

I know it's different at other schools," Troy patiently tried to explain to me. "I mean, at other schools, people date. You know, a guy asks a girl out, and they go out to a movie or something. You know, like dating? But here at Cornell, nobody dates. We go out in groups to local bars. We go to parties. And then after we're good and drunk, we hook up. Everyone just hooks up."

"Does that mean you have sex?" I ask

"Hmm," he says, with a half-smile on his face. "Maybe, maybe not. That's sort of the beauty of it, you know? Nobody can really be sure."

My conversation with Troy echoes an overwhelming majority of conversations I have had with young people all across the country. Whether among college students or recent grads living in major metropolitan areas, "hooking up" defines the current form of social and sexual relationships among young adults. The only point Troy is wrong about is his assumption that traditional dating is going on anywhere else. Dating, at least in college, seems to be gone for good.

Instead, the sexual marketplace is organized around groups of same-sex friends who go out together to meet appropriate sexual partners in a casual setting like a bar or a party. Two people run into each other,

seemingly at random, and after a few drinks they decide to go back to one or the other's room or apartment, where some sexual interaction occurs. There is no expectation of a further relationship. Hookups can morph into something else: either friends with benefits or a dating relationship. But that requires some additional, and complex, negotiation.

Many adults find this promiscuity hard to grasp. What is this hooking up culture all about? What does it mean exactly? What's the *point* of all that sex? Is it even fun? For the past two years, I've been involved in a study to find out. The Online College Social Life Survey was developed initially by Paula England, a sociology professor at Stanford, and has now been administered to about 7,000 college students at nine campuses—large and small, public and private, elite and nonelite—including Stanford, Arizona, Indiana, Radford, UC Santa Barbara, SUNY Stony Brook, Ithaca College, and Evergreen State. We asked participants about their sexual behaviors, their experiences of various sexual activities, orgasm, drinking behavior, and their romantic relationships. We asked both women and men, gay and straight—but mostly straight. All were between 18 and 24. I've also consulted with other researchers at other schools, and compared our data with theirs. And I've looked at data from several large, nationally representative studies of sexual behavior among young people.

Some of what's going on won't come as that much of a shock; after all, young adulthood since the sixties has been a time of relative sexual freedom and well-documented experimentation. What may be surprising, though, is how many young people accept that hooking up—recreational sex with no strings attached—is the best and most prevalent arrangement available to them. Once, sexual promiscuity co-existed with traditional forms of dating, and young people could maneuver between the two on their way toward serious and committed romantic relationships. Now, hooking up is pretty much all there is; relationships begin and end with sex. Hooking up has become the alpha and omega of young adult romance.

And though hooking up might seem utterly mutual—after all, just who are all those guys hooking up *with*?—what appears on the surface to be mutual turns out to be anything but. Despite enormous changes

in the sexual attitudes of young people, the gender politics of campus sex don't seem to have changed very much at all. Sex in Guyland is just that—guys' sex. Women are welcome to act upon their sexual desires, but guys run the scene. Women who decide not to join the party can look forward to going to sleep early and alone tonight—and every night. And women who do join the party run the risk of encountering the same old double standard that no amount of feminist progress seems able to eradicate fully. Though women may accommodate themselves to men's desires—indeed, some feel they have to accommodate themselves to them—the men's rules rule. What this means is that many young women are biding their time, waiting for the guys to grow up and start acting like men.

Yet the hooking-up culture so dominates campus life that many older guys report having a difficult time making a transition to serious adult relationships. They all say that eventually they expect to get married and have families, but they have no road map for getting from drunken sloppy “Did we or didn't we?” sex to mature adult relationships. It turns out that choosing quantity over quality teaches them nothing about long-term commitment. Nor is it meant to. The pursuit of conquests is more about guys proving something to other guys than it is about the women involved.

As a result, most guys drift toward adulthood ill prepared for emotional intimacy better suited to fantasies of being “wedding crashers” (hooking up with women who are attending a friend's wedding) than becoming grooms themselves. They know little more about themselves and their sexuality at 28 than they did at 18, and the more subtle aspects of romance and partnership likewise remain a mystery. They barely know how to date. While the hookup culture might seem like some sort of orgiastic revelry, in truth these guys are missing out. It's not just that they're delaying adulthood—it's that they're entering it misinformed and ill prepared.

### A Brief History of Campus Sexual Patterns

In the 1930s, Michigan sociologist Willard Waller described campus

romance as a complex dance that he called “rating-dating-mating.” Waller saw a competitive romantic marketplace in which students rated themselves in reference to both the other sex and the evaluations of their same-sex friends (“rating”). They then sought to date appropriately—slightly up, but not too much. In their eyes, dating “up” too much would make the relationship too insecure; dating “down” would decrease your own rating.

In order to have what he called a “Class A” rating, men, Waller wrote, “must belong to one of the better fraternities, be prominent in activities, have a copious supply of spending money, be well-dressed, be ‘smooth’ in manners and appearance, have a ‘good line,’ dance well and have access to an automobile.” Women, by contrast, may need “good clothes, a smooth line, ability to dance well,” but paramount, by far was her already determined “popularity as a date,” since her “prestige depends on dating more than anything else.”

What is immediately striking about Waller's comment, written nearly three-quarters of a century ago, is how accurate it continues to be—for men. *His* prestige still depends, in large part, on his social networks and his material assets. *Her* datability, though, no longer depends simply on social attributes. To be sure, women have to be pretty and sociable—that hasn't changed. But, according to a recent survey at Duke, they *also* have to be sexy, and accomplished, and ambitious, and athletic—and not to show that they are expending any energy at all doing any of it. “Effortless perfection” was the phrase the university gave the phenomenon.

