Hooking up is a North American term describing a form of casual sex among adolescents (Manning, Longmore & Giordano, 2005; Paik, 2010) and emergent adults (Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013; Olmstead, Pasley & Fincham, 2013). However, hooking up differs from casual sex (Fielder, Walsh, Carey & Carey, 2013), as casual sex is characterized by intercourse with a stranger and hooking up can entail a wide variety of behaviors (Paul & Hayes, 2002) and can occur on multiple occasions (Bogle, 2008) with people who are friends or acquaintances (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Hooking up can be a potential pathway to exclusive relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Wade & Heldman, 2012).

Hooking up is variously defined in the literature, with most entailing physical intimacy that may or may not involve intercourse (Paul & Hayes, 2002), with someone with whom there is no commitment (Heldman & Wade, 2010) and no explicit expectation that a relationship will ensue (Fielder, Carey & Carey, 2013; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley & Fincham, 2010). Yet, hooking up can be a pathway to relationships, leading some to suggest that it is a more common form of courtship than the traditional date (Bradshaw, Kahn & Saville, 2010).

Keywords: hooking up, masculinity, college, sexual decision-making, agency

A great deal of empirical research on hooking up has emerged in recent years. While gender is the most common variable examined in hookup behaviors, the overwhelming majority of this research is focused on women. It is often assumed that casual sex practices like hooking up are explicitly masculine, so that enthusiastic male participation is expected. This article examines males’ assumption of agency in collegiate hookups regarding partner choice and sexual behavior. Using in-depth interviews from male undergraduates at a large public research university and focus groups from a small liberal arts college, both on the East coast of the United States, I find that the peer group is instrumental in shaping sexual decision making and reinforcing the double standard. Additionally, awareness of rape culture serves to complicate males’ choices and behaviors regarding sex.

* Stony Brook University.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author, Department of Sociology, Stony Brook University, N433 Social and Behavioral Sciences, Stony Brook, NY 11794-4356. Email: racheldkalish@optonline.net
Consistent within the literature are fairly high rates of hookup prevalence, with some studies finding well over half of participants of studied populations experienced hookups. One of the earlier studies using a nationally representative sample of college women found 40% had hooked up (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), while other research teams found higher rates: Daniel and Fogarty (2007) find 87% have hooked up. The studies using waves of the online College Social Life Survey, a dataset with over 22,000 participants from over 20 American colleges and universities, finds consistently high rates of hooking up (Armstrong et al., 2012; England, Shafer & Fogarty, 2008). The studies finding the lowest prevalence of hooking up use samples that are not comprised of college students (Fortunato et al., 2010) or a mix of college students and those of a similar age not enrolled in colleges (Eisenberg et al., 2009), which suggest that hooking up is more common in college, or that the collegiate environment is conducive to hooking up (Bogle, 2008).

Heldman and Wade “theorize the distinction between a sexual culture that includes hooking up and a ‘hook-up culture’” (2010, p. 323), with the latter characterized by the commonness of hooking up, to the extent that other forms of intimacy are devalued. Indeed, hooking up is considered the modal form of intimacy on college campuses (Fielder, Walsh, Carey & Carey, 2013), particularly among heterosexual students. Wade and Heldman (2012) assert that hooking up is hegemonic, and that “opting out of hookup culture felt, to many, like opting out of socializing entirely” (p. 135).

Gender is the most common variable examined in hookup behaviors (Wade & Heldman, 2012). However, the overwhelming majority of this research is focused on women, often regarding the negative emotional consequences they can experience (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2012; Paul & Hayes, 2002). It is often assumed that casual sex practices such as hooking up are explicitly masculine (Allen, Husser, Stone & Jordal, 2008; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 2004), so that enthusiastic male participation in hooking up is expected. Some authors even suggest that hooking up is favorable to males (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Grello, Welsh & Harper, 2006; McGinty, Knox & Zusman, 2007) or helps them to earn status (Armstrong et al., 2012), while others report that men’s experiences with hooking up are varied and emotionally laden (Epstein et al., 2009; Olmstead, Pasley & Fincham, 2013; Paul, 2006).

Hooking Up and Masculinity

A great deal of the hooking up literature deals with gender, yet, as is common in sex research, many studies rely on samples that are overwhelmingly female (McGinty et al., 2007; Grello et al., 2006), not allowing for within-group comparisons of men. Still, a growing body of literature examines males’ experiences with hooking up (Epstein et al., 2009; Olmstead, Pasley & Fincham, 2013; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013).

Many characterizations of male sexuality describe men as eager participants in casual sex, since non-emotional attachment and sexual conquest are aspects of traditional masculinity, particularly for White, privileged males (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2008). This implies that males prioritize sex over relationships and gives the impression that all males enthusiastically engage in complication-free hooking up.
Whereas studies comparing men’s and women’s experience tend to support the idea that men seek nonrelational sex over traditional dating, studies also find that this preference is not universal…. In fact, regarding nonrelational sex, some men appear to have difficulties meeting the goal of ‘no strings attached’ that is central to the hooking up script, whereas others may refer to sexual behavior with familiar partners as hookups or even engage in hookups with relational goals in mind. (Epstein et al., 2009, p. 415, italics in original)

Additionally, other studies reveal a more complicated picture: differences in race emerge where young men of color are more relational than White men (Ray & Rosow, 2010; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003), as do differences regarding men’s thoughtfulness about sex and relationships, where more thoughtful men are less likely to engage in hooking up (Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013).

