The Effects of Gender and Sociosexual Orientation on Perceptions of Casual Sex

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Abstract
This study was designed to examine perceptions of casual sex among young adults. The central goal was to determine if there is still a double standard for judging individuals who engage in casual sex, with females who initiate casual sex being judged more harshly than males who initiate casual sex. In addition, we were interested in whether the gender of the participant or the participant’s willingness to engage in casual sex (i.e., their sociosexual orientation) might influence perceptions of individuals who initiate casual sex. Participants read hypothetical scenarios in which the actors engaged in casual sex. The gender of the initiator of the sexual act was manipulated. Participants were asked to evaluate the initiator of the sexual act, to indicate their own gender, and to complete Penke’s Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (2011) to assess their willingness to engage in casual sex. We did not find a significant effect for gender of the initiator ($p = 0.15$), suggesting that there was no double standard among our participants in judging males and females who initiated casual sex. We did find a significant effect for gender of the participant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that males evaluated the initiators of casual sex more positively than females, and for the sociosexual orientation of the participant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that participants who were more willing to engage in casual sex evaluated the initiators of casual sex more positively. There were no significant interactions among the three independent variables.
The Effects of Gender and Sociosexual Orientation on Perception of Casual Sex

Casual sex is defined as “a sexual encounter, which may or may not involve intercourse, between two people without the expectation of developing a relationship” (Paul & Hayes, 2002). There is clear evidence that casual sex is particularly frequent among college-aged students (Cates, 1991; Gognon, Kolata, Laumann & Michael, 1994; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991) and that casual sex is becoming more common, developing into a societal norm for young adults. There have been many attempts to explain this change, including the introduction of the birth control pill, medications for STDs, legalization of abortion, and increasing exposure to sexuality in the media (Gognon, Kolata, Laumann, & Michael, 1994).

Historically, there have been large gender differences in attitudes toward and self-reported engagement in casual sex. In general, “sex is encouraged for males, but discouraged for females” (Levesque, Simmons, Wicke, & Lipe, 2007). One reason for this sex difference seems to be that “sexual activity reinforces masculinity but is deemed as unacceptable female behavior” (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992). These sex role stereotypes have been around for centuries, leading women who engage in uncommitted sexual acts to be deemed promiscuous. Promiscuous women have, in turn, been viewed as immoral and impulsive.

One study we found suggests that, while the existence of sex role stereotypes has been documented for many years, “the degree to which these widely held beliefs represent myth or reality is less easily determined” (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). In one often-cited study conducted by Clark & Hatfield (1989), large gender differences were reported. Men in this study were very likely to agree to sex with a stranger, whereas
women were exceptionally unlikely to do so (Conley, 2010). However, rates of casual sex are thought to be increasing among both males and females, with the increase seeming to be especially strong among females. In support of this viewpoint are the results of a meta-analysis on sex differences conducted by Oliver and Hyde (1993). These authors compared the size of sex differences in sexual behaviors from studies in which data was collected during the 1960s and those in which data was collected in the 1980s. Larger sex differences occurred in the 1960s than in the 1980s. They concluded that the existing literature demonstrates an “increased permissiveness over the last four decades in women’s sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors”. A more recent meta-analysis conducted in 2007 by Petersen and Hyde found very similar results. When exploring the experiences of college students’ casual sexual hookups, Paul and Hayes (2002) “found no significant differences between males and females in frequency of hookup experiences”. Of their participants, 60% reported either gender as typically instigating a hookup. Here, a hookup was defined as a sexual encounter without the expectation of developing a relationship, which is similar to the definition Paul and Hayes (2002) used to describe casual sex.

Although a good deal of research has examined gender differences in regards to casual sex, questions still remain regarding how much of an effect the decrease in gender differences has had on perceptions of individuals who engage in casual sex. An important question is whether a double standard still exists for casual sex such that men who engage in casual sex are judged less harshly than women who engage in casual sex. Empirical evidence is, to date, quite mixed. First, some studies find that a double standard is alive and well. Leigh, Aramburu, & Norris (1992) examined reactions of women and men to a hypothetical first time sexual encounter scenario that involved alcohol consumption.
Participants were asked to judge the behavior and characteristics of both individuals involved, specifically looking at the participants’ judgments on the character that initiated the sexual encounter. They found that “the behavior of the male participant in the sexual encounter was seen as more acceptable and common than the female partner…[and that] men were more likely than women to find the behavior of each member of the couple socially acceptable.” Therefore, they suggest that even though men and women’s sexual behaviors are becoming more similar, a double standard remains in perceptions of the initiators of casual sex. In contrast, others studies have found that a once-strong double standard is diminishing. For example, a study that investigated sex and physical attractiveness in evaluations of perceived promiscuous persons found that “women rated a promiscuous man more negatively than men rated a promiscuous woman” (Levesque et al., 2007). Finally, some studies have found that a reverse double standard may exist. For example, Milhausen & Herold (1999) surveyed 165 women at a university in which “Ninety-five percent indicated that they definitely or probably believed a double standard exists (a standard in which it is more acceptable for a man to have more sexual partners than a woman).” However, when investigating if women would support the double standard that women are judged more harshly than men, they found a reverse double standard, one that is harsher towards men than women.

