

Dissenting Voices

Volume 3 | Issue 1

8-20-2014

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Repository Citation

Moore, Andrea (2014) "Reframing Sexual Responsibility: Hooking-up," *Dissenting Voices*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dissentingvoices/vol3/iss1/7>

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Reframing Sexual Responsibility: Hooking-up

“Hook-up” culture can be seen as an outlet for women’s sexual freedom. For centuries women have not been allowed to express or have equal rights as men. Some feminists believe that women have grasped this “hook-up” culture as a way to gain sexual freedom and thus become more equal to men, but did this phenomenon backfire? This paper traces the historical emergence of “hooking-up” as a courtship ritual, explaining where it came from as well as what is new about it. The paper addresses the three themes of drugs and alcohol, sexual satisfaction, and the psychological well-being as lenses to assess hook-up practice and its relationship with sexuality. The paper also examines whether or not hook-up culture is empowering or disenfranchising for women.

Introduction

We live in a culture in which social media and mediated depictions of sex and sexuality are virtually omnipresent. Popular culture is overflowing with sexualized and sexualizing depictions of women, and increasingly, men as well. Some argue that the pervasiveness of these kinds of depictions do more than reflect the reigning sexual

values in our culture. Rather, these depictions play a key role in eliciting the very sexual identities and behavior they claim to reflect including uncommitted sex (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). While some feminist scholars and activists are opposed to the sexualization of culture, of which uncommitted sex is one small piece, this kind of uncommitted intimacy is celebrated by others (e.g., Rosin, 2012). Feminist Hanna Rosin (2012) celebrates the “hooking-up” culture as sexual freedom for the next generation. As a feminist and a college student, I am not opposed to women gaining and maintaining their sexual freedom through “hooking-up,” but I do not believe that women who hook-up are truly getting all the things they think they want.

As a culture we are influenced in diverse ways. The plots of movies, themes in books, television shows, and lyrics of popular music have all taken a permissive turn with respect to representations of sexuality among consumers (Garcia et al., 2012). Sex has also increasingly become digitized, making it easier to access and harder to avoid. We now have access to apps on our smart phones like Grindr and Tinder made for the sole purpose of connecting sexually with strangers in

close proximity with the mutual intention to “hook-up.” Uncommitted sexual encounters—more commonly referred to as “hook-ups”—are becoming progressively more engrained in popular culture, reflecting some transformations in sexual predilections and changing social scripts surrounding sexual identity, behavior, and intimacy (Garcia et al., 2012).

This paper considers feminist scholarship on hooking-up. Is this a phenomenon we should be celebrating or are skeptics right to be worried? I trace the historical emergence of “hooking-up” as a courtship ritual, explaining where it came from and what exactly is so new about it. I also address three distinct themes in “hooking-up” research to better assess the practice and its relationship with sexual equality and to determine if hooking-up and its associated outcomes empower or disenfranchise women. These themes include the role of drug and alcohol use with hooking-up; whether, how, and whose sexual satisfaction results from hooking-up; and findings related to psychological well-being and hooking-up. As I show in this paper, hooking-up fails to deliver all that it promises, at least to women. Though men may receive many of the benefits associated with

“hooking-up” as delineated by social and political expectations of male dominance, it is not surprising that women are not benefitting in all of the same ways. This research paints a very different picture of hooking-up and gives us new reason to pause and consider the meanings and consequences of the “hook-up” practice.

What Is Hooking-up?

Hooking-up is a broad, widely used phrase among young adults, and it carries many different meanings. The invention of the term “hooking-up” was not an accident by any means. It is no accident that definitions of the term, particularly among the group of individuals who invented it, are not vague as a matter of bad definition; rather, “hooking-up” is better understood as intentionally obscure. “Hooking-up” allows some to understate what happened (e.g., “No, we just hooked up”), others to overstate (e.g., “Yeah, we hooked up!”), and possibly everyone to conceal information. Operational definitions of hooking-up differ among researchers (Garcia et al., 2012). One of the most popular definitions of hooking-up among college students refers to a man and a woman pairing off at the end of a

party or a night out at a bar to engage in a physical/sexual encounter (Bogle, 2007). In most cases, women end their night going off to the man’s house or apartment with the intentions of engaging in sexual intercourse.

