Hooking up for the 'wrong reasons' tied to poorer health

February 12 2014, by Ted Boscia

(Medical Xpress)—When college students have casual sex – "hooking up" – how it influences their mental and physical health depends in part on their intentions for doing it, finds a Cornell study.

Hooking up for the "wrong reasons" – peer pressure, to boost one's self-esteem, hoping it will lead to a long-term relationship or coercion by intoxication or other means, according to examples given in the study – decreased students' well-being compared to peers who refrained from casual sex. On the other hand, casual sex motivated by the "right reasons" – such as a self-directed desire for pleasure, intimacy or excitement – did not heighten these negative health effects.

"Why you engage in casual sex is more consequential for your physical and mental health than whether you do it," said author Zhana Vrangalova, Ph.D. '13 in the field of human development. Her paper, "Does Casual Sex Harm College Students' Well Being? A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Motivation," was published online Feb. 5 in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.

"There are a number of situational, personal, interpersonal and social factors that determine whether one's casual sex experiences are good or bad for them," Vrangalova said. "This study is one of the first to examine, and find evidence of, one such factor: motivation."

At the start and end of an academic year, Vrangalova surveyed 528 Cornell undergraduates, recording their mental and physical well-being,

number of casual sex partners, their motivations for hooking up and various demographic factors. Applying self-determination theory, a psychological measure of people's intentions, she determined whether students hooked up for autonomous reasons – those that are self-directed and reflect one's values – or non-autonomous factors, outside influences such as coercion or social pressure.

After controlling for demographics, personality traits, prior casual and romantic sex, and initial levels of well-being, hookups motivated by external forces were linked to lower self-esteem, higher depression and anxiety, and poorer physical health. Autonomous hookups were not linked to negative outcomes. (The study defined hookups as any form of genital contact between partners who were not in a long-term romantic relationship.)

"Most studies on the link between casual sex and health have only looked at the simple comparison between those who have hooked up as a single group and those who haven't, and findings have often been inconsistent across different studies," said Vrangalova, who did the work as part of her doctoral dissertation. "This study shows the importance of internal processes, such as motivation, as moderators for health outcomes."

The results could help guide teachers, counselors and doctors advising young adults about sex by "shifting education, policy and clinical work away from uniform, one-size-fits-all strategies and messages regarding casual sex and its health consequences, and toward more individually tailored, and, thus, more useful, approaches," the paper reports.

More information: "Does Casual Sex Harm College Students' Well-Being? A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Motivation." Vrangalova Z. *Arch Sex Behav.* 2014 Feb 5. [Epub ahead of print] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24496788

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