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Subjective adult identity and casual sexual behavior

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Abstract

A majority of Americans have a casual sexual experience before transitioning to adulthood. Little research has yet to examine how identity influences causal sexual behavior. The current study fills this gap in the literature by examining if subjective adult identity predicts casual sexual behavior net of life course transitions in a national sample of Americans. To answer this research question, the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health is utilized. Structural equation modeling results show the older and more adult-like individuals feel the less likely they are to report a recent casual sexual partner. Once life course factors are included in the model, subjective identity is no longer associated with casual sex. Practitioners who work with adult populations need to consider how life course transitions influence casual sexual behavior.

Keywords

Adulthood; Life course theory; Casual sex; Identity; Symbolic interactionism

1. Introduction

Subjective adult identity is the development of an adult sense of self regardless of chronological age. Prior studies have proposed that people start to feel like an adult as a result of experiencing life course transitions (Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson, 2005), acquiring adult roles (Johnson, Berg, & Sirotzki, 2007), and comparing personal behavior to adult reference groups (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). While several studies (Benson & Elder, 2011; Foster, Hagan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Lowe, Dillon, Rhodes, & Zwiebach, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2005) have examined what predicts subjective adult identity, limited research exists on whether subjective adult identity influences later casual sexual behavior. It is possible that no longer having casual sex may be a marker of adulthood. To address this limitation in the literature, the current study uses the United States based sample of the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) and investigates the research questions, “Is subjective adult identity linked to casual sexual behavior and do life course transitions explain the association between identity and casual sex?” Casual sex is defined as having sexual behavior outside of a committed/romantic relationship. This research makes a contribution to the literature by investigating the relationships between adult identity, casual sexual behavior, and life course transitions.

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1.1. Life course theory and the delaying of adulthood

Life course theory is a beneficial framework for examining the predictors of subjective adult identity and casual sexual behavior. There are three important components of the life course framework that are particularly relevant: (1) historical variations in lives, (2) the timing of life events, and (3) age-graded behavior or age norms (Elder, 1995, 1996). First, emerging adulthood has become a distinct life course stage and occurs before adulthood. This new life course stage has been created by several historical and societal changes. As a result of the second demographic transition, there has been an increase in the median age at first marriage, rise in higher education enrollment rates at this life stage, and more acceptance of premarital sex (Arnett, 2007; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004; Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van De Kaa, 1987). Furstenberg et al. (2004) and others have argued that in contemporary society it takes longer to achieve adult status. Because of the societal changes such as later ages at marriage and the delaying of adulthood, there are new norms, institutional arrangements, and identities that occur during the time period before adulthood (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

One of social expectations of emerging adulthood is exploration of the sexual self before settling into adult roles such as marriage (Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2013). One way some emerging adults explore their sexuality is experimenting with casual sexual behavior. Indeed, recent estimates suggest that current emerging adults are more likely to have sex with a casual partner compared to the previous generation of the same age group. More specifically, those who were emerging adults in the years 2004–2012 had more casual sexual partners compared to those who were emerging adults in 1988–1996 (Monto & Carey, 2014). It is important to note that sex in romantic relationships is also common during emerging adulthood, suggesting that people explore their sexuality both in and out of romantic relationships during this life course stage (Felder, Carey, & Carey, 2013). Emerging adulthood is distinct from adulthood in terms of behavior expectations and casual sex may be more acceptable during emerging adulthood and be less socially appropriate during adulthood.

Second, in line with life course theory, the timing of life events can influence the transition to adulthood and feeling like an adult. Foster et al. (2008) reported that having a child was associated with feeling like an adult. Thus, experiencing life course transitions, such as parenthood may lead one to feel like an adult earlier compared to someone who has not transitioned into adult roles. Undergoing more adult life course transitions most likely increases the probability of an adult identity.

Finally, different life course stages have associated age-graded behaviors (Elder, 1995; Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). This means that there are socially prescribed roles and behaviors that are linked with emerging adulthood that will be different than expected adulthood actions. Massoglia and Uggen (2010) make the argument that some deviance is expected by larger society during adolescence and most teens are deviant in one way or another such as drinking alcohol while underage or using marijuana. Since society expects some deviance during adolescence, most often when crimes are committed during this life course stage, teens are tried in a separate court system with criminal records being sealed when people turn 18 or when they are legally an adult. The authors note that as people age

into adulthood, delinquency becomes age-inappropriate and society becomes less accepting of the behavior. A similar argument can be made regarding casual sex. The emerging adult years are often viewed as a time of identity and sexuality exploration (Arnett, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2013) and casual sex is associated with the emerging adult years (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014). As people commit to adult roles such as parenthood and marriage, casual sex may be less accepted by society. In other words, casual sexual behavior is possibly more socially acceptable during emerging adulthood, but may have age-inappropriateness for adults.

