

“It Felt Good but Weird at the Same Time”: Emerging Adults’ First Experiences of Six Different Sexual Behaviors

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Abstract

Although sexual behavior is multidimensional, little research has focused on the experience of nonintercourse behaviors for adolescents and emerging adults. This article uses open-ended coded data from a longitudinal study of college students ($N = 346$; M age = 18.5, 52% female, 27% Hispanic/Latino [HL], 25% non-HL European American, 23% non-HL Asian American, 16% non-HL African American, 9% non-HL multiracial) to examine what emotional responses emerging adults report about their first experiences of six sexual behaviors. The four most common emotional reactions were happy, excited, fearful, and indifferent. Descriptions were largely positive, although mixed reactions were relatively common and emotional reactions varied by behavior. Results suggest the importance of including multiple types of sexual behaviors, as well as their possible positive and negative outcomes, in sexuality education programs.

Keywords

emerging adulthood, mixed methods, sexuality, gender

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First intercourse has been viewed as an important and meaningful life transition in both popular media (Kelly, 2010) and research (Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004). However, little is known about the first experiences of other types of sexual behaviors. In the last decade, researchers have advocated for studies of sexual behavior in adolescence and emerging adulthood that move beyond a focus on risk behavior and incorporate more normative perspectives on sexual behavior (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). This conceptualization includes expanding the study of sexual behavior beyond penile-vaginal intercourse to include other, often less risky, sexual behaviors (Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2000). In addition, researchers have suggested attention be paid to the *meaning* of sexual behaviors to adolescents (Russell, 2005; Welsh et al., 2000). In line with these perspectives, we use open-ended data to examine emerging adults' emotional reactions to their first experiences of six different sexual behaviors and how these reactions differ by gender.

We focus on the experience of first sexual behaviors among emerging adults, because much of what is known about first sexual behaviors focuses on adolescents (Vasilenko, Ram, & Lefkowitz, 2011), even though a large minority of individuals do not engage in intercourse and other sexual behaviors in adolescence (about 40% for vaginal intercourse; Herbenick et al., 2010). Emerging adulthood is an important period in terms of exploration of relationships and sexuality (Arnett, 2000; Lefkowitz, 2005), and is a critical period for understanding new experiences of sexual behaviors. Emerging adults, particularly those attending college, may feel more positive about sexual experiences during emerging adulthood compared with adolescence, as more peers are sexually active and they may experience more relaxed attitudes about sex on college campuses (Lefkowitz, 2005). Thus, emerging adulthood may represent a period in which transitioning to sexual behaviors is healthier for development than sexual behavior earlier in adolescence.

Emerging adults engage in a range of sexual behaviors in addition to vaginal intercourse. The average age of a first kiss is 15, with the vast majority of college students having kissed in their lifetime (Garcias, Cavalie, Goins, & King, 2008; Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureño, & Rea, 2004). About 80% of college students have ever engaged in genital touching, around 70% have engaged in both fellatio and cunnilingus, and nearly 30% have engaged in anal sex (Garcias et al., 2008). First intercourse can be associated with changes in mental health (Meier, 2007; Spriggs & Halpern, 2008; Vasilenko et al., 2011), and these changes may be due, in part, to the way individuals perceive and interpret their experience (Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Welsh, 2014). However, relatively little research has focused on how individuals perceive their first experiences of nonintercourse behaviors. Thus, more

information is needed to fully understand emerging adults' sexual behavior and how it fits into their overall life and mental health.

The focus of much of the research on individuals' emotional reactions to their sexual behaviors has been on gender differences. This focus is consistent with conceptualizations of sexual scripts and double standards which portray sexual behavior differently for men and women (Hyde & Oliver, 2000). For example, women are predominantly socialized to prioritize commitment before engaging in sexual behavior (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Crawford & Popp, 2003). Once in a committed relationship, there is little cultural encouragement to enjoy sexual behavior and much emphasis placed on pleasing a partner (Tolman, 2002; Wolf, 1997). For men, on the other hand, frequent and enjoyable sex is viewed as a more acceptable and integral part of masculinity (Smith, Guthrie, & Oakley, 2005). Men are viewed as more entitled to sexual pleasure than women are, whereas women must manage sexual responsibilities such as pregnancy and reputation in addition to pleasure (Tolman, 2002; Tolman & Diamond, 2001). These double standards may influence how men and women experience and interpret their sexual behavior. For example, women may feel more guilt, shame, or regret about sexual behavior than men, who may experience more positive emotions (Fugere, Escoto, Cousins, Riggs, & Haerich, 2008). Thus, emerging adult women may feel more negative about their first sexual experiences than men do, as a result of strong cultural factors that view sex as more acceptable and positive for men than women.

