

Casual Sex during Emerging Adulthood

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Emerging adulthood has been characterized, in part, as a time to explore sexuality and to gain sexual experience (Gilmartin 2006). Part of this sexual exploration may involve experimenting with casual sex behaviors. Much of the literature on casual sex during emerging adulthood uses samples of college students (e.g., Glenn, and Marquardt 2001; Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006; Paul and Hayes 2002; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000), but the pathways through emerging adulthood are diverse (Mouw 2005); as such, many individuals do not enter college. For example, 66 percent of high school graduates continue on to some form of part-time or full-time higher education (US Census 2008). A third of individuals do not directly enter college; thus college based samples used in previous research may misrepresent the prevalence and experience of casual sex among the emerging adult population. This paper attempts to more thoroughly understand the relationship between casual sex experiences during the emerging adult years for both young people who attend and do not attend college. We examine differences and similarities in casual sexual behavior according to education and employment status as well as the meaning and accounts that young adults, themselves, give to their casual sex experiences.

The majority (81%) of young women have sexual intercourse before the age of 20 (Darroch, Singh, and Frost 2001), thus reflecting the reality that sexual activity is common among the targeted population. Casual sex has also become a more common phenomenon. A sample of college students (England, Fitzgibbons Shafer, and Forgary 2007) reports that by senior year, 76 percent of respondents participated in some form of casual sex behavior that may or may not have included sexual intercourse. Thirty-eight percent of students report there was

vaginal intercourse in their most recent casual sex interaction. Similarly, McGinty, Knox and Zusman (2007) report that 60 percent of their sample of college students had a casual sex relationship with someone they knew, referring to this relationship as “friends with benefits.” Using samples of college students, research has shown that casual sex behavior is experienced by a large portion of individuals. The current investigation goes beyond prior research on casual sex of emerging adults by investigating the degree to which and ways in which casual sexual behavior varies by education and employment status.

Our research on casual sex in early adulthood contributes to prior work in three key ways. First, of the 18.9 million new cases of sexually transmitted infections (STI) each year, about half are reported by individuals between ages 15-24 (Weinstock, Berman, and Cates 2004). Desiderato and Crawford (1995) report that among college students who knew that they had an STI, 40 percent of women and 34 percent of men did not tell their current sex partner. Moreover, the more previous sex partners reported by respondents, the less likely they were to tell their current partner about having had an STI. Building on the prior literature, the current paper will document predictors of casual sex during emerging adulthood, which can lead to a better understanding of the relational and health consequences of casual sex. These findings can help better inform public policy regarding health behavior.

Second, we examine gender differences in patterns of casual sex. Among a sample of undergraduates (Grello et al. 2006), the antecedents to casual sex have been found to vary according to gender. Men with lower levels of depression are more likely to be classified as having casual sex. Interestingly, the opposite is true for women. Women with a greater number of depressive symptoms are more likely to report having casual sex. What is yet to be explored in the literature on casual sex in emerging adulthood is that the gender distinctions may have

different patterns among other groups than they do among college students. The current project not only investigates differences in casual sex behavior of men and women, but also how employment and education status influences the gendered experience.

Because so much of the literature has emphasized college students' experiences, a key focus will be upon the casual sex experiences of individuals who do not enroll in college after high school. It is well documented that emerging adults follow multiple paths to adulthood regarding, employment, education, and family roles (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, and Park 2005; Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber 2005); however, the research on sexual behavior has not reflected this complexity.

To guide this research, a life course framework is utilized. A principle of the life course perspective is age appropriate behavior. Elder (1995) explains there are expected social roles and behaviors that are associated with a person's age. This is relevant to the current project because certain behaviors and attitudes are expected with emerging adults. First, sexual attitudes are, on average, more permissive regarding sexual behavior compared to other stages in the life course (Lefkowitz and Gillen 2006). Second, Arnett (2000) describes emerging adulthood as a time of frequent residential movement and higher education enrollment. Arnett points out that a distinguishing feature of this age group is their diversity and unstable movement throughout this time period. Being away from parents, but not having full adult responsibility, has been argued as one key reason why emerging adults partake in casual sex. Dworkin (2005) found college students feel like there are little to no consequences to many of their risk-taking activities, such as binge drinking and casual sex. What is unclear from the prior literature is whether emerging adults who are not enrolled in college have the same casual sex patterns as individuals enrolled in college.

We address three research questions using the fourth wave of the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS). First, we examine predictors of three indicators of casual sex: the number of casual oral sex partners, the number of lifetime casual vaginal sex partners, and the number of casual vaginal sex partners in the last 24 months. Second, we investigate how casual sex experiences differ for individuals based on their employment and higher education enrollment. Also, we investigate whether men and women have different casual sex patterns based on their employment and education status. Throughout, qualitative data will be used to help assess the explanations given by emerging adults for engaging in, or not engaging in, casual sex behavior.