”Hook-ups” can involve anything from kissing to sexual intercourse or anything seen as falling in between these two ends of the sexual spectrum. Regardless of what happens sexually, a hallmark of hooking-up is that there are “no strings attached” to the encounter (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Other researchers have described the term hooking-up by focusing on the uncommitted nature of a sexual encounter rather than which behaviors do or do not “count.” The ambiguity of this term may allow individuals to manipulate each other’s perceptions of their sexual behavior (Garcia et al., 2012). Indeed, the ambiguous nature of the term is one of its most defining characteristics. Other researchers define hooking-up as casual sex outside of a formal relationship, a sexual encounter, usually only lasting one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). In a hook-up, some physical interaction exists, usually a sexual encounter between two people who are not dating or in a relationship,

and where a more traditional romantic relationship is not an explicit condition of the encounter (Garcia et al., 2012). From a more behavioral definition, hooking-up is described as an event where you are physically intimate with someone whom you are not dating or in a romantic relationship with at the time and with whom you understand there is no mutual expectation of a romantic relationship (Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2011). As we see from the diversity of definitions and scholarly disagreement, the term itself resists qualification. There are many different ways to define what hooking-up is, and many different ways to participate. Where did for such an obscure term come from, and importantly, what are the historical origins of this form of courtship?

History of Hooking-up

Many people believe that the behaviors of hooking-up have replaced other courtship practices, like “dating,” altogether. As we have seen over the past sixty years, the prioritization of traditional forms of courtship and pursuing romantic relationships has shifted. The most popular question that feminist researcher Bogle proposes is: “when did traditional dating lose its dominance and hooking-up begin to

emerge” (2012, p. 777). Most argue that the shift took place in the 1960s, during the sexual revolution. This was a time where there was a dramatic change in sexual behavior (Bailey, 1988). The shift from dating to hooking-up occurs primarily within the college culture. Prior to the 1960s, social life revolved around dating life; today it is the complete opposite where social life determines whether you are or are not hooking-up. One way to look at hooking-up is to consider that there are fewer formal rules, or, to some, no rules at all today compared with the past. But hooking-up has social norms, roles, and expectations as well, though these may be less carefully spelled out and perhaps followed with less commitment (Bogle, 2007; 2008). As the world of dating changes dramatically, the older and outdated ideas and rituals of dating are replaced with new ideas about relationships and views on dating. Throughout virtually most of contemporary American history, monogamy was the standard and anything that fell below that standard was frowned upon. Women have never really had the sexual freedom to explore and experience sex as they please, though men have never had to follow these same restricted standards. Even if they broke these standards, they were

not looked at any differently. A lot more pressure is put on women to adhere to the monogamous relationships whereas men are freer to do as they please.

As the 1970s came to an end, the ideas surrounding dating also began to change. This was a period known as the sexual revolution, which was a social movement challenging traditional dating and sexual behaviors. Our dating world today is extremely different from the dating world between the 1920s and 1970s. In the 1970s, youth began rejecting the formal rules and rigidity of dating, fundamentally transforming the meanings and practices associated with intimacy (Strouse, 1987). Many young adults within current college culture might not even be able to tell you the standards or rules that dating held. The idea of men wooing just one woman and following these past traditions today are almost nonexistent. As I mentioned earlier, the rise of and advances in technology have made engaging in hook-ups and communicating with each other through texting, emailing, Skyping or face timing much more accessible. This allows couples to be in contact initially without physical intimacy or contact. We also live in a generation where online dating is the new phenomenon,

allowing people to date and have relationships via the Internet. The intimate aspect of dating is slowly diminishing, leaving people with ongoing opportunities for engaging in hooking-up. Considering these factors, is “hooking-up” something feminists should celebrate or challenge? The alcohol and drug-fueled crutch that facilitates “hook-ups”, the sexual satisfaction (or lack thereof) that comes with “hook-ups”, and the mentality that women hold prior to, during, and post “hook-up”, are important considerations.

