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Running head: CULTURE AND CASUAL SEX

Cultural, Social, and Gender Influences on Casual Sex

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## Abstract

Recently, scholars have become interested in learning more about the antecedents and consequences of casual sex. This article reviews current theorizing as to cultural, social, and gender differences in young people's attitudes toward casual sex and in their willingness to engage in such encounters. It is intended as a comprehensive review, integrating the theorizing and research from multiple disciplines—including cultural psychology, history, social psychology, and evolutionary psychology—and reviews current research on casual sex. We will discover that culture plays a crucial role in young people's attitudes toward casual sex, their willingness to engage in such activities, and the consequences of such activities. The review concludes by highlighting future research needs to determine whether—in the wake of the last century's cultural and social transformations—changes are occurring in the practice, the prevalence, and/or the purposes of casual sex.

## I. Introduction

Until recently, cultural psychologists and other scholars have devoted little attention to the phenomenon of casual sex. A few pioneering articles have been written on the perils of teenage sex, including the dangers of promiscuity, STIs, AIDS, and teenage pregnancies (Traeen & Lewin, 1992), but many tracts read more like dire warnings than scholarly attempts to understand the phenomenon. In recent years, however, scholars have become interested in learning more about the nature of casual sex. In part, this interest is fueled by claims that among young people's casual encounters are becoming more common—a few sensational commentators claim that casual sex is now the norm among young people [[http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/n\\_8227](http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/n_8227); [http://www.benoitdenizetlewis.com/public/pdf/Teen\\_Romance.pdf](http://www.benoitdenizetlewis.com/public/pdf/Teen_Romance.pdf)]. Others worry about the twin scourges of AIDS and STIs.

In this journal article, we will review current theorizing as to cultural, social, and gender differences in young people's attitudes toward casual sex, the frequency of their sexual fantasies, and their desire and willingness to engage in casual sexual activity. We will also review what we know about the effects of such activity (with specific focus on problematizing the risk-only approach), and suggest possible directions that future research might take. In the past, much of the research was conducted on American college campuses. Recently, however, cultural scholars and scholars worldwide have become interested in this phenomenon. Reflecting the existing literature, this paper will focus on adolescents and young adults, single men and women, and on heterosexual casual sex. The literature on gay casual sex is problematic

and voluminous. It deserves another review, in and of itself, and that will be forthcoming. Since research on “casual sex” is still somewhat limited (and, as we shall see, there is even much disagreement as to what constitutes “casual sex”), we will draw upon a variety of academic disciplines in attempting to discover the place of sexual activity in young men’s and women’s heterosexual relations.

## II. Definitions of Casual Sex

Currently, theorists are somewhat inconsistent in their definitions of casual sex. Definitions can range from one-time sexual encounters, to sex in causal relationships, to “promiscuous” sexual behavior in heterosexual/bisexual/homosexual brief encounters. In this paper, we will define casual sex as:

A person mindfully engaging in sexual activities (such as mutual stimulation, oral sex, or sexual intercourse) outside of a “formal” relationship (dating, marriage, etc.), without a “traditional” reason (such as love, procreation, or commitment) for doing so.

Such brief encounters may occur between casual friends, acquaintances, or total strangers and they frequently “just happen”.

In this paper, “casual sex” will serve as an umbrella term for a wide range of sexual activities. Other common names for these activities are “one-night stands,” “hook-ups,” “fuck-buddy sex,” “friends with benefits,” “anonymous sex,” “no strings attached,” “booty calls” “swinging,” “chance encounters,” “cruising,” and “dogging.” Surely in time other slang terms for this activity will arise. It is, of course, possible that these terms represent somewhat different phenomena (Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2010). In this initial review, however, of necessity we will focus on similarities not differences in the various forms of casual sex.

Let us turn now to the perspectives of theorists from a variety of disciplines who speculate about the antecedents and consequences of casual sex. We will see that while many scholars emphasize cultural factors and others emphasize evolutionary factors, increasingly most take a cultural and biopsychosocial approach—pointing out that it is the interaction of culture, social context, personal experience, and biological factors that shape young people’s attitudes and willingness to participate in casual sexual encounters. Which of these factors prove to be most important depends on culture, personality, gender, and social context.

### III. Cultural Perspectives on Casual Sex

Culture appears to have a profound affect on young men and women’s attitudes toward casual sex, their willingness to engage in casual sex, and the consequences of such activities.

1. Cultural differences in *attitudes* toward premarital sex, chastity, and casual sex.

Cultures vary markedly in their attitudes toward young people’s casual sexual activity. Not all pre-marital sex is casual sex, of course, but it seems reasonable to assume that if a society condemns *all* pre-marital contact and strongly values chastity, it is almost certain to disapprove of young people’s casual sexual encounters as well.

In a cross-cultural survey of over 10,000 people from 37 countries, representing a diversity of cultural, geographic, political, ethnic, religious, racial, economic, and linguistic characteristics, Buss (1989) asked young men and women to indicate what characteristics they most valued in potential mates. Although in most cultures participants agreed about the importance of such characteristics as love, character,

emotional stability, and maturity, one thing they disagreed about was whether or not premarital sexual activity ought to be taboo. In China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Israel (the Palestinian Arabs), and Taiwan, young men were insistent that chastity was “indispensable” in a potential bride. In Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, and West Germany, on the other hand, chastity in a bride was considered to be of trivial importance—or even a disadvantage. A few respondents even jotted notes in the margin of the questionnaire, indicating that, for them, chastity would be a *disadvantage*.

In an alternative analysis of Buss’s (1994) data, Wallen (1989) attempted to determine which was most important—culture or gender—in shaping young people’s mate preferences. He found that for some traits—such as good looks and financial prospects—gender had a great influence on preferences. (Whereas gender accounted for 40%-45% of the variance, geographical origin accounted for only 8%-17% of the variance.) For other traits, such as **chastity**, ambition, and preferred age, on the other hand, culture mattered most. (In those instances, gender accounted for only 5%-16% of the variance, whereas geographical origin accounted for 38%-59% of the variance.) Wallen concluded that, in general, the cultural perspective may well be more powerful than evolutionary heritage in shaping young people’s preferences in mates. There is considerable evidence that culture is, in fact, a powerful determinant of young people’s attitudes toward pre-marital sex, chastity, and thus (and most importantly for our purposes, casual sex.)<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Cultural differences in casual sexual *activity*

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<sup>1</sup> A note: Many current researchers find such terms as “premarital sex”—implying all will eventually marry—and “chastity” to be archaic and/or offensive terms. In the interests of clarity and accurate reporting, we have chosen to use the terms the original authors used.

