

## Why I Do Not Like Sex

Lee Sechrest  
University of Arizona

As a variable, I mean. I, as a research psychologist, do not like sex as a variable in our studies. In fact, I do not like education, race, ethnicity, income, marital status, and all other variables of that ilk.

The problem is that sex (and the other variables) is not a psychological construct. When sex is used as a variable in psychological studies, we are *never* (well, next to never) interested in what sex really is, a biological variable. We are not interested in the nature of the genitalia, in the gonads, and so on. Not even in the distribution of body hair or the nature of the upper body profile. We use sex as a *proxy* or *surrogate* for a latent, but unspecified, variable. We use sex because it is easily observed or measured and, for all practical purposes, really can be assumed to be measured without error.

But sex, the biological, observed variable, is often, maybe even usually, only weakly correlated with the latent variable. That is, biological sex is often a weak proxy for the variable we are really interested in. What is this latent variable? Well, it is actually one of a whole set of potential latent variables that are amorphous and overlapping. But, essentially, when psychologists use sex in their studies, it is because they believe that it captures the variance in a variable that they almost never make explicit but that represents in some way the residue of the array of life experiences that fall differentially to the lot of men or women. For example, the observation that females are far more likely than males to develop anorexia/bulimia is not usually premised on any notions about the actual effects of biological sex, e.g., such as might result from sex-related hormones. Rather, the underlying variable is couched in terms of ideas about such experiences as pressures toward certain body images, male domination, etc., etc. (Not so very long ago, Anne Quindlen's column—admittedly she is not a psychologist—blamed eating disorders on Barbie dolls). When it is observed that females seem to find it more difficult to quit smoking than do males, that difference, again, is usually not referred to biological sex differences, e.g., in addictive potential. The difference is usually taken to derive from differences in the social meaning of smoking, in susceptibility to influence, in differential support for quitting, and so on.

So? Females differ considerably in the degree to which they are exposed to all the life experiences that contribute to that feminine residue. Some females are much more exposed than others, and the experiences rub off more on some females than others. Therefore, female (sex) is only an inexact measure of the latent variable. In fact, \*males\* differ in the degree to which they are exposed to the very same experiences. Some males are

reared in such ways, or in some other way have experiences, that are much more like those of females than are the life circumstances of other males. Thus, on both sides, sex is a measure of the residue of experience that is loaded with error.

A recent article (Good, Wallace, and Borst, 1994) noted that \*both\* males and females with masculine or undifferentiated gender-role self-concept scored lower on measures of relationship quality than did feminine or androgynous males and females. A crude comparison would show that males (biological) score lower on measures of relationship quality, but the latent variable is that residue of experience (and probably some genetic disposition) that is found in both sexes and that we term “masculine orientation.” (I would recommend the Good, et al. article as not only a good review but as provocation to thinking about what we are missing when we substitute sex for the underlying variables that are psychologically meaningful.)

Here are some examples of other ways that I have seen “sex,” i.e., biologically manifested, used as a proxy for a psychological latent variable:

- females are known to have better verbal skills than males
- males are better at spatial tasks than females
- females are more positive toward children than males
- females have a greater capacity than males for empathy
- females have a smaller tolerance for alcohol than do males

And many, many others. Usually these substitutions of sex for the latent variable are implicit and often occur in discussion and interpretation of findings. That does not make them more sensible.

What we, as psychologists, ought to do is to measure the variables in which we are interested directly, i.e., develop and use measures of the actual latent variable in which we are interested. If we are interested in the residue of experience, measure it somehow (perhaps with a sex-role orientation scale); if we are interested in verbal ability or spatial ability, then measure those abilities. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that because we can attach some latent variable to sex that we know that that variable is, in fact, operative in the situation we are studying. I remember (but not well) one study in which a presumed personality difference between males and females actually did turn out to stem from differences in verbal behavior, a different tendency to embellish verbal responses in certain ways.

Other variables are similarly misused by psychologists. Race, for example, is used much like sex. When we find race differences (or correlations, if that is our statistical bent), we do not really know what they mean. If race stands for the residue of the experience of segregation and discrimination, then we ought to measure that experience directly. I mean come up with a measure for it. Racial and ethnic minorities are not at all homogenous with respect to their experiences. Education is measured by reported years spent in a schoolroom. We do not really care how many years

anyone spent in a schoolroom. We care about knowledge, sophistication about the world, intellectual discipline, and things of that sort. Education rubs off more on some people than on others—and it sticks to some longer. We ought to measure the results of education as best we can. We can surely do better than years in a classroom, and we at least will have a pretty good idea of what we are measuring. The case is the same for income, marital status, place of residence, and all such variables. None of them is psychological. And we are psychologists. We need to be faithful to our discipline and our methods.

A very good reason, a compelling reason for what I am recommending is that virtually all our methods of statistical analysis assume that observed variables are measured without error. When we “measure” a latent variable with a single observed variable, as when we “measure” worldly sophistication with dollars of income, our analyses cannot know that we are merely guessing, and we obtain a weight (beta weight, parameter estimate) that assumes that we have measured the effect of the latent variable without error. When, in fact, the variables we are using do have error in them, the beta weights, or similar parameters, will be \*underestimated\* in most instances. If we want to measure the effect of “discrimination” on some outcome and we measure that discrimination with the faulty proxy of racial designation, we will almost certainly underestimate the effect of discrimination. If we enter sex into a regression equation (as in a path analysis), thinking that we will pick up the variance attributable to spatial ability, we will underestimate the effect of spatial ability on later variables in the equation.

Of course, what I am suggesting would be difficult. Of course. If it were not, I would not need to be suggesting it (actually, I'd insist if I thought I had any real influence); everyone would be doing it. Part of our problem (and I see it as such) stems from the fact that we have never really thought through the nature of variables such as those to which I am referring. Part of the difficulty, too, is that it is just easy to “throw in” sex, or age, or race, or education, and see what happens. In my estimation, almost nothing good is likely to happen from throwing in variables. If we do not know what we are measuring going into a study, we are not likely to be much better off coming out of it. True, we can probably always conjure up an explanation for sex, race, income, and other such differences after the fact, but our conjectures will have about as much relation to reality as the tricks of the stage conjurer. We need to be more ambitious about our science.

There is a place in science for variables such as those I have been discussing. It just isn't in psychology. Sex is for sociologists.

## References

- Good, G. E., Wallace, D. L., and Borst, T. S. (1994). Masculinity research: A review and critique. *Applied and Preventive Psychology, 3*, 3-14.