

is hooking bad for young women?

by elizabeth a. armstrong, laura hamilton, and paula england

“Girls can’t be guys in matters of the heart, even though they think they can,” says Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*, published in 2007. In her view, “hooking up”—casual sexual activity ranging from kissing to intercourse—places women at risk of “low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, and eating disorders.” Stepp is only one of half a dozen journalists currently engaged in the business of detailing the dangers of casual sex.

On the other side, pop culture feminists such as Jessica Valenti, author of *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (2010), argue that the problem isn’t casual sex, but a “moral panic” over casual sex. And still a third set of writers like Ariel Levy, author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005), questions whether it’s empowering for young women to show up at parties dressed to imitate porn stars or to strip in “Girls Gone Wild” fashion. Levy’s concern isn’t necessarily moral, but rather that these young women seem less focused on their own sexual pleasure and more worried about being seen as “hot” by men.

Following on the heels of the mass media obsession, sociologists and psychologists have begun to investigate adolescent and young adult hookups more systematically. In this essay, we draw on systematic data and studies of youth sexual practices over time to counter claims that hooking up represents a sudden and alarming change in youth sexual culture. The research shows that there is some truth to popular claims that hookups are bad for women. However, it also demonstrates that women’s

hookup experiences are quite varied and far from uniformly negative and that monogamous, long-term relationships are not an ideal alternative. Scholarship suggests that pop culture feminists have correctly zeroed in on sexual double standards as a key source of gender inequality in sexuality.

the rise of limited liability hedonism

Before examining the consequences of hooking up for girls and young women, we need to look more carefully at the facts. *Unhooked* author Stepp describes girls “stripping in the student center in front of dozens of boys they didn’t know.” She asserts that “young people have virtually abandoned dating” and that “relationships have been replaced by the casual sexual encounters known as hookups.” Her sensationalist tone suggests that young people are having more sex at earlier ages in more casual contexts than their Baby Boomer parents.

This characterization is simply not true. Young people today are not having more sex at younger ages than their parents. The sexual practices of American youth changed in the 20th century, but the big change came with the Baby Boom

cohort who came of age more than 40 years ago. The National Health and Social Life Survey—the gold standard of American sexual practice surveys—found that those born after 1942 were more sexually active at younger ages than those born from 1933-42. However, the trend toward greater sexual activity among young people appears to halt or reverse among the youngest cohort in the NHLS, those born from 1963-72. Examining the National Survey of Family Growth, Lawrence B. Finer, Director of Domestic Research for the Guttmacher Institute, found that the percent of women who have had premarital sex by age 20 (65-76 percent) is roughly the same for all cohorts born after 1948. He also found that the women in the youngest cohort in this survey—those born from 1979-1984—were less likely to have premarital sex by age 20 than those born before them. The Centers for Disease Control, reporting on the results of the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, report that rates of sexual intercourse among 9th-12th graders decreased from 1991-2007, as did numbers of partners. Reports of condom use increased. So what are young people doing to cause such angst among Boomers?

Hooking up isn't the rampant, hedonistic free-for-all portrayed by the media.

The pervasiveness of *casual* sexual activity among today's youth may be at the heart of Boomers' concerns. England surveyed more than 14,000 students from 19 universities and colleges about their hookup, dating, and relationship experiences. Seventy-two percent of both men and women participating in the survey reported at least one hookup by their senior year in college. What the Boomer panic may gloss over, however, is the fact that college students don't, on average, hook up that much. By senior year, roughly 40 percent of those who ever hooked up had engaged in three or fewer hookups, 40 percent between four and nine hookups, and only 20 percent in ten or more hookups. About 80 percent of students hook up, on average, less than once per semester over the course of college.

