

Hooking Up in Young Adulthood: A Review of Factors Influencing the Sexual Behavior of College Students

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Hooking up, or casual “no strings attached” sexual encounters, has become the normative heterosexual relationship on college campuses. This phenomenon has only recently received public attention. Many citizens have become alarmed that this trend is indicative of moral decline in our culture, a reflection of our hypersexualized media, and a promotion of sexual irresponsibility. However, this is not necessarily so, and researchers have come to identify both social and psychological factors that have produced and continue to maintain this sexual environment on campuses. This paper will review some factors that previous research has discussed, including the shift in intimacy over the past century, social norms enforced by peer groups, psychological attachment style, and the developmental transition period between adolescence and adulthood. Implications for students and psychotherapists who work with students will be discussed.

KEYWORDS *casual sex, college students, hookup culture, sexual behavior*

INTRODUCTION

While research investigating the sexual attitudes and behaviors of college students dates back decades, it was not until after 2000 that studies addressing the so-called “hookup culture” on college and university campuses began being published in greater numbers (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Gilmartin, 2006;

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Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). “Hooking up” has no universal definition; however, several authors use definitions with a similar premise. Glenn and Marquardt (2001) define a hookup as a “distinctive sex-without-commitment interaction between college women and men” in which “a girl and a guy get together for a physical encounter and don’t necessarily expect anything further” (p. 4). Paul and colleagues (2000) define it as “a sexual encounter which may or may not include sexual intercourse, usually occurring on only one occasion between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances” (p. 76). Whatever definition is used, most authors agree that hooking up is a major feature of the college environment, involves casual sex practices, includes anything from kissing to intercourse, and the interactions have no strings attached (Bogle, 2008; Gilmartin, 2006; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Kalish, 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000).

One important point to recognize is that “hooking up” and “dating” are not the same concept, and these terms should not be used interchangeably when examining relationships in this population (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). When students discuss dating, it is in reference to two people who are already a couple going out together or when a man or woman attends a formal event, such as a Greek function, with a date (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Dating behavior is no longer the core of campus relations. Single students rarely meet others through traditional dating; now the hookup is at the center of heterosexual relationships on campus (Bogle, 2007b, 2008). So while students understand what formal dating is, it is something in which they do not often engage (Bogle, 2008).

The sexual scripts of dating and hooking up are different from each other (Bogle, 2008; Kalish, 2007). Each has their norms for meeting, becoming sexual, and handling the relationship. Hooking up often stems from a night out at parties or bars and involves alcohol as a social lubricant (Bogle, 2008; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Kalish, 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Its script emphasizes flirtation and nonverbal signals, followed by some form of a sexual interaction (e.g., kissing, oral sex, manual stimulation) in which the partners often do not communicate about what is happening, and it ends when one person leaves, passes out, climaxes, or the encounter is interrupted (Kalish, 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Thus, hookup partners rarely end up dating, and the sexual encounter is not a reflection of emotional intimacy or relationship commitment (Bogle, 2007b, 2008; Paul et al., 2000). Alternately, traditional dating involves getting to know each other during time spent together, a commitment of both emotional and physical intimacy from each partner, and the potential for marriage or long-term partnership.

Due to literature on the hookup culture being relatively new, it is not definitively known why and how these types of sexual interactions have become the norm. However, several reasons have been proposed. First, some scholars assert that more permissive sexual behavior stems from a

shift in intimacy over the past century—especially since the sexual revolution of the 1960s (Bailey, 1988; Bogle, 2008). Second, others have linked hooking up to social norms created and enforced by popular culture and peer groups (Agostinelli & Seal, 1998; Bogle, 2008; Chia & Gunther, 2006; Lambert, Kahn, & Apple, 2003). Last, some believe navigating sexual intimacy is a developmental process and reflects the transition from adolescence into adulthood (Bogle, 2008). Thus, college is conducive to hooking up because it is a space to experiment with and negotiate sexual boundaries. All three of these reasons posit that this behavior is influenced by social context.