Research has provided some support for these gender differences in emotional reactions to first vaginal sex. Qualitative research has shown that female and male adolescents view the meaning of first intercourse in ways consistent with sexual double standards; female adolescents are more likely to view their virginity as a precious gift to bestow upon a close partner, and male adolescents are more likely to view virginity as a stigma to remove (Carpenter, 2002). Female adolescents are more likely to report negative consequences, like guilt, and are less likely to feel satisfied by their first intercourse than male adolescents (Darling, Davidson, & Passarello, 1992; Dickson, Paul, Herbison, & Silva, 1998; Guggino & Ponzetti, 1997; Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010; Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995; Wight et al., 2008). Although they have diminished somewhat in the past few decades, significant gender difference in feeling pleasure or guilt as a result of first intercourse remains (Sprecher, 2014). In addition, research has suggested that adolescent girls feel less positive overall about their first intercourse than boys (Reissing, Andruff, & Wentland, 2012). However, other research has suggested that girls or young women experience many positive consequences of sex. Although some specific negative consequences may be more common in girls and young

women than boys and young men, their overall evaluations of first intercourse are equally positive in some studies (Smiler, Ward, Caruthers, & Merriweather, 2005; Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004). Even when female adolescents feel *less* positive about their first intercourse experience than male adolescents, on average they view first intercourse as a positive experience (Reissing et al., 2012; Wight et al., 2008). In short, women's experience of first intercourse may be, on average, less positive and more negative than men's, but both view the event as a largely positive experience.

Less is known about the experience of first sexual behaviors other than vaginal intercourse. When reporting on the experience of a first kiss, both positive emotions, such as excitement and satisfaction, and negative emotions like fear and uncertainty, are common, but men report more positive experiences of their first kiss than women (Regan, Shen, de la Pena & Gosset, 2007). Women report more positive than negative feelings about their first experiences of fellatio and cunnilingus, although their descriptions of fellatio are less positive than those for intercourse and cunnilingus (Malacad & Hess, 2010). In addition to this literature, some research has examined feelings about other sexual behaviors not specific to first experiences, which gives some indication about how individuals may view these behaviors. One study of college women suggests that both female students and their male partners desire and enjoy cunnilingus, despite popular notions of men only being interested in fellatio (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011). Women also report more desire, wanting, and pleasure for kissing, vaginal intercourse, and cunnilingus compared with erotic touching and fellatio (Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009). Another study found that male college students reported greater enjoyment of vaginal intercourse, anal sex, and performing and receiving oral sex than female students did, whereas female students reported greater enjoyment of kissing (Garcias et al., 2008).

In the current article, we examine emerging adults' emotional reactions to their first experiences of six sexual behaviors: kissing, touching, performing oral sex, receiving oral sex, vaginal sex, and anal sex. We use coded data from an open-ended question about each first sexual experience, which enables us to understand what emerging adults themselves think is important about their behavior. This method is particularly useful for research on first experiences of nonintercourse sexual behaviors, about which relatively little is known. Rather than ask students to retrospectively report on all six behaviors, we followed students longitudinally and asked them to describe how they felt about a particular sexual behavior within a few months of their first experience. This method differs from prior studies of first sexual intercourse, which often ask college students to reflect on behaviors that may have occurred many years ago. Our methods enable us to understand the more

immediate perceptions of sexual experiences, separate from changes that may occur due to time for reflection and breaking up with or strengthening a relationship with a partner (Smiler et al., 2005; Sprecher et al., 1995). In addition, these data allow us to focus on the transition to first sexual behavior during emerging adulthood, a period about which relatively little is known. In summary, we have two aims:

1. To identify commonly occurring emotional reactions to first experiences of kissing, touching, performing and receiving oral sex, vaginal sex, and anal sex; and
2. To examine how engaging in these various behaviors differentially predicts reporting particular emotional reactions and overall level of positivity and negativity, and whether there are gender differences in these associations.