In addition, the sexual activity in hookups is often relatively light. Only about one third engaged in intercourse in their most recent hookup. Another third had engaged in oral sex or manual stimulation of the genitals. The other third of hookups only involved kissing and non-genital touching. A full 20 percent of survey respondents in their fourth year of college had never had vaginal intercourse. In addition, hookups between total strangers are relatively uncommon, while hooking up with the same person multiple times is common. Ongoing sexual relationships without commitment are labeled as "repeat," "regular," or "continuing" hookups, and sometimes as "friends with benefits." Often there is friendship or socializing both before and after the hookup.

Hooking up hasn't replaced committed relationships. Students often participate in both at different times during college. By their senior year, 69 percent of heterosexual students had been in a college relationship of at least six months. Hookups sometimes became committed relationships and vice versa; generally the distinction revolved around the agreed upon level of exclusivity and the willingness to refer to each other as "girlfriend/boyfriend."

And, finally, hooking up isn't radically new. As suggested above, the big change in adolescent and young adult sexual behavior occurred with the Baby Boomers. This makes sense, as the forces giving rise to casual sexual activity among the young—the availability of birth control pill, the women's and sexual liberation movements, and the decline of *in loco parentis* on college campuses—took hold in the 1960s. But changes in youth sexual culture did not stop with the major behavioral changes wrought by the Sexual Revolution.

Contemporary hookup culture among adolescents and young adults may rework aspects of the Sexual Revolution to get some of its pleasures while reducing its physical and emo-

tional risks. Young people today—particularly young whites from affluent families—are expected to delay the commitments of adulthood while they invest in careers. They get the message

that sex is okay, as long as it doesn't jeopardize their futures; STDs and early pregnancies are to be avoided. This generates a sort of limited liability hedonism. For instance, friendship is prioritized a bit more than romance, and oral sex appeals because of its relative safety. Hookups may be the most explicit example of a calculating approach to sexual exploration. They make it possible to be sexually active while avoiding behaviors with the highest physical and emotional risks (e.g., intercourse, intense relationships). Media panic over hooking up may be at least in part a result of adult confusion about youth sexual culture—that is, not understanding that oral sex and sexual experimentation with friends are actually some young people's ways of balancing fun and risk.

Even though hooking up in college isn't the rampant hedonistic free-for-all portrayed by the media, it does involve the movement of sexual activity outside of relationships. When *Contexts* addressed youth sex in 2002, Barbara Risman and Pepper Schwartz speculated that the slowdown in youth sexual activity in the 1990s might be a result of "girls' increasing control over the conditions of sexual intercourse," marked by the restriction of sex to relationships. They expressed optimism about gender equality in sexuality on the grounds that girls are more empowered in relationship sex than casual sex. It appears now that these scholars were overly optimistic about the progress of the gender revolution in sex. Not only is casual sex common, it seems that romantic relationships themselves are riddled with gender inequality.

hookup problems, relationship pleasures

Hookups are problematic for girls and young women for several related reasons. As many observers of American youth sexual culture have found, a sexual double standard continues to be pervasive. As one woman Hamilton interviewed explained, “Guys can have sex with all the girls and it makes them more of a man, but if a girl does then all of a sudden she’s a ‘ho’ and she’s not as quality of a person.” Sexual labeling among adolescents and young adults may only loosely relate to actual sexual behavior; for example, one woman complained in her interview that she was a virgin the first time she was called a “slut.” The lack of clear rules about what is “slutty” and what is not contribute to women’s fears of stigma.

On college campuses, this sexual double standard often finds its most vociferous expression in the Greek scene. Fraternities are often the only venues where large groups of underage students can readily access alcohol. Consequently, one of the easiest places to find hookup partners is in a male-dominated party context. As a variety of scholars have observed, fraternity men often use their control of the situation to undermine women’s ability to freely consent to sex (e.g., by pushing women to drink too heavily, barring their exit from private rooms, or refusing them rides home). Women report varying degrees of sexual disrespect in the fraternity culture, and the dynamics of this scene predictably produce some amount of sexual assault.

