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Masculine Status, Sexual Performance, and the Sexual Stigmatization of Women

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Collegiate hookup culture advances ideas of masculinity but contradicts notions of appropriate feminine sexuality. Drawing on focus group and interview data with college students, I examine how a group of class- and race-privileged fraternity men face dilemmas as they enact a group constructed masculinity focused on sexual performance and the objectification of women. I employ a symbolic interactionist framework to illustrate how men, attentive to peer status yet anxious about the sexual stigmatization of women, draw on cultural ideas about appropriate feminine sexuality as they account for their approaches to sex and women (both with whom they interact sexually and how) along a range of intimacy — from hookups to committed relationships. I demonstrate that heterosexual interaction does not unequivocally link to masculine status and that men sometimes strive to limit the impact of casual sex or avoid it altogether.
Keywords: masculinity, heterosexuality, social status, college

Collegiate hookup culture advances ideas of male sexuality as relentless and indiscriminate but disrupts beliefs about women — that they should avoid casual sex encase sexual desires in romantic motives and strive for committed relationships — thus putting women at risk of being sexually stigmatized. Although research has examined how college women negotiate competing expectations (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wilkins and Dalessandro 2013), little research has examined how collegiate sexual culture and gender beliefs create dilemmas for men as well (for an exception, see Wilkins 2012). In this article, I draw on in-depth and focus group interview data with college students to investigate the sexual and romantic experiences of a group of class- and race-privileged fraternity men.

While demonstrations of heterosexual mastery and the domination of women are key to peer belonging and masculine status among these men, enacting the group's construction of sexualized masculinity comes with costs to individuals. Men have to calibrate their personal preferences and practices with the group's competitive and

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objectifying approach toward women and sex. They also face increased concerns about the sexual propriety of women, who, through the same interaction processes that produce this masculinity, are often configured as used, degraded, and abject. In response to dueling concerns about sexual performance and women's sexual propriety, I show how men "sort" women sexually, drawing on gender meanings of sexuality to make distinctions about women's sexual "worth" and potential impact, as intimacy partners, on masculine status. This sexual sorting of women helps men resolve dilemmas associated with gendered and classed sexuality within a young adult and collegiate context.

Three bodies of literature inform my analysis of college men and sexuality. I begin with scholarship that views gender as an accomplishment of everyday interaction and heterosexuality, more specifically, as integral to young men's performances of high-status masculinity and the maintenance of privilege in relation to women. I then discuss work on collegiate sexual culture that documents the rise of casual sex and the gendered nature of sexual and romantic relationships among students. Finally, I use an intersectional lens to reveal how other dimensions of inequality intersect with gender to shape sexual dilemmas for men.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Masculinity, Sexuality, and Social Status

Interactionist research investigates the processual character of inequalities and how they are created and reproduced in interaction (Schwalbe et al. 2000; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Through a balance of accomplishment and accountability, individuals *do gender* (West and Zimmerman 1987) — or perform it according to cultural expectations while holding others accountable for similarly intelligible performances. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) use the term "manhood acts" to refer to those practices that men use to signify masculine selves and elicit deference from others. Those boys and men who are best able to enact culturally idealized forms of masculinity, or *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), are rewarded with power and status. Meanings and practices that do not conform to notions of manhood are suppressed (Bird 1996; Connell 1995), a process that privileges men over women but also creates hierarchies among men (Chen 1999). While the preferred signifiers of masculinity may vary by subgroup and context, many groups of men in our culture signal masculinity through demonstrations of heterosexuality. Not doing so puts boys and men at risk of being seen as unmanly, feminine, or homosexual (Pascoe 2007).

To theorize the link between masculinity and heterosexuality, scholars have built on Rich's (1983) notion of heterosexuality as a compulsory institution. Pascoe (2007), for example, uses the term "compulsive heterosexuality" to refer to a range of ostentatious displays of heterosexuality and male dominance that she observed in an ethnographic study of U.S. high-school students. These compulsive behaviors

represent boys' attempts to stave off threats to their manhood, largely from other boys, and their attempts to dominate girls and control their bodies. Boys in the study said of a man who is not having sex: "he's no one. He's nobody" (p. 88). Boys and young men engage in "sex-talk" to signal masculinity through heterosexual knowledge and sophistication (Eder 1995; Kehily 2002) and to "align themselves with personhood and subjectivity" (Pascoe 2007). Studying youth masculinities in the United Kingdom, Richardson (2010) argues that dominant cultural discourses and male peer group networks *compel* young men to adopt restricted masculinities predicated on the sexual objectification of women, often in contradiction to their private feelings and preferences. Heterosexuality, she argues, is a crucial sight where young men construct and contest masculine identities.

College students, like other youth, are largely excluded from evident forms of power (e.g., economic and political), which may cause them to focus on social relationships and social status (Milner 2004): who's friends with whom and who gets invited to what parties. For young men denied access to adult forms of masculine status, homosocial friendships (Bird 1996) and sex with women may be especially important. Partying and associated activities — such as drinking, dancing, and erotic interaction — are intimate, informal behaviors, typical of *expressive relationships*, or those based on companionship and affinity, which are especially important to social status. In contrast, *instrumental relationships* tend to be impersonal, goal-driven and less impactful on status (Milner 1994; Milner 2004). Intimate activities such as eating, sleeping, and having sex can be key ways that social actors display and acquire social status. At the same time, social actors may avoid intimate contact with those perceived to be low in status. Associating sexually with the right person can be a sign of one's position in a group, whereas associating with outsiders or subordinates may lower one's social standing (Milner 2004). Within the gendered context of collegiate sexual culture, sexual interactions with women are high stakes for men, presenting both opportunities and risks.

