


Young Adult Casual Sexual Behavior: Life-Course-Specific Motivations and Consequences

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Abstract

Most young adults have had some casual sex experience. However, it is important to understand the motivations for such behavior. We investigate the motivations for and consequences of casual sex using a life-course lens. We use the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study to examine a diverse sample of young adults with recent casual sexual experiences ($N = 239$). We draw on a subset of in-depth relationship narratives ($N = 44$) to provide a more nuanced understanding of the motivations for and consequences of casual sex. We find that sexual pleasure and substance use remain the most common reasons for participating in casual sex. However, young adults report motives that are associated with the young adult stage in the life course including too busy for commitment, geographic mobility, and feeling too young to be tied down. These findings can inform service providers who work with the young adult population.

Keywords

casual sex, life-course theory, young adults, gender

For many individuals, involvement in casual sexual activities begins during adolescence (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2005). Similar to prior studies (e.g., Bailey et al. 2008; Eisenberg et al. 2009), we use the term casual sex to refer to vaginal intercourse among unmarried individuals that occurs outside of committed intimate relationships. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) indicated that among sexually active teenagers, 38 percent reported a casual sex experience (Manning et al. 2005). Moreover, involvement in casual sexual activities is even more common as individuals transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Prior findings from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) ($N = 1,031$) suggest that among individuals, ages 18 to 24, 54 percent reported ever having casual sex and 39 percent reported having had casual sex during the last two years; moreover, men, compared with women, reported more casual sex partners (Lyons et al. 2013). Similarly, Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2010), examining a sample of undergraduates ($N = 12,925$), found that 67 percent of sexually active college seniors had casual sex. Taken together, these

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studies suggest that casual sex appears to be relatively common among contemporary young adults in the United States. We move beyond prior work by examining the motivations and implications of casual sex among young adults drawing on the TARS data and relying on life-course theory and a mixed-methods approach.

This research contributes to the literatures on casual sex and young adulthood in at least four ways. First, few studies have considered motivations for casual sexual activity from a life-course perspective. The benefit of a life-course approach is that it may provide unique insight into why young adults participate in casual sexual behavior. Second, many studies were limited to college samples (e.g., England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006; Paul 2006; Paul and Hayes 2002; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000; Regan and Dreyer 1999); however, it is also important to explore casual sexual involvement across a broader educational range of young adult respondents. Third, our mixed-method approach allows us to investigate self-described meanings, which are not possible with standardized surveys. Last, understanding the motivations for casual sex can inform health care and service providers who work with the young adult population. Specifically, understanding why young adults participate in casual sex behavior can lead to better intervention strategies that encourage healthy sexual decision making.

Background

Life-course Theory

Life-course theory guides the current study's focus on motivations for casual sexual activity. Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2011) state that two important themes in life-course theory are (1) the significance of historical change and (2) continuity in life pathways. Societal changes that have influenced the life-course stage of early adulthood include increased enrollment in higher education, more time spent outside the parental home, and delayed marriage and childbearing (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). Moreover, these societal changes may be associated with increased casual sexual activity among young adults. For example, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) argued that some female college students did not want serious committed relationships, in part, because the time commitment of having boyfriends could distract from studying. The young women in their sample claimed that "hooking up," which refers to casual sexual interactions that do not necessarily include vaginal sex (Fielder and Carey 2010), and casual sex were acceptable alternatives to more serious relationships. Thus, prior research has shown that there has been societal changes that have created new roles and behaviors associated with the young adult stage in the life course. We expect that if young adults do not feel that they have the time for more committed relationships, they may be more motivated to have casual sex as an outlet for sexual behavior without the time commitment of romantic relationships.

The second important theme of life-course theory is the focus on continuity of pathways; that is, behaviors and experiences that have occurred during adolescence may influence young adult events and behaviors (Elder 1985). Raley, Crissey, and Muller (2007), based on the Add Health data, reported that casual sexual experiences during the teen years were associated with transitioning into cohabiting unions during young adulthood. Less research has been conducted on casual sexual behavior beyond the adolescent or young adult periods or how young adult casual sexual relationships have influenced sexual activity and union formation later in the life course. We expect that prior romantic and sexual experiences will underlie motivations for young adult casual sex.

As young adults anticipate transitioning into roles related to adulthood, such as those associated with marriage, they may be less likely to participate in casual sex. Shanahan et al. (2005) reported, using a longitudinal sample ($n = 1,010$) of early young adults, that family transitions such as marriage or parenthood were significantly associated with feeling like an adult. Further, Arnett (1998) notes that when young adults were finically independent from their parents, they were more likely to feel like an adult. We expect that if young adults feel too young to be tied down, a measure of

subjective identity, they will be more likely to engage in casual sex behavior. Also, as young adults start to feel more “adult-like,” which may be associated with adult transitions like marriage, they may be less likely to have casual sex. Thus, the life-course perspective informs our view that young adulthood is a unique life stage with associated roles and behaviors that will influence the motivations for casual sex behavior. In addition, motivations for young adults’ casual sex may be influenced by past as well as anticipated future relationships and life-course events.

Conventional Motivations for Casual Sexual Activity

Prior research has focused on general motives for participating in casual sex. First, consistent with a risk behavior approach, some studies have emphasized the role of substance use (e.g., Fielder and Carey 2010; Grello et al. 2006; Owen et al. 2010; Paul 2006). Grello et al.’s (2006) study, based on a college sample ($N = 404$), found that 65 percent of respondents reported that they had used drugs or alcohol during their last casual sex experience. Similarly, Fielder and Carey (2010) found that among their sample of first semester college students ($N = 140$), alcohol use was associated with a greater number of vaginal casual sex partners by the end of the school year. Owen et al. (2010), also examining college students ($N = 832$), reported that alcohol use was a significant predictor of hooking up.

Second, some research based on college samples focus on a “simpler” motive: Young adults are seeking sexual satisfaction without emotional attachment (e.g., Garcia and Reiber 2008; Grello et al. 2006; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Li and Kenrick 2006; Regan and Dreyer 1999). In a study of undergraduate students ($N = 507$), the most common motivation for hooking up was physical/sexual gratification (Garcia and Reiber 2008). Also using a sample of college students ($N = 178$), Li and Kenrick (2006) found that both men and women ranked physical attractiveness as an important characteristic for short-term sexual partners.

A third motive reflects concerns about peers’ opinions. Among a sample of undergraduates ($N = 105$) who had some casual sexual experience, one stated motivation for engaging in casual sex was enhanced social status among peers (Regan and Dreyer 1999). Moreover, this was particularly the case for men in their sample. Conversely, the students in the Garcia and Reiber (2008) study reported that peer pressure was not a strong predictor for hooking up, but men were slightly more likely to claim that peer pressure was a motivation for hooking up compared with women. Summarizing, conventional motivations for casual sexual activity included substance use, sexual satisfaction, and perhaps peer influence. As such, we expect our sample respondents to endorse these motivations for casual sex as well.

Life Stage Motivations for Casual Sexual Activity

Some motives for casual sex are more reflective of the young adult stage in the life course. Demographic research has emphasized that young adulthood is characterized by geographic mobility, enrollment in higher education, and employment changes (Mouw 2005; Osgood et al. 2005; Rindfuss 1991), and social psychologists have stressed that young adulthood is a life stage characterized by identity and sexual exploration (Arnett 2000, 2004). Thus, our investigation of motivations for casual sex considers these demographic and social psychological life-course-specific considerations. We examine how characteristics of young adulthood, such as geographic movement and not feeling like an adult, might influence engaging in casual sex activity.