Due to the open-ended nature of our variables of interests, our analyses are largely exploratory. However, based on the literature on sexual double standards and gender differences reviewed above, we predict that, in general, female students will be less likely to report positive and more likely to report negative emotional reactions compared with male students, and this association may be stronger for more physically intimate behaviors (oral, vaginal, and anal sex).

Method

Participants

Data are from the University Life Study (ULS; Patrick, Maggs, & Lefkowitz, 2014; Vasilenko, Duntzee, Zheng, & Lefkowitz, 2013), a longitudinal study of college students recruited during their first semester at a large, Northeastern University ($N = 744$). A stratified random sampling procedure with replacement was used to achieve a diverse sample of first-year college students. Because this article focuses on first sexual behaviors, we only include the 346 individuals who reported engaging in at least one of six sexual behaviors for the first time during the course of the study. The sample was 52% female, 27% Hispanic/Latino [HL], 25% non-HL European American, 23% non-HL Asian American, 16% non-HL African American, 9% non-HL multiracial, with a mean age of 18.5 ($SD = 0.4$) at Semester 1 (S1). More than half (58.5%) of the sample had a mother with a college degree or higher. The vast majority identified as heterosexual (98%), with 5 participants reporting a homosexual orientation and 2 participants reporting a bisexual orientation. Participants

attended an average of 19.1 religious services a year ($SD = 19.6$). Overall, there were no significant differences between the analytic and full samples on gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, age, or religiosity at S1 ($p > .05$). However, within our analytic sample, there were some demographic differences by behavior (i.e., between participants who transitioned to a specific behavior during the study and those who did not transition to that particular behavior). Compared with participants who did not transition to kissing over the course of the study, those who transitioned to kissing were less likely to be White and more likely to be Asian; participants who transitioned to touching were less likely to be White and attended religious services more frequently; participants who transitioned to anal sex were more likely to be Black or Hispanic and less likely to be Asian. There was no difference between participants who did or did not transition to oral sex or vaginal sex during the study.

Procedures

Participants completed a web-based survey during each of their first seven semesters of college. Each participant received an email containing a secure link to the study and received US\$20 to US\$40 for completing this portion of the survey, depending on the semester.

Measures

In Semester 1 (S1), participants were asked questions about whether they had engaged in each of six behaviors in their lifetime: kissed a partner on the lips, touched with a partner under clothes or with no clothing on, performed oral sex on a partner, had a partner perform oral sex on them, vaginal sex, and anal sex. Oral sex was defined as "a person putting his or her mouth on a partner's genitals"; vaginal sex was defined as "sex in which the penis penetrates the vagina"; anal sex was defined as "sex in which the penis penetrates the anus." Each subsequent semester, participants who had not previously engaged in a behavior were asked about that behavior again. For instance, if a participant reported at S1 that she had never kissed someone, at S2 she was asked this question again. When a student replied "yes" to any of these behaviors between S2 and S7 of the study, she or he answered an open-ended question, "How did you feel about this first time?" Thus, students reported on perceptions of behaviors that occurred within approximately the last 6 months or less. In total, students reported 870 events of first sex across all behaviors between S2 and S7 of the study (see Table 1) and provided open-ended responses about these behaviors for 684 events. About one third of the

Table 1. Coded Categories of Descriptions of First Sexual Behaviors for Presence of Emotional Reactions and Overall Positivity and Negativity.