In Waller's time, all this rating and dating was ultimately in the service of mating—romantic (and sexual) relationships between committed intimate partners that would lead, eventually, to marriage. But today, the sequence of rating, dating, and mating has been all but abandoned among young adults. To be sure, they still rate themselves and each other. Men have to be cool, women effortlessly perfect. But the idea of dating seems quaint but irrelevant. Today, campus culture is no longer about dating to find an appropriate mate. Now, it's more about mating to find an appropriate date!

“A date for me is, like, when a guy calls you up and says, ‘would you like to go someplace,’ you know, like to dinner, or to a movie,” says

Debbie, a 21-year-old senior at the University of Virginia. "That never happens here!" She laughs. "Now it's like you see a guy at a party and he says, 'What are you doing now? Can I walk you home?' It's like, you know, the beginning of the date is like the end of the date. He walks you home, and then you hook up."

In some ways this is not news. College campuses have always been sexual hothouses, places of sexual experimentation, freedom, and predation. Many of the reasons are obvious: Young people are out from under direct parental control and feel freer to experiment with different activities. The fact that many are away from home means they are also freed from the critical scrutiny of their high-school and neighborhood friends, free to try on new identities with different cliques. And, of course, their hormones are in full gear.

To many parents, the sexual shenanigans of the contemporary college campus sound like some drunken bacchanalian orgy. But this isn't because parental restrictions have disappeared or because sexual liberalism pervades campus life. All this sexual activity on college campuses also has a lot to do with simple demography: the onset of fertility in adolescence, first sexual experiences, and the delayed age of marriage.

Stated most simply, *a college student today will never again be in a place where there are so many sexually active unmarried people*. Nor will college students ever again be around so many sexually active people *like themselves*—with roughly similar class and race characteristics (since most college sexual activity takes place with people of one's own race and class background). Prior to college, not as many people are sexually active. And after college, not as many people are sexually available—either in terms of their physical proximity or in terms of their relationship status. College is the quintessential gathering place for middle-class white Americans aged 18 to 22. They don't even need to plan much—like they do in high school when they live with their parents, or after they graduate from college, when they actually have to go somewhere to meet others. In college dorms they bump into each other randomly, frequently, seemingly spontaneously, with little planning, like excited atoms, eager to discharge.

## Hooking Up

In recent years, scholarly researchers and intrepid journalists have bravely waded in to demarcate the term "hooking up," map its boundaries, and explain its strange terrain. But the definitions are vague and contradictory. One research group refers to it as ". . . a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring on only one occasion between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances." Another study maintains that hooking up ". . . occurs when two people who are casual acquaintances or who have just met that evening at a bar or party agree to engage in some forms of sexual behavior for which there will likely be no future commitment."

Our collaborative research project, The Online College Social Life Survey, found that hooking up covers a multitude of behaviors, including kissing and nongenital touching (34 percent), oral sex, but not intercourse (15 percent), manual stimulation of the genitals (19 percent), and intercourse (35–40 percent). It can mean "going all the way." Or it can mean "everything but." By their senior year, we found that students had averaged nearly seven hookups during their collegiate careers. About one-fourth (24 percent) say they have never hooked up, while slightly more than that (28 percent) have hooked up ten times or more.

As a verb, "to hook up" means to engage in any type of sexual activity with someone you are not in a relationship with. As a noun, a "hookup" can either refer to the sexual encounter or to the person with whom you hook up. Hooking up is used to describe casual sexual encounters on a continuum from "one-night stands" (a hookup that takes place once and once only with someone who may or may not be a stranger) to "sex buddies" (acquaintances who meet regularly for sex but rarely if ever associate otherwise), to "friends with benefits" (friends who do not care to become romantic partners, but may include sex among the activities they enjoy together).

Part of what makes the hookup culture so difficult to define and describe is the simple fact that young men and women experience it in very different ways. They may be playing the same game, but they're often on opposing teams, playing by a different set of rules, and they

define “winning,” and even “scoring,” in totally different ways. Sameness doesn’t necessarily mean equality.

Indeed, the current patterns of sociability and sexuality among heterosexuals have actually begun to resemble the patterns that emerged in the mainstream gay male community in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the pre-AIDS era. Sex was de-coupled from romance and love, and made part of friendships that may—or may not—have anything to do with romantic relationships. “Fuck buddies” are the precursors to “friends with benefits.” Sex was seen as recreational self-expression, not freighted with the matched baggage of love and relationship. When it comes to scoring, then, gay and straight men have a lot more in common with each other than either group does with women. To put it another way, it is gender, not sexual orientation, that is the key to understanding these campus sexual patterns. If we want to understand the complexities of the hookup culture we must do so with gender in mind.

### Deliberate Vagueness

The phrase “hooking up” itself is deliberately vague, which is why any attempt to define it concretely will inevitably fall short. In fact, it is its very vagueness and ambiguity that characterize it. “It’s, like, anything from like making out to intercourse,” says a 19-year-old female sophomore at Radford University. “[A]nything from, in my opinion, kissing to having sex,” says another. “Having sex,” says another. But then she pauses.

But see, hooking up and having sex can be two different things. It’s really hard. When people say “we hooked up,” you don’t really know what they mean by that. Because I don’t really consider having sex hooking up. I think that’s a different thing. Like having sex is separate from hooking up. I think it should be anyway. Because everyone can just be, like, “yeah, we hooked up,” and you never know what they did. They could be having sex every night and you’re assuming that they probably just made out or something like that.

Maybe, as one woman suggested in an interview, hooking up is the “yada yada yada” of sex.

