



The Shift from Dating to Hooking up in College: What Scholars Have Missed

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Abstract

In recent years, research has been building that suggests dating has been replaced by hooking up as the dominant way for heterosexual students to get together on college campuses. Although recent studies have documented the phenomenon of hooking up, there is evidence that this behavior was likely in place long before it was recognized in the literature. Yet, for the past several decades, scholars have continued to examine ‘dating’ among college students. This calls into question whether scholars missed a fundamental shift in how heterosexual men and women form sexual and romantic relationships on campus. In this paper, I will (i) review the major findings on hooking up, (ii) explain the differences between traditional dating and hooking up, (iii) explore when traditional dating declined and hooking up emerged on the college campus, and (iv) discuss the effect of this shift on the literature.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, studies have begun to document the phenomenon of ‘hooking up’ in college (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Lambert et al. 2003; Paul and Hayes 2002; Paul et al. 2000). In 2001, a national study on college women’s sexual attitudes and behaviors found that college students rarely go on traditional dates; instead, they hook up. Glenn and Marquardt (2001, 4) define a hookup as: ‘when a girl and a guy get together for a physical encounter and don’t necessarily expect anything further’. Glenn and Marquardt (2001) found that hooking up is a very common practice, so much so that they concluded that this form of interaction is dominating male–female interaction on the modern college campus. In the quantitative portion of their study, they found that 91% of college women believed hookups occurred ‘very often’ or ‘fairly often’ on their campus. Furthermore, 40% of the college women sampled said they had personally engaged in a hookup encounter since coming to college. Glenn and Marquardt (2001, 4) concluded ‘hooking up, a distinctive sex-without-commitment interaction between college men and women, is widespread on-campus and profoundly influences campus culture’.

Other studies reveal further evidence that hooking up is a hallmark of the college experience. In a representative study of undergraduate students at a college in the Northeastern part of the USA, 78.3% of the men and women sampled had hooked up. Paul et al. (2000) found that the participants' total number of hookup partners ranged from 0–65 with an average of 10.8 and a median of 6. Paul et al. (2000, 84) concluded that 'some students were hooking up on a weekly basis'. In Bogle's (2008) qualitative study of 76 college students and young alumni from two universities on the East Coast, hooking up was found to be the primary script for how men and women interact on campus. Bogle (2008) argues that the campus environment and the way in which students define college life promote hooking up among students on contemporary college campuses.

Dating versus hooking up: Not just a semantic debate

Hooking up is a term widely used on campuses to describe heterosexual intimate interaction; it is not just a contemporary term used to describe dating. In fact, the terms 'hooking up' and 'dating' have distinct meanings and in most instances are not used interchangeably (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). When college students use the term 'hookup', it generally refers to a man and woman pairing off at the end of a party or evening at a bar to engage in a physical/sexual encounter. The hookup can involve anything from kissing to sexual intercourse or anything seen as falling in-between these two ends of the sexual spectrum. Regardless of what happens sexually, a hallmark of hooking up is that there are no obligations or 'strings attached' to the encounter (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001).

College students recognize what dating means, but they rarely do it. When students use the term 'date', they are not referring to dating in the traditional sense (i.e., the type of dating that was popular from the 1920s through the mid-1960s on college campuses [Bailey 1988]). Rather, they are referring to either a man and a woman, who are *already a couple*, going out on a date, or attending a fraternity or sorority function accompanied by a date (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). In other words, single or unattached students generally do not get together with the opposite sex via traditional dating and formal dating is not at the center of the college experience.

The hooking-up script and the traditional dating script are fundamentally different. Each script carries its own set of norms for behavior. Although there is some overlap, there are several critical distinctions. During the dating era, social life focused on the dating pair. The script for a date followed many widely recognized conventions. Men initiated invitations to go out on dates. The man was supposed to contact the woman to ask for a date in advance, giving her at least several days notice; he was

responsible for planning an activity for the date, such as going to dinner or a movie, as well as picking the woman up and driving (or walking) her home. Given that the man was responsible for the initiation and planning of the date, he had to pay for any expenses (Bailey 1988).

