact introduces another common methodology in examining vocabulary, which is to have participants supply one term across separate interpersonal contexts. A study by Walsh and Leonard (1974) exemplifies this second type of methodology by including the component of context. The researchers had participants list synonyms for sexual intercourse, followed by indicating if they would use the term in two situations. These contexts consisted of being among members of their own sex, or being in a social situation among mixed company. Their results indicated that males
averaged significantly more synonyms than females, and participants of both genders were more comfortable using the synonymous terms in same sex company than mixed.

Sanders & Robinson (1979) examined these differences even more extensively across contexts in their study on gender differences in sexual vocabulary by asking college students to give the one word they would use for male or female genitalia in four separate interpersonal contexts (e.g., informal same-sex peer group, mixed-sex peer group, parent conversation, and intimate conversation with their partner). Results were consistent with previous research; male participants produced more terms than female participants did.

Also consistent with Braun & Kitzinger's (2001) finding was that both genders showed a higher hesitancy to name female genitals than to name male genitals. Although both genders were more likely to use formal terms in the parental context than any other, females preferred these technical terms more than males across all contexts. Many studies show that across interpersonal contexts, females commonly demonstrate a narrower range of terminology regarding sexual vocabulary, providing mostly euphemistic or formal terms (Simkins & Rinck, 1982; Walsh & Leonard, 1974).

**Gender effects in offensiveness ratings**

Although the studies discussed above have produced important results regarding the gendered use of sexual vocabulary; they did not explicitly examine any of the participants' perceptions of the words they were providing. Offensiveness is one perceptive component of vocabulary use that has been involved in social implications drawn from language research, such as the conclusion that individuals' production and perception of words, and their corresponding offensiveness, are based on the position they hold in society (Jay, 1992; Murnen, 2000). Thus, studying the concept of offensiveness is an important part in evaluating gender differences in not
only the use of sexual vocabulary, but more importantly on how it is perceived. Jay (1992) defines offensiveness as "a term used to denote the degree to which a certain word or concept possesses negative or aversive properties" (p. 161). The concept of offensiveness is useful to observe in the area of human sexuality, as much research on offensiveness ratings has also found the most offensive words to be associated with sexual conduct (Jay, 1992).

Murnen (2000) somewhat studied the missing aspect of offensiveness in provided sexual words by investigating how degrading the sexual terms given by 167 undergraduates for genitalia were. Researchers asked participants to provide the one term they would use for male and female genitalia across three contexts (mixed-gender group, same-gender group, and intimate partner). Thirty additional participants were then asked to rate the offensiveness of the words through the use of a dichotomous rating, classifying the terms as "degrading" or "not degrading". These ratings were then applied to the terms provided in her previous study, and analyzed for gender differences. It was found that men were more likely than women to use degrading terms for male and female genitalia. Murnen (2000) is not the only researcher to attempt to gather offensiveness ratings of words; however her study is one of few that have focused explicitly on sexual vocabulary across interpersonal contexts.

Social Desirability Effects

Because of the strong effect that public norms can have on female attitudes and behavior regarding many facets of human sexuality, it is also important to pay attention to social desirability as a player in this area of research. Some research on sexual language has already found social desirability and sexual guilt to be strongly related to sexual vocabulary research outcomes (Gailbraith & Mosher, 1968; Plaud, Gaither, & Weller, 1998). Alexander & Fisher (2003) found evidence that self-reports of sexual behavior were affected by the context in which
participants completed the measures, rather than actual gender effects. In this study, undergraduate participants were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their sexual experiences and attitudes in one of three testing conditions. One of these included was an anonymous condition in which participants completed a paper and pencil measure in a large group. Another condition was a bogus pipeline condition in which participants were connected to a false lie detector, with the third testing condition promoting socially desirable responding by including an exposure threat in which participants were given the impression that someone might view their responses. The results of this study showed that women reported more sexual partners in the bogus pipeline condition than the exposure threat condition, implying that social desirability may have affected their responses. What is even more important, in the exposure threat condition only, women reported significantly less partners than men. These results support the idea that self reports on sensitive topics such as sexuality seem to be affected more by socially desirability among women than men.

