

Introduction

The journalist Tom Wolfe, a keen observer of American culture, offered this musing on junior high, high school, and college students:

Only yesterday boys and girls spoke of embracing and kissing (necking) as getting to first base. Second base was deep kissing, plus groping and fondling this and that. Third base was oral sex. Home plate was going all the way. That was yesterday. Here in the year 2000 we can forget about necking. Today's boys and girls have never heard of anything that dainty. Today's first base is deep kissing, now known as tonsil hockey, plus groping and fondling this and that. Second base is oral sex. Third base is going all the way. Home plate is learning each other's names.¹

Clearly, times have changed. Most images that we see today of college students are in a sex-charged atmosphere like MTV's *Spring Break*, where bikini contests, bump and grind dance contests, and "beach sports" with barely clothed contestants are common scenes. Comparing today's "co-eds gone wild" with our idea of college students of yesteryear, it is perhaps easy to jump to the conclusion that our young people are in moral decline. But it is too simplistic to characterize the change in moral terms. Wolfe's "bases" point to something much more than an increase in sexual activity among today's youth. I would argue that today there is something fundamentally different about *how* young men and women become sexually intimate and form relationships with one another. For American youth, particularly college students, "dating" and mating has become a whole new ball game.

Dating, which permeated college campuses from the 1920s through the mid-1960s, is no longer the means to *beginning* an intimate relationship.² College students rarely date in the traditional sense of the term. Do they have sexual encounters? Yes. Are they interested in finding

boyfriends and girlfriends? Many are, yes. But unlike previous generations, college students today are not forming relationships via dating.

I want to suggest that two factors have been especially important in the demise of traditional dating on college campuses.³ First, young people are postponing marriage. Age at first marriage is at an all-time high; the typical groom is 27; the typical bride is 25.⁴ Although today's men and women may be delaying marriage, they are often sexually active from adolescence; the average age of first intercourse is 17.⁵ Second, a growing proportion of young people nationwide are spending the early years of their adult life on college campuses. From 1970 to 2000, enrollment in undergraduate institutions rose by 78 percent.⁶ Thus, college has become an increasingly important setting for early sexual experiences. So, if college students are not dating, just what are they doing?

In 2001, a national study on college women's sexual attitudes and behaviors revealed that instead of dating, many students were "hooking up."⁷ The study defined a hookup as "when a girl and a guy get together for a physical encounter and don't necessarily expect anything further."⁸ The results of this study sparked a media firestorm over the idea that hooking up had replaced dating on college campuses.⁹

Media reports often portray an extreme version of hooking up. It is not so much that the reports are false as much as they don't represent the whole truth. A typical story line comes from Karen Heller of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, who reported that "the latest lie teenagers tell themselves is about having 'friends with benefits,' the ability to have sex, to 'hook up,' without the attendant drudgery of relationships. This means that kids expose private parts, exchange bodily fluids, risk pregnancy and STDs, but don't have to plan Saturday dates." This piece leaves readers with the impression that anyone who has hooked up has engaged in sexual intercourse or some other form of "risky" sex. However, hooking up covers a wide range of activities and many college students use the term to refer to "just kissing."

In other cases, media references go beyond portraying the extreme to actually giving a misleading definition of hooking up. It's been defined as "oral sex," "a one-night stand," or "engaging in a lot of promiscuous sex." These definitions are narrow at best, and often fuel public concern that today's youth are engaging in behavior that is a danger to their physical and emotional well-being. Even given that the ambiguous nature of the term "hooking up" makes it difficult to figure out

what is really going on, it is still irresponsible, though not surprising, for journalists to add to the confusion by presenting only the most risqué stories in order to sell papers.

Further, hooking up has been connected to an array of social problems, such as binge drinking, drug abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, feminist scholars have been concerned about the link between hooking up and sexual assault, while conservatives have linked hooking up to being raised by divorced parents.¹⁰ Some of the concern over the link between hooking up and other problems is legitimate, but these potential connections do not justify denouncing the hookup system on those grounds alone.

Much of what has been said about hooking up falls on one end of the spectrum or the other. The mass media takes on a moralistic tone, suggesting that young people are engaging in immoral behavior that will ultimately lead to their doom, whereas recently released books like *The Happy Hook-Up: A Single Girl's Guide to Casual Sex* authored by women of the hooking-up generation make light of the hookup scene.¹¹ Neither of these opposing perspectives provides the most useful way to analyze the current culture, nor do they add clarity to the discussion.