Did you ever see that episode of *Seinfeld* where they’re, like, “yada, yada, yada.” And you’re, like, “what does that mean?” She’s, like, “I went home with him and yada, yada, yada.” And that’s kind of, like, what a hookup is. Because you don’t really know exactly what it means, unless you’re talking to a really good friend and they’re telling you all the details.

Judging from our survey, there’s a whole lot of yada yada yada going on. Yet that vagueness serves men and women in very different ways. When a guy says he “hooked up” with someone, he may or may not have had sex with her, but he is certainly hoping that his friends think he has. A woman, on the other hand, is more likely to hope they think she hasn’t.

In a sense, hooking up retains certain features of older dating patterns: male domination, female compliance, and double standards. Though hooking up may seem to be mutually desired by both guys and girls, our research indicates that guys initiate sexual behavior most of the time (less than a third of respondents said this was mutual). Hookups are twice as likely to take place in his room as in hers. And, most important, hooking up enhances his reputation whereas it damages hers. Guys who hook up a lot are seen by their peers as studs; women who hook up a lot are seen as sluts who “give it up.” According to Duke’s study of campus sexual behavior, “Men and women agreed the double standard persists: men gain status through sexual activity while women lose status.”

“There is definitely a double standard,” says Cheryl, a sophomore at Creighton. “I mean, if I do what my friend Jeff does [hook up with a different girl virtually every weekend], my friends wouldn’t talk to me! I mean, that’s just gross when a girl does it. But a guy, it’s, like, he’s like Mr. Man.”

“If a guy hooks up with a girl, he sort of broke down her wall of protection,” explains Terry, a Stanford junior. “She’s the one that let her

guard down . . . her job going into the night . . . was to like protect herself, protect her moral character and her moral fiber, and it's like you came in and went after her and she was, like, convinced to let her guard down . . ."

This is a somewhat surprising view of things, given just how much we think everything has changed. It not only echoes the 1950s, but even farther back to the Victorian age. Despite the dramatic changes in sexual behavior spurred by the sexual revolution, sexual experience still means something different for women and men. "It's different from what it used to be when women were supposed to hold out until they got married. There's pressure now on both men and women to lose their virginity," is how one guy put it. "But for a man it's a sign of manhood, and for a woman there's still some loss of value."

The vagueness of the term itself—hooking up—turns out to be a way to protect the reputation of the woman while enhancing that of the man. In addition to that conceptual vagueness after the fact, hookups are also characterized by a certain vagueness before and even during the fact as well. Most hookups share three elements: the appearance of spontaneity, the nearly inevitable use of alcohol, and the absence of any expectation of a relationship.

### Planned Spontaneity

In order for hookups to work, they have to appear to be spontaneous. And they do—at least to the guys. One guy told me it's "a sort of one-time, spur-of-the-moment thing. Hookups generally are very unplanned."

"Oh, sure," said Jackson, a 22-year-old senior at Arizona State, "you go to parties on the prowl, looking to hook up. But you never know if it's going to happen. And you certainly don't know who you're gonna hook up with. That takes several drinks."

Yet such spontaneity is nonetheless carefully planned. Guys have elaborate rituals for what has become known as "the girl hunt." There are "pregame" rituals, such as drinking before you go out to bars, since consuming alcohol, a requirement, is also expensive on a limited budget, so it's more cost-effective to begin the buzz before you set out.

There are defined roles for the guys looking to hook up, like the "wing man," the reliable accomplice and confidant. "The wing man is the guy who takes one for the team," says Jake, a sophomore at Notre Dame. "If there are, like, two girls and you're trying to hook up with one of them, your wing man chats up the other one—even if she's, like, awful—so you can have a shot at the one you want. Definitely a trooper."

When guys claim that the hookup is spontaneous, they are referring not to whether the hookup will take place, but with whom they will hook up. Women have a different view of spontaneity. Since they know that hooking up is what the guys want, the girls can't be "spontaneous" about it. They have to think—whether or not, with whom, under what conditions—and plan accordingly, remembering a change of clothes, birth control, and the like. They have to decide how much they can drink, how much they can flirt, and how to avoid any potentially embarrassing or even threatening situations. The guys lounge in comfort of the illusion of alcohol-induced spontaneity; the women are several steps ahead of them.

"Girls, like, before they go out at night, they know whether or not they're going to hook up with somebody," says Jamie, a 21-year-old senior at Arizona State. "It's not spontaneous at all."

Yet the illusion of spontaneity remains important for both guys and girls. It's a way of distancing yourself from your own sexual agency, a way of pretending that sex just happens, all by itself. It helps young people to maintain a certain invulnerability around the whole thing. It's not cool to want something too much. It's better to appear less interested—that way no one will know the extent of your disappointment if your plans don't come to fruition.

### The Inevitability of Alcohol

Drinking works in much the same way. Virtually all hooking up is lubricated with copious amounts of alcohol—more alcohol than sex, to tell the truth. "A notable feature of hookups is that they almost always occur when both participants are drinking or drunk," says one study. In

our study, men averaged nearly five drinks on their most recent hookup, women nearly 3 drinks. Says one woman:

Like, drinking alcohol is like a *major* thing with hooking up with people. A lot of the times people won't have one-night stands unless they're drunk. Actually, I can't tell you I know one person who has had a one-night stand without drinking or being drunk, and being, like, "oh, my head hurts. I can't believe I did that."

To say that alcohol clouds one's judgment would be an understatement. Drinking is *supposed* to cloud your judgment. Drinking gives the drinker "beer goggles," which typically expand one's notion of other people's sexual attractiveness. "After like four drinks a person looks a little bit better," explains Samantha, a 21-year-old senior at the University of Virginia. "After six or seven that person looks a lot better than they did. And, well, after ten, that person is the hottest person you've ever seen!" Or, as Jeff puts it, "Everybody looks more attractive when you're drunk."

