

---

# H

---

## Hookup Culture

Alexandra H. Solomon  
The Family Institute at Northwestern University,  
Evanston, IL, USA

### Name of Concept

Hookup Culture

### Synonyms

Casual sex; College dating; Friends with benefits,  
Hooking up; Hookups; Modern love

### Introduction

Few topics in the field of couple and family therapy trigger judgment and highlight generation gaps like the topic of hookup culture. The term “hookup culture” refers to a zeitgeist that accepts and encourages casual sexual encounters, including one-night stands, which focus on physical intimacy without emotional bonding or longer-term commitment.

Hookup culture is generally associated with Western (particularly American) emerging adults. It is worth noting that it is a historically recent (and somewhat controversial) phenomenon to consider ages 18–25 to be a discrete

developmental stage, usually referred to as emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004). This term is intended to capture the protracted transition between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood noted among young people today. Although so-called millennials, today’s emerging adults, are not the first generation to separate sex and commitment, today’s hookups look different from hookups from the past. Hooking up has become institutionalized in popular culture including music, film, and social media. Hooking up has become normative, with most emerging adults reporting at least one hookup during their college years (Paul et al. 2000; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Most significantly, hooking up threatens to all but replace more traditional forms of dating. As many as two-thirds of hookups are “repeat performances” with the same partner, and ambiguous relationships involving casual sex are often the entrées into a committed relationship (Armstrong et al. 2009). Committed romantic relationships still occur, as most young adults report they were in a relationship that lasted 6 months or more during their college years (Armstrong et al. 2009).

### Theoretical Context for Concept

In 2009, the median age at first marriage for Americans was 26 years old, about 5 years later than the generation before (Elliot and Simmons 2011), which means that millennials have more years between sexual maturity and “I do” than

any generation before. Despite the number of young adults who are delaying marriage, most never-married Americans report that they would like to get married (Pew 2013). Although it is unclear which came first – the delay of entry into marriage or changes in the world of dating – what is abundantly clear is that marriage has gone from the *cornerstone* of adulthood to the *capstone* (Cherlin 2010). Hookup culture is, at its core, an attempted solution to a reality facing young adults today.

Further, the digital age affects intimate relationships in ways we are just beginning to comprehend. As the iPhone made its debut in June 2007, younger millennials, especially, started dating with smartphones in their hands. Dating apps have become normative, even for college students who certainly do not need them to locate potential mates. One consequence of searching for love through an app is encountering the “paradox of choice” (Schwartz 2004).

Schwartz’s (2004) work indicates that our desires for abundance and choice end up reducing our feelings of satisfaction once we have made a choice. Aziz Ansari applied Schwartz’s ideas to the world of intimate relationships in his book, *Modern Romance* (2015). Seduced into thinking that more choice is better, young adults risk shopping for love with a consumer mentality, believing that their soulmate is just one more swipe away. This mindset perpetuates the relational ambiguity and lack of commitment that epitomize hookup culture.

Additional factors (psychological, sociological, and economic) converge to create and perpetuate hookup culture. Today’s generation of young adults are the first with easy access to high-speed internet pornography, which skews sexual and relational expectations especially for young men. “Helicopter parenting” (especially among families with socioeconomic privilege) may lead young adults to privilege career success above success in love (Solomon 2016). A growing gender gap in academic achievement leads young heterosexual women to treat their male counterparts as the new “ball and chain” (Rosin 2012). Economic challenges like crushing student loan debt and flattening wages perpetuate an

atmosphere in which marriage feels incongruous and out of reach. Finally, it should be noted that the vast majority of scholarly (and mainstream) examination of hookup culture have privileged the stories of heterosexual white college students, and conversations with members of marginalized communities (nonwhite, LGBT, religious, lower SES/first generation college students), when they do occur, tend to seek understanding of how these individuals define themselves vis-a-vis hookup culture, which is presented as “mainstream” or “the norm.”