While the potential explanations listed here are not exhaustive (see Bogle [2008] for more reasons why hooking up may be becoming more common on campuses), this article will focus on the explanations listed above in considering hooking up on college campuses and its psychological impact on students. Research addressing each of the explanations will be reviewed to help the reader understand more fully the extent to which the social environment of university campuses is affecting the beliefs, norms, and behaviors of students, both positively and negatively. However, no topic can be fully examined without touching on possible psychological constructs at play as well. Behavior is influenced by psychological and social factors, and sexual behavior is no exception. In fact, there is strong evidence linking permissive sexual behavior (hooking up) to attachment style (e.g., Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003). This alternate yet important factor will be reviewed briefly before providing implications for both students and clinicians who work with the college student population.

The conceptual and empirical studies reviewed in this article were found searching the online databases PsycINFO and Sociological Abstracts using the keywords of “hooking up,” “attachment styles,” “college students,” “sexual attitudes,” and “casual sex.” Other relevant literature was found through references listed in the initial studies obtained. Although this area of study is relatively new, this review does not include information on all studies related to the sexual behaviors of college students, such as the literature available about “risky” sexual behavior among young adults related to sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, alcohol abuse, or the role love styles play in relationships and sexual intimacy. The literature cited within this paper was chosen for several reasons, including impact on our understanding of hookup behavior, recent/up-to-date data (where possible), and unique, distinct findings.

WHY HAS HOOKING UP BECOME THE NORM?

In the following section, the proposed socially-based reasons for the development and maintenance of the hookup culture will be reviewed. It

will begin with a review of heterosexual relationships over the course of the past century. Following this, a discussion of social norms and misperceptions among students on university campuses will be explored. Last, the notion that experimenting with sexual intimacy is a developmental task of adolescence and young adulthood, with hooking up as one stage of the process, will be explicated.

Shifts in Intimacy Throughout the 20th Century

Prior the 1920s, the primary way in which a man and woman got to know each other was through “courting” (Whyte, 1990). This term meant a young man would be invited to call on a young woman at her home, spend time with her family, and allow all parties to get to know more about one another (Bailey, 1988). The interactions of the young couple were overseen by family members, and the purpose was to determine whether or not they would be acceptable marriage partners (Bailey, 1988; Whyte, 1990). Parents served as the relationship “gatekeeper” and often had the final say as to whether or not the young adults could develop their relationship and eventually marry (Bailey, 1988).

However, with the proliferation of cinemas and dance halls, and increased access to automobiles during the 1920s, young people found that they were often able to escape the watchful eye of parents and “dating” became the norm (Bailey, 1988; Rothman, 1984). Young men and women began to accompany one another out and had more freedom to choose the type of interactions in which to engage. Dating was a way to meet members of the opposite sex and have fun without being focused on the marriage potential of dates (Waller, 1937). There were strict codes around this era of dating as well. Dating partners were chosen on the basis of social desirability (Waller, 1937). Both men and women on college campuses sought to increase their social ranking through any number of means (e.g., being good at dancing, belonging to a fraternity, having attractive clothes). The dating scene was also highly monitored and controlled by peer relationships (Bailey, 1988; Waller, 1937, 1938). Given the pressure during this time to compete with other students and conform to this more permissive dating script, exclusively dating one person lost popularity (Bailey, 1988).

With the onset of World War II and the loss of available bachelors to date, the dating script began to shift, and “going steady” with one person exclusively became the norm (Bailey, 1988). The dating script of this time was more sexually conservative (Lance, 2007) and involved giving the other person a physical memento to wear (being “pinned”) to signal to others that the person was taken. However, this change did not mean that young adults committed themselves early to one person; there could be any number of “steadies” before deciding on an engagement (Bailey, 1988; Rothman, 1984). The goal for both young men and women was to find a suitable mate

and marry. With the postwar economic boom, opportunities for jobs and the affordability of single-family homes allowed couples to marry younger and settle into a family life (Bailey, 1988; Whyte, 1990).