While young adulthood is a life stage in which casual sex is common, it is also a stage in which committed relationships of longer duration become more salient to individuals (Giordano et al. 2012; Settersten and Ray 2010). These patterns, we argue, are not necessarily contradictory. In a recent longitudinal analysis of the TARS data examining the casual sex trajectories of adolescents as they aged into early young adulthood, the number of romantic partners was correlated significantly with the number of casual sex partners over time (Lyons et al. 2010). Nevertheless,

researchers who study casual sexual activity have not examined fully whether involvement in more serious romantic relationships and casual sex are related (for an exception, see Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). The current study moves beyond previous research by examining how prior romantic relationships can act as a motivator for casual sex as opposed to just an alternative to committed relationships. For example, some young adults might “take a break” from serious relationships but still participate in casual sex relationships.

Implications of Casual Sexual Activity

Prior investigations of the implications of casual sex typically have focused on the negative consequences of casual sex, such as feelings of regret, poorer relationship quality, depressive symptoms, reputational concerns, and lower educational attainment (e.g., Campbell 2008; Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; Grello et al. 2006; McCarthy and Grodsky 2011; Paik 2010). In a study of female college students, those who engaged in casual sex, compared with those who did not, were more likely to report feelings of regret (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Consistent with these findings, Grello et al. (2006) reported that among a sample of undergraduates, women who participated in casual sexual activity, compared with those who did not, experienced more depressive symptoms; conversely, men who had casual sex, compared with those who did not, experienced fewer depressive symptoms. In contrast, Eisenberg et al. (2009) analyzing a diverse sample of sexually active young adults in Minnesota did not find a significant association between the casual relationship status of the most recent sex partner and indicators of psychological well-being measured as depressive symptoms, body satisfaction, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation for men and women. One exception was that male respondents who were in a committed relationship reported slightly more depressive symptoms compared with male respondents whose last sexual experience was with a casual partner.

Although much of the literature on the implications of casual sex has focused on *negative* consequences, the high levels of casual sexual activity and more liberal sex attitudes of young adults (Lefkowitz 2005) suggest that all experiences may not be associated with negative outcomes. Based on prior research (Lyons et al. 2013; Paul 2006), we expect that many young adults recognize casual sex as a common occurrence during this life stage and do not necessarily view it negatively. Examining adolescents, prior research based on the TARS has documented that a substantial minority felt closer with partners after having casual sex, and casual sex was sometimes the beginning of a relationship of longer duration (Manning et al. 2005). While building on prior work, which has focused on negative implications of casual sex, we examine how young adults, themselves, describe the consequences of casual sex, recognizing that these experiences may be viewed as having negative and positive consequences.

For analysis purposes, although we conceptualize motives and implications of casual sexual activity as distinct, we acknowledge that in many instances these overlap. For example, to the degree that individuals believe that friends approve of such liaisons, they may be more likely to engage in casual sex and may be more likely to perceive that they gained peer approval. Similarly, individuals may be motivated by desires to avoid being hurt—and subsequently enjoy sexual relationships that do not require commitment. However, it is possible that the consequences that unfold are not as expected (as in the case of individuals who develop unanticipated stronger feelings for the partner, even though they expected the relationship to be casual). Thus, it is important to study both motivations for and implications of casual sex behavior because motivations can influence implications. If the implications of past casual sex experiences are either positive or negative, they can alter future motivations for casual sexual behavior.

Gender and Casual Sexual Activity

Researchers have reported that gender is critical in investigating the motivations for and implications of casual sex (e.g., England et al. 2007; Grello et al. 2006; Regan and Dreyer 1999). Men

have tended to report more frequent casual sex experiences (Lyons et al. 2013; Grello et al. 2006; Paul et al. 2000; Petersen and Hyde 2010; Poppen 1995). Further, there are potential gender differences in the motivation for participating in casual sex. Regan and Dreyer (1999) reported in a study of college students that men were more likely to claim status among friends as a reason for participating in casual sex, and women were more likely to participate in casual sex because of mutual feelings of attraction and friendship. Using an online survey of undergraduate students, England et al. (2007) found gender similarities in reports of enjoyment of casual sex experiences. Owen and Fincham (2011) reported that women were more likely to claim negative emotional reactions to hooking up, but both men and women claimed the hook-up experience to be mostly positive. Yet, women, more so than men, may be judged harshly by peers if they have many sex partners (Kreager and Staff 2009). This sexual double standard may limit women's involvement in casual sex relationships and may be implicated in gender differences in stated motivations and perceived consequences of casual sexual involvement.

Current Investigation

In this study, we draw on structured surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews with a large, heterogeneous sample of young adults and examine the motivations for and implications of casual sex during this phase of the life course. In the results section, we provide a descriptive portrait of casual sex attitudes and behaviors of all young adults in our sample. Next, we outline conventional motivations for casual sex among a subsample who had a recent casual sex experience. We conceptualize these motivations as conventional because they were reported as important in prior research. Conventional motivations are as follows: (1) Casual sex is fun and enjoyable, (2) casual sex occurs because of substance use, (3) there is no emotional commitment with casual sexual relationships, and (4) casual sex is a way to acquire peers' approval. Subsequently, we highlight motivations for casual sex that are associated with the characteristics of early young adulthood. We rely on prior research, which studies the characteristics of early young adulthood, and examine how these qualities influence casual sexual behavior during this stage in the life course. Finally, we investigate both negative and positive implications of casual sex behavior.

Method

Data

TARS. To investigate the outlined research questions, we relied on the third wave of interviews from the TARS. We collected these data to investigate family, peer, and romantic partners' influence on romantic and sexual behaviors of adolescents. The first interview was collected in 2000, based on a random sample of youths in the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio. The second interview was collected in 2002 and the third interview in 2004. The geographic area of Lucas County was similar to estimates of race and ethnicity, family income, and education to the national population; however, national estimates could not be determined with the TARS dataset. The first interview included a sample of 1,316 youths as well as a parent or guardian interviewed separately. School records were used for the sampling frame, but school attendance was not required for inclusion in the sample. Most of the survey interviews occurred in the respondents' homes using laptop computers to protect privacy. This strategy ensured that questions that may be more sensitive, such as casual sexual behavior, cannot be overheard by other members of the household. There was an oversampling of racial minority youth.

We limited the quantitative sample ($N = 1,114$) to young adult (ages 18–22) respondents ($N = 700$). All young adults were asked questions about casual sex attitudes and behaviors. Questions regarding motivations for casual sex were asked of respondents who had at least one casual sex partner during the past 24 months ($N = 239$). Respondents without a recent casual sexual

experience were not asked motivation questions. Thus, our analytic sample for the quantitative analyses is limited to the 239 respondents who had a recent casual sex experience.

The qualitative data were drawn from respondents who were administered an in-depth face-to-face interview at the third interview ($n = 92$). Respondents were selected if they reported engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors, such as a high number of sexual partners and/or having a casual sex experience. A comparison group included respondents who scored average on the mentioned risk factors. These interviews generally occurred at different times than the survey interviews and were completed from August 2005 to August 2006. The goal of these interviews, in comparison to the survey data, was to create relationship narratives where respondents would self-describe their romantic and sexual history and their views of the meaning of these relationships.

