

# Sex, Commitment, and Casual Sex Relationships Among College Men: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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**Abstract** Using a sample of 200 emerging adult male college students, we examined how men varied in the meanings they gave to sex and their self-reported engagement in two types of casual sex relationships (hookups and friends with benefits). Using qualitative methods, we conducted a content analysis of men's written responses to a series of questions about the meanings they ascribed to sex (i.e., intercourse), their perceived connection between sex and commitment, and how they believed these meanings were related to their sexual behavior. Three groups of men emerged: *Committers*, *Flexibles*, and *Recreationers*. Groups were then compared on social desirability, demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, year in school, religious service attendance), and self-reported casual sexual behaviors in the past 12 months. Analyses showed that men in the *Flexibles* and *Recreationers* groups engaged in significantly more hookups and had significantly more friends with benefits partners in the past 12 months than did men in the *Committers* group. Implications for relationship education intervention aimed at men and research on casual sex relationships are discussed.

**Keywords** Emerging adulthood · Sexuality · Romantic relationships · College men

## Introduction

Emerging adulthood (age 18–25 years) is a unique period for self-exploration, decision making, and identity formation (Arnett, 2000), primarily in the areas of romantic relationships, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2006). The concept of emerging adulthood has largely focused on individuals in the U.S. (Arnett & Tanner, 2006), although some scholars have explored this concept among non-U.S. populations (e.g., Buhl & Lanz, 2007). Emerging adult romantic and sexual relationships have been the target of a great deal of recent inquiry, with attention given to committed romantic relationships as well as relationships that are considered more “casual” in nature (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011).

Emerging adults are a heterogeneous population (Arnett, 2006). Most research examining sexual behaviors among this population focuses on gender, treating both sexes as homogeneous groups (e.g., Hans, Gillen, & Akande, 2010; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010). Further, studies typically include small samples of men, limiting variability among men's responses (e.g., Fielder & Carey, 2010a; Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008). Forrest (2001) asserted the need to give greater attention to the sexual and reproductive health of college men. The purpose of this study was to examine within-group variation among emerging adult college men's sexual meanings and behaviors. We examine the meanings they ascribe to sex (i.e., intercourse) and how these meanings are related to sexual behaviors. Using qualitative methods, distinct groups of men were identified with regard to meanings for sex, how sex was related to relationship commitment, and how holding such meanings was related to their sexual behavior. We then compared men quantitatively to examine differences in demographic characteristics and recent casual sex relationship experience.

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## Emerging Adulthood: Romantic and Sexual Relationships

Emerging adulthood is a time of exploration and instability, which is evident in individuals' frequent transitions into and out of romantic and sexual relationships (Arnett, 2004). College environments provide ample opportunities for sexual exploration (Bogle, 2008) and decision-making (Allen, Husser, Stone, & Jordal, 2008). Indeed, college populations largely consist of emerging adults, as increased numbers of high school graduates choose to pursue post-secondary education. For example, recent data showed that, in 2009, 70 % of those who completed high school enrolled in college, reflecting a steady rise since 1970 (Snyder & Dillow, 2011).

Although the formation of romantic relationships among emerging adults has shifted over time (see Bogle, 2008), many continue to form committed romantic partnerships (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). For example, the traditional dating script (Rose & Frieze, 1993) is well-known by emerging adults (Laner & Ventrone, 2000) but less commonly enacted until already paired with a romantic partner (Bogle, 2008). Although the pathway to sexual intimacy is diverse, Regnerus and Uecker (2011) asserted that most emerging adults are sexually intimate within the context of a committed relationship. However, they also suggest that the dominant sexual script is serial monogamy wherein emerging adults cycle through a series of brief committed relationships rather than remaining in one long-term relationship. Those involved in romantic relationships engage in a variety of sexual behaviors, but this range of behaviors is broadest among those who report mutual love within their relationships (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007). The potential for exposure to health risks is present, even within the context of committed relationships. Such risks may be due to consistency of condom use within sexually active romantic relationships where findings are mixed regarding this consistency (see Manlove, Franzetta, Ryan, & Moore, 2006). Many individuals report involvement in multiple sequential sexual romantic relationships that include lowered condom use compared to those in long-term committed relationships (Kelley, Borawski, Flocke, & Keen, 2003).