Under the Influence

There are many different factors that go into reasons why people elect to “hook-up.” Drugs and alcohol seem to be one of the most common things that come to the surface when you hear a hook-up story. No good story begins with, “this one time when I was sober...” right? That is because within many campus cultures, sex, drugs, and alcohol are basically everywhere. Drugs and alcohol are known as ways to boost one’s confidence to go over and talk to that really pretty girl or maybe even an excuse as to why you hooked up with that frat boy the other night; it was probably those “beer goggles” making him seem so cute and charming. Drugs

and alcohol play a significant role facilitating hooking-up among adolescents and young adults. In most cases both parties consume alcohol, lowering their inhibitions and making the hook-up more likely to happen (Bogle, 2012). Without alcohol as a social lubricant, it is less likely that college students would be able to signal interest in a hookup and deal with the potential for rejection, so alcohol helps make hookups possible within the college culture (Bogle, 2012). My research uncovered two principal issues. The first includes the ways drugs and alcohol make a hook-up more likely to occur, so environments structured by drug and alcohol use and availability are environments where we ought to expect a lot of “hooking-up.” The second is that drugs and alcohol make it more likely that sexual intimacy in a hook-up will be engaged in less safely both in terms of STIs and contraceptive measures and with respect to issues of consent and mutual interest.

That feels good...Or does it?

One of the main reasons people hook-up is because it feels good, right? No one wants to do something from which they do not get some enjoyment. But are women getting as much sexual pleasure from hook-ups as men? And

are hook-ups simply a new way young men and women are experiencing the sexual revolution? A great deal of research has attempted to answer these questions, which meant asking difficult questions about how exactly to measure sexual satisfaction. Most of this new body of scholarship (Bogle, 2012; Cross & Morgan, 2003; Bailey, 1988) finds that women are *not* getting as much pleasure out of hook-ups as men.

As we have already learned, hooking-up is very common among college students and young adults. Most young people have an agreement on what hooking-up involves (even if only implicitly), and that it is outside of an exclusive relationship. But who is this really benefiting? Most research suggests that hook-ups benefit men at the expense of women. This suggestion is based on the assumption that a committed relationship is the most likely context for pleasurable sex, especially for women (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012). In one study, Armstrong et al. identify four ways that prior research has theorized the sources of women’s sexual satisfaction in heterosexual sex:

- (1) ...deploying the right practices to achieve genital stimulation;
- (2) ...relationship-specific skills acquired by a partner over time,
- (3) good sex as a

consequence of commitment and affection, and (4) considerations of how gender inequality may degrade women's experiences of sexuality (pp.2-3).

All of these are considered substantial points for female sexual satisfaction.

The identification of women's sexual satisfaction relies on the orgasm as an outcome of genital stimulation. But "women had orgasms much more in relationships than in hook-ups and reported enjoying relationship sex more" (Armstrong et. al., 2012, p. 1). Within heterosexual intercourse, research has discovered that many men are unsuccessful in making their female partner orgasm during hook-ups. This does not mean that men are trying and failing to please their hook-up but rather they are unaware of ways to satisfy their partners sexually within the hook-up. This is the discrepancy within heterosexual hook-ups known as "the orgasm gap" (Armstrong et al.). Men and women both are more likely to orgasm if they engage in a greater number of sexual practices with the same partner (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997), and hook-ups are by definition primarily associated with people who have never intimately interacted before, or not much, and certainly not often. Studies have shown

that eight percent of women orgasm without intercourse during a hook-up and 24 percent of women orgasm with intercourse during their hook-up (Armstrong et al.). Within relationships, orgasm increased up to 53 percent without intercourse and 75 percent with intercourse. As sexual knowledge increases so does sexual satisfaction while health problems diminish (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2009; Parish et al., 2007, as cited in Armstrong et al).