In all instances, precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality and the ability of the respondent to speak candidly about their relationships and experiences. The interviewer had over 20 years of experience in conducting interviews of this type and sought out quiet areas within the home, including the front porch or backyard, as well as her car, in instances in which there was the possibility that another family member or partner might listen to the interview. Some of the qualitative interviews took place in public places (family restaurant, library) when it was apparent that no private places were available within the home. The interviewer also was adept at stopping the interview or speaking in a coded manner, if another family member unexpectedly entered the area where the interview took place.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. While all of the interviews were useful, because of their salience to the overall research questions, we focused particular attention on the subsample of 44 respondents who discussed casual sexual relationships. These in-depth interviews were not meant to generalize to the population but allowed us to highlight the perceived motivations for and implications of casual sex for a sample of young adults who had engaged in these casual sexual relationships. The subsample contained more men ($N = 30$) than women ($N = 14$). The qualitative sample was similar to the quantitative samples on key demographic characteristics (see Appendix Table A1). The number of lifetime casual sex partners was substantially higher for the in-depth interview sample ($M = 15.2$) than the survey sample of casual sex experienced ($M = 9.5$). All of our respondents fit our profile of high risk because they reported casual sexual activity at the time of interview. Thus, the qualitative responses are not representative of young adults in Lucas County, but provide in-depth and rare insight into young adult motivations for casual sex.

The TARS data were appropriate for the research questions for several reasons. First, the data provided detailed measurement of the motivations for casual sexual behavior, which were not available in larger national datasets. Second, in-depth qualitative interviews permitted individuals to describe in their own words what they saw as motives for and implications of their casual sexual experiences. Finally, much prior research on casual sex is based on college samples. In contrast, TARS respondents did not have to attend high school classes to be included in the survey. Individuals who were not attending high school during the time of the first interview may have had different educational and casual sex trajectories at later interviews.

The analysis of the quantitative data relied on *t*-tests to determine gender differences and similarities in the motivations for and implication of casual sex. The first step of the analysis of the qualitative data was based on a careful reading of the interviews followed by open-coding with special attention to motivations for and implications of casual sexual experiences. After the initial reading of the interviews and with the research questions in mind, the researchers constructed a preliminary code list. Example of codes were "substance use," "casual sex because too young to be in a relationship," "casual sex is less drama," "doesn't want a relationship because too much going on in life right now," and "tell friends." Some codes reflected existing measures from the quantitative survey, but other codes emerged out of reading the narratives. Next, the transcribed texts and code list were downloaded into the qualitative database ATLAS.ti. The researchers then coded the data based on the code list. All the researchers coded the same interview and compared

codes to establish inter-coder reliability and discussed any coding discrepancies. The codes for motivations and implications were organized and classified so that broader themes emerged and were assessed. All respondents' names were changed to ensure confidentiality. We viewed the qualitative data as providing an alternative, but compatible, method for assessing respondents' views and as especially useful for clarifying respondents' own understandings about motivations for and implications of their casual sexual experiences.

Measures

The qualitative instrument included questions about sexual relationships outside of dating relationships. If the respondent indicated that they had casual sex, they were asked to elaborate on such relationships. Standard follow-up questions included, "Describe your relationship with *casual sex partner*?" "Did you want to become closer or become boyfriend/girlfriend with *casual sex partner*?" and "Did other people know about your relationship?"

The TARS included several survey items on casual sex, which allowed for systematic comparisons by gender. The questions focused on the relationship context, attitudes, motives, and consequences of casual sex, and referenced respondents' most recent casual partner during the last 24 months. Specifically, respondents were asked, "In the last 24 months, how many girls/guys have you had sex with that you were not really dating or going out with?" If respondents indicated that they had one or more recent casual sex partner, they were then asked about their motivations for the most recent casual sex experience.

Attitudes. To measure an overall attitude about casual sex we used responses to the statement: "A person should only have sex with someone they love." The responses ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree."

Relationship context. The young adults in the sample were asked two specific questions about their most recent casual sex partner. Casual sex was defined for respondents as "sex with someone that you weren't really dating or going out with." The first question asked, "When you had sex for the first time how long did you know this person?" The responses were 1 = "Just met that day" to 8 = "For a year or more." The second question to measure the relationship context of the most recent casual sex partner asked, "How many times did you have sex with *casual sex partner*?" The responses were (1) "Only that one time," (2) "Once or twice a year," (3) "Once every 2–3 months," (4) "Once a month," (5) "Once every 2–3 weeks," (6) "Once a week," (7) "2–3 times a week," (8) "Once a day," and (9) "More than once a day."

Motivations. Measures assessed the following five types of *conventional* motives: sexual, substance use, relationship-based, and peer pressure. There is one *life-course-specific* motivation in the quantitative analysis: age and commitments. Respondents were asked, "To what extent do you agree that the following are reasons why you had sex with *casual sex partner*?" Responses ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree," so higher scores reflected greater agreement. The following two statements assessed *sexual* motivations: (1) "I was horny" and (2) "I thought it would be fun." We measured *substance use* with the statement, "We were drinking or using drugs." To measure *relationship-based* motives, we drew on three indicators: (1) "I was in love" and (2) "I thought it would bring the relationship closer," with the responses ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." The third indicator asked, "Did you want *casual sex partner* to be your girlfriend/boyfriend" with response categories of 0 = "no" and 1 = "yes." To measure *peer pressure*, we used the statement "My friends were all doing it." To tap *age and commitments* as a life-course-specific motive, we relied on the indicator "I'm too young to be tied down to one person." Both age and commitments and peer pressure had responses 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree."

Table 1. Means for Attitudes and Behaviors among All Young Adults ($N = 700$).

	MI%
Attitudes	
A person should only have sex with someone they love	3.33
Too young to be tied down	2.61
Casual sex experiences	
Percent who have had casual sex	47%
Percent who have had recent casual sex	36%
Mean number of casual sex partners	1.31

Source. Toledo Adolescence Relationship Study Wave Three.

Implications. Measures assessed the following perceived implications of casual sexual activity: peer acceptance, regret, and closeness with partner. Two questions measured *peer acceptance* of the relationship. The first question asked, “Did your friends approve of this relationship,” which had response categories of 1 = “strongly disapproved” to 5 = “strongly approved.” The second question asked, “Did you tell your friends about this relationship” and was coded as 1 = “yes” and 0 = “no.” To measure *regret*, we used the following question: “How much do you regret having sex with *casual sex partner*?” and responses ranged from 1 = “not at all” to 5 = “very much.” To determine *closeness*, we asked, “After you first had sex, did you feel closer to this person or not,” which was coded 1 = “much less close” and 5 = “much closer.”

Demographic variables. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable in which 1 = female and 0 = male. Race and ethnicity were measured by how the respondents self-identified. The categories were white, black, Hispanics, and “other” racial and ethnic groups. Age was a continuous measure. Education status was measured with the question “How far have you gone in school?” Responses were categorized as (1) “less than high school,” (2) “currently in high school high,” (3) “high school graduate but not enrolled in higher education,” and (4) “currently enrolled in college.” (See Appendix Table A1 for descriptive statistics.)