Data and Method

The TARS data was originally collected in 2000 based on a stratified, random sample of 7th, 9th, and 11th grade adolescent youth in Lucas County, Ohio. The sample includes an over-sampling of African American and Hispanic youth. At wave I, there was a sample 1,316 youth. By wave IV, there were 1,092 valid respondents with a retention rate of 82 percent. Our sample consists of respondents who are in early emerging adulthood, ages 18-24 (N=1,073). Among those respondents we excluded from the analyses individuals who were still in high school (N=52) or already graduated with a Bachelors degree (N=48). The final analytic sample is N=973 young adults (463 males and 510 females).

TARS is an appropriate dataset for this investigation for several reasons. First, the TARS data provide detailed information about different types of casual sexual behavior as well as information about employment and school status. Second, TARS has qualitative in-depth interviews with N=100 respondents at the fourth wave. The qualitative component was collected to investigate sexual risk-taking in more detail. Finally, much of the research on casual sex uses

either college samples or school-based samples like the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. To be selected into TARS, school attendance was not a requirement, which means that individuals who are not attending school will be included in the current project. This may be important because individuals who are not attending high school during wave I may have different higher education trajectories and school enrollment trajectories at later waves.

Dependent Variables

Three dependent variables are used to address the research questions. To measure the number of *lifetime casual oral sex partners* (mean=2.12; range 0-80) we use the question: “How many different people of the opposite sex have you had oral sex with that you weren’t really dating or going out with?” To measure *lifetime casual vaginal sex partners* (mean=3.15 range 0-97) we use the question: “How many different people of the opposite sex have you had vaginal sex with that you weren’t really dating or going out with?”. Finally, the question, “In the last two years, how many people of the opposite sex have you had vaginal sex with that you were not really going out with?,” was used to measure *recent number of casual sex partners* (mean=1.38; range=0-75).

Independent Variables

The core independent variable is determined based on the education and employment status of the respondents, and is separated into four mutually exclusive groups. The education question asks: “How far have you gone in school?” and responses range from 1 (dropped out of high school) to 10 (graduate school). To measure employment, we use the question: “Are you currently working for pay for at least 10 hours a week?”. Given young adults varied employment and education trajectories, it is important to combine the education and employment variables to create an indicator of *activity status*. The first group consists of individuals that are

currently not in school or employed (N=254, 26%). The second group is the largest group and is comprised of individuals that are not enrolled in school but are currently working (N=372, 38%). The third group consists of individuals who are both employed and enrolled in higher education (N=255, 26%). Finally, the last category and reference group are young adults who are currently not working but enrolled in school (N=92, 10%). Further analyses will test other specifications of this covariate.

Controls

We include variables found to predict casual sex in prior work (e.g., Grello et al 2006; Lefkowitz and Gillen 2006; McGinty, Knox, and Zusman 2007). These variables include personal characteristics: residence, depression, self-esteem, drug use, alcohol use, religiosity, liberal sex attitudes, and sex history. Demographic variables examined include the following: family structure, mothers' education, race, gender, and age. We also explore gender differences and similarities in the effect of the activity status indicator.

Qualitative Interviews

One hundred individuals from the larger sample were selected to be included in the in-depth interview sample. These participants were chosen because of previous high-risk behavior. The qualitative component will attempt to supplement the quantitative findings by providing the opportunity for the emerging adults to explain why they do or do not participate in casual sex and explore how college enrollment, employment, and residence serve as mechanisms of influence on casual sex behavior. Preliminary analysis of the qualitative data suggests that there are gender distinctions in motivations for casual sex among young adults in school and those working full time.

Analytic Strategy

We estimate a series of ordinary least squares regression models, predicting each dependent variable (number of oral casual sex partners, number of lifetime casual vaginal sex partners, and casual sex partners in the last two years). We will first examine how the activity status indicator is related to each dependent variable. Different models for men and women are shown. Next, we will include the full array of covariates in the model.

Preliminary Results

As described above the mean number of casual oral sex partners is 2.12, 3.15 for lifetime casual vaginal sex partners, and 1.38 casual vaginal sex partners in the last two years (Table 1). Men compared with women report significantly more partners for each measure of casual sex (analysis not shown). Males report 3.16 casual oral sex partners, while females report only 1.18. In terms of lifetime casual sex partners, men report a mean of 4.37 and women report a mean of 2.03. Finally, men report 2.01 and women report .81 casual sex partners in the last 24 months.

