

Original Article

Receptivity to sexual invitations from strangers of the opposite genderGert Martin Hald^{a,b,*}, Henrik Høgh-Olesen^c^a*Department of Public Health, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark*^b*Clinic of Sexology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark*^c*Department of Psychology, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark*

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Abstract

This study investigated the primary conclusion from Clark and Hatfield's often cited field experiment "Consent to Sex with a Stranger" that men agree to sexual invitations from moderately attractive strangers of the opposite gender more readily than women do. In addition, this study investigated whether rates of consent are influenced by a subject's age, relationship status, rating of confederate attractiveness, and type of sexual invitation. A number of moderately attractive confederates of the opposite gender individually approached 173 men and 216 women. After a standard introduction, the confederates asked each participant one of the following three questions: "Would you go on a date with me tonight or during the week/weekend?", "Would you come to my place tonight or during the week/weekend?", or "Would you go to bed with me tonight or during the week/weekend?" Significantly more men than women consented to a sexual invitation. Specifically, significantly more men than women consented to the "come to my place" and "go to bed with me" conditions. For female subjects, higher ratings of confederate attractiveness were found to significantly increase the odds of consenting to a sexual invitation, whereas for men, confederate attractiveness was found not to significantly influence consent rates. Finally, relationship status was found to be a significant and strong moderating variable of consent for both men and women. Thus, men and women who are not in a relationship are significantly more likely to agree to a sexual invitation than those who are in a relationship.

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Keywords: Sex; Invitation; Mating; Denmark; Gender difference; Attractiveness**1. Introduction**

Using a slightly modified methodology, we investigated the primary conclusion from Clark and Hatfield's 1989 classic field experiment (see also Clark & Hatfield, 2003) that men agree to sexual invitations from moderately attractive strangers of the opposite gender more readily than women do. In addition, this study extends the findings from Clark and Hatfield's studies by including measures of subjects' relationship status, age, rating of confederate attractiveness, and subject awareness. These variables have previously been proposed as potentially important moderators of a subject's response to sexual invitations (Voracek, Fisher, Hofhansl, Rekkas, & Ritthammer, 2006; Voracek, Hofhansl, & Fisher, 2005). Furthermore, not controlling for

these moderators may reduce study validity by leaving the results vulnerable to methodological artifacts (Hald & Høgh-Olesen, 2009).

Clark and Hatfield's original experiments were conducted in 1978, 1982, and 1990 at Florida State University. The experiments showed large and significant gender differences in receptivity to sexual invitations from moderately attractive strangers of the opposite gender, with men being significantly more receptive than women the more explicit the sexual invitation (Clark, 1990; Clark & Hatfield, 1989). These results are consistent with empirical evidence showing gender differences in receptivity to sexual invitations across different methodology and data domains, with men being more receptive than women (Mathes, King, Miller, & Reed, 2002; Voracek, Fisher, et al., 2006; Voracek et al., 2005).

Compared with women, men also tend to have a more positive, unrestricted, and promiscuous attitude toward casual sex (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985; Fisher, Byrne, White, & Kelley, 1988; Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapton-Foote, & Foote, 1985; Schmitt, 2005; Townsend, 1995; Wilson,

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1987), exhibit greater willingness to pursue extra-dyadic involvement (Seal, Agnostinelli, & Hannett, 1994), and more often seek short-term and casual relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Eysenck, 1976; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Mathes et al., 2002; Wiederman, 1997). In addition, men generally prefer more sexual partners (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; McBurney, Zapp, & Streeter, 2005; Schmitt, 2005) and are more sexually aroused by novelty (Buss, 2003a, 2003b; Symons, 1979) compared with women. These differences not only appear to be universal in humans (Schmitt, 2005) but are also found in many animal species (Stewart-Williams, 2005). Furthermore, Schmitt's (2005) cross-cultural studies indicate that, even under circumstances in which social roles, sexual scripts, and present cultural expectations are similar for men and women (see also Clark & Hatfield, 2001; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), men are significantly more unrestricted and promiscuous in their sexual patterns than women.

There are more reproductive benefits for a man to mate with multiple women within, for example, 1 year than for women to do so. Consequently, the reproductive benefits from casual sex are much higher for men than for women (Clutton-Brock & Vincent, 1991). In evolutionary terms, these benefits exert strong selective pressures on a man's mating strategy to favor more unrestricted sexual practices and multiple partners. Therefore, according to the Parental Investment Theory, men will accept sexual invitations from strangers more readily than women will (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972). Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1. Male subjects will consent to sexual invitations significantly more often than female subjects.