Collegiate Sexual Culture and Intersecting Inequalities

Across the United States, residential colleges are associated with *partying*, or alcohol-fueled, erotically charged revelry (Sperber 2001). Many sexual encounters on college campuses take the form of *hookups*, or "no strings attached" sexual experiences that range from kissing to penile-vaginal intercourse (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007). People who hook up do not necessarily have expectations of later talking, forming a relationship, or repeating the experience, but they may do so (Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000). Indeed, based on the ongoing research of students at nineteen colleges and universities across the United States, sociologist Paula England concludes that hooking up and committed monogamous relationships coexist, with most students experiencing at least one hookup by the time they graduate and many students fluctuating between relationship forms of varying intimacy and commitment. Although most hookups do not lead to relationships, many relationships begin as hookups, England finds, attesting to the centrality

of hooking up in collegiate sexual culture even for students more oriented toward relationships and monogamy (Jhally 2011).

Despite expectations for both college men and women to hook up, young adult sexuality is rife with gendered double standards (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007) and hooking up can have different implications for men than for women. College women partiers receive status for engaging in practices that highlight their sexual attractiveness and availability to men, such as dressing provocatively, dancing, flirting, and even kissing other women, but they also face sexual stigma and complain of men's disrespect within romantic and sexual interactions (Hamilton 2007; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Men tend to have control over when and how these interactions occur (Ridgeway 2009; Sassler and Miller 2011) and tend to have their sexual interests satisfied before women's (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012).

Other dimensions of inequality intersect with gender to structure young adults' opportunities to participate in collegiate hookup culture and the meanings they make of it. Class-privileged students are more likely to adopt an "emerging adult" perspective that embraces delayed adulthood, self-development, and experimentation (Arnett 2004; Furstenberg et al. 2004). Young people who are privileged by race and class also have more latitude in how others view their behavior, whereas less privileged youth face more scrutiny, surveillance, and less forgiving interpretations of their behavior (Ferguson 2000). Some Black male college students, for example, may distance themselves from predatory types of masculine sexuality, either by emphasizing academics (Harper 2004) or by emphasizing romance over sexual conquest (Ray and Rosow 2009).

Privileged women face "double binds and flawed options" (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) at the intersection of sexual double standards and class-related beliefs about self-development and the transition to adulthood. While hookups bring the risk of sexual stigmatization and men's disrespect, they are a rewarding part of party culture and are less burdensome and "greedy" than committed relationships. Wilkins and Dalessandro (2013) argue that privileged women may resolve competing expectations by approaching relationships in college as "monogamy lite"—as less serious and committed than "adult" relationships. By configuring infidelity as justifiable and normative behavior for college students, these women resist the gender inequality that compels women into heterosexual relationships yet limits their agency in initiating, directing, and ending these relationships.

If privileged women face "double binds and flawed options," how do privileged men fare, and what are the benefits and costs of enacting high-status masculinity within collegiate sexual culture? To date, most research has treated men's experiences of collegiate party culture as straightforward and positive; the celebration of casual sex is assumed to provide men with uncomplicated heterosexual paths to masculine status. My analysis problematizes the relationship between heterosexuality and men's gender privilege, revealing that men too face dilemmas as they enact a performance-based heterosexual masculinity within a young adult and collegiate

context. Using a symbolic interactionist framework, I demonstrate that heterosexual interaction does not unequivocally link to masculine status and that collegiate party culture, while privileging men, also imposes restrictive expectations that limit how men can interact sexually and romantically with women. I show how the homosocial peer culture of fraternity life compels men to calibrate their personal sexual preferences and practices with an idealized group construction of masculinity based on heterosexual mastery and the domination of women — what I call *player masculinity*. Their accounts of life in the party scene, while reflecting the enjoyment of homosocial camaraderie and heterosexual experimentation, also reflect deep ambivalence toward women's party and hookup behaviors. Men find themselves caught between peer expectations to approach women in objectifying ways and public gender beliefs that render women suspect and stigmatized for casual sex. I argue that, in order to negotiate these dueling concerns, men sort women sexually, drawing on gendered meanings of sexuality to make distinctions about different *types* of women. I show that men refer to these distinctions as they make determinations about which women to interact with sexually and how. By drawing on cultural ideas of good womanhood and sexual propriety to sort women, men are able to sustain heterosexual performance and the objectification of women as central to masculine identities while simultaneously attending to concerns about the ethics of a performance-based heterosexual masculinity and the sexual objectification and stigmatization of women.

SETTING, DATA, AND METHODS

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from two studies of college student social life, one involving sixteen group interviews with eighty-seven students (twenty-four men and sixty-three women) and another involving in-depth interviews with forty-four men, all students at a large Midwestern university, a flagship state school recognized for extensive research and a robust undergraduate student social life. Frequently ranked as one of the nation's top "party schools," the university enrolls approximately 30,000 students. Around 15% of undergraduate men belong to twenty-two fraternities. From these two larger studies, this article primarily focuses on fourteen race- and class-privileged men who are members of "mainline" fraternities — historically White, middle- and upper-middle-class organizations that own houses on campus. These mainline fraternities are located at the heart of the dominant campus party scene. While I include no direct quotes from the focus groups, data from these interviews, and data from interviews with non-"mainline" fraternity men, provide information on the cultural and institutional organization of the university and fraternity-driven party scene.

I conducted eight focus groups alone or with a co-investigator. The co-investigator conducted the remaining focus groups, either alone or with one other researcher. We conducted focus groups with students from both formal organizations (e.g., sororities and religious groups) and informal ones (friendship groups and commuter students).

We asked students about their personal opinions and experiences regarding partying, sex, and the balance of academics and socializing. We asked students about the various social scenes on campus. While from many different walks of campus life, students in each focus group discussed the fraternity-driven party scene. Even among students who did not regularly participate, many had attended one of its parties or were at least keenly aware of its existence.