But intentionally clouding judgment is only part of the story. The other part is to cloud *other people's* judgment. If you were drunk, you don't have to take responsibility for what happens. For guys, this means that if they get shot down they can chalk it up to drunkenness. The same holds true for their sexual performance if they do get lucky enough to go home with someone. In fact, drunkenness provides a convenient excuse for all sorts of potential sexual disasters, from rejection to premature ejaculation to general ineptitude born of inexperience. For a lot of guys, the liquid courage provided by alcohol is the only thing that makes them able to withstand the potential for rejection that any sexual advance entails in the first place.

While both sexes might get to enjoy the lack of responsibility alcohol implies, this turns out to be especially important for the women, who still have their reputations to protect. Being wasted is generally accepted as an excuse. "What did I do last night?" you can legitimately ask your girlfriends. And then everyone laughs. It's still better to be a drunk than a slut. "A hangover," Laura Sessions Stepp writes in her book, *Unhooked*, "is a small price to pay for exoneration."

## The Absence of Expectations

One of the key defining features of hooking up is that it's strictly a "no strings attached" endeavor. Young people in college—and this seems to hold true for both women and men—seem generally wary of committed or monogamous relationships. The focus is always on what it costs, rather than what it might provide. And if you consider that half of young adults come from divorced households, their cynicism is neither surprising nor unfounded. "I don't know if I even know any happily married couples," one young woman says. "Most of my friends' parents are divorced, and the ones who aren't are miserable. Where's the appeal in *that*?"

Hooking up is seen as being a lot easier than having a relationship. Students constantly say that having a relationship, actually dating, takes a lot of time, and "like, who has time to date?" asks Greg, a junior at the College of Wooster in Ohio. "I mean, we're all really busy, and we have school, and classes, and jobs, and friends, and all. But, you know," he says with a bit of a wink, "a guy has needs, you know what I mean? Why date if you can just hook up?"

When one older teenager explained her most recent hookup to a *New York Times* reporter, he asked if she thought the relationship might lead to something more. "We might date," she explained. "I don't know. It's just that guys can get so annoying when you start dating them."

"Serial monogamy is exhausting," one young woman tells journalist Stepp. "You put all your emotions into a relationship and then you have to do it all over again." Says another:

Dating is a drain on energy and intellect, and we are overworked, overprogrammed, and overcommitted just trying to get into grad school, let alone getting married. It's rare to find someone who would . . . want to put their relationships over their academics/future. I don't even know that relationships are seen as an integrated part of this whole "future" idea. Sometimes, I think they are on their own track that runs parallel and that we feel can be pushed aside or drawn closer at our whim.

Which is a pretty revealing statement since it wasn't so long ago that Doris Lessing remarked that there had never been a man who would jeopardize his career for a love affair—and never been a woman who wouldn't.

Guys seem to agree, but for a different set of reasons. Brian says:

Being in a real relationship just complicates everything. You feel obligated to be all, like, couply. And that gets really boring after a while. When you're friends with benefits, you go over, hook up, then play video games or something. It rocks.

Guys may hook up because they get exactly what they want and don't have to get caught by messy things like emotions. "A lot of guys get into relationships just so they get steady [expletive]," another teen tells journalist Benoit Denizet-Lewis. "But now that it's easy to get sex outside of relationships, guys don't need relationships." "That's all I really want is to hook up," says Justin, a junior at Duke. "I don't want to be all like boyfriend and girlfriend—that would, uh, significantly reduce my chances of hooking up, you know?"

Yet the absence of expectations that supposedly characterizes the hookup seem not to be as true for women. And this is not a simple case of "women want love, men want sex." Rather, it's a case of women being able and willing to acknowledge that there is a lot of ground between anonymous drunken sex and long-term commitment. They might not want to get married, but a phone call the next day might still be nice.

Young women today are more comfortable with their sexuality than any generation in history. There are certainly women who prefer hooking up to relationships. Women also hook up to avoid emotional entanglements that would distract them from their studies, professional ambitions, friendship networks, and other commitments. Or they hook up because they don't think they're ready for a commitment and they just want to hang out and have fun. Yet many also do it because it's the only game in town. If they want to have sexual relationships with men—and by all appearances they certainly do—then this is the field on which they must play. Some women may want more, some may not, but since

more is not available either way, they take what they can get. As one young woman explained it to sociologist Kathleen Bogle,

Most of the girls I know are looking for something, you know, someone, even if it's not serious, someone that is there to hang out with and talk to. [Girls want] a feeling of being close to someone and I don't know if it's even that guys don't want that, it's just that they don't care if they have that, it's like "whatever." It could be any other girl any night and you know that's fine with them.

And for the women who do want relationships, hooking up seems to be the only way to find the sort of relationships they say they want. They hope that it will lead somewhere else. Says Annie, 23, who recently graduated from George Washington University, in response to "Why do women hook up?"

Because they want to find love. They want, even though people don't care about consequences, they want to find love. At least girls do. At least I do. I wanted to find love. I wanted to be happy and in love and just have that manly man hold me. They just want to find that. And even if the consequences are bad, it's a lot better going through the consequences and being loved than it is being alone and never loved.

## Race and Hooking Up

Hooking up may be a guy thing, but it is also a *white* guy thing. Of course there are exceptions, but minority students are not hooking up at the same rates as white students. This is partly because minority students on largely white campuses often feel that everything they do is seen not in terms of themselves as individuals but representative of their minority group. "There are so few blacks on campus," says Rashon Ray, a sociologist at Indiana and part of our research team. "If one guy starts acting like a dog, well, word will get around so fast that he'll never get

another date.” As a result, on some large campuses, black athletes will hook up with white women, but will date black women.

