

The Promise and Peril of “Hook Up Culture”

Lisa Wade, PhD

COLLEGE?

Today, I am going to talk about...

...whether, in fact, you are hooking up.

- And I’m going to talk about...

...whether we should be worried about that.

- I’m going to draw on **work by scholars who are doing quantitative research** about sex on campus using very large samples of students, especially an ongoing study headed by Paula England that includes surveys completed by over nearly 20,000 students at 17 colleges and universities.
- ...and I’m also going to draw on **my own in-depth qualitative research** that I conducted with a colleague, Caroline Heldman.
 - Our sample was small – just 33 women and 11 men – but we asked for and were given **rich, rich data...** Our respondents, all first year students, wrote stories, both good and bad, confessions, rants, hopes and dreams, etc.
 - And our college is **very similar to F&M**: small liberal arts school (about 2,200), mostly living on campus, mostly all traditional college student age...
 - So as I reveal this data to you, think about whether the observations of my students sound familiar or not.

To begin, even though we do see a sort of **moral panic about hooking up...**

- your generation **didn't invent casual sex**. But there are **some new things** about hooking up. Most notably, the hook up of today is *less likely* than the casual sex of yesteryear to include **intercourse**.
- Still, more and more of you are having more and **more types of sexual contact**, writ large, with more and **more people**.

This sounds like a contradiction, so... How to explain this?

- Well, we all have a sense of the **proper order in which to increase sexual intimacy**, right?
- Like, we know that kissing is supposed to come before butt grabbing...
- Butt grabbing without kissing is called sexual harassment!

- Sociologists call this agreed upon order of activities a **sexual script**.
- And the sexual script has **changed**.

I was an undergraduate, **20 years ago...**

And that time, the sexual script went...

kissing, groping, naked groping, intercourse, and **only then oral sex**.

But today

it tends to go kissing, groping, naked groping, oral sex, and only then intercourse.

Or maybe even kissing, groping, oral sex, and only then naked groping, and intercourse.

- You see, your generation, like mine, takes **intercourse more-or-less seriously**, but our generation had intercourse *between* naked groping and oral sex...
- ...and your generation doesn't.
- **Without intercourse standing between making out and oral sex**, oral sex is more likely to happen.

So if we look at what happens in hookups:

- About 40% of hook ups include intercourse.
- Another 12% include oral sex.
- Another 15% include hand stimulation of the genitals.
- The remaining 32% only involved kissing and non-genital touching.

- So, in a counterintuitive way, the shifting of the expected order of sexual activities has both decreased rates of intercourse and increased rates of sexual contact.

But this doesn't translate into LOTS AND LOTS of sex, even oral sex.

Many of you will not hook up in college and, among those of you that do, many of you will only hook up a handful of times over the four or so years you're here.

- The average number of hook ups for a graduating senior is **only 7**.

- About 25% of college students will **never hook up**.
- About 30% will do so three times or less (that's less than one hook up a year),

- Another 30% of you will do so between four and nine times.

- Only about 15% of you will hook up ten times or more during college.

ASK: Did I get the order right between Miranda and Carrie?

- Ok, so only about 15% of college students will hookup 10 or more times.
- And while some of these Samanthas may be hooking up “every weekend” (which is what your parents and the media and some of your professors are afraid of), this 15% also includes people who hook up just two or three times a year.
- And, remember, sometimes we’re just talking about making out. On average, a person who has 10 hookups on college will acquire four new sexual partners in four years.

Hardly a bacchanalian orgy...

So, there is no hook up epidemic.

I do think, however, that we have a problem on college campuses.

- The problem stems not from there being “too much” casual sex on campus but from the overall dissatisfaction with sex on campus and the lack of alternatives. Let me talk about each.

Dissatisfaction with Sex on Campus

Most of my students – who remember were all frosh -- **were overwhelmingly disappointed** with the sex they were having in hook ups.

- This was **true of both men and women**, but was felt more intensely by women.
- Students wanted at least one of three things from sex:

pleasure.

meaningfulness,

or empowerment,

And few were getting any of these things in great measure.

Let's start here with EMPOWERMENT

- Many of the women in our sample, specifically, felt that they had **inherited a right** to express their sexuality from the **women's movement** of the 60s and 70s..

So they **embraced sex** ...and *the right to say "yes" to sex.*

- They saw **college as an opportunity** to enact their liberation.

And it was going to be glorious.

- But many of our female respondents felt *disempowered* instead of empowered by sexual encounters...
- They didn't feel like equals on the sexual playground, more like jungle gyms.

This was, in part, because of the normalization of sexual pressure from men.