I also conducted forty-four life history interviews with college men — twenty-four of whom were fraternity members and another twenty men were residents of a residence hall. All were heterosexual-identified and between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two years. I purposively sampled men in four of the largest and most visible fraternities with houses on campus. I contacted participants about the study via campus e-mail. In some cases, I e-mailed the participants after an organization coordinator provided a list of men and their e-mail addresses. In other cases, a coordinator forwarded my e-mail. I explained that I was interviewing heterosexual men about manhood, sexuality, and relationships with women. Personal recommendations from participants and snowball sampling led several men to participate. These interviews lasted on average one-and-a-half hours and were conducted in private offices on the campus.

I talked to the men about their pre-college life experiences, from their family backgrounds and childhoods to their high-school friendships and early romantic and sexual experiences. They discussed their paths to college and their experiences since matriculating, both social and academic. I also asked about their goals for the future, such as whether they expected to get married and have children. Much of the discussions focused on romantic and sexual relationships and on the men's notions of normal, appropriate, and ethical sexual behavior for men. I asked questions about their friends' sexual practices and attitudes in order to gain insight into their peer cultures. While interviewing did not allow me to observe men's actions firsthand, it did allow me to collect men's detailed accounts of, and reflections on, their intimate experiences and campus social life. The semi-structured, qualitative nature of the interviews encouraged men to serve as informed and reflexive participant observers on fraternity life and the campus party scene. I treat the interviews as men's public sense making of their social worlds and experiences. I frequently asked the men to illustrate their accounts with specific examples and stories. When discussing men's views of women's sexuality, for example, I asked both "What makes people think a girl is a slut" and questions such as, "Can you think of a specific girl like this? Tell me about her." "What kinds of things do your friends say about her?"

After each interview, I took preliminary notes on my impression of the interview and the key ideas that had emerged. I created a narrative sketch of each respondent, including demographic information related to hometown, race/ethnicity, and social class (based on parents' education level and employment); his lifestyle in college, including social and academic interests; and my impression of his appearance, personality, and demeanor during the interview. I transcribed and analyzed interviews

using the software-based data analysis program ATLAS.ti. I identified and coded patterns across interviews and flagged negative cases that could clarify or alter emergent themes (Rizzo, Corsaro, and Bates 1992).

Given the content of the interviews, I considered how my positionality might affect data collection. I was a fellow man, yet somewhat older and in the quasi-professional role of "grad student" researcher. I had neither past or present affiliation with fraternities, nor had I participated in the kind of intense party cultures associated with them. Nonetheless, the men rarely seemed guarded, instead offering elaborate "insider" descriptions of partying and sex on campus, even providing many details unflattering to themselves. The men may have used the interviews as sites to construct and signify masculine selves (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001).

While I was interested in exploring "double standards" within college sexuality, I was nonetheless surprised by men's eagerness to talk about college women's sexuality in a critical way. An initial analysis of interview data revealed that nearly all men, from across campus locations and organizations, expressed ambivalence toward sexually active women, especially women active in the party scene. Those fraternity men at the heart of this scene — nearly all White, middle- and upper-middle-class — expressed some of the strongest concerns, anxieties, and condemnations toward these women. They celebrated and relied on women's promiscuity while agonizing about it at the same time. These contradictions sensitized me to the dilemmas that lie behind — and partially result from — these men's privileges.

PERFORMING PLAYER MASCULINITY

Among mainline fraternity men living at the heart of the dominant campus party scene, being creditable social actors means participating in the collective enactment of "player masculinity," a masculinity project focused on male bonding, assertions of heterosexuality through the objectification and mastery of women (men *play* and women *get played*), and a conspicuous indulgence in carefree socializing and group revelry. A gender project that is fundamentally collective, player masculinity resolves problems young adult men in college face regarding friendship, gender, and sexuality: it fuses friendships and builds collective identity; it helps men achieve a widely exalted form of masculinity based on male bonding and heterosexual conquest; and it more generally aligns with widespread expectations for the quintessential college experience (friends, partying, and sex). Perhaps unsurprisingly, men describe the group membership, socializing, and sexual experiences of fraternity life as rewarding and exciting. Yet, as I will show, enacting player masculinity is not without costs.

Player masculinity among these men is both strongly *expected* and intoxicatingly *available*. As an ongoing situated accomplishment maintained through peer accountability and policing (West and Zimmerman 1987), player masculinity is constructed within a sexist, heteronormative sociohistorical context, and the specific cultural and organizational structures of fraternities. As Greg explains, "You got 70-plus young

guys all living together, always thinking about sex. You can't go five minutes without hearing about some guy [thinking about] fucking some girl, or some hot chick from class." From an interactionist perspective, "compulsive" assertions of heterosexuality (Pascoe 2007) are less about sexual desire than about compelled gender and sexual identity work — about producing collective identity, validating one's place in the group, and delineating group boundaries. Men's accounts reveal the link between sex and peer acceptance and status. As Nick explains,

> It's definitely a status thing. And the guys who do [get girls], they're definitely, uhm, seen as like, oh he's a stud, he's popular. And guys'll want to be around him, go out with him to the bars and stuff. It like, raises the spirit of the whole group, I guess.

Eric agrees, saying, "Especially if you're on a roll with the girls, you're the man, you know, you're the man … And everybody likes that feeling." David Grazian (2007) finds that the collective and ritualistic performance of masculine sexual competence benefits individual men, who receive emotional support and confidence when "girl hunting," group recognition of individual sexual successes, and, even in the face of personal failure, dividends from others' successes and the enjoyment of the group "hunt" itself. While Grazian contends that for the men in his study, Ivy League undergraduates writing about their experiences of Philadelphia's nightlife, casual sex was an unlikely outcome, the fraternity men I focus on here face far better odds and have, at least based on their own accounts, abundant opportunities for actual sex and thus many tests of hetero-masculine competence.[1] "Between guys talking about it and actually doing it, there's a lot of sex," Mark says. Alex agrees, saying, "in high school you kind of talk the talk, but here you're really, uh, really walking the walk."

