

Pluralistic Ignorance and Hooking Up

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"Hooking up"—when two people agree to engage in sexual behavior for which there is no future commitment—has become popular on college campuses. In this study we examined the extent to which pluralistic ignorance affects hooking up. One hundred thirty-six female and 128 male college students answered questions regarding their own comfort and their perceived peers' comfort in engaging in a variety of sexual behaviors while hooking up. We hypothesized and found that both women and men rated their peers as being more comfortable engaging in these behaviors than they rated themselves. Men expressed more comfort than did women in engaging in these behaviors, and both sexes overestimated the other gender's comfort with hooking up behaviors. Pluralistic ignorance appears to apply to hooking up on college campuses, and we explore some potential consequences of pluralistic ignorance in this context.

Although one-night stands and uncommitted sexual behaviors are not a recent phenomenon, past research has focused on personality traits, attitudes, and individual differences in willingness to engage in such behaviors (e.g., Gerrard, 1980; Gerrard & Gibbons, 1982; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Snyder, Simpson, & Gangestad, 1986). The tacit assumption in this past research was that sexual behaviors within a committed and loving relationship were unproblematic, but that unloving, uncommitted sexual relations had to be explained. However, today on college campuses across the United States what was once viewed as problematic has now become normative, and students refer to this process as "hooking up."

Hooking up occurs when two people who are casual acquaintances or who have just met that evening at a bar or party agree to engage in some forms of sexual behavior for which there will likely be no future commitment (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Kahn et al., 2000; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). The couple typically does not communicate what sexual behaviors they will or will not engage in, and frequently both parties have been drinking alcohol (Kahn et al., 2000; Paul et al., 2000). Paul et al. (2000) found that 78% of women and men on the campus being studied had engaged in hooking up at least once. In the Kahn et al. (2000) sample of college students, 86% of the women and 88% of the men indicated they had hooked up. Almost one half (47%) of the men and one third of the women in the Paul et al. sample engaged in sexual intercourse during the hookup, and Kahn et al. found that their sample believed petting below the waist, oral sex, and sexual intercourse occurred with some regularity in the process of hooking up.

Pluralistic ignorance, a concept first coined by Floyd Allport (1924, 1933), exists when, within a group of indi-

viduals, each person believes his or her private attitudes, beliefs, or judgments are discrepant from the norm displayed by the public behavior of others. Therefore, each group member, wishing to be seen as a desirable member of the group, publicly conforms to the norm, each believing he or she is the only one in the group experiencing conflict between his or her private attitude and his or her public behavior. Group members believe that most others in their group, especially those who are popular and opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), actually endorse the norm and want to behave that way, while they themselves privately feel they are going along with the norm because of a desire to fit in with the group and exemplify the norm (Prentice & Miller, 1993, 1996). In this study we examined the extent to which pluralistic ignorance might be related to U.S. college students' comfort levels with sexual behaviors involved in hooking up. Consistent with the premise of pluralistic ignorance, we hypothesized that college students would perceive others as having a greater comfort level engaging in a variety of sexual behaviors than they themselves would have.

Prentice and Miller (1993) demonstrated pluralistic ignorance among college students in the area of alcohol consumption. On a campus where heavy alcohol use was the perceived norm, Prentice and Miller found that students estimated both the average student and their friends to have less discomfort with the level of alcohol consumption on campus than they reported for themselves. Furthermore, for male but not female students, they found greater consistency between respondents' comfort levels with alcohol consumption and the perceived norm and between respondents' reported drinking levels and the perceived norm at the end of the semester than at the beginning of the semester. Although correlational in nature, these results suggest that over time, male students may have changed their attitudes and behaviors to bring them more in line with the perceived norm. Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) reported similar findings with regard to the discrepancy between college students' own comfort

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with the amount of drinking at the university and what they estimated to be the general campus attitude.

Although pluralistic ignorance was originally conceptualized as a discrepancy between public behavior and private beliefs (Miller & McFarland, 1987), others have used the concept to refer to situations in which there is not direct evidence of behavioral similarity (e.g., Fields & Schuman, 1976; O'Gorman & Garry, 1976). More recently, Cohen and Shotland (1996) invoked the concept of pluralistic ignorance in a variety of dating situations for which public scrutiny was absent. They found that both men and women believed that the average other person of their sex had more liberal sexual expectations than they set for themselves, both sexes believing the average other person of their sex would expect sexual intercourse much sooner in a relationship than they themselves would expect it. When asked whether a same-sex peer would expect to have sexual intercourse with a person with whom they were emotionally involved but for whom they felt no physical attraction, both men and women believed the average man and woman would expect sexual intercourse, while only approximately 50% of the participants would expect sex themselves in such a relationship, and an even smaller percentage reported having had sex in such a relationship. Finally, when there was neither emotional nor physical attraction to a partner, few women or men expected that they would have sexual intercourse with the partner, but believed the average man and woman would indeed expect sexual intercourse.