Historically, cultures have also differed in how common it was for young men and women to engage in premarital/casual sexual activity. The Silwa, in Aswan, Egypt, for example, (like people in much of the Muslim world) once disapproved of young men and women even talking about sex before marriage, much less engaging in it. Young men and women apparently found the idea of premarital sexual experimentation/casual sex so shameful and terrifying that no one was known to have ever violated the taboo (Ammar, 1954).

In a few Polynesian societies, things were very different. Marshall (1971) conducted field research in Mangaia, in the Cook Islands. He argued that in Mangaia, although romantic love was rare, young people frequently engaged in casual sexual encounters. He observed: “copulation is a principal concern of the Mangaian of either sex” (p. 123). In a compelling critique of this study, Harris (1995) contended that Marshall and a host of other anthropologists have ignored the fact that in Mangaia, young men and women often feel passionate love as well as sexual desire for their sexual partners and that not all brief encounters should be classified as “casual sex.” Arguments aside, it is clear that in Mangaia, cultural leaders are far more tolerant of premarital and/or casual sex than are cultural leaders in the Muslim world.)

Culture, then, has been found to have a profound impact on whether young men and women find it socially acceptable to engage in casual sex. In some cultures, casual sex is the norm; in others, casual encounters are a serious offense, punishable by death (see Brown, 1952; Broude & Greene, 1976; Francoeur, 1999 to 2002; Goethals & Whiting (Palfrey House, n.d.); Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Heise, 1967; Jankowiak, 1995, Minturn, et al., 1969; Stephens, 1972; for a summary of this research.) For

modern-day survey reports indicating the markedly different rates of casual sex worldwide, see Agha, 2002 (Lusaka, Zambia); Fekadu, 2001 (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia); Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Oppermann, 2003 (Australia); and Traeen and Lewin, 1992 (Norway).

#### IV. Evolutionary Perspectives on Casual Sex

Since Darwin's (1859/1988) classic *The Origins of Species*, anthropologists have been interested in how men and women go about selecting casual sexual partners and mates. Many evolutionary psychologists point out that one trait that has stood *Homo sapiens* in good stead is their ability to adapt. Humankind can survive (and prosper) in a wide range of climates (from the Arctic to the sub-Saharan Africa), physical settings (from seashore, to forest, to desert), and social structures (polygamous, monogamous, and polyandrous). No surprise for Darwinians, then, is the fact that in *Homo sapien* societies, as well as in primate groups, there exists an impressive array of sexual behavior. Men and women appear to respond more to cultural and social conditions than to genetic imperatives (Hrdy, 1981 and 1997).

On the other hand, many prominent evolutionary theorists argue that certain gender differences are “bred in the bone.” In a pioneering book, Symons (1979), for example, argued that men and women are programmed to desire very different things in a mate or sexual partner. His argument proceeds as follows:

According to evolutionary biology, an animal's “fitness” is a measure of the extent to which it succeeds in passing on its genes to the next generation (p. 6).

It is presumably to both genders evolutionary advantage to produce as many progeny as possible. But men and women differ in one critical respect—how much they are

required to invest to ensure the survival of their offspring. *Men* need invest a trivial amount of time and energy in any one child. A single man can conceivably father an almost unlimited number of children. In recent times, Abdul Aziz married more than 300 wives in order to ensure the loyalty of the desert tribes. His sons now rule Saudi Arabia. One Saudi ruler claims to have more than 5,000 children (Sasson, 1992).

*Women*, on the other hand, must invest a great deal of time and effort in their offspring if they are to survive. In tribal societies, most women are lucky to produce even five surviving children (Hrdy, 1981). Howell (1979) followed the reproductive careers of 166 !Kung women over 11 years. She reported that the maximum number of births for any woman was five; the minimum zero. Women must usually sacrifice a year or two in nursing, protecting, and teaching children to survive on their own.

Symons (1979) observed:

The enormous sex differences in minimum parental investment and in reproductive opportunities and constraints explain why *Homo sapiens*, a species with only moderate sex differences in structure, exhibits profound sex differences in psyche (p. 27).

In a seminal paper, Buss and Schmitt (1993) proposed a “Sexual Strategies Theory” of human mating. They argued that men and women are programmed to desire different traits and to employ very different strategies in short-term relationships (such as “one-night stands”) versus long-term (marital) relationships. Here is a brief recap of what their theory has to say about gender and casual sex:

1. In *short-term relationships*, men should tend to be interested in “playing the field,” or engaging in as much casual sex with as many fertile partners as possible. Women's casual sex strategies should vary—depending on whether they are focused on short-term or long-term advantages.

In casual encounters, it is to *men's* advantage to be sensitive to clues to women's reproductive fitness. They should be “turned on” by women who are easily available and “turned off” by women who are sexually inexperienced, conservative, prudish, or who possess a low sex drive. They should care a great deal about good looks, youth, and health. They should be eager to have numerous, fleeting sexual encounters. In the absence of an ideal sexual partner, men should be willing to engage in casual sex with almost anyone, under almost any circumstances. They should try to avoid commitment or investing too much in any one relationship.

*Women* in short-term relationships should employ one of two adaptive strategies. Some may focus on what's in it for them in the short-run. They attempt to maximize their outcomes by demanding a high price for their sexual favors. Buss (2003) observes:

In many traditional societies, such as the Mehinaku of Amazonia and the natives of the Trobriand Islands, men bring food or jewelry, such as tobacco, betel nuts, turtle shell rings, or armlets, to their mistresses. Women deny sex if the gifts stop flowing. A girl might say, “You have no payment to give me—I refuse” (p. 86).

Women in short-term or casual relationships should attempt to maximize their outcomes by demanding a high price for their sexual favors.

Casual encounters can also be entered into with a vision for the future.

