

# **Cheating, Hooking Up, and Attention to Romantic Alternatives Among College Students**

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*While numerous studies have emphasized more situational factors related to cheating, hooking up, and attention to romantic alternatives (e.g., alcohol use, need fulfillment, opportunity), the present findings support Finkel et al.'s (2012) argument for greater attentiveness to personal factors intrinsic to the individual that may influence the incidence of such behaviors. Personal factors (e.g., avoidant attachment, selfishness, and maximizing) were found to be significantly related to cheating, hooking up, and attention to romantic alternatives, explaining as much as 40% of the variance in these behaviors.*

Since the 1960s, there has been a gradual shift away from dating as the primary courtship model among college students. In its place has emerged a series of uncommitted sexual

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encounters among individuals who are not romantically involved with each other—“hooking up” (Bogle, 2008; Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). Even for those students who state that they are in a committed romantic relationship, the frequency of extradyadic sexual activity (“cheating”) can be quite common, with reported rates as high as 68% of women and 75% of men (Allen & Baucom, 2006; Weideman & Hurd, 1999). Furthermore, dating students often report high attentiveness to romantic alternatives other than their partner (Miller, 1997).

Numerous studies have suggested various situational explanations for the incidence of hooking-up, cheating, and attention to romantic alternatives among college students. Among the most common of these explanations are the following: (a) alcohol use (e.g., Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010; Gil-Rivas, 2012), (b) immediate need fulfillment (e.g., Allen & Baucom, 2006; Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006; Miller, 1997), (c) opportunity (e.g., Feldman & Cauffman, 1999; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Niehuis, 2005), and pressure (e.g., Gonzaga, Haselton, Smurda, Davies, & Poore, 2008; McAnulty & McAnulty, 2012; Stinson, 2010).

Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, and Sprecher (2012) have argued for a closer look at personal factors intrinsic to the individual when investigating romantic relationship behaviors. Similarly, Perlman and Sprecher (2012) have suggested that the investigation of personal attributes when explaining individual’s sexual behaviors has been an underutilized research approach.

Some investigations of personal factors predictive of hooking up, cheating, and attention to romantic alternatives have been undertaken, and the most frequently-researched variable of this type has been attachment style. For example, those with a more avoidant attachment

orientation have been found to engage in more hooking-up behavior (e.g., Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Stinson, 2010), to have a greater likelihood of cheating on their romantic partner (e.g., Allen & Baucom, 2004; Pereira, Taysi, Orcan, & Fincham, 2013), and to give greater attention to romantic alternatives (e.g., DeWall et al., 2011; Overall & Sibley, 2008). An anxious attachment orientation has also been found to be associated with infidelity (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002), but Blow and Hartnett (2005) have suggested that this finding is rare in the empirical literature.

Beyond this personal factor of attachment style, however, investigations of personal factors related to the sexual behaviors of hooking up, cheating, and attention to alternatives have been spotty, and there is an admitted need for further investigations into such individual difference factors (McAnulty, 2012; Garcia et al., 2012). In the present studies, incidences of hooking up, cheating, and attention to romantic alternatives were investigated as a function of the following personal characteristics: (a) intact versus non-intact family of origin, (b) capacity to control one's thinking and emotional states, (c) maximizing, (d) selfishness, and (e) attachment style.

While the research links between most of these personal factors and the sexual behaviors of interest in the present paper have not been as frequent and direct as has been the investigation of an avoidant attachment style, there are threads of related research from which the hypotheses in the present paper have been derived. For example, related to the variable of intact versus non-intact family of origin, Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2005) reported a link between the divorce of one's parents and more frequent and varied sexual behavior during adolescence. Similarly, emotional instability (as measured by the NEO trait of neuroticism) has been associated with an increased likelihood of uncommitted sexual behavior (Gute & Eshbaugh,

2008). For the variable of maximizing, Schwartz (2004) has presented evidence in retail and work domains that compared to satisficers, maximizers experience less satisfaction with the choices they have made, they are less committed to the alternatives they have chosen, and they engage in more browsing behavior. Schwartz went on to suggest that these characteristics of maximizers may also apply in romantic love contexts. Finally, for the variable of selfishness, Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, and Markman (2006) have presented evidence that within the context of marriage, positive attitudes toward sacrifice were predictive of greater commitment to one's partner as well as greater investment in the relationship.

