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CONOR KELLY

Feminist Ethics: Evaluating the Hookup Culture¹

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Hooking up—the practice of pursuing sexual activity without any expectation of a relationship—has become a fixture of the U.S. college experience. *** Sociological research reveals that this practice appeals to college students by ostensibly providing greater independence than traditional relationships. An outside analysis of these claims, however, demonstrates that the heterosexual hookup culture operates in a decidedly sexist fashion. In fact, the four common features of this culture: lack of commitment, ambiguous language, alcohol use, and social pressure to conform, all undermine the freedom, equality, and safety of women on campus. An intentionally feminist perspective is in a unique position to highlight and critique these faults and the additional resources of feminist theology and ethics have the potential to help change this sexism in practice.

*** Pursuit of some level of sexual activity without the constraints and expectations of a relationship is a common element of the U.S. college experience. *** While some parents, faculty, and administrators view it as the

¹ *Editor's note:* For the purposes of this volume a number of detailed citations have been omitted. For full details, see the original publication: Conor Kelly, "Feminist Ethics: Evaluating the Hookup Culture," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* vol. 28, no. 2 (1992), 27–48.

end of morality, a number of the students involved embrace hooking up as the epitome of freedom and equality. Common sense suggests that neither generalization is sufficient, and encourages a closer examination to grasp the situation more accurately.***

THE HOOKUP CULTURE: WHAT IS IT?

As college students will reveal from their own experiences, there simply is not one definition of "hooking up." Sociologist Kathleen Bogle acknowledges that "it can mean kissing, sexual intercourse, or any form of sexual interaction generally seen as falling in between those two extremes."*** In general usage, then, hooking up commonly refers to some form of sexual activity without the expectation of a consequent relationship between the parties.*** In actual practice, it appears that the random hookup between total strangers is very rare. Usually, hookup partners have had some previous contact, even if it is something as simple as sharing a common class.***

Four common elements—a lack of commitment, an acceptance of ambiguity, a role for alcohol, and a social pressure to conform—make it possible to speak of an identifiable hookup culture across the collegiate landscape in the United States,*** although*** diversity of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, the type of institution one attends, and a host of other variables converge to create different experiences for different people.***

The most striking common feature among various understandings of hooking up is the lack of commitment:*** a divorce between one's sexual activity and one's emotions.***

The primary commitment that men and women seek to avoid in the hookup culture is a long-term relationship.***

*** Research shows that those who hook up identify the removal of relationships as one of the hookup culture's chief advantages because it preserves autonomy. Specifically, they view hooking up as a way to get sexual gratification without compromising their freedom. This is hardly a surprising by-product of U.S. culture, which traditionally places great emphasis on independence. High-achieving college students have been encouraged by both parents and peers to lead multitasking lives in which their success in academics and extracurricular activities is touted as their ticket to a bright future. Women in particular are placing higher burdens of perfection upon themselves, and assume that they can have a successful career or a love life, but never both. Love actually appears as a stumbling block to the independent, successful lives these students have been raised to expect.***

A 2001 study discovered that only two kinds of relationships existed on campus in actuality: either interested parties were “hanging out” in groups, without any real one-on-one time, or in “joined at the hip” relationships,” in which a sexually active couple chose to be exclusive and would immediately begin spending all their time, including every night, together. There is little to no space in the college atmosphere for slowly progressing relationships that might begin on an emotional level before moving to physical intimacy and even less space for traditional dating relationships.

*** In the hookup framework, though, there are no clear steps to a relationship and there are few examples of what a relationship can or ought to look like in the aberrant situation when one should arise. As a result, students often imagine that a relationship is an overwhelming commitment that will completely consume their lives. They have no means to envision something between hookups and weddings. So, on campuses all across America, students choose hookups now and postpone marriage for later.

While the decline of dating has indeed been a contributing factor in the rise of the hookup culture, research on this link at least implies that a return to dating would be preferable.*** Such a claim deserves critical analysis from a feminist perspective because the history of dating suggests its return would hardly be a boon for women. In fact, dating gave a preponderance of power to men, especially in contrast with previous systems for courtship. Traditionally, men were expected to provide the financial means for each date, which gave them control over a number of factors from venues to initiative. This system often led men to believe that their payments entitled them to sexual favors in return. Meanwhile, women were expected to limit sexual activity to such an extent that blame even fell upon the victims of rape. While some have suggested that dating left both men and women open to the possibility of exploitation—men being able to exploit women sexually and women being able to exploit men for their money—these respective potentials cannot be equated fairly. Additionally, equal capacity for exploitation would hardly be considered the basis of a system that promotes full human flourishing. In historical practice, dating functioned far from its romantic idealization, facilitating the commodification of women rather than promoting genuine relationships between men and women. Thus, there is little to suggest that dating would be a positive alternative to the hookup culture, but even less to characterize hooking up as an improvement.***