Other pathways to sexual intimacy might be more casual in nature. Although the study of casual sex relationships is not new (e.g., Clark, 1990; Herold & Mewhinney, 1993), the popular press has prompted a renewed interest in casual sex relationships among emerging adults, particularly those attending college (e.g., Stepp, 2007). Two types of casual sex relationships of interest to our study are "hookups" and "friends with benefits relationships" (FWBRs). Although romantic relationships may form out of casual sex relationships, this tends to be the exception rather than the rule (Bogle, 2008). Either way, both types of casual sex relationships serve as examples of how sexual intimacy precedes relationship commitment.

## Hooking Up

Hookups can include a variety of intimate behaviors, ranging from deep kissing to intercourse (vaginal or anal) (Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011). These encounters typically include an expectation that the individuals involved are not committed to one another afterward (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006) and can occur between recent acquaintances, friends, ex-partners, or complete strangers (Fielder & Carey, 2010b; Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008). Alcohol use has consistently been linked to hooking up (e.g., Fielder & Carey, 2010b; Owen et al., 2010). Although not inherently risky, penetrative hookups (i.e., oral sex and/or intercourse) may increase exposure to potential health risks (e.g., sexually transmitted infections). Some individuals take steps to protect themselves from exposure to health risks (e.g., condom use); however, recent evidence shows that condom use during hookups is inconsistent or absent altogether, particularly during oral sex hookups (see Fielder & Carey, 2010b; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009).

## Friends with Benefits Relationships

Researchers have examined attraction and sexual behavior between cross-sex friends (e.g., Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Reeder, 2000). Yet, recent attention has been given to the arrangement of sexual liaisons that occur between friends. FWBRs are common among college student samples. For example, Owen and Fincham (2011) reported that 47.2 % of their sample of 889 college students had a FWBR in the past 12 months. Similarly, in a sample of 1,013 students, Puentes, Knox, and Zusman (2008) found that 50.1 % had experienced a FWBR. Like hookups, FWBRs include a range of sexual behaviors, but they occur between two individuals that have a friendship which extends beyond a one-time sexual encounter (Bisson & Levine, 2009). As with other casual sex relationships, individuals engaging in penetrative behaviors may increase their exposure to potential health risks. For example, VanderDrift, Lehmilller, and Kelly (2012) found that commitment to both the friendship and sexual aspects of the relationship decreased the likelihood of condom use. They also found that a sizeable minority of their sample (39.7 %) were concurrently involved in other sexual relationships (e.g., with additional FWBR partners).

## Emerging Adult Men

Gender differences regarding sexual attitudes and behaviors have been the focus of much empirical inquiry. Compared to women, men tend to hold more permissive attitudes regarding casual and premarital sex (Petersen & Hyde, 2010) and they also report becoming sexually involved earlier within romantic relationships (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Regarding casual sex relationships, some studies show that men are more likely to hookup (e.g., Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003)

whereas others report no significant differences compared to women (e.g., Owen et al., 2010). Men are also more likely to desire no change in FWBRs whereas women preferred either becoming “just friends” or moving into a committed romantic relationship (Lehmiller, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2011). Although studies comparing men and women provide valuable insight into how men and women differ in their sexual practices, much less is known about how men differ from one another.

Traditional male sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) ascribe that men should be sexual initiators and willing to engage in such opportunities and that this role of sexual pursuer is often tied to perceived masculinity in men. The role of sexual initiator and aggressor is often tied to a perceived masculine ideal (Rose & Frieze, 1993). That is, part of being a “real man” means a consistent willingness to engage in sexual opportunities when they arise (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1994). However, recent research on men in heterosexual relationships showed that some rejected the traditional sexual script of constant pursuit of sex (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005). Other scholars challenge hegemonic masculinity and assert that masculinity can be enacted in a variety of ways (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), including a desire for commitment, love, and intimacy within sexual relationships (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Wagner, Seal, & Ehrhardt, 2001).

### Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore potential within-group variations among emerging adult college men regarding their perceived meanings of sex (i.e., intercourse, sexual activity), its relationship to commitment, and how such meanings are consistent or inconsistent with self-reported casual sex behaviors. We focused specifically on men for two reasons. First, traditional sexual scripts suggest that men should be willing to engage in sex if such opportunities arise. Recent research shows that not all men adhere to this script (e.g., Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005) and that some men embrace various sexual scripts as a means of demonstrating masculinity (Connell, 1995). We were interested in how men described sex and commitment and if such descriptions conform to or deviate from traditional sexual scripts and masculinity. Second, much research on sexuality and casual sex relationships compares men and women (for exceptions, see Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009). Although these findings are important, it is critical to understand men as a heterogeneous population to enhance gender-specific prevention and intervention efforts to promote men’s sexual and reproductive health (Forrest, 2001).