1.2. Why identity influences behavior

The current study builds upon life course theory by also incorporating a symbolic interactionist understanding of identity. Massoglia and Uggen (2010) explain that people start to understand themselves and their adult identity through two major comparisons. First, people compare their current behavior to their younger selves. Second, people compare their actions to others who are in their adult reference groups (e.g. workplace). In other words, social contexts provide a prescription of what roles are appropriate for being an adult and individuals then analyze their own behaviors in comparison to the reference group's behavior. As an individual's actions start to change from when she was an emerging adult and start to be similar to other adults she knows, she will begin to think of herself as an adult. Similarly, Johnson and Mollborn (2009) argue that adult identity becomes more salient when the individual internalizes and starts to collect more socially-agreed upon adult roles.

Understanding subjective adult identity through both symbolic interactionist and life course lenses is similar to Johnson and Mollborn (2009) and Massoglia and Uggen (2010) and helps explain why identity and life course transitions might be associated with casual sexual behavior during adulthood. As the transition to adulthood becomes more diverse in contemporary society (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005), there is not a single marker of adulthood. For example, graduating from college and finishing one's education might not be enough to feel like an adult; however, as one commits to multiple adult roles this will increase the chance of feeling like an adult, which will further increase the probability of doing more socially expected adult behavior. Not only do transitions influence identity, but subjective adult identity should affect later behavior and life decisions (Benson, 2014a). Taking a developmental perspective on subjective adult identity, it is expected that people who have a salient adult identity would engage in activities that are associated with adulthood and stop behaviors related to emerging adulthood (Benson, Johnson, & Elder, 2012). If casual sex is an age-graded behavior of emerging adulthood, then no longer having casual sex would be an age-graded behavior of adulthood. Thus, transitioning into more adult roles, such as parenthood should increase the probability of feeling like an adult and decreasing the probability of having casual sex.

1.3. Aging out of casual sexual behavior

The median age of sexual debut in the United States is 17 (Guttmacher Institute, 2014), but the median age at first marriage is at an all-time high of 27 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Thus, current emerging adults spend a substantial amount of time during the life course with

the possibility of premarital sex, which can include sex with casual partners. As a result of the changing landscape of the emerging adult years, casual sex is becoming a normative behavior among contemporary emerging adults. Using a sample of undergraduate students, Armstrong, England, & Fogarty (2009) stated that 67% of sexually active university students during their last year of university reported at least one casual sexual partner during their lifetime. Lyons, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore (2013) found that 54% of educationally diverse emerging adults-not just those enrolled in higher education-claimed to have had casual sex during their lifetime. The number of recent casual sexual partners increased as people aged from adolescence into emerging adulthood and the number peaked around age 21 (Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2015). As these results suggest, most or over half of emerging adults have casual sex before transitioning into adulthood. It is also important to highlight that emerging adults believe that there is social support among their peers to have casual sex and that casual sex is not just normative in number alone. The college students in Wade and Heldman's (2012) study stated that socializing in the university environment was conducive to finding casual sexual partners and that their peer group supported casual sexual behavior. College students were likely to believe their peers were more comfortable with casual sex than they themselves were (Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003). These findings suggest that college students feel that they are immersed in social groups that support casual sexual behavior. Thus, casual sex during emerging adulthood is both normative in number in that most emerging adults have at least one casual sexual partner and socially normative where casual sex is thought to be common within the larger social group.

If casual sex is an age-graded behavior of emerging adults, it is possible that casual sex starts to become age-inappropriate when people enter adulthood. By 30, most people have "settled down" into adult roles such as moving out of the parental home, getting married, and having children (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). The probability of marriage for American women by the age 30 is .68 and the probability increases to .84 by age 40 (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). In the United States, a large majority of adults do get married at some point even if there has been a shift to later ages at first marriage. Marriage is one of the traditional markers of adulthood (Shanahan et al., 2005) and there is an almost universal expectation of sexual exclusivity in a marital union (Treas & Giesen, 2000). Among Americans over the age of 18, having multiple sexual partners during the past 12 months is more common among emerging adults compared to people in their 30's, most likely because more people get into the formalized committed relationship of marriage. Specifically, 97% of married women had only one sexual partner during that last year, which suggests less casual sex as women transition to the adult role of wife (Chandra, Mosher, & Copen, 2011). As one commits to adult roles, it is expected that she will feel more like an adult and be less likely to have casual sex, since casual sex may be thought of as an emerging adult age-graded behavior and age-inappropriate for adults.