MY HISTORY WITH HOOKING UP

My introduction to hooking up came firsthand. During my own college career in the early 1990s, hooking up seemed to be at the center of the social scene. I recall spending a lot of time talking to friends, who were attending colleges up and down the East Coast, about whom they hooked up with, whom they wanted to hook up with, or who they “heard” had hooked up with whom. Although many of these conversations were just for fun, there was also a more serious side to these discussions. Students I knew often struggled with various aspects of hooking up; for example, “how far” a hookup should go, how to act with your hookup partner the next day, and how to turn a hookup into a relationship. Although most of my close friends were female, I saw male friends struggle with hooking up as well. From my standpoint, it appeared that hooking up, for better or worse, was an entrenched part of the college experience.

Fast-forward to 2000. As a graduate student in sociology, specializing in gender, I was having a conversation with one of the members of

the sociology department whose two sons were about to embark on college life. I found myself trying to explain the phenomenon of hooking up to someone who came of age during the dating era. When I was finished going on and on about how different relationships are in college nowadays, he replied to all my ramblings by saying: “Why don’t you do a study of that?” From that conversation, this book began.

I started by looking at the phenomenon of hooking up through a sociological lens. I wondered when hooking up started; after all, it didn’t used to be that way, right? I wondered if my observations of how hooking up worked held true for others. I wondered why the “rules” (or lack thereof) that governed the hookup system on campus seemed no longer to apply once I graduated. In other words, I wanted to take my personal observations of the college hookup scene and place them in a larger context.¹² As a first step, I reviewed the existing scholarship and was stunned to find no studies on hooking up prior to 2000.¹³ Virtually all of the past research on college students and relationships referred only to dating.¹⁴ Much of the research during this period focuses on heterosexual dating couples once they are already in a relationship. Relatively few studies examine how college students establish themselves as a couple in the first place. Those that do assume that students are dating in the traditional sense and then proceed to ask questions based on that assumption.

A few sexual behavior researchers over the past few decades did acknowledge changes on the American college campus. These studies often look at college students’ attitudes and behaviors regarding premarital sex, “casual” sex, or “risky” sex.¹⁵ Results indicate that college students have become more liberal over time in terms of both their attitudes on sex and their sexual behavior. Although this literature documents change, it does not address one of the most important differences in sexual behavior on college campuses. That is, the way that college students get together to engage in sexual activity—the how and the why, as opposed to only the what.

As my research continued, a handful of studies on hooking up emerged. The first was led by a team of psychologists at the College of New Jersey, revealing that 78 percent of undergraduate students at a large college in the northeastern United States had engaged in a hookup.¹⁶ They defined a hookup as “a sexual encounter, usually lasting only one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances. Some physical interaction is typical but may or may not

include sexual intercourse."¹⁷ Ultimately, the researchers concluded that "some students were hooking up on a weekly basis."¹⁸

The results of a second study, conducted by the Institute for American Values, indicate that hooking up is a nationwide phenomenon that has largely replaced traditional dating on college campuses. This study examined the sexual attitudes and behaviors of college women across the country and found that hooking up was a common activity that dominates male-female interaction on campus. The key findings included that 91 percent of college women believed hookups occurred "very often" or "fairly often" on their campus, and 40 percent had personally engaged in a hookup encounter since coming to college. The researchers concluded that "hooking up, a distinctive sex-without-commitment interaction between college men and women, is widespread on campuses and profoundly influences campus culture."¹⁹

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

This book builds on the previous studies, but is distinct in many ways.²⁰ I wanted to look at how relationships form or how people get together both during college and after. By interviewing college students, I gained the knowledge of experiences and observations they shared in their own words, which I believe is ultimately the best way to understand their relationships. I did not assume that the students were hooking up or dating; instead, I asked them to talk about how men and women initiate sexual encounters and romantic relationships.²¹ Given that the meaning of "hooking up" is often debated, I thought it important to let those involved in the hookup culture explain what it means to them.

