



# A double standard for “Hooking Up”: How far have we come toward gender equality?



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 8 September 2012

Revised 15 April 2013

Accepted 22 April 2013

Available online 3 May 2013

### Keywords:

Hooking up

Gender

Sexual double standard

Sexual attitudes

## ABSTRACT

While sexual attitudes have liberalized in the past half century, research is mixed as to whether attitudes have become less gendered over time. Recent studies on college students' sexual and romantic relationships suggest that a sexual double standard continues to organize sexuality on many campuses. Data from the Online College Social Life Survey shed light on students' evaluation of casual sex, or “hooking up.” In addition to exploring gendered attitudinal patterns, we use gender structure theory to explore how individual characteristics and normative expectations of campus group affiliations shape attitudes. While three quarters of students do not hold different standards for men and women's hooking up, attitudes are more conservative than liberal, with almost half of students losing respect for men and women who hook up “a lot.” However, men are more likely to hold a traditional double standard, while women are more likely to espouse egalitarian conservative attitudes. Individual characteristics, including age, religion, race, social class and sexual orientation are frequently related to sexual attitudes, as are number of hook ups, fraternity/sorority affiliation and varsity athletic participation.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

## 1. Introduction

Has the gender revolution stalled when it comes to sexuality? While little stigma remains around heterosexual premarital sex within the bounds of intimate relationships, there is far less evidence about whether women face harsher standards than men for casual sexual activity. Whereas early studies into the sexual double standard in the 1960s asked about premarital sexual intercourse, “the behaviors pertaining to the sexual double standard have expanded beyond premarital sexual involvement to include activities such as engaging in casual sex and having multiple sexual partners” (Sakaluk and Milhausen, 2012, p. 464). As premarital sexual intercourse became decreasingly stigmatized, research shifted to examine attitudes toward sexual behavior outside of committed relationships. Recent studies suggest an increasing, though not total, acceptance of casual sex outside of relationships in some contexts (Ahrold and Meston, 2008; Bogle, 2008).

Despite increasingly permissive attitudes toward sexual activity, there is mixed evidence for whether or not sexual attitudes have also become decreasingly gendered. While some recent studies suggest that men and women may be evaluated similarly across a range of sexual behaviors (Crawford and Popp, 2003; Marks and Fraley, 2005), other research shows that the evaluation of sexual behaviors remains substantially different for men and women (Armstrong et al., 2012; Bogle, 2008; Reid et al., 2011; Sakaluk and Milhausen, 2012). Evidence for gender distinctions is particularly strong for attitudes toward casual sex outside of relationships. For instance, in a series of review articles, Petersen and Hyde (2010, 2011) find that gender differences in attitudes are greater on questions of casual sex than relationship-bound sex acts. In addition, Conley et al.

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(2012) find significant gaps between men and women's acceptance of casual sex offers, and fear of social stigma partially mediated these gaps.

Recent scholarship on sex outside of relationships among college students has found the salience of a sexual double standard to students' sexual and relationship experiences (Armstrong et al., 2010; Bogle, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2010; England and Thomas, 2006; Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009; Reid et al., 2011). For instance, Bogle (2008) finds that college women risk gaining a negative reputation by engaging in "too much" non-relationship sex, while their male counterparts are often rewarded for the same behaviors. Armstrong et al. (2012) find college women orgasm more in relationships than in casual hook ups, and implicate the sexual double standard in this finding, as "doubts about women's entitlement to pleasure in casual liaisons keep women from asking to have their desires satisfied and keep men from seeing women as deserving of their attentiveness in hookups" (2012, p. 458).

If persistent sexual double standards within hookup culture exist, it is unclear if these are imposed by men or normatively adopted by both men and women. The degree to which male sexual autonomy and privilege are reinforced by sexual double standards suggests that men are more likely to endorse such standards. On the other hand, not all men are equally privileged by cultural norms which prescribe high levels of casual heterosexual sexual activity. While women may be less likely than men to endorse sexual double standards, there is evidence that some college women respond to inequalitarian social contexts in ways which do not reject, but reinforce and incorporate elements of inequality (Jackson and Cram, 2003). If women endorse a double standard, this attitude may reflect a strategy of differentiating the self from others used to elevate reputation and status among peers (Hamilton, 2007; Schwalbe et al., 2000).