Women may participate in casual sex in the hopes of attracting an appealing mate for the long-term. Even in a one-night stand, they might search for professional men with ambition, status, good earning capacity, and a strong career orientation; men who are kind and considerate, understanding, honest, dependable, easy-going

and adaptable; men who like children. These qualifications for casual sex would indicate potential hope for a more long-term relationship.

Buss and Schmitt continue:

2. In *long-term relationships*, men and women confront a different set of adaptive problems. Men should still prefer women who are good looking, young, healthy, and of maximum reproductive value. But now they must also be concerned about finding a marital partner who will be willing and able to commit to a long-term relationship, who will be faithful, and who possesses good mothering skills. Women who are considering a long-term relationship should prefer men who are willing make a commitment, who are able and willing to invest resources in them and their children, who possess parenting skills, and who are willing and able to protect the family from harm. In theory, as men and women's investments converge (as they do when contemplating commitment to long-term relationships), both should become increasingly choosy about the appropriateness of a mate.

Since the seminal paper by Buss and Schmitt (1993), a parade of evolutionary psychologists have pointed out that:

The biological irony of the double standard is that males could not have been selected for promiscuity if historically females had always denied them opportunity for expression of the trait (Smith, 1984, p.601)

Thus, during the past few years, evolutionary theorists have begun to speculate about why women might choose to engage in casual sex. Among the multitude of reasons proposed are the acquisition of goods and services (Symons, 1979), a desire to confuse men about paternity—leading many men to have an interest in protecting a woman's offspring (Hrdy, 1981), genetic hypotheses (i.e.,

getting pregnant by a man possessing better genes than her husband (Symons, 1979), having genetically diverse offspring), mate switching hypotheses (e.g., acquiring a better mate) (Symons, 1979, Fisher, 1992), mate skill acquisition hypotheses (e.g., mate preference clarification), and mate manipulation hypotheses (e.g. taking revenge or deterring a partner's future infidelity) (Symons, 1979). See Greiling and Buss (2000) for a review of the full array of these hypotheses. Gangstad and Simpson (2000), point out that in evolution, men and women were forced to make “trade-offs”; thus it is no surprise that both employ a strategy of “strategic pluralism”—utilizing different mating strategies in different settings. (For a critique of the Gangstad and Simpson (2000) model [and several other mate selection models] see the open peer commentary that follows that article.)

Evolutionary theorists have assembled considerable evidence in support of the contention that in general American men possess more positive attitudes toward casual sex, think about casual sex far more often than do women, possess a stronger desire for sexual intercourse with a variety of partners in a variety of settings than do women, are more reluctant to forgo sex, tend to initiate sex (and rarely refuse sexual offers,) are willing to sacrifice more for sex, and so forth (see Baumeister, Cantanese & Vohs, 2001; Buss, 2003; Gangstad & Simpson, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2003; for a review of this research). Jankowiak and his colleagues (2009) observe:

Research has consistently found that when women seek a short term mate, or a casual sexual encounter, it has less to do with seeking momentary sexual pleasure and everything to do with either resource accumulation (Buss, 2008; Hrdy, 1999; Symons, 1979); mate switching (Betzig, 1989) or a desire to evaluate a prospective long-term mate (Buss, 2008; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Greiling & Buss, 2000; Meston & Buss, 2007). Additionally, it has been noted that women find one-night stands less emotionally satisfying than men (Campbell, 2008). Clearly what appears to resemble male short-term sexual behavior on closer investigation is nothing of the sort (p. 3).

This may be true, but we would point out that (1) almost all of the existing

studies have been conducted with American college students. (2) The vast majority of studies have relied on self-report measures rather than on observations of actual behavior or true experiments. (3) In reports, gender differences are often exaggerated. There is generally far more intra-gender variability in attitudes and behavior than inter-gender variability, and in the West (and perhaps worldwide), social norms and behavior appear to be changing—once profound gender differences are decreasing.

Recently, Petersen and Hyde (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of research into gender differences in sexuality, conducted from 1993-2007. They analyzed the impact of gender on 30 sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors for men and women from 87 countries, from six continents. They included 834 individual samples and seven large national data sets in their analyses. Consistent with evolutionary psychology, they found that men did indeed report more permissive attitudes toward casual sex and slightly more sexual experience than did women. However, they also found that (1) in nations and ethnic groups with greater gender equality, people display smaller gender differences in attitudes and behaviors than do people from more traditional nations and ethnic groups, (2) over time, many traditional gender differences seem to be disappearing, and (3) in all nations, those gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors which did still exist were surprisingly small. Exceptions were in the incidence of masturbation, pornography use, **attitudes toward casual sex** and the incidence of **participating in casual sex**—all of which yielded medium effect sizes. As predicted, men possessed more permissive attitudes toward casual sex and engaged in slightly more casual sexual behavior than did

female participants.

## V. Cultural and Biopsychosocial Perspectives on Casual Sex

Currently, the once passionate arguments over “Is it culture or is it evolutionary imperatives?” seem to be moderating. Today, many scholars attempt to take a Cultural and biopsychosocial perspective in their attempt to understand the nature of casual sex—an approach that attempts to integrate the influences of culture, societal pressures, and personal experiences in shaping sexual attitudes and behavior (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eastwick, 2009; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Mathes, et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Wood & Eagly, 1999, 2002).

Wood and Eagly (2002) point out that if scholars are to understand people’s attitudes and behavior, they must consider both the immediate, proximal causes (such as a culture’s gender roles and people’s social experiences) as well as ultimate distal causes (such as genetic factors, biological processes, and features of social structures, such as local ecologies) of sexual attitudes and behavior. There is considerable evidence in support of Wood and Eagly’s contention that culture, socialization, and evolved physical and reproductive capacities all influence men’s and women’s sexual choices. An example: In patriarchal societies (where property is inherited through the male line), men generally possess power, status, and control resources. There is generally a strict sex-typed division of labor, in which men are assigned the role of protector and provider, while women are assigned childrearing activities. In such societies, powerful men tend to craft social norms that cater to their own sexual needs and desires (say, to assure the paternity of their offspring), while sacrificing those of women. Men are allowed to be sexual beings while women’s sexual lives are fairly

restricted. In contrast, in more egalitarian societies, power is shared and a fairly flexible sexual division of labor exists. In those societies, a sexual double-standard favoring men is less likely to prevail. Men and women are likely to be more similar (than different) in their sexual attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Nonetheless, even in these societies many biologically based gender differences will exist (see Petersen & Hyde, 2010, for a discussion of these issues).

