

The preparations began days in advance. Jess, a college senior, had been asked out on a first date by a 24-year-old friend of a friend. Her tribe was buzzing with excitement. "Everyone was my number-one fan," Jess says, tucking her long brown hair behind her ear. "It's super unusual for someone to go out on a *real* first date, so everyone wanted a piece of the action. My girls were Facebook-stalking him and commenting on his looks. Everyone wanted to Uber to the city with me and hang out at the bar across the street from where I was supposed to meet him."

As my former student shares the story of her *first* first date, I'm struck by how the whole concept of dating is brand new to Jess and her friends, though sexual experiences are not. On college campuses across the country, "hooking up" has all but replaced traditional, old-school dating rituals, and I can't help feeling uneasy that for many young adults, getting naked with someone you barely know is less newsworthy than meeting up for a drink and a conversation. And while a part of Jess finds the communal attention intrusive, another part finds it quite natural. After all, this is exactly how she's been living since she was in her early teens. "My generation is really public," she explains. "We put it all on Facebook and Instagram. It's how we live. I think that's why there was some comfort in having it be a group thing."

So despite Jess's nagging sense that it ought to be *her* first date, not a collective one, when the big night rolled around, her tribe hung out at one bar while Jess and her date got to know each other over drinks at a bar nearby. As it happened, she wasn't crazy about the guy. They texted a few times after that night, but things fizzled out and life quickly moved on.

Today, at 23, Jess is working at her first job and about to go on her *second* first date. "Amazingly, he *called* me!" she said. "You've got to understand, guys might text or post something on social media for you, but they don't call. I realize how crazy it sounds that a 23-second voicemail about meeting up for dinner sends me over the moon. But a phone call is the real deal!"

Like most Gen X mental health professionals, my exposure to youth culture has waned over the years. The one direct experience that's kept me in touch is that I teach an undergraduate course at Northwestern University called *Building Loving and Lasting Relationships: Marriage 101*. Originally launched in 2001 by William Pinsof and Arthur Nielsen, the course now fills within hours of registration opening and receives lots of media attention, probably because it offers some unusual experiential elements, including the chance for students to explore their own "love templates" and get academic credits for doing something as deeply personal as keeping a self-reflection journal. In turn, I get to hear firsthand my students'

# INSIDE Hookup Culture

BY  
ALEXANDRA  
SOLOMON

## *Are We Having Fun Yet?*

confusion about what it takes to create a satisfying intimate relationship—which makes the rise of hookup culture all the more disconcerting to me.

Donna Freitas, in her book *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture Is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused about Intimacy*, offers this definition of a hookup.

- A hookup includes some form of sexual intimacy, anything from kissing to oral, vaginal, or anal sex, and everything in between.
- A hookup is brief—it can last from a few minutes to as long as several hours over a

single night. The hookup may be a drunken makeout on the dance floor or involve sleeping over and taking the so-called “walk of shame” in the morning.

• A hookup is intended to be purely physical in nature and involves both parties shutting down any communication or connection that might lead to emotional attachment.

At the start of each semester, I tell my students that, although I hate to burst their bubbles, they didn't coin the term *hookup* in a sexual sense. We did—Gen X. Still, it's clear to me that today's generation has taken hooking up to a whole new level. In the '90s, although some college students were part of the hookup scene, couples still abounded on campus. These days, committed couples seem to be the exception, at least at Northwestern, and my students are quite open about the emotional fallout they experience as a result. A landscape overrun with mindless and outwardly inconsequential hookups instead of relationships leaves them feeling like they're in a passive and reactive stance, adrift and insecure about love. It's a place of discomfort: hooking up doesn't feel quite right, but committing to a relationship doesn't either.