	Response example	All behaviors					Percent reporting feeling				
		Kissing n = 55	Touching n = 80	Perform oral n = 158	Receive oral n = 142	Vaginal n = 144	Anal n = 105				
Happy	"It was an incredible experience. It felt really good."	24.7	29.1	20.0	38.7	33.3	14.3				
Fearful	"I was very nervous and scared."	13.9	16.4	16.3	12.7	10.4	12.4				
Indifferent	"I didn't feel one way or another about it."	12.9	9.1	12.5	13.4	10.4	13.3				
Excited	"It was a fun and exciting experience."	10.2	23.6	27.5	5.6	7.6	1.0				
Strange	"I felt weird because I didn't know what I was doing."	4.5	3.6	2.5	5.6	0.0	5.7				
Disgusted	"Felt disgusting the next day. Swore to never do it again."	3.5	1.8	0.0	0.7	0.7	3.8				
Surprised	"It was random and unexpected but it felt good."	1.8	3.6	2.5	2.8	1.4	1.0				
Relieved	"Relieved-happy-relaxed."	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.4	0.0				
Proud	"I was proud of myself."	0.3	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0				
Sad	"I was depressed."	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0				
	Response example (high on construct)	M (SD)									
Positivity	"It was one of the best experiences and I was very excited."	2.1 (1.2)	2.4 (1.1)	2.3 (1.0)	2.5 (1.3)	2.3 (1.2)	1.5 (1.0)				
Negativity	"I felt like I had made a horrible mistake. I felt ill and sick with myself. I was depressed."	1.7 (0.9)	1.4 (0.6)	1.3 (0.5)	1.4 (0.6)	1.8 (1.1)	2.2 (1.3)				

Note. Numbers for emotional reactions indicate the percentage of responses that contained this response. Numbers for overall positivity and negativity indicate mean scores of responses measured on a 1 to 5 scale.

occasions of first behaviors occurred during S2 (first-year spring), one third during S3 to S4 (second year), and one third during S5 to S7 (third or fourth year). This pattern of first behaviors more commonly occurring in the early semesters of colleges was found across all behaviors, and the modal semester of reporting a first experience was S2 for all behaviors. Approximately half of participants in the analytic sample reported a first experience of one behavior during the course of the study, with about one quarter reporting first experiences of two behaviors and one quarter reporting three or more behaviors.

We created a coding scheme assessing the content and overall positivity and negativity of open-ended responses. We made a list of categories of possible responses based on prior research on first sexual behaviors (e.g., Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Brady & Halpern-Felsher, 2007; Guggino & Ponzetti, 1997; O'Sullivan & Hearn, 2008; Regan et al., 2007; Smiler et al., 2005; Tsui & Nicoladis, 2004; Wight et al., 2008). In addition, one undergraduate and one graduate student read through all participant responses to generate categories that occurred in the responses but were missing from the categories generated from the literature (i.e., proud, surprised, disgusted, strange, and indifferent). Coders indicated first whether any emotional reaction was reported and then checked whether or not each of 10 types of reactions was reported (see Table 1 for list of emotional reactions). In addition to coding the content of these responses, we coded their overall positive and negative valence, similar to an approach used in prior work (Lefkowitz, 2005). Positivity and negativity were rated on separate scales, because it is possible for responses to be low in both positivity and negativity, or to contain meaningful amounts of both positivity and negativity. Both positivity and negativity were rated on a 1 to 5 scale: 1 (*none*), 2 (*a little*), 3 (*some*), 4 (*pretty much*), 5 (*a lot*). Coders were instructed to rate the responses on the writer's portrayal, not on their personal evaluations of whether an event was positive or negative.

Four undergraduate coders trained and supervised by the first author each coded every response, and discrepancies between coders were discussed with the full coding team. Final codes used in this article represent the resolutions of these group meetings, rather than any individual coder's response. Interrater reliability was good for items used in subsequent analyses (average kappa for emotional reactions ranged from .83-.96; average intraclass correlation (ICC) for positivity = .96 and negativity = .94).

Results

First, we examined frequencies of reporting the 10 emotional reactions (Aim 1; Table 1). At least 1 emotional reaction was present in 67.1% of responses. Four emotional reactions (happy, excited, fearful, and indifferent)

