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SEXISM IN PRACTICE

Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture

Conor Kelly

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Hooking up—the practice of pursuing sexual activity without any expectation of a relationship—has become a fixture of the U.S. college experience, resulting in an identifiable hookup culture across the country that can and should benefit from a feminist analysis. Sociological research reveals that this practice appeals to college students by ostensibly providing greater independence than traditional relationships. An outside analysis of these claims, however, demonstrates that the heterosexual hookup culture operates in a decidedly sexist fashion. In fact, the four common features of this culture: lack of commitment, ambiguous language, alcohol use, and social pressure to conform, all undermine the freedom, equality, and safety of women on campus. An intentionally feminist perspective is in a unique position to highlight and critique these faults and the additional resources of feminist theology and ethics have the potential to help change this sexism in practice.

On college campuses all across the country a hookup culture appears as a unifying feature. Although an exact definition is difficult to pinpoint, scholars and students alike agree that a pursuit of some level of sexual activity without the constraints and expectations of a relationship is a common element of the U.S. college experience. There is less agreement, however, when it comes to the implications of the practice. While some parents, faculty, and administrators view it as the end of morality, a number of the students involved embrace hooking up as the epitome of freedom and equality. Common sense suggests

that neither generalization is sufficient, and encourages a closer examination to grasp the situation more accurately. Stepping back to evaluate this phenomenon from a feminist perspective allows precisely this kind of analysis and reveals two significant insights: heterosexual hookups are decidedly sexist in the way they actually occur on college campuses, and the resources of feminist theology and ethics offer hope for combating this disturbing reality.¹

The Hookup Culture: What Is It?

As college students will reveal from their own experiences, there simply is not one definition of “hooking up.” Sociologist Kathleen Bogle acknowledges that “it can mean kissing, sexual intercourse, or any form of sexual interaction generally seen as falling in between those two extremes,” and journalist Laura Sessions Stepp offers an equally broad understanding.² In general usage, then, hooking up commonly refers to some form of sexual activity without the expectation of a consequent relationship between the parties.³ Some definitions attempt to acknowledge the general lack of a preexisting relationship between the hookup partners, but this view, while accurate, should be carefully nuanced, lest it portray hookups as occurring between two completely random, unknown individuals.⁴ In actual practice, it appears that the random hookup between total strangers is very rare. Usually, hookup partners have had some previous contact, even if it is something as simple as sharing a common class; and thus, hookups between acquaintances or friends of friends emerge as the most prevalent iteration.⁵ In spite of differences in definitions, four common elements—a lack of commitment, an acceptance of ambiguity, a role for alcohol, and a social pressure to conform—make it possible to speak of an identifiable hookup culture across the collegiate landscape in the United States.

Of course, the existence of an identifiable hookup culture should not lead to the conclusion that all college students will have the same experience with this phenomenon. Although the social pressure to conform has helped create

¹ The hookup culture, of course, is not just a heterosexual purview. In this paper, however, I focus on the impact of heterosexual hookups because the gender differences in these situations create a distinct interaction that men, far more than women, are in a position to exploit to a dominating advantage.

² Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), quotation on 27; and Laura Sessions Stepp, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 24.

³ Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2001), 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman, “In Control? The Hookup Culture and the Practice of Relationships,” in *Leaving and Coming Home: New Wineskins for Catholic Sexual Ethics*, ed. David Cloutier (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 49.

a hookup culture that dominates the relationship scene, the college experience in the United States is hardly monolithic. Diversity of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, the type of institution one attends, and a host of other variables converge to create different experiences for different people. The hookup culture is no exception to this rule, and in fact, research readily notes that race is one significant factor shifting the prevalence of hooking up and its meaning. The Institute for American Values (IAV), for example, reported that among African American men and women, the term *hooking up* had a number of non-sexual meanings, primarily akin to “meeting up” with someone. Other scholars have noted that on campuses where they are in the minority, African American students hooked up less because there was little interest (from either whites or blacks) in pursuing sexual activity with individuals of another race.⁶ There is reason to assume that the hookup culture operates differently for members of other racial minorities as well, but little research on what this might actually mean. Likewise, research on the hookup culture has so far focused its attention on residential college campuses and elite universities, so there is also limited information on what effect, if any, differences in socioeconomic status or institutional type might have on the hookup culture.⁷ Such limitations, however, do not make the current research on the hookup culture irrelevant. While perhaps not comprehensive, this research does show the existence of a pervasive hookup culture that can, and should, still be analyzed in its particulars.

The most striking common feature among various understandings of hooking up is the lack of commitment. In fact, Stepp, a journalist for the *Washington Post* who has done extensive research on the sexual lives of adolescents and young adults, prefers to identify the hookup culture as the “unhooked” culture, insisting, “hooking up’s defining characteristic is the ability to *unhook* from a partner at any time.”⁸ In Stepp’s account, the hookup culture expects young men and women to unhook sex from any form of a commitment to a relationship, a task that also requires a divorce between one’s sexual activity and one’s emotions.⁹ Other scholars have referred to this as an effort in compartmentalization, since young women and men seek to control their thoughts and

⁶ Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 14; and Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 67.

⁷ Bogle acknowledges these limitations specifically in her discussion of methodology. See Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 6, 189–90. Similar limits are acknowledged by the other researchers used here. See Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 8–9, 70–74; and Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 247–48. Although Stepp’s interviews included more racial diversity, she notes that the socioeconomic demographics were uniform (*Unhooked*, 10–12).

