

**Adolescent Sexual Norms and College Sexual Experiences:  
Do High School Norms Influence College Behavior?**

Laurie James-Hawkins, PhD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Essex, Department of Sociology, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, United Kingdom, [laurie.hawkins@essex.ac.uk](mailto:laurie.hawkins@essex.ac.uk), (+44)1206 874885

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research on adolescent and young adult sexuality typically does not examine how social norms and other messages learned in adolescence may impact sexual behavior in emerging adulthood. This research uses a life course framework to examine how social norms about sexuality in high school influence subsequent sexual behavior within university cultures promoting casual sex. Forty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate women on a large public Western United States university campus. Women were asked about family, peer, school, and community norms about sexuality in adolescence, and their sexual and romantic relationships in college. Five groups of women emerged from the data: the Religious, the Relationship Seekers, the High School Partiers, the Late Bloomers, and the Career Women. Women within each group had similar normative backgrounds and also utilized similar strategies to integrate into cultures of casual sex on their University campus. It is concluded that social norms from adolescence have striking implications for sexual behavior in the college setting, and that research on sexuality must adopt a life course perspective that acknowledges women's previous normative environments in order to understand women's sexual behavior in college.

**Keywords:** adolescent sexuality, hookup culture, life course, social norms, gender, sexuality

In January of 2017, the *Seattle Times* ran an article titled “How Hookup Culture Makes College Students Afraid to Feel” (Brodeur, 2017), claiming that cultures of casual sex negatively impact the psychology of today’s university undergraduates. Books published by sociologists and journalists make similar claims, suggesting that today’s youth have moved into a new realm of pressure to engage in uninhibited and frequent casual sex with unmistakably gendered consequences (Bogle, 2008; Stepp, 2007; Wade, 2017). These scholars argue that cultures of casual sex are mentally and physically damaging to both young men and women - but especially to young women (Stepp, 2007), although recent work has argued that casual sex can be positive for both men and women (Snapp, Ryu, and Stepp, 2015). Despite the explosion of research on hookup cultures and casual sex among college students, scholars are just beginning to examine the degree to which young adults’ earlier sexual experiences and adolescent normative environments may impact their college sexual strategies and behavior (see Allison, 2016; Lyons, Manning, Longmore and Giordano, 2015).

Current research tends to focus on sexual behavior either in high school (Santelli, Carter, Orr, & Dittus, 2009; Santelli, Morrow, Anderson, & Lindberg, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008) or in college (Bogle, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Wade, 2017), although some literature is beginning to look specifically at the transition between the two life course stages (Crouter & Booth, 2014; Haydon, Herring, Prinstein, & Halpern, 2012; Sennott & Mollborn, 2011). The life course perspective suggests that exposures at one stage of life will have an impact on later stages of life (Elder, 1994), suggesting several avenues for exploration regarding transitions in social norms and sexual behavior during the transition to adulthood. For example, the social messages youth receive from those whose lives are linked to theirs (Elder, 1994), such as parents and peers, regarding the appropriateness of sexual activity, are likely to have a lasting impact on how they view themselves as sexual beings (Carpenter, 2010) both in high school and later in college. Consequently, the behavior of young people as they move from the high regulation of their natal home to the relatively unregulated environment such as a college dormitory is likely to be heavily influenced by those early messages. Youth also are influenced by their cumulative sexual experiences, initiation of which for most in mid to late high school (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012; Carpenter, 2010). In addition, recent changes in normative expectations regarding sexual behavior in college (Bogle, 2008) may also influence what

young people perceive to be “correct” behavior in their freshmen year. Finally, cultural messages such as religious prohibition of sex or contraceptive use (Regnerus, 2007) which often contribute to cultural and social norms, may also help to shape young women’s sexual strategies in college.

This research uses 45 semi-structured interviews with college women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four on the campus of a large public western United States university to investigate how social and cultural norms about sexuality learned in adolescence, combined with adolescent sexual experiences, may influence how young women navigate hookup cultures on college campuses during the transition to adulthood. I identify five groups of women who had similar sexual experiences and normative environments in adolescence, and who also behaved in similar ways in college in terms of their sexual behavior. I use a life course perspective to examine how social norms about sexuality learned in adolescence combined with young women’s own sexual experiences shape the sexual strategies they use as they enter university campus settings with normative cultures of casual sex. I argue that we cannot understand college sexual behavior without understanding adolescent experiences and the accompanying norms about sexuality that precede entry into the university environment. While different specific normative environments about sexuality may exist on different college campuses, thus potentially generating somewhat different groupings of women, I argue that in all cases, women with similar and distinct backgrounds will make use of the combined social norms about sexuality and their own sexual experiences from adolescence to formulate guiding principles regarding their views of and participation in hookup cultures in new normative environments on college campus.

## **Background**

### **The Life Course Perspective**

The life course perspective (LCP) applies a longitudinal lens to everyday life events examining the social norms that guide when and how individuals experience life events and transitions. The relationship between individuals’ lived experiences and the social structure that surrounds them suggest that exposures in one stage of life will impact subsequent stages of life (Elder, 1994; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). LCP proposes that there are specific and culturally agreed-upon timings for life events, and that transitions between these events will impact later life experiences (Carpenter, 2010). LCP also suggests that historical

time, place, and social group membership influence what is considered to be normal in terms of life course transitions; thus, what is considered to be on-time or off-time may vary depending on the historical time period or generation in which one grew up (Elder et al., 2003). The order in which major life events should occur also may vary depending on historical context, and social norms about ordering of life events also can vary depending on agreed upon norms within the broader culture at any given time, and may vary within a specific community or social network (Elder et al., 2003).

Social norms are defined as group-level expectations for appropriate behavior (Settersten, 2003), such as the expectations of a romantic partner, parents and friends, or one's school or community. Norms are typically evaluations of behavior and are often structured around differential power (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010). In regards to sexual behavior norms are often structured around gendered power (Wade, 2017). While norms are generally considered to involve external sanctions (Mollborn, 2009; Rimal & Real, 2003), some debate exists as to whether something can be called a norm if no external sanctions result from its violation. Some scholars argue that external sanctions are a necessary condition (Bendor & Swistak, 2001; Rimal & Real, 2003), while others posit that individuals can internalize norms and provide themselves with internal sanctions even in situations where they do not fear external sanctions (Horne, 2003; Liefbroer & Billari, 2010).

#### *Life Course Perspectives on Adolescent Sexuality and the Transition to Adulthood*

Cultural norms dictate specific ordering and timing of life events (Marini, 1984a, 1984b) such as when it is appropriate to begin sexual activity (Schalet, 2011), or to have children (Wu & Wolfe, 2001). Norms are generally associated with specific points in time (Hechter & Opp, 2001), yet people move from one normative environment to another throughout their lives, and carry past norms with them as they struggle to adapt to new sets of norms in new social settings. Thus, whether life events are normatively considered "on-time" or "off-time" is important, as experiencing off-time events, such as early engagement in sexual behavior or early childbearing, may vary from one normative context to the next (James-Hawkins & Sennott, 2014), especially as adolescents transition to adulthood (Mollborn, 2017). Thus, what is considered normal timing in regards to initiation of and engagement in sexual behavior or childbearing may vary

depending on one's community, family, or broader social networks (Elder et al., 2003). For example, a young woman moving from a community in which teenage pregnancy is frequent and visible may perceive that pregnancy in one's teens or early 20s is acceptable and appropriate (James-Hawkins & Sennott, 2014). However, if that same young woman moves to a setting such as a university campus, she will likely find that pregnancy is not visible - even if it does occur - and that childbearing during college is considered to be "off-time" (Arnett, 2007; Brown, 2007; Panis, Lillard, & Upchurch, 1995), exposing the young woman to an entirely new set of expectations about the appropriate timing of life events. While this young woman may ostensibly appear to adapt to the new norms discouraging childbearing, it is possible that she will choose less effective contraceptive methods due to her exposure to the norms in her previous environment which endorsed young childbearing. Thus, the strategies a young woman develops to adapt to new norms about sexuality and reproduction while in college are likely to be heavily dependent on the norms and experiences she brings with her when she moves from the natal home to the university setting.

LCP also suggests that lives are lived interdependently with others, and that social influences and norms are shared through relationships among one's social networks (Elder et al., 2003). This is especially evident when examining messages about sexuality between adolescents and their parents. Parents express both explicit and implicit messages about sexuality to their teenage children (Mollborn, 2017). While norms about sexuality can vary by community, school, and even within peer groups within a single school, parents continue to have a large influence in the regulation of adolescent sexuality (Browning, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). Yet there are often wide variations in how parents think about and communicate messages about sexuality to their children, depending on the age and gender of the child, or even the specific child with whom they are communicating (Mollborn, 2017; Sennott & Mollborn, 2011). As a result, while some adolescents experience parental norms demanding abstinence from sexual activity, often on religious grounds (Regnerus, 2007), other adolescents receive mixed messages in which sexual activity is condemned while contraceptive use is promoted if sexual activity does occur (Mollborn, 2017). Still others receive messages which are supportive of safe, consensual sexual activity in adolescence, although this is less frequently the case in the United States than in Western European countries (Schalet, 2011).

The life course of an individual is also influenced by the historical time and place in which they live (Elder, 1994). Recent research on sexuality in emerging adulthood has focused on cultures of casual sex on university campuses suggesting that casual sex has increased in recent decades (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000), and that it has become normalized in university settings (Bogle, 2008; Paul et al., 2000). Thus, normative ideas about the appropriateness of casual sex on college campuses today may differ from what was considered appropriate for previous generations (Carpenter, 2010). Consequently, while parents may discourage casual sex or provide religiously based messages encouraging young people to “wait until marriage” before engaging in sexual activity, these messages may have little meaning for emerging adults entering collegiate environments where casual sex is perceived as normative and often actively endorsed by other students. In fact, the idea that casual sex is normal on college campuses, whether it actually is or not, may encourage young men and women to engage in riskier sexual behavior in an attempt to “fit in” to their new normative environment (Paul et al., 2000), although it should be noted that for some women casual sex is normative in high school as well (Sennott & Mollborn, 2011).