Males experience and seek emotional attachment with intimate partners, in adolescence (Smiler, 2008; Giordano, Longmore & Manning, 2006), in college (Epstein et al., 2009; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013; Paul, 2006) and out (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). While men are aware of the traditional hookup script and its emphasis on markers of heterosexual masculinity, by their behavior, they also reshape the hookup script to allow for more relational outcomes (Ray & Rosow, 2010; Epstein et al., 2009; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013).

Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley and Fincham (2013) find three patterns in their sample of 200 college men. Slightly less than half of the sample considers sex a demonstration of feeling and emotion, and a way to express commitment to a partner, which is counter to pervasive characterizations of men eschewing commitment. In fact, the smallest proportion of their sample consisted of men who emphasized sex as a form of recreation or conquest, that is, the stereotypical depiction of male sexuality commonly found (Kimmel, 2008). However, the existence of a large proportion of men who maneuver between recreational and relational motives for sex (Epstein et al., 2009; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013) underscores the need for more studies examining within-group variation.

A common theme among the studies of males’ participation in hooking up is the effect of the peer group on men’s behavior (Epstein et al., 2009; Flood, 2008; Giordano et al., 2006; Kimmel, 2008). Hooking up can be a vehicle through which men earn or lose status among peers, since peers regulate behavior. Peers police the performance of masculinity (Pascoe, 2007; Peralta, 2007) and public displays of heterosexuality are an important component of that (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2007, 2013). Heterosexual sex, and the stories told about it, become a way for males to bond (Flood, 2008; Pascoe, 2007), demonstrating how homosocial relations can take precedence over cross-sex interactions. Flood (2008) asserts that the homosocial male audience is a significant element of males’ sexual decision making, and the ambiguity of the term hooking up facilitates that by allowing males to use an unclear label to describe behavior as casual, even when the motivation was emotional or relational, but perhaps unsuccessful (Epstein et al., 2009).

This body of literature implies that male participation in hooking up is more nuanced than stereotypical depictions of masculinity suggest. While sex is often thought of as something spontaneous (Bogle, 2008; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Olmstead, Pasley & Fincham, 2013), research finds that thoughtfulness about sex and re-
relationships deters hooking up (Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013). This article seeks to expand upon this distinction by examining young men’s agency in sexual decision making (Allen et al., 2008; Powers-Albanesi, 2010) in a context fraught with different emotions (Paul, 2006) and choices (Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley & Fincham, 2013).

Gender enactment is a significant component of agency (Holland et al., 2004; Powers-Albanesi, 2010). Agentic sexual choices are not only a product of various constructs of gender, but agency, or lack thereof, can also be an element of a specific gender performance, yet these gendered performances, and the resulting deployment of agency, are affected by cultural messages that offer conflicting models of young adult sexuality.

**Masculinities**

Masculinities involve a constellation of behaviors and bodily practices which confer status and power. Masculinity is relational, as peers help to construct meanings and markers of success associated with behaviors and practices in different locations and time periods. “Masculinity is not a fixed identity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). Race, class, sexuality, and global location all affect men’s enactment of masculinities. This leads to competing options for men and may create ambiguity in one’s choice of script called upon at particular times (Nagel, Kalish & Kimmel, forthcoming 2014).

Although masculine scripts encourage sexual relations with women, the most condoned social relationships for men are with other men, again emphasizing the value of the male peer group. The homosocial aspect of these relationships creates a risk of such intimacy being seen as sexual, so that in order to maintain a heterosexual identity, men must publicly enact their heterosexuality. This can encourage casual sex with women, as well as homophobic behavior towards anyone whose performance of masculinity is subpar (Pascoe, 2007).

Scripts of masculinity vary with region, culture, race, and global location, so that there are different elements of masculinities that are prized in different circumstances. Here, the focus is on American collegiate masculinity, which implies a shared or similar socioeconomic status, since students attending the same university are generally from similar class backgrounds (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). On the college campus, some statuses are more influential than others, so a student athlete may earn a great deal of masculine capital (Boeringer, 1999). A student athlete of color on a college campus may be more of a figure of hegemonic masculinity than a White non-athlete, since athletics are prized in the collegiate arena and many students emulate athletes (Benedict, 1997). Additionally, the composition of the student body matters, since a student of color will enact his masculinity differently on a predominately White campus than on an historically Black campus (Ray & Rosow, 2010), or the fraternity status will mean less on a campus where the entirety of the student body is Greek-affiliated.

Hooking up is often characterized as the sexual domain favored by males (Holland et al., 2004; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Kimmel, 2008). Males are thought to enjoy sex and eschew relationships, so hooking up is considered an unproblematized be-
havior for young men. “Casual sex remains a male prerogative” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 518). Traditional notions of heterosexual masculinity dictate that men seek out sex with as many females as possible (Kimmel, 2008) and are rewarded for having multiple partners. However, while it is agentic for males to seek out hookup partners, different elements of masculinities emerge that impact males’ agency in sexual decision-making, and offer a variety of sexual goals for young men. This study expands the current literature by examining the choices made by young men within the hookup culture. Previous studies consider effects of hooking up; this study examines the enactment of specific agentic choices regarding sexual partners and behaviors.

