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# Doing Gender in the Bedroom: Investing in Gender Norms and the Sexual Experience

Diana T. Sanchez

Jennifer Crocker

Karlee R. Boike

University of Michigan

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*People often believe that they must be consistent with gender norms to obtain others' approval. The authors believe people who invest in gender norms tend to base self-esteem on others' approval, which undermines their sexual autonomy and ultimately diminishes their sexual satisfaction in intimate relationships. A survey of 309 sexually active college students examined whether placing importance on conforming to gender norms undermines sexual relationships because of its link to basing self-worth on others' approval and decreased sexual autonomy. Using structural equation modeling, the authors found that valuing gender conformity (but not avoiding gender deviance) negatively affects sexual pleasure for both men and women through increased contingency on others' approval and restricted sexual autonomy. The model fit the data for both men and women.*

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**Keywords:** *gender roles; sexuality; self-determination; self-worth; social norms*

**F**eminist theorists have suggested that gender roles limit men and women to half the human experience (Hyde, 1996). Men are limited to the male sphere of human activity and women to the female sphere. At the same time, men and women often feel pressure to conform to gender norms. People who deviate from gender norms may meet with harsh disapproval (i.e., the backlash effect; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For example, men who are communal are seen as less competent and hireable than agentic men (Rudman, 1998), whereas women who are agentic tend to be evaluated less favorably (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992) because they violate the stereotypes that women should be in the communal role and men the agentic role.

Although people who violate gender norms face sanctions, not all men and women follow gender norms. Some men and women defy gender norms in American cul-

ture, for example, men who participate equally in child care and domestic duties (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997) or women who enter male-dominated fields (*Women Breaking Through Male-Dominated Fields*, 2001). People differ in how important they believe it is to meet gender norms (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997).

Adherence to gender norms operates as a double-edged sword (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Although people who follow gender norms may receive more favorable evaluations by others, adherence to gender norms may have costs to the self. Research suggests that placing importance on adhering to gender norms is a risk factor in psychological adjustment<sup>1</sup> (P.R. Carver, Yungler, & Perry, 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). Egan and Perry (2001) suggested that people who value gender normativity feel that others' regard is conditional, namely, that others' acceptance and support depend on behaving consistently with gender norms. Consequently, they experience pressure from the self and others to adhere to gender norms. Following this perspective, Sanchez and Crocker (2005) argued that people who place importance on adhering to gender norms need external validation and base their self-esteem on external sources such as others' approval.

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**Authors' Note:** Diana T. Sanchez, Department of Psychology and Women's Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Jennifer Crocker, Karlee Boike, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Diana T. Sanchez is now at the Department of Psychology, Rutgers University. Diana Sanchez was supported by a Ford Foundation graduate fellowship during the preparation of this article. Jennifer Crocker was supported by NIMH Grant K02 MH01747-01. We would like to thank Julie Garcia for her helpful comments on earlier versions of the article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Diana T. Sanchez, Department of Psychology, Rutgers University, Tillett Hall, Piscataway, NJ 08854-8040.

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In the present study, we explore the costs of investing in gender norms for sexual relationships. Many theorists argue that the sexual interaction is one of the most powerful domains in which men and women feel pressure to enact gender roles (Coward, 1985; see Rohlinger, 2002). We examined how investment in gender norms (i.e., those who believe that being gender normative is central to the self; Wood et al., 1997) affects the sexual experience of heterosexual men and women through basing self-esteem on others' approval and sexual autonomy.<sup>2</sup> We propose that men and women who invest in gender norms are more likely to base self-esteem on others' approval and thus feel less sexual autonomy and consequently experience less sexual satisfaction.

#### *Investment in Gender Norms*

Social scientists have long explored how sex (i.e., biological definition of male and female) and the social construction of gender (i.e., what society defines as feminine or masculine) affect psychological health and the everyday social experiences of men and women. Adherence to gender norms and engagement in the socially sanctioned execution of one's gender offer some benefits. Following gender norms can foster social acceptance and approval. For example, meeting traditional gender role expectations can improve likeability and perceptions of accessibility of women in high-status positions (Rudman, 1998; Takiff, Sanchez, & Stewart, 2001). However, the costs of gender role adherence frequently outweigh the benefits. Accumulating research suggests that pressure to meet gender norms limits social behaviors and ultimately promotes poor psychological outcomes such as lowered self-esteem (P. R. Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001; Perry, 2004; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). Even so, the pressure to meet gender norms is ubiquitous. Girls and boys, men and women are inundated with messages from their family, peers, communities, and the media (e.g., magazines, television shows, and advertisements) that dictate the traditional performance of gender<sup>3</sup> (e.g., Bem, 1983; Bussey & Bandura, 1992; Egan & Perry, 2001; Kim & Ward, 2004; Lott, 1987; Raag & Rackliff, 1998).