were present in more than 10% of responses and were examined in further analyses. Examples of each reaction are presented here, with students' grammar and spelling mistakes retained. *Happy* was the most commonly reported emotional reaction, occurring in almost 25% of responses across all behaviors. Happy included things like feeling "happy," "good," or "great." For example, a female student who reported first vaginal sex at S2 stated "It felt awesome and I'm happy I lost my virginity to my boyfriend and I am happy I did it at the time I did. I had a great time and I don't think I will ever regret it." A female student who reported her first kiss at S3 also expressed happiness about her experience, writing, "It was great . . . well worth the wait for the perfect moment." *Fearful* was the next most commonly reported emotional reaction, occurring in almost 15% of responses. This category included responses indicating being "scared" or "nervous." For example, a male student who first reported performing oral sex at S2 wrote, "i was very nervous and didnt know if she would enjoy it." *Indifferent* was present in almost 13% of responses and indicated feeling "ok" or "indifferent." For example, a female student who first reported performing oral sex at S2 wrote, "I didn't really feel one way or another about it." Similarly, another female student wrote, "it was an interesting feeling . . . neither good nor bad" about her first experience of anal sex at S4. *Excited* was reported in about 10% of responses and often included descriptions like "fun" or "exciting." For example, a male student who experienced his first kiss at S5 wrote, "Heart racing—disbelief. Very exhilarating." Note that responses could be coded to contain more than one emotional reaction, and a common example of this co-occurrence is responses coded for both *fearful* and *excited*. For example, a male student said he was "Nervous and excited at the same time" about his experience of first vaginal sex at S4. Less commonly reported emotional reactions were *strange*, *disgusted*, *surprised*, *relieved*, *proud*, and *sad*.

We also examined descriptive statistics for overall positivity and negativity (see Table 1). An example of a response high on positivity was a male student who first reported vaginal sex at S7 and wrote, "it was one of the best experiences and i was very excited." Also rated high on positivity was a female students who wrote, "It was perfect—better that I dreamed it would be" about her first kiss at S6. An example of a response high on negativity was "I felt like I had made a horrible mistake. I felt ill and sick with myself. I was depressed," written by a female student about her first vaginal sex at S4. Another example was a female student who first reported performing oral sex at S4 and wrote "I hated myself for doing it—and I was extremely angry with my partner for wanting me to do it." Some responses contained elements of both positivity and negativity. For example, two responses rated moderately high on both positivity and negativity were "Very Awkward but felt

good” (female student, kiss, S7) and “I felt great and enjoyed it but worried about things that follow it because it was no protection involved” (female vaginal sex, S4). Mean positivity scores by behavior ranged from 1.5 (anal sex) to 2.5 (receiving oral sex); mean negativity scores ranged from 1.3 (touching) to 2.2 (anal sex).

To understand differences in odds of reporting specific emotional reactions and level of positivity and negativity by gender and type of behavior (Aim 2), we ran six multilevel models, with happy, fearful, indifferent, excited, positivity, and negativity as outcomes. This analytic strategy accounted for the nesting of the data due to the multiple events that could be reported by a single participant. Level 1 equation includes vaginal sex as the reference group, with beta coefficients that examine how the other five behaviors differ from vaginal sex. Level 2 adds interactions testing gender differences in these associations. For models looking at odds of reporting different emotional reactions, we used a Bernoulli distribution, which is appropriate for modeling binary outcomes, to predict the average odds of reporting an emotional reaction dependent on predictors (Garson, 2013). For models looking at positivity and negativity (continuous outcomes), we used a normal distribution to predict the level of each of these factor by the covariates.

Results of these multilevel models are presented in Table 2. Because the interpretation of the interaction terms is complex, we first present in detail how to interpret one model, followed by an overall summary of results for other models presented by each sexual behavior. As a sample interpretation, we turn to the model for *happy*, in which odds ratios are presented. The γ_{00} coefficient shows the odds of feeling happy for the reference group (female participant reports of vaginal sex) and the γ_{10} to γ_{50} coefficients indicate whether odds of happiness for other behaviors differed from odds for vaginal sex for female students. The γ_{01} to γ_{51} coefficients indicate the gender differences for each behavior. For example, female students had 31% lesser odds of feeling happy about touching compared with vaginal sex (γ_{20}), with no significant differences by gender (γ_{21}). There were no significant differences between odds of feeling happy for kissing and receiving oral sex compared with vaginal sex. The Male \times Perform interaction (γ_{31}) is significant, suggesting that the negative effect of performing oral sex compared with vaginal sex is lessened for male compared with female students; male students had only 44% lesser odds (calculated by $\gamma_{30} \times \gamma_{31}$) of reporting happiness about oral sex compared with vaginal sex (in contrast to 91% lesser odds for female students). No other gender differences in these associations were observed; thus, the differences are similar to the differences observed for vaginal sex (i.e., male students had greater odds of reporting). In sum, female students were equally likely to report happiness about vaginal sex, kissing, and

Table 2. Multilevel Models Predicting Presence of Four Most Common Feelings and Overall Positivity and Negativity in Reports of First Sexual Behaviors by Type of Behavior and Gender.