1.4. Life course transitions and adulthood

As noted above, as individuals acquire more adult roles they should start to feel like adults and be less likely to have casual sex. The current study includes seven life course transition measures: having a high school degree, enrollment in higher education, employment,

moving out of the parental home, marriage, cohabitation, and becoming a parent. The second demographic transition is found in countries that have low fertility rates and people who delay or forgo marriage (Fussell & Gauthier, 2005; Van De Kaa, 1987). Because of the postponing of adult roles such as marriage and childbearing in countries like the United States, Canada, Germany, and other European countries, there has been a creation of the new emerging adult life course stage (Fussell & Gauthier, 2005). As a group, emerging adults are diverse in the paths they take to adulthood (Amato et al., 2008; Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005; Shanahan, 2000) and there are no universal markers of adulthood within the United States or across national borders (Fussell & Gauthier, 2005). As Benson (2014b) states and as the second demographic transition would predict (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van De Kaa, 1987), there has been a destandardization of the emerging adult years in postindustrial societies such as the United States, Canada, and most of Europe. This means that people are increasingly taking different paths through the emerging adult years compared to prior generations. Fussell and Furstenberg (2005) used U.S. decennial census data from 1900 to 2000 to examine how life course transitions varied over time. The authors' major findings showed that emerging adults in 2000 had more combinations of transitions compared to prior generations. They concluded that there was more diversity among recent emerging adults because of such things as staying in the education system longer, delayed marriage, and increased non-marital childbearing. As noted above, there is not one single transition that indicates adulthood, but as individuals experience more adult transitions this should influence identity.

Completing education is often thought of as a marker of adulthood and so enrollment in higher education is one critical marker of emerging adulthood which might delay feeling adult-like. Forty-three percent of American 18–24-year-olds are enrolled in higher education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) and 86% of Americans over the age of 25 have a high school or secondary school degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b). Foster et al. (2008) reported that a high school degree was not associated with feeling like an adult, but being enrolled in university was negatively associated with perceived adult identity. Other research (Johnson et al., 2007) did not find that school enrollment was associated with relative age among emerging adults.

As noted above, there are several other life course transitions besides education that are considered markers of adulthood such as employment and moving out of the parental home. Recent estimates show that among 20–24-year-old American emerging adults, 62% are employed and of those who work, the average work week is comprised of 33.9 h. This is compared to 72% of 25–29-year-olds who work an average 40 h a week (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Similarly, 20–24-year-olds are more likely (43%) to live with their parents compared to 25–29-year-olds (19%) (Qian, 2012). These markers of adulthood are also associated with subjective adult identity. Moving out of the parental home and being employed are both correlated with feeling older compared to one's peers (Johnson et al., 2007).

Lastly, family demographic transitions, such as co-residential union experience and becoming a parent may be associated with adulthood. Sixty-six percent of women ages 25–29 experience a cohabiting union in their lifetime (Manning, 2013) and half of American

women are married by the age of 27 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Further, half of women experience a birth by age 25.3 (Arroyo, Payne, Brown, & Manning, 2013). Shanahan et al. (2005) reported that parenthood and experiencing a coresidential union were associated with feeling like an adult.

1.5. Control variables

According to life course theory, prior experiences and life transitions will both directly and indirectly influence later life course stage experiences (Elder, 1985). Life situations influence how quickly one feels like an adult regardless of chronological age. Being disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic status may influence adult identity. More specifically, stressors earlier in the life course influence later life course stages because hardships cause people to: (1) enter sooner into age-graded roles, (2) take on more responsibilities, and (3) anticipate a shorter life-span compared to their same aged peers (Johnson & Mollborn, 2009). Ferraro, Shippee, and Schafer (2009) discuss the idea of cumulative disadvantage where life course trajectories do not occur in isolation, but are influenced by the accumulation of life long risk. This means that life course trajectories of people are not random, but vary according to socioeconomic status with people in lower socioeconomic statuses often being at a disadvantage. The reverse is also true, in that, having more resources improves the ease of transitions (Frech, 2014). Thus, it is important to consider socioeconomic status and adolescent family background when investigating subjective adult identity. People from two biological parent families and whose parents were more educated were less likely to feel like an adult during emerging adulthood (Foster et al., 2008). Similarly, parental income was negatively associated with feeling older than one's peers (Johnson et al., 2007).