The hookup script is less formal. Hookups generally occur at the culmination of a night of 'hanging out' among a large group of classmates/friends at a campus party or local bar. Either the man or woman can initiate the interaction, but in either case cues will be nonverbal (eye contact, body language, attentiveness, etc.). Neither the man nor the woman is responsible for the expenses incurred during the evening. In most cases, the only expense would be alcohol and college students usually pay their own way or may buy 'a round' for their friends (Bogle 2008).

Alcohol seems to play a more central role in facilitating the hookup script than it did in the dating era (Bailey 1988). In fact, alcohol is not only available at campus social events that culminate in hookup encounters, but it is often consumed by one or both parties involved in the hookup (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Paul et al. 2000). Many students believe that drinking alcohol lowers their inhibitions, thereby making a hookup possible. Without alcohol as a social lubricant, it is unlikely that college students would be able to signal interest in a hookup and deal with the potential for rejection inherent to this script. This 'need for alcohol' may account for the increasing role that 'partying' has played in the social lives of college students over the past several decades (Moffatt 1989; Strouse 1987). Thus, alcohol use and alcohol-centered events (e.g., campus parties) play a critical role in making hookup encounters possible.

Another critical distinction between dating and hooking up is that when the dating script dominated campus life, college men and women went on dates first and then, in some cases, became sexually intimate with one another. Moreover, with dating, there was some expectation that the degree of sexual intimacy would match the level of emotional intimacy (Bailey 1988; Whyte 1990). College students following the hookup script, on the other hand, become sexual first and may not ever go on a date with their hookup partner. Additionally, with hooking up the degree of sexual intimacy is often not connected to the level of commitment to the relationship. For example, some hookup encounters include oral sex or sexual intercourse, yet no ongoing romantic relationship is formed between the partners (Bogle 2008; Paul et al. 2000).

Thus, the hooking-up script is distinct from traditional dating. Furthermore, the studies that have been conducted thus far suggest that hooking up has replaced dating as the primary means by which college students initiate sexual and romantic relationships. Yet, most research prior to 2000 focused exclusively on dating. This raises the question: When did traditional dating lose its dominance and hooking up begin to emerge?

The demise of the dating system

Some scholars who have studied dating found that a shift took place in America's 'dating' culture since the 1960s sexual revolution (Bailey 1988; Whyte 1990). In *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, social historian Beth Bailey asserts that 'it has been more than a quarter of a century since the dating system lost its coherence and dominance' (1988, 141). According to Bailey (1988), the mid-1960s represent a period of change in American culture that ushered in a 'new system of courtship'. Although Whyte (1990) found some continuity in dating patterns across generations, he acknowledged a dramatic change in the sexual behavior of singles who came of age after 1965.

One of the earliest references to the demise of formal dating was made by Murstein. In a review of mate selection research for the 1970s, Murstein (1980) posed the question: 'Is dating dying?' Murstein concluded that the traditional date is 'rapidly disappearing' among both high school and college students. Other scholars have also referred to the lack of traditional dating in college. Horowitz's historical analysis of undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century through the mid-1980s found that 'formal dating ... had largely stopped in the 1960s, replaced by informal group partying ...' (1987, 259). Similarly, Moffatt's anthropological study of students at a college in the Northeastern part of the country found 'the principal peer-group activity associated with student sexuality at Rutgers in the 1980s was 'party'ing'. Through parties, students tried to meet new erotic partners or got in the mood for sexual pleasures with partners they already knew' (1989, 49). Strouse also noted the increasing importance of group interaction among college students. 'In the 1970s, the youth rejected the formal rules and rigidity of dating' (Strouse 1987, 374). In fact, Strouse argued that college bars and parties play a crucial role in facilitating heterosexual contact during college.

