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HOOKING UP: TEENAGE CASUAL SEX

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Casual Sex Trends and Patterns

Increased attention in the media, popular culture, and scholarship has been paid to the relationship context of adolescent sexual activity. The terms used to refer to sex outside of the confines of traditional dating relationships range from ‘hooking-up’ to non-romantic sex to casual sex. Here, we refer to casual sex and define it as sexual intercourse between a teenager and someone he or she is not dating or in a committed relationship. It is during adolescence when most people become sexually active. Twenty-two percent of young adults have had sex by the age of 15 (Harris, Duncan, and Boisjoly 2002), and by age 18, about half, 58% of females and 54% of males, have had sex (Abma et al. 2004). The majority of research on adolescent casual sex assumes the behavior is vaginal sex, but oral sex is also an important sexual behavior to consider. In fact, among adolescents, oral sex is more common than vaginal sex. Thirty-five percent of 15-year-old males and 26% of 15-year-old females have had oral sex. The percentage of people who have ever experienced oral sex increases as individuals age. Of 18-year-olds, 65% of males and 70% of females have had oral sex (Mosher, Chandra, and Jones 2005). Unless otherwise stated, the research we discuss in this entry refers to vaginal sexual intercourse.

It is also during adolescence that many individuals begin to participate in casual sex. Most teenagers begin their sexual lives by having sex that is not casual, but instead within a relationship (Chandra et al. 2005; Cooksey et al. 2003; Elo et al. 1999; Manlove et al. 2006; Manning et al. 2000). Using data from the National Survey of Family Growth in 1995, Manning et al. (2000) find that three-quarters of teenage females first had sex with someone to whom they were engaged or ‘going steady.’ Using data from the 1994-1995 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), about 71% of teens first had sex with a romantic partner

(Manlove et al. 2006). In 2002, 79% of 15-19 year old females first had sex with someone they were “cohabiting with, engaged to, married, or going steady” (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Cottingham 2006), while males more often report their first partner was a casual sex partner. In 2002, about half of males (53%) stated they were cohabiting, engaged, or going steady with their partner (Manlove et al. 2009). Despite these gender distinctions in casual sex, there appears to be no recent time trend in the relationship context of first sex among males or females (Manlove et al. 2009).

Research on the prevalence estimates of casual sex (not just sexual initiation) relies on the Add Health data, which were collected nearly 15 years ago in 1994-1995. About one-quarter of teens (26%) had a casual sex partner in the 18 months prior to the first wave of the Add Health, which represents about three-fifths of sexually active teens (Manning et al. 2005). Raley et al. (2007) rely on older teens and a shorter time window and report similar findings. However, these analyses focus on teens across a wide range of ages and do not reflect the percentage who eventually experience casual sex by age 18. Analyses using the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study data indicate that by age 18, 46% of males and 37% of females had at least one casual sex partner (Lyons 2009).

Teenagers do not limit themselves to just casual sex partners. Most teens who had casual sex also had sex with a romantic partner (Grell et al. 2003; Manning et al. 2005) Analyses of the first two waves of the Add Health data show that 39% of teens who had casual sex at wave one went on to have sex with a romantic partner between interview waves (18 month interval), and one-fifth of teens who had sex only with romantic partners prior to wave one went on to have sex with a nonromantic sexual partner (Manning et al. 2005). Taken together, while casual sex is relatively common during adolescence, most teens do not initially start having sex with casual partners, yet three-fifths of sexually active teenagers experienced casual sex before entering young adulthood.

Not only is it important to understand the levels and patterns of casual sex, it is also of interest to know the meaning adolescents give to these relationships. Most often, casual sex partnerships are not ‘one-night stands’ or, in other words, sex with someone they just met. Nearly three-quarters of teens who had casual sex report this person was ‘friend’ or ‘ex-girlfriend or boyfriend’ (Manning et al. 2006). Adolescents knew their casual sex partners as long as romantic sex partners, indicating these relationships were not with strangers or someone they just met at a party. The relationship horizon of casual sex partnerships is mixed, a sizeable minority (32%) felt closer after having sex, and 33% wanted their casual sex partner to become a boyfriend or girlfriend (Manning et al. 2006). These findings are consistent with Furman and Hand (2006) who argue that relationships are fluid, and one purpose to casual sexual relationships may be to move toward a more traditional relationship. Manning et al. (2006) find that teenage casual sex relationships appear to be quite private; only one-third told their friends about the relationship in contrast to 92% of teens in romantic sexual relationships. Thus, there appears to be wide variation in the types of casual sex relationships and requires researchers to develop a more nuanced categorization of sexual relationships.

Casual Sex Correlates

As teenagers move through adolescence, they are more likely to engage in casual sex as they get older (Manning et al. 2005). Yet casual sex does not become the majority experience until age 19 for males and 20 for females (Lyons 2009). Teens who initiated sex at younger ages more often had sex with casual partners than teens who started having sex at older ages (Terry-Humen et al. 2006; Manning et al. 2000). The age gap between sexual partners is greater in casual sex relationships than romantic sex relationships (Manlove et al. 2006).