Therefore, in the present paper it is hypothesized that fewer of the sexual behaviors of interest (i.e., hooking up, cheating, and attention to romantic alternatives) will be found among those participants from an intact family of origin than among those from a non-intact family. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that for four of the remaining IVs of interest (i.e., control of one's thoughts and emotions, maximizing, selfishness, and avoidant attachment), there is an inverse relationship between each of these personal factors and the sexual behaviors of interest. For the last IV measured in the present studies (i.e., anxious attachment), further exploratory investigation has been entertained in the present studies.

## Method

### **Study 1**

#### *Participants*

A total of 129 women ( $M$  age = 19.69,  $SD$  = 1.26) and 109 men ( $M$  age = 19.87,  $SD$  = 1.31) participated in Study 1. All participants were recruited from general psychology courses in partial fulfillment of a research requirement for the course

### *Materials and Procedure*

All participants were provided a consent form in which they were advised that all data collected in the study would be confidential and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. All testing took place in a classroom setting in groups of approximately 35 students. All participants were asked to complete the following questionnaires.

*General Information Form.* Each participant was asked questions about their sex, their age, their family of origin (i.e., intact versus non-intact), and whether they had ever been in a serious dating relationship. Each participant was also asked the following four questions: (a) “Have you ever cheated on someone that you were dating?” (b) “If yes, how many times (that you can remember) did this happen?” (c) “As you think back over your years of relationships, have you ever had a hook-up?” and (d) “If yes, approximately how many hook-ups have you had?”

*Capacity to Control One’s Thoughts and Emotions.* Pallant’s (2000) Perceived Control of Internal States Scale (PCOISS) was used to measure participants’ ability to exercise ongoing control over their internal cognitive processes. The PCOISS is an 18-item questionnaire that has yielded strong internal validity (i.e., Cronbach’s alpha coefficient = .92). Furthermore, tests have confirmed the construct validity of the PCOISS (see Pallant, 2000). Sample items from this scale are: “I find it hard to stop myself from thinking about my problems” (R), “When I am in a

bad mood, I find it hard to snap myself out of it” (R), and “I am usually able to keep my thoughts under control.” Ratings were made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The higher the score on the PCOISS, the greater the control of one’s thoughts and emotions.

*Maximizing.* The 13-item Maximization Scale (Schwartz, 2004) was used to measure maximizing tendencies. Following are item from this scale: “When shopping, I have a hard time finding clothing that I really love” and “Whenever I am faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren’t present at the moment.” Ratings were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). The higher the score on this scale, the greater the maximizing tendencies of the individual.

*Selfishness.* Phares ad Erskine’s (1984) 40-item Selfism Scale was used to measure the variable of selfishness. This scale has been found to measure an individual’s tendency to view various situations from a self-serving perspective rather than from an other-oriented point of view (Erskine, 1972). Sample items from this scale are: “Call it selfishness if you will, but in this world today we have to look out for ourselves first” and “I believe people have the right to live any damn way they please.” Ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 (*strongly agree*); the higher the score, the greater the selfishness.

*Attachment Style.* The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ERC) – Short Form by Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, and Vogel (2007) was used to measure attachment style. From this questionnaire, avoidant attachment and anxious attachment scores were derived for each participant. There are six items in the ERC used to measure each of these attachment styles.

Following are sample items for the measurement of avoidant and anxious attachment styles, respectively: “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner” (Av) and “I turn to my romantic partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance” (R – Av); “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner” (Anx) and “I find that my partner(s) don’t want to get as close as I would like” (Anx). Ratings on the ERC were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The higher the score on each of these scales, the greater the avoidant attachment and the anxious attachment tendencies of the individual.

## **Study 2**

### *Participants*

A total of 138 women ( $M$  age = 19.69,  $SD$  = 1.26) and 73 men ( $M$  age = 19.87,  $SD$  = 1.31) who were in a self-described serious romantic relationship participated in this study. All participants were recruited from general psychology classes as partial fulfillment of research requirements for the course.

### *Materials and Procedure*

Students in general psychology courses were asked if they were currently in a serious dating relationship. Those students who were in a romantic relationship and who self-identified that relationship as serious were asked to participate in the study. All participants were provided a consent form in which they were advised that all data collected in the study would be confidential and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. All testing took place in a classroom setting in groups of approximately 30 students. All participants were asked to complete several questionnaires.

Each participant was asked to complete a General Information Form. On this form were questions about the participants' sex, their age, their family of origin (i.e., intact versus non-intact), and how long they had been in the current romantic relationship.