The most commonly encountered disadvantage of hookups, though, is that sex in relationships is far better for women. England’s survey revealed that women orgasm more often and report higher levels of sexual satisfaction in relationship sex than in hookup sex. This is in part because sex in relationships is more likely to include sexual activities conducive to women’s orgasm. In hookups, men are much more likely to receive fellatio than women are to receive cunnilingus. In relationships, oral sex is more likely to be reciprocal. In interviews conducted by England’s research team, men report more concern with the sexual pleasure of girlfriends than hookup partners, while women seem equally invested in pleasing hookup partners and boyfriends.

The continuing salience of the sexual double standard mars women’s hookup experiences. In contrast, relationships provide a context in which sex is viewed as acceptable for women, protecting them from stigma and establishing sexual reciprocity as a basic expectation. In addition, relationships offer love and companionship.



Photo by Kevin Fitzgerald via Getty Images

There are up-sides and down-sides to both monogamous relationships and hookups.

relationship problems, hookup pleasures

Relationships are good for sex but, unfortunately, they have a dark side as well. Relationships are “greedy,” getting in the way of other things that young women want to be doing as adolescents and young adults, and they are often characterized by gender inequality—sometimes even violence.

Talking to young people, two of us (Hamilton and Armstrong) found that committed relationships detracted from what women saw as main tasks of college. The women we interviewed complained, for example, that relationships made it difficult to meet people. As a woman who had just ended a relationship explained:

I’m happy that I’m able to go out and meet new people... I feel like I’m doing what a college student should be doing. I don’t need to be tied down to my high school boyfriend for two years when this is the time to be meeting people.

The most commonly encountered disadvantage of hookups is that sex in relationships is far better for women.

Women also complained that committed relationships competed with schoolwork. One woman remarked, “[My boyfriend] doesn’t understand why I can’t pick up and go see him all the time. But I have school... I just want to be a college kid.” Another told one of us (Hamilton) that her major was not compatible with the demands of a boyfriend. She said, “I wouldn’t mind having a boyfriend again, but it’s a lot of work.”

Right now with [my major] and everything... I wouldn't have time even to see him." Women feared that they would be devoured by relationships and sometimes struggled to keep their self-development projects going when they did get involved.

Subjects told us that relationships were not only time-consuming, but also marked by power inequalities and abuse. Women reported that boyfriends tried to control their social lives, the time they spent with friends, and even what they wore. One woman described her boyfriend, saying, "He is a

reported that men's efforts to control them escalated. In the course of interviewing 46 respondents, two of us (Hamilton and Armstrong) heard ten accounts of men using abuse to keep women in relationships. One woman spent months dealing with a boyfriend who accused her of cheating on him. When she tried to break up, he cut his wrist in her apartment. Another woman tried to end a relationship, but was forced to flee the state when her car windows were broken and her safety was threatened. And a third woman reported that her ex-boyfriend stalked her for months—even showing up at her

workplace, showering her with flowers and gifts, and blocking her entry into her workplace until the police arrived. For most women, the costs of bad hookups tended to be less than costs of bad relationships. Bad hookups were isolated events, while bad relationships wreaked havoc with whole lives. Abusive relationships led to lost semesters,

wrecked friendships, damaged property, aborted pregnancies, depression, and time-consuming involvement with police and courts.

The abuse that women reported to us is not unusual. Intimate partner violence among adolescents and young adults is common. In a survey of 15,000 adolescents conducted in 2007, the Centers for Disease Control found that 10 percent of students had been "hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend" in the last 12 months.