“I know we don’t do what the white kids do,” said one black male student at Middlebury College in Vermont. “That’s right, you don’t,” said his female companion. “And I don’t either. If I even thought about it, my girls would hold me back.” Said another black student at Ohio State, “if I started hooking up, I mean, not like with some random white girl, but like with my sisters, Oh, God, my friends would be saying I’m, like, ‘acting white.’”

As a result, minority students are likely to conform to more conventional dating scripts, especially within their own communities. Our survey found that blacks and Latinos are somewhat less likely to engage in hooking up, and Asian students are *far* less likely to do so.

### Hooking Up and Relationships: “The Talk”

In general, women tend to be more ambivalent about hookup culture; some report feeling sexy and desirable, others feel it’s cheap and rarely leads anywhere. But when it comes to forming an actual relationship, the tilt is almost entirely toward the women. They are the ones who must negotiate whether the hooking up will proceed to a deeper level of intimacy. On many campuses, women are the ones who typically initiate the “Define the Relationship” conversation—the “DTR,” or, more simply, “The Talk.” “Are we a couple or not?” she asks.

Some women don’t even bother to ask. “I didn’t want to bring it up and just be, like, ‘so where do we stand?’ because I know guys don’t like that question,” says one woman to sociologist Kathleen Bogle. Another tells her it’s the women who want the relationship and the guys who make the final decision. “It always comes down to that,” says Ann, a junior at Wright State University.

You know, women see hooking up different from men. I mean it’s fun and all, but like after once or twice, like, where is it going? I mean, are you or aren’t you, you know, like a couple? Me and my girlfriends always talk about how to bring it up, how to start the

talk. I know he doesn’t want to hear it. But otherwise, what’s all that hooking up *for*?

Justin, a junior at George Washington, offers the apposite retort:

Oh, man, don’t get me started on “the talk”! It’s like as soon as you hook up with someone, and you, like, have a good time, or whatever, and suddenly she’s all, like, “well are we a couple, or not?” Of course you’re not! You just hooked up, man!

“So,” I ask him, “what do you do when she wants to have that talk?”

Avoid it. Like if she says, all serious, like, “Justin, we have to talk,” like you know what’s coming, right? That’s when I get busy doing something else. Or I don’t call her back. Or I try and avoid seeing her in private and only like bump into her on campus or something. But I definitely do not want to have that talk. It ruins everything.

But why are guys so relationship-phobic? Virtually every guy I spoke with said that he wanted to get married someday, and that he hoped he would be happy. Just not now and probably not until his early thirties. Their relationship phobias are less related to fears of romantic entanglements from which they would have trouble extricating themselves, and more to do with the purposes of hooking up in the first place. Hooking up, for guys, is less a relationship path than it is for women. In fact, it serves an entirely different purpose.

### Sex as Male Bonding

In some ways hooking up represents the sexual component of young men’s more general aversion to adulthood. They don’t want girlfriends or serious relationships, in part, because they don’t feel themselves ready (they’re probably not) and also, in part, because they see relationships as “too much work.” Instead they want the benefits of adult



relationships, which for them seem to be exclusively sexual, with none of the responsibility that goes along with adult sexuality—the emotional connection, caring, mutuality, and sometimes even the common human decency that mature sexual relationships demand. Simply put, hooking up is the form of relationship guys want with girls.

Yet it's a bit more complicated than simple pleasure-seeking on the part of guys, because as it turns out pleasure isn't the first item on the hookup agenda. In fact, pleasure barely appears on the list at all. If sex were the goal, a guy would have a much better chance of having more (and better) sex if he had a steady girlfriend. Instead, guys hook up to prove something to other guys. The actual experience of sex pales in comparison to the experience of talking about sex.

When I've just got laid, the first thing I think about—really, I shouldn't be telling you this, but really it's the very first thing, before I've even like “finished”—is that I can't wait to tell my crew who I just did. Like, I say to myself, “Omigod, they're not going to believe that I just did Kristy!”

So says Ted, a 21-year-old junior at Wisconsin:

Like I just know what will happen. They'll all be high-fiving me and shit. And Kristy? Uh, well, she'll probably ask me not to tell anyone, you know, to protect her reputation and all. But, like, yeah, right. I'm still gonna tell my boys.

Hooking up may have less to do with guys' relationships with women and more to do with guys' relationships with other guys. “It's like the girls you hook up with, they're, like, a way of showing off to other guys,” says Jeff, a proud member of a fraternity at the University of Northern Iowa. “I mean, you tell your friends you hooked up with Melissa, and they're like, ‘whoa, dude, you are one stud.’ So, I'm into Melissa because my guy friends think she is so hot, and now they think more of me because of it. It's totally a guy thing.”

He looks a bit sheepish. “Don't get me wrong,” he adds, with little

affect. “I mean, yeah, Melissa is very nice and blah blah blah. I like her, yeah. But,” he sort of lights up again, “the guys think I totally rule.”

Jeff's comments echo those I heard from guys all across the country. Hooking up is not for whatever pleasures one might derive from drunken sex on a given weekend. Hooking up is a way that guys communicate with other guys—it's about homosociality. It's a way that guys compete with each other, establish a pecking order of cool studliness, and attempt to move up in their rankings.

“Oh, definitely,” says Adam, a 26-year-old Dartmouth graduate now working in financial services in Boston. “I mean, why do you think it's called ‘scoring?’ It's like you're scoring with the women, yeah, but you're like scoring *on* the other guys. Getting over on a girl is the best way of getting your guys' approval.”