One reason for these mixed results may be that studies have not always considered the characteristics of the research participants who are being asked to evaluate the initiators of casual sex. One characteristic that seems to be particularly important is the gender of the participant. Some studies suggest that women may be particularly harsh in their judgments of other women who initiate casual sex. For example, Spreadbury
(1982) found that “women were more likely to label other women’s sexual behaviors as promiscuous than men’s sexual behaviors, indicating that women supported the sexual double standard” (Milhausen & Herold, 1999). While these studies still provide evidence for a double standard, it brings into question if the double standard has changed and for whom it applies. In a meta-analysis conducted by France, Henningsen, Oates, & Shaw (2009) mixed evidence regarding the direction of the double standard was prevalent; Abbey (1982) found that men evaluated men and woman initiators as being more promiscuous than did women, additionally, Sigal et al. (1988) & Quackenbush (1987) found that men did not view females as being any more sexual than males. While these studies all found an effect for gender of the participant, one supporting the double standard and one supporting a reverse double standard, some research takes an alternate approach and suggests that the double standard actually influences both genders equally (Leigh, Aramburur, & Norris, 1992; Milhausen & Herold, 1999; Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

Another important factor that has not received much attention is how perceptions of individuals who initiate casual sex might be influenced by the sociosexual orientation of the participant. Sociosexual orientation refers to one’s willingness to engage in casual sexual relations (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008); an unrestricted orientation refers to the tendency to engage in uncommitted sexual relations, while restricted orientations refers to the tendency to engage only in committed sexual relations. Millhausen and Herold (1999) found that women who had many previous sexual partners were more accepting of men who had many partners, suggesting that those with unrestricted orientations judge others less harshly in perceptions of casual sex. DeLamater (1984) states that, “gender differences in orientations to sexuality ultimately creates differences in the kind of
activity considered legitimate for each”. Agostinelli and Seal (1998) demonstrate this in their findings that “those with unrestricted sociosexual orientations and men attributed more permissive and less sexually responsible attitudes to both themselves and close friends, than did people who were restricted and women”. Nevertheless, none of these studies are very recent, and some were conducted almost a decade ago. Thus, sociosexual orientations may be shifting from restricted to unrestricted due to incidences of casual sex increasing, which in turn should change attitudes, and ultimately create a new subjective norm present today. This new norm would have many implications, such as to what extent the double standard would be present, and to whom it applies.

Due to the mixed literature regarding double standards and perceptions in reference to casual sex, our study was designed to examine what factors influence how individuals evaluate others who initiate casual sex. We surmised from the literature that the gender of the participant and sociosexual orientation are factors that were not thoroughly investigated and may strongly influence one’s perceptions of others who engage in casual sexual encounters. We were primarily interested in if the gender of the initiator, the gender of the participant, and/or the sociosexual orientation of the participant affect perceptions of casual sex.

Method

Participants

Participants (N= 262) were obtained online through Facebook and the Hanover College Psychology Department website. All participants were U.S. residents, between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, and had at least one sexual encounter prior to completing
our study. Four participants were excluded from our data due to them not meeting these criteria. Of the participants 68.3% (N=179) were female, 30.9% (N=81) were male, and 0.8% (N=2) preferred not to disclose their gender. In regards to sexual orientation, 84.7% (N=222) were heterosexual, 7.3% (N=19) were bisexual, 5% (N=13) were homosexual, and 3% (N=8) preferred not to disclose their orientation. Per education, 9.5% (N=25) had their high school diploma or GED, 79% (N=207) were currently attending college, 3.8% (N=10) had an Associate’s Degree, 4.2% (N=11) had a Bachelor’s Degree, and 3.5% (N=9) were attending or have attended graduate school. Lastly, 49.6% (N=130) were currently in a relationship, and 50.4% (N=132) were not currently in a relationship.