We contribute to the extant literature by using a mixed-methods approach to understand the connection between the meaning of sex and its relationship to self-reported sexual behaviors. Doing so allows men to explain the meaning of sex in their own terms, as opposed to giving them a set of response

options. Although research has addressed the definition of “sex” (e.g., Hans et al., 2010; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007), no study was found addressing the *meaning* of sex (i.e., sexual activity) among emerging adults. Connecting qualitative research with self-reported behavior allows for the understanding of how these meanings are consistent or inconsistent with sexual practice. Due to the exploratory nature of our study, no formal hypotheses were formed; however, our study was guided by two research questions:

- RQ1: What are the meanings given to sex (i.e., sexual activity between two individuals) by emerging adult college men and how do they perceive sex as related to commitment?
- RQ2: How do men differ in their self-reported casual sex relationship behaviors based on their meanings given to sex and its connection with commitment?

## Method

### Participants

Of a possible 225 participants, 203 responded to our written questions about sex and commitment. Three participants were subsequently removed due to incomplete written responses, resulting in a final sample of 200 men. Most participants reported as White (67.5%), followed by African-American (13.5%), Latino (12%), Asian American (3%), and *Other* (4%). Participants largely identified as heterosexual (93%) and they were primarily freshmen (36%) or sophomores (34%). On average, men were 19.3 years of age ( $SD = 1.62$ ). Most reported a family structure wherein their parents were married and living together (67.5%). A majority (59.5%) was not in a romantic relationship; of those in a romantic relationship, 81.3% reported dating exclusively, 16.0% were dating non-exclusively, and 1.3% were engaged.

Most participants (67.5%) reported hooking up in the past 12 months and the average number of hookups was 3.29 ( $SD = 3.47$ ). Just under half (46%) reported having a friend with benefits relationship in the past 12 months and the average number of friends with benefits partners was .97 ( $SD = 1.27$ ). Among those who had hooked up in the past 12 months, 66.7% reported engaging in a hook up that included intercourse (vaginal/anal). Among those who reported being in a romantic relationship (37%), most of these (62.7%) reported first hooking up, having a FWBR, or both, with their romantic partner (see Table 1).

### Procedure and Measures

Participants were undergraduate men at a large southeastern university. All were enrolled in a course on marriage and

families, which met a university liberal arts requirement. Data were from a larger project on emerging adult romantic relationships, which was approved by the university institutional review board. After providing informed consent, participants completed an online survey during the first week of the semester. Sample demographics and items about casual sex relationships were acquired from this survey. Participants were ensured that their responses to these and other items were confidential.

The qualitative data were collected from a course assignment regarding future romantic relationship expectations during the first week of class. Participants obtained the assignment online through the course website, completed it electronically, and then uploaded it to the website. The only individuals who read participants' written responses were research assistants on the project. The course instructors did not view participants' responses. Due to the confidential rather than anonymous nature of the data, we were able to link the quantitative data to the participant's written responses. Participants received course credit for participation and those who chose not to participate completed an alternative written assignment. For this study, we examined participants' written comments from the following set of questions (see PREP for Individuals, Inc., 2005):

1. What does sex mean for you?
2. Is sex connected with commitment in a relationship and why?
3. Does one [sex or commitment] come before the other?
4. How does your expectation in this area affect your sex life?

This data collection method allowed participants to respond privately, without the constraints of being in a lab or classroom, and others (e.g., Allen et al., 2008) have used similar methods.

### Qualitative Analysis

Written comments to the open-ended questions about sex and commitment were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which is consistent with the examination of written text as a main source of data (Krippendorff, 2004). As a guide, we used a modified form of the constant comparative method of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), central to grounded theory methodology (LaRossa, 2005). To avoid biasing the data to the extent possible, a coding team of three coders was assembled. Consistent with grounded theory methods, an auditable trail of memos and coding notes were kept and referred to throughout the coding and writing process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although described here in a linear fashion, open, axial, and selective coding is a simultaneous process (LaRossa, 2005).

After the data were prepared for coding, each coder independently coded the first 20 responses, attending to consistent patterns among responses. Then, the team met to discuss patterns among the written comments. Initially, two groups of

participants emerged, with a third group needing additional coding to determine if enough variation existed to split this third group into two groups. Having two groups and a possible third group established, the coders then independently coded the next 20 responses as well as re-read and, if necessary, re-code the previous 20 responses. This process ensued over the course of several meetings until all 200 responses were coded into the identified groups. When disagreements arose regarding the coding of a response, the team discussed the response, considering how other responses may have been coded similarly or dissimilarly until consensus was reached.