Building Player Consensus

Many rituals of everyday life reflect the negotiation of this gendered social order, and the give and take of aligning individual interests with the group.

As Gil explains, "Guys like to engage in what I like to call hypothetical 'girls I'd like to fuck talk' … you know, 'I'd do her,' or 'I'd hit that.'" Will says, "Guys are always looking at girls. You know, it's like an appreciation thing. We're just saying whether they're hot or not. Whether we'd like to get with'em." "That's really the whole point of going out," Jason explains, "is to talk about which girls are hot."

As homosocial practices of masculinity, these rituals, like "girl watching" (Quinn 2002), are ways men signal to other men that they share a similar orientation within heterosexuality and toward women — that of the masculine sexual subject, the sexual aggressor (Bird 1996; Quinn 2002). At the same time, as cultural routines (Corsaro and Eder 1990) they provide young men with predictable ways to acquire, test out, and convey knowledge about women's desirability. Even the simple act of walking around campus with friends — "a group of guys is always going to be looking at girls, saying which ones are hot," Jeff claims — provides lessons in feminine aesthetics and

low-risk "practice" opportunities to sexually posture and adjudicate women's sexual allure. Men's ritualistic, collaborative evaluation of women builds toward a *working consensus* (Goffman 1959) regarding signifiers of women's desirability, allowing men with presumably varied tastes and interests to coordinate action regarding subjective issues such as feminine beauty and sexual propriety.

Men can receive generous expressions of approval for hooking up with women widely seen as desirable, as Will explains:

> Guys will give you that look, across the room, when you're talking to a really hot girl. And then if you go upstairs, like you're leaving the party and taking the girl upstairs your friend's like, 'Oh hey you leaving? Where you go — oh, nice. Nice!'

Men who hook up with hot women are admired: "He's a stud. Other guys wanna be him and look up to him," Kevin says of a man known for hooking up with attractive women. Greg agrees, saying: "A real player gets the girls all the guys are after. He's the man and … he gets attention. He gets envied." Men celebrate each other's particularly impressive hookups through gossip and storytelling, as Chris explains: "Everybody knows about it. Everybody's talking about it."

Men also receive intense teasing and reprimands for sexual failures, explains Jacob: "Eww, she ugly." They'll tease you like that. Talk about her, say she's a dog. And it's like, "Come on man, I was working that. I put a lot of time and energy into that." As a form of collective "rule governed aggression" (Lyman 1987) during which any one man may suddenly become the "outsider" and the target of the group, collaborative baiting and ribbing call men into question for being failed masculinity performers. Prior research argues that women and sex are often subjects of young heterosexual men's joking banter, teasing, and insulting (Eder 1995; Lyman 1987). "You get teased for the girls you've done stuff with — is she hot or not, is she a slut, these kinds of debates," Greg explains. Jason tells a story about talking to a girl for a few weekends, only to have his friends say they "heard she was a slut" and that she "hooked up with like three guys in this other fraternity," causing him to abruptly end his pursuit. He admits to feeling "kind of embarrassed" and like he had "been fooled" by this woman. When pressed to explain why he stopped talking to her despite his initial strong interest, he replied, as if it were obvious, "I'd never hear the end of it." "The ongoing commentary about who's hooked up with who, who's done what with this girl, that girl, it's endless. It's all the time, and it can be raunchy," Gil says.

Whether men want their private experiences converted into player fodder is largely irrelevant, as communal player talk serves the common good by building group identity and generating shared understandings of women and sex. Seth discusses "morning after" rap sessions with a typical mix of fondness and frustration:

> The next day [after a party] definitely there's a lot of talk. There's some bragging but even more than that you get a lot of questions — a lot of questions. You can't say nothing. So inevitably the morning after a big party, you get a kind of session where everybody's asking each other all these questions and trading stories of the

evening. Seth recognizes the fun elements of these sessions, but conveys annoy-
ance at the lack of privacy and forced participation. Mark said he at first feared
parties because he was "paralyzed and, like, I couldn't talk to girls. Girls made me
nervous [laughs]." His friends would harass him, he says, needling him after par-
ties for information about his interactions with women, but he would deflect and,
essentially, mislead. "And I'd like make shit up. Be like, 'Oh yeah me and this one
girl talked, but, like, whatever.'" He says he felt like a liability until he eventually
"got some game" and became "pretty good at getting girls." The "questions — a
lot of questions" hold men accountable; men must signify their commitment to
the group and their sophistication in enacting player masculinity.

Some men chafe at the compelled alignment of their interests with the player
collective and clearly address this tension in interviews, alternately positioning
themselves as insiders and outsiders to this competitive heteromasculine arena.
Alex proudly reported that his fraternity brothers call him "porn star" because of
his regular hookups, but he admitted during his interview that, when behind closed
doors, he prefers a sexual encounter to go no further than making out. As much
as possible, he purposefully keeps his brothers misinformed, keeping to himself his
belief that sex is best if between two people who know and trust each other. Gil
reveals his anxiety about group player behavior by saying, "I hope I don't play a part
in this, but I think sometimes I do, the way you're accepted by guys is how many
girls you've been with, what you do with girls, and you know stuff like that … "

The same interaction processes that produce player identities also present a
kind of "collateral damage" in the form of women interpreted as used, degraded,
and abject, and these meaning-making processes can easily take on a life of their
own, regardless of individual men's attitudes. David used the term "runaway train"
to describe the gossip, joking, and storytelling that ensued after he hooked up
semi-publicly with a girl he "really liked." "I had to do damage control so my friends
wouldn't think she was a slut." He found himself in a tricky position, on the one hand
wanting to share details of his exciting sex and yet, on the other hand, fearing that
doing so might "fuel the fire" and brand her as promiscuous. He had to balance the
potential peer status benefits with the costs; establishing his own (player) reputation
might damage hers. Allen recounts a story of Jill, a woman he knew from high
school: "[She] had sex with this guy in [another fraternity] and he put something
about it in an email, so all of his brothers would know. She's forever, *that girl*." In
a version of "morning after" storytelling, an email LISTSERV post-rendered Jill a
used sexual object. While Allen personally resists the negative meanings attached
to her and her actions, he feels powerless in the face of her new reputation.