With the coming of the feminist movement, sexual revolution, and social upheaval of the 1960s, relational scripts once again changed as young adults on college campuses turned to group events such as parties in order to meet potential partners. These group events allowed students the ability to either meet someone to date exclusively or to find someone to gratify immediate sexual desires. The ability to gratify sexual needs in the moment was largely due to increased availability of contraception, such as condoms and birth control pills. The development of more permissive sexual attitudes and norms led to changes in behavior such as increased premarital sex and oral sex (Lance, 2007; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Whyte, 1990). This was an era in which students rejected parental and cultural expectations (Strouse, 1987) and became, to an even greater extent, active agents of their own sexuality.

Changes that took place in the 1960s have carried over to the current hookup culture (Bogle, 2008). Young adults are attending college in greater numbers and marrying later, so university campuses are a place where they can experiment with sexual behavior and freely interact with the opposite sex without any parental or institutional oversight (Bogle, 2007b, 2008). The most recent data regarding the current hookup culture demonstrates high rates of participation as well as a broader notion of sexuality. Prevalence rates of hooking up on college campuses range from 53% to 76% of the student population (Grello et al., 2006; Flack et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2000; Penhollow, Young, & Bailey, 2007), with significantly more male participation (Paul et al., 2000; Penhollow et al., 2007). In a recent study, Trotter and Alderson (2007) found that students have a very broad definition of what constitutes “having sex,” a broad definition of what a “sexual partner” is, and a somewhat narrow definition of “virginity loss.” Thus, despite high participation rates in the hookup culture and rather extensive definitions of what sexual behavior is, students may still have a narrow definition of virginity loss in order to engage in the hookup culture and also maintain their status as “technical virgins” (e.g., oral sex is not considered virginity loss).

When looking back over the past century, Bogle (2008) noted several themes that emerged from the changes in heterosexual relationships. First, power from young women has been slowly eroded over time. While courting took place at the discretion of the young woman and her family, dating beginning in the 1920s placed control and responsibility with young men regarding asking, planning, and paying for a date. Now, with more women on college campuses than men, and students meeting at bars and parties instead of traditional dating, men have acquired even more leverage in intimate relationships. Second, there was a shift from relationships being under the control of families to increasing amounts of peer influence

regarding how to meet people and what is acceptable behavior. As familial oversight faded, and peer oversight strengthened, there have been increasing amounts of visible sexual intimacy between partners.

Social Norms Enforced by Popular Culture and Peer Groups

While perceptions of acceptable sexual behavior are impacted both internally (individual values) as well as externally (e.g., peer group norms, media), the social environment of adolescence and young adulthood appears extremely powerful. Wanting to belong and fit in with one's peer group often results in young adults conforming to perceived social norms (Bogle, 2008) despite having private attitudes and beliefs that are discrepant from the norm—a concept called pluralistic ignorance (Allport, 1924, cited by Lambert et al., 2003). Thus, a college student may think he or she is the only one who has reservations about the hookup culture, so instead of following their personal convictions, he or she conforms instead (Lambert et al., 2003).

Several researchers have gathered data suggesting pluralistic ignorance and misperceptions of sexual norms are widespread in college students. As reported previously, actual prevalence of hooking up ranges from 53–76% of the student population. However, Paul and Hayes (2002) found that students estimate about 85% of other students have hooked up. Similarly, students rated themselves as having more discomfort with hooking up than their peers (Lambert et al., 2003), less sexual activity and fewer number of partners (Scholly, Katz, Gascoigne, & Holck, 2005), more conservative sexual expectations (Cohen & Shotland, 1996), more sexual responsibility (Agostinelli & Seal, 1998; Lewis, Lee, & Patrick, 2007) and less sexual permissiveness (Agostinelli & Seal, 1998). Few students expected they would have sex without the presence of a physical or emotional attraction but believed the average other student would (Cohen & Shotland, 1996). And, perhaps surprisingly, men and women have similar misperceptions regarding their own and opposite gender peers. Lambert and colleagues (2003) found both men and women overestimate the other gender's comfort with hooking up, while Cohen and Shotland (1996) found that both men and women believed another person of their gender would expect sex much sooner than they would expect it themselves.