Perceptions of Initiators of Casual Sex

Three scenarios were used in this study to assess participants’ perceptions of individuals who initiate casual sex. In each scenario there was a description of an individual initiating a casual sexual encounter with a member of the opposite sex (see Appendix 1). Two of the scenarios were previously created by Kowalski (1992) and Leigh & Norris (1992), but were revised (e.g., to shorten the length of the scenarios). The third scenario was created for this study. The gender of the initiator was manipulated such that half of the participants read three scenarios with female initiators and half of the participants read three scenarios with male initiators. Following each scenario, participants were given four questions that assessed their perceptions of the initiator of the sexual act on a five-point Likert scale (e.g., “How positively do you perceive Jane?”).

Preliminary analyses indicated that participants’ responses were fairly consistent across the four questions and across the three scenarios; scenario one had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .87, scenario two had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .87, and scenario three had a
Cronbach’s Alpha of .88. As a result, participants’ responses were averaged across the three scenarios (\( \alpha = .91 \)), with higher scores indicating more positive evaluations of the initiator.

**Sociosexual Orientation**

Each participant took The Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), abbreviated as SOI-R (see Appendix 2). This inventory “assesses one’s willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations” (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). The SOI-R consists of nine items that assess three aspects of socio-sexual orientation: behavior (e.g., past sexual behavior), attitudes (e.g., acceptance of sex without love), and desire (e.g., frequency of sexual fantasies or arousal). The SOI-R has been deemed appropriate for individuals of any sexual orientation, any age range from 18 to 60 years, any relationship status, and any education level within the “normal-range”; however the SOI-R is not recommended for anyone who is sexually inexperienced. The SOI-R puts individuals into either a “restricted” or “unrestricted” sociosexual category; restricted refers to the “tendency to have sex exclusively in emotionally close & committed relationships”, while unrestricted refers to the “tendency for sexual relationships with low commitment & investment” (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). All nine items have values from one to five due to the 5-point Likert scale and are summed to form a full-scale score that represents the global Sociosexual orientation (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). If an individual’s score is at or below 49 they are put into the restricted category, while those who score 50 or higher are put into the unrestricted category. The SOI-R scores were averaged across all nine items, which produced a Cronbach’s Alpha of .87.
Procedure

Individuals participated in the online study by clicking on a link that directed them to the survey. The survey was titled “Casual Sex in Young Adults” and stated that in order to take the survey the participant had to be at least 18 but not over 24 years of age, a U.S. resident, and had to have willingly participated in at least one sexual encounter. After clicking the link, an informed consent form appeared (see Appendix 3). Participants had to click an “I consent” button in order to continue the study. After consenting, the participants were randomly assigned to read scenarios in which either a male or female initiated casual sex with a member of the opposite sex and to indicate their perceptions of the initiator. They were then directed to the SOI-R, demographic questions, and lastly were sent to the debriefing page, which included a comment box. The participant was required to answer each question in order to move forward in the questionnaire. If the survey was abandoned early then the answers were discarded, with no data being collected.

Results

To analyze our data, we ran a between-subjects 3-way analysis of variance. Our factors included the gender of the initiator of the sexual act (male/female), the gender of the participant (male/female), and the SOI-R classification (unrestricted/restricted). We did not find an effect for the gender of the initiator, \( F(1,252) = 2.072, p = 0.151 \). Although male initiators \( (M=2.82, SD= 0.07) \) were perceived slightly more positively than female initiators \( (M=2.68, SD= 0.06) \), this difference was not statistically significant (see Figure 1). However, we did find a statistically significant effect for gender of the participant, \( F (1,252) = 13.75, p < 0.001 \). Regardless of the gender of the initiator, male
participants ($M=2.93, SD=0.08$) viewed the initiator more positively, than did female participants ($M=2.58, SD=0.05$) (see Figure 2). There was also a statistically significant effect for the SOI-R, $F(1,252) = 52.11, p < 0.001$. The participants categorized as unrestricted ($M=3.10, SD=0.06$) viewed the initiator more positively than those in the restricted category ($M=2.41, SD=0.08$); that is, those with more positive attitudes towards casual sex viewed the initiator more positively than those with more negative attitudes towards casual sex (see Figure 3). There were no significant interactions between any of the study variables (i.e., gender of the initiator, gender of the participant, or sociosexual orientation of the participant) in predicting participants’ evaluations of the initiators of casual sex.