### **Collegiate Sexuality and Norms of Casual Sex**

“Hookup” is a deliberately vague term that allows those using it to admit to sexual behavior without specifying exactly what behavior was engaged in. Scholars have found that the term hookup can refer to everything from kissing to penetrative sexual intercourse (Olmstead et al., 2018). Many recent studies examine the rates of hookup behavior on college campuses (Bogle, 2008; Olmstead, Conrad, & Anders, 2018). Over 70% of university undergraduate students report having participated in casual sexual behavior of *any* kind (Flannery & Ellingson, 2003; Paul et al., 2000), and just under 70% say they have engaged specifically in oral or vaginal sex (Reid, Webber, & Elliott, 2015). Other scholars have found high levels of engagement in risky sexual behavior more generally during college, such as sex without condoms (Flannery & Ellingson, 2003; Scholly, Katz, Gascoigne, & Holck, 2005), sex with multiple partners (Scholly et al., 2005), and sex while under the influence of alcohol (Flannery & Ellingson, 2003; Randolph, Torres, Gore-Felton, Lloyd, & McGarvey, 2009). While some adolescents do experience hookups prior to college (Manning, Longmore, Copp, & Giordano, 2014; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005; Sennott & Mollborn, 2011), variation

from school to school, and between communities can be extensive (Olmstead et al., 2018; Warner, 2013). In contrast, the existence of hookup cultures on college campuses is usually considered to be ubiquitous (Olmstead et al., 2018; Olmstead, Roberson, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013; Reid et al., 2015).

Gender norms also have been shown to have an impact on sexual activity including participation in romantic relationships and casual sexual behavior (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005). Hookup cultures have been found to be more beneficial for men (England & Thomas, 2006; Wade, 2017), and scholars have argued that women sometimes stay in relationships they don't want to be in because they believe that it will be difficult to find a new relationship in a setting in which casual sex is perceived as easily available (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). However, recent scholarship has argued that hookups are not always bad for women (Farvid and Braun, 2017; Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2015). Some researchers argue that both men and women participate in hookups with the intention of forming romantic relationships and that they see hooking up as the main pathway to relationship formation (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; J. Reid, Elliott, & Webber, 2011). However, others feel that women put more emphasis on the possibility of a relationship when they engage in a hookup than do men (England & Thomas, 2006; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Finally, some argue that hooking up is not a good path to relationship formation for either men *or* women (Brimeyer & Smith, 2012). Researchers also have found that the majority of young men and women do participate in romantic relationships in college even when there is a norm of hooking up on the college campus (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Wade, 2017).

Religion is considered as a primary way in which society regulates sexual behavior (Rigo, Uzarevic, & Saroglou, 2016). Because religious thought is heavily entwined with social and cultural norms (Davidson, Moore, & Ullstrup, 2004) it has been hypothesized that religion has an influence on whether university students chose to engage in hookups (Davidson et al., 2004). Religiosity has been associated with lower levels of sexual behavior, especially engagement in casual sexual encounters among college students (Davidson, Moore, Earle, & Davis, 2008; Davidson et al., 2004; Meier, 2003), and past researchers have found a connection between sexual behavior and church attendance (Burdette & Hill, 2009; Meier, 2003). In addition, Sexual contact before marriage is specifically prohibited by many western religions (Brimeyer & Smith, 2012;



Davidson et al., 2004), although it has been found that plans for marriage to one's romantic and sexual partner can be used to justify engaging in premarital sex (Burdette, Ellison, Hill, & Glenn, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

Life course views of how adolescents deal with changing normative environments are important because in terms of sexuality, U.S. college environments are often (but not always) quite different from environments experienced in high school. Despite this, how high school norms and sexual experiences may influence later sexual strategies is under researched. Dorms on college campuses typically provide little supervision (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013), whereas in high school, surveillance is high, and hiding sexual behavior from one's parents is often of paramount importance (Davidson et al., 2008). Although some research has been done on conflicting norms about sexuality in the transition to college (Sennott & Mollborn, 2011), this research did not specifically address how past social norms and experiences may be related to how one adapts to new social norms, such as hookup cultures on college campuses. Despite the call for research on sexuality using the LCP (Carpenter, 2010), and the focus of LCP on culturally shared norms, social norms researchers typically do not look at how norms from one stage of the life course may influence behavior in later stages, nor do they explicitly consider social norms as cumulative throughout the life course (for exceptions see Allison, 2016; Lyons, Manning, Longmore and Giordano, 2015). Thus, this study addresses three main questions:

1. How do the social norms and messages from young women's social networks in adolescence influence the strategies they adapt regarding engagement in romantic or casual sexual activity as they transition to college? (Interdependent lives)
2. How do changes about the appropriate timing of life events such as entering into sexual relationships or childbearing influence young women's engagement in sexual behavior in college and their use of pregnancy prevention methods? (Timing of life events)
3. How do perceptions that casual sex on today's college campuses is normative influence young women's sexual behavior? (Time and place)

### **METHODS**

## **Study Design and Recruitment**

Semi-structured in-person interviews were conducted between March and November of 2013. Forty-four women were recruited from the undergraduate population of one public western state university ranked in the top 100 universities in the United States. One additional woman at a nearby community college heard about the study and was also included for a total of 45 interviews. Participants were recruited on an availability basis via flyers posted on campuses as well as through announcements and flyers distributed in various classes during the spring and autumn semesters of 2013. Announcements were also placed in an electronic student bulletin. Interested women voluntarily contacted the researcher and were administered a short set of screening questions. To be included in the sample women had to be: between the ages of 18-24, currently sexually active, not currently pregnant, not medically or voluntarily sterile (i.e. at risk of pregnancy), and had to have reported that they had taken a contraceptive risk at least once when pregnancy was not desired. Contraceptive risk was defined as sex without a condom when either no form of female contraceptive was being used, a female form of contraception such as the birth control pill was being used inconsistently, or when withdrawal was used as the only form of pregnancy prevention. Contraceptive and pregnancy risk-taking was a recruitment limitation as the study was focused on understanding reasons women had sex without contraceptives when they did not desire pregnancy. No women were excluded on the basis of being medically or voluntarily sterile. The research was approved by the IRB at the university at which the study was conducted.

## **Data Collection**

Interviews took place in a private room on the university campus from which all but one of the participants were recruited. Each participant was compensated \$30.00 for their time, and the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Ten initial interviews were conducted and used to hone the interview guide, followed by an additional 35 interviews using the revised guide. When participants arrived, informed consent was obtained, and they were asked to fill out a short demographic survey including questions about their socioeconomic background, sexual activity frequency, and recent contraceptive use (see Table 1). The

interviewer was a white woman in her early-40s. Each interview was audio recorded and professionally transcribed by a third party. Pseudonyms were used and details were changed maintain confidentiality.

During the interview participants first provided their sexual and relationship history in high school, including romantic relationships and any casual sexual encounters in which they had engaged. Participants then described the views of their parents regarding sex, contraceptive use, and abortion, including any influence of religion on their parent's views, their upbringing, or their own views. Similar information was also requested about the participant's high school peers. Following the high school sexual history, the same questions were asked regarding participants experiences while attending university. Specific instances of contraceptive and pregnancy risk-taking were interrogated in detail including reasons why risks were taken and how participant's and their broader social networks would have reacted should an unintended pregnancy have occurred. Participants then were asked questions about power and sexuality including the influence of their current and past partners over their participation in sexual activity and their past contraceptive use. Finally, participants responded to questions regarding their perceptions of broader cultural norms governing sexual and reproductive behavior within the United States.

### **Participants**

Women interviewed were largely from suburban (N=26) and urban (N=14) areas. Most reported that they were upper middle class (N=18) or middle class (N=13), with some categorizing themselves as lower middle class (N=6) or working class (N=4). Four participants categorized themselves as upper class. Most reported their relationship status as single (N=28), followed by being in an exclusive relationship (N=15), and two were living with a romantic partner. The majority of women were 18 and 19 (N=23), followed by 20 and 21 (N=17), and a few were 22 to 24 years old (N=5; see Table 1).

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis was done by one analyst, a white woman in her early 40s, using a qualitative descriptive design (Merriam, 2014), which combines inductive and deductive thematic analysis methods (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008). The initial questionnaire was focused on determining how adolescent and college sexual experiences and choices may be connected, thus, analysis first focused on this broad question and

overall experiences in high school were compared to those in college for each participant. An initial coding scheme was generated based on the content of the questionnaire with codes such as “high school sexual experiences,” “college sexual experiences,” “high school peer sexual behavior,” “participation/experiences with casual sex” and “religious background.” Interviews were then read several times each with additional codes added as they arose from the data. Coding was done by hand using printed copies of the transcripts. When initial coding was complete, codes were examined across transcripts and within each woman’s own narrative. Examples of codes arising from the data include “attitudes about abortion,” “use of Plan B,” and “slut shaming.” Line by line and thematic strategies were used (Charmaz, 2014).

Constant comparison was used to identify how women’s narratives were similar or different to one another in their descriptions of both their high school and college sexual experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Through this process, it became evident to the analyst that there were distinct groups of women who reported similar experiences in high school and also similar sexual behavior in the university setting. Based on this, all transcripts were reread and categorized based on women’s similar descriptions of both their behavior and the normative contexts present in both adolescence and in college. Five typologies were identified which categorized all but one of the forty-five women interviewed: (a) childhood and adolescent experiences of religion and limited monogamous sexual behavior in college (Religious; 10 women, 22%), (b) traditional gender norms in adolescence and the later use of casual sex as a potential pathway to a romantic relationship (Relationship Seekers; 8 women, 18%), (c) engagement in casual sex in high school and later eschewing of casual sex in college (High School Partiers; 9 women, 20%), (d) non-participation in sex in high school followed by full engagement in casual sex in college (Late Bloomers; 5 women, 11%), and (e) women from liberal backgrounds in which sexuality was supported as natural in high school followed by prioritization of education and career in college, with a lack of interest in romantic relationships and full participation in casual sex culture (Career Women; 12 women, 27%). One woman remained uncategorized (2%). Women’s overall narratives were then examined to see if stories told by women assigned to the same group resonated with each other and that the group made sense as a whole.