Pluralistic ignorance might have consequences when beliefs about the norm condone intimate sexual behaviors. In the process of hooking up, pluralistic ignorance may lead one or both sexual partners to act according to the perceived norm rather than to their own convictions. There is a large literature showing that men have more liberal attitudes towards sexual behaviors and expect sexual intercourse sooner in a relationship than do women (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Knox & Wilson, 1981; Oliver & Hyde, 1993) and that men are much more receptive than are women to offers of sexual intercourse (Clark & Hatfield, 1989). Byers and Lewis (1988) found that disagreements among dating partners on the desired level of sexual behavior was almost always in the direction of the male partner wanting a higher level of sexual intimacy than that desired by the female partner. Thus, it is possible that many men go into hooking-up situations hoping to engage in more intimate sexual behaviors than are desired by their female partners. Because men are expected to initiate sexual activity (DeLamater, 1987; Peplau & Gordon, 1985), it is possible that in the process of hooking up, some women will experience unwanted sexual advances and possibly even sexual assault or rape.

In their research on hooking up, Kahn et al. (2000) asked 92 female and 50 male college students if they had ever had a "really terrible hooking up experience." Nearly one half of the women (42%) and the men (46%) indicated they had had such an experience. A "terrible experi-

ence" for the men was usually due to the women wanting a relationship or to the use of too much alcohol or drugs; none mentioned pressure to go further than they desired. However, nearly one half of the women (48.3%) who reported having a terrible hooking-up experience indicated that they were pressured to go further than they had wanted to go. They gave responses such as "I hooked up with a guy who didn't understand the meaning of 'no'" and "I didn't want to—he did—he wouldn't back off." These women may have experienced sexual assault during a hook up but did not label their experiences as such because they believed the behaviors to be normative. In addition, 10.3% of the women and 11.1% of the men in this sample said the hook up was terrible because they had gone too far without mentioning pressure from partner. Going too far might have been the consequence of pluralistic ignorance, conforming to a presumed norm.

The present study sought to extend the findings of Cohen and Shotland (1996), which were restricted to expectations of sexual intercourse in dating situations, to the area of hooking up. Further, we wanted to examine whether pluralistic ignorance occurred with other sexual behaviors besides sexual intercourse. Based on the research on pluralistic ignorance and gender differences in expected sexual behaviors, we hypothesized that both male and female students would see other students as more comfortable with various hooking-up behaviors than they were themselves. Although we expected individuals would vary in their own comfort levels with various hooking-up behaviors, we expected they would believe other students to be uniformly more comfortable engaging in those behaviors than they were themselves. Furthermore, consistent with previous literature, we hypothesized that men would be significantly more comfortable than women with engaging in all hooking-up behaviors. Finally, we hypothesized that due to pluralistic ignorance, both women and men would overestimate the other gender's comfort with all hooking-up behaviors.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred seventy-five female and 152 male undergraduate students from a mid-sized residential southeastern public university that has few nontraditional students served as participants for the study. The convenience sample represented a moderately even distribution of year in school: for first years, $n = 79$ (41 females, 38 males); for sophomores, $n = 70$ (37 females, 33 males); for juniors, $n = 84$ (45 females, 39 males); and for seniors, $n = 93$ (52 females, 41 males). A female experimenter approached students as they entered the university library and asked them to volunteer to answer some questions about hooking up and sexual behaviors as part of her senior honors project. She approached other students in their residence halls. No differences appeared between these two samples for any of the dependent measures. Analyses concerning plu-

realistic ignorance and comfort with hooking up are based on the data from 136 women (77.7%) and 128 men (84.2%) who indicated that they had hooked up.

Materials and Procedure

The questionnaire consisted of questions developed by the authors to examine student attitudes toward hooking up. On the first page, students read that the investigator was interested in "students' attitudes and behaviors with regard to dating and 'hooking up,'" and hooking up was defined as "a sexual encounter between two people who may or may not know each other well, but who usually are *not* seriously dating." Participants also signed an informed consent form, which indicated all information would be anonymous and confidential. To insure anonymity and encourage honest responding, the only demographic information obtained was the participants' year in school. We made no attempt to determine sexual orientation or marital status; however, on this residential campus the overwhelming majority of students come to the university directly from high school, identify themselves as heterosexual, and have never been married (James Madison University Office of Institutional Research, 2001-2002). Participants were told they were not required to complete the survey if they became uncomfortable.