⁸ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24, 119.

their emotions by sequestering these from their physical relationships.¹⁰ Donna Freitas, a religious studies scholar, has argued in a similar vein that the growing divide between college students' sexuality and the rest of their lives is an effort to separate their sexuality "from their larger value commitments—religious, spiritual, or otherwise."¹¹ Nevertheless, the primary commitment that men and women seek to avoid in the hookup culture is a long-term relationship.¹² From a feminist perspective, this is particularly troubling because the avoidance of relationships builds implicitly upon an autonomous understanding of the self and a devaluation of relationality. In many ways, feminist theology has sought to correct both of these trends, suggesting that relationality is an integral piece of what it means to be human and critiquing the autonomous self as the by-product of a predominantly male perspective.¹³

Reinforcing the claim that the hookup culture is based upon this troubling conception of the autonomous self, research shows that those who hook up identify the removal of relationships as one of the hookup culture's chief advantages because it preserves autonomy. Specifically, they view hooking up as a way to get sexual gratification without compromising their freedom.¹⁴ This is hardly a surprising by-product of U.S. culture, which traditionally places great emphasis on independence. High-achieving college students have been encouraged by both parents and peers to lead multitasking lives in which their success in academics and extracurricular activities is touted as their ticket to a bright future. Women in particular are placing higher burdens of perfection upon themselves, and assume that they can have a successful career or a love life, but never both. Love actually appears as a stumbling block to the independent, successful lives these students have been raised to expect, so hookups "appeal to them as useful, even necessary, in achieving what they want and what others want for them."¹⁵

The belief that relationships act as an impediment to social lives is a key element in perpetuating the hookup culture, and stems from limited perceptions of what college relationships might look like. The IAV's 2001 study discovered that only two kinds of relationships existed on campus in actuality: either interested parties were "hanging out" in groups, without any real one-on-one time, or in "'joined at the hip' relationships," in which a sexually active couple chose to be exclusive and would immediately begin spending all their time, including every night, together. There is little to no space in the college atmosphere for slowly

¹⁰ Zimmerman, "In Control?" 56.

¹¹ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, xv.

¹² Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 20.

¹³ For a comprehensive account of this strand in feminism, see Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), esp. 1–6.

¹⁴ Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 21–22; and Stepp, *Unhooked*, 36–37, 81.

¹⁵ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 169, 172, 174–75, quotation on 38.

progressing relationships that might begin on an emotional level before moving to physical intimacy and even less space for traditional dating relationships.¹⁶

Other scholars have also noted the striking lack of dating in the traditional sense of a pair doing activities together and getting to know each other before moving to physical intimacy. Bogle has argued that the hookup culture is in essence a reversal of the once common dating “script,” since it begins with sexual activity and has the potential (albeit a very small one) to lead to a relationship, whereas dating began with a relationship and had the potential to move to the physical level at a later date.¹⁷ In the hookup framework, though, there are no clear steps to a relationship and there are few examples of what a relationship can or ought to look like in the aberrant situation when one should arise. As a result, students often imagine that a relationship is an overwhelming commitment that will completely consume their lives. They have no means to envision something between hookups and weddings.¹⁸ So, on campuses all across America, students choose hookups now and postpone marriage for later.

While the decline of dating has indeed been a contributing factor in the rise of the hookup culture, research on this link at least implies that a return to dating would be preferable.¹⁹ In fairness, this assumption is often relayed from students who express dating as their own romantic ideal.²⁰ Regardless of the source, such a claim deserves critical analysis from a feminist perspective because the history of dating suggests its return would hardly be a boon for women. In fact, dating gave a preponderance of power to men, especially in contrast with previous systems for courtship. Traditionally, men were expected to provide the financial means for each date, which gave them control over a number of factors from venues to initiative. This system often led men to believe that their payments entitled them to sexual favors in return. Meanwhile, women were expected to limit sexual activity to such an extent that blame even fell upon the victims of rape.²¹ While some have suggested that dating left both men and women open to the possibility of exploitation—men being able to exploit women sexually and women being able to exploit men for their money—these respective potentials cannot be equated fairly.²² Additionally, equal capacity for

¹⁶ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 51; and Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 25–27. As mentioned, one notable exception appears to be African American students on campuses with a white majority. Bogle found that they created a space for “talking” before a dating relationship or physical intimacy (*Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 67).

¹⁷ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 47–48.

¹⁸ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 190.

¹⁹ This is particularly prevalent in Zimmerman, “In Control?” 55–56; and Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 164, although Bogle acknowledges dating had its own drawbacks (181).

²⁰ See Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 136; and Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 130–38.

²¹ Beth L. Bailey, *From the Front Porch to the Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), esp. 15, 20–24, 88–89.

²² For this claim, see a well-known piece by sociologist Willard Waller, “The Rating and Dating Complex,” *American Sociological Review* 2, no. 5 (October 1937): 727–34, esp. 728.

exploitation would hardly be considered the basis of a system that promotes full human flourishing. In historical practice, dating functioned far from its romantic idealization, facilitating the commodification of women rather than promoting genuine relationships between men and women. Thus, there is little to suggest that dating would be a positive alternative to the hookup culture, but even less to characterize hooking up as an improvement. In fact, the denial of relationships in the hookup culture should still be considered regressive.

Beyond the avoidance of relationships and commitment, when students choose to hook up, the ambiguous nature of language in the hookup culture appears as another benefit. As mentioned before, when referring to specific practices, hooking up can mean anything from “fairly chaste making out” to sexual intercourse, depending on the situation and the person utilizing the term.²³ Researchers have found this to be the value of the phrase in the first place, with the ambiguity serving a curious double duty in female and male circles. In general, the imprecision provides women the opportunity to speak about hooking up without revealing the sorts of specifics that might damage reputations, while allowing men to suggest to their friends that they engaged in more sexual activity than they actually did.²⁴

The very purpose of the ambiguity seems to be the creation of a level of privacy in what most college students assume to be a public element of their lives. Bogle suggests that this function is particularly important because her research discovered that college students believed their peers were constantly watching their sexual behavior and judging them for it.²⁵ In Stepp’s view, college students have responded by developing “a vocabulary that gives them maximum freedom. The distance between what one says and what one means has never been greater.”²⁶ For these students, simply to say that they “hooked up” with a classmate allows them to satisfy peer expectations without divulging too much detail and prevents others from challenging their behavior since what they say and what another person hears are not necessarily the same thing. Like the avoidance of committed relationships, the vague language allows for the preservation of one of a college student’s most important assets: independence.

