

UNDERSTANDING HOOKUP CULTURE

What's Really Happening on College Campuses

[transcript]

PAULA ENGLAND: So I want to talk about what's happening in sexuality in college among heterosexuals. I want to give a descriptive portrait of what's happening these days in what I call the "hooking up culture" – and also what's happening with relationships – and show how patterns are still gendered.

So let me tell you what data I'm basing this on. First of all, I've been collecting some qualitative data at Stanford University where I teach – interviews of undergrads by undergrads, and I've also been doing focus groups in a class I teach on sex and love. And then I'm using quantitative data from an online survey of undergraduates. I now have about eighteen public and private universities that the data are coming from, so I have a pretty big sample. And today I'll limit things to heterosexuals.

So in the online survey, I asked characteristics of people's most recent hookup and about characteristics of the most recent relationship that they had been in – and said for them to limit that to a relationship that lasted at least six months.

Now what do they mean when they say "hookup"? Now what the survey said was "use whatever definition of hookup you and your friends use." And then I also asked about: Have you been in a relationship of at least six months while you were in college? And then I asked about the last time you and your partner did something beyond just kissing. So I'm calling that the most recent sexual event in this relationship. So you'll see reference to these results from these questions.

So, first of all, what do they mean by "hookup"? That is, what is sexually happening on what students call "hookups"? So this graph is telling you men's and women's reports of what they did on the most recent hookup. Now I should explain how I'm categorizing things here. I have sort of a – if you'll forgive me – base system, as we used to say. That is, suppose that in my hookup I made out with the guy, and there was hand-genital stimulation, and we had oral sex, but we didn't have intercourse. So I'm going to appear in the oral sex bar. In other words, you're classified on this hierarchy from left to right, the highest – not implying any value judgment – the highest thing you did.

So what you see here is that, if you wondered, does hookup always imply they had sexual intercourse? No. Somewhere about thirty, forty percent of hookups involve intercourse, a quarter to a third only involves making out and some touching and nothing genital. And then you have these categories in between. I'll intersperse qualitative data throughout. FR means female respondent. The qualitative quotes are all from Stanford students, but remember all this quantitative stuff is from the combined sample of all these universities. So she says, "All that happened was kissing and fully clothed action. I hooked up with him

again. There was more sexual stuff but not sex.” So it’s clear that when students use the term “sex” they usually mean intercourse. This male respondent said, “She was very happy to hookup, but actually having sex was going to really mean something to her.” Some of these quotes are just so priceless.

So are people hooking up with strangers? The answer to that seems to be not usually. Here’s their answers to a question about how well you know this person that you hooked up with – again this is the most recent hookup. So it’s less than fifteen percent or so said not at all, sometimes they know them very well. There’s a distribution here. Now one of the things that I had to learn when I got into this was I was sort of assuming that every hookup – it only happens once with this person. But in fact there are repeat hookups. So of this sample of most recent hookups, this is the distribution of how many times had you previously hooked up with the same person? And what you see is that twenty percent of them were “ten or more times,” although fully half were “we never hooked up before” – so there’s this distribution.

So hookups often involve alcohol. So if you look at men, at the mean they had six drinks – for women it’s four.

Asked “Have you contacted this person since you hooked up?” the vast majority of the men say “yes” – and actually most of the women too. It’s over sixty-five percent of the women. It’s higher for the men than the women I think because, as you’ll see in a lot of the later data, there seems to be this norm that men are supposed to be doing the initiating on everything, which seems to be still fully in force here. Now some people have argued, and in fact students will themselves often say this, that, well now there’s all of this hooking up and that people don’t date anymore. I started this whole research project – it’s an odd way to get into a research project – because when I was teaching at Northwestern, a student came to my office and said he wanted to do his senior honors thesis on why Northwestern students don’t date. And I said, “They don’t?” And this was the beginning of my whole education. Well, it turns out he’s wrong. They do somewhat, but here’s what I think is going on.