**The Current Study**

This study examines the enactment of agency in young males’ sexual decision making in collegiate hookups. Utilizing a qualitative mixed methods approach, both interview data and focus group data illuminate the ways in which masculinity, status, and race interact to shape sexual decisions and agentic sexuality for young men at two east coast American colleges. The research questions consider the factors that impact a young man’s choice of partner as well as the specific sexual choices made with those partners.

**Methods**

**Interviews.** Interview participants were seventeen students at a large, public university on the east coast of the United States recruited through announcements in sociology classes, flyers posted on campus advertising a study on relationships, and through the use of snowball recruitment. Because other research teams characterize hooking up to be most common among White students (Kimmel, 2008; Ray & Rosow, 2010), I made the attempt to recruit students of color. The sample closely matched the undergraduate population at the university in terms of race. I also oversampled student athletes and fraternity members, in order to examine differences between groups. This resulted in a sample with a large proportion of high-status males: five men were members of fraternities, six were student athletes.

The men ranged in age from 19 to 26, with a modal category of 20, and an average age of 21.2 years. Half of the respondents were in their junior year when the interview was conducted, four were first year students, and five were seniors. By self-identification, the sample consisted of four African American, three Hispanic, and 10 White men. One man identified as bisexual. Eleven were resident students, with the remaining six residing off campus. All seventeen males indicated they hook up.

**Interview procedure.** Interviews were conducted over the 2008-2009 academic year. Participants consented to be interviewed, and to have those interviews audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, participants choose a pseudonym, and all data is identified by pseudonym only. All interviews were conducted in the private setting of the author’s office. This subset of male respondents is part of a larger project examining sexual agency in hookups.

In a semi-structured interview, participants were asked about their social circle on campus, and about their experience with dating, relationships, and hooking up.
Students were asked to provide the definition of hooking up used amongst their friends, so that they could describe these behaviors as they experience them, rather than using a specific definition provided, which may not align with their lived experience. Questions probed for information about relationship formation and the difference between relationships and hookups.

Participants were also asked about their sexual behavior in hookups and relationships. Participants described their sexual partners, the progression of sexual behaviors, contraception use, and sexual decision-making. At the conclusion of the interview, all participants were offered a referral list for counseling options in the event that the interview caused any difficulty emotionally.

Focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted at another public college on the East coast of the United States. This small, liberal arts school has been recognized for its diverse population of students, where students of color are the majority. Two key informants helped organize and run the focus groups. The key informants had coursework in sociological research methods, and the author instructed them on confidentiality and comportment, as well as the research questions and main topics to cover. They were told to allow for natural discussion among the group, and to probe for more information. The author was present in the room during the groups, but the undergraduate key informants facilitated the groups to mitigate any effect a female researcher might have on the young men’s candor. The groups discussed partner choice, relationships, and sexual behaviors. By the second hour of the second group, saturation was reached, as topics covered in the first group were repeated.

All participants gave consent to participate and to have the group audiotaped. To ensure confidentiality, only age and ethnicity were collected. The first group had twelve participants, and the second group had seven. They ranged in age from eighteen to twenty four, with the majority between eighteen and twenty. While there was no attempt to recruit particular students, all students present in both focus groups were students of color. The majority was African American or Caribbean American, two were bi-ethnic: one indicated he was Puerto Rican and Black, and another was Filipino and Hispanic. Both of the key informants who facilitated the groups were African American. This composition is similar to the campus population, and especially resident students.

The young men who participated in the focus groups were all resident students on campus, living among two different wings of the same residence hall. Conducting the groups in a residence hall likely influenced the comfort level and ethnic composition of the group, as the majority of resident students are Hispanic or African American. They all appeared very familiar with each other, and with the two key informants who ran the groups. The groups took place over a span of two weeks during the spring semester in 2013. At the conclusion of each group, participants were instructed to respect the confidentiality of their peers.

Analysis. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in 2009, so that data was analyzed first, and informed the focus group analysis. The initial step was to identify phrases or concepts in the transcripts that appeared interesting, and recurred over multiple transcripts. Data were organized around recurring concepts, which formed the basis of the codes. The frequency of these recurring concepts was counted so that those endorsed by
many participants formed the basis of the analysis. The focus group transcripts were approached the same way, and similar codes emerged. This process of refinement throughout analysis helped shed light on nuances that appeared across both forms of data. The use of multiple data sources was intended to mitigate the small sample size and increase the validity of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

Choice of Partner

Males, in accordance with traditional masculinity, act agentically in their pursuit of sex, especially when their partner is someone who helps them earn status. Gender role ideology also impacts sexual decision making because males rely on stereotypical notions of femininity when choosing what sexual acts to engage in, and with whom. As mentioned above, these males will engage in sex as an enactment of their masculinity, but their specific choices are affected by the extent to which their female partner will bolster their status among peers.

Status-earning partners are highly attractive or highly sought after by other males. Males gain accolades from friends for talking to attractive or “hard-to-get” girls, as the following focus group excerpt demonstrates:

Male Voice: How do you feel about new ones?
Male Voice: You feel good, you’re like, damn.
Male Voice: I got it! She went to a party. Mad dudes trying to talk to her. She curb all the other dudes, and went home with me.