In addition to this linguistic open-endedness, a third common feature across the hookup culture is its connection with the party culture, specifically alcohol use. There is some disagreement over the exact role that alcohol plays in the practice of hooking up, with some students maintaining that alcohol is not a significant factor in their self-reported hookup experiences, and other research discovering the opposite. Freitas’s interviews, for example, identified few

²³ See Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 119.

²⁴ Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 22; and Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 28.

²⁵ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 72.

²⁶ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 28.

instances in which her subjects had been drinking.²⁷ Stepp, however, wrote, “of the hundreds of young women I interviewed about hookup experiences, less than a half-dozen said they were sober at the time.”²⁸ These discrepancies are most likely linked to the institutional differences among the subjects and varying types of research undertaken by these scholars.²⁹ Significantly, even at the schools where most students self-reported that their hookup habits did not involve alcohol, these same students still identified drinking as a key component of the hookup culture on their campus.³⁰ Regardless of what students self-report, it seems that alcohol is a central component in the social expectations of the hookup culture, even if it is not always an element in isolated practices. In fact, the IAV report factored this social standard into its very definition of hooking up, proclaiming, “a notable feature of hook ups [*sic*] is that they almost always occur when both participants are drinking or drunk.”³¹

Given the way the hookup culture progresses, a significant role for alcohol is hardly surprising. Bogle’s notion that the hookup culture is a script for interaction between the sexes envisions a standard sequence of steps that culminates in a hookup, all of which could be aided by alcohol. First, an individual identifies a potential hookup partner at a party, usually on the basis of physical attractiveness. Next, he or she has to determine whether this potential partner has any interest in hooking up, a process that proceeds through “a series of nonverbal cues.” The nonverbalization of intent continues as interested parties search for an appropriate place to hook up, a decision influenced by the extent of expected physical activity, since kissing is often acceptable in the open at parties, but further sexual behavior is shunned into privacy. This whole process requires a fair amount of initiative and demands careful recognition of nuanced cues to be successful. Should a party misinterpret any of these interactions, the potential for sudden rejection is high. As a result, a number of students rely on alcohol to lower their inhibitions so that the script can develop according to plan. In light of this process, Bogle asserts that the “hookup culture and the alcohol culture are . . . inextricably linked.”³²

If one accepts an essential relationship between alcohol and the hookup culture, there might be a temptation to say that the contemporary collegiate drinking culture in America is to blame for the prevalence of hooking up. The researchers who have interviewed students, however, caution against this interpretation. Bogle, for example, notes that it is not necessarily the case that

²⁷ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 140.

²⁸ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 115.

²⁹ Freitas, for example, created an online survey and followed up with on-campus interviews in a structured environment. See Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 11–12. Stepp’s “research” occurred while following her interviewees to bars, clubs, and parties. See Stepp, *Unhooked*, 13.

³⁰ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 95.

³¹ Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 15.

³² Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 30–35, 63, 167.

alcohol leads to hookups; rather, it is just as likely that a desire to hook up promotes alcohol consumption.³³ Stepp states it even more explicitly, “Booze doesn’t cause college students to jump into bed with each other, it simply makes it easier for them to do something they think they want to do.”³⁴ In particular, both Bogle and Stepp insist that students choose alcohol because, like other aspects of the hookup culture, it allows them greater freedom—in this case freedom from complete responsibility for their choices. It helps them handle rejection, allowing young adults to tell themselves, in retrospect, that they did not put their best self forward because of the alcohol.³⁵ Additionally, drinking also allows them to dismiss activity that they would normally regret, like going too far sexually or even hooking up with someone with whom they would not normally choose to partner. As Stepp acknowledges, “a hangover is a small price to pay for exoneration.”³⁶

While alcohol, like noncommittal sex and ambiguous language, can be another element of the hookup culture that provides its participants with the independence they seem so desperately to crave, the prevalence of hooking up demands an initial sacrifice of freedom before bestowing these benefits. In fact, the social pressure to conform to the hookup culture is so great that students may feel absolute freedom when working within the script but no one has the liberty to avoid the system altogether. Certainly, abstaining from the hookup scene is possible, but this decision is rife with social consequences that all contribute to the perpetuation of the hookup culture.

The first element ensuring the hookup culture’s power and prevalence is the potential for social marginalization. As mentioned in the discussion about the noncommittal nature of hookups, little space exists on campus for the development of relationships.³⁷ Thus students who wish to avoid the hookup culture leave themselves with few alternatives for forming intimate and romantic relationships while at college. As Bogle explains, these individuals “are on the margins of the social scene and they know it.” For this reason, most of the students who choose to opt out of the hookup culture are already in committed relationships, usually with long-distance boyfriends or girlfriends.³⁸

The second element arises from the fact that the hookup culture is the dominant form for relating between the sexes, with the result that every heterosexual college student seems to expect all his or her peers to follow its script. Indeed, while it may seem oxymoronic, Stepp adamantly insists that the hookup culture “is a way of thinking about relationships, period,” so that in the midst

³³ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁴ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 117.

³⁵ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 168.

³⁶ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 115.

³⁷ See Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 25–28. See also Bogle, *Sex, Dating and Relationships*, 126.