## **RESULTS**

Women interviewed described different strategies for dealing with the transition from adolescent sexual experiences and norms to college campus norms supporting a hookup culture of casual sex. All women interviewed felt casual sex was the predominant normative culture on their campus and that at least some experimentation with casual sex was required in order to have the “college experience.” High school sexual experiences were described in terms of being young and making mistakes, while women talked about their experiences in college as being different from - and better informed - than their past high school behavior. Yet, while women felt that they had learned from their past experiences, they simultaneously asserted that their past experiences had *not* influenced their current strategies for dealing with sexuality in college hookup culture. Despite individual women’s lack of recognition of the influence of past norms on present sexual behavior, comparisons across women suggested that women who experienced similar sexual experiences and normative environments in high school also adopted similar strategies for dealing with norms of casual sex on their college campuses, suggesting that past norms were in fact influential.

In line with previous research on hookup cultures (Bogle, 2008; Wade, 2017), all of the young women interviewed indicated that alcohol consumption was a primary component of their willingness to engage in sexual activity in both romantic and casual sexual relationships, and that it facilitated contraceptive risk-taking. However, because alcohol consumption was virtually universal in women’s stories about their sexual encounters and risk-taking behavior it did not distinguish between groups. Instead, within both romantic and casual sexual relationships women’s approval of and engagement in hookup culture appeared to stem from the norms about sex and contraceptive use they experienced in adolescence. Each of the five groups (the Religious, the Relationship Seekers, the High School Partiers, the Late Bloomers, and the Career Women) reported somewhat different norms about sexuality in high school, as well as different and specific strategies used to deal with the new normative environment they experienced upon entry to college (see Table 2).

**The Religious: “We were raised Catholic.”**

*Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Social Norms*

All of the women in the Religious group were brought up with religion including attending church. Most were Christian or Catholic although other denominations were reported. Despite their religious upbringing, almost none of the women described themselves as currently religious in college. Although they denied that there was a strong influence of religion on their sexual behavior when directly asked, they described their sexual behavior in ways that were consistent with religious conservatism. The Religious women did not participate in casual sex and had generally had only one relationship spanning high school and college, and which was both romantic and sexual. These women often referenced religion when discussing their orientation toward sexual and romantic relationships – which for this group were the same thing. Victoria described her religious upbringing and how it influenced her belief system when it came to sex in high school:

My background, or my core belief, I'm more or less Episcopalian, and for religious beliefs I just wanted to wait until I was in love with someone and ... knew that the person was going to be there unconditionally for me until I gave myself to them sexually...So I definitely waited until I was in a serious relationship.

Interestingly, although Victoria felt that she needed to be in a serious relationship to justify sexual activity she did not express the belief that she needed to wait until marriage. Abby on the other hand, explained how her parents explicitly advised her to wait until marriage: “My parents, they really said, ‘Wait until you’re married, wait until you’re married.’” Abby’s very religious parents used an explicit religious doctrine in talking to their daughter about sexuality to encourage her to wait until marriage before having sex. Abby described lying to her mother about her sexual activity during high school (and later during college as well), even though it caused her some distress to do so: “My mom has asked me [if I’ve had sex] and I have lied to her. Which is really, really hard to admit, but that's the truth.” All women in this group hid their sexual activity from their families, which is not surprising given the explicit “wait until marriage” messages most of them reported receiving. However, women in the Religious group were not sexually abstinent. Instead, women justified their sexual activity as appropriate as long as it occurred within in a long-term relationship and with a man they expected to marry. These restrictions on what they considered appropriate sex allowed these women to avoid

being labeled as “damaged goods” and to feel as if they had retained their purity and innocence. In this way, these women were able to justify their pre-marital sexual activity to themselves.

Part of the process of justifying pre-marital sex was viewing it as a way to create a deeply emotional connection with their romantic partners. There was also a strong emphasis on the purity of their *sexual experiences*, rather than the purity of being chaste or virginal. As a result, these women spoke with pride about being virgins when they first had sex with their boyfriends. Alyssa stressed that her current boyfriend that she began dating in high school, was “the only sexual relationship I’ve ever had.” For her this exclusivity held deep meaning in that it allowed her to justify her sexual activity as part of a deep and long-lasting emotional commitment. Victoria also emphasized the wholesomeness of her first sexual experience: “It was ... a first-time experience, like he was my first sexual experience ever and [it] felt very clean and pure.” For Alyssa and Victoria, and the other women in this group, their sexual activity was justifiable and in keeping with the religious messages they received from their communities, schools, and parents, because of the deep emotional commitment they felt they had with their boyfriends. Thus, they allowed themselves to experiment sexually, while feeling that they were not compromising their (often unrecognized) religious values.

Although the Religious women hid their sexual activity from their parents, they explicitly sought approval and permission from their friends or same gender siblings, most of whom were not having sex themselves. Samantha discussed asking her friends in high school if she could have sex with her boyfriend and still avoid the label of “slut”:

[Before I had sex] I consulted [my friends] because I was like, ‘Is this a bad choice? Is this a slutty sort of thing?’ And they were really encouraging of it because they really liked my boyfriend and we’d been going out and stuff.

Samantha and her high school friends, who shared her religious values, found her sexual activity to be permissible because she had been going out with her boyfriend for some time and was explicitly engaged in a romantic relationship which she anticipated would lead to marriage. This justification of women’s own sexual activity became even more important to them as they described entering college and experiencing a normative environment of casual sex in which they did not feel they belonged.

*College Sexual Strategies*

When they arrived at college, the Religious women had difficulty with hookup culture and strongly disapproved of it. At the same time, the casual sexual activity going on around them provided them with the perfect opportunity to delineate how their own sexual activity differed from the casual sex culture in which others were participating - and was therefore better. They did this largely by judging other women for having sex outside of a romantic relationship, labeling them as “sluts” – the same label they had sought to avoid in high school in relation to their own sexual behavior. The women’s religious backgrounds created tension for them as they started college, and seeing themselves as different from the women around them was an important tool which they used to resolve their own internal conflicts and to figure out where they fit – or did not fit – in a normative environment of casual sex.

In their narratives, the distancing of themselves from those who engaged in casual sex often began with statements delineating their own focus on sex within committed relationships, subtly indicating that they disapproved of women who did not focus on meaningful emotional and romantic relationships as a prerequisite for sex. Abby, who was 19 at the time of the interview and was one of the few women who identified herself as currently religious, had been with her first and only boyfriend since her junior year of high school. She came from an explicitly religious background and referred frequently to what the Bible said throughout her interview. Although Abby’s chosen peer group in high school shared her religious views, the environment within her high school overall was not religious, and she was called “Abstinent Abby” by other teens because of her stance against pre-marital sex. Abby’s sister married at eighteen and did not have sex until her wedding night, which Abby agreed was the “correct” way to do things. Despite this, Abby decided to have sex with her longtime boyfriend, David, just after they graduated from high school. Throughout her interview Abby worked to reconcile her decision to have sex before marriage with her conservative religious beliefs. She talked about her philosophy of sex and romantic relationships in a way that was typical of how this group of women thought about their sexuality upon entering college:

I definitely knew that, number one, I didn't want to sleep around with a lot of different guys because sex meant more to me than sex. It was not only like you are giving away a part of your body but you



are giving up a part of you. And if you are going to do it with somebody then it's going to be somebody who is meaningful to you.

For Abby, having sex was the same thing as giving a part of herself away to her partner. Because she and David had been together for over a year when they graduated from high school, Abby was certain they would eventually marry and so gave herself permission to have sex with him. She also relied on her perception of the stability of her relationship with David to subtly emphasize that their sexual activity was appropriate – even at one point saying that their friends joked that she and David were “like an old married couple.” The way in which Abby talked about her own ostensibly pure sexuality versus the casual sexuality of those around her helped her to draw symbolic boundaries between herself as pure and in love, while other women engaging in premarital sex were “sluts.” Her conviction that other women did not see sex in the way that Abby did, helped her to protect herself from self-recrimination for having sex before marriage. Referring to her relationship with David as just as good as a marriage also enabled her to avoid attaching negative connotations to what she saw as a gift she was giving to David, although it's worth noting that she never mentioned receiving a gift *from* David. Other women in this group described their view of sexuality similarly and were very careful to distance their own behavior from that of other women who do not wait for marriage – or even a “meaningful” relationship – before having sex. This was a common strategy among these young women as they carved out their own moral sexual identities and was especially important as the women entered college and experienced norms of casual sex on their campuses.

Interestingly, the tactic of othering women who did participate in casual sex and hookups was most often directed at *friends* who engaged in hookups and casual sex. Their new college friends provided these women with an obvious comparison group, and they used that comparison to justify their own behavior as they clung determinedly to the views of sexuality they held in high school. Describing how their friends' casual sexual behavior was “bad” because they engaged in casual sex with multiple partners, reinforced these women's own pride at having had sex with only one man, and only within a long-term romantic relationship. Women also claimed a higher morality than that of their friends. Sydney, a 19-year-old freshman, described her interactions with friends who chose to participate in hookups: “I have some risky friends [in college]

...They will go out and drink and sleep with people. Which is bad. Very, very bad.” By labeling casual sex as “bad,” the Religious women inherently labeled their own sexuality within a romantic relationship as “good.”

#### *Connections Between High School and College*

Women in the Religious group all came from religious backgrounds and attended church in childhood. While other women from other groups also sometimes had religious backgrounds, they generally did not experience regular church attendance. The Religious women drew on their strict religious teachings and limited their sexual experiences to one romantic partner, eschewing casual sex in high school and adhering to traditional gender norms of feminine passivity and male dominance. When they arrived at their university, where a strong culture of hookups and casual sex was present, women in the Religious group drew on their conservative backgrounds and denigrated women who participated in casual sex – including their close friends. The Religious women maintained their high school relationships and emphasized the purity of their sexual behavior as compared to other women. While most denied that they still actively practiced religion in college, they continued to adhere to traditional gender roles and to evaluate themselves and others in light of the religiously based messages they described hearing in adolescence.