- About one in six women are raped in their lifetime. Women who go to college have a higher risk of being raped than women who do not (closer to 1 in 5 or 1 in 4), and women who hook up have a higher chance of being raped than women who do not hook up.
- And **students were aware** that they could be subjected to sexual pressure...

- Two of my female students had this to say...

“...a lot of boys... feel that it is necessary to drink hardcore and when they are drunk they try to push you into engaging in sex...”

even nice guys “feel pressured into having sex and thus pressure women into having sex with them...”

- And many students, even those who recognized that the pressure was there, **didn’t really see this as a problem**
- They figured that men would inevitably want sex and that they were and should be free to pursue it.
- So **sexual pressure was normalized**, it was seen as just how things are inevitably.

One student, who we call Rachelle, told a story in which she hooked up with two guys to try to prevent her unconscious friend, April, from being raped.

- Her friend was **passed out on a bed** and a guy started **groping** her. At this point her friend wakes up, very upset, having flashbacks to a previous rape.
- So Rachelle **tries to protect her** by distracting both men in the room with her body.

She writes:

“...so I was making out with Mark while Mitch was touching me, in order to distract them so they wouldn’t touch her when she was feeling so vulnerable. I wasn’t attracted to Mitch, but was too wasted to say no when he pulled off my pants... I couldn’t keep both guys busy for long, though, but because Mark and April had hooked up before, I let him kiss and touch her. Mitch had pulled me onto the floor and he was fucking me at that point.”

- So, in the end, Rachelle isn't able to protect her friend, and *she also* has sexual contact she doesn't want (matching the legal definition of rape).

- **Reflecting on the night**, Rachelle said that it had “bad moments,” but it

“the night overall wasn't bad.”

- Amazingly, it **doesn't occur to Rachelle** to let the men in the room go sexually unsated. Mark and Mitch were “horny though,” she writes, and therefore *someone* had to have sex with them.

Like Rachelle, many of our female students recalled consenting to sexual activity they did not desire because they felt it was their only option, even in the absence of physical coercion, threats, or incapacitation.

- Options such as saying “no,” asking him to masturbate, leaving the situation, or abandoning the friendship or relationship did not seem to occur to them.

It was almost as if they felt that it was **the natural order of things... like water flowed downhill, women must release men's sexual tension.**

Ironically, then, women were engaging in sex because they felt that the playing field was even, but it was not.

- And this inevitably colored their experience.
- So women's empowerment? Not so much.

The second thing students wanted from sex was sexual pleasure.

PLEASURE

Even when sex was **both consensual and truly wanted**, students often reported **highly unsatisfying sexual encounters**.

This, too, was more true for women than for men.

Many of the women explained that they **felt like “masturbation toys”**:

“I was just a warm body being used to make a guy have an orgasm”

I feel like a “sex toy” with “three holes and two hands.”

Women were dissatisfied with the sexual skills of their partners, but they also **often deprioritized their own pleasure**.

“My sexuality was filled with anxiety and my need to please the guy instead of worrying about my own pleasure”

“... even if I was in charge I did not make sure I was being pleased.”

- One woman, who had hooked up with 13 men in her first year, confessed that she had **not been given a single orgasm**:

“...the guy kind of expects to get off, while the girl doesn't expect anything...”

- Remember I mentioned that **rates of oral sex** were rising because it now precedes intercourse in the assumed trajectory of sexual events?
- Well, that's not the whole story. It turns out that rates of oral sex performed on men have increased over the last 20 years; rates of

oral sex performed on women have actually decreased in that same time period.

- Combine that with the fact that intercourse alone is unlikely to reliably result in orgasm for women, and we see fewer orgasms for women.

• Overall, in first time hook ups, it turns out, women have orgasms less than half as often as men.

Finally, students wanted sex to be meaningful.

MEANINGFUL

- One of my male students, **Joel**, confessed that meaningless sex turned out to leave him feeling empty. He wrote

“At first I felt free and life seemed to be so great. When my experiences became more intimate, however, I found that I actually had a lower sex drive than I did in high school. Even oral sex seemed to just not be right deep down inside, even though on the surface it was extremely pleasurable.”

So Joel hooked up a few times in his first semester, but he **didn't hookup at all in his 2nd**.

- Joel **might have been looking for love**, as some of my students were...
- ...but much of the time, when students said that they wanted sex to be meaningful, they didn't mean that they only wanted to have sex in the context of love;
- But they did want something; and they used terms like “intimacy” or “connection.” One respondent thought that:

some sort of “sentiment” would be nice: “...like, you make me feel optimistic or you make me feel alive or you make me feel safe. Or you inspire me.”