When I talked to college students and recent graduates about sex and relationships, I wanted to capture the experiences and observations of both men and women. Including men in the study fills a void left by the national data on hooking up.²² I interviewed a total of 76 people from 2001 to 2006, 34 men and 42 women.²³ I spoke to 51 undergraduate college students of all grade levels (ages 18–23) and 25 alumni (ages 23–30); this enabled me to consider whether there are differences in how men and women interact in college compared to after. I asked the alumni many questions about their college years; therefore, data on the college experience were generated for all interviewees. Nearly all of the people

I interviewed were white (95 percent). The lack of diversity is partially due to the lack of diversity on the campuses I studied and partially by design. I decided not to oversample minorities because research suggests that how college men and women interact varies by race.²⁴ There is also a lack of diversity in terms of sexual preference, with 96 percent of those I interviewed identifying themselves as heterosexual.²⁵ Although the number of people I interviewed from diverse backgrounds was small, I learned a number of things about how these students initiate sexual and romantic relationships (see chapter 4). Hopefully, these preliminary findings will stimulate future research in this area.

I conducted interviews with students and alumni from two different types of universities to ensure that the findings were not limited to one type of campus or geographic area. The universities are in different states; one is a large state university on the East Coast, the other is a smaller faith-based (Roman Catholic) university in the Northeast. There are many similarities between the two institutions. Most students on both campuses are white and middle or upper-middle class. Both universities are considered primarily residential, with the majority of students living on campus or in nearby apartments or houses with fellow students. Despite these similarities there are also key differences. One university is public, the other is private. The state university has more than three times the number of full-time undergraduates as the private university. There are also significant differences in terms of campus culture and policies for students living in residences; for example, the faith-based university has a rule against having sexual intercourse in university-owned resident facilities.

I began by asking the people I interviewed some background questions, and then I posed many questions about their experiences and observations of how men and women meet, get together, and form relationships. Although most people I spoke with were similar in terms of race and class, I tried to interview a diverse group of students in terms of gender, grade level, and major. I also made a conscious effort to interview different “types” of students. For example, I interviewed some students who were in fraternities/sororities and very much a part of the stereotypical, alcohol-centered college social life, as well as some students who neither drank alcohol nor attended parties. For the alumni portion of the study, I interviewed people from many different professions. Additionally, I have spoken to hundreds of college students about these issues as well as many twenty-something singles.

These conversations have taken place everywhere from bars to living rooms and from classrooms to dormitories.

Like most studies, my findings do not necessarily speak to the experiences of all college students or recent graduates. Nor can I say what percentage of college students (or young alumni) are hooking up, or how often they do it. What my study can show is what hooking up means, how it works on the college campuses I studied, and how it changes after college.

SPEAKING OF HOOKING UP

“Hooking up” is not a new term. Although media references did not begin until around the turn of the twenty-first century, there is evidence that the term “hooking up”—and presumably the practice—was being used by college students across the country since at least the mid-1980s.²⁶ But “hooking up” is a slang term and slang by definition is an informal and nonstandard language subject to arbitrary change, so it is not surprising that there is some confusion and disagreement over the meaning of the term. In fact, the young people I spoke with use many slang terms to describe their intimate interactions. By examining the phrases they use in context, from “hooking up” to “friends with benefits” to “booty call,” I discovered not only what they mean in general, but also that they mean different things to different people, particularly men compared to women.

My challenge as a researcher is being able to find the right language to explain what I uncovered about these relationships. This has been a particular challenge with regard to hooking up. Can hooking up be characterized as a “phenomenon” or is it a “system”? Perhaps a more sociological way of talking about it would be to refer to it as a culture (i.e., the hookup culture on campus). Rather than choosing among them, throughout the chapters that follow I use these terms interchangeably to describe what hooking up is and how it differs from traditional dating. Ultimately, I found that one of the most useful ways of comparing today’s hooking-up culture with the dating era is to look at each as a “script.”