So, first of all, there’s this term “dating.” When students say that, they’re talking about already being in a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship, ok? It’s the prearranged date; you know John calls Mary on Wednesday and says do you want to go to a movie on Saturday or something? Do you want to go to dinner tomorrow night? That’s what’s much rarer than decades ago. When students say “we don’t date here,” that’s what they mean – these don’t exist at all. But in fact they do exist, but they have declined I think. Now anytime I start talking about trends in this talk, now bear in mind my data are only about now and so I’m sort of speculating, I sometimes fall into this bad habit comparing it to what I think was going on when I was in college among my friends, which is always a bad way to do social science. But, in the absence of data we all slip into it.

So to date – first of all dates sometimes come after you’ve hooked up with the person. And it’s very clear to me that dates are sometimes now a way that one person, usually the guy, signals to the women that he’s interested in more than just her body that he’s maybe interested in a relationship. So in that sense, I actually think that today if you get asked on a date, it is more indicative of a serious relational interest than it was say when I was going to college. But anyhow, so the date isn’t dead, but hook ups are more common than dates. Although not by as big of a margin as you would think based on all of this talk about how the date is dead.

And also you might be thinking, based on these hysterical media portrayals that you know, the average kid graduating from college having had fifty hookups or something. Which in the old days, wouldn’t be an uncommon number of dates by the way. But in fact, if we take the median senior year, you know it looks it’s somewhere about like four to six or something, four to seven or something like that. So, now there’s a lot of variation here, something like a quarter of the kids never hookup, and some people have lots and lots- so you know there’s variation. So, I said dating has this new meaning. So this man says, “There’s no such thing as casually going out to gauge the other person anymore. You can hangout but we’re only dating once we’ve decided to be in a relationship”

So once I got into this research for a while, I realized well the really interesting question here is, ‘how do they get to relationships?’ So here’s what I think is going on- first, most hookups don’t lead to a relationship, but many relationships came from a hookup. By the way, that would have been true about the date forty years ago, right? Most dates didn’t lead to marriage, but most marriages started with date. So it’s kind of like that with hookups and relationships here. Sometimes there’s romantic interests preceding the first hookup, sometimes not. Sometimes dates are coming in between the first one, and hookups and it gets sort of defined as a relationship.

So this guy says, “For a time it was a regular hookup, and then we actually started getting attracted to each other, and a relationship actually ended up happening”. So, this one sounds like the hook up was casual sex, they hooked up multiple times, and it kept being casual for a while and then interest in the relationship increased. This woman says, “It tends to start with an interest there already, like chemistry. Then alcohol and a party setting helps people hookup. If they’re really into each other a series of hookups can lead to a relationship”.

So she’s telling you more about this path where there is some interest before but somehow I think what has changed, is the date isn’t the common way in which you start playing out this interest. You know it’s almost as if there’s this whole other process going on about informalization it seems like. And maybe like, everybody is afraid about revealing their cards because you have to be vulnerable, something like that is going on I think. So, how do we know when we’re in a relationship? Students talk about the talk, sometimes they even call it a DTR - the define-the-relationship talk. And relationships become official, this is their term, or exclusive- implying relationships kind of imply monogamy, via a talk to define

more clearly what's going on here and this talk may come after a few hookups, a few dates, something like that. So here's some examples:

This guy says, "She asked me if we were just friends or more, I considered us to be more, I said I did." This woman says, "I was initiating a lot of the do you like me discussions, I think he was the one who initiated the actually lets do this". So as you see, it's not like these are these serious soul-searching hour-long discussions about lets define the parameters of our relationships. That isn't how it happens in real life. This woman says, "I wanted to see where I stood, but I didn't want to go are we exclusive? So I was sneaky and said, if my friends ask what's going on with us what should I tell them?"

So, I want to talk about ways in which this whole scene that I've kind of been describing is gendered. And there are four ways I'm going to talk about and the first one is physical pleasure. So I asked people about this most recent hookup, did you have an orgasm, do you think your partner had one? So if you just take all hookups, irrespective of what they did, forty-four percent of men and nineteen percent of women had an orgasm. Folks this is worse than the sex gap in pay in terms of proportions you know. Lets talk about orgasm rate in different contexts. So of first hookups it's eleven versus thirty-one, that's by first I don't mean your first ever but in your first with this partner.