- So they wanted to feel *something*...
- And they also wanted it to be in a **context of “trust” and “care.”**
- In other words, they wanted

“friends with benefits.”

Not friends on Facebook friends

but real friends

Friends who truly liked each other and had positive hopes for one another.

- In other words, they wanted to be **“in like”** so that they could explore their *sexuality in the context of benevolence*.

Still, most of our students reported difficulty achieving even this level of intimacy.

This is because hookup culture prescribes a sort of carelessness about sex that *precludes* benevolence.

- One of the rules of hooking up, after all, is that you are supposed to do it carelessly.

CARE-LESS

Sex is supposed to be careless in two ways:

- First, you're **not supposed to choose** your partner carefully, **think carefully** about whether to have sex...
- And, second, you're **not supposed to care** for your partner.
- This is part of why **alcohol** is so important in hook up culture. It's **not only because** it lowers your inhibitions or gives you an excuse for why you are doing things you're not supposed to do...
 - ...it's also because getting drunk is **one way to show others**, including your hookup partner, that you're being **careless**. If you're drunk, well you didn't really mean it.
- One student, who confesses that she's never had sex sober, explains, insightfully that **sober sex is scary** because...:

“...a sober hook up indicates one that is more serious, which either no one is interested in or no one is brave enough to admit they want.”

- This comment reveals that hookup culture requires not only that you enjoy casual sex, but that you have an active *disinterest* in your sexual partner. That you could *care less*.
- Another student echoed her comment:

“Even if both partners feel attracted to each other, not physically but emotionally, they do not tell each other that.”

- Other students concurred. One wrote, “The rules of the sex game is that you can never show your true feelings and insecurities to the partner.”

- Another explained that sex was “trivialized” as a rule.
- Similarly, a third felt that, in general, “emotional satisfaction” was entirely “disregarded.”

Emotional connections are avoided; they are off-script.

- So people *weren't* friends with benefits, they would **hook up and then not be friends at all...**

“None of the guys here want to be my friend... just a girl that they can have a one-night stand with... After they do that, they don't care... [They] could care less about what I do with my life or if I ever see them again. Many times afterward the guy will not say hello or even acknowledge my presence.

“You could have labeled it friends with benefits,

without the friendship maybe?”

So it turned out that the sex on campus was very antagonistic, mean even... and that most students would have been happy if their hookup partners would just be nice...

In sum, most respondents experienced pretty significant dissatisfaction.

- They wanted their sexual activity to be pleasurable, empowering, or meaningful, but most of the sex students were having failed to offer any of these things, **especially to women.**
- This **doesn't mean that men weren't dissatisfied.** In fact, men are equally likely as women to desire a relationship... but men weren't disempowered as often and the economy of orgasm benefitted them more than it did women.

Overall, then,

• 11% of my respondents expressed **unequivocal enjoyment** of hookup culture.

• 50% were having hook ups, but were doing it rather **ambivalently or reluctantly**, some with extremely negative experiences.

• For them, hooking up was a price they were willing to pay for the opportunity to have sex and the small possibility that a string of hookups would lead to a relationship.

• And 38% **opted out** of hooking up altogether.

Less than 1% maintained a committed **relationship**.

• The ones who opted out wanted to have sex, but weren't willing to have the kind of sex available on campus...

• So the **first problem** I see on college campuses is dissatisfaction... and this is related to the **second problem** I see, which is the cultural dominance of hooking up.

DOMINANCE

• ...the fact that it is a *culture* at all.

There's a difference between a campus on which there is **hooking up** and a campus that is characterized by **hookup culture**.

• The presence of hooking up is **not necessarily bad**, and in many ways can be good.

Remember that 11% of my students on campus really *enjoy* hook up culture.

- One student, for example, was able to discover, for the first time, her own sexual desire:

...for me, this casual sex has been life-changing. It's amazing to finally have that desire. I've wanted for five years now to desire to have sex, to enjoy sex, and to understand what everyone is always raving about. Now I can finally have those things and it is truly liberating.

Even the 50% of students who were ambivalent, though, enjoyed the opportunity to have casual sex.

- And many students **learn** a lot from hooking up, even if they didn't like it. One ambivalent participator explained:

...every experience that I have had with these guys has taught me more about who I am and what type of role sex has in my life. I am no longer afraid to give into my desires, but I am also aware of what I feel is right and wrong.

- For many students, then, hooking up helped them **clarify their values, embrace their own sexuality, and learn how to enforce their boundaries.**
- This isn't a terrible tragedy, it's called "learning" and it's how some of us grow into mature sexual adults.