These studies show that some scholars began to call into question whether dating had the same relevance on college campuses as it once did. Furthermore, this research suggested a fundamental change in how heterosexual college students 'get together'. Thus, although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact time and place when dating began to lose prominence among college students, the evidence points to a new system beginning to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although scholarship on relationships and sexual behavior did not recognize the shift to hooking up in college prior to 2000, the term began to surface in studies of campus culture conducted in the 1990s (Boswell and Spade 1996; Handler 1995; Williams 1998). Handler's (1995) study of sororities found hooking up to be a part of social life among sorority sisters and fraternity brothers. Similarly, Boswell and Spade's (1996) study of fraternities and rape culture found that hooking up was common on

campus. Williams's (1998) study of the connection between alcohol, drugs, and relationships among college women found that 'drunken hookups' occurred regularly and that alcohol played a key role in facilitating the hooking-up process.

When one looks beyond behavioral research, the term 'hooking up' can be found in a number of studies on slang terminology (Eble 1996; Glowka et al. 1999; Hancock 1990; Murray 1991). For example, Murray's (1991) study of slang terms used by college students on campuses across the country each year from 1983 to 1988 included an entry for 'hookup'. The primary definition given was to 'acquire a sexual companion' (Murray 1991, 222). Interestingly, the term was recorded at 33 campuses (the most among the entries) and also appeared in the definitions of four other terms. For example, the term 'raid' was defined as an 'uninvited, unwelcome person who interferes in any way with hooking up' (Murray 1991, 222). Eble's (1996) comprehensive study of college slang used at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill between the 1970s and 1990s found the term 'hookup' to be commonly used from the mid-1980s. Eble's definition included 'to find a partner for romance or sex' or 'to kiss passionately'.

Thus, almost 20 years before social scientists began conducting research on hooking up, the term was being used on campuses throughout the country. If, as some scholars have suggested, (i) dating has not been the dominant script on campuses since the late 1960's, and (ii) hooking up has replaced dating as the dominant script in college, then what does this mean for the past few decades of research on heterosexual interaction?

Reexamining the 'dating' literature

Despite the evidence of the decline of traditional dating and the emergence of hooking up, the dating literature from the past several decades missed this fundamental shift in how college men and women meet and form sexual and romantic relationships. Although there is a vast literature on dating, the overwhelming majority does not look at *how* men and women get together. Instead, research on unmarried heterosexuals during this period has primarily focused on couples. Much of this research, using college student samples, assumes the dating script is still intact and then proceeds to examine various aspects of dating relationships. For example, many studies examine gender differences in sexual attitudes among dating couples (Cupach and Metts 1995; Seal and Agostinelli 1994; Sheppard et al. 1995). Gender differences have also been examined in other (nonsexual) aspects of dating relationships, such as relative power (Felmlee et al. 1994) and emotion (Sprecher and Sedikides 1993). A number of studies have also examined why premarital dating relationships break up (Felmlee et al. 1990; Sprecher 1994), how individuals cope with the break up (Cupach and Metts 1986), and how they define their relationship once the break up is over (Foley and Fraser 1998).

Although the dating literature failed to recognize the demise of formal dating on college campuses, some of the sexual behavior scholarship in this period does reflect the cultural changes happening in society. For example, as changes in sexual behavior (e.g., increased rates of premarital sex) and the threat of HIV/AIDS were documented, researchers began to study 'casual sex' or 'risky sex' among college students (Baldwin and Baldwin 1988; Carroll and Carroll 1995; Cooper 2002; Dermen et al. 1998; Desiderato and Crawford 1995; Hammer et al. 1996). These studies of sexual behavior and its correlates make an important contribution to understanding single men and women's sexuality, but the concept of casual or risky sex does not address the many issues that the hookup script encompasses. Although hooking up can take the form of casual sex or a 'one-night stand', it is not limited to that scenario (Bogle 2008; Paul and Hayes 2002). Thus, while many scholars recognized changes in heterosexual interaction after the 1960s sexual revolution, the focus was on changes in sexual behavior, not on changes to the script itself.

