

Life Course Specific Motivators and Implications of Early Young Adult Casual Sex Behavior

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Abstract: Most young adults have some casual sex experience. It is important to understand the motivations for such behavior because of potential health consequences. Prior research has not investigated the possible life course specific motivators and implications of young adult casual sex behavior. We use the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study which is a diverse sample of young adults (N=210). We also utilize a subset of in-depth relationship narratives (N=44) to answer our research questions. We find that traditional motivators remain the most common reasons for participating in casual sex. These include sexual pleasure and substance use. However, young adults also claim life course specific motivators such as geographic mobility, social learning from prior romantic relationships, and feeling too young to be tied down. Further our sample provides some positive implications for participating in casual sex activity. Future research should consider life course specific motivators and implications when studying casual sex activity.

Casual sex is considered sexual behavior that occurs outside of a committed relationship. There has been some growing concern over casual sex because of potential physical and mental health outcomes. More specifically, casual sex is associated with lower rates of contraceptive and condom use resulting in greater risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Manlove, Ryan, Franzetta 2007; Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2000). Much of the prior work on casual sex behavior has reflected these health concerns and has focused on contraception or problem behaviors such as alcohol misuse (e.g., Desiderato and Crawford 1995; Grello, Welsh, Harper 2006; Manlove et al. 2007), but does not consider the developmental significance of casual sex. This study provides a more nuanced understanding of casual sex that occurs during the early young adult years with a focus on the both positive and negative motivations and implications for participating in casual sex.

Drawing on life course theory and a multi-method approach (in-depth interviews and survey data) we investigate the motivations and implications of casual sex that occurs during the early young adult years. We rely on recently collected data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (N=210) which includes specific questions about the relationship context of sexual experiences. This research contributes to the literature in three ways. First, exploring the motivations and implications of young adults' sexual experience, especially casual sex, can lead to a better understanding of the lived relational and health realities of this targeted population. Findings from the current study can help in the development of programs and public policy on sexual health behavior. Second, little research has used mixed methods to explore the meanings and motivations underlying casual sex. The literature can benefit from a mixed method approach, not only to examine trends in casual sex, but also the decisions underlying choices to engage in casual sex behavior. Finally, much of the research on casual sex experience among young adults is comprised of four-year college samples (e.g., England, Fitzgibbons Shafer, and Fogarty. 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Grello et al. 2006; Paul and Hayes 2002; Paul McManus and Hayes.

2000; Paul 2006; Regan and Dreyer 1999) even though university students have some of the lowest amounts of casual sex activity (Lyons, Manning, Giordano, Longmore 2010). It is well documented that young adults take multiple paths leading to adulthood regarding employment, education, and family roles (Rindfuss 1991; Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, and Park 2005; Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber 2005); however, the research on sexual behavior has not reflected this complexity. We rely on a random sample of teenagers who have been followed into early adulthood (18-22) and includes young men and women pursuing many different education and employment trajectories, not just four-year college bound young adults.

### **Background**

Life course theory based research indicates that young adulthood is a distinct stage in the life course (Arnett 2004; Settersten and Ray 2010). Similar research suggests that an individual's trajectories and life transitions are influenced both by coexisting trajectories and transitions (MacMillian and Copher 2005) and previous events and transitions (Elder 1985). As we apply this approach to our research question, casual sex behaviors do not occur in isolation from other life events but, instead casual sex behavior has a reciprocal relationship with other life events. For example, the educational arena may influence sexual behavior and also sexual behavior may affect educational outcomes. McCarthy and Grodsky (2010) found that teens who only had casual sex had lower educational outcomes compared to adolescents who had romantic relationships or romantic and casual intimate relationship experiences. This suggests, in light of the life course theory, that sexual behavior is influenced by other life trajectories and transitions. Further, young adulthood has specific normative behaviors and attitudes associated with it because it is a specific life state. This is a time during the life course of frequent residential movement, higher education enrollment, identity exploration, and the time to gain romantic and sexual experience before transitioning into the full adult role of marriage (Arnett 2004). Indeed, the historic

highpoint of age at first marriage (26 for women and 28 for men) in the United States (US Census 2009) suggests there is more life course space for premarital sexual relationships. Arnett (2004) points out that much of the commonality of this age group is that there is a lot of diversity in life paths. In sum, the life course perspective provides the basic concept that people in early young adulthood are a unique group with patterned casual sexual behavior which may be influenced by specific young adult life course events such as educational attainment or residential mobility. Also, these life course specific motivations are associated with young adult specific implications.

### *Casual Sex Behavior Trends and Correlates*

For many individuals casual sex debut starts during adolescence. Manning, Giordano, Longmore (2006) reported that among sexual active teenagers, 38% had a casual sex experience. Casual sex becomes more common as individuals age from adolescence to young adulthood. Among all 18-24-year-olds, 54% reported ever having casual sex and 39% reported having had casual sex during the last two years with men reporting more partners than women (Lyons, Manning, Giordano, Longmore 2010). Thus, casual sex behavior appears to be common among young adults.

At the same time, young adults are not only having casual sex but they are also engaging in committed, romantic relationships (Sassler 2010). In fact, prior research has shown that engaging in romantic relationships was associated with an increase in casual sex behavior (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, Giordano 2010). Researchers who study casual sex have yet to examine the mechanism through which romantic relationships influence casual sex relationships. The current study investigates how prior romantic relationships can be a motivator for casual sex behavior during young adulthood.