Men and women negotiate gender role expectations in different ways. Some believe it is important to be similar to traditional norms and avoid gender deviance, whereas others do not share that belief (Wood et al., 1997). Previous research showed that investment in gender norms predicts engagement in stereotypical activities and avoidance of nonstereotypical activities (Egan & Perry, 2001; P. R. Carver et al., 2003). For example, P. R. Carver and colleagues (2003) showed that investment in gender norms among adolescents predicted less agentic behavior in girls and less communal behavior in boys. In

addition, those who invest in gender norms tend to show evidence of self-regulation in accordance with those norms in both experimental and experiential report conditions (Guerrero-Witt, Wood, & Kashy, 2004; Wood et al., 1997).

Once a person becomes invested in gender norms, gendered scripts direct their daily experiences. People who invest in gender norms may feel as though their social acceptance and success depends on adherence to gender norms (P. R. Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). People who invest in gender norms tend to base their self-esteem more on external sources such as approval from others, accounting for diminished psychological well-being (Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). People who invest in gender norms tend to worry about what other people think and ultimately let the evaluations of others determine their self-worth.

Research on gender roles typically focuses on how adherence to gender norms is problematic for women's mental health (Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999), academic performance (Eccles & Jacobs, 1986; Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990), and subjective sexual experiences (Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2005; Tevlin & Leiblum, 1983). Restrictive gender norms, which undermine women's power, competence, and agency, help account for women's higher rates of depression, poorer standardized scores, and higher discontent with sex. However, the argument that gender roles are more problematic for women than for men contrasts with evidence that investment in gender norms is a risk factor for both men and women (Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). We argue that although gender roles per se may be more problematic for women than for men, investment in gender norms (i.e., feeling pressure to conform to gender norms) is equally problematic for women and men. With regard to gender roles, the expectation that women should be subservient and cater to their partners (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Kiefer, Sanchez, Kalinka, & Ybarra, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2005; Tevlin & Leiblum, 1983) affords women less autonomy in their intimate relationships with men. In addition however, both men and women who invest in gender norms may be vulnerable to diminished autonomy because they feel pressure to conform and base their self-esteem on what other people think of them.

#### *Basing Self-Esteem on Others' Approval*

William James (1890) suggested that people are selective in what they stake their self-worth on; they have beliefs about what they must be or do to have worth as a person (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). People differ in the domains in which they base self-esteem (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Schwalbe & Sta-

ples, 1991). Some college students base self-esteem on more external domains such as others' approval, social comparisons, academic performance, or their physical appearance, whereas others base their self-esteem on more internal sources such as being a virtuous person or religious faith (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). When people are contingent on specific domains of self-worth, their self-esteem depends on success or failure in these domains (e.g., Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002).

Others' approval has often been cited as a major contingency or source of self-worth (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1986; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Mead, 1934). Basing self-worth on external sources, like others' approval, is related to more negative psychological outcomes than basing it on more internal or intrinsic aspects of the self, such as being a virtuous person (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003; Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). Self-esteem that requires approval from others is easily threatened and consequently, tends to be low (Crocker, 2002; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and unstable (Kernis & Waschull, 1995). People who base self-esteem on others' approval should be sensitive to rejection and may feel pressure to conform to social norms because they fear the disapproval of others (Crocker & Park, 2004). This felt pressure to conform should undermine autonomy in relationships.