Often, males indicated that the positive reinforcement from their peers encourages them to hook up. Sixty-five percent (n = 11) of the males interviewed indicated that approval from their peers, or the perception of such approval factored in their choice of hookup partner. According to Tony, a 26-year-old White male, “They’re like, ‘Dude, she’s SO hot!’ So I was like, ‘All right!!’” This comment, describing his most recent hookup, shows not only the impact of his friends’ praise: their comment made him feel good about his choice to hookup with this particular girl, and it also made him feel good about himself.

The peer group effect endures even outside of their presence. When asked what they are thinking during a hookup, a number of men indicated their mind was on their friends’ approval of their partner and the accolades they expected for hooking up with her. Fifty-three percent of the males interviewed (n = 9) mentioned that they were anticipating the approval they would get when recounting their exploits to friends. According to Michael, a 21-year-old Hispanic fraternity member, “It really just depends. If it’s a hot girl, I generally tend to think, ‘oh wow, I’m about to have sex with this girl!’” However, not all males are thinking about the approval they may earn. Forty-one percent of the males interviewed (n = 7) indicated they were concerned about how their partner would perceive their performance. Twenty-four percent (n = 4) specifically mentioned their own reputation, and how important it was to maintain (“I’m gonna represent”):

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1 Percentages refer to the percentage of males interviewed.
My reputation counts a lot. I don’t want to be that bad person. So as far as what’s going through my head about what I’m going to do, then yeah, I’m gonna represent, I guess. I don’t want my name to come out of a bad conversation, like, “he was bad news.” (Jason, a 20-year-old Hispanic fraternity member)

The men in the focus group were also quite vocal about performing well (“laying it down”) to avoid being known as an inadequate partner. They discussed how they needed to mitigate a bad performance (“bust in two [minutes]”), even when such performance was a product of their feeling toward their partner (“shit was that good”).

Male Voice: You know you have to lay it down. You know the probability is high for her—unless she really cares about you—not to stay with you. And you know how girls talk, so you’ll be in that group to not get any.
Male Voice: If shit was that good, I don’t last that long.
Male Voice: She can’t leave until she get the best performance.
Male Voice: I was chasing a girl that was a 10, 11, and I did that shit—your ass is staying here for at least six more hours. I gotta make up for that.
Male Voice: I bust in two, and then I’m like, “Look, girl, my first time. Let me get about 10 minutes, this orange juice, and we get like that.”

Collegiate males are aware of the approval of their peers and consider it in sexual decision-making. As mentioned above, some partners help young men earn status; conversely, some partners detract from their status. These are described as “bad hookups:” a girl who is unattractive, or who has an undesirable personality trait. Interestingly, for some, appearance can mitigate her less than ideal personality. Scott, a 22-year-old White fraternity member, describes a hookup partner of his: “she’s a cute girl and everything, it’s not about that, I just really get turned off by her personality and I wonder sometimes which head is doing the thinking, so like this girl, I’m attracted to her but her personality kind of ruins it for me,” yet he continues to hookup with her, and attributes it to his male libido. Four of the participants indicated they had experienced feedback from friends due to a “bad hookup.”

Additionally, a young woman can be a “bad hookup” if she is rumored to have had a lot of partners. Thirteen of the men interviewed in the study made reference to “slutty” or “promiscuous” girls as bad hookups. Again, these young men were describing that they did indeed hookup with these young women, but because she was “slutty” or “nasty,” they changed their behavior. James, a 20-year-old White student-athlete, describes his sexual decision-making:

Rachel: How do you decide what you will or will not do sexually on a hookup?
James: How well I know the girl, like how long I’ve known her and if I think she’s like a big-time slut or not.

It must be emphasized that such characterizations are based on perceptions that may or may not be rooted in reality.
Rachel: How would you know if she’s a big-time slut?
James: Just what I’ve heard about her, like if people have told me stuff about her before, how she’s acting that night, if she’s acting really touchy, just if she wants sex, then I know she’s a big-time slut.
Rachel: Now, if you know that she wants sex, will you have sex with her or would you not?
James: That depends on looks, actually.
Rachel: It depends on how she looks?
James: Yeah. If she looks really good, I’ll have sex with her, but if she’s just like average, I’m not gonna have sex with her. I’ll do other stuff, but I wouldn’t have sex with her. If that was the first night I met her and she was just a slut, I wouldn’t have sex with her. But I have done that before, so I don’t know why I’m saying that. [laughter] I just thought about that and I actually have done that before.

James has a clear idea of how he is supposed to act with a girl whom he considers a “big-time slut,” yet, by his own admission, he struggles with curtailing the sex. Additionally, her looks can even mitigate the “slut” status and encourage him to have sex with her. Ironically, she becomes a “big-time slut” if she wants sex, yet young men engage in the same behavior of “just wanting sex” without any concern about losing status. In fact, for males, they earn status for it, again illustrating the power of the sexual double standard on college campuses (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009).

