

Sexual Assault: What Does the Hook-Up Culture Have To Do with It?

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within [Culture](#), [Education](#)

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The sexual assault epidemic on college campuses is created, in part, by the effects of the hook-up culture. The first in a two-part series.

The problem of sexual assault is not new. In the modern college setting, however, the deconstruction of sexual norms, coupled with an "anything goes" mentality, has created a perfect storm for the proliferation of assault.

Tomorrow, we will propose some solutions that aim at the heart of the problem—a culture that reduces sexual activities to the level of recreation—but in order to arrive at a solution, we first need to understand the reality of the problem we face.

The Nightmarish Reality of Sexual Assault

It's hard to get a grasp on what sort of world can produce such an abusive culture unless you or someone you care for has gone through it. That as many as one in four—or, at the very least, one in ten—young women have experienced sexual assault sounds so nightmarish. Sadly, rampant sexual assault on campus is a reality that thousands will return to this coming September and that many freshmen will encounter for the first time.

Broadly speaking, when we think of rape, one of two narratives comes to mind: the unsuspecting victim surprised in a dark alley, or the two drunk people who both get carried away at a college frat party, with one person waking up and regretting his or her actions.

Neither of these is a very helpful construction for a serious conversation about sexual assault. The first scenario represents a very small portion of sexual assaults on college campuses and is by no means unique to campus life. The latter—which is not actually an example of assault—gives cover to those who would explain away all assault as simply a matter of blurred lines and choices regretted in the light of day.

The truth is that sexual assault on campus is nuanced and complex. Usually, survivors know their assailants, and often alcohol is involved. But that doesn't mean that assaults are merely regretted hook-ups. They are not. In fact, many victims purposely avoid casual sex. Sexual assault victims include a vast array of people: men and women who may be straight-laced or sexually adventurous, religious or secular, teetotalers or partiers.

Hook-Up Culture Leads to Rape Culture

This doesn't mean that the hook-up culture is guiltless when it comes to campus sexual assault. Rather, if not for the hook-up culture, "rape culture" could never have acquired its current foothold at our universities.

First, it creates a setting in which it is very easy for people who want to do bad things to do them undetected. When somewhat drunkenly bringing someone back to your dorm is the norm, how are bystanders (in a dark, noisy, crowded space) supposed to distinguish good intentions from bad? How can an onlooker see the difference between a young man genuinely seeking to help his friend get back to her room safely and one pretending to be a good friend, only to take advantage of her once there? One of us had the horrible experience—twice—of being witness to a friend's assault in the very next room and being powerless to do anything, not because of physical inability, but because by all external appearances what was happening looked just like any other weekend night.

Second, a sexual ethic that centers on the pursuit of pleasure and personal gratification and reduces the significance of a sexual act to that of a scrabble game—mere recreation—teaches that persons are means to an end. We are taught to use each other's bodies for our mutual satisfaction and to assume that sexual activity does not carry any unintended consequences. But once we get used to heedlessly using one another's bodies, it is dangerously easy to see using another's body for our own gratification as unproblematic, even if the other person isn't doing the same to us. A hook-up culture based on mutual use and lack of consequence can't help but lead in the direction of unilateral use of another's body.

Third, the language that we millennials use for discussing sexual boundaries, constraint, and consensual interaction has all but disintegrated. The domination of the hook-up as the preeminent romantic script has repercussions for all young adults—even those who don't pursue hook-ups themselves. Over and over, we are told that physical encounters can be casual and fun, because they only have the meaning that we ascribe to them. Context is stripped from a range of sexual expression; even commonly used words lose their meaning. A hook-up, for example, can consist of anything from simple kissing, to petting, to penetration, to a range of other activities limited only by the adolescent imagination. What someone might expect in a hook-up or a romantic relationship can vary dramatically from person to person.

This series of vague and variable sexual expectations clashes dangerously with the *carte blanche* given to young American adults. After all, boys will be boys and girls will go wild. The selfish individualism expected among adolescents and young adults tells us not to take “no” for an answer. Respect for ideas of sexual integrity—the concept that sex might by its nature mean something more than a game—has gone out the window. With it went respect for the very concept of boundaries.

Those with a strict code of sexual ethics have all the more boundaries to be crossed. Their plight is worsened by our culture’s tendency to conflate sexual continence with repression. At its best, we are told that a chaste lifestyle might be possible for the superhuman or abnormally religious, but not for the average college kid. At its worst, this attitude leads to a disdain for sexual boundaries as backwards, misogynistic, and dangerous—or simply stupid and unworthy of respect.

We know two young women with nearly identical stories. These two young women held views on sexuality that were so laughable to their peers that in one case one of them forced himself upon her (and in the other forced her to touch him inappropriately) just to prove a point. In neither case was any regard shown for the repercussions the young women would face in the wake of such a personal violation. When confronted later about the incident, each young man would dismiss the violation and turmoil in the wake of the assault as a consequence of the woman’s “prudish” views about sex, rather than as a result of his knowingly having crossed a person’s most intimate boundaries. And when this was brought to light, in both instances the community rallied around *him* instead.

Consent Doesn’t Work

We graduated only a few years ago, and each of us needs both hands to count the number of friends who were sexually violated in college—and those are only the ones we know about. These are not people we sought out for their traumas or folks who invited any sort of trouble: in the course of what would otherwise be normal college life, people and institutions they trusted betrayed them in one of the most painful ways possible. As often as not, the abusive encounters did not include alcohol, and they occurred in common spaces as often as in the dark corners of fraternity tap rooms. To our knowledge, not one of their assailants has faced any kind of legal or disciplinary repercussions, and barely any have suffered any social fallout—even when publicly accused.

Why, then, when college administrations do so much to drive home the concept of “consent,” do college students continue not to get the message? Because they see from the outset that consent—as it is currently conceived—doesn’t make sense. Out of one side of their mouths, administrators acknowledge the alcohol-fueled hook-up culture with a proverbial shrug of the shoulders, and out of the other side tell students that any alcohol use negates the possibility of consent. By this standard, all sexual activity framed by alcohol consumption is, in some sense, sexual assault. Any college freshman understands that it just doesn’t make sense to say that any alcohol-infused dance floor make-out session could be called assault—at least not when the powers that be are encouraging any and all forms of sexual expression. The standard is viewed as

inconsistent and absurd, so it gets shrugged off.

While alcohol is implicated in many cases of sexual assault, it is only a catalyst in a system already primed for assault. On a campus where binge drinking was the norm but the hook-up was not the dominant form of sexual interaction, sexual assault would both be much easier to avoid and much harder to commit.

Fortunately, there is much that students and university faculty and administrators can do to reshape campus norms away from abetting assault and towards creating a safer and healthier environment in which students can flourish. This is the subject of our next essay, which will be published tomorrow.

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