There are shifts in attitudes and behaviors during early young adulthood. As individuals transition into young adulthood, they become more open regarding their sexual attitudes (Lefkowitz and Gillen 2006). For some, the time spent during young adulthood in college is

often seen as an environment more tolerant of experimenting with sexual behavior than any other time or place during the life course (Bogle 2008). These liberal attitudes and increased experience with casual sex behavior is why the young adult years is an important stage in the life course when studying such behavior.

### *Motivations*

Prior research has focused on several traditional motivations for participating in casual sex which may apply to casual sex at a variety of life course stages. Some of the most commonly reported reasons for having casual sex during early adulthood are substance use, sexual satisfaction, and weak emotional attachment (Paul 2006; Regan and Dreyer 1999; Grello et al 2006; Li and Kenrick 2006). We investigate how young adults reference these traditional motivations and consider who they are tied to their life course stage.

At the same time, there are motivators for casual sex that result because respondents are in a particular stage of their life, young adulthood. Demographic work indicates that young adulthood is characterized by geographic movement, education enrollment, and employment changes (Rindfuss 1991; Osgood et al. 2005; Mouw 2005), while at the same time, a period of relationship and sexual exploration (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2004). Thus, we examine how motivations for casual sex during young adulthood may be linked to their particular life course stage.

### *Implications*

When investigating implications of casual sex, prior studies focus on the negative consequences of casual sex, such as regret, lower educational outcomes, poorer relationship quality and depressive symptoms (Campbell 2008; Grello et al. 2006; Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; McCarthy and Grodsky 2010; Paik 2010). More specifically, women who participated in casual sex were more likely to report having feelings of regret compared to women who did not participate in such behavior (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Another potential negative implication

of casual sex behavior is educational outcomes. McCarthy and Grodsky (2010) reported that adolescents who only participated in casual sex behavior had lower educational outcomes compared to teens who either had romantic relationships or romantic and casual relationships. Finally, Grello, Welsh, and Harper (2006) reported that men who had casual sex had lower depressive symptoms and women who participated in casual sex activity had higher depressive symptoms compared to their female peers who did not engage in casual sex behavior. This may not always be the case. Eisenberg et al. (2009) analyzed a diverse sample of young and did not report a significant difference between depressive symptoms and the most recent sex partner being casual. The literature on implications of casual sex has focused on negative consequences. However, the high levels of casual sexual activity and more liberal sexual attitudes of young adults (Lefkowitz 2005) suggests that casual sexual experiences may not always be tied to negative outcomes as viewed by the young adults themselves.

Based on prior research, we expect that many young adults recognize casual sex as a common occurrence during this life stage (Paul 2006; Lyons, Manning, Giordano, Longmore 2010). Research on adolescents suggests that a substantial minority feel closer after having casual sex and it is sometimes the beginning of a romantic relationship (Manning et al. 2006). We extend prior work that focuses on negative implications of casual sex and examine how young adults themselves view the life course specific implications of casual sex with an emphasis on both the negative and positive implications.

### *Gender*

Prior researchers (Regan and Dreyer 1999; England, Fitzgibbons, Shafer, Fogarty 2007; Grello et al. 2006) have reported that gender is important to consider when investigating the motivations and implications of young adult casual sex behavior. The basic trends in casual sexual behavior differ according to gender with men reporting unique trajectories and greater casual sex experience (Poppen 1995; Grello et al. 2006; Paul et al. 2000; Lyons et al. 2010). Further, there are

potential gender differences in the motivations for participating in casual sex. Regan and Dreyer (1999) reported that men were more likely to claim the social environment (e.g. status among friends) as a reason for participating in casual sex and women were more likely to participate in casual sex because of interpersonal reasons (e.g. mutual feelings of attraction and friendship). Young adult women may have a line to walk when it comes to casual sex behavior. England, Shafter, Fogarty (2007) reported that college females were motivated like college males to participate in casual sex behavior. The researchers did not find differences between men and women in terms of enjoying a casual sex experience. However, a college woman may have been judged harshly by her peers if she had a high number of casual sex partners. This sexual double standard may prevent women from engaging in a high number of casual sex relationships. Armstrong, Hamilton, and England (2010) echoed this finding and claimed that casual sex behavior could give young women a bad reputation. Based on prior research, we expect to find some gender differences in the motivations for participating in casual sex behavior.

### **Current Investigation**

The goal of this paper is to examine the motivations and implications of casual sex in early adulthood. We explore gender similarities and differences in the motivations and implications using largely quantitative survey data of 210 respondents ages 18 to 22. We analyze the life course specific motivations and implications of young adults' casual sex experiences using in-depth interviews with 44 young adults ages 17 to 22

### **Data**

#### *The Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS)*

To investigate the outlined research questions, wave III of the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study (TARS) is used. The TARS was originally collected to investigate the family, peer, and romantic partners' influence on romantic and sexual behaviors of adolescents. The first wave was collected in 2000, which included a random sample of youth in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>,

and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in Lucas County, Ohio. Wave III was collected approximately four years later in 2004. The geographic area of Lucas County is similar to estimates of race and ethnicity, family income, and education to the national population. Wave I, includes a sample of 1,316 youth. School records were used as for the sampling frame but school attendance was not required for inclusion in the sample. Most of the interviews occurred in the respondents' homes. There is an oversampling of racial minority youth. We limit the wave III quantitative sample (N=1114) to young adult (ages 18-22) respondents (N=700) and respondents who had at least one casual sex partner (N=331). Finally, our sample is then is comprised of respondents who had answered the casual sex motivation questions (asked of respondents who had casual sex in the past two years) which reduces the final quantitative sample to 210 respondents (n=127 men and n=83 women).