Regardless of men's private conceptualizations of masculinity and sexuality, their
accounts as a whole speak to the importance of player masculinity to fraternity life
and high-status masculinity within it. Ritual player practices serve as a regulatory
framework through which all of these men construct and negotiate masculine iden-
tities. Everyday talk such as gossip, teasing, and insulting, among other ritualized
interaction practices such as "girl hunting," forms a player discourse with which men
regulate themselves and each other.

"SLUT" STIGMA

Men's accounts of women's sexual behavior in the party scene are deeply ambivalent, with sudden shifts from exuberant details of women's sexual availability to words of warning, reproach, and even contempt for women. In the first interpretation, women who dance suggestively, flirt liberally at parties, and regularly have casual sex are hot and exciting. "Girls are nuts here," Eric explains giddily. "It's girls gone wild, live," Will says, referring to the popular video series featuring college-age women behaving provocatively for cameras. In the second interpretation, however, men frame women's sexuality in terms of morality, self-respect, and character. They use terms such as "dirty," "not classy," "slutty," "gross," and "nasty" to convey their disapproval and even revulsion toward promiscuous women.

In sharp contrast to the carefree revelry component of player masculinity, men make frequent, grave references to women's regret, self-respect and "class," revealing their uneasiness with the double standards that enhance men's social standing while spoiling women's. Allen, for example, speaks lightheartedly of "dirty girls who know how to have a good time" at one point in his interview but later shifts tones to offer words of warning for women partiers:

> It's that, I think when girls get really drunk they start to do things that they'll regret the next day … And I just think that before you start to party you should be aware of what you might do. If you're going to get shit faced and take your panties off and dance with your skirt up around your waist, that's not showing a lot of class or respect for yourself. And guys will get certain ideas about you.

Hamilton and Armstrong find that fear of "slut stigma" (2009) drives many college women to alter their sexual behavior and maybe even preferences. Fearing social judgment and bad reputations, women may avoid hookups, have fewer hookup partners than they desire, or hide sexual activity. The men in this study confront these same stigmatizing beliefs, albeit from a counter and *privileged* position, leading to their own dilemmas.

As discourse involved in the enactment and regulation of player masculinity, slut talk — derogatory names, gossip, and stories highlighting women's sexual deviance and stigmatization — underscores the importance of sexual performance to masculine legitimacy, sexual propriety to women's legitimacy, and the interconnections between the two. Similar to the construction of adolescent masculine identities through boys' everyday repudiation of the "fag" (Pascoe 2007), the regular naming of sluts asserts masculine privilege at the expense of the feminine other. The slut, like the fag, is a "threatening specter," a failed gender performer, one within an already devalued gender category.

All of the fraternity men are able to tell "mythical slut" stories, or hard-to-believe accounts of women being shockingly sexual that circulate widely among their friends. Nick tells a story of Becky, who "let two guys fuck her on the porch a couple of years ago. Right there in the open." While he could not vouch for the story's veracity, it was erotic lore among his friends. Mark tells of a woman who performed oral sex on

six men over the course of one evening. Her name is now synonymous with oral sex among his friends. By constructing women as pornographic objects of men's collective entertainment, these stories appeal to masculinity logics that connect manhood to the sexual exploitation of women. The episodes described are purely sexual (i.e., not romantic) and the women featured are abject — grossly immodest, defiled, and subordinate. Slut stories craft meanings about men: committing wildly uninhibited (hetero) sexual acts is humorous, sexually exciting, and evidence of the libidinal and recreational nature of men's sexuality. And they craft another set for women: feminine sexual propriety is imperiled and at risk, and women can suffer utter (social) destruction through sexuality.

SORTING WOMEN SEXUALLY

Compelled by peer expectations into performances of player masculinity yet confronted with gender beliefs that attach stigma to promiscuous women, individual men face binds as they interact intimately with women. Those women most willing to interact sexually are likely to be stigmatized, rendering them less clearly beneficial and potentially threatening to men's social standing. The converse is also true: a woman can be conferred status based on her perceived sexual restraint. Thus, while heterosexual interaction is a precondition for respect and status, sex has varying impacts on men's player standing, depending on the "erotic status" (Green 2005) of the woman partner and the nature of the interaction.

Men's descriptions of their hookup and relationship experiences reveal the importance of *sorting women sexually*. As a heterosexual strategy, sorting involves men deploying gendered meanings of sexuality to make distinctions among women, especially regarding their sexual propriety and how sexual contact with given women might impact masculine standing. The men in the study report a wide variety of relationships with women, from one off sexual encounters with near strangers to long-term committed relationships. In their accounts of each type of relationship, men draw on the logic of sorting to make sense of the nature and terms of the engagement, including how to approach sex and whether to seek commitment. Sorting enables men to respond to both player expectations for sexual performance and widespread gender beliefs that sexually stigmatize women.

Hooking Up: "If I know she's a good girl, then I'll be more respectful of course."

Kevin claims that men are reluctant to have sex with promiscuous women: "No man, that's nasty." But he amends his declaration when asked about very attractive women: "Well, all right. Yeah. I'll give you that. Guys'll be interested. They're always interested, always enticed. But look, they're gonna try to get with her and get something, a little something, without giving in return." The most desirable women, in terms of their impact on masculine status, combine overall sexual allure and

availability without appearing "desperate," dirty,' or "low class." As Kevin's quote illustrates, however, women may be sexually stigmatized yet have high "embodied capital" (Bourdieu 1987), such as thin yet curvy bodies, "pretty" faces, and good fashion sense. For these women, Kevin says, men will try to "get" sex "without giving in return." By framing some sexual encounters as *instrumental*, as artfully goal-driven (just sex) and non-intimate, men transform a potential disadvantage (sexual contact with a woman deemed undesirable) into a player advantage.