His friend, Dave, 28, sitting next to him at the bar, is also a Dartmouth grad. He nods. “It's not just like keeping count,” he says. “Not a simple tally, you know? It's like ‘how many have you had?’ yeah, but it's also ‘who did you get?’ That's how my guys . . . well, that's how we evaluated you for membership in the worldwide fraternity of guys.” They both laugh.

Of course, the awesome insecurity that underlies such juvenile blustering remains unacknowledged, which is interesting since that insecurity is the driving force behind so much of sex in Guyland. The vast majority of college-aged guys are relatively inexperienced sexually. Most of them have had some sex, but not as much as they'd like, and nowhere near as much as they think everyone else has had. Perhaps they've received oral sex, less likely they've performed it, and if they have had intercourse at all it is generally only a handful of times with one partner, two if they're lucky. There are virtually no trustworthy adults willing or able to talk honestly about sex with young people. Talking to their parents is far too awkward. Sex education in schools is often restricted to a quasi-religious preaching of abstinence. Any information that they do manage to cobble together—how it works, what to do, what women like, what they expect—comes almost entirely from their peers, and from pornography. In fact, pornography winds up being the best source of sexual information available to them, and as we've seen pornography is filled with lies.

Yet most guys think that they are alone in their inexperience. They think that other guys are having a lot of sex, all the time, with a huge number of women. And they suspect, but would have no way of knowing, that other guys are a lot better at it than they are. Seen in this light, the hookup culture, at least for guys, is more than a desperate bid simply to keep up. It's a way to keep up, and keep quiet about it—while being rather noisy at the same time.

## Hooking Up vs. Good Sex

Mature sexual relationships are complex; good sex takes time to develop. It usually helps to be sober enough to know what is happening. Hooking up may provide quantitative evidence of manly sexual prowess, but it cannot answer the qualitative insecurities that invariably attend sexual relationships. Hooking up may make one feel more like a man when talking with other guys, but it doesn't help—indeed, it may actually hinder—healthy and mutually satisfying sexual relationships with women. And it certainly cannot answer the anxieties that haunt guys when they are alone. Hooking up offers sex without entanglements, but it is attended by so many possibilities for ego devastation, misunderstanding, and crises that it can still become quite entangled. And since there is so much surface interaction in hookup culture, but so little actual connection, most of this stays buried.

With all this hooking up, friends with benefits, and booty calls, guys should feel they have it made. But there is a creeping anxiety that continually haunts guys' sexual activities, particularly these almost-men. They worry that perhaps they're not doing it enough, or well enough, or they're not big enough, or hard enough. Though the evidence suggests that men are in the driver's seat when it comes to sex, they feel that women have all the power, especially the power to say no.

And these days, those women have a new "power"—the power to compare. Many of the guys I spoke with became suddenly uneasy when the topic of women's sexual expectations came up. They shifted uncomfortably in their seats, looked down at the floor, or stared into their soft drink as if it were an oracle.

Jeff, a sophomore at UC San Diego said,

Uh, this is the tough part, you know. I mean, well, like, we're supposed to have hooked up a lot, but now so are they, and they, like, talk about it in ways that we guys never would. So, like, you feel like you have to be this fabulous lover and they have to come at least three times, and like, your, you know, your, uh, dick isn't the biggest she's ever seen, and, like, you always feel like you're being measured and coming up a bit . . . [he laughs uncomfortably], short.

"I think guys in your generation were more worried about whether or not you were going to get laid at all," says Drew, a senior at Kansas State. "I'm pretty sure I can hook up when I want, and I have several FWB and even the occasional booty call. But I worry about whether I'm as good at it. I hear all this stuff from other guys about what they do, and how crazy they get the girl, and I think, whoa, I don't do that."

Guys feel a lot of pressure to hook up, a lot of pressure to score—and to let their friends know about it. And they feel a lot of pressure to be great in bed. In Bogle's study, some students estimated that some of their friends were hooking up twenty-five times every semester. And they believed that while they thought hooking up meant kissing and other stuff, they thought their friends were actually having intercourse. "It's always the other student who, they believed, actually had intercourse every time they hooked up," she writes.

I asked guys all across the country what they think is the percentage of guys on their campus who had sex on any given weekend. The average answer I heard was about 80 percent. That is, they believed that four out of every five guys on campus had sex last weekend. Actually, 80 percent is the percentage of senior men who have ever had vaginal intercourse in our college survey. The actual percentage on any given weekend is closer to 5 to 10 percent. This gives one an idea of how pervasive the hooking-up culture is, how distorted the vision of young men by that culture is, and the sorts of pressures a guy might feel as Thursday afternoon hints at the looming weekend. How can he

feel like a man if he's close to the only one not getting laid? And if so many women are available, sexually promiscuous, and hooking up as randomly as the men are, what's wrong with him if he's the only one who's unsuccessful?

As it turns out, guys' insecurity is not altogether unfounded. Most hookups are not great sex. In our survey, in their most recent hookups, regardless of what actually took place, only 19 percent of the women reported having an orgasm, as compared to 44 percent of the men. When women received cunnilingus, only about a quarter experience an orgasm, though the men who reported they had performed cunnilingus on their partner reported that she had an orgasm almost 60 percent of the time.

This orgasm gap extends to intercourse as well. Women report an orgasm 34 percent of the time; the men report that the women had an orgasm 58 percent of the time. (The women, not surprisingly, are far better able to tell if the men had orgasms, and reporting rates are virtually identical.)

Many women, it turns out, fake orgasm—and most do so “to make that person feel good, to make them feel like they've done their job.” But some women said that they faked it “just really to end it,” because they're, “like, bored with it.”