There is considerable evidence for Wood and Eagly's biosocial model. Schlegel and Barry (1986) compared values in 185 non-industrial societies. They found that in societies in which women made substantial contributions to the food-based economy, people were more tolerant of premarital sexual permissiveness—for both boys and girls. In modern-day, post-industrial cultures and societies where traditional gender roles are becoming less confining, women and men's sexual attitudes, feeling, and behaviors are becoming increasingly permissive (and similar). As we reported earlier, in a meta-analysis conducted by Petersen and Hyde (2010), of men and women from 87 countries and six continents, they found: (1) the more egalitarian the society, the more similar men and women are in their sexual attitudes and behaviors, and (2) with the passage of time, many traditional gender differences seem to be moderating or disappearing. This was true, for example, for attitudes toward premarital sex, number of sex partners, and the like. (See also Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Clement, 1989; Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Howard, 1988; Lyon, 2009; Kunkel, et al., 2003; Netting, 1992; Oliver and Hyde, 1993; Schmitt et al., 2003; Wood & Eagly, 2002 for additional evidence for this contention).

In this paper, we too will adopt a cultural and biopsychosocial model in our attempt to understand the nature of young people's attitudes toward casual sexual activities and their sexual behavior.

## VI. The Nature of Casual Sex

In the next section, we will discuss what scholars from a variety of disciplines have learned about the nature of casual sex. We will survey young people's attitudes toward casual sex, try to ascertain how common such activities are, why people choose to engage in casual sex (rather than searching for a committed relationship), and how such flings generally work out. At this point we would like to remind our readers that (probably because this research is so recent) this research tends to focus primarily on adolescents and emerging adults, in Western settings, and because much of it is done in connection with STI and AIDS prevention programs, its primary interest is often on the dire effects of casual encounters. This is especially true of the research into the antecedents and consequences of casual gay sexual encounters. (We will not be reviewing this latter literature in this paper. This extensive literature is deserving of a full-fledged review of its own.) A second point: Today, the gold standard for summarizing research findings is a meta-analysis. When possible, we will stress such studies. This will not always be possible, however. Since the very point of this article is to acquaint researchers with culturally relevant research from many fields, which utilizes a variety of idiosyncratic measures, it is usually impossible to conduct traditional meta-analyses on such diverse data. Hopefully, such analyses will be more possible in the future (when cultural scholars from the various fields begin to

converge on their theories and research procedures). Below, is a report on the research that does exist.

#### *A. Attitudes Toward Casual Sex*

Ahrold and Meston (2010) studied University of Texas students' attitudes toward casual sex. They found that Asian-American college students were far more positive about casual encounters than were Hispanic or European-American students. For both Asian and Hispanic students, the higher their acculturation scores, the more likely their attitudes were to mirror those of European-American students. Researchers find that as men and women move from the teen years to young adulthood they become more liberal and permissive in their attitudes (and thus more likely to engage in casual sex.) (Lefkowitz and Gillen, 2006; Lyons, 2009; Manning, et al., 2005).

As we observed earlier, throughout the world, men generally possess more positive attitudes toward casual sex than do women. Petersen and Hyde (2010), in their meta-analysis of the attitudes of men and women from 87 countries, found that young men worldwide reported moderately more permissive attitudes toward casual sex than did young women.

In a survey of 281,064 college students at 421 different American colleges and universities, social psychologists asked, "If two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for a very short time." A full 55.2% of the men, but only 31.7% of the women, strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement (Buss, 2003). Men were also more likely (than women) to describe themselves (and to be described by others) with words indicating a more casual attitude towards sex: words such as "unfaithful, polygamous, adulterous, and loose," and are

less likely to be described as “faithful, monogamous,” and “devoted” (Buss, 2003, p 257). Similar gender differences were secured by Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, and Foote (1985); Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels (1994); Milhausen and Herold (2001); National Center for Social Research & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2001) [Great Britain]; Oliver and Hyde (1993); Petersen and Hyde, (2010).

Simpson and Gangestad (1991, 1992) developed a *Sociosexual Orientation Inventory* (SOI) to assess how tolerant people are in regard to casual sex, as well as to gauge the extent to which they have actually engaged in it. Reise and Wright (1996) found that men who scored high on the SOI admitted to possessing personalities “similar to those of narcissists and psychopaths.” They were good-looking, but saw themselves as arrogant, manipulative, and unconstrained by morality or ethics. Women who scored high on the SOI, on the other hand, described themselves as attractive and fun, albeit a bit self-absorbed, and shallow. For a review of the many attitudinal and personality traits that have been found to have a small, if inconsistent, influence on young people’s willingness to participate in casual sex (such as self-esteem and religiosity), see Lyons (2009), Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000), Uecker, et al. (2008), Walker, Tokar, and Fischer (2000).

Sexual attitudes have been found to be a strong predictor of whether or not young people (of various races) participate in casual sex (Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008).

### *B. Sexual Fantasy*

Men appear to fantasize about casual sex more often than do women (Baumeister et al., 2001). Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994), for example, found that men fantasize about encounters with a greater number of sexual partners than do women. Men were four times as likely as women to have imagined sexual encounters with over 1,000 different partners (Ellis & Symons, 1990).

### *C. Desire/Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex*

Almost all men and women (78%-99%), in a variety of countries, consider “a faithful marriage to one partner” to be the ideal arrangement (Pedersen, Miller, Putcha-Bhagavatula, & Yang, 2002; Stone, Goetz, & Shackelford, 2005). Nonetheless, there appear to be marked gender differences in the desire for casual sex prior to marriage. Men desire more sexual partners, pursue casual sex with multiple partners, and are more willing to accept sexual “come-ons” from strangers, casual acquaintances and friends than are women (Barash & Lipton, 2002; Buss, 2003; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Fischtein, Herold, & Desmaris, 2007 [Canada]; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2003). A few scholars are skeptical of such purported gender differences—pointing out that whether one secures such marked differences depends on how the “ideal” is defined, whether one considers typical or off-the-chart desires, and the way questions are posed (Fenigstein & Preston, 2007; Pedersen et al., 2002).