Finally, the current study controls for the two demographic characteristics of gender and race. Females in comparison to males were more likely to feel older than their peers and were more likely to have an adult status (Foster et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2007). Compared to Whites, Blacks were more likely to feel like an adult and Hispanics were less likely (Foster et al., 2008). Race and gender have proven to be important predictors of adult identity in prior research and thus are including as control variables in the current study.

1.6. Current study

The current study investigates the link between subjective adult identity, life course transitions, and casual sexual behavior and uses the nationally representative American Add Health dataset to test three research hypotheses. First, as individuals feel more like an adult they will be less likely to have casual sex at the next wave in the dataset. In other words, as people start to feel like they are aging out of emerging adulthood, they will be less likely to participate in the emerging adult behavior of casual sex. Second, adult transitions, such as parenthood, will be positively associated with feeling like an adult and negatively associated with casual sexual behavior. Lastly, the relationship between subjective adult identity and casual sex will no longer be significant after taking life course transitions into account.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedures

To investigate the current research questions the Add Health was analyzed. The first wave of data collection of the Add Health was in 1994–1995 and gathered information on students enrolled in 7th through 12th grade in the United States at that time. The Add Health dataset was a nationally representative school-based sample, which used a cluster stratified sampling design. The in-home survey was face-to-face interviews with sensitive topics being computer assisted. The wave I interview consisted of responses from the adolescent and one parent, usually the mother. Interviews were based mostly on health related topics, such as health status and sexual partnerships. (For more information on the Add Health sampling design please see <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/design>).

At wave I, there were $N = 20,745$ adolescents in grades 7–12 in the sample. Wave II was collected in 1996 ($N = 14,738$), wave III in 2001–2002 ($N = 15,197$), and the final wave in 2007–2008 ($N = 15,701$). Most of the wave IV respondents were young adults ages 24–32. Of the wave IV sample ($N = 15,701$), 901 cases were missing on the weight variable and therefore not included in the final analyses. Further, 2,517 respondents were interviewed in wave IV, but not wave III and consequently were not asked about the adult identity independent variables. The final analytic sample was $N = 12,283$. In terms of attrition, those who were in wave I and not in the final sample were significantly less likely to come from a two parent biological family, be female, identify as White, and have parents with a higher education degree. Parents' income was not a significant predictor of being included in the final sample.

Multiple imputation was utilized to handle the missing cases. When a respondent was missing on a variable, the statistical package would randomly impute 20 numbers for the missing value which lead to 20 different datasets. Once the multiple datasets were constructed, the statistical package would compute the parameter estimates and standard errors on the individual datasets and then average the values. Multiple imputation was considered one of the best available methods for handling missing data (Allison, 2012). That being said, it could be difficult to know how many datasets should be imputed to get accurate results. Similar to Chen, Liu, and Kaplan 2012, twenty datasets were imputed which was considered an acceptable number of datasets. The analyses were conducted using MPlus 7 and all analyses were weighted and robust weighted least squared estimators (MLSMV) were employed.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Casual sex—*Casual sexual behavior* was constructed using two survey questions at wave IV. In the detailed relationship section of the interview, respondents were asked about their current or most recent partner. First, in order to determine if the current or recent relationship was casual in nature, the following question was assessed: “Which of the following best describes your relationship with *partner* at the (present time/time you broke up)?” Responses ranged from 1 = “engaged” to 5 = “only having sex.” If respondents reported that their partner was “dating frequently, but not exclusively,” “dating once in a

while,” or “only having sex” the relationship was coded as casual (1) and if the respondent stated the relationship was “engaged” or “dating exclusively” the relationship was coded as non-casual (0). Married and cohabiting relationships were also coded as committed/non-casual (0). Next, another question was assessed: “On average, how often (did/do) you have sexual relations with *partner*?” Then select times per day, times per week, times per month, or times per year from the list. By sexual relations we mean vaginal intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, or other types of sexual activity.” If respondents indicated that they had sexual relations one or more than one time with the partner, they were coded as a sexually active partner. A wave IV relationship was considered casual sex, if the respondent’s relationship was coded as both casual and sexually active.

2.2.2. Subjective adult identity—Four wave III questions were used to construct the *subjective adult identity* latent measure: (1) “Some people grow up faster than others, some grow up slower. In terms of social maturity, would you say you grew up faster, slower, or at about the same rate as other people your age?” (2) “In terms of taking on adult responsibilities, would you say you grew up faster, slower, or at about the same rate?” Responses for these two variables ranged from 1 = “faster” to 3 = “slower” (reverse coded); (3) “In general, how old do you feel compared with others your age?” Answers for this question were 1 = “older all of the time” to 5 = “younger all of the time” (reverse coded); and (4) “How often do you think of yourself as an adult?” with response categories of 1 = “never” to 5 = “all of the time.” Responses were coded, such that higher numbers on the variable were associated with feeling more adult-like. All four wave III variables were used to create one latent subjective adult identity variable.