Women do engage in short-term interpersonal and sexual relationships. However, the Sexual Strategies Theory predicts that women most often do so as a means of mating with men who have highly desirable traits, genes, looks, positions, and/or resources (Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997; Scheib, 2001). Recently, Schützwohl, Fuchs, McKibbin, and Shackelford (2009) examined the role of an imagined requestor's physical attractiveness on the willingness of men and women to accept the sexual invitations of Clark and Hatfield (1989) in three cultures. For men, attractiveness had little effect on the rates of consent as long as the female requestor was at least "moderately attractive". For women, consenting rates for the least explicit sexual invitation (i.e., "go on a date with me") increased with the physical attractiveness of the imagined male requestor. For the more explicit sexual invitations (i.e., "come to my place" and "go to bed with me"), women reported a greater likelihood of consent only when the imagined requestor was an exceptionally attractive prospective male partner (Schützwohl et al., 2009). This finding implies that, at least on a hypothetical level, the attractiveness of requestors/confederates impacts women's consent rates but less so men's. We hypothesize

that this effect also extends to real-life settings. Given the use of at least moderately attractive confederates in this study, we propose a second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2. Subject's rating of the attractiveness of the confederate will significantly predict consent beyond age, relationship status, and type of sexual invitation for female subjects but not for male subjects.

Mating with an unknown member of the opposite gender on the basis of an unusual first-time request inherently carries evolutionary risks, such as threats to personal safety or the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Some of these risks may be specific to people in committed relationships and not to gender—for example, the risk of losing a primary partner with good reproductive prospects following the revelation of infidelity. These risks may make subjects in relationships, regardless of gender, less willing to consent to unusual sexual requests from strangers (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This effect was indicated in a pilot experiment to this experiment in which subjects frequently rejected the sexual invitation with reference to being in a relationship (Hald & Høgh-Olesen, 2009). Consequently, we propose a third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3. For both genders, relationship status will significantly predict consent beyond age, type of sexual invitation, and the subject's rating of confederate attractiveness.

2. Methods

2.1. Ethics

Due to the potentially sensitive and controversial nature of the experiment, and because subjects were participating without giving prior informed consent, the study was reviewed and approved by the nationally appointed Ethical Regional Committee of Denmark.

2.2. Participants

In total, 389 subjects (173 men and 216 women) from the four largest cities of Denmark were included in the experiment. All subjects were approached outdoors either on university campus or at a centrally located pedestrian or park area during the first three weeks of May or the first week of June 2009 between 11 am and 5 pm. Data related to the subjects' age, relationship status, attractiveness, and subject awareness are shown in Table 1. *Subject awareness* refers to the influence that subjects' suspicions or wariness of being in an experiment, on "candid camera" etc., may have had on their responses.

Twenty-one confederates (11 women and 10 men) were included in the experiment. All confederates were first-year psychology students at Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark,

Table 1

Age and attractiveness of subjects and confederates followed by subjects' relationship status and subject awareness

Variables	Men	Women	Test	Effect size Cohen's d^a
Mean age in years (SD)				
Confederates	20.9 (0.6)	21.5 (1.0)	$t=1.50$, $df=19$	0.69
Subjects	23.5 (3.4)	22.1 (3.3)	$t=4.09^*$, $df=367$	0.43
Mean attractiveness ^b (SD) of confederates as rated by:				
Panel of psychology students	5.1 (0.8)	5.7 (0.7)	$t=5.77^*$, $df=240$	0.75
Approached subjects	5.7 (1.7)	6.9 (1.4)	$t=6.81^*$, $df=355$	0.73
The individual confederate	6.4 (0.7)	6.6 (1.0)	$t=0.62$, $df=19$	0.28
Mean attractiveness ^b (SD) of subjects as rated by:				
Approaching confederates	6.3 (1.3)	6.2 (1.4)	$t=0.90$, $df=387$	0.09
The individual subject	6.7 (1.3)	6.0 (1.5)	$t=4.65^*$, $df=340$	0.50
Subject currently in a relationship			$\chi^2=0.25$, $df=1$	0.05
No	78	92		
Yes	87	114		
Subject awareness			$\chi^2=1.43$, $df=1$	0.12
No	152	196		
Yes	14	11		