As in Study 1, each participant was also asked to complete Pallant's (2000) PCOISS, Schwartz's (2004) Maximization Scale, Phares and Erskine's (1984) Selfism Scale, and the Wei et al. (2007) ERC Scale. In addition, each participant in Study 2 was instructed to complete Miller's (1997) Attentiveness to Alternatives Index. This 6-item scale asks respondents to report how often various behaviors occur (from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*). Sample items are: "I flirt with people of the opposite sex without mentioning my partner" and "I rarely notice other good-looking or attractive people" (R). The higher the score on this scale, the greater the attention to romantic alternatives.

## Results

### Study 1

Of the 238 participants in Study 1, 99 women (77%) and 83 men (76%) reported that they had been in a serious dating relationship in their lives. Of these, 25 women and 20 men reported at least one incidence of cheating on a romantic partner at some point in time. In other words, 19% of the women and 18% of the men who had ever been in a serious dating relationship reported cheating on a romantic partner. These findings support the suggestion by McAnulty and McAnulty (2012) that the traditional trend of men cheating more often than women is shifting such that there are fewer differences between men and women in this area of sexuality. The average number of times participants cheated was 1.80 ( $SD = 1.06$ ) for women and 1.77 ( $SD$



= 1.21) for men. Comparisons of the cheating behaviors of men versus women were not statistically significant.

In terms of hooking-up behaviors, 72 of the women (56%) and 68 of the men (62%) reported that they had engaged in at least one episode of hooking up. This difference between women and men was not statistically significant. The average number of hook-ups for women was 1.98 ( $SD = 2.61$ ), and the average number of hook-ups for men was 3.60 ( $SD = 3.96$ ). This difference yielded a significant  $t$ -value of 3.78 ( $p < .0005$ ). These findings support previous studies indicating that women and men are equally likely to hook up (Owen et al., 2010), but that the frequency of these hook-ups tend to be greater for men than for women (Peterson & Hyde, 2011).

Several personal factors were correlated with each of these measures of sexual behaviors by college students. These bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1. A review of this table indicates that: (a) those individuals who cheated on a romantic partner were more often from non-intact families of origin, they had less control of their internal states, they scored higher in maximizing, they were more selfish, and they were more apt to have an avoidant attachment style, (b) the number of times people cheated was greater for those from non-intact families, for those who were maximizers, for those who were more selfish, and for those with an avoidant attachment style, (c) those students who reported hooking up were more often from non-intact families, they had less control over their internal states, and they scored higher on the selfism scale, and (d) the number of hook-ups was greater for those participants from non-intact

**Table 1.** Study 1 Correlations of IVs With Each DV—All Participants ( $n = 238$ )

	<u>Cheated</u>	<u># of Times</u>	<u>Hook-Up</u>	<u># of Times</u>
Intact/Non-Intact	-.164***	-.135**	-.132**	-.128**
Perceived Control	-.111*	-.109	-.115*	-.068
Maximizing	+.133**	+.139**	+.032	+.116*
Selfishness	+.216***	+.184***	+.250***	+.247***
Anxious	+.033	+.021	+.056	+.018
<u>Avoidant</u>	+.153**	+.126**	+.089	+.118*

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .03$  \*\*\* $p < .005$

families, for maximizers, for those who were more selfish, and for those with an avoidant attachment style.

In an effort to investigate the differential effects of the IVs on the sexual behaviors of young women and young men, further analyses were completed on the female and male data separately. The bivariate correlations for the 129 female participants are presented in Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses were completed on these data. Since there were no theoretical determinants for the order of entry of the IVs, these variables were entered based on the strength of the bivariate correlations reported in Table 2.

For the variable of whether women in this study had cheated, five IVs were entered into the regression equations. Together, the variables of selfishness, family of origin, perceived

control of internal states, maximizing, and avoidant attachment explained 12% of the variance in whether women in this study had cheated on a romantic partner or not.

**Table 2.** Study 1 Correlations of IVs With Each DV—Women Only ( $n = 129$ )

	<u>Cheated</u>	<u># of Times</u>	<u>Hook-Up</u>	<u># of Times</u>
Intact/Non-Intact	-.206**	-.157**	-.077	-.081
Perceived Control	-.163**	-.159**	-.132	-.130
Maximizing	+.141**	+.122*	+.058	+.169**
Selfishness	+.243***	+.217***	+.272***	+.310****
Anxious	+.084	+.038	+.126	+.055
<u>Avoidant</u>	+.121*	+.124*	+.128*	+.177**

\*Approaching sig.  $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .05$  \*\*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\*\* $p < .005$

Regression analyses were also completed on the frequency of cheating data for women. Regression of cheating frequency on five IVs (i.e., selfishness, perceived control of internal states, family of origin, avoidant attachment, and maximizing) yielded an  $R^2$  value of .092.