Once the three groups had emerged from the data, each group was examined in greater detail with specific attention to language use and possible variations within each group. We gave specific attention to how men varied in the way they responded to each question within the set of questions, considering sequencing of sex and commitment (when relevant) and the myriad of terms and processes men identified when discussing the meanings they attached to sex.

At this point in traditional grounded theory methodology, a theoretical story emerges (LaRossa, 2005). The intent of this portion of the study was not to generate theory, but to gain in-depth understanding about the meaning of sex and its relationship with commitment in this sample of men. Therefore, we critically examined how our findings fit with previous literature on the topic in general and among emerging adult men, focusing on unique language use and a contribution to the extant literature. Our modified approach to selective coding is not unique (see Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007).

### Quantitative Measures and Analyses

Our analyses were guided by our research questions, primarily our second research question. We were interested in quantifying the qualitatively derived groups and comparing them on a variety of characteristics and self-reported casual sex relationships (e.g., hooking up and FWBRs).

### Demographic Items

*Romantic relationship status.* Participants were asked, "Are you currently in a romantic relationship (e.g., dating, have a boyfriend/girlfriend, engaged, married)?" Responses were coded as (1) *yes* and (0) *no*.

*Family structure.* Family structure was identified by the following item: "Please select the option that best describes your situation." Responses included (1) *my parents are married and living together*, (2) *my parents are separated or divorced*, (3) *one of my parents is deceased*, (4) *my parents never married*, and (5) *other*. We created a dichotomous variable for family structure: (1) *parents are married and living together* and (0) *all other family structures*.



**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of participants ( $N = 200$ )

Characteristic	$N$ (%)
Race/ethnicity	
White	135 (67.5)
African-American	27 (13.5)
Latino	24 (12.0)
Asian	6 (3.0)
Other	8 (4.0)
Year in school	
Freshman	72 (36.0)
Sophomore	68 (34.0)
Junior	43 (21.5)
Senior	16 (8.0)
Other	1 (0.5)
Family structure	
Parents married, live together	135 (67.5)
Parents separated or divorced	44 (22.0)
One parent deceased	5 (2.5)
Parents never married	7 (3.5)
Other	3 (1.5)
No response	6 (3.0)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	186 (93.0)
Homosexual	2 (1.0)
No response	12 (6.0)
Relationship status	
Date, nonexclusive	12 (6.0)
Date, exclusive	61 (30.5)
Engaged	1 (0.5)
Not in a relationship	119 (59.5)
No response	7 (3.5)
Hooked up past 12 months	
No	59 (29.5)
Yes	135 (67.5)
No response	6 (3.0)
FWBR past 12 months	
No	100 (48.8)
Yes	92 (47.3)
No response	8 (3.9)
HU with sex past 12 months	
Hooked up without sex	43 (21.5)
Hooked up with sex	90 (45.0)
Did not hook up	59 (29.5)
No response	8 (4.0)
Romantic relationship formation	
Date exclusive, HU first	38 (19.0)
Date exclusive, FWB first	1 (0.5)
Date exclusive, HU & FWB first	8 (4.0)
Date exclusive, no HU or FWB first	15 (7.5)
Date nonexclusively	12 (6.0)

**Table 1** continued

Characteristic	$N$ (%)
Engaged, no HU or FWB first	1 (0.5)
Not in a romantic relationship	119 (59.5)
No response	6 (3.0)

*Race/ethnicity.* Participants reported their race/ethnicity from the following: *White, African-American, Latino, Asian American, and Other*. Due to the limited number of minority males, we dichotomized race/ethnicity as (1) *White men* and (0) *Minority men*.

*Year in school.* Participants indicated their year in school as freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, or other. For this study, year in school was dichotomized as (1) *junior/senior* and (0) *freshman/sophomore*.

*Religious service attendance.* To measure religious service attendance, participants were asked, “How often do you attend religious services?” Responses ranged from (0) *never or almost never* to (3) *one or more times per week*.

#### *Social Desirability*

An issue inherent in the study of sensitive topics like sex is socially desirable responding (Anastasia & Urbina, 1997). To examine this, we included the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). Participants responded to 10 items that represent socially desirable thoughts or behaviors. Each statement consisted of either a yes or no response. Items were summed and higher scores indicated greater social desirability.