The men in the focus group spoke critically about the double standard as they perceive it. However, while critical of it, they also abide by certain standards for judging women’s suitability as a hookup or a potential relationship partner (someone to “cuff”):

Male Voice: Let me just tell you guys what it is. If a guy fucks 50 women, he is the man. If a girl fucks 10, she’s a whore. I didn’t even have to get to 50….
Moderator: The girl me and you talk about—if she has 20 bodies [partners], how do you look at her? Don’t lie.
Male Voice: She’s a dog.
Male Voice: She’s a whore, a slore [slut + whore].
Male Voice: She’s a slore with two Hs….
Male Voice: At 18 years old, a girl has 50 bodies, I’m over it. I ain’t gonna front; she’s off. Why would you have 50 bodies? But if I know her, I’m like, all right; she just likes to have sex. A lot of people do. You can’t judge a girl because she likes to have sex.
Male Voice: Really?
Male Voice: Because, at the end of the day, you want to have sex with her, too, so I’m not gonna be like, “Oh, she’s a ho.” But to cuff me, that’s a whole other story—you gotta be loyal, because as much as you like sex—you could have sex with me, and then go out and have sex with somebody else.

Ali, a 20-year-old African American fraternity member, also discussed the different labels girls can have, and how that impacts his behavior. When asked how he decides what he will do sexually on a hookup, he replied, “how much info I have on them.” He continued, discussing how he makes sexual decisions, but also how he evaluates potential for a relationship (a “wifey”):
Ali: Before the fact, even before I even get into a situation, there’s a prede-
termined mindset, in that I know, “Okay, this girl looks like, or from what I
know, from the people I talk to and the surveys that I’ve done [laughs], I
know that this girl is a girl that’s trustworthy,” or a girl that’s clean, you
know?
And then I know the girls that I know, like, “Oh, she a dirty girl.” Not dirty,
but like she nasty, you know? Like she do some nasty stuff, you know? And
those girls, you kinda stay away from. But then you know the girls that, you
know that they do they nasty stuff, but nobody really knows about it except
the people that are close to them, and you only heard it because of the fact
that you know those people—those are the people that you try to make your
moves.
The other ones where you know like, okay, they’re good, but they’ll never
ever do anything like that, those you look like, “Okay, she could be a possi-
ble wifey.”

Ali is aware that the labels people can get are not always accurate, but he also rec-
ognizes that a person’s behavior in public may not always align with their behav-
ior in private (“you know that they do they nasty stuff, but nobody really knows
about it except the people that are close to them”), so he seeks out girls who may
be more sexually adventurous, but do so without gaining a reputation. He de-
scribed his efforts to unearth information about potential partners (“the surveys
I’ve done”) by talking to their friends, enemies and former partners, all in the serv-
ice of deciding how to interact with someone.

Sexual Behavior

A number of men reported that hooking up provides them with confidence, a
trait highly valued among men, and prized, as well, among women in a potential
mate (Talbot & Quayle, 2010). Twenty-four percent of the males interviewed ($n = 4$)
indicated they enjoy the chase or pursuit of hookups. Thirty-five percent of the
males ($n = 6$) mentioned that being successful in the pursuit of a hookup provides
them with self-assurance in other areas, such as work and school. These young men
specifically mentioned that hookups provide them with confidence or an ego-boost.
Scott, a 22-year-old White fraternity member, described why he hooks up: “I don’t
know, I feel like I perform better with like work, school, with everything when I am
… when I am sexually active.” Interestingly, many of the males who mentioned
confidence as a reason for why they hook up were higher-status males, fraternity
members and athletes, so the confidence they felt may be a product of their con-
formity to the expectations associated with the masculine role for a high status
male.

Male students reported little difficulty deploying sexual agency regarding their
choices about safe sex. Most students described regular use of condoms during sex-
ual intercourse. This unspoken deployment of sexual agency attests to the ubiqui-
uty of the desire to engage in responsible sex, especially during hookups. This
agentic behavior enabled young adults to have safe sex, but since it is unquestioned,
it does not provide them with skills to practice negotiating sexual agency in other
aspects of the relationship. Twenty-four percent of the young men ($n = 4$) indicated
that contraception was a foregone conclusion. In fact, they were somewhat incred-
ulous when asked if they have ever had difficulty with partners over the use of contraception. For some, the idea of unsafe sex is threatening, so they are wary of partners who encourage it, interpreting the request for unprotected sex as an indication that she is purposely trying to infect them with a STI or trap them with a pregnancy. These sentiments were extremely common in the focus groups. The men in the focus groups seemed wary or even suspicious, doubting a partner’s admission of being on birth control.

Male Voice: But what if she says, “All right, yo, I’m on birth control. Can we go raw?” Would you still do it?
Multiple: I want to see the birth control pills.
Multiple: No.
Male Voice: I don’t want to hear you just got it.
Male Voice: You don’t take the birth control pill for two days, and you can get pregnant very easy.
Male Voice: If you go to the doctor with her, or you watch her get a shot from the doctor, you’re good.