Hierarchical regression analyses were also completed for both of the hooking-up variables. These analyses revealed that the two IVs of selfishness and avoidant attachment explained 8.8% of the variance in whether or not women had hooked up. For the number of hook ups variable, the three statistically significant IVs (selfishness, avoidant attachment, and maximizing) accounted for 11% of the variance in how many times women had hooked up.

Table 3 presents the bivariate correlations for the 109 male participants. Again,

**Table 3.** Study 1 Correlations of IVs With Each DV—Men Only ( $n = 109$ )

	<u>Cheated</u>	<u># of Times</u>	<u>Hook-Up</u>	<u># of Times</u>
Intact/Non-Intact	-.105	-.101	-.221***	-.223***
Perceived Control	-.045	-.042	-.137*	-.130*
Maximizing	+.133*	+.177**	-.018	+.009
Selfishness	+.184**	+.143*	+.217***	+.172**
Anxious	-.038	-.005	-.016	+.030
Avoidant	+.204***	+.139*	+.037	+.040

\*Approaching sig.  $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .05$  \*\*\* $p < .02$

regression analyses were completed. For the DV of having cheated on a romantic partner, the three IVs of avoidant attachment, selfishness, and maximizing explained 6.4% of the variance in whether or not men in this study had cheated on their partner. When looking at the DV of how many times men had cheated on their romantic partner, 5% of the variance was explained by the three IVs of maximizing, selfishness, and avoidant attachment. Whether men had engaged in hooking-up behavior or not was strongly related to family of origin, selfishness, and control of internal states. These three IVs explained 10.5% of the variance in whether or not men had hooked up. Finally, for the variable of how many times these male participants had participated in hook ups, 8.8% of the variance was explained by the three IVs of family of origin, selfishness, and control of internal states.

## Study 2

For the 211 students who responded that they were currently in a serious dating

relationship, the average attention to alternatives score was 11.65 ( $SD$  3.31). The mean attention to alternatives scores for the women ( $n = 138$ ) and the men ( $n = 73$ ) were 10.91 ( $SD = 2.94$ ) and 13.04 ( $SD = 3.53$ ), respectively. This difference was statistically significant ( $t = 4.659$ ,  $p < .0001$ )

Table 4 presents the bivariate correlations of the attention to alternatives scores with each of the DVs for all participants combined, for the women, and for the men. The  $R^2$  value deriving

**Table 4.** Correlations of Each IV With the Attention to Alternative Scores for All Participants Combined ( $n = 211$ ), the Women ( $n = 138$ ), and the Men ( $n = 73$ ) as Well as the  $R^2$  Value Derived From Regressing Attention to Alternatives on the Statistically Significant DVs

	<u>All Participants</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Intact/Non-Intact	-.071	-.040	-.159
Perceived Control	-.069	-.184*	-.129
Maximizing	+.363***	+.321**	+.359**
Selfism	+.324***	+.242**	+.477***
Anxious	+.062	+.120	+.139
Avoidant	+.477***	+.426***	+.546***
$R^2$	.303	.258	.399

\* $p < .02$     \*\* $p < .002$     \*\*\* $p < .00001$

from hierarchical regression analyses in which attention to alternatives was regressed on the statistically significant DVs are also presented in Table 4. As can be seen in Table 4, the DVs that best predicted attention to alternatives were avoidant attachment, maximizing, and

selfishness. For the women, perceived control of internal states was also significantly related to their attentiveness to romantic alternatives. Combined, these DVs explained 30% of the variance in attention to alternatives for all the participants, 25.8% for the women, and nearly 40% for the men.

### Discussion

In accounting for the sexual behaviors of young adults, several situational variables have been identified—among the most prominent of these have been alcohol use, need fulfillment, opportunity, and pressure. No doubt situational factors will continue to play an important role in the sexual behaviors of college students, but the present investigations suggest the possible importance of individual-difference factors in the exercise of these behaviors.

Selfishness was found to be predictive for both men and women for the variables of cheating, the number of times cheating, hooking up, the number of times hooking up, and attention to romantic alternatives. As described by Phares and Erskine (1984), “A person high on selfism categorizes a large number of situations in a selfish or egocentric fashion. At the opposite end of the dimension are those individuals who subsume their own satisfaction in favor of others across a wide range of situations” (p. 601). Clearly this has been the case for both men and women when it comes to the sexuality variables investigated in the present studies. If one views the present findings within the context of assertions offered by Twenge (2006) that selfishness among young people has been on the rise for several years now, it would be reasonable to expect an increase in cheating, hooking up, and attention to romantic alternatives on college campuses.