*** When students choose to hook up, the ambiguous nature of language in the hookup culture appears as another benefit.*** Hooking up can mean anything from “fairly chaste making out” to sexual intercourse.*** Researchers have found this to be the value of the phrase in the first place,

with the ambiguity serving a curious double duty in female and male circles. In general, the imprecision provides women the opportunity to speak about hooking up without revealing the sorts of specifics that might damage reputations, while allowing men to suggest to their friends that they engaged in more sexual activity than they actually did.

The very purpose of the ambiguity seems to be the creation of a level of privacy in what most college students assume to be a public element of their lives. *** Like the avoidance of committed relationships, the vague language allows for the preservation of one of a college student's most important assets: independence.

*** A third common feature across the hookup culture is its connection with the party culture, specifically alcohol use. ***

Significantly, even at the schools where most students self-reported that their hookup habits did not involve alcohol, these same students still identified drinking as a key component of the hookup culture on their campus. Regardless of what students self-report, it seems that alcohol is a central component in the social expectations of the hookup culture, even if it is not always an element in isolated practices. ***

*** Students choose alcohol because, like other aspects of the hookup culture, it allows them greater freedom—in this case freedom from complete responsibility for their choices. It helps them handle rejection, allowing young adults to tell themselves, in retrospect, that they did not put their best self forward because of the alcohol. Additionally, drinking also allows them to dismiss activity that they would normally regret, like going too far sexually or even hooking up with someone with whom they would not normally choose to partner. ***

*** The social pressure to conform to the hookup culture is so great that *** no one has the liberty to avoid the system altogether. Certainly, abstaining from the hookup scene is possible, but this decision is rife with social consequences that all contribute to the perpetuation of the hookup culture.

The first element ensuring the hookup culture's power and prevalence is the potential for social marginalization. *** Students who wish to avoid the hookup culture leave themselves with few alternatives for forming intimate and romantic relationships while at college. *** Most of the students who choose to opt out of the hookup culture are already in committed relationships, usually with long-distance boyfriends or girlfriends.

The second element arises from the fact that the hookup culture is the dominant form for relating between the sexes, with the result that every

heterosexual college student seems to expect all his or her peers to follow its script. ***

Consequently, for individuals choosing to leave the hookup culture after they enter an exclusive relationship with someone else, the temptation to continue hooking up with individuals back on campus is always present and the general presumption against commitment offers no real reason to pursue strict fidelity. *** Additionally, due to the prevalence of the hookup script, men and women who remove themselves from the hookup culture run into difficulties should they attempt to have social lives on campus because other classmates presume that any interest—from dancing to talking—is a signal for a hookup. Truly, then, it is impossible to completely sever oneself from the hookup culture, no matter how distasteful one might find it.

The oppressive nature of the hookup culture's dominance is also evident in the effects it can have on dating in the lesbian gay bisexual transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community. In a profound example, LGBTQ students report that the heterosexist assumptions of the hookup culture make it difficult for them to build their own, nonheterosexual relationships. *** Suffice to say that the experience of the LGBTQ community on campus reveal that the hookup culture not only promotes sexist values but heterosexist ones as well.

*** The hookup culture serves students longing for independence and balancing busy lives. On this basis, one could argue that the hookup culture is a beneficial element of today's college experience for those who want to pursue it. The social pressure to conform problematizes this interpretation some, although this too could be explained as a necessary evil that should be mitigated, if not removed, in order to allow the willful participants of the hookup culture to preserve their freedom.

THE HOOKUP CULTURE: WHY SHOULD IT BE CONCERNING?

*** Elements of the hookup culture *** that afford participants freedom are more complex and more hazardous than the culture acknowledges. Bogle summarizes the situation quite succinctly, noting that “in many ways, the hookup system creates an illusion of choice. Although students may have many options about how they conduct themselves within the hookup culture, they cannot change the fact that hooking up is the dominant script on campus.”¹ ***

1 Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 184.