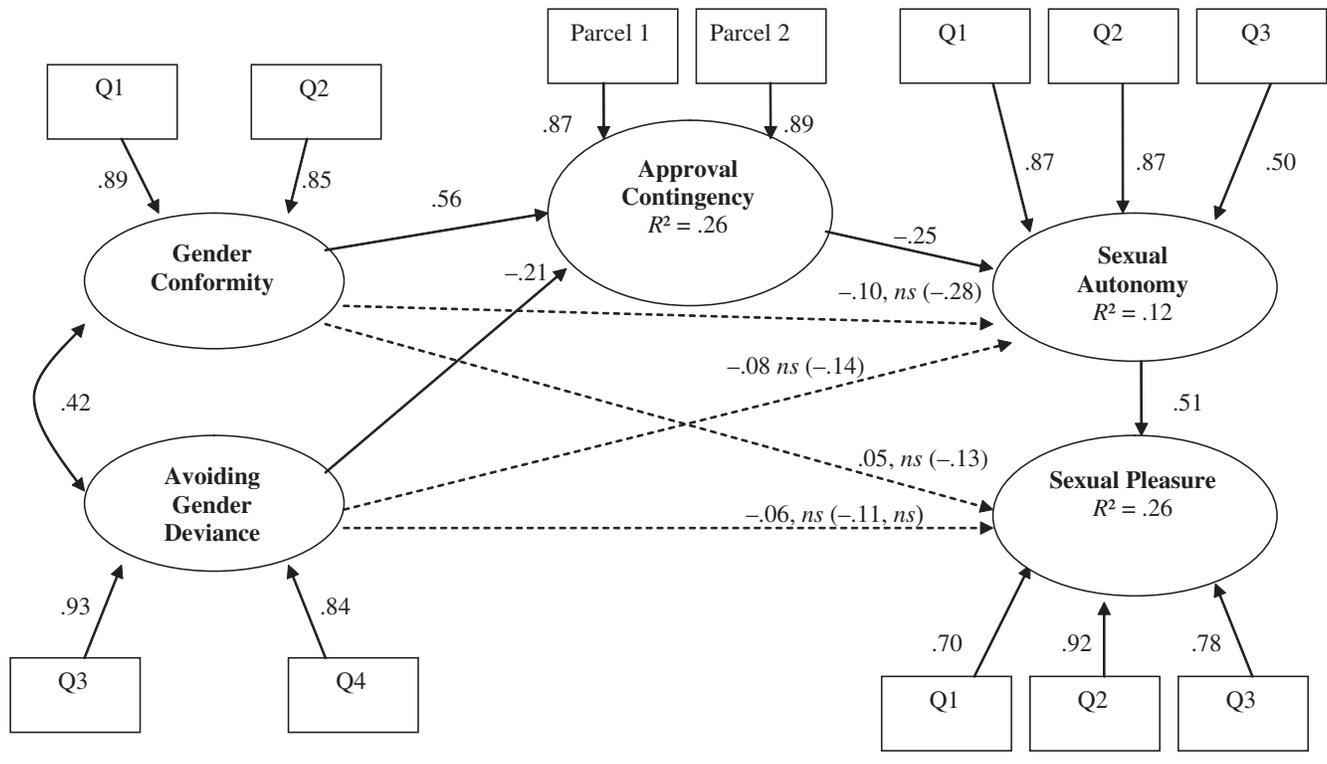
People who believe it is important to behave consistently with gender norms may feel as though acceptance, love, and support from others rely on their ability to maintain gender role consistency. People who value gender norms most likely learned to evaluate their gender normativity through the reactions of others. Many parents teach their children how to perform gender appropriately by praising gender-normative behavior and admonishing gender-deviant behavior (Bem, 1993; Bussey & Bandura, 1992; Egan & Perry, 2001; Lott, 1987; Pollack, 1998; Raag & Rackliff, 1998). Thus, people who value gender normativity use others to gauge their success at performing gender and ultimately their value as a person. Investing in gender norms predicts greater self-worth contingency on others' approval, which is a risk factor for well-being. In a sample of 677 college students, Sanchez and Crocker (2005) found that students who think it is personally important to be similar to the traditional gender norm tended to base their self-esteem on external domains such as others' approval. Furthermore, being externally contingent mediated the relationship between investment in gender norms and poor psychological well-being. This pattern held for both men and women as well as for Asian Americans, African Americans, and White Americans. The consequences of

basing self-esteem on others' approval may extend beyond psychological well-being to negatively affect sexual relationships.