The longer I offer Marriage 101, the more aware I am that my students' world is quite at odds with the values of self-awareness and self-responsibility that I emphasize in it. For most of them, much of the course material feels foreign and, at times, irrelevant to the here and now of their lives. Nonetheless, they seem grateful to have the space and time to think critically about what intimacy means and how to achieve it. My contact with them has given me an usually close-up view of what

it means to be a college student today, as well as a keen awareness that any generalization I make about today's hookup culture also seems to highlight the exceptions.

Of course, not every student participates in hookup culture. Some are indeed in committed relationships, while others remain single but take sexual relationships seriously. Many students are like Sasha,

head. I feel like I avoid oral because I honestly don't know if I'm good at it or not. If I'm awful, he'll tell his friends, and I'll be embarrassed. I'll be *that* girl.”

As she speaks, I'm struck by just how sad and scary her behavior seems to me. When strangers (or near-strangers) mix sexual activity with copious amounts of alcohol, giving and receiving sexual consent becomes a tricky business.

A 2007 study in *The Journal of Interpersonal Violence* found that 90 percent of the unwanted sex reported by college women occurred during a hookup. This is made worse by what Freitas points out: “Hooking up is a practice where communication itself is eschewed as destructive to the success of the activity.” But beyond the physical danger is the emotional one. Rather than focusing on who and what *she* desires, Sasha moves through her social life wondering who'll desire *her*, removing herself from the driver's seat of her own love life. Her story speaks also to the risk of humiliation when sex precedes trust and how that kind of hookup can undermine self-esteem. “If you just see me as ‘a girl,’” she says, “and then you stop hooking up with me and start hooking up with

someone else, all I can think is that it's because of my looks. It can't be about me as a person because you don't even know me. So I think to myself, *Fine, I'll lose 20 pounds and try again!*”

Kayla, another of my students, shares another all-too-common story: hooking up while simultaneously yearning for emotional connection. “Sean and I knew of each other through mutual friends,” she begins, tucking her long legs underneath her. “We were at a party one night. We got

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a bubbly and warm 20-year-old, who struggles with conflicting emotions around the hookup culture she's immersed in. “This is what I always say about the hookup scene,” she tells me. “During the day I feel like a human being, and at night I feel like a sexual commodity. I'm focused on who might want to hook up with me, and not thinking about my personality or my aspirations.” With a placid smile on her face, she describes her typical hookup this way: “I'd rather have sex with a guy than give him

drunk and hooked up. I left in the morning before it got awkward. The next weekend, we texted about plans and ended up hooking up after a party again. That became a pattern for us, and after probably six times, we hung out sober during the day. Even though we didn't discuss it, I figured that meant we were 'exclusive.'

*Exclusive* is a term frequently used by college students, capturing a connection that's more than a random hookup but less than a committed relationship. It seems, for many, saying "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" at this stage of life is tantamount to saying "fiancé." *Exclusive* seems to be an effort to ensure that you won't go home alone at the end of a party, while avoiding the messiness of a serious romantic relationship.

What Kayla shares next feels typical as well. "We were getting to know each other a little, and then one day I asked him what he'd done the night before, since we were at different parties." She leans toward me as she shares this next piece, but her voice stays steady and sure. "Turns out, he slept with some random. I was so upset and disappointed, but I wasn't surprised. I told him that he needed to be either with just me, or not me at all. Then he turned the whole thing on me, calling me crazy and saying, 'We were fine until you got all weird on me.' But I could tell by the way he'd broken the news to me that he knew I'd be upset. I was embarrassed that he chose to have sex with someone else when I know he liked having sex with me. But the worst part was that I felt so brokenhearted about it—and so dumb about feeling so brokenhearted."

Kayla's internal battle—feeling hurt, but believing she shouldn't be—reflects her internalization of the hookup culture's message that relationships should be "no fuss, no muss." If she can't be "chill" about a guy's sexual roaming, she's failed. I tell her that I'm glad she doesn't know how to shut down her feelings, as they're a vital data source for her. She nods emphatically and

concludes that the whole "Sean drama" actually turned out to be a wakeup call for her. "Since that experience, I handle myself differently," she says. "I might make out with a guy, but I won't have sex until we have an actual conversation about who we are to each other. That's the problem with this whole hookup scene. We do it to try to avoid stress, but I think it actually creates a lot of stress."