If relationships threaten academic achievement, get in the way of friendship, and can involve jealousy, manipulation, stalking, and abuse, it is no wonder that young women sometimes

opt for casual sex. Being open to hooking up means being able to go out and fit into the social scene, get attention from young men, and learn about sexuality. Women we interviewed gushed about parties they attended and attention they received from boys. As one noted, "Everyone was so excited. It was a big fun party." They reported turning on their "make out radar," explaining that "it's fun to know that a guy's attracted to you and is willing to kiss you." Women reported enjoying hookups, and few reported regretting their last hookup. Over half the time women participating in England's survey

The costs of bad hookups tend to be less than the costs of bad relationships: bad hookups are isolated events, but bad relationships wreak havoc with whole lives.

very controlling person... He's like, "What are you wearing tonight?"... It's like a joke but serious at the same time." Women also became jealous. Coping with jealousy was painful and emotionally absorbing. One woman noted that she would "do anything to make this relationship work." She elaborated, "I was so nervous being with Dan because I knew he had cheated on his [prior] girlfriend... [but] I'm getting over it. When I go [to visit him] now... I let him go to the bar, whatever. I stayed in his apartment because there was nothing else to do." Other women changed the way they dressed, their friends, and where they went in the hope of keeping boyfriends.

When women attempted to end relationships, they often



Photo by Cyndy Andrews via Creative Commons

Problems posed by relationships range from time conflicts with schoolwork to the more serious issue of relationship violence.

reported no relational interest before or after their hookup, although more women than men showed interest in a relationship both before and after hookups. The gender gap in relationship interest is slightly larger after the hookup, with 48 percent of women and 36 percent of men reporting interest in a relationship.

toward gender equality in sex

Like others, Stepp, the author of *Unhooked*, suggests that restricting sex to relationships is the way to challenge gender inequality in youth sex. Certainly, sex in relationships is better for women than hookup sex. However, research suggests two reasons why Stepp's strategy won't work: first, relationships are also plagued by inequality. Second, valorizing relationships as the ideal context for women's sexual activity reinforces the notion that women shouldn't want sex outside of relationships and stigmatizes women who do. A better approach would challenge gender inequality in both relationships and hookups. It is critical to attack the tenacious sexual double standard that leads men to disrespect their hookup partners. Ironically, this could improve relationships because women would be less likely to tolerate "greedy" or abusive relationships if they were treated better in hookups. Fostering relationships among young adults should go hand-in-hand with efforts to decrease intimate partner violence and to build egalitarian relationships that allow more space for other aspects of life—such as school, work, and friendship.

recommended resources

Kathleen A. Bogle. *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York University Press, 2008). A provocative investigation of college hookups based on 76 interviews.

Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer, and Alison C. K. Fogarty. "Hooking Up and Forming Romantic Relationships on Today's College Campuses." In M. Kimmel and A. Aronson (eds.), *The Gendered Society Reader*, 3rd edition (Oxford University Press, 2008). Overview of the role of gender in the college hookup scene.

Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt. *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Mating and Dating Today* (Institute for American Values, 2001). One of the first empirical investigations of college hookups.

Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth A. Armstrong. "Double Binds and Flawed Options: Gendered Sexuality in Early Adulthood," *Gender & Sexuality* (2009), 23: 589-616. Provides methodological details of Hamilton and Armstrong's interview study and elaborates on costs and benefits of hookups and relationships for young women.

Derek A. Kreager and Jeremy Staff. "The Sexual Double Standard and Adolescent Peer Acceptance," *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2009), 72: 143-164. New empirical research confirming the continued existence of sexual double standards.

Wendy D. Manning, Peggy C. Giordano, and Monica A. Longmore. "Hooking Up: The Relationship Contexts of 'Nonrelationship' Sex," *Journal of Adolescent Research* (2006), 21: 459-483. Part of a series on sexual activity among younger adolescents.

Elizabeth A. Armstrong is in the department of sociology at the University of Michigan, and **Laura Hamilton** is in the department of sociology at the University of California-Merced. Together, they study how social class shapes women's academic, social, and romantic pathways through and out of the university. **Paula England** is in the department of sociology at Stanford University. Her research focuses on gender inequality in labor markets and how gender and class affect family life.

AD