



# DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

*A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences*

---

## ***DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH***

**VOLUME 30, ARTICLE 46, PAGES 1327–1338**

**PUBLISHED 29 APRIL 2014**

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol30/46/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2014.30.46

### *Descriptive Finding*

**The sexual double standard and gender differences  
in attitudes toward casual sex among U.S.  
university students**

**Paula England**

**Jonathan Bearak**

©2014 Paula England & Jonathan Bearak.

*This open-access work is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial License 2.0 Germany, which permits use, reproduction & distribution in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided the original author(s) and source are given credit. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/de/>*

## **Table of Contents**

1	Introduction	1328
2	Data and methods	1329
3	Results	1330
4	Summary and conclusions	1335
	References	1337

## **The sexual double standard and gender differences in attitudes toward casual sex among U.S. university students**

**Paula England<sup>1</sup>**

**Jonathan Bearak<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

A significant portion of premarital sexual activity is casual rather than in relationships, and commentators disagree on whether this is what women prefer.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

We examine gender differences in attitudes toward casual sex. We also assess whether there is a double standard whereby women are judged more harshly for casual sex.

#### **METHODS**

We use a large online survey of U.S. university students to examine gender differences with regard to attitudes and reports of sexual behavior.

#### **RESULTS**

While distributions overlap, the average man looks more favorably on casual sex than the average woman. Both sexes show substantial openness to relationships. We find evidence of a double standard: men are more judgmental toward women than toward men who have casual sex. Men appear to over-report and/or women to under-report intercourse and fellatio, suggesting that men see these acts as enhancing and/or women see them as diminishing their status.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Women face more negative judgment than men when they are known to engage in casual sex, and they also report less interest in casual sex than men. Our analysis does not permit us to assess whether the double standard we find evidence of explains why women have less interest in casual sex, but we hypothesize that this is the case.

---

<sup>1</sup> New York University, U.S.A. E-Mail: pengland@nyu.edu.

<sup>2</sup> New York University, U.S.A. E-Mail: jmb736@nyu.edu.

## **1. Introduction**

In the United States today, average age at first intercourse is 17, first marriages are typically in the mid-20s, and premarital sex is ubiquitous (Guttmacher Institute 2013). Numerous other affluent nations also have late marriage and substantial premarital sex (Schalet 2011; Darroch et al. 2001; Hubert et al. 2004). For U.S. cohorts born before World War II, much of premarital heterosexual activity was between partners engaged to be married, but later cohorts were more likely to have had sex in relationships that didn't lead to marriage (Klassen et al. 1989). More recently premarital sexual activity is often in contexts even more casual than a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship (Manning et al. 2006; Bogle 2008; Armstrong et al. 2012). It is likely that these changes, common to affluent Western nations, arose from structural and cultural changes that promoted secularization and individualism, and which manifest in casual sex among young adults, as well as the rise of childbearing within cohabitation (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). In the U.S., the rise of casual sex has been dubbed the "hookup" culture.

Commentators disagree on whether the casual sex entailed on hookups is good for women and whether it is what women want. Regarding the U.S. college scene, Bogle (2008) calls the disagreement over whether relationships or hookups are preferable a war of the sexes that women have lost. (For similar views see Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Regnerus and Uecker 2011; Regnerus 2012). These authors posit the conventional wisdom that men want casual sex more than women, while women are more desirous of relationships and limiting sex to relationships. Evolutionary psychologists argue that men's greater interest in casual sex is hard-wired (Buss 1989; Baumeister et al. 2001). Many social scientists, on the other hand, see such gender differences in preferences for casual sex as resulting from a socially enforced double standard: girls and women are judged harshly if they are seen as "too" sexual (Crawford and Popp 2003; Miller 2008; Armstrong et al. 2012), while boys and men more often receive accolades (Pascoe 2007). Other journalists and social scientists question the claim that women are more interested in relationships than men. They argue that many college women participate enthusiastically in the hookup culture, and that it is better for women's autonomy, education, and careers to avoid relationships till well into their 20s (Rosin 2012:17-46; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

We use a large dataset on U.S. college students to examine whether there is evidence for a double standard and for gender differences in attitudes toward casual sex. We cannot resolve the nature/nurture question regarding any differences we find, but we can show how large any existing gender differences in preferences are, and whether there is evidence of a double standard, which might be a plausible explanation for differences in preferences.