#### **The Relationship Seekers: “It’s what you have to do to make them like you.”**

#### *Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Social Norms*

Women in this group came from families who endorsed traditional gender norms when it came to sexuality, but whose families were not religious. As in the Religious group, traditional gender messages were clearly communicated to their daughters, leading the Relationship Seekers to value romantic relationships very highly and to have generally negative feelings about casual sex. However, unlike the Religious women, the Relationship Seekers typically *did* engage in both casual sex and sex within romantic relationships during high school. Having experienced sex in both the casual and romantic context, eventually all of these women decided that sex with a romantic partner was better and that they wanted to be in a long-term romantic relationship. However, this did not necessarily stop them from continuing to engage in casual sex.

The Relationship Seekers grew up in a normative environment which dictated that men should have control in both romantic and sexual relationships. Lauren talked about her traditional views of gender: “I was

brought up that a guy is more in control of the majority of that aspect [sexuality]. And just, like, in general.” Messages Lauren received in adolescence emphasized romance over sex, and she viewed men as having more power in both romantic and sexual situations. These messages did not, however, stop her from engaging in the normative casual sex culture present in her high school.

Whereas the Religious women generally experienced norms in their immediate high school peer groups which dictated abstention from sexual activity, the high school environments the Relationship Seekers experienced were ones in which both casual sex and sex within a relationship were common. Although they did not *endorse* casual sexual encounters, they did *participate* in them. Hannah said that in her high school “everybody was having sex.” Like Hannah, the other women in this group reported that sexual activity of all types was frequent in their high school.

Although sexual activity was common among their peers, these women did not have sex education classes in school, nor did they report receiving information about sex from their parents. In fact, women described the messages they received from both their parents and their doctors as being negative and explicitly condemnatory both of sexual activity overall, and of specific aspects of hookup cultures like multiple partners and participation in casual sex. Ellie described her mother’s reaction when she was a teenager and began birth control pills ostensibly for heavy periods: “My mom, she kind of addressed [sex] ... She was like ‘You know now that you’re on birth control, you can’t just go around sleeping with people.’” Ellie’s mother wanted to make sure that Ellie understood that taking the pill was not permission to engage in sexual activity. Thus Ellie, like other women in this group were caught between negative messages from their parents, and the normative environment of their high school which endorsed sexual activity.

#### *College Sexual Strategies*

In college the Relationship Seekers expressed high levels of self-doubt, and many of their doubts were tied to the strong belief in traditional gender expectations and roles with which they grew up. They described their participation in casual sex as reinforcing self-doubt and contributing to their overall negative self-perception. Many women in this group explicitly said that they did not see themselves as the type of person to have casual sex – even if they were engaging *only* in casual sexual relationships. Lauren described

this well when she said “I don’t think I’m really the type to be randomly hooking up with guys. But I have.” Lauren’s statement is representative of this group of women in general. They did not identify themselves as people who were comfortable engaging in casual sex but participated in hookup culture in both high school and college anyway. Lauren’s statement, and others like it, also called attention to the negative views of casual sex these women held, the value that they placed upon sexual activity within romantic relationships, and their subscription to traditional norms about male dominance.

Given their romantic relationship orientation, subscription to traditional gender norms, and the mixed messages about sexuality they received in high school, women in this group felt a strong need to justify engaging in casual sex. In addition, they worked to bring their actions in line with their traditional gender views - which for them meant that women want romance, but men want sex. The Relationship Seekers accomplished this goal by hoping that the casual sex they engaged in would lead to the romantic relationship they really desired. One strategy they used to facilitate the development of a romantic relationship was to engage in risky sexual behavior. For example, women described having sex without a condom as a way to demonstrate their desire for a romantic relationship to their partners. Ellie described it this way: “Sex without a condom is a very intimate thing. Like you are pretty much just connecting with a person as close as you can get.” She went on to discuss a recent casual sexual relationship in which she had hoped that her willingness to have sex without a condom would earn her respect from a repeat casual sex partner and lead to a romantic relationship, which ultimately it did not.

I would’ve thought that he would’ve had a little bit more respect if he’s thinking like ‘Maybe having sex with her without a condom is going to happen’...I kind of hoped or thought or was naïve enough to think that he would think it was also a sign of respect and not do anything with other people. But I was wrong.

Like Ellie, Lauren was in a long term “friends with benefits” relationship which she desperately wanted to turn into a romantic one. She discussed being willing to “do anything” her sexual partner wanted in hopes that eventually he would see her in a romantic light: “It was like I just want him to only be with me so bad that I would just do anything.” For Lauren doing anything included having sex in public places and without

contraception. The idea that women would “do anything” to turn a casual sexual relationship into a romantic one was prevalent among women in this group. When their casual sexual relationships did not become romantic ones, they felt badly both about having casual sex and about engaging in sexual risk-taking, which they stressed as being out of character for them. Lauren perfectly described the way these women justified their behavior to themselves:

The first time I had sex with him he was a stranger to me. But in my mind, I was like, ‘well, maybe we’ll get to know each other.’ So that was kind of like my justifying what I was doing. But I still felt guilty.

Lauren used future possibilities of getting to know her casual sexual partner, or even potentially entering into a relationship with him, to explain her casual sexual behavior to herself, although that did not stop her from feeling guilt about behavior she considered fundamentally inappropriate.

The Relationship Seekers also perceived differences in status between men and women. They associated these status differences with sexual activity and specifically differentiated what made women “sluts” versus men. Marlee was inclined to pass judgment on other women – even close friends – based on the number of sexual partners they had. She described her dynamic with her college roommates this way, “If one of my roommates is sleeping around too much and my other roommate and I are talking about how slutty she has been, we will tell her to her face, ‘You are being slutty.’” For these women, identifying someone who had casual sex frequently with different partners – and therefore clearly not for the purposes of seeking out a romantic relationship – helped them to justify their own casual sexual behavior because they *were* seeking a romantic partner. With her use of the word “slut” Marlee was inadvertently acknowledging and perpetuating the negative gender stereotypes associated with female sexuality and female expression of desire with which she grew up.

#### *Connections Between High School and College*

While some of the Relationship Seekers did talk about their parents being somewhat religious in their own youth, these women did not describe religion as part of their upbringing. However, they did adhere to traditional gender norms of female subordination to men. These women participated in both casual and

limited romantic relationships in high school. In college, the Relationship Seekers reported no religious influence, and they participated in casual sexual encounters with the express purpose of seeking a romantic relationship. However, they continued to feel shame in regards to their participation in casual sex and were all unsuccessful in finding the romantic relationship they wanted.

**The High School Partiers: “I feel like I got it all out of my system in the past.”**

*Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Social Norms*

A small group of women who engaged in casual sex in high school decided that they were done with it by the time they entered college. These women generally had not discussed sex with their parents, and like the Relationship Seekers, their peers in high school were engaging in both casual sex and sex in relationships. However, unlike the Relationship Seekers, for these women - the High School Partiers - there was a strong norm of teen pregnancy in their high schools and the surrounding community. They all knew someone, frequently a close friend of theirs, who had become pregnant in high school and had a baby or had an abortion. The High School Partiers, like their friends, engaged in both casual sex and sexual risk taking while in high school.

The parents of the High School Partier’s did not discuss sex with their daughters. When asked about communication with her parents about sex, Megan said “I didn’t talk to them about it.” Jasmine talked about her perception that her mother was afraid that if sex was discussed it would make Jasmine more likely to engage in it, “[My mom] thought if she did talk to me about [sex] that she was encouraging me to have sex.” Although many of these women had some form of sex education in their high school, there was no discussion about sex at home, and their close friends were engaging in casual sex and taking repeated sexual risks - a norm which these women adhered to.

The High School Partiers saw sex, both casual and romantic, as normal within their high school environments. Stephanie said “I was kind of a party girl” in talking about her experiences in high school. She went on to describe the range of her sexual experiences before coming to college: “I had repeated hookups and I also had like one-time things.” Annika agreed with Stephanie, describing her high school as “kind of like a hookup culture because it’s like most people were drinking and it was a big group [of kids].” These

women had normative environments in their high schools which supported participation in sex, which was often, though not always, casual. In retrospect the High School Partiers felt this combination may have led them to participate in casual sex before they were ready to do so. Annika described it this way: “I let myself – when I was not even 18 years old – be in ‘friends with benefits’ [relationships]. That's kind of a lame move on my part.” Although they did not necessarily disapprove of casual sex encounters in general, they did feel that it was not appropriate for women in high school, although the norms in their high schools influenced these women to participate in casual sex encounters anyway. This regret effected the sexual strategies they used when they got to college.

### *College Sexual Strategies*

The experiences the High School Partiers had, as well as those of their friends, led them to declare that they were not interested in participating in hookup culture in college. Stephanie described coming to this conclusion in her senior year of high school, “I didn't want to like go and have sex with a bunch of people [in college] ...I was so over it. And that's why I kind of wanted a boyfriend.” Stephanie, and others in this group said that they did not intend to participate in casual sex in college, and they were all in romantic relationships at the time of their interviews. However, this decision to forgo casual sex did not necessarily mean that they were looking for an immediate romantic relationship. In fact, about half of the High School Partiers had decided to stop having sex altogether when they first arrived at their college campus. Annika describes her feelings about this, “I was like ‘I'm just going to lay off sex. I don't want to put myself through that right now.’” Jasmine agreed with Annika, saying, “I came to college and I was like, ‘okay, I don't need [to take birth control pills] anymore.’ I figured I would stay away from boys.” This was not what ended up happening for these women, who all entered into relationships either in the summer right before coming to college or within the first few days of college. Interestingly, their romantic relationships generally began with casual sex – despite their insistence that they had decided not to participate in casual sex in college.

Successfully entering relationships through casual sex was not common in other groups but was in this group. Megan talked about the progression of her relationship with her boyfriend:

We just hung out and then it was obvious that we liked each other so it started out just [having] sex on the weekends. Then we actually started hanging out, just us two. Instead of me going out and coming back and sleeping with him I would stay and want to hang out with him. So, then we just started dating.