“He was, like, trying so hard to make me come,” says Trish, a senior at Washington University in St. Louis. “And there was, like no way it was going to happen. I felt so bad for him. I mean, I had gone down on him and he came already, and he was, like, trying to be a good sport about it, but really . . . So I just faked it, and he felt good and I felt relieved.”

## Hooking Up and Gender Politics

Hooking up seems disadvantageous to women in so many ways, and not only because the sex isn't so great. In fact the disincentives appear so numerous that one eventually might wonder why women bother. The hookup culture appears to present a kind of lose-lose situation. If they don't participate, they risk social isolation—not to mention that they also forego sex itself, as well as any emotional connection they may be

able to squeeze out of the occasion. If they do participate, they face the potentially greater risk of “loss of value,” and there's a good chance that they won't even have any fun.

On the other hand, one ought not overstate the case. Anti-feminist jeremiads fret constantly about women's lost modesty, chastity, or even their capitulation to male standards of sexual conduct. Conservative columnists complain about ever-loosening sexual mores, and use the gender inequality of hookup culture to advise women to keep their legs crossed. Women, they counsel, must remember the message that their grandmothers might once have told them, “men want only one thing.” And so women, if they yearn for commitment and marriage, have to relearn how to just say no.

Since the 1990s, abstinence campaigns have been encouraging young people to take a “virginity pledge” and to refrain from heterosexual intercourse until marriage (the campaigns assume that gay and lesbian students do not exist). Abstinence-based sex education is pretty much the *only* sex education on offer in the majority of American high schools. And many parents see abstinence as the best advice they can offer their children about how to reduce their risk for sexually transmitted disease, unwanted pregnancy, or sexual assault.

At first glance, such campaigns appear to be somewhat successful. One study found that the total percentage of high-school students who say they've had heterosexual sex had dropped from more than 50 percent in 1991 to slightly more than 45 percent in 2001. But teen pregnancy rates have risen, and whatever decline in abortion rates may have occurred is due largely to the restrictions on its availability, not a curtailment of sexual behavior. Nor do abstinence campaigns offset the other messages teenagers hear. Sociologist Peter Bearman analyzed data from over 90,000 students, and found that taking a virginity pledge does lead an average heterosexual teenager to delay his or her first sexual experience, but only by about eighteen months. And the pledges were only effective for students up to age 17. By the time they are 20 years old, over 90 percent of both boys and girls are sexually active. Another campus-based survey found that of the 16 percent who had taken virginity pledges, 61 percent of them had broken their pledge before graduat-

ing. Pledgers were also less likely to use condoms, although they were just as likely to practice oral sex as nonpledgers.

What's more, because abstinence-based programs are often used instead of actual sex education, few people really know exactly what "counts" in keeping your pledge. In one recent survey of 1,100 college freshmen, 61 percent believed you are still abstinent if you have participated in mutual masturbation; 37 percent if you have had oral sex; and 24 percent if you have had anal sex. On the other hand, 24 percent believed that kissing with tongues broke their abstinence pledge. In the survey by Angela Lipsitz and her colleagues, the majority of those who said they "kept" their vows had experienced oral sex.

At first glance, abstinence might be seen as the antithesis of the Guy Code, since promising not to have sex would negate the drive to score that is central to the Code. But abstinence actually sits easily within the Guy Code. Abstinence pledges put all the responsibility on the girls to police sexual activity—and to bear all the consequences and responsibilities if something goes wrong. Abstinence pledges also make it a lot easier for guys to maintain the good girl/bad girl, Madonna/whore dichotomy that has kept the sexual double standard in place for decades. "Does having sex with, like, a ho, actually violate your abstinence pledge?" one first-year student asked me recently. "I mean, I definitely respect the nice girls, and I am abstinent with them."

Even those who advocate prudence rather than abstinence nonetheless seem to focus all their attention on the women. If a woman ever intends to marry, and most do, hooking up is exactly the wrong way to go, say several recent commentators on the issue. In a 2001 survey by the Independent Women's Forum, a conservative anti-feminist think tank, authors Elizabeth Marquardt and Norval Glenn tell us that while more than four out of five college women surveyed say they want to get married, there are too many elements in college culture that "undermine the likelihood of achieving that goal." Marquardt and Glenn propose reviving a "culture of courtship" to encourage those old-fashioned dates—and that old-fashioned sexual frustration.

Laura Sessions Stepp in her book *Unhooked* claims that hooking up is "a replacement for dating," in which "intimacy is disposable"; "a way of

playing at romance while controlling the unruly emotions that come with real romance." Stepp argues that "young people have virtually abandoned dating and replaced it with group get-togethers and sexual behaviors that are detached from love and commitment—and sometimes even from liking." She worries that this will make it more difficult to date, mate, fall in love, and marry. And indeed it might, for both sexes. Yet at the end of her book she offers advice only to mothers and daughters—mostly about how women should be far choosier about their dating and sexual partners, lest they permanently impair their ability to develop those relationships—ever.

Such advice ignores the pleasure-seeking behaviors and intentions of both women *and* men, and assumes that women are naturally chaste and virginal, were it not for those rapacious men. Such an image is obviously insulting to men, since it imagines them as no better than predators. And it is also probably insulting to women, who have shown themselves fully capable of seeking and enjoying sex in ways that their mothers—and certainly those grandmothers!—could never have imagined. Both women and men are pleasure-seeking creatures, especially on campus, and it lets guys entirely off the hook if the focus of all the advice is only the women.