*Methodological Considerations*

Within the study of human sexuality, as with any other sensitive topics, the aspect of methodology is extremely important. The present study was designed in a way that differs methodologically in many aspects from the previous sexual vocabulary research discussed. Many of the studies within this area of research have either asked for all the sexual words the participant could provide without the variable of context being measured (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Kutner & Brogan, 1974); Walsh & Leonard, 1974), or for only one genitalia word that would be used across interpersonal contexts (Murnen, 2000; Sanders & Robinson, 1979; Simkins & Rinck, 1982). The present study attempted to resolve this discrepancy by asking participants to provide all the words they would use across four different interpersonal contexts.
Another potential limitation apparent in methodology related to sexual word studies relates to word ratings given by participants. In Murnen's (2000) study, coding for degrading terms was accomplished through ratings of 15 males and 15 females. Although coding was only used for terms which at least 70% of participants agreed were degrading, the groups used were considerably small and came from a small liberal arts college. It should also be noted that these classifications as "degrading" or "not degrading" were not assessed for reliability or validity. Thus, the results of this study regarding offensiveness ratings may be limited. The present study studied the relations between sexual words given and offensiveness of those words through the use of a larger subject pool in determining the ratings of sexual terms. The current study also incorporated two different means of obtaining offensiveness ratings, including a Likert scale rating in addition to a dichotomous rating. Murnen (2000) also did not analyze participant gender effects on how offensive the sexual terms were perceived during the coding of derogatory terms. The present study will analyze this perceptual aspect of offensiveness in addition to the examination concerning the offensiveness of provided words.

Because of sexuality research's sensitive nature, previous findings regarding sex differences in sexual vocabulary could also have been inflated due to socially desirable responding by women if the study carried an anonymity threat (e.g., paper and pencil survey in a room with the researcher). Overall there is much evidence that socially desirable responding may be a response effect that requires more attention when evaluating results within the field of sexual vocabulary research. Therefore, the present study used an anonymous on-line survey in an effort to reduce the likelihood of social desirability effects.

Through modifications in methodology, as compared to previous studies, it is a goal of this study to clear up any potential extraneous effects on the results of sexual vocabulary
research. Many of the findings within this domain have portrayed strong gender effects among the frequency and types of words given, as well as the offensiveness of those words. It is possible that when number of sexual terms and provided word offensiveness are evaluated through the present study's revised methodology, gender effects may dissipate and not be as powerful as previously suggested.

The main purpose of this study was to integrate methodologies similar to the previous studies discussed, as well as currently unutilized methods in the area of sexual vocabulary, in light of the methodological limitations presented above. Further, more specific research objectives included (a) To what extent do the variables of participant gender, context, or genitalia type influence the number of sexual terms generated? (b) To what extent does gender influence how offensive a given word is perceived? (c) To what extent do participant gender, context, or genitalia type influence the offensiveness of the sexual terms provided?

Phase 1

Method

Participants

One hundred eighty-three students participants enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ball State University participated in the study, though 40 students did not provide at least one word across all contexts so their data was discarded. The mean age of the remaining 143 students (n = 94, 65.7% women; n = 49, 34.3% men) was 19.8 years (SD = 4.20). Approximately 90% were between the ages of 18 and 21. The majority of participants were Caucasian (96.5%), heterosexual (93.7%), single and never married (92.3%), and Christian, Non-Catholic (51.7%). Approximately 71% of participants were in their first year of college.

Materials
Demographics. Participants were asked to answer items to indicate their age, gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, number of completed college semesters, marital status, and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual).

Sexual vocabulary. Questions used to obtain the sexual vocabulary words from participants were formatted in an open-ended manner. Although only male and female genitalia terms were used in the final analyses of the present study, seven separate word categories were provided (male genitalia, female genitalia, sexual intercourse, fellatio, cunnilingus, a condom, and orgasm/ejaculation). For each word category participants were asked to type in all of the words that they would use. All seven word categories were repeated across four interpersonal contexts: same-gender informal conversation, mixed-gender informal conversation, parental conversation, and partner/spouse intimate conversation. The order of interpersonal context was varied by using four different versions of the survey.