### *Sexual Autonomy*

We hypothesize that people who invest in gender norms and consequently base self-esteem on others' approval experience diminished autonomy in sexual relationships. We borrow our conceptualization of sexual autonomy from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1987, 1995). Autonomy is defined as the feeling that one's behaviors originate in themselves rather than external forces and therefore are volitional, chosen, and self-determined. Autonomy positively predicts well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review). For example, autonomy predicts greater academic success (see Deci & Ryan, 2000, for a review; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989), less engagement in risky health behaviors (Turner, Irwin, Tschann, & Millstein, 1993), and greater daily vitality, well-being, and positive affect (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, autonomy is specifically conducive to sustaining healthy and satisfying relationships (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996). Autonomy not only implies freedom from external pressures but also an inner consistency between one's desires and choices (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

We believe that the concept of autonomy is highly relevant to sexual relationships. Positive and satisfying sexual experiences may require sexual autonomy. People who report that they are able to initiate and refuse sexual activities also report more positive, satisfying, and consensual sexual experiences (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993; Morokoff et al., 1997; Tolman, 2002). For decades, sex researchers and therapists have suggested that the root of many sexual dysfunctions lies in the inability of individuals to express sexual desires and exercise choice during sexual activities with their partners (Sprecher & Regan, 2000; Tevlin & Lieblum, 1983; Weinberg, Swensson, & Hammersmith, 1983). In accordance with these perspectives on sexuality and self-determination, we contend that sexual autonomy fosters pleasurable sexual experiences. Furthermore, we posit that investment in gender norms diminishes sexual autonomy because it is associated with basing self-worth on others' approval, which in turn undermines the experience of choice and volition in one's sexual activities. Fearful of their partner's disapproval and the resulting drop in self-worth that would ensue, men and women who are highly invested in gender norms may engage in unwanted sexual behaviors to please their partners.



**Figure 1 Results on sample as a whole.**

NOTE: In the figure, betas in parentheses refer to the direct effects between investment in gender normativity and autonomy as well as gender normativity and sexual pleasure (excluding all other paths) in separate nested models. Dashed lines represent the direct paths we hypothesized would be mediated. Standardized beta coefficients are shown. All betas are significant at  $p < .05$  unless otherwise stated.

*Present Research*

We tested whether people who invest in gender norms experience lower sexual satisfaction because they base self-esteem on others' approval, undermining their sexual autonomy. Thus, we predicted that (a) investment in gender norms is positively related to basing self-worth on others' approval and negatively related to sexual autonomy and sexual satisfaction, (b) basing self-esteem on others' approval mediates the relationship between investing in gender norms and sexual autonomy, and (c) sexual autonomy mediates the relationship between investing in gender norms (gender conformity and avoiding gender deviance) and sexual pleasure (see Figure 1). The hypothesized mediated relationships are represented by dashed lines. In the hypothesized model, we treat gender conformity and avoiding gender deviance as two aspects of investment in gender norms on the assumption that people could invest in one or both types of gender norms or neither. Androgyny theories suggest that some people value both femininity and masculinity (e.g., Bem, 1974), suggesting that some participants in this study would characterize themselves as investing in meeting the gender norm for their gender and the opposite sex. We tested the fit of this model for men and women as well as the entire sample.

METHOD

*Participants*

In this study, 309 sexually active heterosexual participants were recruited from the introductory psychology subject pool; 117 men and 192 women (236 Whites/White American, 19 Asian/Asian American, 19 Hispanic/Latino American, 14 Black/African American, 21 identified as Other) completed the survey for course credit.<sup>4</sup>

*Materials*

We assessed investment in gender norms using the four-item scale developed by Wood and her colleagues (1997). Participants were instructed to think of how society defines the ideal man and woman and were asked two questions regarding how important it is to conform to gender norms from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*; Cronbach's alpha = .84). For women, the questions were, "How important is it for you to be similar to the ideal woman?" and "To what extent is being similar to the ideal woman an important part of who you are?" For men, the questions pertained to the "ideal man." Participants were then asked two questions regarding how important is it to avoid gender deviance (Cronbach's alpha = .88).

The two questions for avoiding gender deviance read, "How important is it for you to be dissimilar to typical members of the opposite sex?" and "To what extent is being dissimilar to typical members of the opposite sex an important part of who you are?"

We assessed basing self-esteem on others' approval with the 35-item Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS; Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). The CSWS consists of seven 5-item subscales that assess the extent to which self-esteem is contingent on various domains. For the present study, we were particularly interested in the Approval From Others subscale. Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed with statements such as "I don't care if other people have a negative opinion about me" and "What others think of me has no effect on what I think about myself." Responses were assessed on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Items on this subscale were reverse-scored such that higher numbers indicated greater contingency on others' approval. The approval subscale has good test-retest reliability and convergent and divergent validity with other measures (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). We randomly divided the scale into two indicators ( $\alpha = .87$ ) in a procedure commonly referred to as parceling. Parceling improves the goodness of fit and reduces bias in estimations of structural parameters compared to individual item use (Bandalos, 2002).