The truth is, hooking up is not the end of the world—it's a time-out, like college. And more important, it's a political time-out; that is, it is experienced differently, and unequally, by women and men. Focusing all one's moralizing attention on young women only perpetuates that inequality, rather than challenges it.

### Hooking Up: The New Norm

What these earnest warnings miss, of course, is not the opposition between hooking up and courtship, but that hooking up *is* today's culture of courtship. It is certainly not true that all the women are hooking up in order to develop relationships, nor are all guys hooking up in the hopes of avoiding precisely the relationships that the women are seeking. Most actually want relationships. But, most say, not quite yet.

Today's college students will get married—eventually. It'll be about

eight years later than their mothers and fathers did. And they'll do that by choice, because before marriage they want to establish careers, enjoy relationships, and develop autonomy. The contemporary culture of courtship is not their parents' culture of courtship, but it is no less a "culture" and no less legitimate because of that.

The students I interviewed in depth following our quantitative survey were convincing on this score. Hooking up, in their minds, is not an alternative to relationships—it's the new pathway to forming relationships. Even if only a small percentage of hookups result in relationships, most relationships do begin with a hookup. For some, hooking up is most definitely in the service of a relationship—just not this particular one.

"Of course I'll eventually get married," says Anne, a Princeton junior who happens to be sitting with Dave when I speak with him. "Just not yet. Right now, I have to focus on my career, getting through medical school, establishing myself. Hooking up's about as much as I can handle. It's the means to an end, not the end itself." And with that, she gives Dave a peck on the cheek, picks up what appears to be twenty pounds of science textbooks, and is off to the lab.

Dave looks at me, shrugs his shoulders, and grins. "All the girls at Princeton are like that," he sighs. "You know that expression from, like, your generation," he eyes me warily, " 'you can look but you better not touch?' " I nod and scowl slightly at being cast as over-the-hill. "Well, around here it's more 'you can touch but you'd better not look'—as in look for a girlfriend."

Kathleen Bogle, a sociologist, argues that hooking up has become the normative path to relationships on campus. "There's something about the way people define college life as a time to party and a time to kick back," she told a journalist. "They're postponing marriage, so they have time to play the field."

## Postgraduate Sex in Guyland

Playing the field takes a somewhat different shape after graduation. Though young people still go to bars or parties in groups, and some still

drink a lot, fewer are slinking off to empty rooms to hook up. On the whole, post-college-aged people are returning to more traditional dating patterns. Bogle followed recent graduates of two colleges, and found that women and men exchange phone numbers or email addresses, and some time in the next few days they will contact each other and arrange to go to dinner or something more conventionally social. It turns out that hooking up in college has added a new act in an old drama, but it is hardly a new play.

Of course, the fact that most young people move beyond hooking up still doesn't neutralize its more negative aspects. Though the hookup culture may be the new norm, that still doesn't make it ideal. Even if guys are having sex in order to assuage an understandable insecurity, they are nonetheless using women. And even if women are themselves conscious sexual agents, there remains an undeniable aspect of capitulation in much of their behavior.

"Hookups are very scripted," one woman tells Laura Sessions Stepp. "You're supposed to know what to do and how to do it and how to feel during and afterward. You learn to turn everything off except your body and make yourself emotionally invulnerable."

What kind of sex is this, where a young woman prepares by shutting down and becoming invulnerable? Where a young man thinks more about his friends than about the woman he's having sex with, or even than his own pleasure? Where everyone is so drunk they can barely remember what happened?

Much of what passes for sex in Guyland is not the kind of sex that adults—those with considerably more experience in this arena—would think of as healthy. It sometimes feels as if it doesn't build a relationship but rather is intended to be a temporary stand-in for one. Nor does it seem to be particularly good sex. And the real skills that young people will need as they take on adult sexual relationships rarely feature in the hookup culture. They're not learning how to ask for what they want, or how to listen to their partners, how to keep monogamous sex interesting, how to negotiate pleasure, how to improve their techniques. And while much of adult sexuality is also a learn-as-you-go endeavor, that doesn't mean there isn't plenty of room for advice and counsel.

Yet most adults aren't talking. The more religious among us may have firmly held beliefs that dictate abstinence and tolerate no middle ground, while the more liberal among us may give our adolescent children books that explain the physiological aspects of what they need to know but say nothing of the emotional component inherent in sexuality. But rarely do mature adults actively engage their sons and daughters in the kinds of candid conversations that might actually prove useful to them. Rarely do we talk about a sexuality that can be both passionate and ethical; rarely do we even explain that there is such a thing as ethical sexuality that doesn't promote or even include abstinence as a goal. Instead, the whole subject is so shrouded in embarrassment and discomfort that we generally avoid it, hoping that our kids will figure it out for themselves without too much trouble in the meantime. Lucky for us they often do.

But not always.

## 10 | PREDATORY SEX AND PARTY RAPE

The words ring in my ears today as if they were just spoken. "When it comes to sex, never take no for an answer." Or this: "Look, girls have to say no, even if they want to do it. It's part of being a girl. So if they say no, they're really saying yes. They still really want you to . . ."

Growing up in the suburbs in the 1960s, I heard those phrases often as I heard my friends reciting the lyrics of the latest Beatles single or the line score of the Yankees games. Hippie or preppie, stoner or jock, nerd or hood, it's how guys talked about what guys talked about.

What I learned in the locker rooms of my youth was, "Tell her anything if you think it'll get you laid." I can still hear my friend Billy, who wrestled at 135 pounds, giving advice to his younger and lighter male partner:

If she wants to hear that you love her, tell her you love her. If she wants to hear that you'll marry her, tell her you'll marry her. The most important thing is to keep going. Don't stop. If she says no, keep going. If she pushes your hand away, keep going. You only stop if she hits you.