



Hookups. Youth Sexuality and Social Change
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Summary

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A hookup is a sexual encounter that can include different sexual practices, ranging from kissing, petting and oral sex to intercourse. The sexual encounter is usually devoid of expectations of commitment and emotional intimacy. In recent decades, hooking up has become a prevalent script of intimate coupling on numerous American college campuses. Little is known, however, about whether this sexual culture is prevalent among youth in the direct surroundings of colleges, for instance in urban erotic contact zones. Youth around the globe learn about hookup culture from the media. Has this resulted in an appropriation of the hookup script in other regions that experienced similar changes in gender and intimate relationships like the US?

These tenets are explored in this multi-sited, qualitative study of youth sexuality in the Bay Area and Hong Kong.

In the social sciences, two strands of research have dominated studies of hooking up. In the first, persistent gender inequalities in hooking up have been delineated. In the second, the alleged social, psychological and physiological ‘risks’ of hooking up are investigated. Much less is known, however, about the conditions under which hooking up became a prevalent script on numerous American college campuses. A common line of reasoning suggests that the rising gender imbalance on many American college campuses has fueled a culture of casual sex. This argument starts from the presumption that young women want committed relationships, while young men want casual sex. Since young men are a minority on most campuses, they are in short demand and hence can define the terms of their intimate encounters. This reasoning, however, is problematic since recent research shows that many college women prefer hookups to committed relationships. Another theory links the particular infrastructural arrangements on campuses to a culture of casual sex. For the first time in their lives, young men and women live

outside of their parents' home, surrounded by peers, most of whom are sexually active and unmarried. Youth are in a similar place in their lives and have similar aspirations. On campus, an alcohol-infused party scene is never far away. As a result, a culture of casual sex is omnipresent. These infrastructural conditions, however, have been present on American college campuses for about a century and can therefore not explain the emergence of hookup culture.

Young men and women in America developed a distinct sexual culture at the start of the 20th century. This coincided with the emergence of youth as a distinct life-phase, separate from adulthood, with its own institutions and its own culture. At that time, adults and young Americans were increasingly physically separated. A developing American economy demanded a skilled labor force, and college education expanded. Many young Americans experienced a period in their lives in which they lived away from their families and among peers on residential college campuses. These autonomous youth enclaves were incubators of youth culture. Sexual norms became an important marker of distinction from adulthood. Dating emerged as the sexual culture of middle-class youth.

The sexual norms of dating were unequal for men and women. For men, it was acceptable to have sex outside of a relationship context. For women, however, this was not the case. Only light sexual practices were acceptable in dating for women, and women were responsible for maintaining sexual boundaries. A gender revolution occurred in the second half of the 20th century. Women entered tertiary education *en masse*, found paid employment in increasingly higher-paid positions, and demanded to be treated equally to men, and this extended to the realm of intimate relationships. As a result, sexual norms started shifting, and premarital sex became acceptable for both men and women. Increasingly, youth experimented with sex outside of a relationship context. During college, youth prioritized their own development above committed relationships. A worsening economy fueled this development imperative. College qualifications became more important for securing a middle-class career, and youth experienced these years as a period

primarily devoted to attaining educational qualifications and the development of their own identities.

The development imperative was eminent for the middle-class students in my research at BAU, a commuter college in the greater Bay Area. For these young men, college was primarily a time devoted to exploring life-style options, experimenting with sex, and building friendships. Committed relationships were experienced as a potential threat to these self-development projects. Many students, men and women alike, prioritized the hookup script on campus above a committed relationship. However, not all students hooked up. It was the sexual culture of middle-class youth. Working-class students had a different understanding of college and prioritized committed relationships above hookups. Furthermore, many working-class students lived with their parents and could not easily access the party and hookup scene around campus. Not all middle-class students, however, hooked up regularly. Hooking up was enmeshed with the college party scene. This scene, at the commuter college BAU, existed in the adjacent neighborhoods of campus at house parties hosted by predominantly sophomore and senior students. Many students found it difficult to access this scene regularly and did not hookup that often. In contrast to many other American colleges, an active and easily accessible social scene was lacking at BAU. Infrastructural arrangements mattered for the emergence of hooking up as a dominant norm on campus. A large residential community of students and an active and accessible social scene proved to be important conditions for hookup culture to emerge.

Hooking up was the sexual culture of college-going youth, but outside of this arena, this sexual script was even less common. I investigated the intimate affairs of so-called 'game' practitioners. These men studied and practiced flirtation and sexual escalation and actively sought these encounters in the urban-erotic contact zone. These men were an extreme case; they were primed towards a hookup script. The 'game' was a competitive field in which players competed for status and money. Status hierarchies between 'game' practitioners were made on the basis of enacted

heterosexual competences. Hooking up regularly signaled expertise in the 'game', and a high status in the community of 'game' practitioners could earn players money. Game 'practitioners' thus had a professional interest in hooking up regularly. If a hookup culture existed in the direct surroundings of college, I expected to find it among these men.