Given the evidence of the decline of formal dating in college and the subsequent shift to hooking up, research over the past few decades that presupposes the existence of the dating script in college may prove problematic. Hooking up is its own script, with its own norms for how to meet, get together, become sexually intimate, and manage the potential formation of relationships. In light of this new script, we must reconsider whether much of the dating literature from 1970 to present accurately reflects the intimate lives of college students, and indeed singles in general.

Terminology problem

Hooking up and dating do not mean the same thing; therefore, these terms cannot be used interchangeably in research studies. Hooking up is not merely a new name for an old concept. Unfortunately, scholars have continued to use the terms 'date' and 'dating' in their research long after 1970 when this likely began to diminish as the dominant script on campus (Bell and Buerkel-Rothfuss 1990; Bettor et al. 1995; Cohen and Shotland 1996; Cupach and Metts 1995; Felmlee et al. 1994; Gilbert et al. 1999; Hogben et al. 1996; Laner and Ventrone 2000; Mongeau et al. 2004; Mongeau and Johnson 1995; Morr and Mongeau 2004; Seal and Agostinelli 1994; Smith et al. 1995; Sprecher 1990; Sprecher and Sedikides 1993). For example, Cohen and Shotland (1996) examined the expectations, experiences, and perceptions of college students with regard to appropriate timing for various forms of sexual intimacy, including intercourse. To this end, the authors designed a questionnaire that asked college students to indicate 'after how many dates/weeks of dating' they thought various sexual acts would be expected or 'after how many dates/weeks of dating' they experienced various sexual acts. Thus, Cohen and

Shotland are taking for granted that dating is the means for college students to become sexually intimate.

Similarly, Mongeau and Johnson (1995) examined sexual expectations and behavior on a 'first date' among college students. The authors asked students to report on 'their most recent male- or female-initiated first date' (1995, 301). Once again the authors are assuming that heterosexual students initiate potentially romantic or sexual interaction via the traditional dating script.

In addition to the fact that many studies reference a script that had become passé, the terms 'date' and 'dating' do not mean the same thing to contemporary college students as they did to previous generations. College students rarely go on a traditional style date unless (i) they are attending an event that requires bringing a date, such as a fraternity or sorority dance, or (ii) they are already in an exclusive relationship (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001).

Although some students become a couple where one does go on a date with his or her boyfriend/girlfriend, because most hookup encounters do not lead to an exclusive relationship, many students never reach the stage in a relationship where going to dinner and a movie would seem appropriate. Thus, what students refer to as dating today is clearly not the same as traditional dating, which dominated campus life from the 1920s through the mid-1960s (Bailey 1988).

Generalizability problem

Many of the studies on dating from 1970 to present are based on research using college student samples. This raises the question: Can college students represent single adults who (i) never attended college and (ii) have graduated and/or left the college environment? Given the demographic differences between college students and singles at large and the nature of the contemporary college campus itself, it is unlikely that the sexual script followed by students mirrors that of all singles.

One reason that college students cannot fairly represent all singles is that the college environment is unique. On campus, students are often surrounded by people like themselves in a close-knit living situation. Fellow students, even those who are technically strangers, have a sense of camaraderie because they attend the same school. The campus environment also creates an arena where students monitor what one another are doing sexually and can be strongly influenced by their peers (Bogle 2008). Additionally, as the literature on alcohol use has documented, students often define their college years as a 'time to party' (Peralta 2001). Given this focus, students can often be found traveling in groups to campus parties or off-campus bars where they socialize with many other students. Since the social rituals followed by single men and women living on a college campus are somewhat different from those of the general public, the sexual script is different in that environment (Bogle 2008).