³⁸ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 71, quotation on 69, 65.

of the hookup culture, young women and men assume that relationships never carry any form of commitment. Consequently, for individuals choosing to leave the hookup culture after they enter an exclusive relationship with someone else, the temptation to continue hooking up with individuals back on campus is always present and the general presumption against commitment offers no real reason to pursue strict fidelity. Underscoring this latter point, Stepp actually discovered that when college students did choose to make a commitment to an exclusive relationship, both individuals expected that their partners would likely cheat on them while they were apart. Additionally, due to the prevalence of the hookup script, men and women who remove themselves from the hookup culture run into difficulties should they attempt to have social lives on campus because other classmates presume that any interest—from dancing to talking—is a signal for a hookup. Truly, then, it is impossible to completely sever oneself from the hookup culture, no matter how distasteful one might find it.³⁹

The oppressive nature of the hookup culture's dominance is also evident in the effects it can have on dating in the lesbian gay bisexual transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community. In a profound example, LGBTQ students report that the heterosexist assumptions of the hookup culture make it difficult for them to build their own, nonheterosexual relationships.⁴⁰ Although there is a hookup culture for gay and lesbian students too, the differences are significant enough to merit their own treatment and more studies are needed.⁴¹ Suffice to say that the experiences of the LGBTQ community on campus reveal that the hookup culture not only promotes sexist values but heterosexist ones as well.

Collectively, the noncommittal nature of hookups, the ambiguity in the language, the use of alcohol, and the social pressure to conform can be taken as the common elements that create an identifiable hookup culture on the U.S. collegiate landscape. For those who participate in the culture and choose to hook up, the practice seems to help them achieve their goals. They have the opportunity to socialize, even to engage in sexual activity, all without having to compromise career or school goals. They also have the advantage of fulfilling what they assume to be their peers' expectations for their sexual activity while maintaining an element of privacy and dignity whenever they say they hooked up. Last, should they discover that their hookup experience was less than ideal, alcohol provides a built-in safety net to dismiss improprieties out of hand. Thus the hookup culture serves students longing for independence and balancing busy lives. On this basis, one could argue that the hookup culture is a beneficial element of today's college experience for those who want to pursue it. The social pressure to conform problematizes this interpretation some, although this too could be explained as a necessary evil that should be mitigated, if not removed,

³⁹ Stepp, *Unhooked*, quotation on 5, 135, 51–52.

⁴⁰ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 104–5, 141–42.

⁴¹ See Stepp, *Unhooked*, 12.

in order to allow the willful participants of the hookup culture to preserve their freedom.

The Hookup Culture: Why Should It Be Concerning?

If certain elements of the hookup culture help students maintain their independence and if it serves their lifestyle, some might want to challenge the idea that anyone outside the culture itself should critique it, let alone the resources of feminist theology and ethics. Indeed, if any of the aforementioned arguments about independence hold true, then the case could be made that the hookup culture *itself* is not problematic. The truth of the matter, however, is that even the elements that afford participants freedom are more complex and more hazardous than the culture acknowledges. Bogle summarizes the situation quite succinctly, noting that “in many ways, the hookup system creates an illusion of choice. Although students may have many options about how they conduct themselves within the hookup culture, they cannot change the fact that hooking up is the dominant script on campus.”⁴² An outside perspective illustrates the sexism inherent in this arrangement, revealing that each of the four common features of the hookup culture operates in such a way as to put college students—especially women—at risk.

While a number of outside perspectives provide useful tools for examining the hookup culture, a feminist perspective is in a unique position to do so because feminism’s pro-women stance is attuned to the sexism that other points of view might easily miss. An analogy will help explain this potential. As Elizabeth Johnson has pointed out, oftentimes a tradition will be unable to see the problematic aspects of its common practices. This opposition to criticism, which she follows Bernard Lonergan in calling “scotosis,” can obscure the real issues and prevent necessary challenges from arising because most people within the system will never conceive of questioning their normal activities in the first place.⁴³ In such instances, it is precisely a partiality, akin to what Jon Sobrino calls the “view from the victims,” that has the capacity to overcome the scotosis and get to the true nature of the matter.⁴⁴ Of course, Johnson and Sobrino are referring to the Christian theological tradition, and the hookup culture is certainly not a tradition in the same sense. Nevertheless, there is an analogous reluctance to

⁴² Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 184.

⁴³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2002), 13–14.

⁴⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), see esp. 1–8. For a more extended treatment of the notion that certain groups, particularly the oppressed, have access to a unique viewpoint in general and in ethical evaluations, see Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 49–82.

engage in criticism in this culture as a whole, especially among its participants. A feminist perspective is necessary to critique each element of hooking up, as it occurs in practice, in order to illuminate the bigger picture. In application, this entails looking at the experiences and voices of women in order to evaluate the veracity of claims about the advantages of hooking up against the effects of the hookup culture on female students.⁴⁵

To begin, removing commitment from the interactions between men and women produces three issues that challenge the assumption that a noncommittal existence provides the freedom that students allege they seek. First, a true expulsion of commitment requires a separation of emotions from physical activity that is challenging to accomplish. A number of students report feeling awkwardness toward their partners in the days after a hookup and both individuals appear unsure of how to proceed without any sense of obligation to each other.⁴⁶ Stepp acknowledges that this takes a substantial toll on women, whom she observed to have a more difficult time engaging in sexual activity in a way that removed attachment completely, and who readily blamed themselves “when, by what seem[ed] like accident or error, attachment [did occur].”⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this sort of sweeping claim has the twin danger of reinforcing gender stereotypes and universalizing women’s experience. Feminist theology has often fought against both of these shortcomings, critiquing the inadequacy of traditional gender dualism and insisting upon the need to account for a diversity of women’s experiences.⁴⁸ Mitigating some of these concerns, however, others have depicted the difficulty of removing all emotional attachment as a human problem. Theologian Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman, for example, has challenged the notion that an emotionally devoid hookup is possible for either sex, querying, “one wonders how attachment-free a hookup actually is if one has to work hard at censoring the natural feelings of connection that develop when two persons engage in sexually intimate behavior (even something as supposedly risk-free as kissing).”⁴⁹

Second, researchers have found that however much young men and women value freedom, they do not actually wish to eschew all relationships. Admittedly,

⁴⁵ On the centrality of women’s experiences to feminist perspectives, see Margaret A. Farley, “Feminist Ethics,” in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 6.