Design and Procedure

In order to complete the survey anonymously, participants completed the study using inQsit, an on-line program used by researchers and professors at Ball State University to administer tests and collect data. Subjects read a brief description of the study and were then given the option to participate by clicking on a link that lead them to the "Participation Credit Form", therefore giving their consent to participate in the study. The participants were then instructed to enter their Social Security Number (SSN) in order to receive credit for the study. Students were asked to provide their name only in order to match with their SSN for participation credit, as well as to certify that a person may only access the survey one time. Participants were informed that they could leave any items blank or quit the survey if they felt uncomfortable without losing participation credit. Also included on the form was a hyperlink to
the actual survey, as well as a hyperlink to a page with debriefing information. There was also a space provided for participants to express any comments or concerns regarding the study once they completed it.

Participants entered the actual survey anonymously once they clicked on the corresponding hyperlink. To further ensure anonymity, SSN's and names were kept in a data file separate from the actual survey data. Participants were then asked to complete the demographic items. When completing the Sexual Vocabulary portion they were instructed to type in as many words as they could think of that they used to refer to each word category. Four different context orders were used in order to reduce any order effects in responding. Participants were allowed to use the same term in multiple contexts if they desired. Those individuals who would not engage in such a discussion were asked to type "ND" in the answer blank. Those who would rely on nonverbal signals to describe a certain item were instructed to type "nonverbal" in the answer blank. Participants who would not name a certain item at all were told to type "None" in the appropriate blank. At the completion of the survey participants completed five items pertaining to how comfortable they felt completing the survey.

Following completion of the survey, participants then clicked on the "Finish" button which took them back to the "Participant Credit Form" in order to click on the hyperlink containing debriefing information. Also at this time participants were then able to enter any comments or concerns in the space provided.

Results
A 2 (Genitalia type) x 2 (Participant gender) x 4 (Context) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for number of words provided to examine the effects of the three variables on term generation. Genitalia type (penis terms and vagina terms) and context (same-sex, mixed-sex, parental, and partner) variables were treated as within subject variables, and participant gender was treated as a between subject factor. Bonferroni's correction method was used in cases of multiple comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's $d$, with the grand mean's standard deviation serving as the pooled standard deviation for all effect size calculations.

Contrary to previous studies, the number of words participants provided did not differ significantly as a function of participant gender, $F(1, 141) = 1.60, p > .05$. Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for all variables and interactions for number of words provided.

Genitalia type (penis terms and vagina terms) was shown to have a significant main effect on the number of sexual words provided, $F(1, 141) = 52.94, p < .001, d = 0.48$, where more penis words were given than vagina words.

Context was also found to have a significant effect on the number of sexual words provided, $F(3, 139) = 28.26, p < .001$. Follow-up multiple comparisons were made to further evaluate context effects using paired samples t-tests. Results showed that significantly more words were provided in the same-sex context than in the mixed-sex context, $t(142) = 4.36, p < .001, d = 0.45$, parental context, $t(142) = 8.04, p < .001, d = 0.84$, and partner context, $t(142) = 5.058, p < .001, d = 0.61$. Other results included significantly more words provided in the mixed-sex context than in the parental context, $t(142) = 3.68, d = 0.16, p < .001$, and significantly more words provided in the partner context than in the parental context, $t(142) = 2.21, p < .05, d = 0.23$. 
Table 1.