#### *Casual Sex Relationship Measures*

*Hooking up.* Participants were provided with the following definition of hooking up: “Some people say that a ‘hook up’ is when two people get together for a physical encounter and don’t necessarily expect anything further (e.g., no plan or intention to do it again).” They were then asked, “Based on this definition, how many different people did you ‘hookup’ with in the past 12 months?” Although participants could enter any number, the majority of responses fell within a range of 0–10. Frequencies greater than 10 ( $n = 16$ ) were re-scored as 10 to create a range of 0–10 or more. This measure and definition of hooking up has been used in previous studies (e.g., Owen et al., 2010; 2011).

*Friends with benefits.* Participants were provided with the following definition of friends with benefits: “Some people say ‘friends with benefits’ is a friend in which there are also physical encounters, but no on-going committed relationship (e.g., not boyfriend/girlfriend).” They were then asked, “Based on this definition, how many ‘friends with benefits’ did you have

over the past 12 months?” The majority of responses ranged from 0 to 4. Scores greater than 4 ( $n = 8$ ) were re-scored as 4 to create a range of 0–4 or more. This measure and definition has been used in previous studies (e.g., Owen & Fincham, 2011).

## Results

### Meanings and Contexts of Sex

Using a modified grounded theory approach to analyzing men’s written comments, three distinct groups of men emerged from the data: *Committers*, *Flexibles*, and *Recreationers*. Each group had a dominant storyline that was consistent among their written comments.

#### *Committers*

Just under half of the men (46.5 %) described sex as a meaningful experience that should be reserved exclusively for those in a committed romantic relationship. These men offered a rich description of the nature of sex as behaviors that exemplified connection in a relationship, a means of expressing love to one’s partner, and often as a demonstration of commitment to the relationship. For example, one 19-year-old male said “Sex is an expression of deep feelings for another, a means of sharing one’s self completely with another. Sex is connected with commitment in a relationship and should be exclusive.” Similarly, an 18-year-old male expressed:

Sex to me is a way of proving your love for someone; it shows exactly how much that person means to you. Yes, sex is connected with commitment. As long as it’s a romantic relationship and not just a hookup...Sex shows how strong your feelings are for another.

This group of men consistently stated that commitment and sex were linked. There was also a clear sequence to the timing, as commitment was a necessary prerequisite to engaging in sexual activity with a partner. One 22-year-old male offered:

Sex is the physical expression of an emotional commitment. Having sex before a relationship exists defeats its purpose and objectifies the two individuals on a purely physical level. I cannot give the gift of my body without first giving my heart...

Although many explicitly identified a sequence, others provided responses that offered a relational context for sexual activity. This consisted of reserving sexual activity for marriage, or at the very least, reserving such behavior for long-term committed relationships. For example, one 19-year-old participant said:

I think it [sex] is something special and should only occur when two people really care for each other. Sex is directly connected to commitment in a relationship and should only take place if it is something that could last forever.

Of all three groups, these men most frequently commented on how the meaning they ascribed to sex and its relation to commitment affected their sexual behavior. Some suggested that their sex life was inconsistent (“...my sex life isn’t as diverse as other college guys but I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s quality not quantity”) or non-existent, as one 19-year-old put it:

I am by choice a virgin because I have not found a woman that I feel I can fully commit to and I do not think it’s fair for me to lead a woman on with sex and then not feel the need to commit to her.

Overall, they reported fewer sexual encounters as a result of the meaning they attached to sex. For those who self-identified as being in a sexually active and exclusive relationship, this context made sex more meaningful and pleasurable. For example, one 20-year-old said “...it makes it [sex] more special and something worth waiting for in any relationship until the timing is right.”

#### *Flexibles*

The second group that emerged from the data was only slightly smaller (41 %) than the first group. The dominant theme in their written comments was that sex had multiple meanings and that although sex and commitment could be connected, they did not have to be. One of the defining features of these men was that, unlike the *Committers*, they identified dual meanings of sex. Frequently, one of the meanings was consistent with those given by the *Committers*, wherein sex meant an expression of love, feelings of compassion for one’s sexual partner, and a representation of an intimate bond between partners. However, they also identified a meaning that consisted of sex as meaningless, a means of satisfying sexual urges, a way to get one’s mind off of things, or engaging in a “good time.” One 20-year-old expressed that “Sex to me means many things. Sometimes it’s just a way to get my mind off things for a night while other times it’s passionate and meaningful.” Another male, age 21, suggested that “Sex to me means the physical expression of love or in certain circumstances, a means of evoking pleasure.” It was from this dual meaning that the term “flexibles” arose. These men did not demonstrate a preference for committed or casual sex, but they were willing to engage in sexual behavior in the context of either casual or committed relationships.