## **2. Data and methods**

We use the Online College Social Life Survey (OCSLS), a 20-minute online survey administered between 2005 and 2011 to students from 21 four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. (N = 24,298.) Although these included a few elite private schools, the vast majority of the sample attended state universities (for a list of the schools, see Armstrong et al. 2012). Nonetheless, U.S. students who attend four-year universities come from more advantaged backgrounds, on average, than those who attend two-year community colleges, so most sample members probably come from middle-class backgrounds. Recruitment took place in a non-probability sample of classes. Since most instructors gave students course credit for taking the survey, there was a nearly 100% response rate; non-representativeness within universities resulted largely from which classes—mostly in sociology—undertook the survey. Fortunately, however, the sample was only 11% sociology majors. The data are available upon request from the first author. We limit our analysis to self-reported heterosexuals.

Some of our analyses draw upon students' reports of three events: their most recent "hookup" and "date" while in college (if any), and their most recent sexual event entailing more than kissing in their current or most recent college relationship of at least six months (if any). Before answering the hookup questions, respondents were told, "Use whatever definition of 'hookup' you and your friends use." However, the question specified that the hookup on which they reported must be one that was not with someone with whom they were already in a romantic relationship. As students informally define hookups, they are less formal than dates, involve sexual activity, not necessarily intercourse, and neither imply nor preclude an interest in a relationship (England et al. 2014). Respondents were asked questions about their most recent hookup, including what occurred sexually, with a "check all that apply" list. They were asked how interested they were in a relationship with the person before the hookup. Similar questions were asked about respondents' most recent date in college (also specified to be with someone with whom they were not already in a relationship), and about the most recent sexual event in a relationship. We also draw upon questions asking about attitudes or preferences regarding sex and relationships.

We show sex-specific means or percentages for attitudes or behavioral reports, and report t-tests for the significance of gender differences. Gender differences in reports of sexual behaviors in specific hookup, date, or relationship events provide a window into misreporting, which may be induced by a sexual double standard affecting what is seen as socially desirable. To make male and female reports more comparable, we restrict events to those in which both participants attended the same college. If men report more sexual activity than women, as past studies have also found (Laumann et al. 1994:177-180), this may indicate that women are under-reporting and/or men are over-reporting

because the sexual behaviors are more socially desirable for men and more stigmatized for women.

We conduct logistic regressions to assess how much reporting that one had an interest in a relationship with one's hookup partner prior to the hookup predicts having intercourse on the hookup, with separate models for women and men. Our interest is in whether women condition intercourse more on relational interest than men. If they do, this suggests that women prefer to confine intercourse to relationships more than men, or at least that they want people to think they do. These models control for respondent's age (18-19, 20-22, and 23 or over), whether an immigrant, number of sexual partners ever, childhood religious denomination (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, other, none), dummies for the school attended, the race of the respondent and of the partner (white, black, Asian, Hispanic, other), religious service attendance last year (never, rarely, regularly), self-rated attractiveness (scale from 1 to 10), number of prior hookups the respondent had had with this partner, number of drinks the respondent had the night of the hookup, and how the partners got together on the night of the hookup (at the same place without prior plan, woman contacted man to suggest meeting, man contacted women to suggest meeting, no answer). Because the last five controls (religious service attendance, attractiveness, prior hookups, number of drinks, and how the partners got together) may have misreporting that differs by gender, we also discuss results (not shown) from a trimmed model without these included.

### **3. Results**

Table 1 shows that a virtually identical percentage of women and men (69% and 70%) wish there were "more opportunities for finding someone to have a relationship with" at their school, and about the same percentage of women and men (95% and 93% of those not in a relationship) say, "If I met the right person now, I'd like to be in an exclusive relationship." A nearly identical proportion of women and men (69% and 71%) see as a disadvantage of a relationship that it might interfere with moving to another city for a job or graduate school. One abstract question about sex also shows no gender difference: 85% of women and 84% of men agree with the statement, "Any kind of consensual sex is okay as long as both persons freely agree to it."

But Table 1 reveals consistent gender differences on most other questions. Fewer women than men (25% versus 38%) say, "I don't really want to be in an exclusive relationship now because I'd rather be free to date or hook up with multiple people." When asked if they had a previous interest in a romantic relationship with their last hookup partner, 39% of women and 32% of men agree. Large gaps appear when respondents are asked whether they "wish there were more opportunities for hooking

up” at their school (16% of women but 48% of men agree), or whether they “would not have sex with someone” unless they were “in love with them” (51% of women but 36% of men agree).