Another reason that the behavior of college students may not be indicative of all heterosexual singles is their age relative to average ages at first marriage. During much of the dating era, the age of college students matched that of singles in the rest of the country. For example, traditional age college students (18–22) in 1960 came of age in an era when the age of first marriage was 20 for women and 22 for men. Whereas today, the average age at first marriage has increased to over 25 for women and over 27 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Given that men and women are staying single longer than ever before, there can be a significant age gap between a single man or woman in college and their postcollege, single counterparts. Therefore, adults who are single into their late twenties and early thirties may not adhere to the same sexual script as younger singles who, while in college, are at the low end of the spectrum for singles nationwide. In other words, contemporary college students are delaying marriage and have more time to spend in less serious relationships.

As a result of the differences between college students and the general population of single men and women, the intimate partnering practices that dominate college campuses may not look the same as those in the larger culture. In fact, Bogle (2008) found that traditional dating is much more common after college. Recent graduates, who engaged in hooking up during college, largely abandon this script in favor of more traditional dating once the environmental factors that facilitated hooking up disappear. Additionally, after one leaves the college environment, the search for a permanent mate alters the tone of heterosexual interaction (Bogle 2008). Thus, studies conducted with samples of college students may not accurately reflect the relationships and sexual behavior of all singles.

Consider the study of Surra and Hughes (1997), which consisted of initial interviews and follow-ups with 60 ‘premarital’ couples. Subjects were recruited through announcements in large undergraduate courses as well as letters sent to campus residence halls of a Midwestern university. Solicitations requested students to participate ‘in a study of dating if they were seeing someone of the opposite sex’ (Surra and Hughes 1997, 9). The study was conducted in order to gain an ‘insider’s perspective’ on the likelihood of a person marrying their current dating partner. Given that most college students will not marry until several years after they graduate, research studies on marital commitment might be better employed with postcollege couples. Regardless, the results cannot be generalized to all dating couples.

Conclusion

Scholars who study intimate relationships must be aware of the influence that cultural factors have on sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973). As our society changed in the 1960s, research indicates that the norms and

behaviors associated with the dating script became outdated, particularly on college campuses. Despite the evidence, many scholars continued to assume the status quo. Recent studies show that a new script dictating the rules for heterosexual interaction on college campuses has emerged: hooking up. The challenge now is for scholarship to begin reflecting the changes in the script.

We are just beginning to understand what hooking up is, how it operates, and the consequences of this behavior. Now that the hookup script has been identified, both quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to learn more. Regardless of the type of study, researchers must first be cognizant of the accuracy of their definition of hooking up that, like dating, can have multiple meanings. Second, research studies should be designed to address the variations of the script and the implications of these differences. This information will not only be important to scholars, but also college administrators and college students themselves.

Defining hooking up

Researchers must begin by utilizing definitions that accurately reflect the range of behaviors associated with the hookup script on college campuses. In the only major nationally representative study on this issue, Glenn and Marquardt defined hooking up as: 'when a girl and a guy get together for a physical encounter and don't necessarily expect anything further' (2001, 4). Importantly, Glenn and Marquardt's research team conducted qualitative interviews with college women throughout the country in order to inform the definition they used in the quantitative survey portion of their study. On the positive side, the ambiguity in their definition (i) reflects the range of behaviors that are a part of the hookup script and (ii) allows for most hookup encounters to be counted as part of their statistics on the prevalence of hooking up.

However, there are also potential problems with this definition. First, it might be useful to know how many hookups were of the anonymous, alcohol-driven variety versus how many fit into another subtype of hooking up. It is impossible to know this from their definition. Second, the phrase 'don't necessarily expect anything further' may be misleading. Bogle (2008) found that some students, particularly women, often do expect 'something further' to develop from a hookup encounter. These women learn over time to lower their expectations regarding the likelihood of a hookup developing into some semblance of a romantic relationship.