*** Feminism's pro-women stance is attuned to the sexism that other points of view might easily miss. *** Oftentimes a tradition will be unable to see the problematic aspects of its common practices. This opposition to criticism *** can obscure the real issues and prevent necessary challenges from arising because most people within the system will never conceive of questioning their normal activities in the first place. In such instances, it is the "view from the victims" that has the capacity to *** get to the true nature of the matter. ***

*** A feminist perspective is necessary to critique each element of hooking up, as it occurs in practice, in order to illuminate the bigger picture. ***

To begin, removing commitment from the interactions between men and women produces three *** challenge[s]. *** First, a true expulsion of commitment requires a separation of emotions from physical activity that is challenging to accomplish. A number of students report feeling awkwardness toward their partners in the days after a hookup and both individuals appear unsure of how to proceed without any sense of obligation to each other. ***

Second, researchers have found that however much young men and women value freedom, they do not actually wish to eschew all relationships. Admittedly, the extent to which this is a problem seems to vary by sex and age. Bogle observed that when men and women arrive on campus, both seem to want the same freedom to play the field, so to speak.² As time goes on, though, women quickly become disenchanted with the hookup culture, hoping for something more. In its 2001 survey, the IAV [Institute for American Values] found that 83 percent of women envisioned marriage as "a very important goal" in their lives and 63 percent of young women expected to meet their future spouse in college.³ Young men, however, do not seek marriage to the same extent. ***

While none of this is to say that no men want to marry and all women do, this sort of discussion still raises concerns about stereotyping and generalizing women's (and men's) experience. At the same time, acknowledging diversity does not make it impossible to speak about commonalities across human experiences. *** It is still significant that the majority of men and women in the thirty-year study maintained that marriage is important to them, making it possible to identify the hookup culture as a disservice to

2 Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 97.

3 Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2001), quotation on 42, 59.

both sexes in this regard. *** However, *** scholars still generally acknowledge that men are more willing to engage in the hookup culture for sexual gratification alone while women are more likely to be seeking relationships from their hookups.

*** Compounding the sexist operation of this arrangement, the IAV study uncovered that the decision to turn a hookup interaction into an actual relationship hinged on the male partner. *** College women are quite aware of the unlikelihood of achieving their goals within the hookup framework, but they still settle for hooking up, either in hopes that they will be the ones to buck the trend or because a “relationship” based on steadily hooking up with one individual appears better than no relationship at all. All this points to the disturbing conclusion that the hookup culture’s lack of commitment serves male goals while limiting female agency.

*** Scholars have also raised concerns about the challenges an abandonment of commitment poses for future relationships. *** The skills the hookup culture encourages young men and women to develop—specifically a detachment from emotion in relationships and an aversion to commitment—are not only unhelpful for creating and sustaining relationships and marriages later in life, they are antithetical. *** The only “norm” operative in the hookup culture is that individuals should avoid hooking up with someone with whom they might be interested in pursuing a relationship, and if they were to hook up, they should limit the extent of sexual activity as much as possible. This reveals that women and men in the hookup culture realize on some level that hooking up is a habit that is detrimental to relationships. ***

*** The reliance on ambiguous language further contests the perceived benefits of the hookup culture in much the same vein.

*** The ambiguity in language has the potential to stifle the development of character traits that would promote healthy interactions between the sexes. *** Relationships, and the trust upon which they are built, require frank conversations. This task is hardly aided by years of employing ambiguous language. The fact that this vagueness develops around relationships and sexual activity only serves to increase the possibility for future challenges.

In addition, one of the most beneficial traits of the ambiguity embedded in the term *hooking up* is its ability to leave as much as possible to the imagination of the listener. Intentionally or otherwise, this has the end result of fostering some level of misperception about the sorts of practices in which

college students are actually choosing to engage. *** In a culture with few rules to guide students' behavior, perceptions about what one's peers are doing play a huge role in determining how far individuals are willing to go sexually with a hookup partner. In general, college students believe their classmates are all engaging in more promiscuous activity than they themselves have experienced, a view that the research does not support. This belief is at least facilitated, if not directly caused, by the ambiguous nature of the language surrounding hooking up and only serves to encourage individuals to pursue riskier activities than they might choose on their own. ***

*** The supposed assets of alcohol's role in the hookup culture are also challenged by a negative potential to facilitate risky behavior. To begin, a belief that one's drunkenness will exculpate bad decisions can, and ostensibly does, lead individuals to make more perilous choices in deciding with whom to hook up and how far to go. Of primary concern, however, is the way in which an inebriation-induced lack of control puts women at risk for rape and sexual assault. This is particularly dangerous for women who may want to hook up but not have intercourse. *** Women will often drink in order to lower their inhibitions when they begin this process, and a woman's capacity to offer resistance can be further limited. What is just as troubling *** is the notion taught to and accepted by some females that it is a woman's responsibility to look after herself and not get into a position where she is uncomfortable or loses control. A more critical analysis from a feminist perspective shows, however, that the hookup culture and this view both avoid addressing how much control a woman really has in a system of pressure so geared toward fulfilling societal expectations of male sexuality.