Students who said they had hooked up were instructed to continue to the next page. We constructed 11-point scales modeled after those used by Prentice and Miller (1993) on which 3 points were labeled: 1 = *very uncomfortable*, 6 = *neutral*, and 11 = *very comfortable*. Participants responded to the question "How comfortable are you with the amount of hooking up that goes on at [school name]?" They then responded to the question "How comfortable are you with engaging in the following activities during a hook up?" with regard to "petting above the waist," "petting below the waist," "oral sex," and "sexual intercourse." Participants used the same scales in response to the questions "How comfortable do you think the *average female* student is with the amount of hooking up that goes on at [school name]" and "How comfortable do you think the *average female* student is with engaging in the following activities during a hook up?" Finally, they responded to the questions "How comfortable do you think the *average male* student is with the amount of hooking up that goes on at [school name]" and "How comfortable do you think the *average male* student is with engaging in the following activities during a hook up?"

Students who indicated that they had never hooked up were asked to skip to a different page of the survey, which contained questions regarding why they did not hook up and whether or not they believed that there was a relationship between hooking up and sexual assault. This part of the questionnaire was included so that all participants would work on the survey for approximately the same amount of time without knowing who had or had not hooked up.

Participants completed the questionnaire privately, usually within a short distance of the researcher. Those participating at the library placed their completed questionnaires

in a large box, and those participating in their residence hall placed completed questionnaires in a large envelope. When they were finished, participants were encouraged to ask questions and discuss the questionnaire with the researcher, who provided them with a debriefing statement and a list of campus resources for sexual assault.

RESULTS

We tested the hypothesis that students would experience pluralistic ignorance regarding hooking up with a 2 (Gender) X 2 (Target: self or other) ANOVA, with target as a within-subjects variable. As hypothesized, participants demonstrated pluralistic ignorance by evaluating their own comfort level with the amount of hooking up, $M = 7.08$, $SD = 2.31$, significantly lower than their estimate of a same-sex peer's comfort level, $M = 7.75$, $SD = 2.08$, $F(1, 262) = 24.24$, $p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .085$. Participants believed that other college students were more comfortable with the amount of hooking up than were they. This main effect of target was qualified by a significant gender by target interaction, $F(1, 262) = 7.55$, partial $\eta^2 = .028$, $p < .01$. Both men and women showed the same pattern of overestimating their peers' comfort levels; however, the pattern was more pronounced among the male students (9.01_{peer} vs. 7.95_{self}), $t(127) = 4.68$, $p < .0001$, $d = .502$, than among the female students (6.57_{peer} vs. 6.26_{self}), $t(135) = 1.85$, $p < .05$, one-tailed, $d = .185$. Table 1 presents these means and standard deviations.

A dependent t test for equality of variances revealed that participants showed significantly less variability in their ratings of peer comfort level in hooking up than in their self-ratings, $t(262) = 1.96$, $p < .05$, one-tailed. When rating their own comfort levels, the standard deviation in participants' responses was 2.31. However, the standard deviation significantly decreased to 2.08 when participants estimated their peers' comfort with hooking up. This decrease in variability when estimating others' comfort provides some evidence for an illusion of universality. That is, participants showed greater uniformity in their beliefs about others' comfort levels compared to their own actual comfort levels.

We used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine the hypothesis regarding men's and women's own comfort levels with various sexual behaviors, with participant gender as the between-subjects variable. Men reported significantly greater comfort with these behaviors than did women, $F(4, 259) = 35.17$, $p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .352$. Table 2 shows that men's greater comfort occurred with all four hooking-up behaviors.

Table 1. Ratings of Own and Average Same-Sex Student's Comfort With Hooking Up

Measure	Self <i>M (SD)</i>	Average student <i>M (SD)</i>
Women	6.26 (1.79)	6.57 (1.63)
Men	7.95 (2.48)	9.01 (1.74)

Note. Ratings were made on 11-point scales (1 = *not at all comfortable* and 11 = *very comfortable*).