Sexual autonomy was assessed by adapting the autonomy scale used in self-determination research on relationships (see LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). It consisted of three items measuring the extent to which participants felt their sexual behaviors were self-determined. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statements on a scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*): (a) "When I am having sex or engaging in sexual activities with someone, I feel free to be who I am"; (b) "When I am having sex or engaging in sexual activities with someone, I have a say in what happens and I can voice my opinion"; and (c) "When I am having sex or engaging in sexual activities with someone, I feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ).

We measured sexual pleasure with three items assessing the extent to which participants perceived sexual intercourse, sexual activities, and sexual intimacy pleasurable on a scale from -3 to 3 with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction and pleasure (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

## RESULTS

We tested the model by confirmatory latent-variable structural analyses using EQS computer software, which allows us to test causal paths between the predictor vari-

ables and the dependent variable simultaneously (Klem, 2000) as well as test mediational models (i.e., indirect and direct effects). In the following analyses, we test the structural model on the entire sample of college students and examine the fit of the model separately for male and female students. We also perform direct effect tests to show the original relationship between investment in gender norms (conformity and deviance) and sexual autonomy as well as sexual satisfaction (see dashed lines in Figure 1). The structural models were performed separately on listwise covariance matrices. In accordance with standard structural equation modeling with EQS software (Raykov, Tomer, & Nesselroade, 1991), we report the following goodness-of-fit indices: normed fit (NFI), non-normed fit (NNFI), and comparative fit (CFI). Acceptable fit indices exceed .90. We also report the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the confidence interval of the RMSEA. RMSEA misfit indices should be at or below .05 or .06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).  $\chi^2$  is reported but has been replaced by the previously mentioned fit indices because of its sensitivity to sample size (Klem, 2000).

Table 1 presents the zero-order correlations among all variables for the overall sample. Table 2 shows correlations for men and women separately. Table 3 shows the results of *t* test comparisons for men and women on the variables of interest. Fit statistics for each model and accompanying nested models are included in Table 4.

### *Analyses on Total Sample*

Testing the hypothesized structural model based on the total sample provided a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(44, N = 289) = 61.50, p = .04, NFI = .96, NNFI = .98, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03$ . The overall model explained 27.5% of the variance in reported sexual pleasure, 26% of the variance in approval CSWS, and 12% of the variance in sexual autonomy. Figure 1 presents the paths obtained in the model. As expected, investment in gender conformity indirectly predicted lowered sexual pleasure because investment in gender conformity predicted basing self-esteem on others' approval, restricting sexual autonomy. Investment in avoiding gender deviance predicted less contingency on others' approval.

### *Gender Analyses*

To test the comparative fit of the model for both men and women, we tested the fit of the covariance matrices for both men and women separately (see Table 2) constraining all paths to be equal. The analysis provided a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(105, \text{women} = 178; \text{men} = 111) = 145.60, p < .001; NFI = .92, NNFI = .97, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04$ . The final model was compared to a completely unrestrained model, and the difference in chi-square was

**TABLE 1: Zero-Order Correlations on Entire Sample**

	1	2	3	4	5
Investment in gender norms					
1. Gender conformity	1.000				
2. Avoiding gender deviance	.365***	1.000			
3. Approval contingency	.409***	.045	1.000		
4. Sexual autonomy	-.203***	-.154	-.280***	1.000	
5. Sexual satisfaction	-.083	-.091	-.065	.376***	1.000

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2: Zero-Order Correlations by Gender**

	1	2	3	4	5
Investment in gender norms					
1. Gender conformity	1.000	.363***	.400***	-.288***	-.119 <sup>†</sup>
2. Avoiding gender deviance	.363***	1.000	.111	-.117*	-.099
3. Approval contingency	.459***	-.020	1.000	-.351***	-.031
4. Sexual autonomy	-.113	-.154	-.280***	1.000	.421***
5. Sexual satisfaction	-.016	-.091	-.065	.376***	1.000

NOTE. These results are based on average responses for the measure. Men are represented below diagonal, women above the diagonal.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 3: Group Differences for Investment, Approval Contingency, Sexual Autonomy, and Satisfaction**