	Happy	Fearful	Indifferent	Excited ^a	Positivity	Negativity
Intercept (Vaginal Female) γ_{00}	0.33***	0.16***	0.08***	0.03***	2.11***	2.12***
Male \times Intercept ^b γ_{01}	2.45*	0.86	1.67	4.97**	0.37*	-0.68***
Kiss γ_{10}	1.82	1.38	1.40	4.95*	0.20	-0.70***
Male \times Kiss ^b γ_{11}	0.44	0.73	0.61	0.30	0.54	0.6*
Touch γ_{20}	0.69*	1.24	2.48	4.15*	-0.08	-0.75***
Male \times Touch γ_{21}	0.68	0.64	0.24	0.39	0.1	0.54*
Perform Oral γ_{30}	0.09***	3.01**	2.73*	1.45	-0.67***	-0.20
Male \times Perform γ_{31}	4.04*	0.28*	0.45	0.86	0.21	0.34
Receive Oral γ_{40}	1.17	1.0	1.59	1.30	0.10	-0.61***
Male \times Receive γ_{41}	0.94	0.83	0.65	0.42	0.18	0.43*
Anal γ_{50}	0.19***	1.38	1.83	—	-0.80***	0.57*
Male \times Anal γ_{51}	1.80	0.34	0.85	—	0.11	-0.43

Note. $N = 684$ person-events, $N = 346$ persons. Gender is coded as female = 0, male = 1. Odds ratios are presented for feelings, and beta coefficients are presented for positivity and negativity. Models for feelings have dichotomous outcomes and were modeled with a Bernoulli distribution.

^aBecause of the extremely low frequency ($n = 1$) of reporting excitement about anal sex, we removed anal sex responses to achieve model convergence.

^bGender interactions for the intercept indicate gender differences for the reference group (vaginal sex). Interactions for other behaviors indicate whether the gender difference is statistically different than that observed for the reference group. Thus, nonsignificant interactions for other behaviors indicate the gender difference is similar to that observed for vaginal sex.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

receiving oral sex, but were less likely to report happiness about touching, performing oral sex, and anal sex compared with vaginal sex. Male students were more likely to report feeling happy compared with female students across all behaviors.

Results are interpreted in the same way for the other three emotional reactions and are similar for the overall positivity and negativity measures (except that they are reported as beta coefficients rather than odds ratios; see Table 2). We summarize these results here more briefly by behavior. In general, male students were more likely to report feeling happy and excited and had more positivity across all behaviors. Female students reported more negativity about vaginal sex compared with men. Kissing was associated with greater

odds of feeling excited and less negativity compared with vaginal sex, although the difference for negativity was weaker for male students. Touching was associated with lesser odds of feeling happy but was associated with greater excitement and was rated as less negative compared with vaginal sex for women; for men, touching and vaginal sex were equally negative, and less negative than the level reported for women engaging in these behaviors. Performing oral sex was associated with lesser positivity and greater odds of feeling indifferent compared with vaginal sex for both male and female students. Performing oral sex was also associated with lesser odds of happiness, although this association was weaker for men; in addition, women, but not men, were more likely to feel fearful about performing oral sex compared with vaginal sex. Receiving oral sex, on the other hand, was associated with less negativity than vaginal sex, although this difference was weaker for men. Anal sex was associated with lesser odds of feeling happy, more negativity and less positivity compared with vaginal sex. Note that because of the low number of individuals ($n = 1$) reporting feeling excited about anal sex, the full model for excited did not converge, and we ran the model excluding occurrences of anal sex. Thus, though not directly tested, the failure to converge due to low rates of excitement about anal sex suggests that individuals were less likely to feel excited about anal sex compared with vaginal sex and other behaviors.