Another consistent theme in their written comments was that sex and commitment could be related, but it was not necessarily so. Closely related to this was the lack of an expectation for a sequence linking commitment and sex. One 18-year-old put it best saying:

To me, sex isn't always an intimate feeling that both partners feel for each other, sometimes sex just means a good time without having anything to do with commitment. I don't necessarily think that sex is connected with commitment in a relationship because sometimes people just enjoy having sex but aren't really committed into making the relationship work. Most of the time a relationship starts before the couple starts having sex but it isn't always like that, sex can make two people realize they have feeling[s] for each other and they then start a relationship.

Another defining feature of this group of men was the effects of the meaning they ascribed to sex on their self-reported behavior. Often, they were unable to identify an effect on their sexual behaviors. However, when they did identify an effect, it focused on how they felt about themselves ("This expectation makes me feel like a more classy individual, instead of a man-whore") or increased sexual flexibility, as one 20-year-old stated: "My personal beliefs on sex leaves things very open for me and would allow for many more experiences than people that believe sex has to be within a relationship."

#### *Recreationers*

The third and smallest group that emerged from the data (12 %) also had a dominant storyline: sex did not hold meaning or, if it did, it was primarily for entertainment and fun. As examples, participants said:

It [sex] doesn't really mean anything to me, it doesn't connect to commitment or anything to me but pleasure. (18-years-old)

To me, sex happens when two people are extremely sexually attracted to each other and there is no other way to express this attraction than to have sex. (18-years-old)

To me, sex means sex. It's a physical action between two people, nothing more. (22-years-old)

Consistently, men reported that sex and commitment were not connected, especially during this stage of their life course (young, in college). They also commented most frequently about the acceptability of casual sexual encounters, hooking up, and having sex with a "friend." For example, one 22-year-old said:

No, it's [sex] not always about commitment, especially in college. There are the infamous "one-night-stands," which involve no commitment... Since I am in college, I am not really looking for commitments. I am totally down for the sex part before the commitment.

A majority of these men also reported that their expectations about sex and commitment had little effect on their sexual

lives. However, some comments reflected positively on the flexibility and freedom of having multiple casual sex partners without an expectation for future commitment, as one 18-year-old said:

Sex is an act that does not necessarily involve love. I don't think that sex has to be connected to a relationship. Many people are content with participating in sex on a casual level. Being a college student, I've had and continue to have casual sex. I eventually want a serious relationship in which I have sex solely with one partner.

#### Quantitative Group Comparisons

In these analyses, the men grouped as *Committers*, *Flexibles*, and *Recreationers* were compared on demographic characteristics, social desirability, and self-reported casual sex relationships in the past 12 months. Because the majority of these were nominal level, Chi-square tests were used. For continuous variables, group means were compared using analysis of variance (ANOVA). In instances where Levene's statistic was violated due to unequal variances (Norusis, 2007), Welch's statistic was examined to determine group mean differences, because it provides a more robust estimate of the *F*-statistic (Brown & Forsythe, 1974). Post hoc analyses were conducted in instances where *F*-statistics were significant to examine specific differences between groups, using Dunnett's T3 when Levene's statistic was violated to correct for unequal group variances (Dunnett, 1980).

#### *Demographic Characteristics*

No significant group differences were found for year in school,  $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 2.68$ ; romantic relationship status,  $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 3.65$ ; or family structure,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 3.52$ . Group differences were found for race/ethnicity,  $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 6.71, p = .03$ . Follow up analyses showed that more White men (53.3 %) than Minority men (33.8 %) were in the *Committers* group, and more Minority men (50.8 %) than White men (36.3 %) were in the *Flexibles* group,  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 5.78, p = .02$ . Group mean differences were found on religious service attendance  $F(2, 63.45) = 13.77, p \leq .001$ . Post hoc comparisons revealed that *Committers* ( $M = 2.61, SD = 1.09$ ) attended religious services more frequently than did *Flexibles* ( $M = 1.84, SD = .80$ ),  $p \leq .001$ .