*Table 1: Women’s and men’s means and gender differences in means on attitudinal questions regarding relationships and casual sex*

	Women	Men	T-Test
<b>Students (12,061 women; 5,445 men)</b>			
I wish there were more opportunities for finding someone to have a relationship with at my school.	69%	70%	^
I don’t really want to be in an exclusive relationship now because I’d rather be free to date or hook up with multiple people.	25%	38%	***
One disadvantage of being in an exclusive relationship in college is that it might interfere with moving to another city for a job or graduate school when I graduate.	69%	71%	***
I wish there were more opportunities for hooking up at my school.	16%	48%	***
Any kind of consensual sex is okay as long as both persons freely agree to it.	85%	84%	*
I would not have sex with someone unless I was in love with them.	51%	36%	***
<b>Students not in a relationship (8,650 women; 4,163 men)</b>			
If I met the right person now, I’d like to be in an exclusive relationship.	95%	93%	***
<b>Students reporting on their most recent hookup (7,460 women; 3,526 men)</b>			
Were you interested in having a romantic relationship with the person you hooked up with before you hooked up?	39%	32%	***

Note: T-tests are for sex differences in means.

^  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , 2-tailed tests

Table 2 examines double standards. In response to the statement, “If someone has hooked up a lot, I’m less interested in this person as a potential girl/boyfriend,” 73% of women and 72% of men agree, suggesting a single standard. But other items show evidence of a double standard. Consider the item, “If women hook up or have sex with lots of people, I respect them less.” A majority of women and men agree (61% and 69%). Comparing these responses to the analogous question about men, women claim

more disrespect for men than for women (61% disrespect a woman but 67% disrespect a man). Men, like women, are more punitive to the other sex than their own, but here the difference is much larger than in women's reports: 69% of men said they respect a woman less if she hooks up or has sex with lots of people, but only 37% feel this way about men who do the same.

Table 2: Women's and men's means and gender differences in means on questions about disrespecting those who have casual sex

	Women	Men	T-test
<b>Students (12,061 women: 5,445 men)</b>			
<b>If women hook up or have sex with lots of people, I respect them less.</b>			
<b>No</b>	39%	31%	***
<b>Yes</b>	61%	69%	***
<b>Did not answer question</b>	0%	0%	^
<b>If men hook up or have sex with lots of people, I respect them less.</b>			
<b>No</b>	27%	53%	***
<b>Yes</b>	67%	37%	***
<b>Did not answer question</b>	6%	10%	***
<b>If someone has hooked up a lot, I'm less interested in this person as a potential girl/boyfriend.</b>	73%	72%	
<b>Students reporting on their most recent hookup (7460 women, 3526 men)</b>			
<b>Have you ever hooked up with someone and afterward had the feeling that the person respected you less because you hooked up with him/her?</b>	54%	22%	***
<b>Have you ever hooked up with someone and then respected the person less because he or she hooked up with you?</b>	21%	31%	***

Note: T-tests are for sex differences in means.

^  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , 2-tailed tests

When asked about their own experiences of feeling disrespected or disrespecting a partner, we also see evidence of a double standard. Asked, "Have you ever hooked up with someone and then respected the person less because he or she hooked up with you?" 31% of women but 21% of men say yes. Asked, "Have you ever hooked up with someone and afterward had the feeling that the person respected you less because you



hooked up with him/her?" more than twice as many women as men claim to have had this experience (54% versus 22%).

We turn now to how reporting (after the fact) that one had an interest in a relationship with a hookup partner before the hookup occurred is associated with reporting that one engaged in intercourse on the hookup. Table 3 shows that in regressions with controls, women who say they were interested in a relationship with this partner before the hookup are 20% more likely to report having had intercourse than those not interested in a relationship (O.R. = 1.20); this is similar (22%, O.R. = 1.22) if we limit the analysis to hookups with those in the same school. For men there is no significant effect; they are not conditioning intercourse on relational interest, or are not conditioning reporting relational interest on whether they had or report intercourse. That women condition sex more on relational interest than men, or want to appear to be doing so in their reports, is indicative of either gender differences in beliefs in the propriety of casual sex or a double standard that makes women more worried that having sex with no relational intent is stigmatizing. (If we remove controls most likely to have misreporting, the results, not shown, are similar.)

*Table 3: Odds ratios from logistic regressions for effects of interest in relationship prior to the hookup on whether respondent reports that hookup involves intercourse, for women and men reporting on most recent hookup*

	Women	Men	Gender Difference in Coefficients
All hookups (7,248 women; 3,376 men)	1.20**	0.93	^
All hookups with a partner from the same school (4,196 women; 2,228 men)	1.22*	0.93	*

Note: All models include control variables. The column for gender difference in coefficients gives the significance test for gender difference in effects of interest in a relationship from pooled models which include interactions with sex for all variables. See text for details.