### CASUAL SEX

Of course, not all young adult sexual exploration is risky. My students and I have talked about a distinction between hooking up and casual sex. Casual sex is an intentionally created, sober (or mostly sober) erotic experience in a noncommitted relationship. A hookup is stumbled into, drunkenly, recklessly, and with a sense of resignation because one doesn't believe that anything else is possible. While casual sex is cocreated between people who agree that this is just for fun, motives in a hookup are muddy: perhaps sex will yield love, perhaps not. It's a "decide-versus-slide" distinction. When entered into intentionally, casual sex can lead to relational self-awareness for some young adults, helping them discover more about who they are, what they desire, and what they value.

Mitch, a recent college graduate, is an example. Despite having the support of his family and friends when he came out as gay in high school, he spent his college years on an emotional roller coaster. As he puts it, "I was really hard on myself, obsessed with this idea that I ought to be interested only in a serious intimate relationship. I thought that if I hooked up, I was fulfilling the stereotype of the promiscuous gay guy. But I struggled to find a guy to date, so I'd get drunk, make out with a guy, and then feel awful about it for weeks."

Today, he feels clearer about the choices he makes. "It's kind of ironic," he says. "I'm more sexually promiscuous these days, but I feel way better about myself than I did in

college. I can claim who I am sexually and create experiences that I desire. Like the other day, I went on Grindr looking for a hookup and matched with this guy. We talked on the phone a little and said to each other that all we were interested in was sex. I went to his house. We were both sober. We talked for like five minutes and then we had sex. It was fun, and the stakes were really low. If the sex was bad, or if I felt uncomfortable at any point, I could've stopped it and left. I'd never have to see him again if I didn't want to. But actually, it was great! Afterward, I got in my car, called my best friend, and declared, 'I'm in my sexual renaissance!' This guy and I have actually seen each other again on a few occasions. We're now 'fuck buddies,' which is fine by me."

Mitch tells me that he'd like to be in a committed intimate relationship, but he feels clear that casual sex isn't having a negative impact on him. On the contrary, he feels it's increased his confidence and deepened his self-acceptance. Clearly, not everyone feels wounded or victimized by the hookup scene.

### ARE MILLENNIALS REALLY SO DIFFERENT?

Again and again, I talk with young adults whose actions don't line up with their stated intentions, desires, and beliefs. They seem to have difficulty quieting the outer noise, tuning into their inner values, beliefs, and emotions, and using that awareness to guide their behavior in their intimate relationships. In other words, they're loving out of alignment.

When I ask the students in my class how they'd like their relationships to unfold, their preferred narrative goes something like this: we hang out as friends, get close over a period of months, and then once there's trust and closeness, we start having a sexual relationship. When I first heard this, it struck a tender chord within me. I've been married for 17 years to the guy

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who lived across the hall from me during our freshman year at college. We became close friends, but it wasn't until our sophomore year that we began dating officially. I'm aware that I carry some shame about our story, somehow feeling that the absence of immediate, undeniable chemistry was a poor diagnostic indicator. How surprising it is—and heartening—to hear that this love story feels aspirational to emerging adults today! I suspect it indicates that young adults are craving some safety to balance their adventure.

In addition, Millennials are marrying later in life than any generation before. Census data from 2009 indicates that the median age at first marriage for Americans is 26 years old, about five years later than the generation before it. I don't know which came first—the delay of entry into marriage, or changes in

the world of dating—but marriage has shifted from the cornerstone of adulthood to its capstone, as sociologist Andrew Cherlin described in his 2010 book, *Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*. Millennials have more time to fill between sexual maturity and “I do.” For better or worse, they're improvising. Nevertheless, they still aspire to marry.