Sociologists believe that how a person behaves in a social setting can resemble an actor following a script.²⁷ In other words, the cultural norms that we live by can dictate how people act in a given situation. In

their classic sociological analysis, John H. Gagnon and William Simon argue that sexual behavior is socially learned.²⁸ Contrary to biologists and psychologists, who often discuss sexuality in terms of “drives” and “urges,” Gagnon and Simon believe that individuals internalize what they call “sexual scripts” in order to interact with the opposite sex.²⁹ For instance, in the United States, sexual scripts suggest that sexual interaction begins with kissing, then sexual touching, and ultimately culminates in sexual intercourse (i.e., the “bases”).³⁰ What is called “scripting theory” not only sheds light on the content and progression of sexual interaction, but also on the appropriate scenarios defined by society for sexual behavior to ensue. Thus, cultural norms can dictate a “script” for when, where, why, and how sexually intimate interaction can occur. Without these scripts, sexual behavior can lose context and meaning.³¹

These sexual scripts are different for men and women and, some sociologists argue, largely determine the roles men and women play during sexual interaction.³² Traditionally, men take on the role of aggressor while women take on the role of gatekeeper. Men initiate sexual interaction; women decide if men will “get any” sexual contact and, if so, how much women will “put out.” There are also culturally prescribed roles that both men and women play in seeking potential sexual partners.³³ The roles that men and women play are shaped by cultural influences in the context of both a specific social setting, such as the college campus, as well as a specific historical time period.³⁴

In the next chapter, I will detail how from the 1920s through the mid-1960s the traditional sexual script dictated that dating was the means for men and women to become sexually intimate. The dating script permeated all social classes, including middle- and upper-class men and women attending college.³⁵ However, in the second half of the twentieth century, a series of changes in the culture, as well as in the environment of the college campus, created the possibility for a new sexual script to emerge. These changes set the stage for the new hookup scene to emerge and flourish, particularly on college campuses.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

A basic sociological concept is that individuals are affected by their social world. The people who are coming of age during the hookup era are not only drawing on their own moral compass to guide their intimate

behavior; they are also profoundly influenced by their social setting (e.g., the college campus), their peers, and the times. In other words, college students and young alumni are not merely acting in isolation; society is providing a script for them to follow. Preliminary studies indicate that hooking up is the dominant script on campuses today, but this does not mean that *everyone* is following this script in the same way, or even at all. What it does mean is that there is a way of getting together that exists at the *center* of college life. Although those in the margins are many, they still recognize the dominant script and are affected by it.

In the chapters that follow, I will explore how one's environment affects how young singles begin sexual and romantic relationships both in college and after. The best place to start understanding the way men and women get together today is by looking at how they got together in the past. In chapter 2, I will look at the rise and fall of dating in the early twentieth century through the mid-1960s and the ensuing rise of the hookup.

With this foundation in place, I will let the words of the men and women I talked with illuminate their intimate lives. In chapter 3, I describe the hookup scene on campus, showing how it happens, with whom, and under what circumstances. I also explore the sexual norms of hooking up, highlighting how they differ from the dating era. In chapter 4, I will discuss the features of the modern college campus that made it conducive to the emergence of a hookup culture. I also consider how other factors, such as fraternity / sorority membership and alcohol use, affect participation in hooking up. In chapter 5, I examine how college students are influenced by their peers. Specifically, I will consider how students' perception of what others are doing sexually affects their own behavior. In chapter 6, I focus on how participation in the hookup culture is different for men and women. I also examine how the traditional sexual double standard applies to the hookup culture.

In chapter 7, I turn to a discussion of life after college. I present alumni accounts of how the singles' scene changes once students leave campus. I explain why men and women favor traditional dating once they are situated in a new environment. In chapter 8, I conclude by comparing and contrasting the traditional dating script with the modern hookup script.

As you begin reading this book, try to put aside what you have heard in the media about hooking up. Before deciding whether you believe hooking up is something to be concerned about or celebrated, let's

first look at what it is and how it came to be. In my own analysis, I found some aspects of hooking up to be less troubling than is often assumed, and other aspects very troubling. In the end, the script in any given period should not be analyzed for the purpose of deeming it “good” or “bad,” but to understand the role it plays in our lives. I know that what I present here will not be the last word on hooking up, but I hope it will make a significant contribution to the growing scholarship in this area.

I have spent the last six years immersed in all things related to hooking up and dating. By talking with college students and “twenty-something” college graduates, I have come to understand how private matters are part of something bigger. That is, our personal stories of sexual encounters and relationships are inextricably linked to the social context in which we find ourselves. Although the accounts of the men and women who talked with me cannot capture the experiences of all college students and young alumni, I hope that by listening to them the reader will take away a deeper understanding of how modern relationships begin in college and beyond.