Schmitt and his colleagues (2003) provide cross-cultural evidence for gender differences in the desire for multiple partners. In a survey of 16,288 people from 52 nations, men expressed a greater desire for a variety of sexual partners

than did women. American and Australian men yearn for sex with a far greater number of partners (in both the near future and over a lifetime) than do women. This is true whether the sexual encounter seems risky or safe (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 2003; Fenigstein & Preston, 2007; Hill, 2002; Schmitt, Shackelford, Duntley, Tooke, & Buss, 2001; Surbey & Conohan, 2000 [Australia]).

Interestingly, the difference between genders tends to decrease as people age. Mathes, King, Miller, and Reed (2002) interviewed men in their teens, twenties, and thirties, who were students at Western Illinois University. As men matured, their desire for casual sex and sexual variety decreased; women's desire for casual sex remained relatively constant over the years. Why this decrease happens has not been fully explored (see Petersen & Hyde, 2010, for a discussion of this point).

In a simple experiment at Florida State University, Clark and Hatfield (1989) tested the notion that young men are far more receptive to offers of casual sex than are women. Class members at Florida State University were assigned to approach reasonably attractive men and women of the opposite sex, and ask one of three questions: (1) Would you go out with me tonight? (2) Would you come over to my apartment tonight? or (3) Would you go to bed with me tonight?

As predicted, men were far more willing to agree to casual sex with a virtual stranger than were women. When class members asked: "Would you go out with me tonight?" men and women were equally receptive: 56% of men and 50% of women agreed to go out on a date. Yet, when confederates asked, "Would you come over to my

apartment” or “Would you go to bed with me?” the gender differences were striking. Whereas few women were willing to risk going to a man’s apartment (6%) or to bed with him (0%), most men readily agreed to go the woman’s apartment (69%) and to go to have sexual relations with her (75%).

This study has been replicated a number of times—in many countries and in many settings—with similar results (Clark & Hatfield, 2003). In one study, Schützwohl, et al., (2009) described the Clark and Hatfield (1989) study to American, German, and Italian men and women. They were asked to imagine being approached by a member of the opposite sex, described as either “slightly unattractive,” “moderately attractive,” or “exceptionally attractive.” They then rated how likely they would be to accept each of the three offers. Firstly, they discovered cultural differences in men’s responses. Italian men were most likely to accept sexual offers, Americans intermediate, and German men least likely to accept sexual offers. Overall, men were less “choosy”; they placed less emphasis on looks than did women—it was only the exceptionally attractive man that fared well when offering a one-night stand. (For similar research on this question, see Greitemeyer, 2005 [Germany]; Hald & Høgg0Ikesebm G, 2010 [Denmark]).

#### *D. Mate Preferences: The Ideal Casual Sex Partner versus Deal Breakers*

##### *1. What Are Men’s and Women’s Sexual Ideals?*

What characteristics are valued in a pick-up? Research suggests that when selecting casual partners, men and women are surprisingly similar in their desire that he/she be good looking and “hot.” Good looks seem to be the *sine qua non* of a pick-up (Greiling & Buss, 2000; Hatfield, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottmann, 1966; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1997). This is true

whether those “cruising the scene” are gay, straight, or lesbian (Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002 [The Netherlands]; Regan & Joshi, 2003.)

Fletcher, Tither, O’Loughlin, Friesen and Overall (2004) gave Dutch men and women a choice between a variety of casual sexual partners. Both genders were most attracted to partners who scored high on attractiveness/vitality. Second best were those who were high on warmth/trustworthiness. Bringing up the rear were potential partners with high status/resources. Women might care about status and power when contemplating marriage, but on a Saturday night in the bar scene, such men apparently aren’t much in demand. (For similar results see Kenrick, Groth, Troth, & Sadalla, 1993; Regan, Medina, & Joshi, 2001). (Somewhat more complex results were found in a pub-setting by van Straaten, et al., 2008 [The Netherlands]).

## *2. What Will Men and Women Settle For?*

Although men and women are equally “fussy” when selecting marital partners, when it comes to a one-night stand, men are willing to settle for less than are women—far less. When asked about their minimum qualifications, University of Texas men were willing to sacrifice a host of assets—such as charm, generosity, honesty, and emotional stability—in order to “score.” Women were not (Buss, 2003).

When asked about traditional “deal breakers”—such as selfishness, violence, lack of education, promiscuity, and alcoholism—once again, men around the world were willing to sacrifice more than were women for the pleasure of a one-night-stand. (For evidence in support of these contentions, see Buunk,

Dijkstra, Kenrick, & Warntjes, 2001 [The Netherlands]; Kenrick et al, 1993; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, & Trost, 1990; Regan, 1998).

Some attribute these differences to gender role socialization and the double standard, which allows men to be promiscuous, while insisting women remain “virtuous” until marriage (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). Others, as we have seen, attribute these marked differences to humankind’s evolutionary heritage and the marked differences in potential parental investments required of men and women (Baumeister et al., 2001; Li & Kenrick, 2006).

#### *E. How Prevalent is Casual Sex?*

Historians argue that in the West (and to some extent throughout the world) there have been momentous changes in young people’s willingness and opportunity to engage in sexual liaisons. They point out, for example, that until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, courting couples were usually confined to small towns, where family and neighbors were well aware of their activities. In 1908, the invention of the Model T gave young people increased freedom to experiment with sex (Bailey, 1989; Collins, 2009). They could escape chaperones and find privacy in the back seat of those automobiles, often while parked in various Lovers Lanes that sprang up throughout the land. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the sexual revolution and the momentous invention of the birth control pill gave young people the first chance in history to participate in casual sex without worrying about pregnancy. These technological inventions made casual sex more possible and less risky. Then, in the 1980s, with the advent of STIs and AIDs, the dangers of casual sex increased yet again. In the future, new medical advances may well reduce that impediment to casual sex. We would expect a continuing, upward trajectory,

for casual sexual encounters. Today, casual sexual activities appear to be gaining a considerable degree of cultural acceptance, if not universal approbation.