Results

General Casual Sex Attitudes and Experiences

To provide an overall notion of approval of casual sex, we drew on the young adult sample ($N = 700$). About 35 percent disagreed with the statement that a person should only have sex with someone they love with a mean of 3.33 (Table 1). Respondents who did not have a casual sex relationship ($M = 3.65$) were significantly more likely to endorse the statement linking sex and love compared with those who had casual sex ($M = 2.88$; $t = 8.98$, $p < .001$). In terms of casual sexual behavior, we found that 47 percent of the total sample (Table 1) and 59 percent of sexually active respondents reported ever having had casual sex. In the total sample, 36 percent had a recent casual sex partner (Table 1), and of the sexually active sample, 44 percent had a casual sex partner during the two years prior to the interview.¹ The average number of casual sex partners during the last two years for all young adults, not just the sexually active, is 1.31 (Table 1), and for those who had casual sex, the average number during the past two years was 2.78, and this was significantly greater for men ($M = 3.51$) than women ($M = 1.87$; $t = 3.65$, $p < .001$).

The relationship context of casual sex varied considerably. The majority of respondents (89 percent) knew their most recent casual sex partner. It was rare that the most recent casual sex partner was someone respondents had just met that day (13 percent for men and 10 percent for women).

Table 2. Means and t-Tests of Attitudes, Relationship Context, Motives, and Implications of Casual Sex among Young Adults Who Experienced Casual Sex ($N = 239$).

	Total	Females	Males	<i>t</i>	Significance
Attitudes					
A person should only have sex with someone they love	2.76	2.88	2.61	-1.65	
Relationship context					
How long they knew most recent casual sex partner when they had sex	4.66	4.95	4.48	-1.39	
Motives					
Horny	3.34	3.18	3.46	1.61	
Fun	3.30	3.05	3.45	2.69	**
Drinking or drug use	2.67	2.68	2.67	-0.06	
Love	1.98	1.90	2.04	1.00	
Thought it would bring the relationship closer	2.39	2.40	2.38	-0.14	
Wanted to become boyfriend/girlfriend	0.31	0.34	0.28	-0.89	
Too young to be tied down	2.78	2.62	2.89	2.04	*
Friends were doing it	2.29	1.87	2.58	4.95	***
Implications					
Friends approve of relationship	2.91	2.78	3.00	1.59	
Told friends about the relationship	0.74	0.77	0.72	-0.98	
Regret	2.12	2.49	1.87	-3.44	***
Sex brought the relationship closer	2.71	2.88	2.61	-1.65	

Source. Toledo Adolescence Relationship Study Wave Three.

† < .1 * p < .05 †. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

In Table 2, the mean of 4.66 suggested that, on average, respondents knew their most recent casual sex partner for a couple of months with the modal group (20 percent) knowing their partner for a year or more. A large share (65 percent) had sex with an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend at some point. Men and women were equally likely to report having sex with an ex (results not shown). Furthermore, over half of respondents with a recent casual sex partner had sex with that partner more than one time (61 percent). Men and women were equally likely to have had multiple sexual experiences with their casual sex partners ($\chi^2 = 6.04$, $df = 8$, $p = .64$; results not shown). Thus, most often casual sex was not simply a “one-night stand” with someone the individual did not know.

Motivations for Casual Sex

Outlined below are two sets of motivations for casual sex behavior. We note that these motivations are not mutually exclusive. First, we describe conventional motivations that have been reported in prior research, such as the following: (1) Casual sex is fun and physically enjoyable, (2) casual sex is due to substance use, (3) casual sex lacks emotional commitment, and (4) casual sex is a way to get peers’ approval (Garcia and Reiber 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Regan and Dreyer 1999). The second set of casual sex motivations are life-course specific. These motivations were associated with the characteristics of the young adult stage and included (1) transitional relationships, (2) too busy for commitment, (3) geographic mobility, and (4) being too young to be tied down.

Motivations for casual sex: conventional

Casual sex is fun. Although there are many expressed concerns about casual sex, our findings reveal that the two motivations for casual sex with the highest agreement scores are those focused on sexual satisfaction and having fun. Thus, theoretical treatments that concentrate on the problematic nature of casual sex do not adequately reflect that sex is often a pleasurable activity. Both men ($M = 3.46$) and women ($M = 3.18$), on average, agreed that one reason they had casual sex was because they were horny, suggesting a desire for sexual satisfaction (Table 2).

The second ranked motivation in the quantitative survey for having casual sex was that "it was fun." Means for male ($M = 3.45$) and female ($M = 3.05$) respondents indicated relatively high levels of endorsement of this belief (Table 2). However, men were significantly more likely to agree with this statement. These results were similar to Regan and Dreyer's (1999) study, which reported that sexual desire and pleasure were top motivations for engaging in casual sex behavior. To illustrate, Melvin, age 20, who participated in the qualitative interview, reported 12 casual sex partners and indicated that for him, casual sex was all about sexual satisfaction and gratification: "... I'm not putting no emotions or feelings into the girl I'm sleeping around with. It's just for pleasure." For Melvin, casual sex was physically enjoyable without emotional commitment. Overall, we found most respondents who had casual sex viewed the experience as fun and an opportunity to explore sexual desire. This is a potentially important finding because it contrasts with the problematic stance emphasized in the research literature and within the context of many prevention efforts.

Substance use. Substance use is one of the most heavily investigated motivations for participating in casual sex (Grello et al. 2006; Paul 2006; White et al. 2009). We found that substance use was an important motivator in our sample as well. Respondents stated that substance use was often involved when a casual sexual experience occurred. In the quantitative sample, the mean level of agreement with drinking or drug use as a motivator ($M = 2.67$) was the third top-ranked reason for having casual sex (Table 2). Further, male and female respondents did not differ significantly in their level of endorsement of this factor.

The qualitative data are consistent with this pattern of quantitative results. For example, Sara, a 20-year-old mother, had two casual partners and linked at least one of these experiences to the effects of alcohol:

I got trashed one night (laughs), so it just kinda' happened. I didn't realize it, you know . . . We were talking . . . but my thinking wasn't clear, and it just happened, so . . . I mean, now that I look back on it, I'm just like . . . whoa. I shouldn't have been drinking that much.

Certainly, not every casual sex experience was related to substance use, but for some, it was an integral part of their narrative accounts and understandings about how these events unfolded. Randy, a 20-year-old male with six casual sex partners, a high school degree, and who works as a roofer, explains that the party scene can have an influential role in casual sex opportunities:

It was more or less, drunken friend with benefits. We went out for like a week, and only knew each other for like a month. Got a hotel together with a couple of friends, had sex that night, and about a week later, had sex again and then about two days later, never talked to her again.

Of course, it is not possible to disentangle completely motivational factors and after-the-fact rationalizations, as Paul (2006) and other researchers have previously suggested.

Lack of emotional commitment. As expected, a motivation for casual sex relationships was avoiding emotional entanglements. A number of respondents who participated in the qualitative interviews emphasized that casual sex partners were almost by definition not meant to involve the development of strong emotional feelings, which, for some, was an attractive feature of this

type of relationship. For example, Phil, an 18-year-old high school senior who reported four casual sex partners during the past two years, focused on the issue of lack of commitment. When asked if he wanted to become closer to his casual sex partner, he said,

Me and her have an agreement that it doesn't go any farther than that . . . It's so cool like I could actually hook up with her, like she could be my girlfriend, like it probably could come down to that because we're so cool about it and like we're really good friends . . . [but] there is no strings. And there is like no weirdness between us. Like we could have sex one night and she would come over the next day and we would just kick it.

