

Researchers find gender bias in sexual cannibalism papers

January 17 2013, by Bob Yirka

(Phys.org)—A trio of biologists, Liam Dougherty, Emily Burdfield-Steel and David Shuker from the U.K.'s University of St Andrews, School of Biology, have found that when researchers write papers that are published in scientific journals, they tend to use gender biased terminology to describe acts of sexual cannibalism. In their paper, published in the journal *Animal Behavior*, they suggest that gender stereotypical word choices can cloud study results and lead to inaccurate results.

When authors use words like "rapacious," "predatory," "voracious," or even "aggressive" to describe the behavior of a female spider when she eats a male – before, during or after sex – the team says, it adds an ingredient to an observation that might not actually exist. In a similar vein, describing the male in such a scenario as "willing to sacrifice himself" implies a degree of nobility that may or not actually be the case. There is no way to know what either spider is feeling or if it's feeling anything at all – a necessary ingredient for ascribing emotional actions to any living creature. In most cases, it appears likely both genders are simply behaving in ways that are most conducive to the carrying on of their species.

To come to these conclusions, the researchers poured over 47 published [research papers](#) that covered sexual cannibalism, highlighting every instance of words that described the behavior of the male or female. Next, they focused most particularly on the use of active/reactive words in such descriptions and contrasted the different ways that the behavior

of the two genders was described. They found that authors overwhelmingly represented the behavior of females in active terms, while describing the males using mostly reactive words. The overall impression authors give, they say, is of [dominant females](#) terrorizing males culminating sometimes, in an act of [cannibalism](#).

The problem with using such words, the authors argue, is that it degrades the science. It's a form of anthropomorphism, and as with any other science, has no place in good research. They suggest that ways be found by authors to describe such activities without resorting to loaded words that add emotional heft to a paper, but little in the way of actual science.

More information: Sexual stereotypes: the case of sexual cannibalism, *Animal Behaviour*, Volume 71, Issue 3, March 2006, Pages 481–490

Abstract

There is a long-standing debate within the field of sexual selection regarding the potential projection of stereotypical sex roles onto animals by researchers. It has been argued that this anthropomorphic view may be hampering research in this area, for example by prioritizing the study of male sexual adaptations over female ones. We investigated how males and females are described in the sexual cannibalism literature. Sexual cannibalism is a specific form of sexual conflict and is highly gendered, with females generally cannibalizing males. We found that females were more likely to be described using active words and males with reactive words. This is contrary to recent results from a survey of the sexual conflict literature. While this reversed gender bias may arise from the nature of sexual cannibalism, our results nevertheless indicate an alternative form of sexual stereotyping. A number of the words used to describe cannibalistic females were highly loaded and suggestive of a negative stereotype of sexually aggressive females. To make progress we suggest first that animal behaviour researchers recognize both the costs and benefits of looking for general patterns as part of the scientific

method. Although necessary, the search for general patterns may validate existing stereotypes or provide the basis for new ones. Additionally, we suggest that the field of sexual behaviour research is neither wholly bad nor good in terms of language use but that we should work towards a consensus of how and when we use particular terms to describe sexual behaviour.

© 2013 Phys.org

Citation: Researchers find gender bias in sexual cannibalism papers (2013, January 17) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-01-gender-bias-sexual-cannibalism-papers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.