Missing data were excluded. χ^2 , Pearson's χ^2 test; t , independent t test.^a Evaluation criteria: <.20=small; .50=medium; >.80=large.^b As indicated on a 9-point attractiveness scale anchored by 1 (extremely unattractive) and 9 (extremely attractive).* $p<.001$.

who volunteered to participate in the study. Confederates were not paid money or course-credited for their participation. Initially, the attractiveness of 37 potential confederates was rated using a panel of psychology students ($N=122$) and a nine-point "attractiveness scale" ranging from 1 (*extremely unattractive*) to 9 (*extremely attractive*). Of the initial 37 potential confederates, 21 were randomly selected and included in the experiment. The range of attractiveness of included confederates as rated by the panel of psychology students for male confederates was 3.4–6.8, and that for female confederates was 3.7–7.2. Table 1 shows the age and attractiveness of confederates.

2.3. Procedure

After careful instruction and training over 2 days, confederates were divided into seven mixed-gender teams. On two weekdays in May and June 2009 when no rain or heavy winds occurred, teams were positioned outdoors at various pre-selected university campus grounds or centrally located pedestrian and park areas in the four biggest cities of Denmark (Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, and Odense) from 11 am to 5 pm. On his or her own, each confederate approached an unknown member of the opposite gender using the following standard introduction: "Hi, my name is 'Name of Confederate'. I am sorry to disturb you like this, but I have been noticing you around and find you very attractive". The confederate then asked one of the following three questions: "Would you go on a date with me tonight or during the week/weekend?", "Would you come over to my place tonight or during the week/weekend?", or "Would you go to bed with me tonight or during the week/weekend?"

Confederates were instructed to only approach subjects who were on their own and with whom they could imagine following through with their request. Each confederate was

to approach as many subjects as possible during the 2 days of the experiment, up to a maximum of 30 subjects (10 for each condition), record the subject's answer (yes/no), and rate how attractive he or she thought the subject was using the attractiveness scale described above. Following the request, subjects were followed and discretely approached by one or two of the remaining members of the research team and debriefed. Subjects were then asked to anonymously reveal the following data: age ("age"), current relationship status ("relationship status"), subject awareness ("subject awareness"), and attractiveness of both the subject himself or herself and the approaching confederate using the nine-point attractiveness scale described above.

To ensure the anonymity of both confederates and subjects, all confederates used standardized recording sheets, which were subsequently placed in the authors' mailbox in a standard white envelope without a name.

3. Results

Initially, data were checked for systematic differences in response patterns across locations or subtypes of locations, such as campus versus pedestrian areas. No difference was found ($p>.05$). Consequently, for all subsequent analyses, data for the different locations were collapsed and analyzed as one data set. In addition, in order to improve study reliability, data was collected from subjects claiming subject awareness (25 of 389) or from whom no background data (16 of 389) were excluded from analyses. Throughout the analyses, "type of sexual invitation" was treated as a continuous variable given that the explicitness of the sexual invitation varied across experimental conditions from less to more explicit.

3.1. Hypothesis 1

As hypothesized, significantly more men consented to a sexual invitation compared with women (Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 348}=17.50, p<.001$, Cohen's $d=0.46$). However, logistic regression analyses revealed a significant interaction between gender and type of sexual invitation on overall consent to a sexual invitation ($p<.01$). Consequently, further analyses were carried out by stratifying for gender. These showed that significantly more men than women consented to the “come to my place” (Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 116}=4.63, p<.05$) and “go to bed with me” (Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 88}=20.64, p<.001$) conditions. No significant gender difference was found for consenting to the date condition (Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 144}=1.81, p>.05$; Table 2).

3.2. Hypothesis 2

A hierarchical logistic regression analysis was carried out for each gender. In the first step, age, relationship status, and type of sexual invitation were entered. In the second step, the subjects' ratings of confederate attractiveness were entered. In the third step, all interactions were entered. All steps were carried out by block-wise “forced entry”. As hypothesized, the results showed that subjects' rating of confederate attractiveness significantly predicted consent beyond age, relationship status, and type of sexual invitation for female subjects ($p<.05$) but not for male subjects ($p>.05$). No significant interaction was found ($p>.05$). Table 3 shows the relative contribution of each predictor stratified by gender.