Phil also stated that he did not think less of his casual sex partner because she was involved with him in this more casual way. These qualitative findings were supported by survey results; respondents frequently disagreed (73 percent) with the idea that they have casual sex because they are in love, with a mean endorsement score of 1.98 (Table 2).

It is relatively rare to report that casual sex occurred in hopes of developing a future committed relationship. Only 20 percent of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they had casual sex because they thought it would bring them closer to their sex partner, and men ($M = 2.38$) and women ($M = 2.40$) shared similar levels of disagreement with this item (Table 2). In line with these results, respondents noted that another appealing characteristic of casual sexual relationships was that there were fewer problems compared with committed romantic relationships. For example, James, an 18-year-old high school dropout, reported five recent casual sexual partners. In connection with his longer qualitative interview, James suggested that in some respects, he preferred these casual liaisons, as they involved fewer worries and demands compared with more serious relationships:

Like you guys get along, like I get along better with this girl than my girlfriend because it's not like emotional ties and stuff. Like we can have sex or whatever and then you know afterwards just go hang out or go, I can leave or she can leave, you know. It's not like you're worried about what the other person is doing all the time or nothing. That's why I like that kind (of relationship) because I don't like all of that worrying about each other, doing anything.

Relying on a sample of university women, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) reported a similar motivation. Yet, the current study focused on a more diverse sample of young adults, highlighting that this motivation is not limited to those pursuing higher education.

The qualitative data in particular provide a more nuanced appreciation of the timing and sequencing of involvement in casual sex and more serious relationships. Reflecting their accumulation of experiences over time, some respondents indicated that they preferred casual sexual relationships over committed relationships because past boyfriends or girlfriends hurt them. Adam, a 20-year-old who worked in an auto body shop, started having casual sex after he broke up with the only girl with whom he had been intimate. He reported a total of 26 casual partners and said,

Yeah, well, she was the first girl I was ever with. And for a long time, she was the only girl I was ever with. And then after we broke up, then I kinda turned into a slut {LAUGH} . . . Just hanging out with girls, having sex with more than one girl in a week.

Later on in the interview, Adam explained that his ex-girlfriend had an abortion, and he was very upset that he did not have a say in the outcome of the pregnancy. This influenced his perspective on relationships, and his current desire to avoid a serious level of commitment. Thus, the emotional pain from prior relationships influenced decisions about involvement in casual sex partnerships.

Casual sex motivations: life course stage

Transitional relationships. The qualitative interviews revealed that for young adults, the concept of a “transitional” relationship was fairly widespread and a generally accepted pattern. Certainly, this motivation is not unique to the young adult period, but it may be a more frequent pattern during this time simply because young adults (as contrasted with early adolescents) had often forged longer and more intimate relationships. Accordingly, the process of breaking up and forming another strong attachment may be viewed as a more difficult endeavor. Casual sexual relationships were considered transitional in that respondents sometimes got involved when they were between two committed relationships. Tori, a 20-year-old who just finished school to become a paramedic, reported one recent casual sex partner and explained that casual sex was a way to “transition” between boyfriends. She was less invested in these relationships and noncommittal about them. She said,

Just because I think I was more into partying and not really caring. When I dated those transitional guys I was still excited about talking to Justin. I mean we were emailing each other back and forth so. I guess I never really got him out of my mind and these guys were just like oh well. Who cares. If they're here, they're here if they're not, they're not.

For Tori, casual sex was a way to fill a potential intimacy gap between two committed relationships, but she nevertheless described them as much less meaningful relative to her longer-term relationship with Justin. Similarly, Tim, a 19-year-old with four recent casual sex partners, explained that he used casual sex relationships as a way to get over a breakup with a girlfriend:

After we broke up, I'd probably say within that week I probably had sex with another girl already . . . Just sexual. No relationship . . . I wasn't trying to get into something after being in something for so long. It was almost two years and there's no point in sticking yourself in that position again. Talk to people, get to know people before you jump into anything.

Tim felt that he needed to “get to know people” before getting into a committed relationship; however, he held much lower standards for casual sexual relationships. Casual sexual relationships can fill the void during these transition periods. Framing the casual sexual encounter in this way also preserves the individual's sense of self as someone who is capable of strong attachments. For example, Tori notes that she still found contacts with her longer-term partner meaningful (“I was still excited about talking to Justin”), and Tim stressed that building up a relationship takes time and effort (“talk to people, get to know people before you jump into anything”).

Too busy for commitment. Some respondents indicated that they were too busy to forge a committed relationship, noting that at this point in their lives, they were heavily focused on other life-course events and circumstances. However, this did not preclude involvement in more casual sexual encounters. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) reported similar themes using a sample of female college students, but our results suggest that this rationale is also frequently invoked within this more diverse sample of young adults. Jason, a junior enrolled in an online high school, reported two lifetime casual sex partners. When asked what he was looking for in a relationship currently, he said, “As of right now, a fling flang. I'm not looking for a relationship at all. That's the last thing I need right now . . . I got a lot of stuff still going on in my life.” At the time of interview, Jason indicated that he was busy with his online courses and focusing on getting into a postsecondary technical training program. Lindsay, a 20-year-old university sophomore who reported two casual sex partners, explained that timing was the main difference between casual sexual relationships and committed relationships:

I think a lot of it has to do with where I am in my life. Like when I dated Paul—right before I dated Terrell—I had just moved like—I had just—because I lived in the dorms my second year, not my first

year of college. So I was doing everything like a year-like behind almost. So, I was just moving away from home for the first time. I was on my own. I was not ready for a serious relationship at that time. I was really into myself and what I was doing and just kind of seeing how things go, but it just kind of isn't the right time, I guess.

Both Jason's and Lindsay's accounts accorded well with Arnett's (2000) depiction of the emerging adult-life stage as having a strong focus on individual exploration. From Jason's and Lindsay's perspectives, their lives were too busy to be in a committed relationship, but this appears to involve more than simply juggling a specific amount of "time." Instead, their narrative accounts encompass this idea that relationship "space" provides a way to grow and develop as a person ("I was really into myself and what I was doing"). At the same time, they were not willing to forgo all sexual relationships and experiences, and thus they chose to engage in casual sex.

Geographic mobility. The young adult-life stage is characterized by geographic mobility due to enrollment in school and moves for jobs and careers. This mobility also appears to have implications for the character of romantic and sexual relationships. Kaleb, a 21-year-old man working on small jobs, reported two casual sex partners and explained that his sexual relationship remained casual because he knew that his partner was moving away to college. He says, "It was her last year of high school, and she was about to go to college. So, I mean we could have worked out (being in a committed relationship) . . . But, it wouldn't have worked out cause, she was going to college."

Sara explained that she had casual sex with a close friend's cousin who lived in a different state. When asked if she expected to have a committed relationship with her partner after having sex, she said,

No. I knew it wasn't . . . It was just gonna be a casual . . . Because he lives in (another state) and I lived up here. I knew that I was never gonna' live there, and he was never gonna' live here. And the long-distance thing would have never worked.

The geographic distance makes Sara aware that her casual sex partner was unlikely to evolve into a serious romantic one, but she was nevertheless willing to follow through on feelings of attraction when they were together in the same location.

In other instances, individuals who participated in the in-depth interview indicated that they did not want to start romantic relationships in anticipation of moving in the near future. Even a temporary move prevented people from forming a committed relationship. Violet, a 20-year-old college student with six casual sex partners, explained why she did not want to have a romantic relationship:

You know I . . . I wasn't like . . . I was just being single for a while . . . I studied abroad and I went to (foreign country) for about six months so I was like no relationships. I'm just going to go and meet a new guy every night. That's what I'm doing.