We also draw on the sub-set of in-depth face-to-face in-depth interviews. These interviews were often conducted at different times than the survey interviews and were semi-structured with probing when needed. The qualitative data was drawn from respondents who were administered an in-depth interview at wave III of the TARS. Interviews were conducted from August 2005 to August 2006, collecting a total sample of 92 respondents. Respondents were selected if they engaged in high risk sexual behaviors, such as a high number of sexual partners and other risk factors, low socioeconomic status, or lack of school success. Finally, there was a comparative group, which included respondents who scored average on the mentioned risk factors. The goal of the interviews was to create relationship narratives where respondents were asked to describe their romantic and sexual history and the meanings behind them. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. These relationship narratives provided the data for the qualitative component of the current study. Many of our qualitative data questions were based on the most recent sexual experience so our current analyses were limited to a subsample of 44 respondents who discussed casual sex relationships.

The subsample contains more men (N=30) than women (N=14). The distribution of key sociodemographic characteristics are provided in Table 1.

First, all the interviews are coded using ATLAS ti, a qualitative database. Next, codes of motivations and implications are organized and classified so that broader themes emerge. All the names are changed to ensure confidentiality. Finally, quantitative data is utilized to supplement the in-depth interviews, and t-tests are used to determine gender differences and similarities for motivators and implications of casual sex.

The TARS is an appropriate dataset for the research questions for several reasons. First, the TARS data provide detailed measurement of motivations for casual sex behavior and this level of detail are not available on larger national data sources. Second, TARS has qualitative in-depth interviews of a sub-sample of respondents at wave III who were asked about the motivations of their casual sex experiences and motivations for such behavior. Finally, much of the research on casual sex uses college samples. To be selected into TARS, school attendance was not a requirement, which means that outlying individuals are included in the current project. Individuals who are not attending high school during wave I may have different higher education enrollment and casual sex trajectories at later waves and, if not accounted for, may bias the findings if using a school-based sampling frame.

### **Measures**

During the survey two questions are asked about the relationship context of the casual sex relationship, one question about casual sex attitudes, six questions are utilized that measure motivations of casual sex behaviors, and four about the implications. For these questions, respondents are asked about their most recent casual partner during the last 24 months.

*Relationship Context.* The young adults in the sample are asked two specific questions about their most recent casual sex partner. The first question asks, “When you had sex for the first

time how long did you know this person?” Response are coded 1= “Just met that day” and 0= “If they knew their partner longer than that day.” This question measures whether the casual sex relationship is likely to occur with strangers. The other question we use to measure the relationship context of the most recent casual sex partner is “How many times did you have sex with *casual sex partner*?” The responses are coded as 1= “Only that one time” and 0= “more than one time.” This question determines whether the relationship is a one night stand or not.

*Attitudes.* To measure a global attitude about casual sex behaviors we use the measure “A person should only have sex with someone they love.” The original responses range from 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 5= “Strongly Agree.” The answers are dummy coded so that 1= “Strongly Agree or Agree.”

*Motivations.* Respondents are asked “To what extent do you agree that the following are reasons why you had sex with *casual sex partner*?” With the responses ranging from 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 5= “Strongly Agree” so, higher scores on the scale mean more agreement with the motivation. The responses are then recoded so that 1= “Strongly Agree or Agree.” The following two questions are *sexual* motivators, “I was horny” and “I thought it would be fun.” We measure *substance use* as a motivator with the question, “We were drinking or using drugs.” To measure *relationship based* motivations we draw on three indicators, “I was in love” “I thought it would bring the relationship closer” (response 1= “Strongly Agree or Agree” and 0= “Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree or Disagree”) as well as a related question “Did you want *casual sex partner* to be your girlfriend/boyfriend” with response categories of 0= “No” and 1= “Yes.” To tap an indicator of *age and commitments* we rely on the question “I’m too young to be tied down to one girl” which has responses of 1= “Agree” 0= “Disagree.”

*Implications.* Three questions measured *peer acceptance* of the relationship “My friends were all doing it” “Did your friends approve of this relationship” and “Did you tell your friends about this relationship.” The first question original responses ranges from 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 5=

“Strongly Agree.” The answers are dummy coded so that 1= “Strongly Agree or Agree.” The question about peer approval of the relationship has response categories of 1= “Strongly Disapproved” to 5= “Strongly Approved.” This is also dummy coded so that 1= “Strongly Approved or Approved.” The final peer question about telling your friends about the casual relationship is coded as 1= “Yes” and 0 = “No.” To measure *regret* of the sexual behavior we rely on the following question, “How much do you regret having sex with *casual sex partner*” responses ranged from 1= “Not at all” to 5= “Very much” and is recoded so the 1= “Felt some Regret” and 0= “Not at all.” To determine *closeness* to the sexual partner after having sex we ask “After you first had sex, did you feel closer” was coded 1= “Yes” and 0= “No.”

## Results

### Casual Sex Levels and Attitudes

An indicator of approval of casual sex is that 25% of young adults believe it is acceptable to have sex with someone who they do not love. A greater proportion of men (34%) than women (16%) endorse this view (results not shown). In terms of casual sex behavior, we find that 56% of sexually young adults report having had casual sex in the two years prior to the interview (results not shown). The average number of casual sex partners during the last two years for sexually active young adults was 2.79 and was greater for men (3.55) than women (1.87) (results not shown). The relationship context varied such that most of the respondents knew their most recent casual sex partner. Among young adults who have had casual sex, 54% had sex with an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend. Men and women were equally likely to report having sex with an ex (results not shown). Overall, it was quite rare that the most recent casual sex partner someone they had just met (13% for men and 10% for women) (Table 2). These casual sex experiences may be part of concurrent relationships, we find of sexually active young adults 38% of men and 27% of women had sex either with someone who was in another relationship or had sex while in

a relationship with someone else (results not shown). Furthermore, we find that among recent casual sex experiences most had sex more than one time (62%).