This strategy is not only about keeping sex casual and "lite" but also about demonstrating dominance and sexual mastery. Allen, for example, refers to women's sexual reputations as he talks about his varying approaches toward sex and relationships:

> Like with some girls, I can be totally one track. Like not to be crude, but just pursue sex and that's it. No games straightforward "I wanna fuck you. This is what it's about." But with other girls, I'll be more open to other things. If it's a girl I respect, if I know she's a good girl, then I'll be more respectful of course. We might talk, hang out, fool around, but it doesn't have to go there. It might and I mean I always like it to, but if she doesn't want it then no.

For women Allen deems "good" and respectable, he says he is willing to abandon his pursuit of sex and forsake short-term status gains. With other women, he says, the sex is straightforward and instrumental—"I wanna fuck you." Seth says that he only invites girls he really likes up to his room, preferring to hook up with other girls in other parts of the house: "you know, a nice quiet corner is just as good as any," he says. "We have some couches in the basement just for that." Despite sex being an informal and intimate activity typically associated with expressive relationships, men can discursively manage the status impact of these encounters by (1) stressing their goal-driven nature and (2) asserting masculine dominance in subtle (private bedroom versus public couch) and not so subtle ways (not "giving in return"). Instrumentalization blunts questions about player proficiencies and helps men avoid *stigma by association* (Goffman 1963).

Men could also protect their status interests by styling sex with less desirable women as *balling*—strictly casual, similar to "fucking"—or, in a cruder but similar vein, *hosing*, a practice where a man has sex with a woman in a rough, lewd and overtly self-gratifying way. As Chris's explanation illustrates, hosing is about sexual performance but also about sorting women: " … ugly girls can get hosed. Girls can be kind of hot but guys don't really like'em, so they get hosed." In line with Bogle's (2008) findings, the men in this study indicate that women who hook up with multiple men in the same fraternity are virtually guaranteed to be stigmatized. Gil says he and his friends call such women "house skanks," "house rats," and "groupies." "It's kind of like the girls don't have any respect," he explains. Yet he and his friends have sex with them, framing the encounters as a "last resort" or "guilty pleasure." This framework allows men to make sense of their failure to acquire more desirable partners in a less negative light. Moreover, in referencing women's complicity (no self-respect), the framework assuages men's guilt for abetting their sexual degradation. As long as

sex with these women is styled instrumental, its impact on men's status is, in some ways, negligible. As Will says, having sex with a "real slut" is "like nothing. It's like not even getting laid." This characterization is somewhat inaccurate, however. While sex with a "real slut" may be a negligible accomplishment that signals failure to acquire a more desirable partner, even sex with sexually stigmatized women can bolster men's claims to "hormone driven," "real" masculinity and provide fodder for storytelling and other bonding rituals.

Committed Relationships: "I wouldn't date a girl like that."

Men also refer to woman's sexual stigma when making sense of their conflicted feelings about commitment and their approach to relationship work. In his talk of committed relationships, Seth, for example, explicitly calibrates his approach toward women with his evaluation of women's "worth": "I prefer to take things slow with girls I'm really interested in." Similarly, David tells a story about a woman he met last month. He likes her romantically but has reservations: "I actually prefer girls who wait a little bit," he says, indirectly criticizing her for engaging in sexual interaction on the first day they met. "I wouldn't date a girl like that," he says.

Gil, who said with confidence at one point in his interview that he expected to meet his future, hopefully virginal wife after college, discussed at length his pattern of "talking to" girls from the party scene only to break things off when he determines he "just [isn't] that interested." As a relationship form somewhere between a hook up and the beginnings of a committed relationship, *talking to* can be on the way to something more serious, or not. Gil feels little obligation to make relationships work: "You know these girls from around. You may know guys they've been with, done stuff with. But if I know a girl's quality, I like to spend time with her." *Deficit model* thinking frames women from the party scene as starting with a disadvantage. From his perspective, he wants a girlfriend, but the right one may be hard to find, especially in college. Men, already privileged by control over the timing and progression of relationships and low expectations for emotion work (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007), can refer to women's sexual reputations when accounting for their own relationship waffling and emotional caginess.

Women can push back, however. The last girl Gil had been talking to grew frustrated with his lack of communication and emotional honesty, and her friends confronted him. While the data I have provide only his accounts of these events, other research suggests that college women may not desire committed relationships, which they perceive as "greedy" with time and energy, but may also feel regularly disrespected and poorly treated by men in hookups (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Ideas of respect and fairness in college relationships are subjective and negotiated, and men may use sorting and its framework of ideas that condemn women for casual sexual activity to justify their relational strategies. From Gil's perspective, he owed this woman nothing and dismissed her friends' complaints as groundless.

Within this logic, men have incentive to increase levels of intimacy, respect, and devotion for desirable women with good sexual reputations. Several of the men

spoke adoringly of past girlfriends and the emotional rewards and vulnerabilities they felt in these relationships. As Seth proclaimed, "I was totally in love with Lana. She knew me, all about me. All the bad stuff and my fears and insecurities. I would have done anything for her." Many also waxed romantic about their imagined future wives. Jeff imagines a future with "a beautiful wife and mother, good kids, loving, trusting marriage. A person you just really want to do things for, who you can rely on, too." By engaging in "intimacy talk" (Wilkins 2009), or discourse that stresses emotional connection, vulnerability, and respect for women, men disassociate from player life and signal identities as moral men — as potentially caring, loving partners and not one-dimensional players. Their *selective* and *strategic* use of this talk qualifies their player behavior as contextual — to a specific time and place and, in part, to specific women.