As attitudes toward (hetero)sexual behaviors have liberalized in past decades, the site of study has continually shifted. Once the majority of respondents consistently reported acceptance of premarital intercourse, scholarship has moved beyond a focus on premarital sexual intercourse to studying views on sex outside of relationships. Recent studies have shifted further from only focusing on intercourse outside of relationships to attitudes toward a variety of sexual behaviors (including oral and anal sex) or casual sexual activity more generally. Given this trend, *frequent* casual sex is something of a new frontier, methodologically speaking. It is a barometer of the degree to which attitudes toward sexuality have continued to liberalize (or not) in recent decades. In this analysis, we examine college students' evaluations of "a lot" of hooking up for male and female targets using quantitative data from a multi-institutional survey on college social life.

We draw upon several distinct research literatures: survey research on sexual attitudes, studies on hooking up, and research on gender politics within the university environment. First, we investigate whether the sexual double standard in attitudes toward hooking up behaviors exists in this sample, and if so, whether it is gender-specific. Second, we investigate the predictors of sexual attitudes for both male and female students. We frame our analysis with gender structure theory, conceptualizing gender as a multi-level social structure with implications at the level of personality or selves (e.g. masculinity and femininity), interactional expectations in daily life (e.g. the "doing of gender"), and also the institutional level of the opportunities and constraints embedded in the organizational and legal structures of contemporary American society (Risman, 1998, 2004). We use this multi-level framework to integrate the research literatures we review and then to build models that include both individual characteristics and interactional peer culture as influences on college students' sexual attitudes.

Our research focuses on predicting attitudes towards casual sex (e.g. hooking up) by individual background characteristics and peer group norms fostered within campus environments. Our major contribution is to test the relative strength of individual-level characteristics (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, religion, mother's education) and campus peer norms and group affiliations (fraternity/sorority and varsity athletic participation) on attitudes toward casual sexual behaviors. Do students primarily bring their attitudes toward casual sex with them to college? Or is there a relationship between campus group affiliations and attitudes as well?

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. The sexual double standard

A sexual double standard exists when "men are evaluated more positively or less negatively than women who have similar sexual histories" (Jonason and Marks, 2009, p. 357). Studies conducted in the 1960s showed that premarital sexual intercourse was judged by all to be more acceptable for men than women, even for those in committed relationships (Reiss, 1960, 1967; Smigel and Seiden, 1968). Research on double standards in the years after the sexual revolution has produced mixed evidence. Some studies have found no differences in evaluations of women and men's sexuality, evidence for the increasing egalitarianism of sexual standards (Marks and Fraley, 2005; O'Sullivan, 1995; Sprecher et al., 1988; Sprecher, 1989). For instance, Reid et al. (2011) used fictional narratives in their study of sexual double standards and found similar explanations for why women and men hook up at parties, sexual desire, without reference to double standards. Similarly, Gentry (1998), Marks and Fraley (2006) and O'Sullivan (1995) find evidence for a convergence of attitudes toward men and women's behavior, with high numbers of premarital partners negatively evaluated for all. Other studies have found that the sexual double standard remains alive and well (Conley et al., 2012; Fugère et al., 2008; Jonason and Fisher, 2009; Jonason and Marks, 2009; Kreager and Staff, 2009; Lyons et al., 2011; Milhausen and Herold, 1999). In some studies, men alone espouse sexual double standards (Fugère et al., 2008; Sprecher and Hatfield, 1996). Other research shows that both men and women endorse double standards in evaluating sexuality (Feldman et al., 1999; Sheeran et al., 1996; Spreadbury, 1982). Milhausen and Herold

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