Discussion

This article examined the subjective first experiences of six different sexual behaviors in college students by asking them to report their emotional reactions to these experiences in open-ended questions. College students reported, on average, more positive than negative emotional reactions to engaging in sexual behaviors for the first time. Although some other research has found sexual activity to be enjoyable and a positive contributor to development and well-being in emerging adults (Tolman & Diamond, 2001), this work differs from many other studies of adolescent sexual behavior, which focus on negative consequences for girls (Darling et al., 1992; Dickson et al., 1998; Guggino & Ponzetti, 1997; Sprecher et al., 1995). It is possible that first experiences of sexual behavior are more positive in emerging adulthood than in adolescence, as sex during emerging adulthood is more normative and individuals may be more prepared for the emotions experienced after engaging in sexual behaviors. This explanation is consistent with prior research that found the transition to first intercourse is associated with better mental health for male college students (Vasilenko et al., 2011) but poorer mental health for younger adolescent girls (Meier, 2007; Spriggs & Halpern, 2008).

However, mixed feelings such as experiencing both happiness and fear were common as well. This ambivalence suggests that, although sexual behavior is generally seen as a positive aspect of emerging adults' experiences, performing a novel behavior for the first time often is associated with apprehension. The ambivalence experienced in first-sexual experiences may be in part because first sexual experiences are seen as a marker for sexual identity development in emerging adulthood. Developmentally, emerging adults are integrating their experiences with their self-perceptions (Arnett, 2000). First sexual experiences also contribute to the construction of the *sexual self* or how one views oneself as a sexual person (Buzwell, & Rosenthal, 1996). Therefore, first sexual experiences in emerging adulthood, particularly with a variety of sexual behaviors, may contribute to the development of the sexual self in conjunction with identity development and be associated with mixed feelings as adolescents make sense of these changes.

The transition to sexual behavior is also a highly gendered experience with different norms for men and women (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Crawford & Popp, 2003). Our results show gender differences in the experiences of first sexual behaviors that are consistent with previous research. Specifically, past work has indicated that men are more sexually privileged and therefore more likely to experience pleasure, whereas women bear the risk of negative sexual reputations, making their sexual experiences more complicated (Tolman, 2002; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003). First, male students were more likely to report happiness and positivity across all behaviors than female students, and female students felt more negative about engaging in vaginal and anal sex and performing oral sex than male students did. This gender difference was not surprising given that women are more likely than men to engage in sexual behaviors to establish a relationship or to please a partner before emotionally ready, referred to as sexual compliance (Impett & Peplau, 2002). Sexual compliance can be associated with ambivalence, regret, or emotional pain (Akintola, Ngubane, & Makhaba, 2012). Thus, female emerging adults may react more negatively to first sex because they may be more likely to engage in these behaviors to please their partners, rather than because they feel ready to have sex. In addition, women's negative emotional reactions could be in part due to their first experience of vaginal sex not leading to the relational outcome they may have expected with their partner.

Women were also more likely to report feeling fearful about performing oral sex compared with vaginal sex, whereas men had similar odds of reporting being fearful for both events. This finding is consistent with research showing that female adolescents feel more negative about performing oral sex than engaging in vaginal sex (Malacad & Hess, 2010). Traditional sexual scripts suggest that men play a more active role in sexual behavior, whereas

women are more passive or submissive (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). Thus, women may be more anxious about performing oral sex, where they play a more active role. In addition, because establishing relationships and pleasing one's partner are important motivators for women's sexual behavior (Tolman, 2002), women may feel pressure to perform adequately. Pressure to "perform or act sexual" emerges in narratives about adolescent girls' experiences with fellatio, which are often laden with fear or anxiety about performance (Burns, Futch, & Tolman, 2011). Finally, female emerging adults were more likely to report excitement about touching and kissing compared with vaginal sex, whereas male emerging adults were equally excited about all behaviors. This finding is consistent with older research suggesting that foreplay, which includes kissing and touching, is more valued and enjoyed by women, and often preferred over intercourse (Denney, Field, & Quadagno, 1984).

There were other differences by type of behavior that deserve mention. First, individuals' emotional reactions to performing oral and anal sex differed from reactions to other behaviors. For example, students were less likely to report feeling happy after performing oral sex and engaging in anal sex and were more likely to feel indifferent about performing oral sex compared with engaging in vaginal sex. Feeling indifferent about performing oral sex could be due to the perception of oral sex as more casual and less intimate than vaginal sex (Chambers, 2007). Thus, emerging adults could be less invested in outcomes of oral sex versus vaginal sex. Although performing oral sex can be associated with pleasure from making a partner happy, it involves less direct stimulation for sexual pleasure and could make an individual subject to negative evaluation by their partner, both of which may lead to more negative reactions. Finally, anal sex may have been viewed as more negative because it is stigmatized and can involve physical pain, particularly for the person being penetrated, which could cause distress to both women and their male partners.