The following script from the film *Friends with Benefits* (2011) helps capture and illustrate ways that the hook-up culture plays out:

Tommy: What, you guys going out now?

Dylan: No, no, no, we're just friends.
We're... messing around a little bit.

Tommy: What do you mean?

Dylan: Sleeping together. But it's just sex.

Tommy: That never works bro. She's a girl. Sex always means more to them even if they don't admit it.

Dylan: Jamie's different.

Tommy: Does she have a penis where most girls have a vagina?

Dylan: No penis.

Tommy: Then she's no different.

-*Friends with Benefits*

This dialogue between two of the male characters in the film *Friends with Benefits* shows a popular example of how today's generation not only

glorifies the casual nature of sex, but also implies that females cannot just have sex without having a deeper meaning to the encounter. This prompts the question, are women really personally benefitting from this new form of sexual freedom in today's hook-up culture?

Act like a Lady, Think like a Man

So are the behaviors and actions of hooking-up really beneficial to women? As with anything else, there are pros and cons embedded in the hook-up culture. Women have made incredible gains with respect to sexual liberation (Rosin, 2012). Women have progressed onto more equal paths, such as becoming more educated and maintaining their spot in the work force. Rosin compares it to the introduction of the birth control pill or legalizing abortion during earlier decades, but with a whole new landscape of sexual freedom. For the first time women are able to explore and utilize their sexual freedom without losing sight of their education and future careers. Despite these facts, the negative stereotypes surrounding women are still relevant and affect their experiences of the sexual intimacy available within "hook-ups." Even though many women are embracing

hook-up culture and taking it by the horns, they are still seen as "easy" for doing it. This shows that the labels associated with participation in hook-up culture are not the same for women and men.

As journalist and blogger Jessica Valenti wrote: "If you have a vagina, chances are someone has called you a slut at least once in your life. There's just no getting around it" (2008, p. 14). The pejorative "slut" is never used in the correct terms or situation. Despite the ubiquity of "slut," it is a term primarily used to refer to women. Men are less likely to be tagged as sluts; men simply are not judged like women when it comes to sexuality. If men are hooking-up with more than one person, we have a separate list of words. Virtually all of them are celebratory. Slut has a condemning connotation: sluts are "bad women," but players are "good men." Society clearly values one role over the other. Purity is pushed on women, yet not required of men.

Women are not as vulnerable as society has made them out to be within the hook-up culture. Surprisingly enough, it is women, not men, who are often initiating and perpetuating the hook-ups. Some women, especially college women, explain hooking-up as "empowering to have that kind of

control,” “guys were texting and calling me all the time and I was turning them down. I really enjoyed it! I had these options to hook-up if I wanted them, and no one would judge me for it” (Rosin, 2012, p. 3). A lot of young women understand hooking-up as sexually and personally liberating, but that is often not how others perceive their actions. By explaining hooking-up solely as “empowering” or something over which they “have control,” they own their sexual freedom within the hook-up culture.

Many women enjoy the idea of casual sex and all of the things that factor into it. Still, at the end of the night after the meaningless hook-up, the thought may cross a woman’s mind that she wants something more than a meaningless, casual hook-up. About 66 percent of women say that they wanted their hook-up to turn into something more (Rosin, 2012). Women do not want to be slutty, but they do want the same sexual freedom that men have. There is no secret that society expects most women to be generally more sensitive and emotional than men, which can cause them to become more emotionally attached, especially after having intimate relations with someone. But does that make them slutty? I do not think that slutty would be the fair

nor correct term, especially when she is doing the same exact thing as her male partner. When we consider the factors that impact hooking-up, the topics of sex education and practicing safe sex are important.

