

Sexual double standards on campus may leave students feeling disempowered

July 25 2016, by Heather Hensman Kettrey

Over the past few years, there has been a steady flow of articles in magazines, newspapers and online news outlets examining what hookup culture on college campuses means for sexual norms and behaviors among young adults, [particularly young women](#).

Some writers suggest women who participate in hookup culture often feel like outsiders struggling to navigate a territory where [young men set the terms](#) of sexual activity. Still, with similar proportions of college men and women hooking up, others wonder if hookup culture might be [liberating for young women](#). Perhaps it's even a sign that the traditional sexual double standard is a thing of the past.

This isn't an easy question to answer. On the one hand, college hookup culture allows women to explore their sexuality in ways that previous generations of women could not. On the other hand, it is a [deeply gendered](#) custom that can enhance a man's reputation and damage a woman's.

As a sociologist who studies gender and sexuality, I decided to explore the status of the traditional sexual double standard in college hookup culture. Do [college students](#) today support it, and if so, to what degree?

Contemporary status of the traditional double standard

In 1960 sociologist [Ira Reiss](#) published "[Premarital Sexual Standards in America](#)," inspiring decades of research on a traditional double standard

that is used to judge women more harshly than men for engaging in similar sexual behaviors.

So, what does all this subsequent research say about the status of this double standard today?

[Some studies](#) indicate the traditional double standard is still relevant. [Others](#) indicate it has been surpassed by an egalitarian standard where men and women are judged similarly for engaging in similar behaviors and that some college students even use a *reverse* sexual double standard to judge men more harshly than women.

Why are these findings so mixed? One [explanation](#) is that contemporary college students tend to believe that the traditional double standard exists in society, but not in their own minds. In other words, they think they don't judge women more harshly than men, but they believe others do.

In fact, findings from a number of studies indicate both men and women expect college women to be negatively judged (presumably by others) for "going too far" on a hookup. This can have real implications for power dynamics in sexual encounters.

In their interviews with college women, sociologists [Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth A. Armstrong](#) found that some attributed their negative experiences with hookups to men's endorsement of the traditional double standard. These women believed the traditional double standard gave men power in hookups and justified the disrespectful treatment of women.

This suggests that when *men* endorse the traditional double standard it has implications for women's experiences with college hookups. So how common is it for men to endorse the traditional double standard? Do women tend to endorse a different standard? And what does judgment of

sexual behavior mean for power dynamics in hookups?

I explored [these questions](#) using data from a sample of over 11,000 students who responded to the [Online College Social Life Survey](#).

Sexual double standards and power in college hookups

Since college students often believe that double standards exist in society, but not in their own minds, I paid particular attention to respondents' belief that a past hookup partner had lost respect for them after a hookup.

I found that most respondents judged men and women similarly for similar sexual behaviors. However, when I broke the results down by sex, an interesting pattern emerged. Approximately 45 percent of men endorsed the traditional double standard, while about 33 percent of women endorsed the reverse double standard. In other words, men's judgments of women were generally harsher than women's judgments of men.

Additionally, over half of women reported feeling that they had been disrespected for hooking up, compared to 22 percent of men. This suggests that the traditional double standard is still relevant, even if [college](#) students believe that it only exists outside of their own minds.

I also found that a respondent's belief that he or she had been personally disrespected by a previous hookup partner was associated with power disadvantages in their most recent hookup.

The respondents who reported feeling disrespected were more likely to engage in sexual acts that they did not personally desire. This included performing sexual acts to please their partner and giving in to verbal pressure to have sex when they didn't want to. Importantly, this was the

case for both [men](#) and [women](#) in the study.

Stigma about sex doesn't help anybody

It's possible that popular discourse about hookup culture may benefit young people if it promotes neutral perspectives that do not portray *anyone* negatively for hooking up.

The fact is, as these findings show, there is a relationship between stigmatization of sexual behavior and sexual disempowerment for young people. When young adults feel judged for past sexual behavior, they may have trouble expressing their desires and setting limits with future partners.

Ultimately, judgment does nothing to promote the development of healthy sexuality among [young people](#).

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Citation: Sexual double standards on campus may leave students feeling disempowered (2016, July 25) retrieved 24 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-07-sexual-standards-campus-students-disempowered.html>

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