Although it wasn't true for most of the women interviewed, for this group casual sex was a pathway to a romantic relationship and they all began romantic relationships with casual sex encounters.

#### *Connections Between High School and College*

The High School Partiers generally came from non-religious backgrounds. There was a history of teen pregnancy in their families and communities and they felt great relief at having made it to college without experiencing a pregnancy themselves. These women engaged in both romantic and casual sexual relationships in high school. In college, women in this group said that they were no longer interested in casual sex and desired a romantic relationship instead. Nevertheless, they all participated in casual sexual encounters very early on in college. However, unlike other groups, their college casual encounters all led to romantic relationships.

#### **The Late Bloomers: "I wasn't sexually active all through high school."**

##### *Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Social Norms*

The Late Bloomers did not have sex until after they graduated from high school, and some of them waited until after their freshman year in college. Unlike the Religious group, the Late Bloomers did not come from religious families and did not attend church growing up. The Late Bloomers received conflicting messages about sex from their parents. Interestingly, while their parents didn't discuss sex with them or give them any explicit positive or negative messages about engaging in sexual activity, their mothers often put these women on birth control pills while they were in high school specifically to avoid a teen pregnancy. To complicate matters, the Late Bloomers reported coming from high school environments in which there was essentially silence about sex, even among their peers.



Although most other groups of women reported active negative communication regarding sex from their parents, this group of women experienced a more equivocal parental message. Lana described her family's way of addressing sensitive issues such as sexuality this way:

My family is funny when we talk about things. We kind of insinuate a lot and imply but we don't really say the exact things. Like [my mother will] say, 'Well, you're smarter than that. You know better than getting pregnant.' Meaning, like, you know to use condoms, you know to take your birth control.

Although her family wasn't communicating active negative messages about sex, they also were not providing the information Lana said she wanted to receive from them. Emmy described her parents as putting her on birth control pills long before she began having sex because they "just wanted me to be safe," although they did not discuss what "safe" meant in this context. Thus, most of the Late Bloomers described being completely uninterested in sex while in high school, although they did engage in some non-sexual romantic relationships and often dated on a casual basis.

#### *College Sexual Strategies*

The Late Bloomers generally remained uninterested in sex when they began college and chose to surround themselves with friends who shared their lack of interest. Given the overall silence about sex in adolescence, women in this group did not know a lot about sex when they eventually did become sexually active, and their first sexual encounters were described as being driven by curiosity rather than romantic or sexual feelings. Nicole described being naïve when she went into her first sexual relationship explaining "I didn't have a lot of sex ed." This was a common experience for the Late Bloomers, who all felt somewhat at a disadvantage in terms of sexual and reproductive knowledge. Ashley also described her lack of knowledge about sex:

I remember when I first started having sex, I never had sex ed ... so I was kind of like going in blind and didn't really know anything about it...So I was kind of relying on the knowledge of my partner who had had sex before.

Ashley relied on her partner for sexual knowledge because he was sexually experienced, she had not had sex education, and she had not learned about sexuality from her parents or peers in high school, thus reducing the control she was able to exert in her initial sexual encounters.

Once the Late Bloomers did become sexually active, they experienced tension between their negative feelings about casual sex and their actual participation in casual sexual encounters. Early in her interview, Nicole explicitly said “I don't do hookups, like that's not really my thing.” However later in her interview she described participating in both one-night stands and a friends-with-benefits relationship, both of which were incongruent with her stated feelings about what constituted appropriate sexual activity.

I started a ‘friends with benefits’ relationship which...doesn't align with my morals at all. That's not the person I am. It's not what I do. And we were together for about two months and had sex every week ... but it was like I felt empty afterwards.

Ashley and Nicole, like other women in this group, participated in casual sex even though they did not feel comfortable with it, and did not have the knowledge necessary to exert any control in their sexual encounters.

Because these women engaged in casual sex but fundamentally did not feel it was appropriate behavior, like the Relationship Seekers, they were motivated to set limits about what was appropriate casual sex and what was not. However, instead of justifying their behavior by claiming to be seeking a romantic relationship, they did so by comparing their own casual sexual encounters to those of their friends and concluding that their behavior was “not as bad.” Emmy talked specifically about where her boundaries were in regards to the permissible number of sexual partners she thought it was okay to have: “I always thought it’s okay to just hookup every once in a while, but never a different guy each week like how my friends were. It was too much.” Emmy expressed this despite the fact that she had never had a romantic relationship and thus *all* of her sexual activity had taken place within the context of casual sexual relationships. While Emmy felt her own casual sexual experiences were permissible because of their relative infrequency, her friends’ behavior was not okay because it was thought to be too frequent.

Nicole was also very negative about a friend who she felt engaged in too much casual sexual activity, “[My friend] had a lot of hookups...I don't want to judge her but it wasn't very exclusive and I feel like when

she's in the moment, especially when she's like intoxicated or anything like that, she doesn't really think.”

Although both Emmy and Nicole prefaced their statements by stating that they did not want to be judgmental, they then proceeded to immediately pass judgment on their friends' sexual activity, deeming it as “too much” and therefore inappropriate in comparison to their own, more conservative level of sexual activity. They did not, however, use the slut discourse favored by other groups who engaged in judgment of the sexual activity of their friends. Instead, women in this group worried more about how peers perceived their sexual activity and spent more time judging themselves and less time judging other women, although they clearly did pass judgment on their friends' sexual activity.

#### *Connections Between High School and College*

The Late Bloomers were not brought up with religion although some reported that their parent's had been brought up with religion. This group was unique in that there was total silence about sex from everyone around them including their peers. They were not interested in sex in high school, although their mother's put them on birth control pills early on specifically to avoid a teen pregnancy. However, despite taking this action their mothers remained steadfastly silent about sex. The Late Bloomers eventually began participating in casual sex out of curiosity. When they did eventually become sexually active, they also began participating in discussions about sex with their peers, although these discussions often involved disapproval of the sexual activity of their peers as well as their own sexual activity.

#### **The Career Women: “I want non-committed sex.”**

##### *Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Social Norms*

The Career Women differed from the four other groups in that they described open communication with their parents about sexuality and a generally sex positive upbringing. This background meant that the Career Women did not have the negative views of casual sex that most other women interviewed held. Instead, they described talking with their parents when they first had sex and often asking for assistance in obtaining contraceptives for pregnancy prevention purposes – assistance which their parents were willing to provide. Most of these women began having sex within a romantic relationship while in high school, although they also engaged in casual sex when not in romantic relationships. Women in this group talked about telling

their mothers about their sexual activity either before they had sex for the first time, or more commonly, very soon after they first had sex. Erin described her mother's reaction when she discussed sex with her soon after Erin became sexually active:

I told her I think roughly six months after I had had sex with [my boyfriend] and she handled it super well. She was like, 'Okay, well if you need anything or you need to talk about anything come to me and I hope you're being safe about it.'

Communication about being "safe" in their sexual encounters was the common response from the parents of the women in this group, and their mothers also generally offered to answer any questions the women might have. Mothers of women in this group often served as a trusted adult for friends of these women, both in high school and later on in college. Madison talked about her mother being there for her college friends to talk to when they felt they couldn't go to their own parents:

I've got some friends who, still, at 19 or 20 years old can't really talk to their parents about sex, being sexually active. A lot of them will come talk to my mom because she will talk to people about [sex]. And I think it definitely makes things easier for me, being more comfortable with her.

Overall, their parent's willingness to talk to them about sex and contraception communicated the message that sex was a normal, natural part of life. Natalie talked specifically about the messages she received from her mother about sex when she was younger:

I feel like I grew up in a very open household...My mom is very spiritual and very about being comfortable in your own body, being comfortable with who you are and sharing things. My mom would always give me the sex books and talk ... about growing and puberty and all that stuff, 'That's normal and natural and everything's okay.' Like it's okay to be a sexual being. Which I know some parents make it seem more shameful. But my mom was very just like, 'It's okay to have sex... It's a beautiful thing.' Instead of a naughty thing.

This message was markedly different from the messages received by other groups of women which tended to frame sex outside of outside of long-term relationships or marriage as being shameful, or whose families did not talk about sex at all. All of the Career Women were in romantic relationships when they graduated from

high school but broke off those relationships so that they could fully participate in “the freshman experience” in college, which included engaging in casual sex.

### *College Sexual Strategies*

The Career Women did not view casual sex as shameful, and they were active and willing participants in the hookup culture at their university. They also had strong career goals and an orientation toward future career, with which they felt a romantic relationship would interfere. Haley described her feelings about romantic relationships in a way that was representative for the Career Women overall: “I’m not in a serious relationship, I’m here to learn.” Haley, and others, felt that college was for learning and planning one’s career and future – and that romantic relationships would take time and energy away from their studies. Allison said: “I want to do a lot. I want to be able to go to college and ... be on my own for a while and not have to worry about somebody else.” For the Career Women, a strong orientation toward their future careers and their own development as students precluded involvement in romantic relationships, especially early in college. But that did not mean that they were not interested in sex.

The Career Women did not feel that casual sex was something to be ashamed of. Natalie talked about it this way: “I think sex is definitely way more casual [in college]. It’s so casual. It’s kind of like, ‘I had sex with this guy this weekend,’ [and my friends say] ‘Oh cool, tell me the details. Oh cool.’” Alexa also talked about her views of casual sex as being appropriate in college: “[My friend and I] actually talked about it being a booty call. We were fine with it. We were both kind of like ‘It’s fine. We can hang out. We can smoke. We can have sex occasionally.’” For both Natalie and Alexa, as well as for other women in this group, casual sex was something that was a normal and positive experience, and so they regularly participated in casual sexual encounters. Jordan described her view of sex this way:

I guess I’m very open about sex, I like sex, I don’t think it’s taboo. I think it’s great... it’s something to be embraced. And human sexuality is interesting ... I don’t see sex as that big of a deal.