*Number of Words - Mean (SD)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genitalia Type</th>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
<th>Same Sex</th>
<th>Mixed Sex</th>
<th>Parental</th>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Genitalia Means x Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penis</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.18 (4.76)</td>
<td>3.12 (2.88)</td>
<td>2.16 (4.04)</td>
<td>2.82 (2.82)</td>
<td>3.32 (2.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.65 (3.08)</td>
<td>3.00 (2.94)</td>
<td>2.06 (2.94)</td>
<td>2.43 (2.27)</td>
<td>2.78 (2.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genitalia Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>4.17 (3.79)</td>
<td>3.04 (2.91)</td>
<td>2.10 (3.34)</td>
<td>2.56 (2.47)</td>
<td>2.97 (2.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagina</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.59 (2.65)</td>
<td>2.22 (2.15)</td>
<td>1.27 (2.70)</td>
<td>2.35 (2.20)</td>
<td>2.24 (1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.22 (2.31)</td>
<td>1.94 (2.26)</td>
<td>1.50 (2.10)</td>
<td>1.89 (2.35)</td>
<td>1.89 (1.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genitalia Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>2.69 (2.50)</td>
<td>2.03 (2.22)</td>
<td>1.42 (1.90)</td>
<td>1.89 (2.20)</td>
<td>2.01 (1.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>3.43 (2.92)</td>
<td>2.54 (2.38)</td>
<td>1.76 (2.48)</td>
<td>2.22 (2.22)</td>
<td>2.49 (2.00) [Grand Mean]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Male Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>4.39 (3.45)</td>
<td>2.67 (2.34)</td>
<td>1.71 (2.70)</td>
<td>2.35 (2.20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Female Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>2.94 (2.47)</td>
<td>2.47 (2.41)</td>
<td>1.78 (2.37)</td>
<td>2.16 (2.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant gender differences were found to be significant only when examining the interaction of gender with context, $F(3, 139) = 5.027, p > .05$. Follow-up independent samples t-tests showed a significant gender difference only within the same-sex context, $t(141) = 2.90, p < .05$, Cohen's $d = .72$, where males gave significantly more words than females (all other $t$'s $\leq 0.49$). Follow-up analyses on the significant interaction between genitalia type and context, $F(3, 139) = 8.61, p = 0.001$, found penis words were given significantly more than vagina words in all contexts, with the strongest effect present in the same sex context, $t(141) = 2.70, p < .001, d = 0.74$.

**Phase 2**

**Method**

**Participants**

Data on offensiveness ratings was collected from approximately 245 females aged 18-44 ($Mdn = 19.0$) and 99 males aged 18-47 ($Mdn = 20.0$). Participants were drawn from two sources: The Department of Psychological Science Human Subject Pool, which consists of mostly students from an introductory psychology course, and students enrolled in PSYSC 277 (Psychology of Sexual Behavior). The race of the sample was predominantly white, with about 92% of participants classifying themselves as Caucasian. Participants were mostly Christian, Non-Catholic (51.3%) and single, never married (94.8%). Approximately 41% of participants indicated they were in their first year of college. The two combined samples differed only in number of semesters completed, with PSYSC 277 students having completed more than introductory students, $t(341) = 3.82, p < .001$.

**Materials**
Demographics. Participants were asked to provide age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, number of college semesters completed, and sexual orientation (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or asexual).

Offensiveness measures. Terms used for the offensiveness rating portion of the study were obtained from phase one. Due to the large number of words produced, only a subset of the words were used. Only words that were provided at least nine times or were the first term typed in by at least one participant were used. Terms that referred exclusively to male genitalia were included relatively equal to the amount of terms used that referred exclusively to female genitalia, coming to a total amount of 133 terms. This final word set contained 51 penis words, 54 vagina words, and 28 ambiguous terms that could be applied to either genitalia type. Lists of these words can be obtained from the author. Offensiveness was measured using two different approaches. One hundred and seventy-nine participants were asked to rate the words using a dichotomous measure (derogatory or not). The other 165 rated the words using a measure consisting of a 5-point scale, (1 = not at all offensive to 5 = extremely offensive).

Design and Procedure

As in phase one, participants completed the offensiveness study on-line using inQsit. They read a brief description of the study, and then those who wished to participate were instructed to click on a hyperlink (thus giving their consent to continue) that lead them to the Participant Credit page. In order to receive credit for participation and ensure each person only completed the survey one time; participants were required to enter their Ball State University username and password. This was in place of their Social Security Number (SSN) as was used in the previous study. As in the first study, participants in this study were informed that they could leave any items blank or quit the survey if they felt uncomfortable without losing
participation credit. Participants' usernames were kept in a separate data file from the actual survey to ensure anonymity.