As with any romantic or sexual behavior, gender is an important consideration when investigating casual sex behavior. As discussed earlier, males are more likely to have started

their sexual lives with a casual partner than females (Terry-Humen et al. 2006). Additionally, among sexually experienced youth, males are significantly more likely to have casual sex compared to females (Manning et al. 2005; Manning et al. 2006; Manlove et al. 2009; Terry-Humen et al. 2006; Manlove et al. 2006). While the gender difference in casual sex may diminish as individuals enter late adolescence (Bailey, Fleming, Henson, Catalano, and Haggerty 2008), analyses of young adults suggest that gender differences persist later in the life course (Lyons 2009).

Generally, Black teens are significantly more likely to have casual sex compared to whites (Manning et al. 2005; Manlove et al. 2006); however, the racial and ethnic gap in casual sex is not large at the time of sexual onset. At the time of first sexual experience, 82% of Hispanic, 79% of white, and 74% of Black teen females were in a romantic relationship, while 41% of Hispanic, 59% of white, and 42% of Black males were in a romantic relationship (Terry-Humen et al. 2006).

Consistent with a developmental approach, sexual behavior during adolescence is normative and part of the progression toward healthy adult relationships (Furman and Hand 2006). The normative beliefs of teens, family, and peers are related to whether adolescents engage in casual sex. Teens who have stronger religious beliefs as well as teens who perceive more benefits to having sex experience greater odds of casual sex (Manning et al. 2005). Further, the authors report that mother's beliefs about the acceptability of sexual activity are associated with greater odds of experiencing casual sex. The perception of peer approval for sexual activity is also positively tied to casual sex.

Casual sex in the traditional risk literature is treated as part of a broader set of problem behaviors and linked to drug and alcohol use (e.g., Hagan and Foster 2001), and prior studies indicate that a select group of traditional risk predictors is associated with casual sex. Manning et al. (2005) report that lower levels of parental caring and school attachment are associated with

higher odds of casual sexual activity. There is a marginal negative effect of self-esteem on the odds of experiencing casual sex versus not having sex. Additionally, teens who are not from two biological families face higher odds of experiencing casual sex rather than not having sex (Manning et al. 2005). These factors that select individuals into casual sexual relationships may be tied to the implications of casual sex for teenage well-being.

Implications of Casual Sex

Adolescent casual sex is important to study because of the potential negative implications of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. These two possible outcomes are directly related to contraceptive use. The research is mixed regarding the association between contraceptive use and adolescent casual sex. Teenagers who engage in casual sex may likely be risk takers and refrain from contraceptive use, while teens in committed relationships more often may plan their sexual experiences and be more prepared for sexual experiences. Similarly, communication levels may be higher in committed relationships resulting in greater contraceptive use. Generally, research focusing on sexual initiation finds that casual sex partners are less likely to use contraception than teens with romantic partners. Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2000) report that individuals who just met or are just friends with their first sexual partner were significantly less likely to use contraception compared to couples who are going steady. Similarly, Manlove and colleagues (Manlove et al. 2009; Manlove et al. 2007; Manlove and Terry-Humen 2007) report that teenage females who initiate sex with casual partners experience lower odds of using contraception than those who have their first sex with romantic partners. There is no significant link between relationship type and contraceptive use at first intercourse among males (Manlove et al. 2009). This would suggest that teens who do not start their sexual careers with casual partners start on a healthier contraceptive trajectory. Thus, teens who participate in casual sex face a higher risk of STI's and unintended teen births.

The association between relationship type and contraceptive use is more mixed in research that moves beyond first sexual intercourse. Ford et al. (2001) finds that romantic partners are more likely to use contraception in their sexual relationship than casual sex partners. Yet in terms of consistently using contraception, sexually experienced female teenagers in romantic relationships were less likely to consistently use contraception compared to those in casual sex relationships (Manlove, Ryan, and Franzetta 2007; Manlove et al. 2004; Manlove et al. 2006). Among males, casual sex is not related to contraceptive use or consistency of use (Manlove et al. 2004). Among females, it is possible that being in a romantic relationship could reflect an ‘exposure’ issue; teens in committed relationships (i.e. longer relationships) have more opportunities to inconsistently use contraception. Additionally, teens in committed relationships may be less ‘fearful’ of their partner having an STI or less concerned about an unplanned pregnancy.

Few studies have focused on how sexual partnerships influence the odds of a birth. Manlove et al. (2009) report that female teens who had casual sex at first intercourse experienced lower odds of transitioning to first birth than teens who first had sex with romantic partners. An explanation may be that casual partners who get pregnant may be less likely to have planned the pregnancy, and the pregnancy may be more likely to end in miscarriage or abortion. Yet the Manlove et al. (2009) study is not based on relationship between sexual partners who parented the child. Instead, it relies on the relationship at time of sexual initiation. Further work on the relationship context of sexual behavior and the resulting planning status of births and pregnancy rates is warranted.