PRIVILEGE AND "PLAYING"

An intersectional lens reveals how gender interlocks with class and race to support player masculinity. In describing college as a time to let loose, have fun, and discover oneself, men's thinking reflects class-privileged assumptions about early adulthood (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Wilkins and Dalessandro 2013). "I just want to have fun," Kevin explains, "because I know down the road it's not going to be like this." And Greg says, "I didn't really have a lot of sex in high school, and now is really the time I can explore … that side of myself." Moreover, men's romantic talk of future wives and families reveals commitment to middle-class aspirations for adult masculinity. Making sense of college as a unique time and place may assuage some of men's guilt over participating in a hyper-sexualized culture that rewards *and* punishes women for being sex objects. In a study of Black college men, Ford (2011) finds that men may negotiate unreasonable or unappealing expectations of Black masculinity by drawing distinctions between the masculinity they *perform* and the men they know and understand themselves *to be*. Men may construct idealized *potential selves* (Hochschild 1997) as a response to the contradictions between collective player masculinity and their personal feelings and values.

   The one class-disadvantaged man among this group illustrates the power of class structures to normalize college party and hookup behavior. Gil, raised by his grandmother in a poor community, explicitly ties college to *upward* mobility and sees hard partying and casual sex as traps — as part of what he calls a "cycle of poverty." He did not easily accept that upward mobility through fraternity membership meant participating in behaviors he interprets as immature, irresponsible, and "low class." In response to the contradictions between player masculinity and his class background, Gil constructs a future, aspirational self, one defined by educational attainment, work, and family. Like the men in Ford's study, he understands this future (middle class) self as more truly representative of who he really is than his current behavior.

Class *and* race privilege likely sustains player masculinity for these men. Ray and Rosow (2009), in a study comparing Black and White "high-status" fraternities, find that White fraternity men adopt more sexual objectifying and less romantic approaches to intimacy with women, in part because their large on-campus houses are good for big parties and casual sex but bad for privacy and romance. In comparison, the small size and organization of the Black Greek community, and the racialization of the campus, create a "hyper level of visibility and accountability" (p. 527) that prevents Black men from enacting hegemonic heterosexual selves the same way White men do. For the men I focus on here, the environment they confront in their fraternities is unprecedentedly gender segregated and unsupervised, especially compared with their previous social environments (in residence halls, high schools, or at home with families), allowing the collective enactment of player masculinity to flourish. The resulting hegemonic structural gender arrangement likely suppresses individual dissent and the expression of alternative forms of heterosexual intimacy (Bird 1996).

Other research similarly highlights the importance of an intersectional lens that recognizes how gender, race, and social class combine to shape men's experiences of collegiate sexual culture. Wilkins (2012) finds that raced gender stereotypes accord Black masculinity both "stigma and status," creating identity tensions that men address by moving between opposing frameworks — "player talk" and "intimacy talk." While the White fraternity men I focus on here do not face racial stigma, they may also engage in intimacy talk as a way to mitigate associations of fraternity masculinity with women's exploitation. On the one hand, their accounts reflect the power of sorting to justify the objectification and mistreatment of women in the party scene. On the other hand, their feelings of uneasiness and ambivalence still come through, revealing that blaming women is a limited strategy for managing the "stigma" of masculinity projects built around the sexual exploitation of women.

DISCUSSION

Because imperatives of player masculinity necessitate the interactional conversion of private sexual desires and experiences into the collective domain, individual men have to calibrate their sexual interests and practices with peers' approval. Their individual approaches to sex are a public concern — watched over and judged by peers. Status processes productive of player masculinity compel men to objectify women, in talk *and* actual interactions, and to see women in terms of sexual worth. Men's accounts of collegiate hookup culture, while exuberant and approving in many ways are also laced with anxieties about women's sexual behavior. I have argued that men's sorting of women responds to the dual concerns for masculine status and men's anxiety about the sexual stigmatization of women.

Sorting may resolve other masculinity dilemmas. Turning down sex or being too picky for no good reason is not a public discourse available to men (Richardson 2010). Sorting some women into a low status, justifiably off-limits category, however,

creates a culturally intelligible justification for declining sex. Sorting is not just about with whom to have sex, but how. If compelled into sexual contact with low-status women, sorting justifies the poor treatment of these women and channels the status impact in manageable ways. By describing encounters as strategically manipulated, men protect and garner status. Moreover, the logic associated with sorting provides men cover, as it suggests that those women who men treat less well are "not worth it" and those they treat poorly are "asking for it."

Ritualistic slut talk may serve as a collective strategy that defends player masculinity from negative associations (that fraternity men are ruthless in their pursuit of sex; that fraternities are sexually dangerous places for women, etc.). Perhaps at a personal level, slut stories address some of the anxiety men feel toward women's poor treatment. In the absence of discourses of women's *benign* promiscuity, men have limited frameworks for making sense of women who are unambiguously active in the hookup scene. Slut stories may quell anxiety by asserting women's agency and individual moral failings, thereby downplaying men's manipulation, deceit, or victimizing. By focusing on a few women's (apocryphal) deviance, slut stories deflect attention from the double standards that rig collegiate sexuality in the first place.