⁴⁶ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 40; see also Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 17.

⁴⁷ Stepp, *Unhooked*, quotation on 121, see also 25, 226–27.

⁴⁸ See Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Continuing the Story, but Departing the Text: A Historicist Interpretation of Feminist Norms in Theology,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 202–5. See also Sheila Greeve Davaney, “The Limits of the Appeal to Women’s Experience,” in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Value in American Culture*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 31–49.

⁴⁹ Zimmerman, “In Control?” 58.

the extent to which this is a problem seems to vary by sex and age. Bogle observed that when men and women arrive on campus, both seem to want the same freedom to play the field, so to speak.⁵⁰ As time goes on, though, women quickly become disenchanted with the hookup culture, hoping for something more. In its 2001 survey, the IAV found that 83 percent of women envisioned marriage as “a very important goal” in their lives and 63 percent of young women expected to meet their future spouse in college.⁵¹ Young men, however, do not seek marriage to the same extent. In fact, research from the National Marriage Project (NMP) on this question established an average discrepancy of almost 11 percentage points over the past thirty years when comparing the importance of marriage to women and to men at the end of high school.⁵²

While none of this is to say that no men want to marry and all women do, this sort of discussion still raises concerns about stereotyping and generalizing women’s (and men’s) experience. At the same time, acknowledging diversity does not make it impossible to speak about commonalities across human experiences, as feminist theologians have attempted to demonstrate.⁵³ It is still significant that the majority of men and women in the thirty-year study maintained that marriage is important to them, making it possible to identify the hookup culture as a disservice to both sexes in this regard. Freitas has suggested as much from her interviews, where she discovered that 79 percent of her subjects produced a nonsexual view of romance (stopping at kissing) when asked to describe their most romantic fantasy. In her view, this indicated a distressing divide between the true goals of college students and their expectations of the hookup culture. However much this may be the case for both sexes, scholars still generally acknowledge that men are more willing to engage in the hookup culture for sexual gratification alone while women are more likely to be seeking relationships from their hookups.⁵⁴

There is little doubt which of these two agendas is successful within the structures of the hookup culture. Men in the NMP’s 2002 study actually cited the ready availability of hookups as one of the reasons they were happy to delay

⁵⁰ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 97.

⁵¹ Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, quotation on 42, 59.

⁵² W. Brad Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt, *The State of Our Unions 2010: When Marriage Disappears; The New Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, 2010), 99.

⁵³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Feminist Ethics: Differences and Common Ground; A Catholic Perspective,” in Curran, Farley, and McCormick, *Feminist Ethics*, 184–204; and Jennifer Beste, “Limits of the Appeal to Women’s Experiences Reconsidered,” *Horizons* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 54–77.

⁵⁴ Wilcox and Marquardt, *When Marriage Disappears*, 99; and Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 164. For a discussion of the divergent goals of men and women, see Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 51; and Stepp, *Unhooked*, 226, 245.

marriage and other long-term relationship commitments.⁵⁵ Compounding the sexist operation of this arrangement, the IAV study uncovered that the decision to turn a hookup interaction into an actual relationship hinged on the male partner. The study's authors insisted, "we heard only of a few instances in which women, or even the two parties as equals, decided the relationship status."⁵⁶ Both Bogle and Stepp report that college women are quite aware of the unlikelihood of achieving their goals within the hookup framework, but they still settle for hooking up, either in hopes that they will be the ones to buck the trend or because a "relationship" based on steadily hooking up with one individual appears better than no relationship at all. All this points to the disturbing conclusion that the hookup culture's lack of commitment serves male goals while limiting female agency.⁵⁷

As if that were not a sufficient criticism, scholars have also raised concerns about the challenges an abandonment of commitment poses for future relationships. Zimmerman has argued that the skills the hookup culture encourages young men and women to develop—specifically a detachment from emotion in relationships and an aversion to commitment—are not only unhelpful for creating and sustaining relationships and marriages later in life, they are antithetical. Strengthening her point, Bogle discovered that the only "norm" operative in the hookup culture is that individuals should avoid hooking up with someone with whom they might be interested in pursuing a relationship, and if they were to hook up, they should limit the extent of sexual activity as much as possible. This reveals that women and men in the hookup culture realize on some level that hooking up is a habit that is detrimental to relationships, a problem that Stepp acknowledges is further exacerbated when men and women decide they do want relationships only to discover they have no other resources with which to do so.⁵⁸

As a whole, then, the avoidance of relationships in the hookup culture is not a true benefit. An attunement to the experiences and voices of women shows that the removal of commitment from relationships is a particularly tricky task to accomplish, especially for women; favors men's goals over women's; and creates obstacles for future relationships and marriages, which students say they desire eventually. This less than ideal picture challenges the freedom that a removal of commitment ostensibly provides, from both a female and a male perspective. The reliance on ambiguous language further contests the perceived benefits of the hookup culture in much the same vein.

⁵⁵ David Popenoe and Barbara Defoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2002: The Social Health of Marriage in America* (Piscataway, NJ: The National Marriage Project, 2002), 6–7.

⁵⁶ Glenn and Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out*, 39.

⁵⁷ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 42–43, 49; and Stepp, *Unhooked*, 65.

⁵⁸ Zimmerman, "In Control?" 56–57; Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 37–39; and Stepp, *Unhooked*, 161.