On the first day of class, I ask students how many of them plan to marry, and year after year, nearly every hand goes up. Unscientific? Yes. But it fits with 2010 Pew Research Center data suggesting that most college graduates do marry at some point. Further, though a few of my students want to talk about open relationships and alternative forms of coupling, almost all, regardless of sexual orientation, express a desire for a sexually faithful marriage. For my students, the question tends to be not *whether* they'll marry, but *when*. In fact, timing turns out to be a sensitive issue

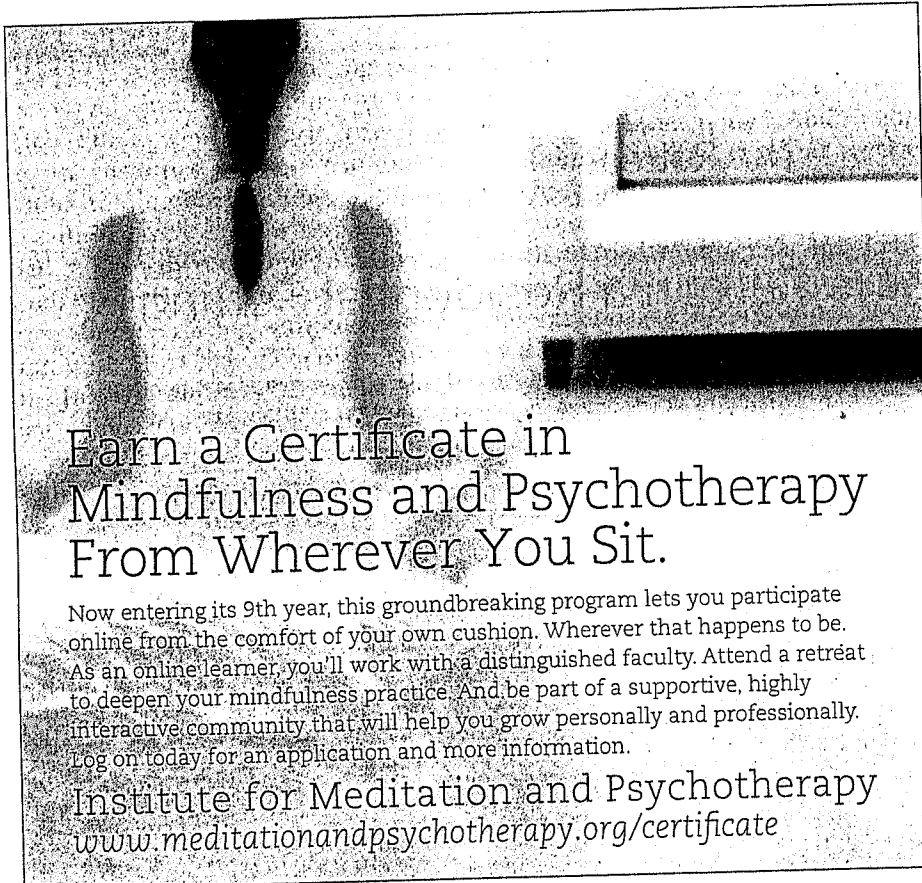
for this generation. In *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter and How to Make the Most of Them Now*, Meg Jay outlines a sort of Millennial Goldilocks problem around the best age to get married. As she points out, young adults hear Baby Boomers saying they settled down too early and Generation Xers saying they got started too late. Millennials are looking to get it just right.

### CALLING ALL REBELS

Meanwhile, hookup culture continues to thrive, even though most therapists would love to see young adults create something more fulfilling than ambiguous, drunken, unsatisfying sex. Here's the problem, though: today's college students tend to be awfully compliant when it comes to hookup culture, and I find myself wondering why. Is it that as a culture we no longer encourage young people to question the status quo? I think about my own college days in the 1990s, when my first women's studies class awakened a fire within me. Emboldened by the critical-thinking skills that were valued in that classroom, I railed against our “screwed up” society to anybody who'd listen. The faculty's support of my anger at cultural norms was transformative for me, because what they were really supporting was my ability to hear and value what was within me.