Violet felt that having a committed relationship would hold her back from fully experiencing the time she had carved out to study abroad.

Too young to be tied down. Many of the motivations described above, such as geographic mobility or focus on other commitments, are particularly relevant for young adults, even if they are not the exclusive province of this phase of the life course; however, the belief that one is "too young to be tied down" references life-course concerns directly. Table 2 suggests that this motivation is endorsed fairly frequently among those who report casual sex experience, and male and female respondents in this subgroup do not differ in their levels of agreement with this motivation for their involvement. Among all young adults, respondents slightly supported the

view ($M = 2.61$) that they were too young to be tied down (Table 1) with respondents who ever had casual sex ($M = 2.69$) being more likely to agree with the idea that they were too young to be tied down in the quantitative survey compared with young adults who never had casual sex ($M = 2.32$; $t = 3.91$, $p < .001$). These findings paralleled the responses from the qualitative interviews. For instance, A.J., a 17-year-old who got his General Education Development certificate (GED) while in jail, reported three recent casual sex partners and explained: "I can't be in a serious relationship at a young age . . . Because there's too many people to see. You know, too many things to do." These narratives revealed that many respondents accepted the general notion that there was an appropriate age when they should stop having casual sex, but they indicated that they simply had not reached it yet. Quinton, a 19-year-old with four recent casual sex partners who just graduated high school, explained how he was in the process of changing but stopped short of a complete endorsement of involvement in a more settled relationship: "Oh that made me change about the females because like I was saying, about the relationships . . . I tried to like work out a relationship and give them months and shit instead of weeks . . . I'm only 19 and I be feeling like I'm 90 . . ."

The narratives revealed considerable diversity in these calculations, however, as some individuals within the sample believed that they had indeed reached an age when they were too old to have casual sex. For example, Melvin, who was mentioned earlier, explained why he no longer wanted to engage in casual sexual encounters:

It gets old. It's played out to me now . . . I tried to have friends with benefits, but I didn't want to get like emotionally attached to somebody. Like with some other females, I wasn't really emotionally attached . . . Because I wasn't ready for a girlfriend . . . it was just like I wanted a girlfriend. I wanted to be serious with a female . . . Because I feel for one, just try. I mean I was what-twenty! I was getting older.

From these respondents' perspectives, casual sex was viewed as a normal part of the life course. However, many of the comments did reflect that this was a developmental phase and indicated that later on they may want to stop having casual sex and start to look for more serious relationships. The variability in perspectives on timing we observed appears consistent with more general studies that have documented considerable diversity in the degree to which individuals "feel like an adult" (Benson and Elder 2011), and with statistics revealed increasing complexity in what constitute normative pathways from adolescence to adulthood. Such discussions about the place of casual sex similarly revealed that most individuals accepted the idea of eventually settling down but varied significantly in the timetable they found desirable for this to occur.

Consequences of casual sex. Even though casual sex most often was associated with low attachment, and was viewed as involving lower emotional risk compared with committed relationships, respondents recognized various consequences of their casual sexual behavior and included references to both positive and negative consequences in their narrative accounts. One of the most commonly reported negative consequences of casual sex was that someone was hurt emotionally. Another negative consequence was that casual sex can sometimes lead to confrontation if the sex partner was in a committed relationship with someone else. The positive consequences included eventually moving into a committed relationship or friendship, enjoying casual sex and wanting to continue the behavior, and getting approval from peers. It is interesting and potentially important to note that these themes stress social rewards and costs, rather than detriments to health, as is often emphasized in prevention messages.

Getting too attached. Even though casual sexual relationships were often forged with the idea of avoiding emotional entanglements, a number of male and female respondents reported getting emotionally hurt. For instance, Justin, a 17-year-old with three casual sex partners, explained that he felt used by his reoccurring casual sex partner. When asked what he did not like about his

casual sex relationship Justin said: “I don’t know. I mean, a relationship, you should care about each other or something. You should talk to each other. Stuff like that. That’s (sex) all she was worried about.” Emily, a 21-year-old with three casual sex partners, defined her relationship with Dylan as “a friend with benefits” but nevertheless found herself becoming emotionally invested in the relationship:

[Dylan was a] friend with benefits that I actually hung out with, talked to, went places with out in public, dinners, you know what I’m saying—but yet he had a girlfriend. But I started finding myself having feelings for him, because of some of the things he would do for me . . . He showed me he cared, in so many words. So . . . um . . . maybe about a month and a half ago, he stopped calling me just out of nowhere. Ain’t heard from Dylan. Haven’t seen Dylan, I’m calling him and he’s hanging up on me . . . Why? Dude, we’ve hung out for this long . . . I’m your friend. You can tell me anything you want. I know about your girlfriend. I know about your son. What’s going on now? (He had become involved with a new partner and moved in with her). Why would he want to go that route instead of stay with me? Where did I go wrong?

Thus, for relationships that extended over a period of time, it is intuitive to expect that feelings of affection or interdependence might develop. However, as Emily’s quote suggests, there may be negative consequences for the individual when there is an apparent mismatch in the evolution of such feelings. Ben, an 18-year-old with nine casual sex partners and quoted below, described difficulties that he experienced when his partner was the one who became emotionally invested in what had started out as a causal relationship. He and his partner Melissa “hooked up” at a party and eventually had sex. Early in the relationship, he told her that as he was headed off to college, he wanted to be free to socialize during this phase of his life. Yet, he soon realized that perhaps because he was Melissa’s first sexual partner, she was unable to sustain the casual parameters that he envisioned:

It ended up being way more of a psychological issue than what she thought it was going to be . . . She just got really attached. Um, yeah, just super attached . . . Her friends had told me that like after the fact that it was like a huge deal to her and like I know that I was . . . I felt like I was kind of thrown into the situation that I didn’t realize how huge of deal it was and it scared me . . . It just felt like a lot of pressure. It felt like she expected us to get married some day or something like that . . .

Drama with the other boyfriend/girlfriend. Sometimes casual sex occurred when one of the partners was in a committed relationship with someone else. Among young adults who had a recent casual sex partner, 56 percent had sex with someone while being involved in another relationship (rates that are higher than reported by the young adult sample [22 percent] as a whole). When this happens, there was a chance that there would be confrontation with the casual sex partner’s other committed partner. Janis, an 18-year-old woman with three casual sex partners explained that her casual sex partner’s girlfriend did not like her and was very angry because Janis slept with her boyfriend: “. . . And she don’t like me, she rolls her eyes and stuff at me, but you can’t be mad at me, be mad at your boyfriend.” Janis goes on to say that the casual sex partner and her boyfriend, Jonathan, got into a physical fight. Thus, casual sex does not always preclude complications such as jealousy and conflict particularly when the casual sex activity is a result of cheating in a committed relationship.

Casual sex is NOT always about regret. As expected, respondents who had casual sex were not likely to report that love was a condition for sex. Only 22 percent of the sample who reported a recent casual sex partner either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that sex should only occur with someone they love, levels of endorsement that were lower than for the sample as a whole (47 percent). For example, Randy mentioned earlier described his definition of a casual sex relationship:

If you're gonna be friends with benefits, then it's basically like "when I want to have sex and when you want to have sex, we're gonna have sex." And then "if you want to have sex with somebody else, then you have sex with somebody else." And just not get mad at each other because it's guaranteed . . . well not necessarily guaranteed, but it's sex when you want it at the push of a button, or a phone call. Like hey, what's up? Want to come over? Okay.