Although other groups of women had a lot of conflicted feelings about casual sex and often explicitly disapproved of it even if they engaged in it themselves, the Career Women saw sex as a normal and natural part of life and a way to retain their dual identities as students and as sexual beings while not having to put

time and energy into a relationship. Jordan expressed this by saying: “I *wanted* non-committed sex.” For many women in this group romantic relationships represented a loss of independence. Jordan went on to say this about her college friends:

I think my friends are very strong, independent girls ... And they definitely focus on being really happy with themselves ... they don't want to be dependent on guys. And I think relationships really do symbol dependency. And my friends just don't want that at all.

Overall, most of these women saw romantic relationships as negative in this stage of their lives, whereas casual sex was something that was fun and could be engaged in without compromising their focus on school and their own development.

In keeping with their view of romantic relationships as being inhibitory to their own growth and development, women in this group who were in romantic relationships in high school specifically broke them off when they left for college. Natalie described her history which was representative of this group of women: “We were all kind of broken up with our boyfriends and [we] came to college [and] it was more just kind of people casually sleeping together.” Women in this group were seeking what they called the “freshman experience” which for them included casual sex in addition to self-exploration. Jordan put it this way: “I feel like you miss out on a lot going to college in a relationship... Definitely there are many ways that a relationship can kind of ruin your freshman experience.” Jordan was concerned that having a boyfriend in college would both distract her from her studies, as well as draw her attention from participating in the activities on campus – including parties, drinking, and casual sex encounters.

#### *Connections Between High School and College*

The Career Women were not brought up with religion. They are the only group in which sex and sexuality was freely discussed as normal and healthy within their family and they were very open with their parents (usually their mothers) about their own sexual experiences. The Career Women engaged in both casual and romantic sex in high school. Most were in a romantic relationship at the end of high school which they then broke off so that they could have the “college experience” which included non-committed casual sex. In college, these women remained non-religious, openly discussed sex and their own and others sexual

behavior with their peers and did not engage in slut shaming. Contrary to most other groups, they explicitly did not want a romantic relationship in college as they felt it would interfere with their studies and career goals, and so engaged in casual sex exclusively.

## DISCUSSION

Women's sexual behavior in college was heavily influenced by the norms they experienced in adolescence. The specific strategies women undertook once in college were influenced both by new peer groups and by internalized messages received from their social networks in adolescence about when and with whom to have sex (research question one). This finding is in line with life course notions of linked lives, which suggests that the individuals with whom we share our lives have a direct impact on our own life course trajectories (Elder et al., 2003). The religious upbringing of women in the Religious group led them to disparage those who participated in casual sex and justify their own behavior as appropriate because it was in a long-term romantic relationship. Women in the Relationship Seekers group also experienced traditional gender messages in adolescence which led them to prioritize men's desires over their own in college, and engaged in casual sex as a way of obliquely demonstrating their desire for a relationship to their casual male partners. The Career Women used messages from adolescence framing sexuality as normal and natural to guide their participation in casual sex in college, using it as a way to satisfy their desire for sex without compromising their focus on their studies and future career goals.

Findings also demonstrate that perceptions about the appropriate timing of life events is important to sexual behavior (Carpenter, 2010, research question two). This was particularly evident among the High School Partiers, who were more inclined to take sexual risks in college because they were relieved that they had not followed in the steps of close family members and experienced a pregnancy in high school – and had thus “timed” their reproductive goals in alignment with broader U.S. cultural norms (James-Hawkins & Sennott, 2014). The importance of the timing of life events was also illustrated by the Career Women, who broke off romantic relationships because they felt that exploring casual sex was part of the “freshman experience” when entering college and that entering college within a romantic relationship would deprive them of what they considered to be a normal college experience. However, it should be noted that because of

the largely middle class, White nature of the sample, there was less variation in what was considered appropriate timing for sexual activity and reproduction than might have been seen in a more diverse sample.

Results also suggest that the historical time and place in which we live is important to young women's sexual behavior (research question three). In the United States today hookup culture has been identified as ubiquitous on college campuses (Bogle, 2008). Thus, even women who were not inclined to participate in casual sex, as was the case with the Religious group, felt the need to explain their non-participation in casual sex and to find ways in which to distance themselves from what they perceived to be incorrect behavior on the part of other women. Other groups of women, such as the Late Bloomers, also subscribed to the idea that casual sex was a moral issue, and experienced shame when they did participate. Some previous research on hookup cultures agrees with the assessment of most women interviewed that hookup cultures are negative for women (Bogle, 2008; Stepp, 2007). Only the Career Women held attitudes and norms more in keeping with research which asserts that casual sex cultures can serve a purpose for women by allowing them to spend time on their studies and planning their future, rather than spending their time on maintaining romantic relationships (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014), which is indeed the narrative that the Career Women presented. Indeed, recent scholarship has found that casual sex can be positive for young women as well as young men (Farvid and Braun, 2017; Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2015).

Many of the groups identified engaged in slut shaming and used the slut discourse to distance their own behavior from other women who they labeled as "worse" than they were in terms of their sexual behavior, supporting previous findings that slut discourses are useful in women's maintenance of their own superiority (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014). Both the Religious and the Late Bloomers felt that their parents disapproved of adolescent participation in sexual activity, and both groups disapproved of casual sex and did not engage in it in high school. However, these two groups diverged in college, with the Religious participating in sex within romantic relationships while in high school which extended over into college, and the Late Bloomers choosing not to participate in sex in high school at all. The Late Bloomers eventually became full participants in the casual sex culture in college out of curiosity and the feeling that it



was “time” to lose their virginity. Thus, the Religious group maintained their status as “good women” through denigrating women who did participate in hookups, whereas The Late Bloomer group were upset with themselves for participating in casual sex once they became sexually active. Both the Relationship Seekers and the High School Partiers experienced high school environments where casual sex was normalized. Although both groups participated in casual sex in high school, the High School Partiers decided that they were done with casual sex and did not intend to participate in hookup culture in college. Despite this, for the most part they did have casual sex when they first entered college, but it rapidly led to a romantic relationship. In contrast, the Relationship Seekers participated in casual sexual encounters in college with the hope that it would lead to a relationship but did not find one – or at least they had not at the time they were interviewed. It is interesting that one group was successful at finding romantic relationships through casual sex and the other was not. It may be that the High School Partiers were less willing to engage in casual sex than the Relationship Seekers, unless they believed there was a sincere interest in a romantic relationship on the part of the man, while the Relationship Seekers were willing to engage in casual sex if *they* were interested in a romantic relationship, even if they did not necessarily believe that interest to be reciprocated. This would be an interesting avenue for future research. Finally, the Career Women were fine with sex – whether casual or within a romantic relationship – but felt that romantic relationships would be detrimental to their focus on their studies and future careers.

### **The Life Course Influence of Social Norms**

Although some groups of women sought out similar peers once in college in keeping with the findings of Schneider & Stevenson (2000), other groups of women engaged with peer groups in which many of their friends were active participants in casual sex even if they themselves were not. Women appeared to use this as a strategy to delineate their own sexual behavior as appropriate in comparison to their friends’ casual sexual activity (Armstrong et al., 2014). Also, the young women interviewed here recognized the different norms they dealt with in high school but generally did not recognize the influence of those previous norms on their strategies for adapting to new sexual norms in college. Whereas previous research has found that the actions of close friends had the biggest influence on teen sexual behavior in the transition to sex

(Sennott & Mollborn, 2011) I find that normative influences on later behavior stem from a combination of broader high school level norms, peer norms, and parent communication about sex in adolescence. It appears that the manner in which adolescent norms conflict and interact with each other can lead to the use of specific strategies for the navigation of new casual sex norms in college. However, this research does echo the conclusions of Sennott and Mollborn (2011) who found that it is important to consider how multiple and often competing norms may work together to influence individual sexual behavior.

While specific groups of women were identified here, I argue that these groups are dependent on the specific context of the college environment into which they enter. Thus, while these groups represent the women interviewed on the specific college campus where the research took place, a large public university that is known as a top “party” school in the U.S., it may well be that different groups would emerge in a different context on a different college campus such as a school in the southern U.S. or a small private school in the northeast of the U.S. This possibility does not diminish the overarching point that the experiences one has in adolescence regarding sexuality directly lead to the formation of specific strategies for participation – or lack thereof – in cultures of casual sex on U.S. college campuses, nor should it temper the conclusion that norms one experiences in one life stage need to be included in discussion of behavior in subsequent life stages within potentially new normative environments.

Other researchers also have examined reasons for emerging adults’ participation in hookup culture (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Uecker et al., 2015; Wade, 2017). Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) interrogate how women engage in party culture – including casual sex – on college campuses, finding strong divisions along class lines. The interviews described here show that even within a fairly homogenous group of women with very similar social locations, differences in past norms about sexuality can strongly influence how - and if - they participate in hookup culture, suggesting that even within social class there are complex dynamics that push women to opt-in or opt-out of hookup culture. There were inherent divides between women who were exposed to different social norms about sexuality in adolescence and experienced differing levels of information and openness about sex, even within this sample of middle class, largely White women. Other researchers have used quantitative data and identified self-esteem as a part of decisions to engage in casual sex

(Uecker et al., 2015), which is in line with my findings regarding women in the Relationship Seekers group who seemed to have lower self-esteem than women in most other groups. However, my findings expand on possible reasons for the low self-esteem and self-doubt which may lead women to engage in casual sexual encounters, even when they do not endorse casual sex overall.

Interestingly, almost none of the women interviewed expressed much concern about the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Most felt that because their casual hookups were usually with male friends, or friends of friends, that they did not have to worry about STIs. This finding is consistent with the concept of unique invulnerability to risk – or the idea that negative events “won’t happen to me” – which has been found to peak in emerging adulthood (Johnson, McCaul, & Klein, 2002; Millstein & Halpern-Felsher, 2002; Thompson, Anderson, Freedman, & Swan, 1996). Women’s definitions of risk taking were almost entirely based on the perceived risk of pregnancy. When asked directly during the interview if they worried more about pregnancy or STIs almost all women responded that they were more worried about pregnancy. Thus, women we’re usually willing to have sex without a condom, even in a casual sexual encounter, because they simply didn’t believe that they were really at risk for contracting an STI. This lack of concern about STIs may also be due to low levels of knowledge which has been shown in previous research among college students (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Wineland, 2018), the idea that they can visually identify the presence of an STI (Civic, 2000; Flood, 2003), or the perception that they can “trust” their partner to tell them if an STI is present (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Thompson et al., 1996).