This evidence highlights that young adults in college have misperceptions about sex and the behavior of their peers. These misperceptions of students are positively associated with their own behavior (Lewis et al., 2007). Pressure to conform to peer norms does not decrease when students leave middle and high school and enter college (Bogle, 2008). Peer acceptance and approval continues to be a driving force in relation to sexual behavior in college. One study of high schoolers found a positive association between the odds of having nonromantic sex and peer approval (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2005), and college students are no different, especially

men (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998). Complying with perceived norms can lead students to engage in unwanted sexual encounters (Flack et al., 2007) after which feelings of regret and guilt may surface. While the outcome of some of these unwanted sexual encounters is negative emotionality, other students see their “mistakes” as learning experiences on their path to developing sexual maturity (Allen, Husser, Stone, & Jordal, 2008). Bogle (2008) agrees that hooking up is a phenomenon that begins in adolescence and lasts through college, but it is a phase that fades as students graduate and progress into the “real world.”

Hooking Up as a Developmental Transition

It must be remembered when examining intimate relationships on campus that they have not emerged in a vacuum. Navigating sexuality is an important component of development during adolescence that continues into young adulthood. Adolescents and young adults are faced with the tasks of integrating messages from peer groups as well as the broader culture about what is acceptable regarding sexuality and of determining for one’s self what is comfortable sexual behavior.

Adolescence is a period that allows teens to explore their sexuality, negotiate emotional and physical intimacy, and develop greater maturity as they grow throughout their middle and high school years (see Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006, for a review of this literature). An integral part of this process is experimenting with sexual interactions in both dating relationships as well as “nonrelationships” (Manning et al., 2006). In surveys of adolescents, researchers have found that teenagers are sexually active in a variety of ways (Halpern-Felsher, Cornell, Kropp, & Tschann, 2005; Manning et al. 2006; Remez, 2000). As a whole, the majority of high schoolers engage in sexual intercourse before graduating (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003; Center for Disease Control & Prevention, 2006). Thus, it can be said that experimenting with sexual intimacy is part of young people’s journey into adulthood.

In one study examining the sexual behavior of adolescents, 32% of 7th, 9th, and 11th graders reported having had vaginal sex (Manning et al., 2006). Of those who were sexually active outside of a dating relationship, 74% reported having had sex with a friend and 63% have had sex with an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend. Many teens in this category, both girls and boys, reported the desire to develop a dating relationship with their sexual partner. Of those who were sexually active within a dating relationship, about two-thirds said they felt closer to their partner after having sex, whereas 22% reported no change in the relationship. These statistics refute the commonly held notion that sexual activity during adolescence is detrimental to their relationships and carried out in a casual, “random” manner.

Besides vaginal sex, oral sex is also relatively common among adolescents. In a sample of 9th graders from two California schools, researchers found

almost 20% had engaged in oral sex (Halpern-Felsher et al., 2005). These students deemed oral sex less risky than vaginal sex as well as more acceptable for adolescents. In addition, older high school students have reported that oral sex requires a lower emotional investment (Remez, 2000) and is not considered “sex” (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Thus, it is apparent that adolescents in high school are weighing the costs and benefits of sexual activity in relation to both what behaviors to engage in and with whom. This cost/benefit analysis continues for young adults on college campuses as they navigate a new environment (Gilmartin, 2006). In fact, unlike the commonly held notion that hooking up consists of anonymous one-night stands, sexual intimacy on campus can look dramatically similar to high school. While some students hookup with “randoms” (Bogle, 2008), the majority of students hookup with friends, classmates, or other students with whom they are familiar (Bogle, 2008; Grello et al., 2006; Kalish, 2007). In addition, it is not uncommon for the same two individuals to hookup multiple times over the course of a semester or year (Bogle, 2008). This “friends with benefits” arrangement may provide the opportunity for students to be a part of the hookup culture, fit in with their peer group, and continue developing sexually without engaging in sexual experiences with strangers (Bogle, 2007a). While these recurrent encounters are not considered indicative of a relationship, it suggests students choose hookup partners with whom they feel a sense of familiarity and security.