If it's a second or third with this partner, sixteen for the women forty-three for the guy. If it's the fourth or higher with this guy, this person, it's thirty-three for the women, sixty four for the men. If it's a relationship of at least six months sixty eight percent for the woman, eighty five percent for the man. So relationships are much better for women in terms of orgasms but they're much better for men too. Now part of this is, people are doing more sexual stuff in the higher order things, but actually even controlling for that, there is this tendency for things to be better in a relationship.

So why do we have this big gap, going back to hookups? So one reason is, asymmetry in who's getting and receiving oral sex. This is just the distribution of who received oral sex and hookups when it happened, so somebody got it but there was not intercourse. So forty percent of the time both got it. It was a reciprocal. But when it wasn't reciprocal, then it's wildly disproportionately men receiving. It does seem like that a lot of the hookup is organized around giving men pleasure more than women, and that's one way in which this whole thing is really gendered.

Here are some quotes about this, this woman said, "he did that thing where they put their hand on top of your head and I hate that. Especially since there was no effort to you know, like return the favor." So I think this is telling you, there's several quotes in my data that say essentially this, mentioning this hand on the head thing, and I don't think it's that you know, the guy is forcing her down to his penis, I think what is going on is people are awkward and they're not really talking about things and it's embarrassing to articulate what you want, but the guy is trying to suggest what he would like you to do and he's giving you the idea. But she doesn't like it, especially when it's not reciprocal. This guy says, or

the interviewer says, “Was it reciprocal oral sex?” and the respondent said, “No I think a lot of the time the girl does it because it’s expected.” This guy says, “The female feels a little more protective of herself. They’re not really expecting or really allow themselves to be that open right away.” Some women will say this too, so I don’t think it is just his delusional idea.

So here is some contrast of what sexual behaviors occurred, in hookups versus relationships. So, I mean basically you can see people are doing more of everything in relationships. They’re having intercourse more often, the women are receiving oral sex way, way, way more, that’s the sort of the middle bar, twenty two percent versus fifty seven percent. They’re also giving oral sex way more, they’re having intercourse more, they’re actually having anal sex more, it’s interesting- one percent versus seven percent of relationship events. And hand stimulation of genitals is going on much more both ways.

So just a lot more is going on in these relationship events. But also there is less of this oral sex asymmetry, there’s some but less. So here’s women’s report of their own orgasm, and the men’s report of their own, the men’s, orgasm, where things are- this is just in hook ups, where things are classified by what they did sexually, and this is in terms of the respondent’s receipt.

So, the difference between the two bars under receive oral sex, is if men get oral sex they orgasm fifty percent of the time and women only thirty percent of the time- this is all hookups. If you had intercourse and did not receive oral sex, men are having orgasm about sixty five percent of the time, women a little more than thirty percent of the time, etcetera. Now, by the way, one thing I think is worth remarking on here is we often tend to have this idea, that well of course men, if they’re having intercourse or receiving oral sex are gonna orgasm ninety-nine percent of the time. Well it’s not here – it’s not true here.

Now remember, some of these people have had twelve drinks, they’re young, they may be awkward, so you know.

What about if we just take reports of the female orgasm. Given what they received/ what percent of women had an orgasm. But the other bar is men’s report of ‘did their female partner have an orgasm?’ So the point here is, men seem to be dramatically overestimating to the extent of which their partner is having an orgasm. I mean they’re either lying and they know they didn’t or they just don’t know - some combination of the two. I’m assuming that women are correctly reporting their own orgasm – that’s an assumption, seems a reasonable assumption. So why wouldn’t guys know, well one reason is women faking orgasms.

So this woman is saying, “He orgasmed I didn’t. I faked it because ‘cause I don’t want to hurt his feelings”. This woman says, “No, faked it. I do that quite often, I think a lot of girls do”. So, I had instructed these undergraduates who were interviewing other undergraduates, to ask people did you have an orgasm? So this is in response to that. This

male respondent is very up front he says; “I don’t think any hookup is based on mutual orgasm, I think it’s just based on an orgasm for me. I guess a consistent one would be based on mutual orgasm.” If you go back to that transcript you can see what he means by a consistent one is a regular hookup with the same person, he doesn’t actually mean a relationship. This is an interesting point because it’s very clear in the data that women orgasm more often if they’re in a hookup with the same person of four or more times than if it’s the first time. So, there is this partner specific learning that goes on in hookups as well as in relationships.