Alcohol was discussed by all women and was at the root of many of their descriptions of risk-taking behavior, whether within a romantic relationship or in a casual sexual encounter. Because the use and effects of alcohol on women’s sexual behavior were so pervasive in the sample, it was not possible to distinguish groups based on use of alcohol. Therefore, while alcohol was an integral part of many women’s stories, it is not discussed in detail here. The finding that alcohol use is common and that it facilitates risky sexual behavior is in line with previous research which shows that alcohol use is high among emerging adults (Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou, 2004) and on college campuses specifically (Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002),

as well as being identified as a critical component of hookup cultures on college campuses (Bogle, 2008; Wade, 2017).

### **Limitations**

Some limitations to this study should be noted. First, these interviews represent the feelings and experiences of one set of female undergraduates on one college campus. As such, they are not necessarily generalizable to other groups, other college campuses, women not enrolled in college, or to men, although the ideas expressed by women interviewed here were in line with much of the existing literature on hookup culture. Second, the women interviewed all graduated high school and are attending college, and college may be a unique environment in terms of norms of casual sex. Casual sex in environments other than college may differ and strategies women use to deal with sexual activity in those environments are likely to differ as well. I offer this as an exciting avenue for future work on casual sex in emerging adulthood. Third, the sample of women at the university at which the study was conducted was overwhelming white, and therefore we cannot conclude that the experiences of minority women, whether on the same campus or at different campuses would be the same. However, a limited number of minority women were interviewed here, and their narratives did not differ markedly from those of white women, nor did all minorities fall into one specific group, suggesting that social class may be a larger factor in determining sexual behavior than is race (Armstrong, 2013). That said, far less attention has been paid to the college sexual experiences of minority women than of White women (Jenkins Hall & Tanner, 2016; Spell, 2017), a problem that cannot be remedied here given the small number of minority women who participated. I offer this as another avenue for much needed future research. Fourth, it is quite likely that certain groups of women with different backgrounds and strategies for integrating into the college hookup culture were uncomfortable talking with a stranger about their sexual experiences and thus did not participate in the study. For example, you might expect women who had experienced sexual assault or who had sought an abortion might be hesitant to discuss their sexual behavior (Astbury-Ward, Parry, & Carnwell, 2012; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Shellenberg et al., 2011). That said, there were a few women in the sample who did reveal sexual assault experiences and two who had sought abortions and their stories were not appreciably different from those of women who did not report

those experiences. Also, there may be other groups that are not represented or who are underrepresented in the sample, such as women from rural areas who may experience different social norms about sexuality, and also may experience more difficulty in accessing sexual health services (Bennett, 2002; Teliska, 2005; Warr & Hillier, 1997). Nonetheless, the conclusions drawn here are supported by existing literature on hookup culture, including ethnographic research which does not rely on self-disclosure to the same extent (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Wade, 2017). Fifth, while overall saturation was reached in terms of the broad research question posed about reasons women take contraceptive risks when they do not desire pregnancy, it is likely that saturation was not reached in all of the identified groups. In particular, there was one participant who could not be categorized, suggesting that either more detail is needed about the groups identified, or that there are additional groups that were not fully represented in the data. Despite this, groups identified were cohesive and distinct. I emphasize here that the actual configuration of groups of women may differ depending on the normative context on any one specific college campus (or other normative environment), and therefore, other typologies may exist. Regardless of the specific typologies, the clear evidence of the connection between past norms and subsequent behavior is an important finding and should not be discounted. Sixth, because part of the overall research objective was to determine why women took contraceptive risks, only women who reported having done so were recruited. It may be that women who have never taken a contraceptive risk would not fit into the groups identified or would themselves represent a novel and distinct group. However, in the end, specific behaviors that women classified as constituting a “contraceptive risk” varied substantially, and for some groups, it was not evident that any objective risk had been engaged in. Despite these limitations, this research provides a rich and detailed account of how some women deal with moving from one normative environment to another, often different one, and demonstrates how past norms may influence the strategies women adopt to successfully navigate new normative environments. This study emphasizes the importance of considering the norms of past environments in order to have a full understanding of how current social norms may influence behavior.

### **Contributions and Conclusions**

This research also makes clear contributions to the literature. I show how women's normative experiences combined with adolescent messages about sexuality work to shape their behavior in college. To my knowledge, the influence of social norms from one life course stage on the next has not been investigated in the extant literature. While this demonstration of the influence of norms across life course stages is specific to sexuality, I suggest that similar mechanisms are likely at work with norms in other domains. I offer this as a potentially productive avenue for future life course research. I also demonstrate how individuals within young women's social spheres impact both her initiation into sexual behavior, and her ongoing participation in it. Specifically, the experiences of young women's peers in regards to sexuality, both those who are part of her close social network, and those within her broader network (i.e. her school or community) had an influence on her views of sexuality in high school, and on her adaptation to college sexual culture. This demonstrates the importance of the LCP concept of linked lives in understanding young women's sexuality. Also, the perceived pervasive norm of casual sex on college campuses today creates a dilemma for women who may come from communities in which casual sex is not the norm. Thus, cultural messages about gender and the appropriateness of casual sexual behavior for young women may create feelings of shame for many of the women who chose to participate in casual sex. This is supportive of the LCP assertion that historical time and place influence life trajectories. Finally, the LCP concept of timing of life events is important in understanding how and why women make decisions about engaging in risky sexual behavior. For some women (the High School Partiers), changes in expectations regarding the appropriate timing of childbearing, for instance, had an impact on subsequent risk-taking behavior. It is likely that similar influences operate in other domains such as the timing of initiation into alcohol use, among others, and I suggest that this may also be an area where future research would be useful.

Importantly, how women feel about hookup cultures *and* the degree to which they chose to participate in hookup cultures, appears to be largely guided by the social norms about sexuality they experienced in high school. This research clearly demonstrates that hookup culture is experienced differently by different groups of women, and that women engage in the hookup culture with varying degrees of positivity. For some women, casual sex is used to bolster their own participation in romantic relationships,

whereas for others it is an activity they feel ashamed of, and for still others it is a way to experience physical pleasure while not distracting them from school and planning for their future. Overall, this research shows how the LCP concepts of linked lives, timing of life events, and historical time and place work together to shape the strategies women adopt when they arrive in the new environment on college campuses and are faced with choices about how and when to participate in normative cultures of casual sex. Most importantly, this research highlights that incorporation of the influence of previous experiences and norms on ones' strategies for adapting to new norms is critical for understanding how people deal with changes in their environments as they transition to new life course stages.

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Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics of Women Interviewed

Name	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Major	Year in School	Type of Area From	Self-Reported Socio- economic Status	Partner Status	Family Religion	Category
Abby	19	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	Evangelical Christian	Religious
Alexa	19	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Rural	Middle Class	Single	Christian	Career Women
Allison	18	White	Undecided	Freshman	Suburban	Middle Class	Single	Catholic	Career Women
Alyssa	18	White	Business	Freshman	Suburban	Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	Catholic/ None	Religious
Amber	19	Black	Art & Humanities	Sophomore	Urban	Upper Middle Class	Single	Christian/ Catholic	Late Bloomer
Anna	20	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Working Class	Living with Partner	Catholic/Non- denominational	Uncategorized <sup>1</sup>
Ashley	23	White	Hard Sciences	Senior	Suburban/Rural	Working Class	Single	Catholic	Late Bloomer
Brianna	18	White	Hard Sciences	Freshman	Suburban	Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	Catholic	Religious
Brittany	20	Asian	Hard Sciences	Junior	Suburban	Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	Buddhist Christian/ Catholic	Religious
Brooke	18	Latino	Undecided	Freshman	Urban	Lower Middle Class	Relationship	Christian/ Catholic	Religious High School Partier
Cassie	20	Other	Business	Sophomore	Urban	Working Class	Single Exclusive Relationship	Catholic	
Courtney	22	White	Hard Sciences	Senior	Suburban	Middle Class	Relationship	None	Career Women Relationship Seeker
Ellie	18	Latino	Art & Humanities	Freshman	Urban	Upper Middle Class	Single	None	
Emmy	18	White	Business	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single	None Catholic/ None	Late Bloomer
Erin	19	White	Business	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single	None	Career Women
Haley	19	Latino	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Urban	Upper Class	Single	Catholic	Career Women
Hannah	21	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Lower Middle Class	Living with Partner	None	Relationship Seeker
Jasmine	19	Asian	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single	Atheist	High School Partier Relationship Seeker
Jenn	19	White	Hard Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Lower Middle Class	Single	Christian	
Jessica	18	Latino	Undecided	Freshman	Urban	Upper Middle Class	Single	Catholic Lutheran/ Catholic	Religious
Jordan	18	White	Undecided	Freshman	Urban	Lower Middle Class	Single	Catholic	Career Women