Measure	Women		Men		Difference
	M	SD	M	SD	t
Investment in gender norms					
Gender conformity	5.74	1.80	5.90	1.64	0.79, <i>ns</i>
Avoiding gender deviance	4.87	1.79	5.29	1.87	1.93*
Approval contingency	4.28	1.24	3.92	1.89	-2.53*
Sexual autonomy	5.67	1.06	5.45	1.03	-1.75 <sup>†</sup>
Sexual satisfaction	2.46	0.07	2.60	1.82 <sup>†</sup>	1.82 <sup>†</sup>

<sup>†</sup> $p < .09$ . \* $p < .05$ .

nonsignificant,  $\chi^2(10) = 12.51$ , *ns*, suggesting that no post hoc constraints should be released. These results suggest that the model fits the data equally well for men and women. Analyses did not reveal a significant difference in the equality constraints on any of the relationships between the factors. The results support our prediction that investment in gender norms negatively affects sexual pleasure through greater propensities to base self-esteem on others' approval, undermining sexual autonomy. Unexpectedly, investment in avoiding gender deviance predicted less contingency on others' approval. Furthermore, direct effects testing suggested no relationship between avoiding gender deviance and autonomy or pleasure, suggesting that avoiding gender deviance does not restrict or benefit one's sexual experience.

## DISCUSSION

The present study provides evidence that investment in gender conformity (i.e., striving to be similar to the gender norm) predicts lower sexual satisfaction. As predicted, this relationship was mediated by the tendency to base self-esteem on others' approval and lower sexual autonomy. The hypothesized model fit the data for the sample as a whole and for both gender groups.

### *Investment in Gender Norms*

Gender role theorists suggest that gender roles can limit men and women. However, not all men and women believe it is important to follow gender norms (Wood et al., 1997). In the present study, investing in gender conformity (placing importance on being similar to the

TABLE 4: Chi-Square Fit Statistics

	$\chi^2$	df	Normed Fit Index	Non-Normed Fit Index	Comparative Fit Index	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	$\Delta\chi^2$
Full model	64.58*	45	.96	.98	.99	.04	—
Compared to direct effects model							
Gender conformity to autonomy	139.78***	50	.92	.93	.95	.08	75.20***
Avoiding gender deviance to autonomy	151.86***	50	.91	.92	.94	.08	87.28***
Gender conformity to satisfaction	125.02***	47	.93	.93	.95	.08	60.44***
Avoiding gender deviance to satisfaction	126.05***	47	.93	.93	.95	.08	61.47***
Gender comparison restrained model	145.60***	105	.92	.97	.98	.04	—
Unrestrained model	133.09**	95	.92	.97	.98	.04	12.51, <i>ns</i>
Compared to direct effects models							
Gender conformity to autonomy	211.30***	108	.89	.93	.94	.06	65.70***
Avoiding gender deviance to autonomy	222.86***	108	.88	.92	.93	.06	77.26***
Gender conformity to satisfaction	194.64***	108	.90	.93	.95	.06	49.04***
Avoiding gender deviance to satisfaction	196.35***	102	.89	.93	.95	.06	50.75***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

norm) predicted basing self-esteem on others' approval, which undermined autonomy in sexual relationships.

The present study shows that investing in gender conformity can negatively affect both men and women even when the norms themselves have differential consequences for men and women. Recent findings suggest that both men and women who feel pressure to conform to gender roles show poorer psychological adjustment (P. R. Carver et al., 2003; Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). Furthermore, Sanchez and Crocker (2005) found that those who invest in gender conformity are more externally contingent, that is, have self-esteem that is based on external sources. The present study extends this previous work by showing that basing self-esteem on others' approval undermines autonomy in intimate relationships, which diminishes sexual satisfaction. We argue that both men and women who invest in gender conformity feel as though they need to meet these ideals to gain others' approval. Although preliminary evidence suggests that those who invest in gender normativity feel better about themselves when they are engaged in gender-normative activities (Guerrero-Witt et al., 2004; Wood et al., 1997), our results suggest that elevated affect and self-esteem could be a short-term boost related to feeling as though one has others' approval. Previous research suggests that boosts and drops in self-esteem related to succeeding and failing at contingencies of self-worth are related to increases in symptoms of depression over time (Crocker, Karpinski, et al., 2003; Kernis et al., 1998; Roberts, Kassel, & Gotlib, 1995). Future research should examine whether satisfying gender norms creates long-term benefits for those who invest in gender normativity or whether the temporary boosts to self-esteem are associated with fragile self-worth and poor psychological

adjustment and impede the development of healthy, satisfying relationships.