2.2.3. Life course variables—There were seven wave III life course variables used in the current study. Similar to Foster et al. (2008), *educational transitions* were measured with two questions: (1) Did the respondent have a high school degree or equivalent? (Did not graduate from high school was the omitted group), and (2) Was the respondent currently enrolled in higher education? (Not enrolled was the omitted group).

Hours worked was a continuous measure using the question, “How many hours a week do you usually work at this job?” *Live with parent(s)* was a wave III variable that asked, “Where do you live now? That is, where do you stay most often?” If the respondent answered, “my parents’ home/my parent’s home” they were coded as “1” otherwise they were coded as “0.”

There were two different dichotomous measures of *coresidential union status*. First, was the respondent ever married (never married was the omitted group). Second, did the respondent ever live in a cohabiting union (never have cohabited was the omitted group). Finally, *had a child* was constructed using the wave III relationship and pregnancy questions. If the respondent or the respondent’s partner had a live birth, they were coded as “1” and if they or their partner never experienced a live birth, they were coded at “0.”

2.2.4. Control variables—Five control variables were included in the analysis and were measured at Wave I. *Family structure* was coded as “1” = raised in a two-parent biological household and “0” if the respondent resided in an “other” type of family formation. *Gender*

was measured at wave I and coded as 1 = “female” and 0 = “male.” To measure *race* respondents were classified as White, Black, Hispanic, and “Other” racial identity. Finally, there were two measures of wave I socioeconomic status which were similar to Benson et al. (2012). *Parent’s log income* was measured using the natural log of parent’s wave I self-reported income. *Parent’s education* ranged from 1 = “8th grade or less” to 8 = “graduate school.” Whomever had higher educational attainment, the mother or father, was used in the final analysis.

2.3. Analytic strategy

First, correlations and descriptive statistics were conducted for all the variables utilized in the analysis. Second, confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine if the four subjective adult identity variables fit the data as one latent construct. Next, the bivariate relationship between the latent subjective adult identity variable and casual sexual behavior was tested. Finally, structural equation models were used to examine the relationship between casual sexual behavior, subjective adult identity, life course, and control variables. Fig. 1 depicts the theoretical model.

Structural equation modeling can be thought of as path analysis with latent variables (McDonald & Ho, 2002). When doing multivariate analysis, structural equation modeling had two components: the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model estimated how well the latent construct was measured by the indicator variables. A latent variable was not measured directly in the data, but indirectly by indicator variables. In this case, the measurement component of the structural equation model measured how well the latent variable of subjective adult identity was modeled using the four indicator variables and was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis was advantageous over other methods of measuring latent variables such as scaling the four indicators for two major reasons. First, confirmatory factor analysis allowed each of the four indicator variables to have unique variances which lead to a superior measure of the latent variable. In regular regression analysis, latent variables could lead to collinearity issues. Second, the resulting latent variable – subjective adult identity – accounted for how the respondents answered the four individual indicator questions simultaneously not just an average across the four variables again leading to greater measurement quality (Acock, 2013).

The second component of structural equation modeling is the structural model. Through structural equation modeling, I was able to efficiently test theory-driven direct, indirect, and mediating effects that also included a latent variable (Buhi, Goodson, & Neilands, 2007; Geiser, 2012). This was important for the current research questions because structural equation modeling allowed for testing if the latent variable of subjective adult identity became non-significant net of the life course factors as hypothesized. In sum, structural equation modeling was an appropriate methodology for the current research questions because it permitted a path analysis that included a latent variable.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive and correlational results

Table 1 showcased the descriptive statistics for all of the variables in the analysis. Ten percent of respondents answered that their current or recent partner was casual. In terms of bivariate relationships, three of the four subjective adult identity variables were significant and negatively associated with casual sex, which was in the expected direction. Social maturity was only marginally significant ($p = .1$) in the anticipated negative direction. The more adult-like individuals felt during emerging adulthood, the less likely they were to have a current/recent casual sexual relationship during wave IV.

The results in Table 1 illustrated that at the bivariate level, school transitions were not significantly related to later casual sex. All of the other life course variables were significantly associated with casual sex in the expected direction. Working more hours, having a coresidential union experience, and becoming a parent were negatively associated with later casual sex. Living at home was significant and positively related to casual sex. Being raised in a two parent family and being female was negatively correlated with having a current casual sex partner. Identifying as Black was positively associated with casual sex, but Hispanics and those who were classified as “Other Race” were not statistically related to the dependent variable. Parental education and income were not related to casual sex in the current sample.