Table 2. Ratings of Men and Women's Own Comfort With Hooking-Up Behaviors

	Men <i>M (SD)</i>	Women <i>M (SD)</i>
Petting above the waist	9.12 (2.47)	7.29 (2.68)
Petting below the waist	8.42 (2.60)	5.13 (2.73)
Oral sex	7.56 (3.05)	3.49 (2.63)
Sexual intercourse	5.65 (3.57)	2.15 (2.31)

We tested the hypothesis that both men and women would overestimate the other gender's comfort with hooking-up behaviors using two separate MANOVAS. The first examined the men's estimates of the average woman's comfort, and the second examined the women's estimates of the average man's comfort. To evaluate the accuracy of these estimates, the comfort estimates were compared with the means of the actual comfort ratings of these hooking-up behaviors. Both the men, $F(4, 259) = 7.82, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .108$, and the women, $F(4, 259) = 16.25, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .201$, significantly overestimated the other gender's actual comfort levels with various hooking-up behaviors. As shown in Table 3, this overestimation occurred for both sexes on each of the four hooking-up behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Cohen and Shotland (1996) found evidence of pluralistic ignorance regarding expectations of sexual intercourse on a date. The current research extended these findings to other sexual behaviors, and did so in the context of hooking up. We found that both women and men reported less comfort with their perceived norm of hooking up than they believed was experienced by their same-sex peers, with men showing a greater difference between self- and peer-ratings than women. In addition, both men and women believed members of the other gender experienced greater comfort with hooking-up behaviors than members of the other gender actually reported. Men were less comfortable with engaging in hooking-up behaviors than women believed them to be, and women were less comfortable with engaging in hooking-up behaviors than men believed them to be. These findings appear to be due to pluralistic ignorance: Hooking up has become the norm for heterosexual sexual relationships on this campus, and since the great majority of students do in fact hook up, it appears

that most students believe that others are comfortable—more comfortable than they are themselves—with engaging in a variety of uncommitted sexual behaviors. It is likely that most students believe others engage in these hooking-up behaviors primarily because they enjoy doing so, while they see themselves engaging in these behaviors primarily due to peer pressure.

Consistent with other pluralistic ignorance research (e.g., Prentice & Miller, 1993), this study showed evidence of an illusion of universality. The students failed to appreciate the extent to which others have different comfort levels with hooking-up behaviors. That is, students wrongly assumed that the attitudes of others about hooking up were more homogenous than they actually were.

Similar to other researchers (Cohen & Shotland, 1996; Knox & Wilson, 1981; Oliver & Hyde, 1993), we found that men expressed greater comfort than did women with sexually intimate hooking-up behaviors. In the context of hooking up, this could lead to serious consequences. Our study suggests that men believe women are more comfortable engaging in these behaviors than in fact they are, and also that women believe other women are more comfortable engaging in these behaviors than they are themselves. As a consequence, some men may pressure women to engage in intimate sexual behaviors, and some women may engage in these behaviors or resist only weakly because they believe they are unique in feeling discomfort about engaging in them. In this context it is possible for a woman to experience sexual assault but not interpret the behavior as such, believing it to be normative behavior with which her peers are comfortable.

"Most of Us" is a campaign implemented on many college campuses in an attempt to reveal pluralistic ignorance about alcohol consumption among college students (DeJong & Langford, 2002; Haines, 1998). The campaign is based on providing students with statistical evidence about actual student attitudes and behaviors regarding alcohol consumption. The goal of the campaign is to show that pluralistic ignorance exists regarding college student's heavy alcohol consumption, and that most students prefer to drink less than what is commonly perceived to be the norm. Considering the results of this study, we propose that a similar campaign highlighting students' beliefs about and comfort levels with sexual behaviors while hooking up might help reduce pluralistic ignorance about hooking up.

Table 3. Differences Between Each Gender's Own Comfort Level With Hooking-Up Behaviors and Estimates of the Other Gender's Comfort Levels

	Women's estimate of men <i>M (SD)</i>	Men's actual comfort level <i>M (SD)</i>	Men's estimate of women <i>M (SD)</i>	Women's actual comfort level <i>M (SD)</i>
Petting above the waist	9.80 (1.45)	9.12 (2.47)	7.73 (1.92)	7.29 (2.68)
Petting below the waist	9.30 (1.67)	8.42 (2.60)	6.38 (2.07)	5.13 (2.73)
Oral sex	8.61 (1.93)	7.56 (3.04)	5.49 (2.19)	3.49 (2.62)
Sexual intercourse	7.62 (2.24)	5.65 (3.57)	4.28 (2.36)	2.15 (2.31)

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