It is important to note that investing in gender conformity is conceptually distinct from actually conforming to or satisfying those norms (e.g., being a masculine man or a feminine woman). Conforming to gender norms in sexual relationships may afford women less power because gender roles dictate female submission and male dominance (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Kiefer et al., 2005; Sanchez et al., 2005; Tevlin & Leiblum, 1983). Independent of the content of these norms, we believe it is essential to consider the importance people place on meeting those norms. The feeling of pressure to meet the norms rather than the norms per se fosters self-worth that is contingent on others' approval and undermines sexual autonomy. In the terms of self-determination theory, when people are motivated to conform to gender norms for extrinsic or introjected reasons (e.g., because self-worth is contingent on meeting the norms), they will experience low autonomy, which undermines well-being. When people who invest in gender norms have integrated those norms into the self-concept and are intrinsically motivated to meet the norms, they may feel autonomous when acting in ways that conform to gender norms and may not show the negative consequences observed here.

#### *Investment in Conforming Versus Avoiding Deviance*

Some people value being similar to gender norms, whereas others believe it is more important to be dissimilar to the opposite sex gender norm. More generally, approach and avoidance represent two distinct methods of achieving goals (C. S. Carver & Scheier, 1998). Interestingly, men and women did not significantly differ in

mean levels of importance of meeting norms for their gender, but men were significantly more likely than women to place importance on avoiding gender deviance. Men may be more resistant to gender deviance because cross-sexed behavior is judged especially harshly in boys (Cahill & Adams, 1997; Martin, 1990; Pleck, 1981; Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999). Investment in gender conformity (i.e., placing importance on being feminine for women and masculine for men) predicted poorer sexual satisfaction. Investment in avoiding gender deviance did not have the same negative effect, suggesting that trying to be similar to the gender norm has more negative implications for intimate relations.

The unexpected difference between investing in gender conformity and avoiding gender deviance has important implications. Most obviously, researchers should consider gender conformity and avoiding gender deviance independently because these two approaches to doing gender have different consequences. Investment in avoiding gender deviance was unrelated to basing self-esteem on others' approval; in fact, when we controlled for the effects of gender conformity in the full model, the independent path from avoiding gender deviance to the approval contingency was negative. Thus, avoiding gender deviance may be less about what other people think but rather a more internalized value that is no longer a response to interpersonal demands. In Kelman's (1961) model of social influence, investing in gender conformity could be a form of social compliance where a person is said to engage in normative activity to gain the approval of others. On the other hand, avoiding gender deviance may be an internalized norm where a person is said to accept influence because the behavior is consistent with the person's value system. Those who internalize norms tend to find engaging in—or in this case, avoiding—gender deviance intrinsically rewarding. Although social norms begin as external demands, some people come to truly believe in them. Future research should examine the motivations behind investing in gender conformity and avoiding gender deviance. Perhaps, gender conformists maintain more extrinsic motivations to meet these norms while those who avoid gender deviance maintain more intrinsic motivations.

#### *Sexual Autonomy*

Sexual autonomy is a popular topic in sexual self-help manuals focused on improving intimate relationships (Weinberg et al., 1983). There are many avenues through which autonomy can be undermined for people who value conformity to gender norms. The most obvious is that these people feel they must perform certain sexual roles and thus feel pressure to act in certain

ways that feel inauthentic or unsatisfying. We argue that contingent self-worth, specifically, basing self-esteem on others' approval, explains why gender conformists feel they must perform certain roles—they fear that if they do not conform to gender norms, they will lose others' approval and will feel worthless as a result. Basing self-esteem on others' approval consequently undermines the freedom and autonomy people feel in their sexual relationships with others. These findings are consistent with the view of researchers who suggest that externally contingent self-worth undermines autonomy (Crocker & Park, 2004; Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). People who base self-esteem on others' approval may behave in ways that are aimed at garnering others' approval and are not consistent with their inner desires. Potentially, people who experienced undermined autonomy may be more sexually compliant (i.e., willingly engage in unwanted sex; see Impett & Peplau, 2003, for a review) and communicate less of their sexual desires, potentially accounting for markedly less sexual satisfaction. Future research should continue to explore how contingent self-worth and undermined autonomy affect the development of healthy and satisfying sexual relationships with others.