Today, casual sex appears to be surprisingly common. In the 1990s, web sites began to appear which were designed to appeal to men and women interested in casual sexual trysts. These included: AdultFriendFinder.com, AshleyMadison.com, Craigslist.com, CasualPal.com, Fling.com, and Mate. 1. In a recent paper, Garcia and Reiber (2008) observed that: “‘Hooking up’ has become a normative sexual experience on American college campuses today” (p. 193). Confirmation of this assertion can be found in England, Shafer, and Fogarty (2008); Garcia and Reiber, 2008; Jonason, et al., (2010); Paul and Hayes (2002); Paul, McManus, and Hayes, (2000).

In nationally representative samples, 70-85% of sexually experienced American adolescents age 12-21 reported engaging in intercourse with a casual sex partner during the previous year (Grello, Welsh, Harper, & Dickson, 2003). More than three-quarters of American college students have experienced at least one hookup (but typically more) with partners they did not consider to be romantic (Paul, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Similar results were secured by England, et al., (2008), Lambert, Kahn, and Apple (2003), and Paul and Hayes (2002). Most often, such casual liaisons are with friends or ex-boyfriends or girlfriends, less frequently with strangers (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). In non-college samples, the percentage of young Americans experimenting with casual sex is even higher (Lyons, 2008).

In a random sample of 2,997 Norwegian adolescents ages 17-19 years of age, Traeen and Levin (1992) asked respondents: “Have you ever had sexual intercourse with

a person you met *for the first time* the same night as the intercourse took place?” About one-third of them said “Yes.”

Whether scholars find gender differences in men’s and women’s willingness to experiment with casual sex depends on a variety of factors—such as when the study was conducted, how the questions were phrased, and the like. In one recent study, for example, Garcia and Reiber (2008) found that on the SUNY campus, 64% of men and women reported having engaged in a hook-up; they found no gender differences. The authors argue that a variety of factors account for the current popularity of casual sex: the greater acceptance of the social sexualization of youth, the increasing age of mothers, the decreasing age of women’s menarche, and the characteristics of the modern collegiate environment.

Previous researchers have found significant gender differences in the prevalence of casual sex, however. American men often claim significantly more casual sexual partners than do women (Buss, 1988; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Hill, 2002). When asked: “Have you ever deliberately had sex without emotional involvement?” 73% of American college men, but only 27% of American college women admitted that they had (Townsend, Kline, & Wasserman, 1995). Similar differences have been found in Hong Kong (Abdullah, et al., 2002).

Although on first glance this gender difference seems peculiar—it does, after all, “take two to tango”—scholars have proposed several reasons for this apparent anomaly. Men may define a given encounter as casual, while women may assume it is a loving interaction or may lead to one. Grello and her colleagues (2006) found that when asked about their most recent casual sexual encounter, 18% of University

of Tennessee women assumed it was a prelude to romance, while only 3% of men shared their assumption. Over 50% of men and women, however, acknowledged that their most recent chance encounter was “a one time thing.” There are other reasons for these pronounced gender discrepancies. Men are known to exaggerate the number of their conquests, while women minimize their numbers (Alexander & Fisher, 2003). Women may rewrite history—forgetting sexual escapades or rejection. In addition, men’s casual encounters may be with prostitutes or women who do not appear in college samples (Baumeister et al., 2001). Whatever the reason, this gender difference appears to be a consistent one. In their meta-analysis of men and women in 87 countries, Petersen and Hyde (2010) found a “medium” gender effect for casual sex, which they defined as: “Incidence or frequency of engaging in sexual behavior with a stranger or a casual acquaintance” (p. 25).

There is some suggestion that the double standard may be eroding, however. In many very recent studies, in the West, both men and women, regardless of race and age, report high (and equal) rates of engaging in casual sex (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993 [Canada]; Lyons, 2009.) As with many other sexual behaviors—masturbation, attitudes toward casual sex, age at first sexual encounter, number of sexual partners, and the like—gender differences in participating in casual sex may be steadily decreasing (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010).

#### *F. Why do Men and Women Engage in/Abstain from Casual Sex?*

##### *1. Reasons for Engaging in Casual Sex.*

What motivates men and women engage in casual sexual activities?

Until recently, American sexologists have assumed that people engage in sexual relations primarily for one of the Big Three reasons: out of love, a desire for pleasure (the attainment of physical pleasure, recreational sex, and “sport fucking.”) or the hope of procreation. When Hatfield and Rapson (2006) asked students at the University of Hawai‘i to list the reasons they and their friends participated in one-night stands, the students cited an array of other reasons as well—among them: a desire for self-esteem, status, spiritual transcendence, duty, conformity, kindness, conquest /power (people can, of course, also *withhold* sex in the hopes of attaining power), submission to others, vengeance (to conquer, degrade, punish), curiosity, money, make someone jealous, attain health and long life (Yin and Yang), stress reduction, save the World, political revolt, relaxation/help in getting to sleep. . . and so on. A similar diversity of sexual motives has been proposed by Browning (2005); Browning, Hatfield, Kessler, and Levine (2000); Browning, Kessler, Hatfield, et al. (1999); Cooper, Shapiro, and Powers (1998); Hill and Preston (1996); Horowitz (2002); Meston and Buss (2007); Nelson (1978).

Which of these possible reasons have been found to motivate young people to engage in casual sexual encounters? The main reason men and women engage in one-night stands is that they are pleasurable (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Greiling & Buss, 2000). Garcia and Reiber (2008) report that 89% of participants at Binghamton University at SUNY identified physical pleasure as the motivation for such activities. No surprise.

Regan and Dreyer (1999) asked American college men and women who had participated in casual sexual liaisons to write an essay about their motives for doing so.