3.3. Hypothesis 3

A hierarchical logistic regression analysis was carried out for each gender. In the first step, age, subjects' ratings of confederate attractiveness, and type of sexual invitation were entered. In the second step, relationship status was entered. In

the third step, all interactions were entered. All steps were carried out by block-wise “forced entry”. As hypothesized, the results showed that relationship status significantly predicted consent beyond age, type of sexual invitation, and subjects' rating of confederate attractiveness for both genders ($p<.01$). No significant interaction was found. Table 3 shows the relative contribution of each predictor stratified by gender.

As relationship status was found to be a very strong predictor of consent for both men and women, this variable was further investigated by stratifying consent rates by relationship status for each gender. For both men and women, the results showed significantly higher consenting rates for subjects not in a relationship compared with subjects in a relationship (women: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 195}=12.22, p<.001$, Cohen's $d=0.51$; men: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 151}=39.69, p<.001$, Cohen's $d=1.19$).

For subjects in a relationship, no significant gender difference was found in consent rates for any of the experimental conditions (“go on a date with me”: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 89}=0.00$; “come to my place”: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 67}=0.85$; “go to bed with me”: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 40}=0.73$; all $p>.05$, with Yates' continuity correction applied).

For subjects who were not in a relationship, a significant gender difference in consent rates for the “go to bed with me” condition was found, with men showing significantly higher consent rates than women (Pearson's χ^2 with Yates' continuity correction applied: $\chi^2_{1, 48}, p<.001$). For the “go on a date with me” or “come to my place” conditions, no significant gender difference was found in the consent rates (“go on a date with me”: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 53}=3.37, p>.05$; “come to my place”: Pearson's $\chi^2_{1, 49}=2.12, p>.05$). However, across experimental conditions, the effect sizes were found to be moderate to large (Table 2).

Interestingly, the overall consent rates of subjects who were *not* in a relationship were not significantly different

Table 2

Overall consent rates by experimental condition followed by consent rates stratified by subjects' relationship status

Experiment ($N=348$)	Experimental condition/type of request		
	“Would you go on a date with me?”	“Would you come to my place?”	“Would you go to bed with me?”
Overall ($N=348$)			
Consent rate, women	20% (80)	8% (62)*	2% (54)**
Consent rate, men	30% (64)	22% (54)	38% (34)
Effect size Cohen's d^a	0.23	0.41	1.11
By relationship status ($n=346$)			
In a relationship ($n=196$)			
Consent rate, women	8% (51)	0% (38)	4% (23)
Consent rate, men	5% (38)	7% (29)	18% (17)
Effect size Cohen's d^a	0.01	0.23	0.27
Not in a relationship ($n=150$)			
Consent rate, women	43% (28)	21% (24)	0% (31)**
Consent rate, men	68% (25)	40% (25)	59% (17)
Effect size Cohen's d^a	0.52	0.43	1.66

Missing values were excluded. Numbers in parentheses represent n /cell.

^a Evaluation criteria: $<.20$ =small; $.50$ =medium; $>.80$ =large.

* $p<.05$.

** $p<.001$.

Table 3

Summary of hierarchical logistic regression analysis for variables predicting overall consent to a sexual invitation

Predictor	Male subjects (<i>n</i> =139)			Female subjects (<i>n</i> =188)		
	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	Exp (<i>B</i>)	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	Exp (<i>B</i>)
Initial model	−0.84**	0.19	0.43	−2.00**	0.23	0.13
constant						
Type of sexual invitation	0.11	0.29	1.12	1.46**	0.42	4.30
Relationship status	3.00**	0.54	20.00	2.14**	0.58	8.52
Attractiveness ^a	0.07	0.15	1.07	0.37*	0.17	1.45
Age of subject	0.18*	0.08	1.20	−0.01	0.07	0.99
Percentage of overall correct predictions	78.4%			89.9%		

Missing values were excluded. Not consenting to the sexual invitation is the reference category. The type of sexual invitation was coded as follows: 1, “go to bed with me”; 2, “come to my place”; 3, “go on a date”. Relationship status was coded as 0 for subjects in a relationship and as 1 for subjects not in a relationship. The attractiveness variable ranged from 1 (*extremely unattractive*) to 9 (*extremely attractive*).

^a Subject’s rating of confederate attractiveness.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

from the aggregated consent rates of Clark and Hatfield (1989) and Clark (1990) for any of the experimental conditions ($p > .05$).