While some women are trying to seek their own pleasure - this one woman says, “He wanted me to go down on him, which I enjoyed. So I go to the bathroom and come back and he’s asleep. Next morning I’m going to assert my wand so I’m like taking his hand to move it down there and he goes for maybe thirty seconds and stops and expects me to repeat the night before, I was like I’m sorry.” So you know, not all women are just going along with this it’s for men’s pleasure. Now you might say, well women just don’t care about orgasms. In this paper I mentioned with Elizabeth Armstrong, we did some regressions predicting, ‘did you have an orgasm in the most recent hookup?’

We also have regressions predicting, ‘did you say you enjoyed the sexual aspect of this event?’ And if we put orgasm in that regression, the odds ratio is ten so- I mean in one sense, duh. Women are way, way, way, way, way more likely to say they enjoyed it if they have an orgasm. In fact this odds ratio is slightly higher for women than it is for guys. So they do care about orgasm. Even if their sense of entitlement doesn’t always lead them to do things to prioritize it. So here you see, although this is the enjoyment, the sexual activity enjoyment variable here that I was just speaking about, although women do say they enjoyed it much more if they had an orgasm, on the other hand even though we know there’s this big orgasm gap, when you compare men’s and women’s scores on how much they say they enjoyed the sexual activity in this event, I would say those two distributions are almost indistinguishable. In general, women are reporting about the same enjoyment level as men.

It sort of reminds you, those of you in the room that are sociologists, of this literature about job satisfaction from years ago. And they were always trying to figure out how women have these crappy jobs but they report just as much job satisfaction as men so it must be a lower sense of entitlement or your comparison group is other women or something. I think something like that’s going on. That, you know women think well, sometimes they like it sometimes they don’t but this seemed pretty good compared to what they think is typically happening in this. So both then asked “How much did you enjoy the sexual activity in the hookup and the overall hookup?” Both men and women say they liked it pretty much or somewhat, most of the time. So, what are women getting out of this, if it’s often not orgasm in the hookups? So I think sometimes it’s male attention. This woman says it, “Made me feel like I was cute, boosted self esteem.” This woman says, “The pleasure that girls receive from hooking up isn’t, like, physical.” She’s not exactly telling you what it is but there’s something there.

All right, enough about orgasm and pleasure. Let's go on to who's initiating these things in hookups and dates and stuff. So, about that most recent hookup where you can see I just drilled them with a lot of questions about this one event, one question was, "Who initiated spending time with this person the evening of the hookup?"

Then we asked, "Who initiated the sexual activity in the hookup?" And then people could say, you know, I did, my partner did, or we both did. And then based on what their sex is, we've figured out these charts. So, basically what you see here is that, especially for sexual activity, men are initiating a lot more than women. By either men or women's report, men are initiating much more, both the starting to talk and the initiating the sexual activity.

So, another thing that's going on is when they go on dates, I asked, "Who asked whom out on the date?" Now here, by either men or women's reports it's almost universally men asking women on dates. There is an attitude question in there, "Do you think it's alright for a woman to ask a man on a date?" Seventy-five percent of men and women say, "Yes". So they think it's fine for women to ask men on dates but women aren't doing it. So the male initiation is really still there. It's very interesting; I read this paper recently by Sharon Sassler. It's a qualitative study of co-habiting partners and she says there's a strong norm that the men are supposed to propose marriage. So it's very interesting to me how much these norms that men are supposed to initiate stuff, are still there or at least behaviorally they're there.

So then we asked, people in a relationship, "How did it become clear that this person was your boyfriend or girlfriend?" So what you see here is that, by either men or women's reports, the most common scenario was that the guy initiated a define the relationship talk. Sometimes the woman initiated such a talk and then, I love this, I just sort of knew, is one of the modal responses. Now, by the way, when I do focus groups, and I ask students, "Who initiates these DTRs?" they say women do. They're all in agreement, oh the women want the relationships more, they initiate the talks, but of the ones that actually become relationships, that ain't true. More about this in a minute.