Once participants clicked on the hyperlink for the actual survey, they entered the study anonymously. They were then instructed to indicate how they thought each of the sexual words given were used through four different response options: (a) to refer to male genitalia, (b) to refer to female genitalia, (c) to refer to both male and female genitalia, and (d) not to refer to male or female genitalia. Finally, participants were given either one of the two versions of the offensiveness measure (dichotomous or rating scale) where they indicated how offensive they thought each of the sexual words was. The participants completed the same five items pertaining to how comfortable they were completing the study as in phase one. After completing the survey, participants clicked on the Finish button that redirected them to debriefing information.

Results

In evaluating the gender effect on how offensive a given word is perceived, the two separate methods of rating the concept differed in significance of results. The dichotomous rating resulted in a significant gender effect where females rated significantly more words as derogatory (M = 40.73, SD = 31.75) than males did (M = 28.14, SD = 29.20), t(177) = -2.547, p < .05, whereas the five-point offensiveness rating did not. Across all participants, mean offensiveness ratings were highly positively correlated with the percentage of participants that rated that term as derogatory, r = 0.97, p < .05. The fact that the offensiveness rating did not generate a significant gender effect made it more appropriate to use in analyzing the final research purpose regarding offensiveness of sexual terms provided, as it was considered as less likely than the derogatory rating to introduce extraneous effects.
Phase 3

Method

The mean offensiveness ratings for each of the 133 words rated by participants in phase two were incorporated into the dataset of phase one, with each offensiveness rating applied to its respective sexual term. All subsequent tests were conducted using the 143 participants from phase one who were eligible for analysis. Participants considered appropriate for analysis were those who provided at least one response in all four contexts, including "ND" and "None" responses, which were coded with an offensiveness rating of zero.

Results

In examining the offensiveness of all words provided across all contexts, a 2 (Genitalia type) x 2 (Participant gender) x 4 (Context) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Genitalia type (penis terms and vagina terms) and context (same-sex, mixed-sex, parental, and partner) variables were treated as within subject variables, and participant gender was treated as a between subject factor. Bonferroni's correction method was used in cases of multiple comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's $d$, with the grand mean's standard deviation serving as the pooled standard deviation.

The ANOVA resulted in a significant main effect for participant gender, $F(1, 141) = 4.16, p < .05, d = 0.34$, where male participants gave significantly more offensive terms ($M = 1.62, SD = 0.55$) than terms that female participants supplied ($M = 1.42, SD = 0.58$). Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for all variables and interactions for the mean offensiveness of words provided.
Table 2.

*Offensiveness of Words - Mean (SD)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genitalia Type</th>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
<th>Same Sex</th>
<th>Mixed Sex</th>
<th>Parental</th>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Genitalia Means x Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penis</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.61 (0.59)</td>
<td>1.63 (0.54)</td>
<td>1.20 (0.63)</td>
<td>1.35 (0.70)</td>
<td>1.56 (0.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.49 (0.55)</td>
<td>1.46 (0.62)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.70)</td>
<td>1.40 (0.59)</td>
<td>1.43 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genitalia Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>1.53 (0.56)</td>
<td>1.52 (0.99)</td>
<td>1.12 (0.68)</td>
<td>1.38 (0.63)</td>
<td>1.48 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagina</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.30 (0.90)</td>
<td>1.93 (0.92)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.96)</td>
<td>1.62 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.95 (0.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.66 (0.97)</td>
<td>1.53 (0.94)</td>
<td>1.17 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.45 (0.65)</td>
<td>1.55 (0.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genitalia Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>1.88 (0.99)</td>
<td>1.67 (0.95)</td>
<td>1.26 (0.88)</td>
<td>1.52 (0.93)</td>
<td>1.69 (0.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>1.69 (0.67)</td>
<td>1.59 (0.67)</td>
<td>1.20 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.46 (0.70)</td>
<td>1.49 (0.58) [Grand Mean]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Male Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>1.92 (0.66)</td>
<td>1.76 (0.63)</td>
<td>1.27 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.47 (0.80)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall Female Means x Cntxt</td>
<td>1.57 (0.65)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.68)</td>
<td>1.17 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.45 (0.65)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ANOVA also resulted in a significant main effect for genitalia type (penis terms and vagina terms), where vagina words provided were more offensive than penis words provided, $F(1, 141) = 39.23, p < 0.001, d = 0.36$.