Discussion

Our research question was inquiring as to what factors influence how an individual evaluates others who initiate casual sex. We expected that the gender of the initiator of the sexual encounter, the gender of the participant, and the sociosexual orientation of the participant could all be factors that influence perceptions of individuals that engage in casual sex. We examined each of these factors individually, and their interactions with one another. From our data we did not find a statistically significant main effect for gender of the initiator, but did find a statistically significant main effect for gender of the participant and for the participant's sociosexual orientation, as scored by the SOI-R. In addition, there were no statistically significant interactions. These results correspond to findings by Abbey (1982), Sigal et al. (1988), and Quackenbush (1987) in that there was no main effect for gender of the initiator, but an effect was present for gender of the participant. Overall, due to our study finding no main effect for gender of
the initiator, it is concluded that no double standard was present in our sample.

One main limitation was that our study tells us how young adults think about casual sex, it does not address what older adults think. Such as, if people are becoming more or less critical about casual sex as they age. By looking at a wide range of age groups, insight would be provided into any cohort effects that may play an important factor when researching perceptions of casual sex. Another limitation was the use of hypothetical scenarios. It does not necessarily tell us how participants would respond to real-life situations or to situations that involve people that they know. For example, a participant may have rated Jane very positively in the scenario, however in real-life they may not want Jane dating their best friend. Also, our online survey was limited to being posted on only two websites, as well as, the fact that it was online for just three weeks. If we ran our study again we would be able to correct some of these limitations, and expand on encompassing a more diverse and wide-ranged sample.

For our future directions, we are curious how strongly the participant's perceptions could be influenced by the initiator's number of previous sexual encounters being exposed prior to the rating of the scenarios. We believe that there could be more influence, if the participant was given more information on the initiator than the one evening described in the scenario. It could also be influential to compare the participant’s sociosexual orientation to that of the initiators in the scenario. Milhausen & Herold (1999) found that women who had many previous sexual partners were more accepting of men who had many partners. Even though they only surveyed college-aged women, they were able to determine that “the number of partners a woman has had is a strong predictor of their acceptance of men with many partners”. This aligns with our results
that those in the unrestricted category of the sociosexual orientation judged all initiators less harshly than those classified as restricted. Therefore, we believe this and more testing regarding sociosexual orientations would be a very interesting focus to take in regards to future directions.


Appendix 1: Casual Sex Scenarios

Note: The gender of the initiator was manipulated such that half of the participants read the following scenarios with female initiators. The other half of the participants read the same scenarios below except with the male initiating the sexual act.

“Matt and Jane were both students at a university. They had seen each other around campus, and became acquainted when they enrolled in the same class. Matt asked Jane if she would like to hang out and study for the upcoming exam. Jane suggested that they could go to her apartment since she lived alone. That night Matt arrived at Jane’s apartment and they began studying. After an hour they decided to take a break. Jane put her hand on Matt’s thigh and offered to give him a back rub. Then she leaned over to Matt and began to passionately kiss him. They began to remove their clothing and had sexual intercourse.” (Kowalski, 1992- Revised).

How positively do you perceive Jane?

Negatively  Slightly negatively  Neutral  Slightly positively  Positively

I would be okay with one of my close friends dating Jane

Strongly disagree

I would be friends with Jane

Strongly disagree

Do you approve of Jane’s actions?

Strongly disapprove

“It was Saturday night, right after finals, just before everybody took off for vacation. Lots of parties were going on that night, including a particularly large one at an off-campus house. Kristen walked into the party a little after ten. She didn't have a boyfriend right then, and like many people she was a bit lonely and definitely looking for companionship. As she was wandering around, she noticed a man she had seen around a few times but never met. Brian had come to the party with two of his friends, who had assured him that it would be full of women who were both nice and nice-looking. Kristen took Brian's hand and they headed for the dance floor. Kristen held Brian close, dancing seductively, and he responded. They kissed throughout the slow dance, and by
the time the dance was over they both had to catch their breath. Kristen asked Brian if he would like to go for a walk. He said “sure.” As they passed Kristen's house, she asked Brian if he would like to come inside. They went to her room and began listening to some music. They then started to kiss, first slowly and then more passionately. They became caught up in the moment and had sexual intercourse” (Leigh & Norris, 1992-Revised).

How positively do you perceive Kristen?

☐ Negatively ☐ Slightly negatively ☐ Neutral ☐ Slightly positively ☐ Positively positively

I would be okay with one of my close friends dating Kristen

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I would be friends with Kristen

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

Do you approve of Kristen’s actions?