We next focus on the relationship of activity status to our indicators of casual sex. Among the total sample, the group not working and not in school report higher means (casual oral mean=2.59; casual lifetime vaginal mean=4.53; casual vaginal last two years mean=1.78) on all casual sex measures compared to the group of not working, but in school (casual oral mean=1.40; casual lifetime vaginal mean=1.96; casual vaginal last two years mean=1.18). When gender is taken into account, a new trend occurs. Men who are not working and not in school report a higher mean number of casual sex partners (casual oral mean=4.46; casual lifetime vaginal mean=7.30; casual vaginal last two years mean=2.96) compared to men not working but in school (casual oral mean=1.69; casual lifetime vaginal mean=2.21; casual vaginal last two years mean=1.46). However, the pattern operates in the opposite direction for women. Women not in school and not working report fewer casual oral sex partners than women in school and

not working (1.03 compared to 1.09) and fewer casual sex partners in the last two years (.81 compared to .89). This pattern of findings will be further explored in the multivariate analysis.

Table 2 presents a male and female zero-order model for each of the three dependent variables which include just the activity status indicator. Prior models that combined males and females indicated that females report significantly fewer casual sex partners compared to males (results not shown). The first column of Table 2 shows that males that are not in school and not working have significantly more casual oral sex partners compared to men in school and not working. Among females there are no significant activity status differentials in the number of lifetime casual oral sex partners. The second model indicates that males not working not in school have significantly more lifetime vaginal casual sex partners compared those school and not working. Females who are not working and not in school have similar numbers of lifetime casual sex partners as those who are in school. Finally, model three does not show a significant difference in number of casual sex partners in the last 24 months for male or female young adults. Preliminary analysis suggests that much of the differences in casual sex behavior for status activities in the bivariate relationship are driven by males but there is not as much of a difference for females.

The next steps include testing other specifications of the dependent variables, evaluate our measurement of the activity status indicator, and to include the full set of covariates in models. A key part of the analysis will be to test for gender interactions to evaluate whether distinctions in patterns of results exist for men and women.

Discussion

Prior literature on casual sex has focused mainly on college students (Glenn, and Marquardt 2001; Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006; Paul and Hayes 2002; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000).

The current project goes beyond this work by including emerging adults who are not enrolled in college. Preliminary analysis shows that there may be differences in casual sex behavior among employment and education groups. Young adults, particularly males, who are not employed and not in school appear to have more experiences with casual sex partners. This suggests that the targets of prior work are in fact those who are at the lowest risk of experiencing casual sex. Furthermore, young adults who are not in school or employed may have the weakest ties to health services (no student health services and no employer provide health care), putting them at the greatest risks. The findings indicate females report fewer casual sex partners on all three measures. The next steps in this analysis are to test gender interactions, evaluate the motivations for casual sex, consider the casual sex attitudes of young adults, and investigate the incentives of male and female emerging adults. More specifically, the analysis will focus on the possible reasons young adults choose to participate in casual sex and why some choose to not have casual sex. We will also explore how school enrollment and employment foster and impede casual sex behavior. The findings from this work focus on an important time in the life course where exposure to sexual risk may be at its peak and normative.

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Table 1. Mean Casual Sex by Activity Status

	Casual Oral Sex Partners		Casual Vaginal Sex Partners, Lifetime		Casual Vaginal Sex Partners, Past 24 Months	
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Full Sample (N=973)	2.12	3.16	1.18	3.15	4.37	2.03
Not in School/Not Working (N=254)	2.59	4.46	1.03	4.53	7.30	2.20
Not in School/Working (N=372)	2.26	3.33	1.11	3.19	4.06	2.28
In School/Working (N=255)	1.72	2.11	1.44	2.13	2.74	1.70
In School/Not Working (N=92)	1.40	1.69	1.09	1.96	2.21	1.68
				Total	Men	Women
				1.38	2.01	0.81
				1.78	2.96	0.80
				1.41	1.96	0.82
				1.01	1.32	0.79
				1.18	1.46	0.89

Note: Males N=463; Females N=510

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study

Table 2. The Number of Casual Oral Sex Partners, Casual Lifetime Vaginal Sex Partners, and Casual Vaginal Sex Partners by Activity Status

	Oral Sex			Lifetime Vaginal Sex			Last 24 months Vaginal Sex							
	Males		Females	Males		Females	Males		Females					
	B	p	B	p	B	p	B	p						
Intercept	1.69		1.09	*	2.21		1.68	*	1.46		1.5		0.89	**
Not in School/Not Working	2.77	*	-0.06		5.09	**	0.51		1.46	†	1.5		-0.09	
Not in School/Working	1.64		0.02		1.85		0.59		0.51		0.51		-0.07	
In School/Working	0.42		0.35		0.53		0.01		-0.14		-0.14		-0.1	
In School/Not Working (omitted)														

Note: Males N=463; Females N=510 N=973; †=p<.1; *=p<.05; **=p<.01; ***=p<.001

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study