Hooking up is also good for students who are really focused on their studies or on balancing work and school; it is a way to get sexual experience that doesn't include the intense time and emotion investments required by relationships.

- In a year-long qualitative study, sociologists Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth Armstrong found that committed relationships competed with schoolwork.

“I wouldn’t mind having a boyfriend again, but it’s a lot of work. Right now with [my major] and everything... I wouldn’t have time even to see him.”

- So hooking up is a way to gain sexual experience in a less distracting way.

And hooking up turns out to be, in many ways, emotionally safer.

- Hamilton and Armstrong found that, when hook ups go bad, people can get hurt; but when **relationships** go bad, they **tend to go bad in a much bigger way**.
 - Men sometimes became controlling, women became obsessively jealous.
 - There was long-term stress because of fighting and trying to rescue dying relationships etc.
 - Sometimes people took semesters off to get away from a boyfriend or girlfriend, or recover from a bad break up.
- So, bad hookups were **isolated events**, but bad relationships sometimes **wreaked havoc** with students’ lives.

So, despite all the problems with casual sex on campus, abandoning the hook up as a college sex stable is not the way to go.

The problem as I see it is not that people are hooking up, the problem is that a hook up *culture* dominates the sexual practices on most campuses today.

- **91%** of college student report that their campus is characterized by a hookup culture.
- My students call hooking up “near an obligation,” “expected,” “a huge thing,” even “necessary” if one wants to have a social life.
- For one it was no less than

the “definitive of sexual relations between college students.”

In this sense, hooking up was a culture that dominated the campus.

HOOKING UP CHECK

- The **party scene** was all about hooking up, and opting out of the party scene did not feel like a reasonable option because, as one student said,

“...if you do not socialize you are **automatically excluded** from anything and everything.”

- One of the things that was so striking about the students I studied was that even those who rejected hooking up for themselves – the ones who opted out – would **bend over backwards to insist** that hooking up was a good thing and that they wished they felt differently.

Said one student: “I see many of my friends sleep with one guy and then another without having any emotions attached and I honestly admire them because I just cannot do that.”

- Many who didn’t like the idea of hooking up for themselves, then, saw their own approach to their sexuality as an **unfortunate dysfunction instead of a valid choice**.
- When a campus is characterized by a hook up *culture*, hooking up is the **main and even the only way** that students feel like they can engage sexually; other kinds of sex seem impossible or undesirable or even embarrassing.

- So students who might want to envision and enact other kinds of sexual engagement find it difficult to do so.

This was definitely true with relationships...

- The students in my sample said that no one wants to admit that they want a boyfriend or girlfriend because it makes them feel vulnerable in a culture in which it is assumed that everyone else *only* wanted to have casual sex.

This is called **pluralistic ignorance**, when a large proportion of a population misunderstands reality.

- My respondents tended to think that *other people thought* that people who would only have sex under conditions of romantic relationships were... mmmm boring... maybe sexually repressed... like hung up on love and *desperate* for a boyfriend or girlfriend. Embarrassing, really.
- In fact, **70% of female and 73% of male college students** report that they'd like to have a committed relationship...
- ...but they don't know that other people want that too because hook up culture dominates the sexual scene and expressing emotions is off script.
 - Among my students, no one mentioned going on a date in their first year of college; none formed a girlfriend/boyfriend type relationship while they were in their first year. So hooking up was available, but relationships were just seen as, well, **antiquated**.

The fact that there are men and women on campus who want to explore **same sex desire was also invisible**.

- Hookup culture is **relentlessly heterosexual**.
- None of my students **identified** as gay or lesbian, three women identified as bisexual.

- But no one, not even the bisexual students, **pointed to LGBT groups** as a source of support, or an alternative vision of sexuality.

Similar to the lack of support for forming relationships and the invisibility of same-sex desire...

...there was no support for abstinence at all.

- Several students who expressed **deep religious commitments** to sexual purity wrote heartbreaking narratives about how **lonely** they were in trying to persist with their beliefs while immersed in hookup culture.

Said **Lawrence**:

It is much harder to stick to my high morals of remaining *pure* here... I find myself in conflict with myself... Always having to internally fight the desire to do sexual things with girls is not easy... the carefree atmosphere really has hit me... I felt more free and unbounded, but at the same time, guilt beyond imagination.

- No one mentioned the Office for Religious and Spiritual Life, even the religious students...

- And, likewise, no one mentioned **feminist groups** on campus that might help them address sexual assault, coercion, and the lack of sexual pleasure.

