

Female animals portrayed as 'femme fatales' by researchers

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Female animals are unfairly sexually stereotyped by researchers, according to experts at the University of St Andrews.

In a new report, the study suggests that cultural stereotypes may influence how we view animal [sexual behaviour](#).

Anthropomorphism – making animals seem like us – is a common problem for animal behaviour researchers. The effects can be quite obvious – giving animals human-like emotions for instance – or more subtle, using human cultural conventions or stereotypes to describe behaviour.

For instance, recent work has suggested that when it comes to sexual behaviour, researchers sometimes fall into a rather Victorian stereotype of the [sexes](#): males are considered dominant, strong and aggressive, whereas females are described as submissive, weak and passive. However, these stereotypes at best fail to capture the reality of male-female [sexual interactions](#) or at worst are just plain wrong.

Emily Burdfield-Steel, a member of the research group, said: "Our work suggests that scientists are not immune to cultural stereotypes and we need to think carefully about the words we use and what they convey."

The most obvious example where such stereotypes are wrong is sexual cannibalism: where it is females that are active killing, and eating males before or during sex.

So is the sexual cannibalism literature free of human stereotypes? To explore this question, researchers at the University of St Andrews compared the language used to describe sexual cannibalism, surveying the scientific literature on sexual [cannibalism](#) and recording the words used to describe [males and females](#).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the researchers found that females were more likely to be described with active words and males with reactive words.

More surprisingly though many of the words used to describe females, while active, were also rather negative.

For example, females were described as "aggressive", "voracious" and "rapacious". Use of these words suggests that researchers risk perpetuating a negative stereotype of sexually aggressive females, akin to that of the femme fatale in noir cinema.

Their results are published online in [Animal Behaviour](#).

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...
ii/S000334721200557X](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S000334721200557X)

Provided by University of St Andrews

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