#### *Social Desirability*

Groups were examined based on social desirability. First, we examined the correlation between social desirability and our measures of casual sex relationships. Social desirability was negatively associated with number of hookups in the past 12 months ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ) and was not associated with

FWBRs in the past 12 months ( $r = -.08, p = .25$ ). We then compared mean scores based on group membership. Mean scores were similar across groups, although *Committers* had the highest mean score ( $M = 5.48, SD = 2.01$ ), followed by *Recreationers* ( $M = 5.26, SD = 1.94$ ) and *Flexibles* ( $M = 5.14, SD = 2.08$ ). No group differences were found,  $F(2, N = 200) < 1$ .

### Casual Sex Relationships

Results from a series of ANOVAs found mean differences for number of hookups in the past 12 months,  $F(2, 58.54) = 14.77, p \leq .001$ . Post hoc comparisons revealed that *Committers* ( $M = 1.97, SD = 2.8$ ) had fewer hookups in the past 12 months compared to both *Flexibles* ( $M = 4.51, SD = 3.61$ ) and *Recreationers* ( $M = 4.43, SD = 3.63$ ) ( $p \leq .001, p = .01$ , respectively). No significant mean differences between the *Flexibles* and *Recreationers* were found for hooking up.

Regarding FWBRs in the past 12 months, mean differences were also found,  $F(2, 51.09) = 22.35, p \leq .001$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that *Committers* ( $M = .40, SD = .79$ ) had fewer FWBRs in the past 12 months compared to *Flexibles* ( $M = 1.42, SD = 1.34$ ) and *Recreationers* ( $M = 1.73, SD = 1.61$ ) ( $p \leq .001, p = .003$ , respectively). No significant differences between *Flexibles* and *Recreationers* were found for FWBRs.

## Discussion

College men were not a homogenous group regarding the meanings they gave to sex and its perceived connection with commitment. Rather than focusing on attitudes or beliefs about sex (see Reiss, 1967) or behaviors that constitute “sex” (e.g., Hans et al., 2010), we attended to the *meanings* of sex. Three distinct groups emerged from the qualitative component of the study and these groups varied in important ways.

The *Committers* was the largest group that emerged. Their responses did not conform to traditional male sexual scripts. Rather, they explained the importance of being within the context of a committed relationship for sexual activity to occur. Their self-reported casual sex behaviors were consistent with their written responses. They reported the fewest average number of hookup partners and FWBRs. These findings were consistent with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), who asserted that a hegemonic perspective of masculinity is largely outdated and men enact masculinity in a variety of ways, many of which are not consistent with a traditional male sexual script (e.g., Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). Men within this group should not be overlooked regarding their potential for health risks because those having sex in committed relationships often do so in the context of sequential monogamous relationships (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011), wherein

condom use is typically inconsistent (e.g., Manlove et al., 2006) and exposure to sexually transmitted infections remains a concern (e.g., Kelley et al., 2003).

The next largest group that emerged, the *Flexibles*, demonstrated flexibility in their meanings of sex and the contexts of sexual behavior. They described multiple meanings for sex and were more tentative with its link to commitment and relationships. This group has received limited attention in research, as studies primarily focus on those having casual sex or those having sex in committed relationships. This, we assert, is an important finding of our study and supports the necessity of attending to within-group variation among men. More research is needed to understand *Flexibles*’ conceptions of masculinity and their decision-making processes regarding sexual engagement. Although these men perceived multiple meanings for sex, some of which were consistent with the *Committers* group, their self-reported casual sex behavior seemed to reflect a greater willingness to enact a more traditional male sexual script.

Our smallest group of men, *Recreationers*, indicated that the meaning of sex was more anatomical and primarily for the purposes of pleasure and gratification. These men consistently mentioned their age and the college context. We assert that this group of men receives greatest attention in studies of sexual behavior on campuses. Although the casual sex nature of the college experience is often highlighted, particularly by popular press (e.g., Stepp, 2007), such encounters are less common than sex within committed relationships (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). We emphasize here that this may be the case; yet, 67.5 % of our participants reported hooking up in the past 12 months and 46 % reported FWBRs in the same time frame. Thus, scholars should continue to examine casual sex relationships, as they remain a popular pathway to sexual intimacy among college students (see Owen et al., 2010, 2011).

The second study aim was to examine the demographic characteristics of the groups that emerged from our open ended questions. We found few differences. First, a greater percentage of White men were *Committers* whereas a greater percentage of Minority men were *Flexibles*. We emphasize caution in interpreting this finding given our grouping by race/ethnicity. Had we secured a larger sample of men, we could have made a more precise comparison between racial/ethnic groups. Second, *Committers* reported more frequent church attendance than did *Flexibles*, which is not surprising given the importance many religious groups place on sexual intimacy within committed relationships (see Barkan, 2006).