Lack of control in the hookup culture is *** [also] created by *** the prevalence of social pressure to hook up, and the lack of viable alternatives. *** Once again, for a variety of reasons, it affects women more than men. For example, women must deal with a separate set of social pressures than men do: the legacy of the feminist movement. It may seem counterintuitive, but *** the initial message of female empowerment and total equality has been interpreted to say that women should participate in the hookup culture in order to match the freedom of men, who have (as a sex, on the whole) traditionally pursued sexual activity for individual gratification without worrying about consequences. As a result, women are told, and sometimes accept, that enjoying the freedoms of the hookup culture is supposed to be an empowering experience. *** To this end, some would say that the hookup culture helps women.

The claim *** demands critical analysis. *** Established traditions are not intrinsically ordered toward equality and flourishing for all members. *** In *** application to hooking up, this starts with the assumption that the structures of the hookup culture are not neutrally geared toward everyone's benefit. The appropriate challenge for each feature, then, is to ask [for whose benefit?] and to give women a chance to answer. In the case of social pressure to conform, the large number of women who report negative hookup experiences challenges the narrative of empowerment. The feminist movement may be a source of pressure for women, but this does not mean that the pressure benefits women. In a disturbing twist, men seem to be benefiting the most, and the women involved express this on the basis of their own experience. "Most girls," admitted one female student in hindsight, "eventually realize that getting a guy to sleep with you is just a fancy way of 'letting' a guy sleep with you."

*** A double standard clearly exists with regard to conduct. *** Female students have to walk a fine line between playing the social games of the hookup culture enough to maintain status while avoiding the "slut" label for participating too much. *** Unlike women, men in the hookup culture quickly learn that promiscuity on their part is either identified jokingly or for the sake of praise. *** Should their reputations be damaged, women can expect either social marginalization or a shrinking pool of viable hookup partners, since few men would be willing to hook up with a known "slut."

From a feminist perspective, the mere existence of these contrary sets of standards is enough to reveal discrimination in the hookup culture. Using this fact to conclude that the hookup culture is pro-men and anti-women would be too simplistic, however. Certainly, the hookup culture serves the relationship goals of the general male population (sex without relationships) and not those of the general female population (commitment). Additionally, as Stepp discovered, "guys frequently create the social environment in which hooking up flourishes and set the expectations about what girls will do."⁴ Yet the fact that men derive benefits from the system does not make it truly pro-men. Freitas reveals that the same structures that are stacked against women also pressure men to prove their sexuality by having sex with multiple partners, and any dissent from this pattern becomes a denial of their masculinity.⁵ It is important to be attentive to this fact

4 Laura Sessions Stepp, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 34.

5 Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101–2.

because the point of a feminist perspective is not to ignore men and focus on women. *** The goal is full human flourishing. It would be most appropriate, then, to speak of the hookup culture as being biased against women rather than unequivocally biased toward men.

Strengthening the conclusion that the hookup culture is biased against women, the limited alternatives to hooking up are similarly oppressive. First, the "friends with benefits" structure purportedly helps women avoid damaging their reputation without abdicating their sexual license because it limits their sexual encounters to one man. This hardly constitutes a relationship, though. More important from a feminist perspective concerned with challenging discrimination, this system is just as biased against women because neither commitment nor exclusivity is expected of the male partner. ***

Combining all these negative implications identified by a feminist analysis, the conclusion is clearly that the four central elements of the hookup culture offer only the perception of freedom. While this is arguably true for both sexes, it is indisputably the case for women. The removal of commitment places an undue burden upon all students to separate their emotions, deny their actual desires, and inhibit their potential for future relationships. The ambiguous language encourages them to avoid frank conversations with their friends and leaves them with little guidance beyond a constant pressure to go further sexually, while the presence of alcohol as a crutch puts women at greater risk for assault. Last, the social pressures to participate in the hookup culture are magnified for women, and work more for men's interests. ***

FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND ETHICS: ADDRESSING THE SEXISM