### *Traditional Motivations for Having Casual Sex*

#### *Casual Sex is Fun*

Even though there are many concerns about casual sex, it is important to be mindful that sex can be a pleasurable activity. Respondents give two primary reasons for having casual sex including sexual satisfaction and having fun. Sixty-five percent of the men and 62% of the women who have had casual sex state the reason they have casual sex is because they are horny (Table 2). Melvin, a 20-year-old man with 12 casual sex partners during the past two years and left university after a semester and still lives with his mother, says casual sex is all about sexual satisfaction and states, "...I'm not putting no emotions or feelings into the girl I'm sleeping around with. It's just for pleasure."

The second ranked motivation for having casual sex is that "it is fun". This belief is endorsed by 58% of men and 44% of women (Table 2). Violet, a 20-year-old woman with one casual sex partners during the past two years and currently enrolled in a university with hopes of graduate school, states that she has casual sex because she thinks it will be fun:

I: Um, yeah, so um I was asking you about (inaudible) to Joe. And you were saying, I was saying, you said from the beginning he probably thought it was more... but then for you it really wasn't.

R: Right.

I: Ever, or just after the fact?

R: For me probably ever. I just, it was kind of like something to do. I guess. I don't know. It was like we were bored or something. I don't know. It was just (sex)...

For Violet, the sexual relationship she has with Joe is just for fun and because sex is something "to do," but she does not want a romantic relationship to follow. Similarly, Kelly, a 20-year-old woman with one casual sex partner but no recent partners and a university sophomore who hopes

to go to graduate school in Europe, explains her casual sex relationship as an understanding between two people that it is to be fun without commitment:

I: ...did you get in this friends with benefits relationship in the hopes that it would lead to more or because it filled a niche?

R: It was just for fun kind of...both people understand that there's not going to be an emotional attachment.

Overall, we find most respondents who have had casual sex view the experience as fun and an opportunity to explore sexual desire.

### *Substance Use*

Respondents state that substance use is often involved when a casual sex experience occurs. Twenty-eight percent of men and 38 percent of women state that the reason they have casual sex is because they are drinking or using drugs, which represents the third top ranked reason for having casual sex (Table2). There is not a significant different between men and women claiming that alcohol and drug use are a motivation for their last casual sex behavior.

Sara, a 20-year-old woman with two casual sex partners but no recent partners and who withdrew from community college because she had a child, uses the fact that she is intoxicated as an excuse for her casual sex behavior:

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.

Randy, a 20-year-old man with three recent casual sex partners, a high school degree, and works as a roofer, explains that the party scene can have an influential role in casual sex opportunities:

I: ...Was that strictly a friends with benefits?

R: 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 day later, never talked to her again.

Not every casual sex experience is related to substance use, but for some, it can be a factor in their decisions to engage in casual sex. We recognize that some respondents may be using substance use as a rationalization for casual sex.

### *Casual Sex and Relationships*

As expected, a motivation for casual sex relationships is avoiding emotional entanglements. The qualitative interviews indicate that casual sex partners are not supposed to have feelings for one another, which, for some, is an attractive quality for this type of relationship. Phil, an 18-year-old man with four casual sex partners during the past two years and a senior in high school who is not expecting to go to college, explains why his casual sex relationship is good because there is no commitment:

- I: ... And um, did you want to become closer? Or did you like want to...
- R: Me and her have an agreement that it doesn't go any farther than that.
- I: And tell me....
- R: 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.
- I: And what makes it cool, that there is no strings?
- R: Yeah, yeah big time, 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.
- I: Okay.
- R: And there would be no weirdness or nothing.
- I: And you don't think less of her for that? And she doesn't think less of you?
- R: No.

These qualitative findings are supported by survey results; only nine percent of respondents who have had casual sex state that they have casual sex because they are in love (Table 2). This

suggests there is little emotional attachment at the time sex occurs. Luke, a 21-year-old man with three casual sex partners and has a high school degree and currently works at a truck dealership with no intention of going back to school, talks about not getting emotionally attached before the sexual interaction happens to prevent later issues:

R: Yeah, it's nice to talk and let people know that that way you don't get feelings involved and have the friend relationship type deal that you want to happen. So it's nice for both people to know, that way later on down the line when you're going out with someone else, she sees you out there with that someone else and you get a weird, you know.

I: Spark the drama.

R: Yeah. That is a bad one to have, so it's good that everyone is on the same page.

Women like Kelly, a 20-year-old with one lifetime casual sex partner and university sophomore who hopes to go to graduate school, say they try not to have casual sex with someone who gets attached:

R: Um, I mean if both people understand that there's not going to be an emotional attachment.

I: Is that something that you talk about out front or is that something that you talk about after the fact?

R: Uh, I think I'm pretty good reading people. I wouldn't do that with someone who I thought was going to like...

I: Get clingy?

R: Yeah or like had a crush on me or something.