For many males, the use of a condom was generally sought to prevent pregnancy. While some men do rely on their female partners to prevent pregnancy, young men are also aware of a discourse regarding the costs of unintended pregnancy. Traditional notions of masculinity emphasize responsibility and the need to be a provider. This is not lost on male college students, and explains why they prioritize the use of condoms to prevent pregnancy during college, when they do not see themselves as responsible or financially stable enough to be able to take care of any potential offspring. In the quote below, the issue of avoiding pregnancy supersedes the pressure on the young man to provide a sexually fulfilling experience for his partner, in recognition of the importance of being a responsible male:

I guess, with the same girl, I slipped up and I guess I got too heavy and I guess I put it in without a condom at one time, but then I took it out, “I’m going to put on a condom.” She was like, “Why?” I told her, “I don’t really do that; it’s not what I do.” Then she was like—she was telling me that it feels good that way. I’m like, “Yeah, I know it feels good, but I’m saying you don’t want a baby, right? You want to have a baby?”
And she made a face, then, “Okay, put the condom on.” (Ali, an African American male, fraternity member, age 20)

It is expected that males should seek out sex at every available opportunity. Refusing sex would be seen as non-masculine, since traditional gender role ideology dictates that it is masculine to have multiple partners, and to be ever-ready for sex, if not actively seeking it (Kimmel, 2008). Because of this, it is unlikely that a young man will stop a sexual encounter if unsure about his desires. A young man who is feeling questionable about participation in a sexual encounter may worry that his partner will question his lack of enthusiasm and thus scrutinize his masculinity. Additionally, as mentioned above, he may also worry that if his partner tells others about it, his reputation may suffer. Ricky, a 19-year-old White student athlete, conveys this struggle:
Ricky: I’m thinking, I don’t know. “Is this really what I wanna do right now, with her?” Usually not thinking too much instead of what’s actually going on…

Rachel: Okay. I was gonna say, if you were thinking, “I don’t really wanna do this,” what would you do? Would you continue or would you stop?

Ricky: Probably continue. It depends. If I really didn’t wanna do it, I’d probably make up some acceptable excuse.

Ricky indicates that he will continue a sexual encounter against his initial preference. But if he is going to stop it, he needs an “acceptable excuse” so as to not tarnish his reputation. His mention of an excuse indicates that he does not feel he can just stop a sexual encounter when he chooses. It is important to note that, even if undesired, he will abdicate his sexual agency and continue the encounter. The men in the focus group indicated they would stop a sexual encounter if the girl was unattractive, or if they were involved in a relationship.

Some men described continuing a sexual encounter beyond their better judgment in a different context. Contrary to their peers mentioned above, when describing what would happen if faced with the situation of being about to hook up with someone, but not having a condom, some of the students indicated that they would choose to have unprotected sex rather than curtail the sexual activity. In this situation, a young man will go along with a sexual encounter because he feels he has to, since “I’m not just gonna not have sex” (James, a 20-year-old, White student athlete, emphasis his). This was more common among the White men interviewed.

Yet there is another reason why males may voluntarily act in a seemingly non-agentic way, and in this circumstance their abdication of sexual agency is achieved in such a way so their masculinity is unquestioned, or strengthened. Due to the high prevalence of sexual assaults on college campuses (Buchwald et al., 1995), there are events to draw attention to the problem of coerced or forced sex. The men in the focus group spoke about this: “What we’re saying is that unless they give you verbal consent and is coherent, they can say you raped her, because they never gave you verbal permission to have sex with them.” Some campaigns specifically draw on notions of gender, promoting the idea that “real men” do not force sex on their partners (Denny, 2007). Consequently, a pattern has emerged where otherwise agentic males abdicate their agency in favor of their female partners. There are different patterns and motivations to this abdication of agency for young men.

While not specifically abdicating their sexual agency, one group of men follows the traditional gender arrangements within heterosexuality, where the male pushes the encounter further and relies on his female partner to stop it. These men see their female partner as a “gatekeeper,” where it is her responsibility to curtail the progression of intimacy. They do this because cultural messages tell them that males are supposed to want sex at all times, and this behavior becomes gender-appropriate, since, “most people are generally looking to have sex, if you’re a guy” (Edwin, 20, White student athlete). Twenty-nine percent of the males (n = 5) indicated this behavior in the context of hookups, as opposed to committed relationships.

Similarly, another twenty-nine percent (n = 5) specifically reference rape, and separate their behavior from any type of forced sexual activity. These young men discussed obtaining verbal consent from a partner, but they also saw their partner
as a gatekeeper. Some men said that not only would they not force sex on a partner, but they would not want to have sex with someone who did not seem engaged in the activity. They said that having a partner who was genuinely interested in them was a large aspect of their arousal. Men in the focus groups also discussed not wanting to have sex with a partner who was too drunk, or unable to consent, due to fear of a rape accusation.³

Some men describe going along with sex, and allowing their female partners to “lead” the sexual activity. These young men are willing partners, but they do not initiate intercourse, allowing their partner to direct the progression of sexual behavior. Seven of the men interviewed indicated this behavior. Tom, a 23-year-old White junior, describes how a sexual encounter typically progresses, “It depends on her. I don’t force it. I always let it just go with the flow. I don’t think that’s really my option to consider.” Tom specifically mentions how he will not use force in his attempt to increase the level of sexual intimacy. This shows his awareness of discourses about predatory male sexuality, and choice to distinguish his behavior from that. He will “just go with the flow” that his partner establishes. He “initiates the feelings” but lets her steer the progression of sexual behaviors.