Kaitlin	20	White	Art & Humanities	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single Exclusive Relationship	Jewish	Career Women High School Partier
Kelsey	24	White	Social Sciences	Junior	Suburban	Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	None	High School Partier
Kim	20	White	Social Sciences	Junior	Rural	Middle Class	Relationship	None	High School Partier Relationship Seeker
Lacey	20	White	Art & Humanities	Junior	Suburban	Upper Class	Single	Christian	Late Bloomer Relationship Seeker
Lana	21	White	Social Sciences	Senior	Rural	Upper Middle Class	Single	None	Late Bloomer Relationship Seeker
Lauren	19	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Middle Class	Single Exclusive Relationship	Christian	Religious
Liz	20	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Urban	Working Class	Relationship	Unspecified <sup>1</sup>	Career Women High School Partier
Madison	19	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Urban/Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single	Orthodox Christian	High School Partier Relationship Seeker
Maria	18	White	Undecided	Freshman	Urban	Upper Middle Class	Single	Christian	High School Partier Relationship Seeker
Marlee	21	White	Hard Sciences	Senior	Suburban	Upper Class	single Exclusive Relationship	None	High School Partier
Megan	19	White	Business	Sophomore	Suburban	Middle Class	Relationship	None	High School Partier
Melissa	21	White	Social Sciences	Senior	Rural	Upper Middle Class	Single	Lutheran/Presbyterian	Career Women
Natalie	21	White	Social Sciences	Senior	Urban	Upper Middle Class	Single	None	Career Women
Nicole	21	Asian	Business	Sophomore	Suburban	Lower Middle Class	Single	Buddhist	Late Bloomer Relationship Seeker
Olivia	22	White	Art & Humanities	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single	Baptist Christian/Jewish	High School Partier
Rebecca	22	Latino	Art & Humanities	Junior	Urban	Middle Class	Single Exclusive Relationship	Catholic	Religious
Samantha	18	White	Business	Freshman	Urban	Upper Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	Catholic	Religious
Shelby	20	White	Social Sciences	Junior	Suburban	Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	None	Career Women High School Partier
Annika	19	White	Social Sciences	Sophomore	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Exclusive Relationship	Jewish	High School Partier
Sydney	19	White	Social Sciences	Freshman	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	relationship	Catholic	Religious Relationship Seeker
Taylor	21	White	Hard Sciences	Senior	Suburban	Upper Middle Class	Single Exclusive Relationship	Christian	Religious Relationship Seeker
Tiffany	19	White	Business	Sophomore	Rural/Suburban	Middle Class	Relationship	None	Career Women
Vicky	20	Asian	Social Sciences	Junior	Suburban	Lower Middle Class	Single	None	High School

Victoria    20    White    Art & Humanities    Junior    Suburban    Upper Class    Single    Episcopalian    Religious

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<sup>1</sup>The interview guide used in the first 10 interviews did not specifically ask about social norms in adolescence nor about religious background of the participants family or parents. In nine interviews this information was elicited organically during the interview, but in one interview there was no information regarding social norms about sexuality in adolescence, and in another no information about religious background and so it was not possible to categorize these individuals on these constructs.

Table 2. Characteristics of Identified Groups in Both High School and College

Group Name	Adolescent Norms and Experiences	College Sexual Strategies
<b>The Religious</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious families growing up</li> <li>• One sexual partner within a romantic relationship</li> <li>• Adherence to traditional gender norms</li> <li>• Did not engage in casual sex</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most deny influence of religion on sexuality</li> <li>• Still with high school romantic/sexual partner</li> <li>• Continued adherence to traditional gender norms</li> <li>• Did not engage in casual sex</li> </ul>
<b>The Relationship Seekers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-religious family background</li> <li>• Engaged in casual sex in high school, although they experienced shame</li> <li>• Adherence to traditional gender norms</li> <li>• Engaged in both casual sex and limited romantic sexual relationships in high school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not religious in college</li> <li>• Engaged in casual sex in college, although they experienced shame</li> <li>• Adherence to traditional gender norms</li> <li>• Unsuccessfully engaged in casual sex in hopes of finding a romantic relationship</li> </ul>
<b>The High School Partiers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-religious family background</li> <li>• Family background of teen/young pregnancy</li> <li>• Engaged in casual and romantic sex in high school</li> <li>• Were no longer interested in casual sex when they began college</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not religious in college</li> <li>• Felt relieved to have reached college without experiencing a pregnancy</li> <li>• Engaged in casual sex at the very beginning of college, which then led to romantic relationships</li> <li>• Quickly found romantic partners when they started college, denied interest in casual sex</li> </ul>
<b>The Late Bloomers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-religious family background</li> <li>• No discussion of sex in family or among peers</li> <li>• Not interested in sex at all in high school</li> <li>• Mother's put them on birth control pills in high school, despite lack of sexual activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not religious in college</li> <li>• Open discussion of sex with peers in college, including "slut shaming" often of themselves and their close friends</li> <li>• Did not initially participate in casual sex, but then fully joined casual sex culture in college</li> <li>• Continued to use birth control pills but were not very good users, inconsistent condom users</li> </ul>
<b>The Career Women</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-religious family background</li> <li>• Family background of sex as normal and healthy activity in late adolescence, had comprehensive sexuality education in high school</li> <li>• Engaged in both casual and romantic sexual relationships in high school</li> <li>• Broke off romantic relationships when they graduated from high school so they could have the "freshman experience" in college</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not religious in college</li> <li>• Openly discussed sex and sexual encounters with peers, did not feel shame for engaging in casual sex</li> <li>• Engaged in casual sex but had no interest in romantic relationships in college</li> <li>• Felt that romantic relationships would detract from their intellectual and career development and so preferred to engage in casual sex</li> </ul>

## **Appendix: Interview Guide**

### **Introductory Questions**

What year are you in school?

What's your major?

Do you have a current partner (boyfriend)?

How many romantic relationships have you been in?

Can you tell me a bit about your relationships?

### **Personal Norms and Risk as a Teen**

Tell me about the relationships you had in high school. (Probe for sex, contraceptives, partner relationship/influence on sex and contraceptives, age at first sex etc.)

Were your friends having sex in high school as well?

Did you talk about contraception with them at that point? What did they think about sex?

Did the experiences that your friends had with birth control affect your decisions about what to use/do? What did you learn from them? What do you think they learned from you?

Did you have any friends in high school that had a pregnancy scare, or got pregnant/got someone pregnant when she/he didn't want to? Can you tell me about her/his experience?

What did your parents think about you having sex? Did they know? Did they help you obtain contraceptives? Why or why not?

Was your family religious? (Probe for religious affiliation, church attendance, their perceptions of their religions stance on contraceptives)

Did you ever have sex without contraceptives while you were in high school? (If yes) Can you tell me about that experience (probe for regret, just not thinking, stupidity, other explanations for why birth control was not used)? Did you worry about pregnancy? What did you do?

Did you worry about pregnancy in general as a teen? Did you have any pregnancy scares?

What your parents have said/done if you had gotten pregnant while you were in high school? What would your friends have said/done?

How would you have reacted? Would you have kept the baby? Had an abortion? Given the baby up for adoption?

How would your partner(s) at that time have reacted? Did he/they worry about pregnancy? Did you talk about it?

How did you and your partner(s) in high school talk about contraceptive use? (Probe for just not thinking and in the moment)

Did you have different experiences with different partners? Can you tell me about your experiences? How were they the same? How were they different?

### **Personal Norms and Risk as an Emerging Adult**

Tell me about the relationships you've had in college. (Probe for sex, contraceptives, partner relationship/influence on sex and contraceptives)

How do your friends view sex now that you're in college?

Did you talk about contraception with them now? Tell me about your conversations. What do they think about sex? Do most of them have long term relationships? Hook ups?

What is the norm for sexual behavior in your friend group right now? How about on campus in general?

Did you have any friends in high school that had a pregnancy scare, or got pregnant/got someone pregnant when she/he didn't want to? Can you tell me about her/his experience?

What about hook ups or other short term primarily sexual relationships?

How have your birth control decisions differed with romantic partners as compared to hook-ups or short-term partners?

Do you talk with your parents about sex now that you are in college? What do they think about relationships you've had? Do you feel like they expect you to be having sex now that you are an adult?

Have you had sex without contraceptives while you've been in college? (If yes) Can you tell me about that experience (probe for regret, just not thinking, stupidity, other explanations for why birth control was not used)? Did you worry about pregnancy? What did you do?

Do you worry about pregnancy now? Do think differently about pregnancy now than you did as a teen? Do you think about contraceptives differently now? Why or why not?

Have you have any pregnancy scares while you've been in college? Have you ever been pregnant? (If yes) How did you handle it?

What would your parents say/do if you got pregnant now, while you are in college? What would your friends say/do? How would they think about a pregnancy differently now that you are in college as compared to when you were in high school?

Do the experiences that your friends have with birth control affect your decisions about what to use/do? What have you learned from them? What do you think they have learned from you?

How would you react if you found out you were pregnant right now? Would you keep it? Have an abortion? Given the baby up for adoption?

How would your partner(s) right now react? Does he/do they worry about pregnancy? Do you talk about it? Tell me about your conversations with your partner about preventing pregnancy.

How do you and your partner(s) now talk about contraceptive use? (Probe for just not thinking and in the moment)

Have you had different experiences with different partners while you've been in college? Can you tell me about your experiences? How were they the same? How were they different?

Do you feel you are at risk for getting pregnant right now? Why or why not? (Are there times when you feel you could become pregnant even when you are not planning a pregnancy?)

Can you tell me about how you and your most recent romantic partner made decisions about preventing pregnancy?

Would changing the way you make decisions about birth control affect your current/most recent relationship?

What would it mean for you if you got pregnant right now?

Does that influence your use of birth control? What about the type of birth control you use?

### **General Partner Influence**

Can you tell me about a time in the past when you were uncomfortable with how you and your partner made birth control decisions? What made you uncomfortable and how did you handle it?

Ideally, what should each partner contribute to birth control decisions and why? Do you feel that one partner should have more input than the other? Which partner and why?

Do you think power within a relationship affects birth control decisions? How? Why?

### **General Norms Questions**

What does it mean for a pregnancy to be planned? How about for a pregnancy to be intended? Are planning and intention the same thing? How often do you think people plan pregnancies? How often do you think they intend them?

Do you feel like you personally can prevent pregnancy? Why or why not?

Do you think other women can prevent pregnancy? Why or why not?

What do you think of when I say birth control? How about when I say contraceptives?

Do you think it's always important to use birth control?

Can you tell me what you think about different types of birth control?

- Probe for condoms vs. other forms of birth control

How do you think about condoms? How important to you is it to use them?

In general are you more worried about getting pregnant or getting an STI? Why?

What do you think makes a woman decide to have unprotected sex when she doesn't want to get pregnant?

What do you think a woman means when she says she had unprotected sex because she "just wasn't thinking" about birth control?

Do you think men and women view birth control differently? Why or why not?

### **Closing Questions**

Are there other things you can think of that have affected how you think about contraceptives or your use of them?

Do you have anything else on your mind you want to share?