Although women ($M = 2.49$) more often than men ($M = 1.87$) reported having regrets (Table 2), it is important to highlight that 48 percent of our sample did not have any regret of their last casual sex relationship with 55 percent of male and 37 percent of female respondents stating they did not regret their last casual sex experience (results not shown). Carla was a freshman at a community college who reported four recent casual sex partners. When asked how she came to the decision to have casual sex, she said:

It was Easter, and I was drunk, and he walked over from a friend's. We went over to our friend Amanda's house. He wasn't drunk though that's the thing. I was drunk. He wasn't. I mean we stayed the night at my friend Amanda's house and one thing led to another . . . I was down with it.

Even when looking back at a casual sexual relationship, and a possible role of alcohol, Carla did not express that she felt remorse about her experience. In fact, she explicitly stated that she wanted to have that casual sexual relationship.

Casual sex can lead to committed relationships. As stated above, most casual sexual experiences were not formed with the idea of developing a romantic relationship. However, 28 percent of men and 34 percent of women who reported a recent casual sex experience indicated that they wanted to become boyfriend/girlfriend after having sex (Table 2). Thus, casual sex was sometimes a step in the direction of a romantic relationship. Twenty-four percent of individuals who had recent casual sex stated that they were somewhat closer or much closer after the first time they had sex with their most recent casual sex partner (result not shown) with men ($M = 2.38$) and women ($M = 2.40$) reporting similar consequences (Table 2). For example, Tim, explained how he slept with his girlfriend the first day they met: "The first time we had met and had sex the first day we met, the next time we got together, we became boyfriend and girlfriend and that was monogamy right there." It is not typical, but committed relationships sometimes started as casual sex relationships. These results are similar to those of Epstein et al. (2009) who found in a qualitative sample of college men ($N = 19$) that casual sex can sometimes lead to committed relationships. Nevertheless, additional analyses indicated that it was rare to start a romantic relationship with sex; only 3 percent of the total young adult sample ($N = 700$) had sex with their current or most recent boyfriend/girlfriend on the first day they met (results not shown).

Another possibility is that casual sex can lead to friendships. Kelly, a 20-year-old with one casual sex partner, stated that her only casual sex partner became one of her close friends. She explained, "We're friends, we talk everyday so it's like, I mean it's not like, there's no attachment whatsoever . . . we kind of became friends after the fact because we were more acquaintance before." For Kelly, casual sex was not an experience that she later regretted. She felt that the relationship brought her closer, although not in the traditional romantic sense.

Approval from peers. Although peers provide a normative climate that may endorse casual sex, significantly more men ($M = 2.58$) than women ($M = 1.87$) stated that a motive for their own involvement was that their friends had casual sex (Table 2). This is consistent with other research that highlights vestiges of the double standard regarding sexual norms (Kreager and Staff 2009). Although a small percentage of respondents reported that peer pressure was a motive for casual sex, some reported acceptance by their friends after casual sex. Table 2 illustrated that men ($M = 3.00$) and women ($M = 2.78$) reported similar levels of approval from friends regarding

their causal relationship. For instance, Kaleb, a 21-year-old with two recent casual sex partners, explained that he was accorded higher status with peers due to his greater experience with casual sex partners. When asked about how his peer group influenced his participation in casual sexual relationships, he said, "I was the best of them all. (Laughter) . . . Then, after that it was somebody else. It was a competition." It is interesting to note that aspects of the normative climate or one's emphasis on these dynamics can change, however, as Kaleb described felt that he had gotten "past" this competitive aspect since he had become involved with a serious girlfriend.

The qualitative data revealed that peers have an influence beyond the initial decision to have sex as friends also emerged as a potential influence on the type of casual sex partner individuals chose. Carla, a community college student with four recent casual sex partners, explained that her friends supported her having casual sex but only with certain types of men:

Um, with Tom, all my friends can't stand him. They think that he was in it for sex just because he had the whole line of the future and they all think it's bullshit. Ian, everyone's friends with Ian so there's none there. They understand where I'm coming from with the whole, the whole thing with him . . . I talk to my friends about everything.

Carla's friends did not judge her for having casual sex, but there was the implication that she should have been more selective in her choices of casual sex partners.

Kaleb's and Carla's experiences illustrate that motivations for and consequences of casual sex may affect each other through a continuous feedback process. Although respondents appeared reluctant to cite peer influence as a specific motive, prior analyses of the TARS data indicate that friends' attitudes were a significant predictor of number of sexual partners (Lyons et al. 2011), and respondents who participated in the qualitative interviews did not uniformly suggest that peers sanction them negatively for engaging in casual sex. This acceptance, along with other motivations described above, could free up the individual to engage in further casual sex behavior. Consistent with this, it is important to note that the majority of young adults with a recent casual sex partner (74 percent) told their friends about their relationship (Table 2), although some indicated within their narratives that not talking or bragging about these experiences was a sign of their maturity. Thus, several respondents stated that they talked to their peers about their casual sexual experiences when they were younger, but not anymore. For instance, James, who dropped out of high school and had five recent casual sex partners, stated,

I mean, yeah, when you were younger, I guess but now it really doesn't matter. I mean like I don't even need to tell anybody else what I'm doing as far as that goes, you know . . . Because I mean like I guess when I was younger, it was like I was all excited about it, like I wanted to brag to my friends about it and so forth.

Thus, peer support appears as one source of motivation for engaging in casual sex, but the consequences for approval and need to share specific details with friends may be age specific. It is also important to underscore that the analyses of in-depth interviews focused heavily on young adults who reported casual sex experience. Thus, individuals without casual sexual experience (who socialized with friends who hold more conservative beliefs) would likely espouse motivations for refraining from such involvements and perceive more social censure and a broader range of consequences stemming from this pattern of behavior.

Discussion

The current analyses are consistent with prior studies in documenting that casual sexual experiences are relatively common occurrences during early young adulthood (Bogle 2008; Fielder and Carey 2010; Lyons et al. 2013). One of the major limitations of prior research, however, is the focus on negative precursors and consequences. This problem-focused lens has emphasized the

role of alcohol as a precipitant (Bogle 2008), and exposure to sexual risk (Poppen 1995) and feelings of regret (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008) as important consequences. Although these are critical to an understanding of casual sexual encounters, the qualitative and quantitative data we analyzed also reflect a high level of acceptance of these behaviors. In addition, motivations and consequences were not always cast in a negative light.

This study corroborated results of prior research in that substance use (Grello et al. 2006), sexual desire (Regan and Dreyer 1999), and a desire to avoid emotional attachment (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) were frequently endorsed as precipitants or sources of motivation for involvement in casual sexual relationships. However, the results also highlighted multiple ways in which the nature of the early young adulthood phase, itself, influenced receptivity to these less serious relationships. Respondents who participated in the qualitative interviews often framed these experiences as transitional, referencing geographic mobility, relationship transitions, as well as their current focus on academic or career concerns. Respondents highlighted more subjective considerations that appeared similarly life-course specific. For example, some emphasized that less serious relationships were consistent with their need for identity exploration, and others specifically noted that they were still “too young to be tied down.”

