



Social context and sexual intercourse among first-year students at selective colleges and universities in the United States



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ABSTRACT

Most examinations of sexual behavior ignore social context. Using panel data from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen, a panel study of 3924 students at 28 selective colleges and universities, I examine how institutional and peer-group characteristics influence the incidence of sexual intercourse among students during their freshman year. Students who enter college as virgins are more likely to have sexual intercourse on campuses where women comprise a higher proportion of the campus population and on campuses that are more academically rigorous. Students who had sex prior to college are less likely to have sex in college when campuses are more residential. Moreover, having friends who value religion and partying affects the likelihood that a student will have sex irrespective of their prior virginity status. These findings highlight the importance of social context for sexual behavior among college students and in the general population.

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1. Introduction

Social scientific investigations of sexual behavior typically focus on the characteristics of individuals that influence consequential outcomes such as the transition to first sex, accumulated number of lifetime sexual partners, contraceptive use, and more. For a number of reasons—including continued inequality and stratification along race, class, and gender lines in sexual relationships, and easy access to students among university-based researchers—the sexual lives of college students in particular have drawn a significant amount of scholarly attention in recent years (e.g., [Armstrong et al., 2012](#); [Bogle, 2008](#); [England et al., 2007](#); [Glenn and Marquardt, 2001](#); [Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009](#); [Owen et al., 2010](#)). What is missing from these studies, however, is a systematic examination of how social context influences college sexual behavior among students on college campuses.¹ Indeed, many studies of college student sexual behavior are limited in scope to one or two campuses and thus cannot address how certain aspects of social context—such as institution-specific characteristics—may shape collegians' sexual experience. Such an examination would shed important light not just on the contextual determinants of college sexual behavior, including the role of institutions and peer groups, but may also have salient implications for understanding the contextual processes underlying sexual partnering in general.

Indeed, college campuses are ideal laboratories for studying social context and sexual behavior. As [Ellingson et al. \(2004:11\)](#) explain, “individuals frequently search for partners in school...because search costs are reduced there and

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¹ Some have examined how one contextual effect or another influences college sex. For example, [Burdette and colleagues \(2009\)](#) explore the role of religious colleges in shaping sexual behavior, and [Uecker and Regnerus \(2010\)](#) examine the effect of the campus gender composition on women's sexual attitudes and behaviors. Others consider contextual influences but have data from only one or two campuses, limiting the amount of comparative analysis that can be done ([Armstrong et al., 2006](#); [Bogle, 2008](#); [Morgan et al., 2010](#)).

information about prospective partners tends to be better.” According to data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), about 59% of college students at selective universities who had one or more romantic partners during their first year met at least one of those partners on campus (author’s calculations).² Colleges provide many forums for social interaction that may foster romantic relationships (Uecker and Regnerus, 2010), and the college admissions process may aid in assortative partnering.

A college campus can thus be conceived of as a “sex market”—the social structure wherein individuals search for a sex partner (Ellingson et al., 2004). The characteristics of the sex market determine the number and types of partners available to an individual, and market characteristics potentially expose individuals to different scripts about sexual behavior (though individuals also bring their pre-existing scripts which help shape their market). This market metaphor has been used previously to study sexual partnering, with one’s market typically defined (by the researcher) as the neighborhood or census tract of residence. For one segment of the population, however, college campuses are more appropriate sex (and romantic relationship) markets.

The current study examines how sexual intercourse is patterned and constrained by the structural characteristics of the sex market, including the institutional characteristics of the college and the peer groups in which students are embedded. I examine one outcome: sexual intercourse during the first year of college. Sex during college is often considered a part of healthy sexual development (Halpern, 2010), and societal changes—notably the availability of birth control (Carpenter, 2005) and declining religious authority in individuals’ lives (Chaves, 2004)—mean that sex outside of marriage is no longer viewed as problematically as it once was (Carpenter, 2005). Despite this, sexual intercourse is an important behavior to study for a number of reasons. For those who have not yet had sexual intercourse, first sex is an important marker in the transition to adulthood (Carpenter, 2005). Indeed, as Carpenter (2005) points out, it is the only sexual event for which there are designated terms (e.g., virginity loss, sexual debut), and major American institutions often portray first sex as the most significant sexual event in a person’s life. Moreover, virginity loss is a cultural object which young men and women use to help construct gender, sexual, racial/ethnic, and religious identities (Carpenter, 2005).

For those who have already had sex, sexual intercourse is still often considered to be a significant event, though not as momentous as one’s first sexual experience. Sexual intercourse among non-virgins, however, provides insight into how sexual partnering occurs within markets when barriers to sexual behavior (such as moral opposition or emotional unreadiness) are likely to be minimal—in other words, we are able to see the influence of a market among those who are not opposed to it in principle. Thus, for both its cultural significance and its theoretical insight, the study of sexual intercourse is important, and the social context in which intercourse occurs during college is to this point not well understood.

2. A social contextual model of sexual behavior

Before any consensual sexual relationship is commenced, some sort of matching must occur. How this matching takes place varies across sex markets, the “spatially and culturally bounded arena[s] in which searches for sex partners. . . are conducted” (Ellingson et al., 2004:8). The participants in these sex markets are mutually relevant to one another, meaning they observe each other’s strategies and preferences for matching and are potential partners for one another. Thus, individuals and their sex market are mutually constituted: individuals are constrained and informed by the market, but individuals also determine the characteristics of the market. Markets, then, are social structures that both act upon individuals and are created and sustained by individuals and their interactions, though social structures have emergent properties irreducible to their constitutive parts. The market or structure in which an individual is embedded (and the degree to which he or she is embedded in it) can influence sexual partnering in at least two ways: (1) It can define the types of partners and behaviors that are deemed appropriate—and the context in which those partners and behaviors are appropriate—by both shaping preferences and exerting social control, and (2) it can limit the availability and willingness of potential sexual partners. Of course, individuals retain agency in their sexual partnering—at least when the partnership is consensual. Markets do not *determine* sexual behavior. But they can exert causal influence on sexual behavior. Despite this, markets have received little attention in the social scientific study of (especially adult) sexual behavior (Laumann et al., 1994). Emphasis has instead been placed on the characteristics of individuals and how they influence sexual partnering. While important, individual-level examinations are incomplete as they ignore structural constraints and differences in sexual scripts across markets (Ellingson et al., 2004).

This market approach to sex is not unlike other sociological theorizing that seeks to explain the reciprocal relationship between social structures and human behavior. Theorists from Bourdieu (1977) to Giddens (1984) to Sewell (1992) have argued that social action is the result of the interplay between the cultural schemas and the resources that are available to different actors. Cultural schemas, or “ordered, socially-constructed, and taken for granted framework[s] for understanding and evaluating self and society, for thinking and for acting” (Blair-Loy, 2001:689), help individuals interpret the world, provide scripts for how to act, and define that which is good and right (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011). These schemas are instantiated in the physical world by resources (e.g., media, rituals, institutions, physical objects), which in turn are imbued with relevance by cultural schemas. Individuals draw on resources to enact schema, and schema are legitimated by the

² Data are weighted to reflect race-ethnic distribution of each student’s campus. The single-sex colleges were not included in the analysis.

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