There were positive relationships between the life course variables and the subjective adult identity variables. Employment, cohabitation/marriage experience, and becoming a parent were positively associated with the subjective adult identity variables. Living at home and being enrolled in higher education were negatively associated with the subjective adult identity variables. Finally, having a high school degree was negatively associated with adult responsibilities and thinking of yourself as an adult, which was in the expected direction.

3.2. Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis was utilized to determine how well the latent variable of subjective adult identity fit the data and was shown in Fig. 2. To determine model fit the confirmatory fit index (CFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used. A CFI value of .90 or higher and a RMSEA value of less than .08 were considered acceptable (Acock, 2013). As shown in Fig. 2, the fit indexes met the required levels (CFI = .99; RMSEA = .04). Further, all of the unstandardized factor loadings were above .40 (range from .44 to 1; not shown). These results indicated a good model fit for the latent variable of subjective adult identity. One modification was made to the measurement model, which resulted in a better model fit. I included also the covariance of the questions regarding adult responsibilities and how old do you feel. Without this alteration in the model, the CFI = .95 and the RMSEA = .08. This model modification was included in the structural model as well.

3.3. Subjective adult identity and casual sex

A structural equation model was used to test if the latent variable of subjective adult identity predicted later casual sex at the bivariate level and the results were showcased in Table 2. As expected, subjective adult identity was negatively related to casual sex. More specifically, the more respondents felt adult-like at wave III, the less likely they were to have a recent or current casual sex relationship at wave IV ($b = -.18$; $p < .01$). The fit indexes of CFI = .97 and RMSEA = .02 suggested good model fit (Table 2).

3.4. Full structural model

Fig. 3 and Table 3 illustrated the full model, which included subjective adult identity, life course, and control variables to predict casual sexual behavior. To improve model fit, the non-significant variables of educational transitions, parent's education, and race were no longer included in the structural equation model and having a child and parent's log income only directly predicted subjective adult identity and not casual sex¹. The full model that included all the variables had a RMSEA = .02 and a CFI = .87 which was below the .90 cut off. After the outlined modification were implemented, there were resulting fit indexes of RMSEA = .02 and CFI = .90 which suggested good model fit (Table 3). As seen in Table 3 and Fig. 3, hours worked, having a child, having coresidential union experience, and being female were all positively associated with subjective adult identity and living in the parental home, being raised in a two parent family, and parental income were negatively associated with subjective adult identity. Further, hours worked, coresidential union experience, being raised in a two-parent home, and being female were negatively associated with casual sex and living at home was positively associated with casual sex. Finally, once the life course variables were included in the structural model, the direct path between adult identity and casual sex became non-significant².

4. Discussion

The current study is designed to examine three research goals: (1) does subjective adult identity negatively predict casual sex, (2) do adult life course transitions positively related to subjective adult identity and negatively predict casual sex, and (3) is subjective adult identity still a significant predictor of casual sex net of life course transitions? Findings from the current study show that subjective adult identity is predictive of later casual sexual behavior. As expected, the more a person feels adult-like, the less likely she is to be in a casual sexual relationship later in the life course. Further, the adult transitions of hours worked, parenthood, and coresidential union experience are positively associated with feeling like an adult and residing in the parental home is negatively correlated with subjective adult identity. These relationships are in the hypothesized directions.

¹Identifying as Black was significantly and positively associated with casual sex. None of the race variables were associated with the latent variable of subjective adult identity. When race was in the model to predict only casual sex the CFI = .89 which was below the .90 cutoff and therefore not in the final model. Not including race in the final model did not significantly change the relationships of the other variables, so race was not in the full model to improve model fit.

²There were similar results when the analysis only included respondents who were sexually active at wave III ($N = 10,637$). Results available by request.

Subjective adult identity significantly predicts casual sex, but the relationship is no longer significant in the full model. These results suggest that life course transitions cause individuals to have a more salient and prominent adult identity which then leads to less casual sexual behavior. In other words, as individuals experience adult life course transitions it changes how they view their sense of self. This more prominent adult identity then influences casual sexual behavior. The findings highlight that it is important for researchers to understand the interrelated nature between transitions and identity. Practitioners who work with the adult population should be aware that casual sex may start to become age-inappropriate, particularly for those who have experienced adult life course transitions such as marriage. This may lead to stress and role conflict for such adults. It is also important to note that there is a significant latent construct of subjective adult identity. Several prior studies only use a single item measure for adult identity. These results indicate that subjective adult identity is a complex concept and researchers should think about including more complicated measures when analyzing subjective adult identity.

