INTRODUCTION

Dr Kirstin Mitchell, along with colleagues from University College London and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, analysed the responses of over 15,000 men and women in the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3).

The study sought to better understand why men always report more opposite-sex partners than women even though the average number reported by men and women should be about the same.

This ‘gender gap’ has been closing over time due to improved survey methods and changes in social attitudes but remains significant.

In Natsal-3, men reported an average of 14 lifetime sexual partners while women reported only 7.

Explaining the gender gap
Research to understand the gender gap has focused on three types of explanation: (1) sampling explanations such as under-representation of high risk groups; (2) counting explanations such as gender differences in what counts as a sexual partner; (3) misreporting due to intentional or unintentional desire to conform to perceived gendered norms and expectations.

We investigated a range of possible explanations using the Natsal dataset and found that almost two-thirds of the gender gap could be explained by three main factors:

• Individuals who reported very high numbers of partners skewed the average, and this effect was stronger for men than women. Men and women at the top end (99th percentile) reported 110 and 50 or more partners respectively. Excluding these men and women reduced the overall average, closing the gender gap.

• The gap reduced further when ‘accounting strategy’ was taken into consideration. Men were more likely than women to estimate rather than count their lifetime partners. For example, among those reporting 5-9 partners, 24% of men estimated compared with 15% of women.

• Sexual attitudes also had an impact on reporting. Women were generally more conservative in their sexual attitudes than men. They were less likely than men to view one-night stands as ‘not wrong at all’ (9% versus 18%) and they were more likely to view a ‘married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her partner’ as ‘always wrong’ (65% versus 57%). Adjusting for these attitudes narrowed the gap even further.

Briefing: Why men report more lifetime sexual partners than women
A number of other explanations were also investigated. Excluding paid-for partners made only a small difference to the gender gap, but gender differences in reported non-UK resident sexual partners had a modest impact over a 5-year period and could also be a potential explanation over the lifetime.

The gender gap is bigger among older people compared to younger people. Part of the reason is that older people have a larger number of years in which to accrue partners and a longer period of time over which to recall them. However, the smaller gap among younger people may also be due to a relaxation of attitudes towards sex over successive generations.

**Why is this study significant?**

This survey is the first to explore all three types of explanation together, within the same nationally representative dataset. It is novel in that it can tell us the relative contributions of these explanations.

Many existing studies of reporting bias are limited to students or high-risk populations, or are conducted in ‘laboratory’ settings, so they don’t show how members of the public respond in a ‘real-life’ survey. To our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to look at all the key types of explanation for the gender discrepancy within the same large and representative sample.

**What are the limitations?**

Because this is a real-life survey and not a methodological experiment, we were not able to test all the possible reasons in the lifetime period.

Another limitation is that the analysis relied on assumptions, not all of which are testable. For instance, we capped extreme high values on the assumption that these over-reported partners, but we were not able to test whether low values were under-reports. So we cannot tell the extent to which this is about men over-reporting or women under-reporting their sexual partners.

**Sexual identities**

These results are relevant to anyone who has had a partner of the opposite sex. Participants were included in our analysis regardless of sexual orientation or identity, because individuals identifying as gay or lesbian may also report opposite-sex partners.

As long as men and women with no opposite-sex partners are also included, the total number of opposite-sex lifetime partners should be equal regardless of how people identify.

**What are the potential uses of this research in the future?**

Accurate reporting of sexual partners is crucial for many reasons, including assessing individual risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and estimating the rate of STI/HIV transmission. Fortunately the gender gap is small over shorter time periods, and these are the periods commonly used in understanding STI risk and modelling transmission.

The study demonstrates why we need to continue to improve survey methodology – both in the way we word questions; in the strategies we use to reassure participants of confidentiality; and in ensuring that survey participants do not feel in any way judged.

**About the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles**

The third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles is a stratified probability sample survey interviewed between 2010 and 2012. The survey was led by UCL and LSHTM and funded by Wellcome and the UK Medical Research Council. It is one of the largest surveys of sexual behaviour in the world.

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