4. Discussion

As proposed in the first hypothesis of the present study, it was found that men respond more favorably to a sexual invitation from a member of the opposite gender than women do. Specifically, compared with women, men were found to respond more favorably to the two most explicit of the three sexual invitations.

As proposed in the second hypothesis, it was found that confederate attractiveness significantly predicts consent beyond age, relationship status, and type of sexual invitation for female subjects but not for male subjects. This finding supports the prediction made by the Sexual Strategy Theory that in short-term mating women most often mate with men with highly desirable traits and characteristics (e.g., good looks). In addition, it extends the work of Schützwohl et al. (2009) by indicating that short-term partner attractiveness may be more important to women than to men, not only on a hypothetical level but also in real-life situations. The finding is also consistent with the Good Genes Hypothesis, which proposes that it is more likely for women to engage in casual sex with men exhibiting attractive external traits, as these may communicate the presence of genes contributing to offspring viability or reproductive success (Hamilton & Zuk, 1982). Physical attractiveness may be one such trait (Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997). The present study only included moderately attractive confederates. Therefore, including confederates at the very extreme ends of the

attractiveness scale may amplify these results or yield different results altogether (Schützwohl et al., 2009).

In agreement with the third hypothesis, the relationship status of subjects was found to exert a strong and significant influence on the consent rates for both genders. Specifically, male subjects who were not in a relationship were 20 times more likely to consent to one of the sexual invitations compared with male subjects in a relationship. Female subjects who were not in a relationship were more than 8 times more likely to consent to one of the sexual invitations compared with female subjects in a relationship.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the risk of losing a primary partner with good reproductive prospects following the revelation of infidelity may explain the importance of relationship status on consent rates across gender (Baker & Maner, 2008; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In addition, as shown by Gonzaga, Hasselton, Smurda, Davies, and Poore (2008), feeling love for a romantic partner may facilitate the suppression of thoughts of attractive alternative mates perhaps to help facilitate fidelity and relationship commitment over time and thereby increase the chance of reproductive success (Buss, 2003a, 2003b).

When our sample was stratified by relationship status, the overall percentile consent rates for both men and women who were not in a relationship did not differ significantly from the aggregated results of Clark and Hatfield (1989) and Clark (1990) across the three experimental conditions. From the Parental Investment Theory follows that the sex that invests the most in the offspring should also show the most discriminating mating patterns and be the most selective about with whom they mate (Trivers, 1972). In humans, the highest investing sex has for millennia been the female (Buss, 1989). Therefore, over time, females should also show the most discriminating mating patterns and be the most selective about with whom they mate. Both these study results and the aggregate data from Clark and Hatfield (1989) and Clark (1990) are consistent with this even though it is acknowledged that in an evolutionary perspective the time span between the current study and the studies by Hatfield and Clark is minimal.

Females may reject more explicit sexual invitations more often than males do due to greater feelings of vulnerability and/or the risk of falling victim to a crime whatever its etiology. Thus, under conditions in which women have time to evaluate the stranger in safe environments (e.g., the date condition), gender differences in consent rates may weaken. Contrary to this is the finding that a higher proportion of females consented to the “come to my place” than the “go to bed with me” condition given that these conditions seem to offer about the same degree of protection against victimization. This implies that differences in consent rates may be due more to gender differences in the sexual psychology of men and women than to differences in feelings of vulnerability and/or risk of victimization. However, the present study did not include measures to address or test this more thoroughly. Other study limitations include the study

settings and subject and confederate characteristics. For example, a different study setting in which sexual invitations may seem less unusual (e.g., a nightclub) and where confederates vary more in age and attractiveness may lead to different results. Furthermore, including subject measures of sexual experience, sensation-seeking proclivities, personality, or other potentially important individual moderators may help further qualify results. Thus, care should be taken in generalizing the present results across settings, age groups, and extreme levels of attractiveness.

Nonetheless, with the use of a naturalistic setup, the study provides evidence of gender difference in receptivity to sexual invitations, especially for people not in a relationship. Furthermore, the study provides support for the importance of short-term partner attractiveness for women, whereas it demonstrates that attractiveness does not significantly influence consent rates for men as long as the short-term partner is moderately attractive. Although the study does not provide an opportunity to investigate the etiology of these findings, they may be seen as consistent with predictions made by the Parental Investment Theory, the Sexual Strategy Theory, and the Good Genes Hypothesis.

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