^  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , 2-tailed tests

Table 4 shows gender differences in reports of behaviors where it is plausible to expect reports to line up absent misreporting. Social desirability bias may affect reports, so if gender differences in reports of what happened on events with students in their own school suggest that men are over-reporting or women under-reporting casual sexual behavior, we take this as evidence of a double standard in which sex is more controversial for women. The percentage reporting intercourse is lower for women than men on hookups (33% versus 40%) and dates (19% versus 29%). But in reporting

intercourse in relationship events the gender difference is trivial (82% and 84%). This suggests that there is not a double standard about the propriety of premarital sex in relationships, but that sex on hookups or dates is more controversial for women than men, and/or more status-producing for men than women, leading to women's under-reports and/or men's over-reports.

Table 4 shows that men and women are close in their reporting of the proportion of times men gave oral sex to women on hookups (19% of women and 23% of men). Where the sexes diverge sharply is as regards men receiving oral sex: women report it in 24% of hookups and men in 37%. On dates and in relationships as well, the large disparity concerns men receiving oral sex, reported by many fewer women than men. Our conclusion is that it is high status for men to receive oral sex, and/or it is stigmatizing for women to reveal that they gave it; this is indirect evidence of a double standard. Women's receipt of oral sex seems not to be as linked to status or stigma for either sex.

Table 4: *Misreporting as assessed by gender differences where we wouldn't expect them absent misreporting*

	Women	Men	T-test
<b>Most recent hookup (4,196 women; 2,228 men)</b>			
Overall, who initiated more of the sexual activity?*			
<i>Woman initiated more</i>	10%	29%	***
<i>Man initiated more</i>	62%	39%	***
<i>I don't know</i>	28%	32%	***
Did you and the person you hooked up with arrange to meet, or did you just happen to be at the same place?*			
<i>Woman contacted</i>	10%	23%	***
<i>Man contacted</i>	38%	21%	***
<i>We were at the same place</i>	43%	41%	
<i>Did Not Answer Question</i>	9%	14%	***
Vaginal intercourse occurred	33%	40%	***
Woman gave/man received oral sex*	24%	37%	***
Woman received/man gave oral sex*	19%	23%	***
<b>Most recent relationship sexual event (1,637 women; 805 men)</b>			
Vaginal intercourse occurred	82%	84%	^
Woman gave/man received oral sex*	63%	73%	***
Woman received/man gave oral sex*	58%	63%	***

Table 4: *(Continued)*

	Women	Men	T-test
<b>Most recent date (3,182 women; 1,851 men)</b>			
Vaginal intercourse occurred	19%	29%	***
Woman gave/man received oral sex*	13%	28%	***
Woman received/man gave oral sex*	12%	18%	***
<b>Most recent date involving any sexual activity (1,982 women; 1,268 men)</b>			
<b>Overall, who initiated more of the sexual activity?*</b>			
<i>Woman initiated more</i>	12%	19%	***
<i>Man initiated more</i>	59%	46%	***
<i>I don't know</i>	29%	35%	***

Note: Calculations pertain only to students reporting on an event in which their partner was a student in their school. T-tests are for sex differences in means on the 0-1 variables.

<sup>^</sup>  $p < .10$     \*  $p < .05$     \*\*  $p < .01$     \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , 2-tail tests

\* Respondents were given response categories indicating what they did or their partner did; we have recoded it into which sex did what.

Table 4 shows differential reporting regarding initiation. Some hookups are preceded by running into someone at an event, while others entail prior arrangement, such as texting someone to suggest meeting at a party. Whereas only 10% of women say that they contacted the man to arrange to meet, 23% of the men say the woman contacted them about getting together for the last hookup; 38% of women say that the man contacted them, whereas only 21% of men claim they did this. Asked who initiated the sexual activity on the recent hookup, 10% of women say they themselves initiated, while 29% of the men say the woman initiated; 62% of the women see the men as having initiated, while only 39% of the men claim to have initiated. Although less stark, there is analogous disagreement on who initiated sexual activity on dates (12% of women but 19% of men think women initiated and 59% of women but 46% of men think that men initiated). The pattern in these reports suggests that women are more reluctant than men to see themselves as initiators, consistent with the double standard. However, here the male reporting is unlike their probable exaggeration of how often they “got” oral sex or intercourse; rather it seems that both sexes have qualms about being seen as the initiator, but women want to avoid this much more than men.