As expected, many of men's and women's reasons for casual sex were similar. Both emphasized intra-individual factors (e.g., sexual desire, sexual experimentation, physical pleasure, alcohol and drug use) and factors associated with the casual sex partner (e.g., attractiveness) as reasons for their short-term sexual encounters. A few differences appeared, however. Men were more likely to emphasize social environmental reasons (e.g., increased status and popularity, conformity to peer group norms), whereas women cited interpersonal reasons for casual sex (e.g., hoping their casual fling would evolve into a serious romance). At SUNY, Garcia and Reiber (2008) found that of men and women who had hooked up, 51% had done so with the intention of initiating a traditional romantic relationship; there were no gender differences. While this might be the ideal (37% of participants: 29% of men and 43% of women) reported a traditional romantic relationship as the *ideal* outcome of a hook-up, only about 6% (4% of men and 8% of women) actually *expected* a hook-up to result in a traditional romantic relationship.

Impett and Peplau (2003) point out that traditional gender role socialization leads some women to believe that it is their responsibility to respond to men's sexual desires and needs, which may also factor into participation in casual sex (Similar gender differences were secured by Greiling & Buss, 2000; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Surbey & Conohan, 2000).

Some young people seek out casual encounters because they are frightened of close, romantic, intimate relationships. Hatfield (1984) identified six reasons why people might fear (and thus avoid) true intimacy: fears of (a) exposure; (b) abandonment; (c) angry attacks; (d) loss of control; (e) one's own destructive impulses;

and (f) losing one's individuality or being engulfed. Paul and her colleagues (2000) speculated that young people who engage in casual sex often do so out of fears of greater intimacy. Presumably, as young people gain social confidence (and overcome these fears), they might advance to more complex intimate relationships. (There is some evidence in support of that contention; see Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Paul et al., 2000).

## *2. Reasons for Abstaining From Casual Sex.*

All sexual affairs involve risks, ranging from concrete risks such as acquiring an STI to less tangible risks concerned with social and religious mores. Most religions consider sex outside of marriage to be immoral (Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000). There is considerable evidence that the more deeply religious people are, the more they disapprove of casual sex and the less likely they are to engage in it. In a national survey of Canadian adults, Fischtein, Herold, and Demarais (2007) found that the more deeply religious Canadians were, the less likely they were to consider engaging in casual sex. Similar results were found in a United States National Survey of Men (NSM) and Women (NSW) conducted by Cubbins and Tanfer, 2000; and by Kontula (2009); [Finland]; Visser, Smith, Richters, & Rissel, 2007 [Australia].

Men and women may worry that if they flout community prohibitions they may acquire a poor reputation, risk community and family reprisals (say, from family members' intent on protecting the family honor or from jealous dates and mates.) These concerns may be greater for women than men. Today, a slang expression, "The walk of shame," describes the shame that women who must walk back in their dorms, the morning after, with looks ravaged from a night of casual sexual activity. Interestingly,

the parallel expression for men is “The stride of pride.” Women may also fear pregnancy.

Both men and women may fear STIs if they engage in high-risk behavior—and these concerns are not baseless. Casual sex with multiple partners, whether heterosexual or homosexual, without adequate protection, is associated with STIs (Christianson, Johansson, Emmelin, and Westman, 2003 [Sweden]; Paul et al., 2000). Many women fear physical attacks and harm (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993). In the 1970s, a hit movie, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, described the horrendous dangers that women faced in singles bars. Scholars find that all these concerns can prevent men and women from engaging in casual sex (Bogle, 2008; Fenigstein & Preston, 2007; Herold & Mewhiney, 1993).

#### *G. What Circumstances Promote Casual Sex?*

Several authors have documented that casual sex is likely to occur when both parties have been drinking or taking drugs (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Grello et al., 2003, 2006; Leigh & Schafer, 1993; Lyons, 2009; Paul et al., 2000). Regan and Dreyer (1999) asked American college men and women to describe their motives for engaging in casual sexual relations. Both genders admitted that alcohol use had played a part in their decisions. Gender makes little difference: both men and women are more likely to engage in casual sex when alcohol is involved (Cooper & Orcutt, 1997; Testa & Collins, 1997). Alcohol and drugs promote casual encounters in two ways: they increase how appealing men’s and women find potential pick-ups to be (viewing partners through “beer goggles”) as well as lowering sexual inhibitions—further strengthening the likelihood of casual sexual encounters

(Conner & Flesch, 2001 [Great Britain]; Jones, Jones, Thomas, & Piper, 2003; Paul et al., 2000).

In a field experiment, Pennebaker and his colleagues (1979) asked student researchers to drop by an array of singles bars in Charlottesville, Virginia—timing their visits for early in the evening, a bit later (when things had just gotten going), and late in the evening (at “closing time.”) Students were assigned to approach men and women sitting at the bar and ask them how attractive they judged the other patrons to be. Early in the evening (at 9:00 p.m. and 10:30 p.m.), men and women were fairly critical of the other patrons (members of the opposite sex were thought to be “fairly attractive,” at best.) Come midnight, men and women, realizing it was “now or never,” became more charitable. As the old country and western song goes, “All the girls get prettier at closing time. They all begin to look like movie stars . . .” So said Pennebaker’s study. In recent years, the twitter: 2 @ 10, 10 @ 2 expresses that sentiment. Thus, it is not surprising that more casual liaisons are agreed to in bars, at fraternity “keg parties” and the like where alcohol is present, while fewer are agreed to in churches, cafés, classrooms, and libraries (Montoya, 2005).

Theorists have also speculated that men and women are more likely to engage in casual sex when they are in settings where they feel anonymous or are submerged in a group (Zimbardo, 1969). In such settings, personal and social codes are temporarily suspended, social constraints are removed, inhibitions fade, and one can engage in sexual behavior with impunity. Indeed, people are most likely to “blow off steam” at such events as Carnival Week in Brazil, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Spring Break in Florida, a summer vacation at a seaside resort, at

professional conferences, or at athletic events far away from home (Herold, Corbesi, & Collins, 1994 [Canada]; Huber & Herold [Canada], 2006; Sönmez, et al., 2006).

#### *H. How Do Casual Sexual Encounters Work Out?*

Theorists are divided as to the costs and benefits of casual sex. Eisenberg and her colleagues (2009) studied a diverse sample of 1,311 sexually active young adults in Minnesota (mean age 20.5) participating in EAT, a longitudinal study of psychological well being and sexual behavior in young adults. They found that young men and women who engage in casual sexual encounters do not appear to be at greater risk for psychological problems than are those involved in more committed relationships.