This active decision-making process is reflected in students’ sense of personal agency regarding sex. A study conducted by Allen and colleagues (2008) found that 45% of students reported they were “in control of their sexual decision-making process” (p. 522) and thought no mistakes had been made on their part. Another 33% of the sample reported being “actively engaged in learning about themselves as sexual actors and decision makers” (p. 524), meaning they were reflecting on their sexual experiences and incorporating those into their developing sense of self. Another 14% said they “were working out their own sense of sexual agency but were facing difficult challenges about their earlier decisions” (p. 525). These students were struggling a little bit more with incorporating their past behavior into their sense of self but were trying. Only 7% of the sample reported not exercising personal agency and making “risky sexual decisions” (p. 526). So while some students are struggling more than others, the majority see their college years as a time and space for them to learn what are good decisions and bad as well as what they do and do not want.

One common theme that has emerged from the literature related to hooking up, “friends with benefits,” and “booty call” arrangements is that men and women have different expectations as they navigate the sexual environment of college campuses. Several researchers have found that women entering college often participate in hooking up with the expectation or hope that these encounters may lead to an exclusive romantic relationship

(Bogle, 2008; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Stepp, 2007). However, after learning the sexual script of the hookup culture and understanding that its main component is “no strings attached,” female students often lower their expectations and disassociate love from sex in order to fit in with peers despite continued ambivalence (Gilmartin, 2006). Conversely, men on college campuses often express no desire for hookup encounters to evolve into romantic relationships (Bogle, 2008), although some privately admit they want more than just hookups (Stepp, 2007). Women express a desire to marry by their mid-twenties at the latest, while men report wanting to wait until their late twenties or early thirties (Bogle, 2008). Therefore, it is clear there is a disconnection between the desires and expectations of men and women while attending college. However, once students graduate and leave college, it appears as though the culture of permissive, casual sexual encounters dissipates as recent graduates become more serious about adult responsibilities (Bogle, 2008).

There is a certain uniqueness about the college environment that makes it possible to closely monitor peer behavior as well as meet many other young adults at a similar point in their lives. Thus, the sexual scripts of college students cannot be considered a representation for the sexual behavior of all other young adults not enrolled at a university (Bogle, 2008). Compared to other single adults in their late twenties and early thirties, college students are at the more immature end of figuring out what “adult” life looks like and determining how they want to conduct themselves. Time in college provides young adults with ample opportunity to delay romantic relationships and engage in more casual relationships (Bogle, 2007b; Stepp, 2007). When talking with college graduates and other recent alumni, Bogle (2008) found that graduates “largely abandon the hookup script in favor of formal dating” (p. 130) once they are no longer in an environment that fosters hooking up. Graduates enter a new phase of adulthood that favors finding a more serious relationship with long-term potential. This shift from hooking up to traditional dating is a transitional experience for young adults since most of them have never actually been on a date. However, it is hoped by this point that these young adults have developed a more integrated sense of self and have more permanent goals for their adult years.

HOOKUP BEHAVIOR AND ATTACHMENT STYLES

While the research reviewed provides strong evidence for a social and contextual influence on the sexual behavior of young adults, others have examined attachment as a psychological component that may also be contributing to this behavior. Theories of attachment date back to the work of John Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and more recently have been applied to romantic

relationships and sexual styles (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987, Feeney & Noller, 1990; Feeney et al., 1993; Schachner & Shaver, 2004; Tracy et al., 2003). Research addressing the link between sexual behavior and attachment focus on three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious.