First, just as a lack of commitment may be a detriment to future relationships, the ambiguity in language has the potential to stifle the development of character traits that would promote healthy interactions between the sexes. As Stepp pinpoints, relationships, and the trust upon which they are built, require frank conversations. This task is hardly aided by years of employing ambiguous language. The fact that this vagueness develops around relationships and sexual activity only serves to increase the possibility for future challenges.⁵⁹

In addition, one of the most beneficial traits of the ambiguity embedded in the term *hooking up* is its ability to leave as much as possible to the imagination of the listener.⁶⁰ Intentionally or otherwise, this has the end result of fostering some level of misperception about the sorts of practices in which college students are actually choosing to engage. This might not seem like much of a problem, but as Bogle notes, in a culture with few rules to guide students' behavior, perceptions about what one's peers are doing play a huge role in determining how far individuals are willing to go sexually with a hookup partner.⁶¹ In general, college students believe their classmates are all engaging in more promiscuous activity than they themselves have experienced, a view that the research does not support.⁶² This belief is at least facilitated, if not directly caused, by the ambiguous nature of the language surrounding hooking up and only serves to encourage individuals to pursue riskier activities than they might choose on their own.⁶³ Thus the lack of upfront discussion about sex and sexuality, while seemingly liberating in the face of peers' expectations and pressures, actually serves to disguise the problem of social pressure, leaving students to assume their peers expect more than might really be the case if open conversations were possible.

Like the value of ambiguous language, the supposed assets of alcohol's role in the hookup culture are also challenged by a negative potential to facilitate risky behavior. To begin, a belief that one's drunkenness will exculpate bad decisions can, and ostensibly does, lead individuals to make more perilous choices in deciding with whom to hook up and how far to go. Of primary concern, however, is the way in which an inebriation-induced lack of control puts women at risk for rape and sexual assault. This is particularly dangerous for women who may want to hook up but not have intercourse. To achieve this goal, the hookup culture requires them to express some interest in a partner. For some men, this initial attention is the only thing they see, and they choose to interpret a woman's later resistance as inauthentic after the first expression of attraction. This view is only encouraged by the popular belief among males in the hookup

⁵⁹ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 241.

⁶⁰ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 74, 89.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 77, 82.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 37; see also Stepp, *Unhooked*, 106, 124.

culture that they are entitled to sexual gratification and that women who express interest in them will be at their beck and call. Couple this with the fact that women will often drink in order to lower their inhibitions when they begin this process, and a woman's capacity to offer resistance can be further limited. What is just as troubling as these male expectations is the notion taught to and accepted by some females that it is a woman's responsibility to look after herself and not get into a position where she is uncomfortable or loses control. A more critical analysis from a feminist perspective shows, however, that the hookup culture and this view both avoid addressing how much control a woman really has in a system of pressure so geared toward fulfilling societal expectations of male sexuality.⁶⁴

Lack of control in the hookup culture is not created by alcohol alone, though. The prevalence of social pressure to hook up, and the lack of viable alternatives, is just as restrictive. Once again, for a variety of reasons, it affects women more than men. For example, women must deal with a separate set of social pressures than men do: the legacy of the feminist movement. It may seem counterintuitive, but Stepp insists that "feminism is undeniably a driving force behind the phenomenon of hooking up."⁶⁵ In particular, Bogle notes that the push for full equality between the sexes in the early years of feminism contributed to a decrease in the viability and prevalence of dating as the main process for finding a spouse.⁶⁶ The initial message of female empowerment and total equality has been interpreted to say that women should participate in the hookup culture in order to match the freedom of men, who have (as a sex, on the whole) traditionally pursued sexual activity for individual gratification without worrying about consequences. As a result, women are told, and sometimes accept, that enjoying the freedoms of the hookup culture is supposed to be an empowering experience. One female Duke student told Stepp, "A strong woman who desired a particular man should, provided he was willing, be able to take that man to bed and do whatever she damn well pleased. . . . If she couldn't do this, she wasn't really empowered."⁶⁷ To this end, some would say that the hookup culture helps women.

The claim that the hookup culture promotes gender equality and female empowerment, though, demands critical analysis. Fortunately, there is a methodological principle employed by many feminist theologians that can help in an analogous way. Known as a hermeneutics of suspicion, this tool assumes on the basis of historical observation that established traditions are not intrinsically ordered toward equality and flourishing for all members. Specifically, this has often meant indicting the theological tradition itself in the perpetuation of

⁶⁴ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 115, 164, 233–34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶⁶ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 21–22.

⁶⁷ Stepp, *Unhooked*, 33, quotation on 142.

patriarchy and offering women's own voices as a corrective.⁶⁸ In analogous application to hooking up, this starts with the assumption that the structures of the hookup culture are not neutrally geared toward everyone's benefit. The appropriate challenge for each feature, then, is to ask *cui bono* and to give women a chance to answer. In the case of social pressure to conform, the large number of women who report negative hookup experiences challenges the narrative of empowerment.⁶⁹ The feminist movement may be a source of pressure for women, but this does not mean that the pressure benefits women. In a disturbing twist, men seem to be benefiting the most, and the women involved express this on the basis of their own experience. "Most girls," admitted one female student in hindsight, "eventually realize that getting a guy to sleep with you is just a fancy way of 'letting' a guy sleep with you."⁷⁰

Further underscoring the conclusion that the structures of the hookup culture are skewed against women, a double standard clearly exists with regard to conduct. While the pressure to conform encourages women to participate in the social scene by hooking up, Bogle notes they are repeatedly scrutinized as they do so. As Freitas observes, female students have to walk a fine line between playing the social games of the hookup culture enough to maintain status while avoiding the "slut" label for participating too much. The discriminatory quality of this tension is clearly evident in comparison with the experience of male students in Bogle's research. Unlike women, men in the hookup culture quickly learn that promiscuity on their part is either identified jokingly or for the sake of praise. As a result, men have virtually no restrictions on their hookup habits while women have to carefully navigate a set of unwritten rules in order to avoid ruining their reputations. Should their reputations be damaged, women can expect either social marginalization or a shrinking pool of viable hookup partners, since few men would be willing to hook up with a known "slut."⁷¹

From a feminist perspective, the mere existence of these contrary sets of standards is enough to reveal discrimination in the hookup culture. Using this fact to conclude that the hookup culture is pro-men and anti-women would be too simplistic, however. Certainly, the hookup culture serves the relationship goals of the general male population (sex without relationships) and not those of the general female population (commitment). Additionally, as Stepp discovered, "guys frequently create the social environment in which hooking up flourishes and set the expectations about what girls will do."⁷² Yet the fact that men

⁶⁸ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Project: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 12–18; and Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 22–26.