## Description

A hookup is defined in the following way:

1. A hookup includes some form of sexual intimacy, anything from kissing to oral, vaginal, or anal sex, and everything in between. The term hooking up is an enormous umbrella. The intentionally vague nature of the term “hookup” has clinical implications. When an emerging adult client tells their therapist they hooked up last Saturday night, instead of making assumptions, the clinician needs to ask for clarification about the scope of the sexual activity.
2. A hookup is brief – it can be as short as a few minutes or as long as several hours over a single night. The hookup may be a drunken “make out” on the dance floor at a party or it might involve sleeping over and taking the so-called “walk of shame” in the morning.
3. A hookup is intended to be purely physical in nature and requires both parties shutting down any communication or connection that might lead to emotional attachment (Freitas 2013).

Hooking up is a risky activity. Alcohol is frequently involved (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Anderson and Clement 2015), compromising judgment, impulse control, self-awareness, and communication. Although the prevalence of alcohol use on campus has not increased in recent years, the incidence of binge drinking (drinking a lot in a short period) has (White and Hingson 2014). Sexual assault

is a significant problem on college campuses with as many as 25% of young women reporting “unwanted sexual incidents” during college (Anderson and Clement 2015). Although sexual assaults certainly happen outside the context of a hookup, data indicate that the majority of unwanted sexual experiences on campus can begin in the context of a hookup (Anderson and Clement 2015), and women who participate in the hookup culture are more likely to be the victims of sexual assault than women who are in a committed relationship and women who do not hook up (Littleton et al. 2009; Anderson and Clement 2015). Today’s young adults take the imperative to never drink and drive seriously; an important sexual health initiative is to transform the social scene and the dating scene in such a way that young adults feel clear that binge drinking and hooking up are a high-risk combination as well.

Beyond these risks are the emotional ones. Certainly, some young adults participate in hookup culture with no ill effects on their emotional health. For others, there is a toll. Succeeding in hookup culture requires young adults to act “chill” and “no drama” about love and sex, meaning the very real risk of tuning out the connection to their internal emotional world. For these young adults, participating in hookups creates feelings of loneliness, failed expectations, and a fear of closeness (Freitas 2013; Stepp 2007).

### **Application of Concept in Couple and Family Therapy**

Despite the fact that young adults may not arrive in the offices of couple and family therapists as part of a couple system or in the context of a family system, marriage and family therapists have a role to play in addressing hookup culture. Young adults desire (and need) time and space to understand what it takes to create and maintain a successful and satisfying romantic relationship, making this a rich area for primary and secondary prevention relationship education efforts. Existing

programs include Howard Markman and Scott Stanley’s PREP program, John Van Epp’s “Love Thinks” program, and Alexandra Solomon’s course at Northwestern University, “Building Loving and Lasting Relationships: Marriage 101.” Programs targeting millennials must explicitly address the complexities of hookup culture and the impact of modern technology on the dating world.

Further, traditional “sex ed” tends to focus on reducing the risks of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), but marriage and family therapists are well positioned to offer *wholehearted sex education* to young adults, addressing relational topics like the role of pleasure in sexual encounters, the impact of pornography on sexual narratives, effective sexual communication, and intergenerational transmission of sexual shame. Marriage and family therapists can engage teens and young adults in these conversations directly, or they could serve as parent coaches so that parents feel empowered and well prepared to talk with their adolescents about sex in a way that goes beyond a fear-based lecture about how not to behave.

In all of these efforts, the goal must be to help young adults develop their *relational self-awareness*. With a deep understanding of who they are based on their family history, early experiences, cultural location, and personality, young adults are better positioned to make sexual and relationship choices that are aligned with their most authentic self (Solomon 2017).

### **Clinical Example**

Dara is a college senior whose experience in hookup culture is quite common. She met Curtis through mutual friends when they attended the same party one night. They got drunk and hooked up. She reports that she “left in the morning before it got awkward.” They had sporadic contact by text over the course of week but did not see each other. The following Saturday, they texted about plans and ended up hooking up after a party again. After repeating this pattern over 5 or 6 weeks, they hung out together, sober, during the day. Even

though they never discussed it directly, Dara assumed that she and Curtis were “exclusive.”

Dara’s term, “exclusive,” is one frequently used by college students and intends to capture a connection that is more than a random hookup but less than a committed relationship. It seems, for many, that saying “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” at this stage of life is tantamount to saying “fiancé.” “Exclusive” appears to be an effort to ensure that you will not go home alone at the end of a party while avoiding the (perceived and actual) dynamics of a committed romantic relationship. Dara and Curtis’s relationship began with sexual intimacy and slowly backed into emotional intimacy.