Context effects were found to have a significant effect on the offensiveness of sexual terms provided, $F(3, 139) = 30.80, p < 0.001$. Follow-up analyses using paired samples t-tests showed that words provided in the same-sex context were significantly more offensive than words provided in the mixed-sex context, $t(142) = 2.58, d = 0.17$, parental context, $t(142) = 8.51, d = 0.84$, and partner context, $t(142) = 4.45, d = 0.40$. Words given in the parental context were also found to be significantly less offensive than words given in the mixed-sex context, $t(142) = 6.80, d = 0.67$ and partner context, $t(142) = 3.64, d = 0.45$. Provided terms in the mixed-sex context were also found to be significantly more offensive than terms given for the partner context, $t(142) = 2.59, d = 0.22$.

The participant gender effect was further clarified through significant findings regarding the interaction of gender with context, $F(3, 139) = 3.00, p < 0.001$. Follow-up tests using independent samples t-tests showed that male participants’ provided words were significantly more offensive than that of female participants in both the same-sex $t(141) = 2.99, p < 0.05, d = 0.60$ and mixed-sex contexts, $t(141) = 2.26, p < 0.5, d = 0.45$, but showed no difference in the other two contexts.

Participant gender effects were also shown to be significant as a function of the genitalia type of the term ($F(1, 141) = 10.32, p < 0.05$). Follow-up analyses of this interaction using independent samples t-tests showed the significant gender effect present only for female genitalia ($t(141) = 3.08, p < 0.05, d = 0.70$, where male participants’ vagina words provided were significantly more offensive than female participants’ given vagina terms.
A significant interaction between genitalia type and context was also found, $F(3, 139) = 6.67, p < 0.001$. Follow-up analyses using paired samples t-tests found vagina words provided as significantly more offensive than penis words provided within all contexts, the strongest significant effect being in the same-sex context, $t(141) = 5.35, p < .001, d = 0.60$.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to replicate previous sexual vocabulary research through adjusting the research design used. This included integrating prior studies’ strengths into a common methodology, while simultaneously attempting to reduce any potential methodological limitations. I wanted to observe the effects of participant gender, genitalia type, and context on sexual vocabularies, as well as how they might be affected by several changes regarding methodology.

The results of all the components of the present study suggest that some aspects of the methodological changes may have had an impact on the participant gender effect regarding the number of words provided. Contrary to previous findings that overall male participants provide more terms for both penis and vagina words than female participants do (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Kutner & Brogan, 1974; Sanders & Robinson, 1979), the results of the present study did not find an overall significant participant gender effect on the number of words provided. One explanation for this lacking overall gender effect could be related to the issue of anonymity. As discussed in the introduction, women's responses to sensitive measures may be more strongly influenced by social desirability than men's, especially when they feel their responses may be viewed (Alexander & Fischer, 2003). The results regarding the reporting of number of sexual partners found by Alexander and Fischer (2003) showed that women reported less partners in the exposure threat condition, closer to the same amount of partners as men in the anonymous
condition, and actually more partners than men in the bogus pipeline condition. These strikingly different results found across the three conditions have strong implications that can be related to the current study’s methodology. Through the use of an anonymous online survey, it is possible that this study may have removed some of the social (exposure) threat associated with self-reports regarding sexuality, and thus some of the gender effect.