☐ Strongly disapprove ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly approve

It was a Friday night, and Samantha was feeling lonely. She was wanting more of a romantic connection than a friendly hang out, so she started searching the internet. She chose to see if there were any people in her area that posted ads on the casual encounters section of Craigslist. There were multiple posts, from men in her age range and general location. She emailed one man asking if he would like to meet up with her, granted that he was looking for a 'no strings attached' encounter. Within minutes he responded positively to her message, and sent her a picture of himself. Samantha responded with a picture of herself, and a few compliments. They decided to meet at a local hotel in an hour. They waited for each other in the lobby and struck up a simple conversation as they made their way up the stairs. They began kissing passionately on their way up the stairs. They removed their clothes as soon as they entered the room, and began having sexual intercourse.

How positively do you perceive Samantha?

☐ Negatively ☐ Slightly negatively ☐ Neutral ☐ Slightly positively ☐ Positively positively
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would be okay with one of my close friends dating Samantha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be friends with Samantha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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<td>Strongly agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you approve of Samantha’s actions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly disapprove</td>
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<td>Strongly approve</td>
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Appendix 2: SOI-R

Please respond honestly to the following questions:

1. With how many different partners have you had sex within the past 12 months?
   - □ 0
   - □ 1
   - □ 2 to 3
   - □ 4 to 7
   - □ 8 or more

2. With how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse on *one and only one* occasion?
   - □ 0
   - □ 1
   - □ 2 to 3
   - □ 4 to 7
   - □ 8 or more

3. With how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse without having an interest in a long-term committed relationship with this person?
   - □ 0
   - □ 1
   - □ 2 to 3
   - □ 4 to 7
   - □ 8 or more

4. Sex without love is OK.
   - □ Strongly disagree
   - □ 2
   - □ 3
   - □ 4
   - □ 5
   Strongly agree

5. I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying "casual" sex with different partners.
   - □ Strongly disagree
   - □ 2
   - □ 3
   - □ 4
   - □ 5
   Strongly agree

6. I do *not* want to have sex with a person until I am sure that we will have a long-term, serious relationship.
   - □ Strongly disagree
   - □ 2
   - □ 3
   - □ 4
   - □ 5
   Strongly agree
7. How often do you have fantasies about having sex with someone you are not in a committed romantic relationship with?

1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5 □
Never Very seldom About once a month About once a week Nearly every day

8. How often do you experience sexual arousal when you are in contact with someone you are not in a committed romantic relationship with?

1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5 □
Never Very seldom About once a month About once a week Nearly every day

9. In everyday life, how often do you have spontaneous fantasies about having sex with someone you have just met?

1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5 □
Never Very seldom About once a month About once a week Nearly every day
Appendix 3: Informed Consent & Debriefing Form

Informed Consent

This research is being conducted by Ashley Adams and Whitley Holt, who are students in the Psychology Department of Hanover College. The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to examine individuals’ perceptions of people involved in casual sex. You will be asked to complete an online survey. After you have completed the questions, you will be given a demographic questionnaire. Finally, when all questions are answered, you will be debriefed. The entire study will not take more than 20 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life.

All information from the study will remain anonymous; your name will not be associated with your responses. If you have any questions about what you will be doing in the study or about the study itself, please contact Ashley Adams at adamsa12@hanover.edu, Whitley Holt at garrettw12@hanover.edu, or our research advisor, Dr. Ellen Altermatt at altermattel@hanover.edu. For questions about your rights as a participant in this research you may contact the chair of Hanover College's Institutional Review Board, Dr. Bill Altermatt, at altermattw@hanover.edu.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusing to participate or ceasing to participate at any time will involve no penalty. Incomplete participation will not result in credit for participating, but you may complete an alternative assignment of equal time commitment in order to receive credit. You may print this page if you would like a copy of this informed consent form.

__________________________  __________________
Signature                                         Date

Debriefing

The study in which you just participated in was designed to measure the effects of gender and personal sexual behavior on one's perceptions of casual sex. Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants until the semester is over. If people know what we are testing before the study begins, they may respond differently, jeopardizing our results.

If you have any questions please contact Ashley Adams at adamsa12@hanover.edu, Whitley Holt at garrettw12@hanover.edu, or our research advisor, Dr. Ellen Altermatt at altermattel@hanover.edu. For questions about your rights
as a participant in this research you may contact the chair of Hanover College's Institutional Review Board, Dr. Bill Altermatt, at altermattw@hanover.edu.
Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* The difference of how positively the participant perceived the gender of the initiator.

*Figure 2.* The difference between the gender of the participants in positively perceiving the initiator.

*Figure 3.* The difference of the participants’ Sociosexual Orientation on the positive perception of the initiator.
Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 3