Using qualitative and quantitative data from the longitudinal Toledo Adolescent Relationship Study, which interviewed people of various ages (15 to 21), races and ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. Lyons (2009) found that most men and women did *not* regret their casual sexual experiences.

Paul and Hayes (2002) asked college students to describe their best and worst hookup experiences. Men and women agreed that hookups were best when there was interest and attraction, when the partner was good-looking, when sexual behavior was enjoyable, and when they felt wanted and cared about. Some women (27%) and men (16%) thought the hookup was best if a relationship evolved afterward. However, 10% of both men and women judged it “the best” because there was no emotional involvement or attachment (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Paul & Hayes, 2002).

And the worst hookups? Alcohol played a large role in the worst hookups, which often involved “quickies” in a car, club, or bar (Paul & Hayes, 2002). Both genders reported feeling a combination of good, aroused, excited, confused, unsure, regretful,

embarrassed, nervous, and scared; women more than men felt uncomfortable and anxious for the end. After their worse hookups, youth felt confused, unsure, used, anxious to leave, and glad it was over. Men, for example, felt disappointed—realizing that their partners were insufficiently attractive and/or too promiscuous. Women felt regretful—reporting shame, regret, self-blame, and pressured to avoid unwanted sex acts (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

Many speculate that men and women may have quite different reactions to a casual sexual encounter. Although the majority of adults agree that premarital sex is acceptable within a romantic context (Regan, 2003), social norms and expectations continue to define casual sex encounters as acceptable for men and objectionable for women (Walsh, 1991). Not surprisingly, then, men have been found to experience more pleasure and less guilt than do women after a casual sexual encounter (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995). Guilt and regret may contribute to women's psychological distress after casual sex (Bogle, 2008; Grello et al., 2006). The data are mixed, however.

Young people who choose to engage in casual sex appear to be as mentally healthy as those who abstain. Men who have had many sexual partners are (sometimes) found to possess higher self-esteem and are less depressed than are those who have had fewer "conquests." (This is not true for young women.) Women who engage in casual sex do not appear to come from stressful family environments or to be low in mate value (as some have assumed). They may possess a tendency toward depression, however (Grello et al., 2006; Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Mikach & Bailey, 1999; Schmitt et al., 2001; Walsh, 1991; Whitbeck, Conger, & Kao, 1993).

Others find that hookups cause problems for men *and* women. Some find that men and women with a history of casual sex may possess lower self-esteem (these data are inconsistent, however), feel more guilt, and experience more depression than do their peers. They also risk more violent victimization, and participate in more delinquent behaviors than do their peers (Paul et al., 2000; Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003).

Rarely mentioned but true is the fact that men and women's casual sexual encounters may, if discovered, take a toll on dates and mates. Most college students' romantic relationships are characterized by expectations of emotional and sexual fidelity. The discovery that one's dating partner has engaged in casual sex with another can be devastating; it may make one feel betrayed (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a, 1999b; Welsh et al., 2003).

## VIII. Summary

We began by reviewing cultural, social, and evolutionary theories as to the nature of casual sex. Like most theorists, we argue that a cultural and biopsychosocial approach is the best way to understand young people's attitudes and willingness to participate in casual sexual encounters. Currently, casual sex appears to be surprisingly common in America and in many places in the world. Regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, college educated or not, most young American men and women have chosen to engage in at least one casual sexual encounter. Not surprisingly, there is a close relationship between the permissiveness of young people's attitudes and their willingness to engage in casual sex. Young people participate in casual encounters for a variety of reasons: a partner's attractiveness, a desire for pleasure, and a loss of

inhibitions (via alcohol and drug use) are popular reasons, but people may risk a casual sexual encounter in the hopes that it will lead to something more serious. How do such encounters work out? Surprisingly, most of them end happily. People do risk a number of unpleasant outcomes: a violation of religious principles, a loss of good reputation, guilt, violent victimization, and at worst STI or AIDs or unwanted pregnancies.

Currently, profound differences are sometimes found in men's and women's sexual attitudes, willingness to engage in casual sex, the reasons why they engage in casual sex, and how such casual encounters work out. Recent research suggests, however, that with the passage of time, such gender differences may well be diminishing.

#### IX. In Conclusion

Many theorists argue that a knowledge of the dynamics of casual relationships is crucially important in gaining an understanding of the architecture of the human mind. Are young people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors primarily shaped by sociocultural or evolutionary imperatives? What is the interplay between the two? It is in casual mating situations, many theorists argue, that scholars will find the answers (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Kenrick et al., 1993; Li & Kenrick, 2006). In fact, studies of casual sexual relationships have demonstrated some of the largest empirical differences between men and women (Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

The elephant in the room, at this moment unseen and unknown, is the matter of change. Most studies are snapshots; what we need are movies. Are gender differences in attitudes and behaviors in regard to casual sex diminishing, growing, or remaining constant? With the advances in contraceptive and abortion technologies on the near

horizon, will the frequency of hookups continue to grow (as seems to be happening) or not? Will monogamy be as important (as it seems today) if the threat of infection from sexual activities is reduced?

If in the wake of globalization, cultures alter significantly, gender differences remain constant, and the frequency of hookups stabilizes, evolutionary theory will gain in credibility. But if the opposite is true—if cultural and social transformations produce marked movements in urbanization, affluence, technology and a new tolerance for gender and sexual variation—then we shall need fully to take that new data into account. If gender differences diminish and the popularity of casual sex increases, these developments may strengthen the cultural argument (see Petersen & Hyde, 2010, for data relevant to this observation.)

It's time to bring *time* into the debate, to encourage more longitudinal work. It is time to focus not only on the purported consequences of causal sexual encounters, but also on the benefits. It is time to see what we can learn about ourselves and each other through the lens of casual sex. It is also time to examine more closely the insights of cultural psychology, history, social psychology, developmental psychology, comparative psychology, reproductive biology, evolutionary theory, public health, and epidemiology in attempting to account for the complex phenomenon of casual sex. We should know a lot more as we track the trajectory and frequency of casual sex in the coming years—know not only more about casual sex itself, but about the human activities of which it is a part.

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