



# “Hookups,” dating, and relationship quality: Does the type of sexual involvement matter?

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## ABSTRACT

Are partnerships that begin as “hookups,” “friends with benefits,” or casual dating relationships less satisfying and rewarding than serious sexual involvements? This research tests whether selection, experience, or mediation processes affect associations between types of sexual involvement and relationship quality. Drawing on a sample of 642 urban adults, we estimated ordinary least squares and treatment-effects regressions examining associations among types of sexual involvement, joint investments, and relationship quality. The results indicated that sexual involvements in nonromantic and casual dating contexts were associated with lower relationship quality in comparison to serious contexts, but these effects were completely accounted for by selectivity. Controlling for joint investments did not mediate these selection effects. The findings support the notion that screening processes associated with sexual involvement have important implications for later relationship quality.

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## 1. Introduction

In the wake of the Sexual Revolution, sex between friends, acquaintances, and strangers has become more common among both adolescents and adults in the United States. The proportion of American women delaying first sexual intercourse until marriage, or experiencing premarital sexual intercourse only with their eventual husbands, has dropped substantially in more recent birth cohorts (Raley, 2000; Whyte, 1990). Based on nationally representative 1992 data, the time from meeting to sexual involvement occurred within 1 month in roughly 20% of adult partnerships among Americans (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 240). Mahay and Laumann (2004, p. 157) found that approximately half of the respondents in their sample reported the onset of sexual involvement occurring with strangers, acquaintances, friends, or casual dating partners in their most recent sexual partnerships formed within the prior 5 years. Professional and public interest in relationship contexts of sexual involvement has been sparked recently by concern over the “demise of dating” among adolescents and college students (Bogle, 2007, 2008; Denizet-Lewis, 2004; Glenn and Marquardt, 2001; Kass, 1997; Manning et al., 2005, 2006; Paul et al., 2000), but this shift appears to be the most recent manifestation of a much larger historical arc associated with the transformation of intimacy in adult relationships (Bailey, 1988; Giddens, 1992).

Several studies have assessed the impact of different types of sexual involvement on relationship outcomes. Population-based studies of adults have found that the virginity status of women at marriage was associated with decreased likelihoods of divorce (Kahn and London, 1991; Laumann et al., 1994; but see Teachman, 2003). Scholars focusing on adolescents have

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reported that nonromantic contexts of sexual involvement were associated with lower likelihoods of contraceptive use at first sexual intercourse (Manning et al., 2000) and sexual exclusivity (Manning et al., 2006). Despite increasing attention to “hook-ups,” “casual sex,” and “friends with benefits,” little is known about whether the relationship contexts in which individuals become sexually involved with their partners are associated with perceived relationship quality in ongoing, adult sexual relationships.

In this research, we address this gap in the literature by investigating whether types of sexual involvement are associated differentially with relationship quality in adult partnerships. To establish this link, we develop theoretical explanations suggesting that observed associations reflect both selection and state effects. On the one hand, some individuals predisposed to finding relationships less satisfying and rewarding may tend to select into nonserious types (i.e., casual dating or nonromantic) of sexual involvement. On the other, experiencing sexual involvement in either casual dating or nonromantic contexts may cause individuals to find their relationships less satisfying and rewarding. Selection and causation processes may also promote the accumulation of joint investments in adult sexual relationships. Social, relational, and sexual dimensions of partnerships, along with children and shared property, are often conceptualized as “relationship-specific capital” or “joint investments,” which arguably enhance the stability and the quality of sexual relationships (Becker, 1981; England and Farkas, 1986; Laumann et al., 1994; Rusbult et al., 1986). Consequently, associations between types of sexual involvement and relationship quality may be mediated by differential accumulations of joint investments. Thus, the primary goal of this research is to examine whether types of sexual involvement influence relationship quality through selection processes, direct causation, or indirectly via the differential accumulation of joint investments.

## 2. Context and quality in sexual relationships

Prior studies examining associations between context and quality in sexual relationships have focused primarily on marital status. Scholars have linked premarital cohabitation to lower relationship quality among married couples (Brown et al., 2006; DeMaris and Leslie, 1984; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Stanley et al., 2004; Thomson and Colella, 1992).<sup>1</sup> The underlying causes of this gap are less clear, however. Existing research on premarital cohabitation is equivocal about whether its association with lower marital quality is the result of selection (Brown et al., 2006) or state effects (Kamp Dush et al., 2003). That is, this association may be spurious – an artifact of individuals predisposed to poor marital quality being more likely to enter into cohabitation – or the experience of cohabitation leads to changes in attitudes and beliefs, making it the root cause of this gap. In addition, the association between premarital cohabitation and relationship quality is modest: the amount of variance explained is typically less than 4% (Brown et al., 2006; Kamp Dush et al., 2003).

Similarly, singles and cohabitators tend to report lower relationship satisfaction than those in marriages (Stanley et al., 2004; Wolfinger and Wilcox, 2008), but only if the future of their relationships is in question (Brown, 2004; Brown and Booth, 1996; Waite and Joyner, 2001; Willetts, 2006). In other words, relationship quality among nonmarried individuals expecting a future with their partners is similar to those that are married. The causal direction between future expectations and relationship satisfaction, we point out, is unclear. Even if longitudinal designs are employed, factor analyses of future expectations and relationship satisfaction found that these items tapped a single underlying construct (Johnson et al., 1999; Stanley and Markham, 1992), suggesting that the former may be confounded with the latter. Taken together, limitations associated with both topics highlight the need for expanding scholarly attention to other determinants of relationship quality.

## 3. Conceptual framework

If prior and current relationship stages matter for relationship quality, one implication is that even earlier relationship contexts may be important as well. Although some individuals delay sex until becoming “serious,” engaged or married, many become sexually involved in casual dating and nonromantic contexts, such as sex between friends, acquaintances, or strangers, and these latter relationships sometimes develop into ongoing sexual relationships as opposed to being simply “one-night stands.” Thus, the relationship context of sexual involvement may be an important omitted variable. Specifically, it may improve the explanatory power of statistical models used to study relationship quality, help elucidate why there are differences across marital statuses, and explain not only relationship satisfaction but aspects of relationship quality, including future expectations, love, and the relative benefits of staying with their partners. In this research, we examine whether diverse relationship contexts of sexual involvement, which typically precede decisions about cohabitation and marriage, matter for relationship quality. To what extent do couples, which started as “hookups,” “friends with benefits,” and “casual daters,” but developed into ongoing relationships, have lower relationship quality? To answer this question, we present two explanations that may account for associations between types of sexual involvement and relationship quality. On the one hand, sociological theories of trust and commitment suggest that associations between types of sexual involvement and relationship quality will reflect state effects. On the other, signaling theory highlights the role of selectivity, where individuals

<sup>1</sup> This research question is related to the study of premarital cohabitation and risks of marital dissolution (Bennett et al., 1988; DeMaris and Rao, 1992; Lillard et al., 1995; Teachman, 2003; Teachman and Polonko, 1990).

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