Research supports the notion that casual sex has some social psychological implications. Grello, Welsh, Harper, and Dickson (2003) use the Add Health and report that not only do individuals who engage in casual sex have higher depressive symptoms compared to virgins, but they are also more likely to have higher depressive symptoms prior to having casual sex. In

other words, it is not that casual sex leads to depression, but that depressed individuals select into casual sex behavior. Grello et al. (2003) do not report a significant gender interaction with depression suggesting depression influence on casual sex is similar for boys and girls. Monahan and Lee (2008) use data from the Add Health on sexually active teens and find no association between casual sex and depressive symptoms among sexually active younger males (ages 12-14). Among older males (15-18-years-old), a similar pattern is reported. In contrast, among young (12 to 14-year-old) sexually active females, having casual sex is positively related to depressive symptoms. The effect is short term, however, and five years later, there are no significant differences observed. For older females (ages 15-18), there is no difference in depressive symptoms based on casual sex experience (Monahan and Lee 2008). This suggests that for adolescent females, the social psychological detriment that may occur concurrently with the casual sex behavior may not have long lasting implications as individuals enter into late adolescence. Grello et al. (2003) also examine the effects of casual sex on other risk behaviors, delinquency and violent victimization, and find that teens who have casual sex also participate in more delinquent behaviors and have higher levels of victimization compared to virgins. Similar to the depression findings, delinquency and violent victimization occurred before transitioning to casual sex. This suggests that these negative behaviors are correlated with casual sex not a cause.

Research has only started to investigate some of the long-term associations of adolescent casual sex. For example, adolescents who have engaged in casual sex behavior during their teen years are significantly more likely to cohabit and less likely to move directly into marriage during early young adulthood (Raley, Crissey, and Muller 2007). Thus, teenage sexual activity outside of romantic relationships may set adolescents on a trajectory of early relationship formation.

Discussion

Many of the studies of casual sex behavior are based on research that relies on samples of college students (e.g., England, Fitzgibbons Shafer, and Forgary 2007; Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006; McGinty, Knox, and Zusman 2007). As noted above, most individuals start their sexual careers during adolescence, and many of the sexually active youth are experimenting with casual sex. Our review of the literature on adolescent casual sex behavior suggests that there is a strong need for nationally representative and updated samples of adolescences. Using such datasets, we can understand the casual sex experiences of a diverse group of adolescents, not just small selective groups. The reliance on small convenience samples has led to some gaps in our understanding of casual sex. For example, more research is needed on casual sex behavior among sexual minority youth, such as same-sex and transgendered youth. Some sexual minority youth may not be 'out' and have few opportunities for sexual relationships that occur within traditional romantic or dating relationships. Often, gender is a focus of casual sex research, but it remains unclear the role gender plays in these subgroups. Further, it is during adolescence that sexual identity and sexuality may be the most variable as a result of exploration (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2009); however, the relationship between identity exploration and casual sex behavior is unknown. At the same time, convenience samples may not capture racial and ethnic diversity experiences. Additional research is warranted that examines not only the patterned casual sex behavior of race and ethnic minorities but also how the meanings and motivations of casual sex vary across racial lines.

Measurement of casual sex can vary across studies, which presents challenges in assessing the findings from the literature. We comment on three measurement issues. First, the majority of adolescent casual sex research focuses on vaginal intercourse, but research also needs to include other types of sexual behavior, such as oral sex. In fact, oral sex is more common than vaginal

sex among individuals ages 15-21 (Brewster and Tillman 2008); therefore, it is important to consider oral sex when investigating casual sex behavior, particularly for this age group.

Second, prior research has relied on the following four measures, which vary in terms of the time span of measurement: ever had casual sex, casual sex at first sex, number of casual sex partners, and number of recent partners. There are strengths and weaknesses to each type of measurement and all are important for fully understanding the casual sex experiences of adolescents. Finally, a simple dichotomy may not be appropriate because the measure may not capture the full complexity of the meanings and correlates of the behavior. For example, an important group to study, and potentially a small group, are the teens who have higher numbers of casual sex partners because they are the ones who face the greatest sexual risks. If casual sex is measured as a dichotomous measure, ever has casual sex versus never having casual sex, then the variation among casual sex participants is not fully captured. As illustrated above, adolescent casual sex is multifaceted and our measurement of casual sex needs to be more nuanced.

Public commentary on casual sex presumes that there is a “hookup culture” among teens with the assumption that adolescents are having a lot of casual sex with people they have just met. Scientific research does not show this to be the case, however. Most often, when adolescents are having casual sex, the majority of their partners are with someone they know, such as a friend or ex-boyfriend/girlfriend. Additionally, even though casual sex becomes more common as people enter late adolescence and most people have at least one casual sex partner by young adulthood, the number of lifetime casual sex partners is relatively low (Lyons 2009). This suggests that even though casual sex is common, casual sex is not totally replacing committed, dating relationships. Among adolescents, sex most often occurs within the context of committed and romantic relationships (Manning et al. 2005), which suggests that ‘dating is not dead.’ Even

though casual sex is not totally replacing the more traditional dating relationship, it is important to study the motivations and implications of this normative behavior. . While there are some possibly serious negative implications such as STIs or unintended pregnancies for adolescent casual sex behavior, future work should focus on all types of implications, such as peer acceptance. Future work also needs to address the implications of casual sex as individuals age into young adulthood when the behavior becomes more normative.

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