An avoidant attachment orientation also correlated with several of the sexual behaviors investigated in the present studies. For women, this personal factor of an avoidant attachment was related to cheating, the number of times cheating, hooking up, and the number of times hooking up (although only the latter variable resulted in a strong correlation). For the male participants, avoidant attachment was related to both cheating and the number of times cheating. It was for the factor of attention to romantic alternatives, however, that avoidant attachment scores predicted a large proportion of the variance for both men and women, with correlations ranging between  $+0.426$  and  $+0.546$ . These findings support those of other studies in which an avoidant attachment orientation has been linked to a variety of uncommitted sexual behaviors.

Schwartz et al. (2002) reported that maximizers tend to consider numerous alternatives prior to making a retail choice, sometimes seeking extensive information about the possibilities at hand. Similarly, Chowdhury, Ratneshwar, and Mohanty (2009) reported greater browsing of retail alternatives prior to making a purchase. The results in the present studies seem to support an extension of these findings to domains of sexual and romantic behaviors. For women, maximizing was correlated with all of the sexual variables of interest except whether or not they had hooked up. For the male participants, maximizing was related to cheating, number of times cheating, and attention to romantic alternatives. Schwartz (2004) offered this description of the romantic love mind-set of maximizers: "For the maximizer, somewhere out there is the perfect lover... Even though there is nothing wrong with your current relationship, who knows what's possible if you keep your eyes open" (p. 82). For the maximizer, what better way to be an effective "romantic browser" than to give attention to romantic alternatives and to personally "check out the merchandise."

Two other variables in the present study were predictive of the sexual behaviors of college students: (a) intact versus non-intact family of origin and (b) participants' control of their thoughts and emotions. However, the relationship of these two variables to the sexual behaviors of interest were different for women than for men. For the women, both the variables of non-intact family of origin and lack of control of one's thoughts and emotions were associated with greater probability of cheating and increased number of times cheating. For the men, however, the variables of non-intact family of origin and less control of thoughts and emotions were associated with greater probability of hooking up and number of hook-ups experienced. Furthermore, for the DV of attention to alternatives, only women's perceived control of their thoughts and emotions was predictive of this behavior.

It is also interesting to note that an anxious attachment orientation was not significantly related to any of the sexual behaviors investigated in the present studies. Bogaert and Sadava (2002) had reported a relationship between an anxious attachment style and the incidence of infidelity, but the present results failed to support these findings.

Together the IVs in the present studies were associated with sizeable proportions of the variance in each of the sexual behaviors of interest. For the women participants, the  $R^2$  values for cheating, number of times cheating, hooking up, number of times hooking up, and attention to alternatives were 12%, 9.2%, 8.8%, 11%, and 25.8%, respectively. For the men, these  $R^2$  values were 6.4%, 5%, 10.5%, 8.8%, and 39.9%, respectively. These data clearly suggest that not only are situational factors important to understanding the sexual behaviors of college students, but that personal factors also play an sizeable role in understanding the exercise of



these behaviors. Further research is needed into these and other personal variables that might account for the variance in sexual behaviors.

One interesting avenue of future research would be the investigation of the relative importance of situational versus personal factors in explaining the incidence of sexual behaviors. Years ago, Mischel (1977) postulated that when attempting to understand which is more likely to influence behavior—situational factors or personal factors—it depends on the strength of the situation. The stronger the situational forces, then the less influential will be the personal factors in predicting the incidence of the behavior in question. Given the fact that sexual situations can sometimes present themselves in a very strong way, it would be interesting to see if the effects of personal factors pale in comparison to situational factors.

One of the major limitations of the present studies is that the findings have been obtained with a college-age population. Obviously, any behaviors investigated within a university environment may have limited generalizability, but this may be especially true within sexual contexts. The university environment is known for its heightened levels of sexuality (McAnulty, 2012), and the determinants of sexual behaviors for college students may be quite disparate from those of the general population. Future research designs should employ older, more diverse samples of women and men. For example, it would be important to know whether individual factors (like selfishness and maximizing) are also related to the sexual behaviors (e.g., cheating, attention to romantic alternatives) of married individuals. Future research should also involve longitudinal investigations of the whether the IVs of interest in the present studies are able to predict actual behaviors occurring over time.

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