These findings add complexity to existing literature that suggests hookup culture facilitates men's desire for sex without commitment (Bogle 2008; Regnerus and Uecker 2011). To be sure, the men in this study indicate that they enjoy casual sex, but they also speak positively about committed relationships and bemoan the difficulties of finding a "good" girlfriend in college. While college men and women alike are subject to norms of emerging adulthood that delay marriage to the mid- to late twenties, college men's motivations to secure and nurture committed romantic relationships are further diminished in a number of ways: by the lack of sexual stigma for sex outside of romantic relationships; by masculinity status processes that reward men for engaging in ritualistic homosocial practices that exclude and objectify women; and by gender norms that free men of responsibility for relationship work. Ironically, these forces that combine to undermine men's motivations for committed relationships may explain why the men in this study wax romantic about past and future girlfriends. Compared with women, men are free to be choosey and to entertain idealized ideas about future (beautiful and virginal) wives. High school may represent a time before the debauchery of college partying, when sexual exploration is normatively contained, especially for women, in romantic relationships (Risman and Schwartz 2002), lessening, although not erasing, men's concerns about both heteromasculine status and women's sexual stigmatization.

CONCLUSION

A symbolic interactionist approach sheds light on the dilemmas these young men face at the intersection of masculinity and collegiate sexuality and on the strategies by which they resolve them. While ideas that tie masculine status to sexual performance are part of widespread cultural myths of manhood in our society, local cultures

of fraternities often condense these ideas into restrictive meaning systems that validate only narrow expressions of masculinity and sexuality (Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990). In this study, the men's interactive work of accounting for their sexual experiences reflects not just the freedom and fun of sexual exploration on a class-privileged pathway through early adulthood, but the anxieties born out of a homosocial environment that compels men into enacting masculinity focused on sexual performance and the objectification of women. Through a careful balance of *how* and *whom* men negotiate the bind of being expected to demonstrate heterosexual competence but only with certain women.

Other research examines collegiate sexual culture from women's perspectives. In a study of college women partiers, Hamilton (2007) finds that some women may fine-tune performances of femininity in order to elicit the most patronage and respect from men, a process Schwalbe et al. refer to as *trading power for patronage* (2000). Rather than directly challenge the unequal gender arrangements of the party scene, some women may accept "compensatory benefits" such as social inclusion and erotic attention that affirm their sexual appeal and overall status. Other women avoid the party scene altogether, viewing the interactional requirements as degrading and unseemly. Facing "double binds and flawed options" in sexual and romantic relationships, privileged college women may avoid committed relationships altogether (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) or view them as "monogamy lite" and use infidelity as a decisive although indirect strategy for exerting influence (Wilkins and Dalessandro 2013). My research sheds light on why college women often complain of their lack of control and men's disrespect in collegiate heterosexual relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

The research presented here only begins to fill the gap in our knowledge of young heterosexual men's experiences of sexual and romantic relationships. Research has often overlooked the identity dilemmas and tensions that gender beliefs create for men. Wilkins (2008) finds that evangelical Christian and Goth young men use the material of their subcultures to rework ideas of masculinity and heterosexual performance. Despite significant differences in their masculinity projects, both groups emphasize relational intimacy, emotional vulnerability, and respect for women. This intimacy talk allows them to claim manhood through heterosexuality despite wider society's interpretation of many of their practices as unmasculine. Although other research has explored how gender, race, and social class intersect to structure the romantic and sexual experiences of men (Ford 2011; Ray and Rosow 2009; Wilkins 2008; Wilkins 2012), additional research could explore how intersecting inequalities shape men's masculinity concerns and perceptions of women's sexual stigmatization. The invocation of "class" by men in this study when discussing women's sexual propriety suggests that sorting and class advantage are intertwined. It may be that men interpret the sexual behavior of women differently based on women's class (or race) background (Bettie 2003), just as men's social class and race affect their attitudes toward women and sex.

Player masculinity and women's sexual stigmatization highlight how gender difference and normative heterosexuality are mutually reinforcing (Jackson 1991). Taken for granted, understandings about sexuality presuppose gender difference. Despite some erosion of traditional gender differences regarding sexual preferences and practices, the *idea* of difference persists (Jackson 1991). Indeed, constructing and policing these boundaries produce hegemonic heterosexuality (Butler 1990). The policing of female sexuality through slut talk, for example, constitutes both femininity and masculinity. On the one hand, sluts appeal to the masculine subject by invoking eroticized domination (Jeffreys 1996). On the other hand, sluts embody unacceptably gendered selves. Sluts represent the "constitutive outside" to normal, intelligible feminine identities (Butler 1990). The shifting and opaque lines between normal/intelligible and abject feminine sexualities may be a key driver of men's anxious ambivalence toward women's sexual propriety. As "heterosexually based gender practice" (Pascoe 2007), ritualistic slut talk thus does heavy lifting: producing and consecrating gendered meanings of sexuality, eroticizing men's dominance and women's submission, and defending men against emasculating threats.

This article adds to literature showing that gender inequality persists in intimate heterosexual relations, despite progress in other social arenas. Behind sorting processes lie ideas that suggest how a woman behaves sexually makes her a *kind* of person, worthy of some rights and privileges and not others. The sexual sorting of women thus can be seen as a form of oppressive othering (Schwalbe et al. 2000) through which men impose shared categorizations and hierarchies upon women, a process that creates collective identities among men and draws boundaries between men and women.

As an interaction site where beliefs in gender difference are interpreted and reproduced, sexual relations may have consequences for the enactment of gender difference more broadly (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Through collaborative, shared experiences, men's subjectivities may be conditioned in ways that impact identity work and network formation well beyond college. Future research could examine how such youth peer culture conditioning may lead men later in life to affiliate with others similar to themselves and to form cohesive, homosocial groups whose boundaries are socially marked by largely invisible gender- and sexuality-related affinities. Moreover, as fraternities (and sororities) are historically sites of great privilege and concentrations of material, cultural, and social capital (DeSantis 2007), men's inclusion or exclusion from this scene is part of a broader matrix of inequality that implicates gender and sexuality as well as social class and race/ethnicity in the unequal division of the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995).

NOTE

1. Research on college party and hookup culture would suggest that the unique qualities of residential colleges facilitate casual sex more effectively than nightlife venues in large urban areas. See, for example, Bogle (2008).

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