There is another group of males that also rely on these discourses as they abdicate their sexual agency to that of their female partners, but for these men, there is a different agenda. These men will purposely NOT put any sexual pressure on their female partners, in an effort to progress the intimacy to a higher level. Specifically, these males are furthering their own sexual agenda by abdicating their agency. They take an act that appears not to be linked to their sexual pleasure, which could be considered a non-agentic one. Edwin, a 20-year-old White student athlete, explains this pattern of behavior:

Edwin: I’d never ask the question [what do you want to do sexually], though.
I’d always wait for the girl to…
Rachel: Is there a reason for that?
Edwin: I don’t wanna pressure them into anything. I’ve always found that works more effective.
Rachel: What works more effectively?
Edwin: If you don’t pressure them.

The five participants who situated themselves within this category tended to have more status or sexual capital on campus, the student-athletes and the Greek organization members. For these students, this behavior is affected not only by discourses about sexual assault, but also by the widespread belief that hookups are more prominent among higher status students (Lambert, Kahn & Apple, 2003). In interviews, when asked who they think hooks up the most, the overwhelming majority of students identified athletes and Greek-affiliated students, which is confirmed in their self-report data as well as in the College Social Life Survey data. When students erroneously believe that certain groups of their peers act in a certain way, it can affect their own behavior to align with their peers, where they emulate the behavior they attribute to these peers, regardless of the accuracy of these

³ Note again that their concern centered around being accused of rape, which is different from concern about not engaging in the act of rape.
assumptions (Reiber & Garcia, 2010), but it also affects the behaviors of those students who are labeled. If these males are highly sought after sex partners, it is likely that their behavior will reflect that, as will the behaviors of their partners, which makes this behavior successful. These men’s partners may be attracted to their status, and may be more willing to initiate sexual activity, which allows the men to reach their desired sexual goal without putting forth much effort.

**Discussion**

This study examined young men’s sexual decision making within the context of the hookup culture (Heldman & Wade, 2010). The role of the peer group was a significant factor in men’s choice of particular behaviors as well as their choice of partner. The peer group underscores the double standard (Crawford & Popp, 2003) in shaping the differentiation between men’s choice of partner for a hookup versus a relationship, as gender expectations and appearance are used to rank and judge, where males classify women into categories of desirability based on the women’s adherence to traditional aspects of femininity, specifically their role as a gatekeeper to curtail sexual activity (Risman & Allison, 2012; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). This separates women who are potential girlfriends from those who are seen only as potential hookup partners. The young men made little reference to young women’s pleasure or desire, instead thinking of women as a vehicle for their own status and pleasure. The focus group men also discussed sex-seeking behavior, but they also talked about ways to treat girlfriends (“wifeys”), suggesting that they are more relational in their sexuality than their White peers, as others have found (Ray & Rosow, 2010; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003).

Young men enact their agency in the service of earning status among peers (Kimmel, 2008), as much so or even more than to achieve sexual pleasure. Gendered stereotypes shape men’s evaluation of partner and behavior. Similar to the men interviewed by Flood (2008), these young men made sexual choices based upon their perceptions of their friends’ judgment and approval.

Young women are often seen as adversaries, or tools through which men gain status and to a lesser extent, pleasure. However, within hookup culture, men often have no concern for the female’s pleasure, unless it is tied to his status, as women can tell other women about a poor performance, which can result in the young man “being in the group to not get any.” Embedded here is a thread of vulnerability: males need to perform well, not only so they maintain a good reputation, but also to stop their female partner from seeking another mate.

The men were aware of the rape culture in which they live, yet their engagement with rape culture varied. One group of men demonstrated disdain for sexual assault, specifically positioning themselves in opposition to it. They differentiated their own behavior from any use of force. These men showed awareness of rape and its prevalence, taking a stance directly against it, which is consistent with a growing movement among men to help eradicate rape (Denny, 2007).

Another group of men interviewed were also aware of rape culture, and separated themselves from the use of force, yet they manipulated this to suit their own sexual desires: they acted as if they were not initiating the sexual behavior, with the specific goal of furthering the intimacy by allowing their partners to progress the sexual behavior. They deployed a performance of abdicating agency in order to achieve pleasure, so what appears to be non-agentic, is actually an extremely agentic act, similar to other studies who found that men interact with women specifi-
cally in a manner that increases the likelihood of sex (Flood, 2008).

The men in the focus groups demonstrated another form of engagement with the rape culture, perhaps shaped by race. These men were vocal about the necessity to maintain verbal consent from a coherent partner. While some appreciated the need for active and voluntary consent for sex, others referred to documenting consent to protect them from allegations of rape. The former group showed concern about the act of rape itself, while the latter demonstrated fear of being accused, with little concern about any coercive or forcible behavior on their part. Again, the latter group demonstrated vulnerability that positions women as adversaries: the women had the “power” to make an accusation, yet they were unable to appreciate the structural power differentials that facilitate rape in general (Buchwald et al., 1995). Additionally, these men of color were wary of rape allegations, due to a mistrust of the criminal justice system and perceived racism within the system against men of color (Hill Collins, 2004).

The men interviewed demonstrated vulnerability, but differently. These men expressed pressure to continue a sex act where they were ambivalent. They felt that they could not refuse sex without an “acceptable excuse,” without a mark against their reputation. This struggle with choices is shaped by expectations that men are constantly seeking sex (Kimmel, 2008), yet it complicates these stereotypes. This echoes Smiler’s work with adolescents, who found it “likely that boys may not have the vocabulary—or the belief—that they can ‘just say no’” (2008, p. 28). The pressure to “say yes” continues past adolescence into college, where peer group and status reinforce stereotypes of masculinity.