The findings can be explained by a life course theoretical perspective. Other scholars (Arnett, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2013) have argued that the emerging adult life course stage is a period of sexual exploration. As expected, the more individuals identify as adults, the less likely they are to participate in later casual sexual behavior. In other words, the results suggest that emerging adulthood is associated with casual sexual behavior and if people feel like they have aged out of the emerging adulthood life course stage, they also aged out of the casual sexual behavior associated with the emerging adulthood stage. This is similar to prior qualitative findings that people can start to feel like they are too old to have casual sex (Lyons et al., 2014).

Surprisingly, educational transitions are not predictors of casual sexual behavior as measured in this study in the full model. This is similar to Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, and Neumark-Sztainer (2009) who reported in their cross-sectional assessment that higher education enrollment was not associated with the most recent sex partner being casual. This is different from the Lyons et al.'s (2013) cross-sectional analysis, which found that compared to people with some college or less than a high school degree, college students had the fewest numbers of casual sexual partners. Most prior studies which examine the role of education on casual sexual behavior are either cross-sectional or over a short period of time. The current study's results suggest that the effect of educational attainment might not have a long term impact on casual sex. Interestingly, the other life course transitions are in the expected direction: all of the experiences associated with adulthood (employment, coresidential union experience, moving out of the parental home) are positively associated with feeling like an adult and negatively associated with casual sex. The only exception is that of becoming a parent in that parenthood is only a significant predictor of subjective adult identity and not casual sex. This finding suggests that becoming a parent influences identity, but does not have a long term influence on casual sexual behavior. The current study finds that living in the parental home is positively associated with casual sex which is different than Bailey, Fleming, Henson, Catalano, and Haggerty (2008) which did not report an association between these two variables. Again, this may be because most studies do not investigate the long term impact of residing in the parental home on casual sex behavior. Bailey et al.'s (2008) study measured casual sex six-months after graduating from high school/secondary school.

Clearly, there is a need for more research to determine if there are long term ramifications of life course transitions on casual sexual behavior.

There are some limitations to the current study. First, the measure of recent casual sexual behavior that is utilized is just one aspect of casual sex and in no way all inclusive of such behavior. More research is needed which examines the relationships between subjective adult identity, life course transitions, and other behaviors, such as the more broad behavior of hooking up and sex with ex-boyfriends/ex-girlfriends. Second, the current study does not distinguish between opposite sex and same sex casual sexual relationships. Further research is needed that examines both of these types of casual sexual relationships. Third, the Add Health does not ask subjective adult identity at the later wave IV. It would have been helpful to measure a change score of subjective adult identity. Fourth, the Add Health is a sample of American youth and more research is needed that examines the relationships between life course transitions, subjective adult identity, and casual sex from a cross-national perspective. Even with these limitations, the current study is a step forward in understanding why life course transitions and subjective adult identity are important and contributes to the larger understanding of the casual sexual behavior of adults.

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Fig. 1.
Theoretical model.

Fig. 2.
Measurement model.

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

Fig. 3.
Full model.

Table 1

Respondent’s reports of casual sex, subjective adult identity, life course, and control variables: correlations and descriptive statistics ($N = 12,283$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. Casual sex	–																		
2. Social maturity ^a	–.03	–																	
3. Adult responsibilities ^a	–.07***	.44***	–																
4. How old do you feel ^a	–.06**	.39***	.34***	–															
5. Think of yourself as an adult ^a	–.09***	.17***	.18***	.28***	–														
6. High school degree ^b	–.06	–.02	–.05*	–.03	–.07**	–													
7. Enrolled in college ^b	.05	–.03*	–.13***	–.10***	–.16***	.67***	–												
8. Hours worked ^b	–.10***	.06***	.13***	.08***	.07***	.05**	–.34***	–											
9. Live with parents ^b	.17***	–.12***	–.19***	–.13***	–.11***	–.04	.08**	–.08***	–										
10. Marriage experience ^b	–.35***	.10***	.21***	.17***	.20***	–.09**	–.38***	.12***	–.51***	–									
11. Cohabitation experience ^b	–.16***	.18***	.23***	.20***	.20***	–.30***	–.43***	.11***	–.39***	.20***	–								
12. Had a child ^b	–.16***	.14***	.29***	.22***	.29***	–.30***	–.44***	–.03	–.40***	.64***	.51***	–							
13. Two-parent family ^c	–.06*	–.14***	–.16***	–.13***	–.13***	.22***	.23***	.03	.10***	–.03	–.23***	–.24***	–						
14. Female ^c	–.13***	.08***	.05**	.07**	.10***	.06*	.11***	–.20***	–.12***	.18***	.10***	.38***	–.02	–					
15. Black ^c	.17***	–.02	.00	.06*	.11***	–.12**	–.12**	–.14***	.03	–.19***	.02	.18***	–.45***	.02	–				
16. Hispanic ^c	–.01	.01	.04	.01	–.03	–.16***	–.08*	.02	.15***	.11**	–.04	.14***	–.02	.01	.00	–			
17. Other Race ^c	.04	–.03	–.02	–.03	–.08***	.06	.07*	–.08***	.07*	–.10*	–.02	–.07*	.01	–.04	.00	–.01	–		
18. Parent’s log income ^c	.00	–.05***	–.09***	–.08***	–.12***	.20***	.32***	.02	–.02	–.12***	–.17***	–.26***	.50***	.01	–.35***	–.21***	.01	–	
19. Parent’s education ^c	.03	–.01	–.07***	–.05***	–.11***	.24***	.35***	–.06***	–.03	–.16***	–.20***	–.28***	.28***	–.02	–.11*	–.35***	.06***	.48***	–
<i>M</i>	.10	2.28	2.37	3.68	4.03	.88	.35	25.94	.40	.19	.41	.21	.68	.51	.15	.12	.07	3.53	5.82
SE	.01	.02	.02	.02	.02	.01	.02	.51	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.02	.01	.02	.03	.10