It is relatively rare to report that casual sex occurs in hopes of a future traditional relationship. Only 19 percent of respondents state they have casual sex because they think it will bring them closer to their casual sex partner (Table 2). Another appealing characteristic of casual sex relationships is that there are fewer problems compared to committed romantic relationships. James, an 18-year-old man with five recent casual sex partners who dropped out

of high school but got a GED, explains why he prefers casual sex relationships even more than the relationship with his girlfriend:

Like not, I don't know 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.

### *Motivations Resulting from the Life Course Stage*

#### *Transitional Casual Sex Relationships*

Casual sex relationships can be transitional in that they are between two committed relationships. Tori, a 20-year-old woman with one recent casual sex partner and just finished school to be a paramedic, explains that casual sex can be a way to “transition” between boyfriends. She is less invested in these relationships and lackadaisical about them. She says:

I: Um...what did you learn about those transitional relationships...

R: ... 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 is a way to fill a potential intimacy gap between two committed relationships. Similarly, Tim, a 19-year-old with four recent casual sex partners and who dropped out of community college and currently lives with his girlfriend, explains that he used casual sex relationships as a way to get over a break up with a girlfriend:

R: After we broke up, I'd probably say within that week I probably had sex with another girl already.

I: With the intent of developing a new relationship...?

R: 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 feels that he needs to “get to know people” before getting into a committed relationship; however, he holds much lower standards for casual sex relationships.

### *Casual Sex Relationships Do Not Hurt As Much*

Respondents choose casual sex relationships over committed relationships in some cases because they have been hurt by past boyfriends or girlfriends. Samantha, a 21-year-old woman with three recent casual sex partners and some community college experience, but currently not enrolled states:

I: You keep your friend with benefits, and then don't- but you have no relationship.

R: Exactly. Because why- I don't have to get my feelings involved. I won't get hurt. There's no drama, there's no nothing. We talk on the phone maybe once a week.

I: But you said you're still lonely.

R: Yes. Deep down inside. Fifty percent of me wants a boyfriend to be there with and somebody to cook for and somebody to work and come home and talk with, and then that other fifty percent is scared to death to even think about having a boyfriend.

I: Because?

R: Of the experience that I had. I'm scared to let loose again with somebody, let my feelings go, give them my all, you know what I'm saying... because then if I'm doing that, then it don't work out in three years, I'm gonna' be right back in the same position.

In addition, Samantha is afraid to get into a committed relationship because of the emotional pain she feels from past romantic relationships. In her view, casual sex relationships are less emotionally risky. Adam, a 20-year-old man with 26 recent casual sex partners and who spent the last two years of high school in technical training and now works at an auto body shop, started having casual sex after he broke up with the only girl with whom he had been intimate:

R: Yeah, well she was the first girl I was ever with. And...

I: Right.

R: ...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}.

I: What do you mean, you turned into a slut {LAUGH}?

R: {LAUGH} Just hanging out with girls, having sex with more than one girl in a week.

Adam later on in the interview explains that his ex-girlfriend had an abortion, and he did not have a say in the outcome of the pregnancy. This resulted in him not wanting to be involved with a committed girlfriend any time soon. Thus, the emotional pain from prior relationships can influence decisions about casual sex partnerships.

### *Too Busy for Commitment*

Some respondents feel they are too busy to have a committed relationship, but still can have non-committed sex. Jason, a 17-year-old with two lifetime casual sex partners but no recent partners and a junior at an online high school, states:

I: What, umm, in terms of relationships, like long term, or your next relationship, are you looking for a fling flang? Are you looking for a relationship-relationship?

R: 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: Because?

R: I got a lot of stuff still going on in my life.

At the time of interview, Jason was enrolled in an online high school and focusing on getting into a postsecondary technical training program. Lindsay, a 20-year-old woman with two casual sex partners and is a university sophomore, explains that timing is the main difference between casual sex relationships and committed relationships:

I: What denotes somebody- like how do they earn casual status with you or serious status with you?

R: It's really- 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 Frank- 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.

From Jason and Lindsay's perspectives, their lives are too busy to be in a committed relationship. At the same time, they are not willing to forgo any sexual relationship, so they engaged in casual sex.

### *Geographic Movement*

Young adults are extremely geographically mobile due to enrollment in school and moves for jobs and careers. This mobility influences their types of romantic and sexual relationships. Kaleb, a 21-year-old man with two recent casual sex partners, a high school degree, and currently working on small jobs to help pay child support, explains his sexual relationship remains casual because his partner is moving away to college:

I: OK...OK. Thinking about the person before Emma... that you were just going to hook up...did you want that person to be in a relationship?

R: I mean yeah. But, she was...

I: Why?

R: Uh...she was going to...it was her last year of high school, and she was about to go to college. So, I mean we could have worked out...But, it wouldn't have worked out cause, she was going to college.

Sara, a 20-year-old woman with two casual sex partners but no recent partners and who withdrew from community college because she had a child, explains that she has had casual sex with a close friend's cousin who lives in a different state:

I: Okay. And you like this guy.

R: Yeah. I still do, but he lives in (another state), so it's never gonna' happen.

I: ...Um and how like- um did you think that by sleeping with him, that that would elevate you to girlfriend status?

R: No. I knew it wasn't- It was just gonna be a casual-that I knew was going to be a

casual thing...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.

I: Okay. But you said you still like him though.

R: Yeah.

The geographic distance makes Sara aware that her casual sex partner will not become romantic. However, when Sara and her partner are in the same location, she wants to be intimate with him.