⁶⁹ See Stepp, *Unhooked*, 119, 151–54.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 147–48, quotation on 227.

⁷¹ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 73; Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 95; and Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 104–6, 112–14.

⁷² Stepp, *Unhooked*, 34.

derive benefits from the system does not make it truly pro-men. Freitas reveals that the same structures that are stacked against women also pressure men to prove their sexuality by having sex with multiple partners, and any dissent from this pattern becomes a denial of their masculinity.⁷³ It is important to be attentive to this fact because the point of a feminist perspective is not to ignore men and focus on women. As feminist theologians often insist, the goal is full human flourishing.⁷⁴ It would be most appropriate, then, to speak of the hookup culture as being biased against women rather than unequivocally biased toward men.

Strengthening the conclusion that the hookup culture is biased against women, the limited alternatives to hooking up are similarly oppressive. First, the “friends with benefits” structure purportedly helps women avoid damaging their reputation without abdicating their sexual license because it limits their sexual encounters to one man.⁷⁵ This hardly constitutes a relationship, though. More important from a feminist perspective concerned with challenging discrimination, this system is just as biased against women because neither commitment nor exclusivity are expected of the male partner.

The only real alternative that researchers have discovered is the culture of what Freitas identifies as “evangelical schools.”⁷⁶ At these colleges, hooking up is not a common practice, and on the off chance that it should occur it seldom involves anything more than kissing. The atmosphere on these campuses has managed to curb the hookup culture, however, only by severely restricting students’ freedoms, and by promoting a “purity culture.”⁷⁷ The troubling reality of the purity culture is that it too is fraught with sexism, stressing male protection of female virginity as fathers pass along “unblemished” daughters to husbands, and female passivity as women are envisioned as sexually and romantically “asleep” until the spouse chosen for them by God (the *Father*) arrives.⁷⁸ This system builds on and reinforces patriarchy, a social structure that accords more power to men and places women in subordinate roles. From its origin, feminist theology has sought to critique and reform patriarchy in religious traditions, so a system built upon this form of female subordination cannot be considered a true solution to a male-serving, female-subjugating hookup culture.⁷⁹ Yet so far this has been the only effective effort at combating the influence of hooking up.

⁷³ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 101–2.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Johnson, *She Who Is*, 31–32.

⁷⁵ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 118–19.

⁷⁶ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 67, 69, 78–80, 119.

⁷⁸ On the matter of male control, see *ibid.*, 85, 92; on the passivity and submission expected of women, see *ibid.*, 81–82, 86; and on the ideal that a future wife remain sexually starved, see esp. *ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 22–23.

There can hardly be any wonder at the fact that so many women feel powerless in the face of the hookup culture.⁸⁰

Combining all these negative implications identified by a feminist analysis, the conclusion is clearly that the four central elements of the hookup culture offer only the perception of freedom. While this is arguably true for both sexes, it is indisputably the case for women. The removal of commitment places an undue burden upon all students to separate their emotions, deny their actual desires, and inhibit their potential for future relationships. The ambiguous language encourages them to avoid frank conversations with their friends and leaves them with little guidance beyond a constant pressure to go further sexually, while the presence of alcohol as a crutch puts women at greater risk for assault. Last, the social pressures to participate in the hookup culture are magnified for women, and work more for men's interests. All of this is worsened by the fact that "alternatives" to this phenomenon are perhaps even more damaging for women and their social standing. Placed alongside the positive claims about the fostering of independence, these challenges offer a more complete picture of what the hookup culture actually entails and highlight its sexist nature.

Feminist Theology and Ethics: Addressing the Sexism

In light of its flaws, a desire for some viable solutions to the sexism of the hookup culture is certainly reasonable, especially for concerned outsiders adopting a feminist perspective. The problem with providing such answers, however, is that the solutions of third-party observers can easily devolve into a form of paternalism that undermines the agency of young men and women just as much as the structures of the hookup culture do. The best way to counteract this possibility lies in presenting resources, rather than explicit answers, which participants in the hookup culture might use first to evaluate their situations and then to create their own empowering alternatives for relationships on campus. While there are numerous places to turn for potential resources, three of the more fundamental concerns of feminist theology represent excellent tools for this process because they can address one of the most important, yet least considered, questions behind the shortcomings of the hookup culture: "Why?"

The emphasis on fundamental—and by this I mean basic—ideas perhaps deserves a brief explanation, since works in feminist theology and ethics that have explicitly addressed sexual ethics might seem like a more logical well for resources to use to address the practice of hooking up. The challenge with using more specialized sources, though, is that they are not as likely as more fundamental principles to help students get to the root of the sexism in the hookup culture. Many excellent works in sexual ethics by feminist theologians are a step too far along in the process because they address sexuality within the context of

⁸⁰ Bogle, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*, 49.

committed relationships.⁸¹ Margaret Farley admits as much in her work on sexual ethics, *Just Love*, where she enumerates seven “bottom line requirements” for “just love” and “just sex.” While she could easily use each of these norms to critique the hookup culture, when addressing the matter of casual sex, Farley eschews all seven and instead proposes teaching the more fundamental value of justice and its applicability to sexuality. She does this in order to get at the heart of the problem, suggesting that her criteria for developing sexual intimacy in loving relationships would be fruitless for those who assumed no integral connection between love and sex. Given that the hookup culture likewise functions on a deliberate disconnect between sex and everything else, those who operate within it will similarly need broader resources that can help them evaluate their most basic presuppositions about relationships and independence.⁸²

