

Consent in Hookup Culture

In the typical college setting, hooking up is generally seen as an expression of sexual liberation. It is the ultimate example of college freedom of choice and independence where two parties are freely choosing to do what they want with their own bodies. However, for a hookup to be morally permissible, valid consent is a requirement. Without valid consent, the autonomy of the person being 'pursued' or seduced is violated; therefore, the hookup is morally wrong. In this essay, I will argue that valid consent in a hookup may be impossible to achieve. I will begin by exploring the situations in which the validity of consent is undermined, I will show how hookup culture coerces students into participating in hookups, and I will offer an acceptable solution to the problem with hookup culture

In a morally permissible hookup, both of the parties give valid consent to the encounter. But first, what is valid consent? There seems to be general consensus around three things that are necessary for *valid* consent, consent that is morally relevant:

(1) That there be no deception. Deception is defined as what one would typically think it to be, a trick, lie, or even absence of truth to get what one desires (in this case, sex)

(a) Suppose person B asks person A if they have any sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Person A tells person B, "No," because they know that person B would not have sex with them otherwise. Person A has committed an act of deception and any consent thereby given is invalid.

(b) Person A has a STD that is dormant and undetectable. Person B has said in the past that they would not want to have sex with someone who has a STD. Person A

does not consider themselves to have a STD, it is dormant and undetectable! Any consent given is valid, this is not an example of deception because person A is not lying at all, they believe to be telling the truth about themselves even though most would consider that is not the truth.

(2) That there be no coercion. First, there are two types of coercion, occurrent and dispositional. In occurrent coercion, it bypasses consent entirely, as seen in cases of brutal rape. Obviously, consent is violated. With dispositional coercion, it can manifest in many ways, but boils down to the *threat* of harm and requires that the other party “consent” to the act. In general, under dispositional coercion, if the party refuses to participate in the “offer” (it is really a threat), they will be harmed in some way.

(a) “Suppose that A is mired in quicksand and is slowly but surely approaching death.

When B happens along, A cries out to B for assistance. All B needs to do is throw A a rope. B is quite willing to accommodate A, ‘provided you pay me \$100,000 over the next ten years.’ Is B making A an offer? Hardly! B, we must presume, stands under a moral obligation to come to the aid of a person in serious distress, at least whenever such assistance entails no significant risk, sacrifice of time, and so forth. A is entitled to B’s assistance.”¹

(b) Suppose person A has lent person B some money. Six month later, when it is time for person B to pay back person A, they say, “I’m going to make you an offer, you have sex with me and then you can have your money”. Person A has coerced

¹ “Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person”, Thomas A. Maps. *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings 7th ed.*

B because he was entitled to the money that was owed and adding extra requirements further and unnecessarily complicates things.

- (c) A teacher, A, threatens a student, B, that they will lower B's grade unless they have sex with them. Since the student is entitled to the normal grade, the student is worse off after this offer and is being coerced.
 - (d) A teacher, A, offers a student, B, that they will raise B's grade if they have sex with them. The student is, technically, according to the offer, better off than they were before. However, can a rational student truly refuse an offer such as this and expect future grades to not be affected by retaliation. Person B, even though they are better off, has been coerced.
- (3) That the party consenting is rational and able to understand what they are consenting to.

With the examples of what valid consent is laid out, it is easy to see now that there are many limitations on what valid consent can really be. A single lie about yourself and the consent that follows is completely invalidated. However, my naysayers will still argue that valid consent as described here happens all the time and is typical of hookup culture. They claim that people normally do not lie about themselves in a hookup. Additionally, if all of this is in order to respect people's autonomy over themselves, then should we not be free to do what we want with our bodies? No, argues Kant, as the respect for autonomy comes from the categorical imperative, we must treat everyone (even our own self) as an end and not a means. We are not allowed to use our bodies any way we please when acting autonomously. This is similar to the case of selling one's own organs for their own profit. Kant argued that selling even small parts of yourself is to treat yourself as a mere object, a piece of flesh that is for sale. What we learn from this is that

acts that treat others as mere objects in any way Kant does not even consider under the blanket of autonomy, acts that treat humans as objects are ruled out.

By this line of reasoning, then perhaps all hookups are morally wrong because the base reasons for hooking up is not to feel emotion, not to treat the other being as an end but to forget about them after the encounter. This is true, in fact, Kant argued that only when both partners share their “person, body and soul, for good and ill and in every respect,” with each other can valid consent be achieved. Kant even went as far as to say that this only happens within a marriage. Sex outside marriage could never have these qualities, he argued. While Kant’s argument that this type of sex can only happen within a marriage is extreme, it puts intense pressures on the moral validity of hookup culture. Can one truly care about the other person’s body and soul, for good and ill while still not becoming emotionally attached? Kant did not think so.

Another problem with hookup culture, is how it has become the norm in college societies². Hooking up is simply seen as a part of college and dating life nowadays. In a study done by Hope Reese, she found that the majority of students’ reasons for why they engaged in hookup culture was not to seek pleasure but social status. The biggest reason the students engaged in hookups she found was because they were trying to fit in and seek approval from their peers. The “sexual liberation” that is championed is really a cloaked form of coercion. If college students don’t participate, they do not see an alternative for themselves, they are coerced into participating in order to fit in. When Reese asked her students why they engaged in hookups, their answer was

²The Atlantic, ‘Coercion and Conformity and Despair’: A Feminist Critique of Hooking Up, Hope Reese

so that they could “fit in”. It is not to treat others and yourself as an end, it is so they can fit in. True consensual sex should always involve treating each other as an end, especially yourself.

How do we fix this disconnect? How can we make sexual liberation something morally permissible? As Professor Reese argues, we need to rethink sexual liberation to include many more categories than just hookup culture. For far too long, it has been accepted that sexual liberation is having lots of sex and engaging in hookups, this is simply not true. Sexual liberation must be re-thought to include abstinence, chastity, the opportunity and choice to opt out of hookup culture without stigma. Reese argues that when we engage in hookups, especially college students, they are looking to connect with others. They want to love and be loved. Paradoxically, a hookup requires that one does not feel emotion. By including these extra categories in the idea of sexual liberation, by promoting more than just hookup culture, we can hope to see students who are actually treating themselves with respect and not just having sex in order to fit in.