#### *Limitations*

The present research is limited by reliance on self-reports, which may be compromised by social desirability.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the causal direction of the relationships among variables in the present study remains unknown. Although we propose that investment causes people to base self-esteem on others' approval, it is equally plausible that basing self-esteem on others' approval breeds investment in gender conformity. These variables likely have a reciprocal relationship in which people who base self-esteem on others' approval come to be more conforming to the greater societal values and people who are gender conforming tend to gauge their success and self-worth on whether they have the approval of others.

Similarly, we argue that gender norm conformity undermines sexual satisfaction through self-worth that is not self-determined and lowered sexual autonomy. However, people who have less satisfying sexual experiences might feel lower sexual autonomy as a result. Most likely, people enter sexual relationships with a degree of sexual autonomy influenced partly by socialization and contingencies of self-worth as well as their previous experiences. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the direction of these relationships.

Importantly, the present study is limited to heterosexual relationships. The concept of normative creativity suggests that lesbians and gay men who resist traditional

gender norms by engaging in intimate relationships with same-sex partners create norms within their communities unencumbered by societal standards (Brown, 1989) and could therefore value others' approval less. For this reason, we suspect that the relationships among the studied variables would be more complex in more nontraditional relationships.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

Investment in gender conformity may also affect other sexual beliefs in addition to sexual autonomy. For example, social norms literature would suggest that norms provide scripts in ambiguous situations (Cialdini, 1993), which could alleviate anxiety or discomfort when approaching new sexual relationships. On the other hand, investing in gender conformity may promote a more general sexual conservatism that contributes to feelings of less sexual agency. We believe exploring the consequences of investment in gender norms and other aspects of gender identity on sexual relationships is a fruitful avenue to understand intimacy between men and women.

Researchers have taken several different approaches to examining gender identity and conformity. Researchers from the gender-schematic approach determine gender identity by measuring endorsement of feminine or masculine characteristics (Bem, 1974). Others use more multidimensional approaches to gender identity such as intergroup attitudes (Egan & Perry, 2001; Spence, 1993), gender role behaviors, and gender typicality (P. R. Carver et al., 2003). For the purposes of this study, we focused on investment in gender norms because we were interested in examining individuals who consciously strive to meet gender norms rather than distinguishing feminine personalities from masculine personalities. However, future research would benefit from examining other aspects of gender identity that may affect sexual relationships. For example, in heterosexual relationships, egalitarian attitudes may account for differences in sexual pleasure. Previous research found that women who have more egalitarian attitudes report more sexual partners, suggesting that egalitarian attitudes loosen adherence to gendered sexual scripts (Lucke, 1998). Other research suggests that adopting masculine traits encourages a masculine pattern of sexual behavior for both men and women (e.g., more sexual experience; Leary & Snell, 1988; Lucke, 1998). The future utilization of a multidimensional model of gender identity to explore the sexual relationship might help us understand the relative influence of different aspects of gender identity and conformity on sexual satisfaction.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to the question of whether women and men should conform to gender

norms. On one hand, research suggests that women and men may gain others' approval or at the very least avoid others' disapproval or negative evaluations if they follow gender norms (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). On the other hand, men and women who feel compelled to follow norms may sacrifice their own needs and desires, which can prevent the development of satisfying and authentic intimate relationships with others. The negotiation between the need for approval and the need for autonomy presents an important next step for work on gender conformity.

#### NOTES

1. Egan and Perry (2001) and Carver, Yungler, and Perry (2003) examined placing importance on gender norms by measuring felt pressure to conform to gender norms that included both felt pressure from the self and from family and peers. We do not suggest that felt pressure is identical to investment in gender normativity, but we are compelled to treat these concepts similarly because they are intuitively related. Although their measure of felt pressure incorporates self-imposed pressure as well as other-imposed pressure, we believe that investment in gender normativity is strongly tied to external influences.

2. In the present study, we focus exclusively on heterosexual men and women.

3. Judith Butler (1993) referred to the acts traditionally associated with gender and gender roles as performances.

4. The present study reports on a subset of measures collected.

5. In another data set not reported in the current article (Sanchez, 2005), we found that social desirability (Crown & Marlowe, 1960) was uncorrelated with investment in gender norms (gender conformity and avoidance of gender deviance).

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