In light of its flaws, a desire for some viable solutions to the sexism of the hookup culture is certainly reasonable, especially for concerned outsiders adopting a feminist perspective. *** While there are numerous places to turn for potential resources, three of the more fundamental concerns of feminist theology represent excellent tools for this process because they can address one of the most important, yet least considered, questions behind the shortcomings of the hookup culture: "Why?" ***

[The] three fundamental concerns from feminist theology that can help facilitate this evaluation are the role of language in the constitution of the self, the link between autonomy and relationality, and the importance of structural analysis. The first notion, that language plays a role in constituting the

self, is essential because it explains why students should bother talking about a hookup culture that seems so impossible to change. As feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp describes, language is political and the act of giving voice to those who have been silenced has the potential for “emancipatory transformation.”⁶ The ultimate goal is to transform the structures of oppression, but even when falling short of this goal the project is not a failure because there is something self-actualizing about expressing one’s own experience. *** The act of speaking allows individuals not only to reflect on their experiences but also to have power over their own identity. *** This should *** be the first step in responding to the hookup culture, for allowing men and women to voice their own concerns in a culture that functions to silence frank conversation is itself a subversive act. As the notion that language is constitutive of the self suggests, the result will be first an empowerment of these students and then, hopefully, an emancipatory transformation of structures.

Similarly, the link between autonomy and relationality in feminist theology can help explain why the pursuit of independence in the hookup culture will necessarily be insufficient. Admittedly, feminism in a multitude of forms has long promoted freedom and autonomy, especially for women. *** What feminist theology has stressed alongside this, however, is that freedom must be properly understood not as complete license, but as interdependence. An excellent critique of the tendency to understand independence in isolation has come from Brazilian ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara, who *** has criticized Western notions of autonomy for being excessively individualistic. Due to the fact that individual autonomy “was promoted in a dogmatic, absolute, univocal, and unlimited way,” she laments, “what was originally affirmed as a value seems to have turned into an antivalue.”⁷ *** To counter this possibility, a foundational assumption of feminist theology and ethics expressed by Elizabeth Johnson stresses “that the self is rightly structured not in dualistic opposition to the other but in intrinsic relationship with the other.”⁸ There is an additional caution raised by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, however, that an exclusive emphasis on relationality can undermine women’s agency, making it difficult for women to recognize

6 Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 3, quotation on 18.

7 Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 72.

8 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2002), 68.

their own individual value apart from their relational identity as daughters, mothers, sisters, and friends.⁹ Keeping independence and interdependence together in tension, though, helps relieve some of these concerns. Thus the message *** is not that autonomy is a false human good, but that authentic independence cannot be understood apart from a relational conception of the human person. ***

A third basic concern from feminist theology and ethics, the importance of structural analysis, addresses why the social pressures perpetuating the hookup culture are so damaging. In feminist theology, structural analysis has accompanied an attentiveness to social context that has helped identify and combat injustice. ***

*** Structural analysis highlights the troubling fact that the hookup culture is built upon a coercive pressure to conform and that women bear the brunt of this burden. From such a perspective, the perpetuation of the double standard exemplified in reserving derogatory labels for women alone serves as an additional example of the injustices inherent in the structures that promote hooking up. ***

*** The role of language in constituting the self, the link between relationality and autonomy, and the concern for structural analysis will not lead to a sudden displacement of hooking up, but they can help change the practice. ***

Given the sexism inherent in the hookup culture, maintenance of the status quo is an untenable outcome. *** While it may be tempting to provide solutions for wholesale transformation of the hookup culture, there can be no one-size-fits-all answer to a phenomenon that has become a problem precisely because it assumed everyone should have the same thing. True change must come from within and the only way to support it is to help young adults think through the problems and alternatives. *** The main significance of these three resources lies in *** facilitating this conversation. *** I hope this discussion will allow students to move to the next step of creating a space and system for relationships more conducive to human flourishing and *** to chip away at a hookup culture that for all its supposed benefits [the hookup culture] is really nothing more than sexism in practice.

9 See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Project, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 55.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the role of “ambiguous language” within the hookup culture.
2. Why does Kelly think that the hookup culture offers the perception of freedom but not the reality?
3. Why does Kelly think that the hookup culture is “sexism in practice”?

■ Compare and Contrast Questions

1. How would Pineau respond to Dixon’s argument that some forms of assault involved in impaired sex should not be subject to the criminal law?
2. Does Kelly’s argument show that there can be a form of mutual coercion into sex?
3. Can Kelly’s arguments about the problems with the hookup culture be extended to sexual activity that takes place under other circumstances?