Research has shown that a secure attachment has positive impacts on intimate relationships and sexual behavior (Feeney et al., 1993; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Paul et al., 2000; Tracy et al., 2003). Adolescents and adults who are securely attached report relationships that are more satisfying and loving (Feeney et al., 1993) as well as trusting, happy, and friendly (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These characteristics are conducive to emotional and sexual intimacy. It has been found that secure people have stable relationships (Tracy et al., 2003) that are high in support and acceptance (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), constructive communication, sharing, mutual sexual exploration (Tracy et al., 2003), and investment in each other (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). These data suggests that the intimate relations formed by securely attached adolescents and adults are not congruent with the hookup culture. Indeed, it has been noted that secure adolescents frequently date and participate in *romantic* relationships (Tracy et al., 2003), have more mutual, *long-term* relationships (Tracy et al., 2003), and are less likely to participate in the hookup culture (Paul et al., 2000).

Unlike securely attached individuals, those who have an avoidant attachment style report relationships lower in satisfaction (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and intimacy (Levy & Davis, 1998), less interest in long-term, romantic relationships (Shaver & Brennan, 1992), and they experience higher rates of relationship dissolution (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). It has been reported that these individuals are less likely to fall in love and date (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Feeney et al., 1993; Tracy et al., 2003), and they are more likely to have sexual experiences characterized by more negative emotions (Tracy et al., 2003). These factors have great impact on adult sexual behavior.

Although they may dislike the affectionate and intimate aspects of sexuality, avoidant adults report higher acceptance of promiscuity and casual sex (Feeney et al., 1993; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). They report greater participation in these types of uncommitted sexual behaviors (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004) and often do so under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Tracy et al., 2003) in order to impress their friends (Schachner & Shaver, 2004). For them, emotional intimacy is not an important precursor to physical intimacy (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004), which may be indicative of their fear of intimacy and closeness.

Like individuals with avoidant attachments, adults who are anxiously attached also have difficulty with their intimate relationships. However, their sexual difficulties have very different causes, manifestations, and outcomes. People with anxious attachments have sex in order to decrease feelings of insecurity, create extreme closeness with a partner, and attempt to make their partner love them more (Schachner & Shaver, 2004). Thus, these adults use sex to fulfill their need for security and love, but in a very maladaptive

way. For them, the primary function of sex is as a barometer for the relationship—monitoring it for decreases in closeness and emotionality (Davis et al., 2006). While at any given time an anxiously attached individual may report high relationship satisfaction, under the surface there is a fear of abandonment and rejection by a partner (Tracy et al., 2003). This fear can lead to relationships marked by obsessive love and jealousy, extreme emotionality (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Feeney & Noller, 1990), and poor communication (Davis et al., 2006). People with anxious attachments cycle through relationships very quickly and rapidly become emotionally and physically intimate (Feeney et al., 1993). However, because of this style and root issue of just wanting to be loved, they find themselves (especially women) engaging in consensual, but *unwanted*, sexual experiences (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004).

Even though attachment styles develop in childhood and are psychologically based, it could be possible that the unhealthy relationships and sexual patterns of avoidant and anxious individuals are exacerbated by the hookup culture. Its emphasis on quickly cycling through sexual partners without any “strings attached” or attending to the emotional needs of the other person involved can be seen as a perpetuation of unhealthy intimate interactions. And whereas close friends and supportive individuals have the potential to provide corrective emotional experiences to increase secure attachment, their potential goes unused given the pressure and expectation of peers to be a part of this environment. Given the link between attachment styles and hooking up, professionals must examine students’ participation (or nonparticipation) using a psychosocial framework.