Sometimes individuals did not want to start romantic relationships in anticipation of moving in the near future. Even a temporary move, can prevent people from forming a committed relationship. Violet, a 20-year-old woman with one recent casual sex partner and currently enrolled in a university with hopes of graduate school, explains why she does not want to have a romantic relationship, "You know I, I wasn't like, I was just being single for awhile. And I could, I have been, 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 feels that having a committed relationship would be holding her back from fully experiencing studying abroad.

### *Too Young to Be Tied Down*

We find in the survey data that 26% of men and 20% of women who have had casual sex believe that they are too young to be tied down (Table 2) and this is consistent with responses from the qualitative interviews. For instance, A.J., a 17-year-old with three recent casual sex partners and who got his GED while in jail, explains, "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." However, there does appear to be an age when individuals feel like they should stop having casual sex, or they had casual sex when they were younger, but not now. Quinton, an 18-year-old with four recent casual sex partners and just graduated high school and is currently looking

for employment, explains how he is in the process of changing:

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 and shit. Like, I need me a woman who stays with me and treats me how I want to be treated.

Also, sometimes individuals start to feel like they are too old for casual sex relationships. For example, Melvin, a 20-year-old with 12 recent casual sex partners and who has one semester at a university but dropped out and still lives with his mother, explains why he does not want to have casual sex anymore:

I: So tell me like- what do you mean, you got tired of having like a hookup buddy?

R: Like um because it-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 is viewed as a normal part of the life course.

Conversely, there is a developmental phase when individuals want to stop having casual sex and start to look for more serious relationships.

### *Implications of Casual Sex*

Even though casual sex most often has low attachment and can be viewed as lower emotional risk compared to committed relationships, respondents still recognized that there are implications to their casual sex behavior. In the qualitative interviews, respondents state that there are both positive and negative implications of casual sex. One of most common negative implications is that someone is feeling emotionally hurt by the relationship. Another negative implication is that casual sex can sometimes lead to confrontation if the casual sex partner is in a committed relationship with someone else. The positive implications include entering in a

committed relationship or friendship, enjoying casual sex and wanting to continue the behavior, and getting approval from peers.

### *Getting Too Attached*

Men and women respondents report getting emotionally hurt by casual sex relationships. For instance, Justin, a 17-year-old with three casual sex partners, explains that he feels used by his reoccurring casual sex partner:

I: ...What did you want out of the relationship with Tonya that you weren't getting?

R: 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.

Samantha, a 21-year-old woman with three casual sex partners and some community college experience but is not currently enrolled, does not feel used like Justin, but does feel like she is settling when she engaged in casual sex relationships:

I: Why not a relationship? Why for you, does this work?

R: It don't, in a way. I guess I'm settling for less... We've never discussed a relationship.

I: And in your mind, you feel like that's settling.

R: To a certain extent, because I'm still lonely.

Unfortunately, some young adults do get hurt because one partner wants commitment and the other one does not. Also, some respondents have casual sex because they would rather have sex with someone they are not in a committed relationship with than not have anyone at all. The lack of attachment casual sex offers can lead people to the possibility of getting emotionally hurt.

### *Drama with the Other Boyfriend/Girlfriend*

Sometimes casual sex occurs when one of the partners is in a committed relationship with someone else. Of young adults who had casual sex, 38% had sex while one of the partners was dating someone else. When this happens, there is a chance that there will be confrontation with

the casual sex partner's other committed partners. Janis, an 18-year-old woman with three casual sex partners and dropped out of high school and wants to go back and get her GED, explains that her casual sex partner's girlfriend does not like her 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 her casual sex partner, Allan, and her boyfriend, Jonathan, got into a fight to the point that Jonathan choked Allan. Casual sex can sometimes lead to jealousy and possible conflict when the casual sex activity is actually cheating in a committed relationship.

### *Casual Sex is not Always about Regret*

As expected, respondents who have had casual sex are not likely to report that love is a condition for sex. Only 18% of men and 24% of women who have had casual sex agree with the idea that sex should only occur with someone they love (Table 2). For example, Randy, a 20-year-old man roofer with three recent casual sex partners and a high school degree, but no intentions to go back for more education, describes 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.

Even women can view casual sex in a positive light and not have regrets. Forty-nine percent of respondents did not regret their most recent casual sex relationships, but women are significantly more likely to have regret compared to men (Table 2). Carla, a 20-year-old woman with four recent casual sex partners and is a freshman at a community college, states:

I: And how did you come to the decision to develop that level of intimacy?

R: To sleep together?

I: Yeah.

R: It was Easter and I was drunk and he walked over from a friends. 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: Sure but what was the decision making process in your mind. I mean ok you're drunk but I mean you were down with it right?

R: Oh, yeah, I was down with it.

Even when looking back at a casual sex relationship, Carla does not express that she feels remorse about her experience. In fact, she explicitly states that she wanted to have that casual sex relationship. In the past two years, Carla has had four casual sex partners, but only one committed romantic relationship.

#### *Casual Sex Can Lead to Committed Relationships*

As stated above, most casual sex partner experiences are not about building a romantic relationship. In fact, only 28 percent of men and 34 percent of women who have had casual sex report they want to become boyfriend/girlfriend after having sex. However, casual sex can sometimes be a step towards a romantic relationship. Twenty-six percent of individuals who have casual sex state that they are somewhat closer or much closer after the first time they had sex with their most recent casual sex partner (Table 2). For example, Tim, a 20-year-old man with four recent casual sex partners and who dropped out of community college and currently works at a pet store, explains 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 start as casual sex relationships. Additional analyses indicate that it is rare to start a romantic relationship with sex; only five percent of the total sample has had sex with their current or most recent boyfriend/girlfriend on the first day they met (results not shown).