The narrative accounts nevertheless reflect diversity in the place of casual sex during this stage of life, as some of the older respondents claimed that they believed that they were getting too old for casual sex. Further, these descriptions included frequent mention of previous serious relationships, or a desire to forge a more committed relationship in the future, suggesting that more intimate, long-term relationships were still considered desired goals over the long haul. Indeed, the data revealed that a majority of the individuals who reported casual involvement had been involved in one or more traditional dating relationships as well, underscoring that these were not necessarily mutually exclusive sets of relationship experiences.

While these data complicate the traditional portrait of casual sex by including attention to positive features identified by these respondents, clearly these short-term relationships may also be associated with negative consequences for some of the individuals involved. For example, about half of the respondents noted some level of regret regarding their most recent casual sexual encounter. However, an important consideration is that many of the specific negative consequences mentioned did not relate to health concerns (e.g., sexually transmitted infections), but instead reflected relationship and social issues. Specific consequences mentioned within the context of the relationship history narratives included becoming emotionally attached and experiencing confrontations with committed partners. Although a number of prior studies have suggested distinctly gendered motivations and consequences for casual sex, the current analyses revealed only a few significant gender differences. For example, both men and women reported relatively high agreement with items focused on physical pleasure and the role of substance use. However, men were more likely to endorse the view that they participated in casual sex because it was fun and were also more likely to agree with the idea that they were too young to be tied down. Further, while peer considerations were not frequently mentioned as motivations by either gender, men more often than women stated that they had casual sex because their friends were doing it (see also Garcia and Reiber 2008). However, the qualitative data provide a more complex window on these social dynamics, as women in the sample who had engaged in casual sexual encounters indicated that they often discussed these experiences with friends and did not find that friends disapproved of their behaviors (see Paul 2006). In addition, while much theorizing has emphasized women's stronger relationship focus relative to their male counterparts (Gilligan 1982), results revealed no gender differences in the two relationship-focused motivations (being in love and wanting to be closer). Male and female respondents infrequently endorsed these motivations suggesting that both men and women understood the sexual script that casual sex was meant to have less emotional attachment. In analyses focused on perceived consequences, few gender differences were identified; however, men less often than women reported regret.

These findings are similar to the Paul and Hayes (2002) qualitative findings on the broader behavior of hooking up in that women compared to men were more likely to have regret and shame after a hook up experience. However, it is notable that a substantial share of women who reported casual sex did not indicate that they regret casual sexual experiences. It is also possible that men underreported and women overreported such feelings. Future research may benefit from considering more subtle measures of the positive and negative consequences associated with casual sex, including feelings of regret.

It is significant to note that in our sample men compared with women report more casual sex partners. It is possible that the larger group of men was having casual sex with a smaller group of women with frequent involvement. Another reason that there may be a difference by gender is that men may overestimate and women underestimate their number of casual sex partners. Nevertheless, the gender difference in the number of casual sex partners was consistent with prior studies on casual sex behavior (e.g., Eisenberg et al. 2009; Grello et al. 2006; Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006; Paul et al. 2000). A meta-analysis (Petersen and Hyde 2010) of national datasets showed that there was a medium effect size ($d = .38$) for the gender difference in number of casual sex partners. Future research should include couple level analysis to determine if there is a true gender difference in casual sex partners or if the gender difference is a result of reporting bias.

It is important to highlight that most casual sex relationships do not occur with strangers, and most young adults indicate that they had sex more than one time with their casual partner. The quantitative findings highlight that both men and women understand the sexual scripts of no commitment regarding casual sexual relationships; however, the qualitative and quantitative data both reveal that casual sex relationships are different than “one-night stands” and can involve relationship churning that can include sex with an ex (Halpern-Meekin et al. 2013). Although young adults in casual sex relationships are not likely to be sexually exclusive, nor is sexual exclusivity expected as it would be in more conventional intimate relationships, these are relationships nonetheless, which may have longer-term implications including evolving into a romantic relationship. Thus, it is important that future research that studies motivations for and implications of young adult sexual relationships conceptualizes one-night stands from casual sex.

This study had a few limitations but represents an important first step. The TARS contains specific questions on casual sex, including items on motivations and consequences, and the qualitative data provide further context for interpreting results of quantitative analyses. Nevertheless, the sample is regional and includes over-samples of nonwhite youth. Thus, these data cannot be used to calculate national estimates, or to generalize beyond the region encompassed by this sample. Further, the qualitative data are based on a nonrepresentative subsample. We hope the themes presented here might be developed into items used in larger scale social surveys. Another limitation of the current analysis is that we did not focus on the ways in which socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, or other key characteristics (e.g., family background) may have influenced these attitudes and behaviors. An important next step is to consider how adolescent experiences influence and shape casual sexual experiences in early adulthood. Further, the current study focuses on heterosexual casual sex and thus additional research is needed using samples of young adults with same-sex casual sexual experiences. In addition, these findings were based on individuals’ self-reports of their casual sexual relationships, which may not be consistent with the views of their casual sexual partners. Certainly, couple data would provide important additional insights. In addition, we asked respondents about their motivations for engaging in a casual sex relationship after the behavior occurred. It is possible that respondents changed their understanding of their motivations based on whether they regretted the experience. Future research should include longitudinal data to determine if motivations change before and after casual sexual behavior. Finally, the data were collected in 2004, suggesting the need to continue data collection efforts, and in particular to move beyond college samples to incorporate a range of distinctive life trajectories as influences on the nature and meanings of casual sex.

Future research on casual sex should also explore in more detail the role that identities play in decision making about these behaviors. Casual sex was relatively common or normative for this age group, and young adults reflected this by stating that they were too young to be tied down. Additional research is needed on how other subjective appraisals (e.g., “whether the individual feels like an adult,” see Benson and Elder 2011) influence individuals’ patterns of romantic and sexual behaviors. The qualitative results suggested that individuals often used negative experiences with past romantic partners as a motive for participating in casual sex behavior, suggesting the importance of considering cognitive and emotional processes that trace back to earlier relationship dynamics. Also, more research is needed to determine whether young adults have less casual sex as they age because they gain the identity of adulthood or is it a result of transitioning into adult roles such as marriage. Finally, future research should investigate the motivations of young adults who choose not to participate in casual sexual behavior. The relationship landscape of young adulthood is increasingly complex and requires attention to the full spectrum of relationship experiences.

Appendix

Table A1. Demographic Characteristics of In-depth Interview and Survey Samples.

	All young adults sample (<i>N</i> = 700) (%)	Casual sex experienced sample (<i>N</i> = 239)	In-depth interview sample (<i>N</i> = 44)
		Percent (%)	Percent (%)
Gender			
Female	52	41	32
Male	48	59	68
Race			
White	64	56	52
Black	23	30	32
Hispanic	8	8	14
Other	5	6	2
Age			
17	0	0	7
18	32	30	23
19	15	18	11
20	40	38	43
21	12	12	16
22	1	1	0
Education			
Less than high school	11	16	16
Enrolled in high school	25	26	27
High school degree/ GED not enrolled	26	26	25
Enrolled in college	38	32	32

Source. Toledo Adolescence Relationship Study Wave Three.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Our sample had similar casual sex estimates compared to other samples. In their sample of college students, Armstrong et al. (2010) reported 67 percent of sexually active college seniors had casual sex. In our sample, of sexually active 21-year-olds, 67 percent had casual sex.

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