WHAT THE HOOKUP CULTURE MEANS FOR STUDENTS

Given the pervasiveness of hooking up in young adults, it would be naive to think this culture does not impact the vast majority of students seen in counseling. And while not all students hook up, simply attending a university and being a part of a campus community exposes all students to the sexual norms and expectations of young adults; we cannot say the hookup culture affects only those who take part in it. In addition, whether or not one personally sees this environment as problematic (see Glenn & Marquardt, 2001, and Valenti, 2009a, 2009b, for opposing views), it cannot be denied there are serious implications for students.

The Sexual Double Standard

A solid argument can be made that there is a sexual double standard on campus that puts male and female students in different positions of power and privilege (Bogle, 2007a; Manning et al., 2006). Historically, female

sexuality has been stymied, controlled, and managed by men. Thus, young women today walk a delicate line between being active agents of their own sexuality on one side and being labeled a “whore,” “slut,” “loose,” and “easy” on the other if they are deemed to hook up too often, go “too far” with hookup partners, or are perceived to be dressing/behaving in an overtly sexual way (Bogle, 2007a). Several researchers who have interviewed college students found women stuck between being expected to hookup and meet the sexual desires of college men but also remain “respectable” at the same time (Gilmartin, 2006; Bogle, 2008). Alternately, these researchers discovered that young men are not held to the same standards as women and are given more leeway regarding their sexual behavior. It appears men are able to have a more cavalier approach toward casual sex and not have their reputation threatened to the same degree as young women (Gilmartin, 2006; Bogle, 2008).

Unwanted Sexual Experiences

Given that hookup encounters are partly attributable to excessive alcohol consumption and conforming to peer norms, it is very likely that many students have engaged or are engaging in sexual experiences that they do not desire (Paul & Hayes, 2002). One study found that students who are participants in the hookup culture are more likely than their nonhookup peers to report unwanted sexual contact (Flack et al., 2007). In fact, Flack and colleagues (2007) found that nearly a third of women admit they have engaged in unwanted sex (often due to alcohol intoxication), and their sample showed 78% of unwanted sexual encounters took place during a hookup. Paul and colleagues (2000) found that 16% of their sample reported feeling pressured during a hookup experience.

Negative Emotionality

While students report a variety of positive emotions related to their hookup experiences (Paul & Hayes, 2002), it is not uncommon for students to report negative emotions including regret, guilt, shame, and anger (Glenn & Marquart, 2001; Paul et al., 2000; Paul & Hayes, 2002). Especially for women, the emotional consequences of the hookup culture can be troublesome, including higher levels of depression than men (Grello et al., 2006). Depressive symptomology may often stem from feelings of regret, and researchers have found that regret for female students is highest when they engage in one-time sexual encounters with men known for less than a day (Gute & Esbaugh, 2008). For men, traditional expectations of masculinity may put them at risk for negative emotionality. Being expected to enjoy sex with many partners and engage in these behaviors often may produce feelings of ambivalence, anxiety, and confusion (Paul & Hayes, 2002). While men and

woman may express negative emotionality differently (depression for women, anxiety for men), it has been found that students of both sexes who participate in the hookup culture suffer equally from lower self-esteem than their nonhookup peers (Paul et al., 2000).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICIANS WORKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS

While every student is unique, all equally participate in the social environment of college that promotes and maintains set norms for behavior. For many students, this is part of the “normal” college experience. However, other students will experience emotional and psychological distress due to perceived peer expectations. Clinicians must be willing to speak openly with clients about their experiences in the social arena as well as their sexual behavior. Given the research discussed, recommendations for clinicians are noted in the following sections.

Addressing Social Pressures

For clinicians who work with college students, it is imperative that we recognize, understand, and are willing to discuss the hookup culture with our clients. Talking with them about pressures they may feel will provide them the safe space they need to disclose and work through any ambivalence, frustration, and anxiety they have regarding the social environment of college. It is within the context of counseling that they can begin developing skills to assertively express their desires and needs with others. Whether this pertains to sexual encounters or being pressured into other risky behaviors (e.g., binge drinking), when students learn to find their voice they are empowered to make healthy decisions for themselves.