Sometimes, casual sex can lead to friendships. Kelly, a 20-year-old with one casual sex partner who is a senior in high school, states that her only casual sex partner became one of her close friends:

- R: Um, I mean right now it's just kind of like standing arrangement I guess.
- I: And neither one of you has gotten attached?
- R: No. I mean we're friends, we talk everyday so it's like, I mean it's not like, there's no attachment whatsoever.
- I: You don't expect any attachment from Frank's end?
- R: No, not at all...we kind of became friends after the fact because we were more acquaintance before. So I mean I guess I would just talk to him about it and try to work it out.

For Kelly, casual sex is not an experience that she later regretted, but feels it brought her and Frank closer, just not in romantic terms.

#### *Approval from Peers*

Even though peer groups can set a normative climate supporting casual sex, relatively few men (23%) and hardly any women (4%) state that they have casual sex because their friends are having casual sex (Table 2). However, more men than women endorse this idea. Even though a small percentage of respondents feel peer pressure is a motivator for casual sex, some report acceptance by their friends after casual sex. Table 2 illustrates that 28% of men and 22% of women either agreed or strongly agreed that their friends approve of the casual relationships. For instance, Kaleb, a 21-year-old with two recent casual sex partners and a high school degree and just moved out of his mothers' house two weeks ago, explains that he gets high peer regard because he has had casual sex partners:

- I: And did you ever feel pressure back when you were out there (not in a romantic relationship)?
- R: ...I mean...I was the best of them all. (laughter) Until ... for the two year. Then, after that is was somebody else. It was a competition.

Kaleb feels he earned respect from his peers for having more casual sex partners than his friends, but has since changed since he got a girlfriend. Peers can influence the type of casual sex partner one chooses. Carla, a 20-year-old with four recent casual sex partners and is a community college freshman, explains that her friends support her having casual sex, but only with certain types of men:

I: 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 do not judge her for having casual sex, but there is the implication that she should be more selective in her choices of casual sex partners. Kaleb's and Carla's experiences illustrate that motivations and implications affect each other through a feedback loop. Peers can be a motivator of casual sex, which can result in peer support, which then can motivate further casual sex behavior. It is important to note that the majority of young adults tell their friends about their relationship but 28% do not tell their friends about their casual sex behavior (Table 2). Talking about casual sex to peers may be influenced by the stage in the life course. Several respondents state that they talked to their peers about their casual sex experiences when they were younger, but not anymore. For instance, James, an 18-year-old with five recent casual sex partners and who dropped out of high school but got a GED, states:

R: 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...

Peer support can be a motivator and implication for casual sex behavior. In addition bragging about casual sex partners may be age specific.

## Discussion

As found in other research (Bogle 2008; Lyons et al. 2010; Fielder and Carey 2009), we report that casual sex is a common occurrence during early young adulthood. We also find a high level of acceptance about casual sex behavior using both quantitative and qualitative data. One of the major limitations of prior research on casual is that it often focuses on how this type of sexual relationship has negative motivations and implications, such as alcohol use (Bogle 2008), regret (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008) or sexual risk taking (Poppen 1995). The literature often omits the notion that motivations for participating in casual sex are not always negative. The prior research has highlighted traditional motivators for casual sex, including substance use, feeling horny, wanting to have fun, and feeling less emotional attachment, which are found to be important factors in this sample as well. A finding that has not been stressed in the literature is that the nature of early young adulthood influences why individuals participate in the casual sex. We find several motivators for casual sex that are life course stage specific, such as transitional relationships, social learning due to prior negative experiences, busy schedules, residential moves, and just being too young to be tied down. Interestingly, older respondents claim that they are getting too old for casual sex and beginning to want more serious relationships. In addition, there can be negative implications of casual sex, such as becoming emotionally attached and experiencing confrontations with committed partners. We find that not all casual sex relationships are viewed negatively by the participants themselves, nor are all of the outcomes negative. There are examples of both men and women who like casual sex relationships and view them as a normal part of their sexual lives. Also, most individuals who participate in casual sex behavior do not have low self-esteem or feel bad about themselves for participating in such behavior. Individuals enrolled in universities or four year higher education institutions have lower numbers of casual sex partners compared to other respondents (Lyons et al. 2010). In the current study, university students claimed that being in a committed relationship

could prevent the respondent from achieving goals such as going abroad for school. This type of motivator for casual sex did not come up as often for non-university students. Finally, there are what respondents view as positive implications of casual sex, such as romantic and friendships and gaining acceptance from peers.

There are some gender differences and similarities worth highlighting. There were not significant gender differences in terms of the traditional motivators of physical pleasure and substance use. These three motivators, being horny, thought it would be fun, and substance use, ranked high for both men and women. There are gender differences in the other traditional motivators of casual sex. Men are more likely to state that they have casual because their friends were doing it. This suggests that men may be more influenced by their peer group than women. Interestingly, there is not a gender difference in the two motivators of being in love and wanting to be closer. This means that both men and women understand the sexual script that casual sex is meant to have less emotional attachment, since only a minority feel that love and bonding are motivators for casual sex.