Much has been written about how adolescents today, especially in high-achieving families, no longer envision revolution—within themselves or the world around them. Instead, their voices are being drowned out by loving but driven parents, who view their children as long-term projects, *tabulae rasae* from which they can create overly successful human beings. And that definition of success is focused primarily on doing, not being.

While love, at least the kind therapists usually talk about, has more to do with being than doing, hookup culture reflects the belief that love is secondary to the pursuit of external success. So as not to disrupt the



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main project—preparing for a “successful” life—intimate relationships *must* be no fuss, no muss. Over and over, my undergraduates tell me they try hard not to fall in love during college, imagining that would mess up their plans. This strikes me as a joyless road to nowhere, given that their happiness as adults will be shaped as much as, if not more, by the quality of their intimate relationship than by their career success.


With our cultural insistence on a narrow and meritocratic path to success, it feels awfully unfair to expect young adults to manifest romantic coherence when our culture seems to reflect back to them anything but. Pornography can be accessed for free, by anyone, anywhere, at any time. This isn't necessarily problematic in and of itself, but what's worrisome is that pornography has become increasingly disembodied and antirelationship. When porn is consumed by young people whose love templates are in formation, how can relational maturity develop? And if pornographic sex is internalized as somehow normal, objectification becomes the default setting for young people's experience of erotic satisfaction.

In a 2012 *New York Times* opinion piece, Indiana University professor Debby Herbenick stated that her students often tell her that she's the first adult who's spoken with them about sex. This is my experience as well. If we're not willing to have an open dialogue about sex with young people from early adolescence onward, the Internet is more than willing to fill the vacuum. Young adults deserve wholehearted education about all aspects of sexuality, not just safety, STDs, and reproduction. Good sex education must address how young people can be conscious consumers of erotic material and how to create happy, fulfilling sexual experiences.

Of course, we can't understand the erosion of young people's capacity to love without considering the colossal impact of smart phones and the 24/7 immersion in digital culture. As our first generation of *digital*

*native* grownups (in contrast to the rest of us who are *digital immigrants*), Millennials are flooded with external stimulation from the moment they wake up until the moment they go to sleep. Increasingly, they can't tolerate the solitude that lays the foundation for intimacy. And if intimacy is hard to come by, they're left with just an avatar of the real deal—a hookup. Engaging in ambiguous hookups appears to be an effort by young people to avoid what they don't trust themselves to handle. When framed like this, hookup culture makes a strange kind of sense, reflecting the anxiety, ambivalence, and passivity of many college student who report dissatisfaction with hookup culture while participating in it because they don't know how to create an alternative. As my student Andrew explained, “It's a chicken-and-egg problem: we don't know how to interact face to face, so we hook up, but the more we hook up, the more we don't know how to interact face to face.”

Unless you're working at a college counseling center—or happen to have learned more personal lessons about the struggles of Millennials in your own family—the world of hookup culture may seem a bit like a foreign country, filled with strange and sometimes off-putting customs. At this point, most Millennials don't have the income or the inclination to frequent our offices or engage in the custom of regular psychotherapy appointments, which may seem strange and archaic to many of them. But one thing is certain: in the coming years, therapists will be getting an increasingly close-up look at the long-term consequences of what it meant to learn about the possibilities of love and commitment at a time when technology and changing cultural norms were transforming the way young people connected with each other. As Meg Jay has written in reviewing research about people coming of age in the early 1990s, “While important events took place from birth until death,



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those that determined the years ahead were most heavily concentrated during the twentysomething years.” Whatever changes lie ahead in our cultural rituals for coming-of-age relationally, we'll be seeing in our therapy practices the emotional legacy of hookup culture, in all its rawness and frantic incoherence, for many years to come. ■

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