Hookups, however, even among competent 'game' practitioners, did not occur frequently, and most sexual encounters abided to a contemporary dating script. The latter script has an extensive screening protocol in which interlocutors communicate a broad range of identity markers to determine their suitability as a match, such as life-style interests, personality traits and social-economic status. While in the hookup script 'emotion work' aims to thwart the development of emotional intimacy, many of the rites enacted within the 'game' tried to foster an emotional tie between interlocutors. For example, there were strategies to stretch the experiential dimension of time and efforts to emotionally relate to each other. In the 'game', this deepening of emotional intimacy often coincided with a gradual intensification of physical intimacy. The prevalent sexual script in the 'game' was not all that casual.

Scripts of youth sexuality travel internationally. On the surface, Hong Kong has seen many similar changes in gender and intimate relationships as America. Women have entered tertiary education and the labor force *en mass*, the age of first marriage has increased, the acceptance of premarital sex has risen, and diverse sexual cultures have emerged. At the same time, college-going youth experience a pressing development imperative. High educational attainments are essential for securing a middle-class lifestyle in Hong Kong. This, however, has not resulted in a decoupling of sex and committed relationships among youth. Students at UHK were aware of the hookup script, but they seldom enacted it. Hooking up was a symbolic resource, used by students to reflect on their own intimate practices and in relation to which their own intimate affairs seemed respectable and civil. Hooking up was the sexual practice of foreign students. Hong Kongese students

used the hookup script as a resource to construct boundaries between themselves and other students. *Ceot pool* was the sexual regime on campus in Hong Kong. *Ceot pool* was a transitional phase between an acquaintance or a friendship and a committed relationship, in which individuals explored their interest in a committed affair and their suitability as a couple. Light sexual practices remained confined to a committed relationship context, and most students only accepted intercourse if their affair was likely to evolve into marriage. Women were held responsible for the safeguarding of sexual boundaries. *Ceot pool* was institutionalized within the campus arena. During orientation-camps, students were encouraged to *ceot pool*, and college departments organized Secret-Angel-programs to facilitate intimate coupling among students. These institutes were conservative in nature and functioned under the auspices of the university administrators. UHK was a tightly integrated community, and peer control was stark. The sexual norms on campus were maintained and policed by students through the invoking of symbolic gender identities of the *gun jam*, *gun jam bing* and *gau gung*. Flirtation was only accepted when students had an interest in a committed relationship. Students were assiduous in policing sexual norms on campus, and transgressions could result in marginalization and subtle forms of exclusion.

In the immediate surroundings of college, sexual norms corresponded with those at UHK. 'Game' practitioners, like their American counterparts, were primed to casual sex. Their contempt for gender change in the 'west' and orientalist imaginaries infused their longing for Hong Kong Chinese women. Despite their interest in hookups, they seldom found casual sex in the urban erotic contact zone of Hong Kong. Their attempts to hookup with Hong Kong Chinese women in this environment resulted in violations of sexual norms. These norms held that sexual partners should meet via acquaintances, sexual activity should not be enacted publically, sex was confined to a committed relationship context, and dating should be primed towards a committed relationship that could potentially evolve into marriage.

Hooking up, like conventional dating of the mid-20th century, emerged as the sexual regime of middle-class youth in autonomous enclaves of residential campuses. In these youth villages, young Americans lived among peers, outside of the direct control of parents. In these autonomous enclaves, a sexual culture developed that differed from adult sexual norms. Outside of the campus arena, sexual norms of youth corresponded to those of adults. In the college campus hookup regime, sex is mainly recreational and devoid of expectations of finding a life-long partner. In contrast, the sexual norms of the adult world link courtship to seeking a marriage partner and confine sex to a relationship context. Hooking up is a key identity practice of college-going youth, which distinguishes youth from adulthood.

In Hong Kong, a distinct college campus culture existed. Sexual norms, however, were not a defining marker of youth culture. Instead, the sexual norms on campus corresponded with those of the adult world. College in Hong Kong, despite the residential campus context, was not an autonomous youth enclave. The older generation maintained a firm grip over the terms in which a youth sexual culture could develop through the institutionalized nature of relationship formation on campus. In contrast to the US, sexual norms in the direct surroundings of campus corresponded with those on the college campus. In the urban erotic contact zone of Hong Kong, like on campus, the prevalent sexual script entailed a coupling primed towards a committed relationship. In this script, a gradual intensification of physical intimacy coincided with a gradual progression of emotional intimacy. Intercourse was confined to a relationship context. The aspirations of their relationship were used by youth to demarcate their practices from those of the adult world. While their parents coupled out of respect for tradition and their relationships were emotionally cold and distant, youth coupled out of a sincere appreciation of their partners' personalities and aspired to a warm, emotionally intimate and caring relationship. Thus, a youth culture in Hong Kong developed around relationship aspirations rather than sexual norms.