The literature has overlooked that there are also life course stage specific motivations for engaging in casual sex behavior. Most individuals have experience with romantic relationships before they enter young adulthood (Carver et al. 2003). We find that prior romantic relationships actually can lead to an increase in casual sex in young adulthood because individuals become hesitant to form committed relationships after negative experiences in romantic relationships. In other words, previous events influence later events in the life course (Elder 1985). As noted by life course researchers (Rindfuss 1991; Osgood et al. 2005; Mouw 2005), young adulthood is often a time with high residential movement, education enrollment, and the start of full-time employment. These life course specific young adulthood characteristics influence casual sex behavior. The qualitative results illustrate that the respondents feel that their busy schedules, residential moves, and feeling too young to be tied down are actual motivators for casual sex

behavior. Casual sex relationships seem to fill a need and are quite functional for young adults who want to have intimate relationships, but are not ready to be in the full adult role of committed romantic relationships or marriage.

Traditionally, popular press and research on casual sex highlights the negative outcomes of having sex outside of traditional relationships (Roese et al 2006; Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; Bogle 2008); however, many young adults construct their casual sex experiences in a positive way. Given the high levels of casual sexual activity, there should be some non-negative motivators for participating in such behavior. On the one hand, the uncommitted nature of casual sex relationships means that there is a possible risk that one partner will get attached or feel used (Paul 2006). Even though most young adults experience casual sex at least once, not all individuals are emotionally able to handle the possible negative implications. On the other hand, not all casual sex experiences are viewed in negative terms, and there are some positive implications of casual sex. Sometimes individuals feel more accepted into their peer group after they engage in casual sex (Paul 2006). Lastly, casual sex relationships can turn into romantic relationships or friendships. Most of the time, committed relationships do not follow the casual sex experience; however, it is important to recognize that casual sex relationships can be diverse and can be a step toward a meaningful relationship.

The findings from this study have theoretical implications. The results do support the life course concept of age-graded behavior (Elder 1985). This is supported in our qualitative analysis when respondents claim to have attitudes that support this behavior. For example, young adults state that they are too young to be tied down as a motivator for casual sex. These behaviors and attitudes suggest that casual sex is not viewed as deviant for the age group. The results reflect the notion that young adulthood is the time when individuals experiment with sexual behavior (Arnett 2004), which in this case is casual sex. It is also reflected in the qualitative data that individuals believe that they will mature out of engaging in casual sex. In

other words, casual sex is normative during this life course stage, but it is expected that there will come a time when individuals want more committed relationships.

This study has a few limitations. The TARS is an excellent quantitative and qualitative dataset that has similar characteristics to the national population; however, the TARS is a regional sample. However, there is no recent national dataset that provides a qualitative and quantitative measure that investigate the motivations for having casual sex. While the TARS is not nationally representative, it is the appropriate dataset for this project. Another limitation is that this study focuses on the gendered nature of casual sex; however, there might be other subgroups of young adults who have different casual sex patterns that are important such as race or socioeconomic differences.

The qualitative findings report that identity can be an important motivator for casual sex. More specifically, casual sex is normative for this age group, and young adults reflect this by stating that they are too young for committed relationships, but still engage in casual sex behavior. Future research should determine if subjective adult identity is related to having casual sex. In other words, it should be examined if individuals who feel like an adult are less likely to have casual sex because they have transitioned out of the life course stage of early young adulthood. The qualitative results report that individuals often use negative experiences with past romantic partners as a motivator for participating in casual sex behavior. Future research should investigate the role gender distrust has on casual sex behavior. This could further our understanding of the complex gendered nature of this behavior. In addition, more research is needed to understand the possible relationship of gender distrust and casual sex and how it varies by socioeconomic status.

The current study's results do have implications for how we measure motivations and implications of casual sex. For example, future research needs to consider the life course specific motivators of casual sex and not just the traditional variables, such as substance use.

There needs to be more accurate measures regarding how residential movement and busy schedules influence individuals' desires to participate in casual sex behavior. The findings from the current study suggest that researchers should consider both positive and negative motivations and implications of early young adult casual sex behavior.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample

	<b>Percent</b>
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	32%
Male	68%
<i>Race</i>	
White	50%
Black	32%
Hispanic	18%
<i>Age</i>	
17	7%
18	23%
19	11%
20	43%
21	16%
<i>Education</i>	
Less than High School	16%
Enrolled in High School	25%
High School Degree/GED not enrolled	27%
Enrolled in College	32%

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Source: Toledo Adolescence Relationship Study Wave Four

N=44

**Table 2. The Percent of Respondents who either Agreed or Strongly Agreed with the Statement**

	Total	Females	Males	t	Sig
<b>Relationship Context</b>					
Had casual sex with someone they just met	11%	10%	13%	0.66	
Has sex more than once with most recent casual sex partner	62%	63%	62%	0.18	
<b>Attitudes</b>					
A person should only have sex with someone they love	21%	24%	18%	-1.05	
<b>Motives</b>					
Horny	64%	62%	65%	0.17	
Fun	52%	44%	58%	1.93	
Drinking or Drug Use	32%	38%	28%	-1.61	
Love	9%	8%	10%	0.22	
Thought it would bring the relationship closer	19%	22%	18%	-0.83	
Wanted to become boyfriend/girlfriend	30%	34%	28%	-0.85	
Too young to be tied down	24%	20%	26%	0.91	
<b>Implications</b>					
Friends were doing it	16%	4%	23%	4.04	***
Friends approve of relationship	26%	20%	28%	1.33	
Told friends about the relationship	72%	77%	69%	-1.22	
Had regret (% how had regret)	51%	60%	46%	-2.08	*
Sex brought the relationship closer	26%	30%	23%	-1.23	

Source: Toledo Adolescence Relationship Study Wave Three

N=210

\*\*\*p&lt;.001; \*\*p&lt;.01; \*p&lt;.05 †

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