These findings offer a new perspective on the experience of first sexual behaviors through recent, open-ended report of emotional reactions instead of retrospective reports. In general, first sexual experiences were viewed in positive ways and could have positive implications for longer term mental, social, and physical well-being. Thus, sexuality education programs and promotion of safe sex practices could be more effective if they recognize that sexual behaviors are pleasurable and should be enjoyable while also emphasizing the importance of engaging in these behaviors safely. In addition, sexuality education programs should discuss oral and anal sex when teaching about sexually transmitted infections (STI) prevention and consensual sex as a way to acknowledge that these behaviors are a part of sexual activity, can be pleasurable, but should also be practiced safely and with consent from

both partners. In addition, kissing and touching can be emphasized as virtually risk-free sexual behaviors that are exciting as well as pleasurable.

There are several limitations to this research that provide areas for future research. First, our study only included college students, which limits generalizability in several ways. Individuals who do not attend college may experience first sexual behaviors differently from college students; thus, future research should recruit participants who are not in college to provide a broader understanding of sexual behaviors among emerging adults. Second, individuals who enter college without having kissed a partner likely differ from those who had kissed a partner but not engaged in oral, vaginal, or anal sex, and thus demographic or attitudinal differences between these types of individuals in our sample may have confounded the differences by behavior. Thus, research with a broader age range is needed to examine differences in sexual experiences at different developmental stages, and to untangle differences in experiences that result from type of sexual behavior and other factors. In addition, this study focused only on emerging adults in the United States, and the experiences of first intercourse may be different in countries with more or less strict proscriptions against premarital sexual behavior. Third, we chose to use open-ended self-reports to gain exploratory information about what emerging adults felt about their experiences. However, in their responses, participants likely focused on the most salient aspect of their experience. Future research could use open- or closed-ended measures and ask further, more specific questions to provide a more detailed understanding of the experience.

In addition to these limitations, future research on the interpretations of first sexual experiences can be expanded in several ways. First, personal and situational factors, such as religiosity and self-esteem, or contextual factors, such as relationship status or alcohol use before sex, may be associated with more positive or negative experiences. For example, first intercourse may be more positive with a relationship partner or in a longer term relationship, particularly for women (Higgins et al., 2010; Smiler et al., 2005). Future research could further examine factors that may influence emotional reactions to sexual behavior. Second, individuals' reactions to their first sexual behavior may differ depending on the timing of the behavior and patterns of spacing between behaviors. Future research could examine latent classes of timing (e.g., Haydon, Herring, Prinstein, & Halpern, 2012) and how these patterns are associated with different emotional outcomes. Third, we focused on first sexual experiences, but reactions to subsequent experiences are likely different. Thus, an investigation into reactions to first and later experiences of the same behaviors would improve our understanding of sexual development. Fourth, individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds differ in

their attitudes about sexual behavior (Meston & Ahrold, 2010) and thus may also differ in their reactions to first sexual behaviors (Higgins et al., 2010). Although our sample was relatively heterogeneous in terms of race/ethnicity, it was too small to adequately examine moderation, and future research should test for racial/ethnic differences. Finally, future research should examine first sexual experiences for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, including how they experience both same-sex and opposite-sex behaviors, as such experiences may play a role in their sexual identity development (Morgan, 2014).

Despite these limitations, this article contributes to our understanding of emerging adult sexual behavior in several ways. First, it uses open-ended coding to understand how adolescents feel about their first sexual experiences, allowing us to explore their own emotional reactions without forcing responses into investigator-generated choices. Second, we examined six different behaviors, allowing us to better understand emerging adults' experience of nonintercourse behaviors. In general, emerging adults felt positive about their first sexual experiences. Yet, there were nuances in emotional reactions experienced among the different sexual behaviors as well as gender differences in experiences of sexual behaviors. These results provide possible new areas of emphasis for sexuality education and prevention programs, including the positive and possibly reinforcing nature of experiences of sexual behaviors, and the importance of nonintercourse behaviors, including some that carry little health risk.

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