So, another way that the culture of hooking up is gendered is the double standard. So when I talk in focus groups, students say women who hook up with too many people or go too far in the first hookup are seen as sluts. And the term slut is used a lot and other terms like ho etc. Men can be seen as a man-whore and sometimes that's pejorative, but also male peer groups, you know, encourage and sort of give high-fives for action. So, it's really clear that reputationally, women are being judged by a different standard as men. And I have had guys say in focus groups that if a woman has sex with him on the first or second hookup, she's seen as less relationship or dating material. So, you know, it's like, when I was 19 my mother was teaching me, well you want to be a virgin at marriage because otherwise, if you've had sex and then that doesn't work out, you don't marry that guy, another guy won't want to marry you.

Well this is kind of the shadow version of that. Almost nobody except Evangelical Christians is expecting virginity by marriage, but there still is this “What’s too much?” I love this quote, this male respondent says, “I see some girls just wanting to hook up.” The interviewer was one of my students, trained by me, says, “Are they treated differently?” So the guy says, “They’re called slutty,” it’s less stigmatic for a guy, there’s still that kind of ‘preserve the woman’ attitude or denounce them. A lot of times they go, “There’s no way I can date her but she’s hot for a hookup.” So, I think, on the one hand there’s a reasonable amount of acceptance that you might get in a relationship with a woman who’s hooked up a few times with other people but there still is this line and you never know exactly where it is, that if you cross it you’re damaged goods a little bit, at least if people know about it.

So we asked this question, “Have you ever hooked up with someone and then respected your hook up partner less because they hooked up with you?” Now, a minority of men or women say ‘yes’ but more men than women say ‘yes’, thirty three versus twenty three percent. And then, the right hand side is, “Have you ever hooked up with someone and then felt that your hookup partner respected you less?” So here we see more than half the women say ‘yes’ to that. Only about twenty percent of the men. So, actually, women are more worried about it happening, perceive it’s happened more than guys say they’ve done it but, by either account, it’s a problem women are gonna have happen to them more than men.

So, is relational orientation gendered? In focus groups and quotes, as I said before, students talk as if women are more interested in relationships. That’s why they think women are initiating more of the DTRs. Here’s the attitudinal data that support it: “About this most recent hookup, you were asked, how interested before the hookup were you in a relationship with this person? After the hookup, how interested were you in a relationship with this person?” So this is the percent of people saying, “I was not interested in a romantic relationship”. So, whether you’re talking about before or after the relationship, I mean the basic movement is they lose interest over the hookup. In both cases, more men than women are reporting that they’re not interested. And these differences are like forty versus twenty-five; up here it’s forty-six versus thirty-four. So they’re not trivial. It’s certainly not, you know, all women are interested and all men aren’t but there is a gender difference in this report at least.

This woman says, “Well right now he calls me everyday and I’m trying to look positive for the future, hopefully it’s something more than a hookup.” Here’s a guy who says, “I’m still interested in pursuing her in the purely physical manner but definitely nothing emotional or romantic where she might be more interested in something emotional or romantic.” So, I think it is somewhat true and it is perceived by students even more dramatically than is the reality probably, that the women are more interested in relationships. This woman says, “I feel like it’s the stereotypical girl thing to do, the guy feels like the girls boxing him into a relationship and I’m paranoid about seeming like that girl. If we continue seeing each other I probably will bring it up eventually.” So, she’s scared to initiate a DTR because she doesn’t want to seem like this, boxing him into things.

So my short conclusion. So we have this new social form, or relatively new, I don't know exactly when it started. In that something sexual precedes rather than follows dates or other expression of relational intent. But the gendering of this, it's new but this new social form, the gendering of it seems quite as extreme as the gendering of the old dating and courtship forms. I mean that would be the broad-brush conclusion, lots of other things one could want to make conclusions about. And I think, I've been interested in, should we think this thing is good for women or bad for women and it's always compared to what, you know. Compared to the old system? I think it's unclear. In some ways, women are empowered. In some ways, maybe they're exploited more. I mean we can maybe talk about that. So I suggest we do talk about it, thank you for your attention.

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