History of Sex Education

Beginning in the early 1900s, America believed in the purity of women, whether it was good for them or not (Cross & Morgan, 2003). America celebrated the idea of purity, but mostly just for women. Men were allowed to have the want, need, and desire for sex while women had to suppress it and act as though it did not even exist. It seems not much has changed in today’s society. As we gradually shifted into the 1920s and the hemlines of skirts rose, the sexual behaviors of adolescents changed as well (Cross & Morgan, 2003).

The 1920s was an era where sexual desire was not so maligned. The behaviors, dating rituals, and sexual desires of adolescents slowly evolved over the years. These eventually took us to a complete explosion of and shift in sexual behavior that would mark a permanent change in women’s sexuality: the birth control pill. Worshipped and embraced by women everywhere, the Food and Drug

Administration approval of the birth control pill in the 1960s completely altered women's sexual behaviors forever (Cross & Morgan, 2003). Studies today show that 60 percent of college students use or have used the birth control pill as their preferred method of preventing pregnancy (ACHA, 2013). From its inception, the birth control pill was a popular choice for college women who wanted to pursue their education and be sexually active without the risk and fear of getting pregnant. The rise of promiscuity, the birth control pill, and people slowly becoming more comfortable with the topic of sex, resulted in an increase in the number of sexual partners and premarital sex. Just two years after the birth control pill hit the market, 1.2 million women were on it, rising to 2.3 million in the third year (Nikolchev, 2010). This was just the beginning of the 1970s, an era that was known for casual and spontaneous sex (Peterson, 1999). After the 1970s burned out and the 1980s came into play, so did Acquired Immunodeficiency Deficiency Syndrome, also known as AIDS. This sexually transmitted infection heightened the awareness of the dangers of unprotected sex and changed the sexual behavior of many

people. Going from this carefree attitude about sex to the awareness that sex could kill you completely changed the sex lives of people everywhere, making any type of sexual intercourse between individuals less likely.

Implications: Sex Education

Popular media has become a primary source of sex education, filled with inaccurate portrayals of sexuality (Collins et al., 2006; Strasburger, 2005; Ward, 2003). Whether or not the media is filling our heads with accurate information is a different story. It is important for education on sexual behavior to be discussed in a serious matter in the household as well as within the school system. Sexual responsibility when hooking-up among college students is a public health issue that colleges and universities must address to ensure student safety and success. The views, beliefs, and knowledge behind sexual responsibility vary from person to person. As previously emphasized, sex is something that is everywhere, especially on college campuses, and it is something that needs to be discussed in a more educational manner. Even the use of the term "hooking-up" is an attempt to avoid such conversations. College students are some of the most

intelligent human beings around, but they are also quite vulnerable to peer influence. College students have an “I already know everything” and “This won’t happen to me” mentality. The hard truth is that they do not know everything, and that negative hook-up experiences can happen to them.

College students today have so much knowledge, access, and education on topics like birth control, STIs and AIDS, that they are much safer yet more experimental than previous generations. The experiments are beginning earlier and earlier. Most students are entering college with pre-established sexual behaviors and in most cases without their virginity. With the increase of students participating in sexual activity, the age at which they are doing so seems to be decreasing (Remez, 2000). This gives colleges and universities more of a reason to educate their students about sexual responsibility, making the decision of whether or not to hook-up and to be more concerned with safety when they do. The more educated our students are, the less likely it is that hook-ups will have negative consequences, making the hook-up culture even more appealing than it already is.

Conclusion

The college years are seen as the prime years within the “hook-up” culture. Like most things that you experience when you are young and in college, it is just a phase in life. These are seen as your selfish years, and hooking-up is something to do when you are either bored, experimenting, or do not know any better. After touching on all of the aspects that factor into women and their sexual freedom, the question remains: is the hook-up culture and its associated outcomes, empowering or disenfranchising to women? People view this topic from many different lenses. I see this phenomenon as being both empowering and disenfranchising. Even though women have taken control of the hook-up culture and their sexual freedom, they are still being discouraged, tormented, and name-called for doing so. Women have forever been a part of this double standard with men and within the hook-up culture. Will this ever change? Or maybe a better question is, Should it?

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