What Dara described happened next feels typical as well. She shared:

I thought we were exclusive even though we had never talked about it. We spent time together during the day, and we were getting to know each other. One night we went out separately, and the next day I asked him what he did. Turns out, he slept with some random. I was so upset and disappointed, but I guess I was not totally surprised. I told him that he needed to either be with only me or not with me at all. I couldn’t believe what happened next. 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 had broken the news to me that he knew I’d be upset. I felt embarrassed that he chose to have sex with someone else because I know he liked having sex with me. The worst part was that I felt so broken-hearted about it, and I felt so dumb about feeling broken-hearted.

Dara’s internal battle, refusing to lean into her sadness and anger, reflects that aspect of hookup culture that insists on a “no fuss no muss” approach to love. Although she judges her emotional reaction to his behavior, it is infinitely preferable to callousness. In her research, Freitas (2013) felt troubled that a full 23% of students she interviewed reported not caring one way or the other about the hookups they had. Rather than resigning herself to what Freitas labeled a “whateverist” stance in which sex has little to no meaning, Dara used the experience with Curtis as a wake-up call for her. She recognized that an ambiguous “exclusive” status promised simplicity but delivered the inevitable messiness inherent in a romantic relationship. She reported that her

experience with Curtis taught her to manage her relationship boundaries more mindfully. She described, “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.”

Today’s dating climate poses both challenges and opportunities for couple and family therapists who are working with young adults. It is incumbent upon relationally oriented clinicians to find ways to work effectively with their own apprehension and judgement about the modern sexual landscape so they can help clients become relationally self-aware. With relational self-awareness as their guide, young adults are better prepared to manage their boundaries, work effectively with the emotions inevitably stirred by love, and make empowered sexual and relational choices for themselves.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Dating Culture](#)
- ▶ [Emerging Adulthood](#)
- ▶ [Modern Romance](#)

## References

- Anderson, N., & Clement, S. (2015, June 12). 1 in 5 college women say they were violated. *Washington Post*. Retrieved November 4, 2016, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2015/06/12/1-in-5-women-say-they-were-violated/>
- Anziz, A., & Klinenberg, E. (2016). *Modern romance*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Armstrong, E. A., England, P., & Fogarty, A. C. K. (2009). Orgasm in college hook ups and relationships. In B. Risman (Ed.), *Families as they really are*. New York: Norton.
- Arnett, J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cherlin, A. (2010). *The marriage go round: The state of marriage and the family today*. New York: Vintage.
- Elliot, D. B., & Simmons, T. (2011). Marital events of Americans: 2009. American Community Survey Reports, ACS-13. Retrieved November 4, 2016, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-13.pdf>

- Freitas, D. (2013). *The end of sex: How hookup culture is leaving a generation unhappy, sexually unfulfilled, and confused about intimacy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hamilton, L., & Armstrong, E. A. (2009). Gendered sexuality in young adulthood: Double binds and flawed options. *Gender and Society, 23*, 589–616.
- Littleton, H., Tabernik, H., Canales, E. J., & Backstrom, T. (2009). Risky situation or harmless fun? A qualitative examination of college women's bad hook-up and rape scripts. *Sex Roles, 60*, 793–804.
- Paul, E. L., McManus, B., & Hayes, A. (2000). "Hookups": Characteristics and correlates of college students' spontaneous and anonymous sexual experiences. *Journal of Sex Research, 37*, 76–88.
- Rosin, H. (2012, September). Boys on the side. *The Atlantic*.
- Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Solomon, A. H. (2016, January). Inside hookup culture. Are we having fun yet? *Psychotherapy Networker*.
- Solomon, A. H. (2017). *Loving bravely: 20 lessons of self-discovery to help you get the love you want*. Oakland: New Harbinger.
- Stepp, L. S. (2007). *Unhooked: How women pursue sex, delay love, and lose at both*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- White, A., & Hingson, R. (2014). The burden of alcohol use: Excessive alcohol consumption and related consequences among college students. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews, 35*(2). Retrieved November 4, 2016, from <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arcr352/201-218.htm>