- Neither were **any other groups** that could be actively offering different logics making a discernable impact on our students.

So, one problem with hook up culture, specifically, is that it disallows or discourages other types of sexual engagement.

Hook up or shut up

And we're left only with one form of sexual engagement that is widely socially supported and acknowledged.

PAUSE

Is this sexual liberation?

- No.
- But it *is* in line with the lessons we get from pop culture and from many of our friends:
 - That saying “yes” – to sex, with anyone, for any reason -- is equivalent to being sexually open and free.

But there are two problems with this definition of liberation.

- **First, it doesn't acknowledge that saying “yes” to sex doesn't necessarily mean that we know how to shape the sex we're having, once we're having it.**
 - This is why most women in college feel free to say “yes” to sex, but then report unpleasurable and awkward sex.
 - And this is **not at all YOUR fault.**
 - No one teaches you how to talk about sex *really*.
 - And, in any case, we **don't have a good language** for talking about sex. Most of our language is comical, violent, or overly anatomical (we have to choose between bumpin' uglies, fucking, or penile-vaginal intercourse).
 - And you've inherited a **rigid sexual script that favors men**. So the default behaviors to aim for are oral sex on him and intercourse, both of which are likely to give him an orgasm, and unlikely to give her one.
- **Second, this definition of sexual liberation – the one in which you simply say “yes” – doesn't leave room for you to say “no.”**
 - Saying “no” is **conflated with being sexually repressed.**

- So if you don't want to have sex, have sex outside of a relationship or marriage, or do "that" (whatever that might be) is explained with the idea of repression.
- If you were **really comfortable** with your own sexuality, **the story goes**, then you **wouldn't be so hung up** on emotions, or rules, or which hole is really for what.

So, no, hookup culture is not sexual liberation.

- Sexual liberation is being able to make choices – and **to say "yes" or "no" to any or all of a myriad of options for any reason** – without fear of social criticism or interpersonal rejection.
- It also means having the **cognitive freedom** to imagine other ways of being sexual, instead of aligning our sexual values and behavior to a pre-determined mold... or give up sex altogether.

So the answer to hook up culture is not the abandonment of casual sex.

It's more culture.

It's all of these things.

- If you want something that looks more like sexual liberation, then you need a multitude of cultures that will compete with hookup culture and allow students to choose between many different ways of expressing their sexuality.

- In addition to looking a lot more like liberation, multiple sexual cultures will foster personal growth and communication.

- Many different options would require students to really

THINK

hard about what they want, instead of simply accepting or rejecting what they're offered.

- Simultaneously, it would require students to really

TALK

about what they want, instead of making assumptions about each other and hiding one's own feelings.

So how do you interrupt the dominant culture?

- First, as **individuals**, you need to be **brave enough to challenge the dominance** of hookup culture. It might be scary, it might mean "turning off" someone that you think is cute. And we're told that that's a terrible thing to do.

- But if you start **challenging hookup culture out loud**, you might be surprised how many other people agree with you. And you're probably more likely to get what you want.

- Second, **collectively**, you need to use your clubs, your classes, your organizations to **start conversations about sexuality**.

- Really interesting conversations might be hosted

By the various religious groups on campus

(about spirituality and sex)

- And they might start a contentious but prolific dialogue with the
the Freethought Society

- Meanwhile,

the public health club

(could start talking about how to make sex safer)

by the LGBTQA clubs

(about alternatives to strict heterosexuality)

by 1 in 4, SAVE, and .08

(about sexual assault)

These are obvious, but imagine that kind of conversations that could be started by

the debate and philosophy clubs

(about ethics and policy),

or in the culture-based clubs...

(about cross cultural variation in sexuality),

or among members of the various race and ethnicity based organizations

(about issues faced by students of color)

by or Epilogue and Prolog (who could encourage students to write about sexuality)

- Not to mention the writers and editors at

The College Reporter

Who could raise these issues at will.

by the Film Society or Gaming Society

(about representations of sexuality in film and video games)

Ultimately disrupting the dominance of hookup culture is up to you.

YOU.

- It's up to you, first, **because administrators, staff, and faculty** can only do so much. This is a contentious political issue... and they have to be thinking about publicity and the bottom line.
- It's up to you, second, because **it is you.**
- F&M is just you and you have the power to shape its culture.

And if you could disrupt the dominance of hookup culture, and you bring many different ways of being sexual into the line of sight...

...NOW THAT would be a true opportunity for sexual learning.

Hook up culture, despite its protestations to the contrary, is not it.

THANK YOU

QUESTIONS