Another potential reason the main participant gender effect regarding number of words was found not to be significant could be associated with the integration of unlimited term listing and separate interpersonal contexts. In previous studies, any time context was evaluated, only one term was asked for. By allowing participants to give as many words as they could, while providing them with four separate contexts to consider, gender effects may have diminished. This speculation is additionally supported through the finding that the only gender effect for number of words found was within the same-sex context \((d=0.72)\), with the other contexts showing no gender difference. With many interpersonal situations available to supply words for, the effect of context may have reduced that of participant gender. Both genders were also found to provide less terms for the parental context than any other context, thus suggesting that the context effect regarding appropriate parental sexual communication was a much stronger influence than that of participant gender.

Although methodological reasons for the above findings can be speculated, the finding that male participants provided significantly more words than females only when imagining communication in the same-sex context could also provide support for the idea of an existing double standard in communication about sex. This is additionally supported by the finding that male participants provided more offensive words than females overall, with the strongest effect present in the same-sex context. The social construction of language roles may have provided
males with the ability to speak about taboo topics such as sex among each other much more comfortably than females could. Social roles instilled in females at a young age may make them feel as though talk about sex is inappropriate, especially among other females. Furthermore, it can be speculated that this gender difference is most prominent in a same-sex peer environment because of the type of jocular language used among men may promote a type of “male-bonding” experience. Findings regarding fraternity involvement in Murnen’s (2000) study have provided support for this idea.

Another important result that emphasized the effect of genitalia type on sexual communication was that significantly more penis words were given than vagina words among both men and women. This result has been found in other research (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Sanders & Robinson, 1979), bringing up an important concern regarding females’ inability to discuss even their own genitalia. This could possibly implicate that public norms for females’ sexual communication in society also exist in their private communicative situations (Sanders & Robinson, 1979). Another speculated explanation for this restricted language pertaining to female genitalia has been related to the fact that until the 20th century, many parts of the external female genitalia were not included in our language (Lerner, 1976). The dictionary’s inclusion, as well as society’s linguistic inclusion, of this vocabulary may be too recent to have an effect on the distinction between internal and external female genitalia within sexual communication. Thus the full female genitalia is often not recognized, and as a result not referred to.

Vagina words provided among participants were also found to be more offensive than penis words provided overall, suggesting that words available for female genitalia could be inherently more offensive than words available for male words. This could also contribute towards females’ lack of desire to use these terms, in that non-offensive words for female
genitalia are not available for them to use in accordance with the social communication roles that have been prescribed to them.

In the current study, there are several strengths to note. The study collected information through the use of an anonymous survey, thus possibly reducing social desirability effects. In addition, the design of the study incorporated methodologies that had not been combined before, thus allowing the examination of some relationships and interactions that otherwise may have not been found. The study also used different methods of measurement and a larger sample size in determining offensiveness ratings of sexual terms, thus possibly increasing the validity of the ratings themselves.

Though some strengths of the study should be noted, there were limitations of the present research design that should be addressed. The results were based on self-reports by demographically similar students who were mostly Caucasian, young, and single. Thus generalizations regarding their communication use and styles to wider populations should be done with care. Another limitation of the study is the possibility that respondents were giving us all of the words that they knew of for male and female genitalia, rather than only the terms that they would actually use across the various interpersonal contexts.

Despite the many findings in the area of sexual vocabulary, there are countless other aspects of this topic that future research should address. One is using qualitative measures in order to gather more specific information regarding participants’ perceptions about the words they are providing. Using strictly quantitative measures restricts the ability to gain a more encompassing look into how individuals perceive the words they use and why they use them. Additional aspects to add to this research would be to include other contexts that have not yet been examined. With the results of this study and others supporting the possibility of context
effects being a stronger influence than gender effects, looking at multiple interpersonal situations such as doctor/patient relationships, sibling relationships, and other social interactions could provide even more interesting results. Another direction for future research in this area would be to concentrate on the more applied, real-world aspects of communication. Language use, especially regarding sexuality, contains much ambiguity when it comes to the individual. This fact has possible serious implications towards sexual miscommunication, whether it is among intimate partners or in cases of sexual assault.
References