#### 4. Summary and conclusions

We used a number of approaches to assess evidence for gender differences in attitudes toward casual sex, and for a double standard that may motivate women to avoid casual

sex or the appearance of such. We find both men and women expressing strong interest in relationships. But most questions about personal interest in or willingness to engage in casual sex show substantially more interest by men. Moreover, women tend to condition (or give the impression of conditioning) having intercourse on a hookup on having prior interest in a relationship with the partner, whereas men do not. Overall, there are substantial gender differences on preferences for casual sex, although mean differences are not found on all statements, and, even when present, distributions overlap substantially.

We also examined whether there is evidence that men and women feel different external pressures regarding casual sex—i.e., that they face a double standard. Consistent with the thesis, it appears that men over-report and/or women under-report intercourse and fellatio, suggesting that these behaviors enhance men's and/or diminish women's status. Women appear to under-report their own initiation of hookups or sexual activity on dates or hookups, and men may do so too, but much less than women, suggesting that women expect more stigma from revealing sexual agency. When asked if they disrespect men and women who hook up or have sex with lots of people, both men and women condemn the other sex more than their own, but the disparity between how much one's own and the other sex is condemned is much larger among men. Women also report having felt disrespected much more than men because they hooked up with someone. Overall, the evidence suggests that women risk much more disrespect than men for casual sex. We cannot say for sure that the double standard is the sole reason for the gender differences in attitudes toward casual sex that we found, but the evidence strongly suggests that it is a factor.

## References

- Armstrong, E.A., England, P., and Fogarty, A.C.K. (2012). Accounting for Women's Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships. *American Sociological Review* 77(3): 435–462. doi:[10.1177/0003122412445802](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412445802).
- Baumeister, R.F., Catanese, K.R., and Vohs, K.D. (2001). Is There a Gender Difference in Strength of Sex Drive? Theoretical Views, Conceptual Distinctions, and a Review of Relevant Evidence. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5:242–273. doi:[10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0503_5).
- Bogle, K.(2008). *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Buss, D. (1989). Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 Cultures. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 12:1–49. doi:[10.1017/S0140525X00023992](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00023992).
- Crawford, M. and Popp, D. (2003). Sexual Double Standards: A Review and Methodological Critique of Two Decades of Research. *Journal of Sex Research* 40: 13–26. doi:[10.1080/00224490309552163](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490309552163).
- Darroch, J.E., Sing, S., and Frost, J.J. (2001). Differences in teenage pregnancy rates among five developed countries: the roles of sexual activity and contraceptive use. *Family Planning Perspectives* 33:244–250. doi:[10.2307/3030191](https://doi.org/10.2307/3030191).
- England, P., Fitzgibbons Shafer, E., and Fogarty, A.C.K. (2014).Hooking Up and Forming Romantic Relationships on Today's College Campuses. In: Kimmel, M. and Aronson, A. (eds.). *The Gendered Society Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press: 559–572.
- Glenn, N. and Marquardt, E. (2001). *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today*. New York: Institute for American Values.
- Guttmacher Institute (2013). Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health. <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/FB-ATSRH.html>.
- Hamilton, L. and Armstrong, E.A. (2009). Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood: Double Binds and Flawed Options. *Gender & Society* 23:589-616. doi:[10.1177/0891243209345829](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243209345829).

- Hubert, M., Bajos, N., and Sandfort, T. (eds.) (2004). *Sexual Behaviour and HIV/AIDS in Europe: Comparisons of National Surveys*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Klassen, A.D., Williams, C.J., Levitt, E.E., Rudkin-Miniot, L., Miller, H.G., and Gunjal, S. (1989). Trends in Premarital Sexual Behavior. In: Turner, C.F., Miller, H.G., and Moses, L.E. (eds.). *AIDS, Sexual Behavior, and Intravenous Drug Use*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press: 548–567.
- Laumann, E.O., Gagnon, J.H., Michael, R.T., and Michaels, S. (1994). *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Manning, W.D., Giordano, P.C., and Longmore, M.A. (2006). Hooking Up: The Relationship Contexts of ‘Non-Relationship’ Sex. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 21(5):459–483. doi:10.1177/0743558406291692.
- Miller, J. (2008). *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence*. New York: New York University Press.
- Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, You’re A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in high school*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Regnerus, M.D. (2012). Contemporary Mating Market Dynamics, Sex-Ratio Imbalances, and their Consequences. *Society* 49: 500–505. doi:10.1007/s12115-012-9592-2.
- Regnerus, M.D. and Uecker, J. (2011). *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rosin, H. (2012). *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Schalet, A. (2011). *Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens, and the Culture Of Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226736204.001.0001.
- Surkyn, J. and Lesthaeghe, R. (2004). Value Orientations and the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) in Northern, Western and Southern Europe: An Update. *Demographic Research Special Collection* 3(Article 3). doi:10.4054/DemRes.2004.S3.3.