### Limitations

Our study had several limitations that warrant discussion. First, the sample was a non-probability convenience sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the course



from which the sample was drawn filled a university liberal arts requirement, men who chose to enroll in the course may have differed in important ways from those who chose not to take the class. Additionally, the course focused on marriage and family, which may have attracted men who were more traditional in their views regarding marital and family issues.

Second, men who scored moderately high or high on the social desirability scale were retained rather than removed. These men were retained, because, although they may have scored high on this measure, we cannot conclude that their written responses were written to reflect upon them positively. Further, no significant differences were found in group mean scores on this measure.

A third limitation is the manner in which we collected men's written responses. Using an online submission, as opposed to in-depth interviewing methods, prevented us from following up with participants to clarify their written comments. We were also unable to engage in member checking (Creswell, 1994), a follow-up procedure wherein participants confirm the way in which researchers coded participants' responses.

Lastly, we chose not to define the words "sex" and "commitment" for participants. Such definitions were left to participants to determine, limiting our understanding of the meaning of specific sexual behaviors or how men understand commitment. Recent evidence showed that a variety of behaviors may be considered as "sex" (see Byers, Henderson, & Hobson, 2009; Pitts & Rahman, 2001).

## Implications

Our findings hold important implications for relationship education among emerging adults and future research on men's sexual relationships. Relationship education among emerging adult college students (see Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011) may be enhanced by focusing on sexual issues, including greater discussion about the definition and meaning of sex, how such meanings develop, and how they influence sexual behavior. Specifically among men, focus should be placed on how such meaning influences safer sex practices, including discussing contraception with one's partner and the frequency and consistency of condom use. Intervention efforts should also address behaviors that may increase exposure to health risks (e.g., sexually transmitted infections). We point to the need to educate men in a variety of relationship contexts.

One point of intervention is discussing the meaning that sex holds for men. For men who hold dual meanings for sex or perceive sexual activity primarily as a form of recreation, attention should focus on ensuring adequate knowledge of condom use and that protection is accessible in the event that a spontaneous sexual encounter occurs. Further, because alcohol use

is often associated with casual sex (Fielder & Carey, 2010b), men whose meanings for sex fall within these two groups could benefit from learning about the influence of alcohol in casual sex encounters. For example, many men who have casual sex while intoxicated may be unaware that they are coercing a partner into sex (see Flack et al., 2007).

Men who hold a meaning for sex that is consistent with a romantic relationship context can benefit from learning about the role of contraceptive discussion with one's sexual partner. Many sexually active heterosexual couples over time move away from condom use and rely on birth control pills (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Of concern here, particularly among emerging adults, is short duration of these relationships. Choosing to limit barrier methods and rely on hormonal methods increases exposure to potential health risks that may come from a previous committed relationship partner (Kelley et al., 2003). These men may also benefit from learning about the need to be prepared with protective measures should they begin a committed romantic relationship. For example, men who wait for commitment prior to engaging in sexual activity with a romantic partner may be less prepared for intercourse should the expected commitment arrive and the opportunity for sex present itself (see Fisher, White, Byrne, & Kelley, 1988).

Another aspect of relationship education specifically for men is educating them about traditional sexual scripts and the acceptability of not subscribing to a hegemonic view of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Although the masculinity scripts identified in the work of Brannon (1976) continue today (e.g., "Sturdy Oak," "Big Wheel"; Kimmel, 2008), men should be educated about the ability to enact masculinity in a variety of ways that go beyond traditional scripts. Promoting men's awareness of alternative masculinities may influence their sexual decision-making processes critical to this developmental period (Allen et al., 2008).

Future research should continue to examine the within-group variations with regard to sexuality, casual sex, and committed sexual behaviors. Given the prevalence of casual sex scripts (Holman & Sillars, 2012), multiple opportunities exist to learn about the sequence of behaviors that lead to casual sex encounters among college men. Although survey research is commonly used, diary methods may provide a richer description of behaviors leading to casual sex encounters, including context, discussion and use of contraception, use of alcohol or other substances, and perceptions of masculinity. Longitudinal methods may be used to examine how the meaning of sex changes during one's college experience. For example, a man may enter college with a "traditional" view of sex and commitment, but through the course of his college experience, such meaning changes. This methodology may promote our understanding of how meaning influences sexual behavior, or how behavior changes meaning.

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