^aSubjective adult identity variables.

^bLife course variables.

^cControl variables.

Lyons

$p > .001$

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

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Table 2

Unstandardized, standardized, and significance levels for casual sex on subjective adult identity (standard errors in parentheses; $N = 12,283$).

Parameter estimate	Unstandardized	Standardized
Measurement model estimates		
Social maturity $\rightarrow X_1$	1.00 (.00)	.62
Adult responsibilities $\rightarrow X_2$	.96 (.09) ***	.62
How old do you feel $\rightarrow X_3$	.88 (.13) ***	.59
Think of yourself as an adult $\rightarrow X_4$	.55 (.08) ***	.31
Error in X_1	.52 (.04) ***	.61
Error in X_2	.49 (.03) ***	.62
Error in X_3	.47 (.03) ***	.65
Error in X_4	.97 (.03) ***	.97
Covariance how old do you feel and think of yourself as an adult	.09 (.02) ***	.14
Structural model		
Adult ID $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.18 (.06) **	-.10

Note: $\chi^2(4) = 20.71$, $p < .001$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .02.

*
 $p < .05$.

**
 $p < .01$.

 $p < .001$.

Table 3

Unstandardized, standardized, and significance levels for model in Fig. 3 (standard errors in parentheses; $N=12,283$).

Parameter estimate	Unstandardized	Standardized
Measurement model estimates		
Social maturity $\rightarrow X_1$	1.00 (.00)	.52
Adult responsibilities $\rightarrow X_2$	1.08 (.09) ***	.59
How old do you feel $\rightarrow X_3$	1.07 (.12) ***	.60
Think of yourself as an adult $\rightarrow X_4$	.79 (.10) ***	.37
Error in X_1	.62 (.05) ***	.73
Error in X_2	.51 (.03) ***	.66
Error in X_3	.48 (.02) ***	.65
Error in X_4	.89 (.02) ***	.86
Covariance how old do you feel and think of yourself as an adult	.19 (.04) ***	.81
Structural model		
Hours worked $\rightarrow$ adult ID	.01 (.00) ***	.14
Live with parents $\rightarrow$ adult ID	-.10 (.02) ***	-.10
Marriage experience $\rightarrow$ adult ID	.09 (.02) ***	.08
Cohabitation experience $\rightarrow$ adult ID	.17 (.03) ***	.18
Had a child $\rightarrow$ adult ID	.17 (.03) ***	.14
Two parent family $\rightarrow$ adult ID	-.13 (.02) ***	-.13
Female $\rightarrow$ adult ID	.07 (.02) ***	.08
Parent's log income $\rightarrow$ adult ID	-.03 (.01) ***	-.05
Adult ID $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.07 (.07)	-.03
Hours worked $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.01 (.00) ***	-.09
Live with parents $\rightarrow$ casual sex	.13 (.05) *	.06
Marriage experience $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.59 (.08) ***	-.22
Cohabitation experience $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.18 (.05) **	-.08
Two-parent family $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.15 (.05) **	-.07
Female $\rightarrow$ casual sex	-.26 (.04) ***	-.12

Note: $\chi^2(30) = 136.06, p < .001$; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .02.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.