Contraception was one area where there was little difficulty enacting sexual agency. This is likely due to these students coming of age with public health campaigns and widespread public education about the risks of unsafe sex. Another explanation is that contemporary college males deploy their agency out of a fear of pregnancy more so than out of a concern for safety. The fact that students regularly describe condom use during vaginal intercourse indicates a greater fear of pregnancy than STIs since discussion of the use of protection for similarly risky behaviors such as oral sex is almost absent. That the focus group men and other males of color were more likely to describe concern for pregnancy underscores the prominence of the provider role in African American masculine scripts, yet these men recognize that they are not in a place to be a provider at this time, so they demonstrate an extreme fear of pregnancy. The men in the focus groups showed vulnerability regarding pregnancy, considering it as something that could “trap” them, so they were vocal about seeing the actual contraception, demonstrating a lack of trust of their female partners.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study examined men’s experiences of hooking up and their use of sexual agency. Gendered expectations and the public aspect of gender performance illuminate the peer group as an important audience for this behavior. Peer group appraisal can serve to make some behavioral choices more prominent than others.

While many recognize college as a site of sexual experimentation (Bogle, 2008), the men did not mention college in discussing why they deploy this sexual agency. Instead, they relied on a much more essentialist explanation: they seek out sex and multiple partners because they are “guys.” To them, sexual assertiveness is implicit
in their enactment of masculinity. Sexual activity is so normalized, it becomes normative, to the point where men will engage in sex acts to which they are otherwise indifferent, but continue because they fear scrutiny if they were to desist. Yet these men mitigate these decisions by referencing the male libido as the reason for this activity (“I’m not just gonna not have sex;” “I wonder sometimes which head is doing the thinking”). High status males seem to have more difficulty with sexual agency, perhaps because they feel more pressure to live up to masculine ideals, or they perceive their behavior as more visible on campus, so they fear stigma more than others.

However, these high status males are also able to draw upon cultural discourses of masculinity to achieve sexual goals. On many college campuses, there is a vocal campus culture existing in opposition to forced or coerced sex (Denny, 2007). This campus culture is experienced by men of color differently than their White peers. Men of color, especially in the focus groups, were explicit in recognizing the need to gain verbal consent in order to avoid any accusation of rape. This may be in part due to the race bias of the U.S. criminal justice system which affects their behavior, and specific stereotypes of African American male sexuality as predatory (Hill Collins, 2004). Simultaneously, many of the constructs of masculinity have changed over the past few years to be more inclusive of different forms that allow for more emotional connection and a less aggressive version of masculinity (Anderson, 2011). These two factors combine for young men in a way that allows them to abdicate their sexual agency in an effort to increase the level of sexual activity they can engage in with a partner, but this is amplified for White men. They then appear to engage in a behavior that is rather non-agentic, which allows them, then, to achieve sexual activity and sexual pleasure while maintaining their masculine status. In some circumstances, such an “abdication” of sexual agency can actually bolster their masculine status.

Yet, there is another discourse existing on college campuses that also impacts hookups. The “pornification” of culture emphasizes and normalizes sexuality, and promotes the idea that young women exist as objects of sexual desire (Heldman & Wade, 2010). This encourages self-objectification of young women and reinforces male entitlement, which is evident here in the young men’s lack of regard for their partners, and their partners’ feelings, as well as their reliance on the double standard. This is consistent with other studies using the online College Social Life Survey (Armstrong et al., 2012; England et al., 2008). For many of the young men, young women are vessels in which they find pleasure, or, as we see here, women are vehicles which men use in the pursuit of status, which is something college men appear to think about and act on in meaningful ways.

It is important to examine the experiences of young men as they navigate the hookup culture as well as the rather untapped dialogue that men have regarding these encounters. Deployment of male sexuality is frequently assumed to be unproblematic; however, an examination of the process of decision-making for young men is certainly not uncomplicated. While there is a variety of outcomes of hooking up, it is important to recognize that the construction of gender as it exists on college campuses is implicated in students’ sexual decision-making, and negative outcomes of hooking up are often linked to inadequate gender performance. Broader gender expectations could mitigate these negative consequences, for both men and women, especially those associated with a sexual double standard.

This study examined gender and the enactment of agency in college hookups.
Peer appraisal is instrumental in guiding sexual decision making and the enactment of sexual agency for young American collegiate males. Men often base behavioral and sexual choices upon how they expect such behavior to be judged by their peers, who shape notions of appropriate partners, and encourage participation in the hookup culture. Scripts of masculinity also impact behavioral choices, particularly around contraception and consent, albeit with results that vary based upon race and status on campus.

While this research draws attention to these relationships in ways that have rarely been studied, it is limited by a few factors. The convenience sampling method used limits the generalizability of the results, as do the small sample sizes. The results discussed here may not apply to the national college population within the United States, or to students in other countries. Another limitation is the heterosexual bias. Future research should attempt to include the voices of bisexual, homosexual and transgender students, since the construction of gender is clearly linked to sexual decision-making, and the experiences of students who are gender-nonconformist would add a great deal of texture to our understanding of sexual decision-making in college.

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