A second representative study was conducted by Paul et al. (2000), a team of psychologists at a college in the Northeastern part of the USA. Their self-administered questionnaire began by defining hookup as 'a sexual encounter, usually only lasting one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances. Some physical interaction is typical but may or may not include sexual intercourse' (Paul et al. 2000, 79). Two

aspects of this definition are problematic. First, Paul et al. say that hooking up usually only lasts one night. However, Bogle (2008) found that although the most likely outcome of a hookup was 'nothing' (i.e., no ongoing romantic relationship formed) there were a variety of other possible outcomes. A hookup may lead to a series of hookup encounters, a 'friends with benefits' arrangement, seeing each other/talking/hanging out, or going out (i.e. becoming an exclusive couple). Thus, it may be misleading to have the phrase 'only lasting one night' in the survey definition.

A second concern with the definition of Paul et al. is the reference to hookup encounters involving 'strangers or brief acquaintances'. Lambert et al. (2003) utilize similar terminology to describe the prior relationship status of hookup partners, by suggesting that the two parties are either 'casual acquaintances' or 'just met that evening'. Although this is true in some cases, it is certainly not true in all cases, perhaps not even the majority. For example, Bogle (2008) found that although some students had hooked up with what they referred to as randoms (i.e., someone they did not know), most often the hookup partner was at least a friend or a classmate.

Although the definitions employed in the early studies on hooking up may be flawed, the data generated have made a very important contribution to the literature on the intimate interactions of college students. Given the complexities of the hookup script, there may not be a perfect definition to employ in quantitative studies. Regardless, future research must attempt to take these definitional complexities into account so that the data and analysis can be more instructive.

Directions in research design

Researchers must also design their studies in order to gauge the prevalence of some of the subtypes of the hookup script. Students use the term hooking up to encompass many sexual acts (kissing, petting, oral sex, intercourse, etc.). Therefore, data should be collected in a way that accounts for these variations in sexual behavior. Paul and Hayes (2002) have begun this effort by conducting a qualitative study contrasting a 'typical' hookup experience with the participants 'best' and 'worst' experiences. Paul and Hayes (2002) found that females' worst hookup experiences often involved feeling pressured to engage in a greater degree of sexual activity. Furthermore, this pressure was often exerted upon women when they were too intoxicated to physically resist the unwanted advances. More research is needed to examine the connection between hooking up and unwanted sexual contact or sexual assault.

This information will be useful not only to scholars, but also college administrators who are attempting to design programs to meet the needs of their students. If the majority of students are having oral sex or

intercourse with virtual strangers under the influence of alcohol that raises very different concerns than if students are kissing or 'fooling around' with a classmate they have had a 'crush on' for several months. One scenario will likely raise concerns regarding students' physical and emotional well-being; the other is far less alarming. The point is not that one version of hooking up is true and the other is false. Studies suggest that both scenarios occur as part of the hookup script. Nevertheless, researchers need to take these variations into account when designing studies in order to get more meaningful results.

College students would also benefit from research that provided clarity on the hookup script. The ambiguity of the term hooking up is likely not accidental. Peers are very interested in what one another are doing sexually and the term hooking up allows students to convey that something sexual happened without actually 'kissing and telling'. According to the students in Bogle's (2008) study, one would only ask a close friend for more details about what actually happened. Thus, students can convey to one another that they are part of the hookup scene without revealing too much personal information.

The problem is that this ambiguity leads to confusion among college students about what their peers are doing. Bogle (2008) found that students generally favor the idea that other students are hooking up more often and going further sexually than they are. Similarly, Lambert et al. (2003) found that both male and female college students believe that their peers are more comfortable with various aspects of hooking up compared to themselves. Students likely hold these distorted views because there is no way to find out what is really happening, so they rely on gossip and guesswork. Empirical evidence can help to dispel myths about hooking up. This information can do more than just satisfy college students' curiosity; it can help them judge what is 'normal' as well as how to conduct their own lives.

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Short Biography

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Note

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