Addressing the Alcohol/Sex Combination

It is of concern that the vast majority of hookup encounters are coupled with alcohol intoxication. While students may believe that they are making informed decisions about their sexuality and acting as independent agents, when intoxication is present the issue of consent becomes blurry. In addition, it is of concern that so many students report that unwanted sexual contact occurs while under the influence of alcohol. For many women on the receiving end of unwanted sexual contact, not being willing to label such encounters as “assault” or “rape” (Flack et al., 2007)

may lead them to blame themselves for any negative emotions or consequences. As student advocates, we as clinicians need to help students recognize that mixing sex and alcohol has the potential for emotional and physical harm.

Addressing the Sexual Double Standard

Part of our job as clinicians is to hear students' ambivalence and help them make sense of conflicting feelings. Although the majority of students report that outcomes of hooking up include feeling excited, desired, and wanted (Paul & Hayes, 2002), this does not mean students do not also feel frustrated, restricted, and disillusioned. Especially for women who seek more than just hookups, being faced with an inflexible system that appears to both exploit their sexuality as well as hold them liable for behavior resulting from that exploitation puts them in a bind. Clinicians who have ambivalent clients must be capable of approaching their concerns from a systemic perspective in order to help students understand the greater forces and expectations at play.

Providing Services to Dispel Myths

Clinicians who work at campus counseling centers are in a unique position to provide services to students that are not provided elsewhere. It is apparent from the data that students have inaccurate perceptions about what other students are doing, how often, and when. Therefore, students may feel the need to keep up with their peers regarding sexual behavior even though students' beliefs do not match the reality of the environment. What may be more helpful than individual work (or as a supplement to individual work) is creating discussion groups where students create a safe space to talk about what they are feeling and correct for one another what is actually going on among peer groups. While students may already talk with friends about their experiences when things are good, having a place to talk with a variety of others about their internal perceptions could be a great first step in dispelling the myths of the hookup culture.

Recognizing That College Is a Time for Learning and Growth

One of the more difficult aspects of conducting therapy with college students is to see them make poor choices and learn hard lessons about love and relationships. While we certainly have a direct role to play if there is trauma involved, clinicians will have to recognize that most students feel they are making informed decisions about their sexuality. We as counselors may believe that clients are not making good choices in the moment, but

we must resist the urge to jump in and teach them lessons before they are at a place to hear them. Part of developing and growing up is trial and error. As their counselors we need to make sure that if they are willingly hooking up then they are approaching sexual intimacy responsibly (e.g., consistent contraceptive use).

Working With Attachment Styles

Based on the available literature, it appears as though individuals with anxious and avoidant attachments have higher probabilities of engaging in sexual relationships that could be high in emotional volatility or risk. When working with students who participate in the hookup culture, assessing and understanding their attachment styles could greatly assist counselors in gaining insight into clients' motivation for participation. A more thorough understanding can help shape interventions to address both participation and attachment style. This author believes much work can be done with long-term clients using the therapeutic alliance to help students begin developing a secure attachment style. The work done in therapy would hopefully translate to the development of healthier intimate relationships in the future.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from the literature published about the hookup culture that sexuality on college campuses is a complex system with both benefits and costs to participants. It is difficult to label this culture inherently bad or good. Sexual scripts among young adults are always changing, and as of now the hookup culture has center stage. However, there is evidence suggesting that psychological distress is a relatively common feature of being a part of this culture. It is up to us to learn more about the intricacies of these encounters so we can better serve the young adults who seek our help.

It should be noted that there are several large holes in this line of research. The overwhelming majority of studies have been conducted with white, heterosexual populations. It will be important in the future to more fully explore the sexual scripts and dynamics of student of color as well as those who identify with the lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender community. In addition, learning about the influence this culture has on international students is important as well. Last, while the research reviewed here includes information from both male and female students, the majority is conducted either with female-only samples or mixed-sex samples. There are two partners involved in hooking up, and much more research is needed about the experiences of male students.

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