Three fundamental concerns from feminist theology that can help facilitate this evaluation are the role of language in the constitution of the self, the link between autonomy and relationality, and the importance of structural analysis. The first notion, that language plays a role in constituting the self, is essential because it explains why students should bother talking about a hookup culture that seems so impossible to change. As feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp describes, language is political and the act of giving voice to those who have been silenced has the potential for “emancipatory transformation.”⁸³ The ultimate goal is to transform the structures of oppression, but even when falling short of this goal the project is not a failure because there is something self-actualizing about expressing one’s own experience. As Chopp asserts, “language is also the site where our subjectivity is formed.”⁸⁴ So, the act of speaking allows individuals not only to reflect on their experiences but also to have power over their own identity. In theological circles, this has been the first step to counteracting a tradition that has defined on its own terms anyone who has been marginalized. This should also be the first step in responding to the hookup culture, for allowing men and women to voice their own concerns in a culture that functions to silence frank conversation is itself a subversive act. As the notion that language is

⁸¹ For two examples of relationships as the foundation of sexual ethics, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Feminism and Christian Ethics: Moral Theology,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 223; and Beverly Wildung Harrison, “Human Sexuality and Mutuality,” in *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity*, ed. Judith L. Weidman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), esp. 149–50.

⁸² Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 164, 215–29, 235, 272; for the assumptions of the hookup culture, see Stepp, *Unhooked*, 6.

⁸³ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 3, quotation on 18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11–12, quotation on 12.

constitutive of the self suggests, the result will be first an empowerment of these students and then, hopefully, an emancipatory transformation of structures.⁸⁵

Similarly, the link between autonomy and relationality in feminist theology can help explain why the pursuit of independence in the hookup culture will necessarily be insufficient. Admittedly, feminism in a multitude of forms has long promoted freedom and autonomy, especially for women.⁸⁶ This has been a reaction in part to the (patriarchal) tendency to define women by the agency of the men in their lives, rather than their own capacities.⁸⁷ What feminist theology has stressed alongside this, however, is that freedom must be properly understood not as complete license, but as interdependence.⁸⁸ An excellent critique of the tendency to understand independence in isolation has come from Brazilian ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara, whose social location outside Western culture gives her a chance to poignantly comment on some of its unspoken assumptions. In particular, she has criticized Western notions of autonomy for being excessively individualistic.⁸⁹ Due to the fact that individual autonomy “was promoted in a dogmatic, absolute, univocal, and unlimited way,” she laments, “what was originally affirmed as a value seems to have turned into an antivalue.”⁹⁰ This happens in particular when limitless independence turns into license for the powerful to exploit the powerless, thereby undermining everyone’s autonomy.⁹¹ To counter this possibility, a foundational assumption of feminist theology and ethics expressed by Elizabeth Johnson stresses “that the self is rightly structured not in dualistic opposition to the other but in intrinsic relationship with the other.”⁹² There is an additional caution raised by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, however, that an exclusive emphasis on relationality can undermine women’s agency, making it difficult for women to recognize their own individual value apart from their relational identity as daughters, mothers, sisters, and friends.⁹³ Keeping independence and interdependence together in tension, though, helps relieve some of these concerns. Thus the message from feminist theology is not that autonomy is a false human good, but that authentic independence cannot be understood apart from a relational conception of the human person.

With regard to the hookup culture, the connection between relational-

⁸⁵ Ibid., 10–39.

⁸⁶ Autonomy, for example, serves as the fundamental starting point of Farley’s analysis of the human person, although she also emphasizes its connection to relationality (*Just Love*, 210).

⁸⁷ See, for example, Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 54.

⁸⁸ See Johnson, *She Who Is*, 67–68.

⁸⁹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 74.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁹¹ Ibid., 72, 75.

⁹² Johnson, *She Who Is*, 68.

⁹³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 55.

ity and autonomy has the ability to explain why so many students have negative hookup experiences. This link speaks directly to the difficulties they face when attempting to sever emotions and commitment from sexual activity as the hookup culture requires. Ultimately, the emphasis on relationality encourages young men and women to reflect critically upon their own interactions with the hookup culture, allowing them to identify its shortcomings and to voice their frustrations. The hope, of course, would be that in seeing the isolating independence of the hookup culture for the incomplete “antivalue” that it is, these young adults would have an alternative vision of autonomy and relationality to guide their efforts to reconstruct a positive social scene. Although such a goal is undoubtedly a distant one given the social pressures of the hookup culture, providing students with the resources to start a conversation about what they want is an essential first step.

A third basic concern from feminist theology and ethics, the importance of structural analysis, addresses why the social pressures perpetuating the hookup culture are so damaging. In feminist theology, structural analysis has accompanied an attentiveness to social context that has helped identify and combat injustice. Its centrality is evident in an informal analysis performed by theologian Mary E. Hunt, who discovered that across diverse commitments in feminist theology, “the common thread is an insistence on critical contextualized analysis of power dynamics so that justice may be done.”⁹⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza speaks of this as a key element in feminist liberation theology, which “understands itself as a political practice not only for personal transformation but also for structural change.”⁹⁵ Similarly, Daly defined the distinctive feature of feminist ethics as attentiveness to “social context” rather than to simply isolated moral actions.⁹⁶ Johnson has further specified this project with her identification of “the emancipation of women toward human flourishing” as the defining standard behind a feminist theological evaluation of social structures.⁹⁷

Turning to the hookup culture, this foundational concern in feminist ethics insists that the current system is unjust. Attentiveness to social context reveals that hooking up facilitates society’s expectations of male sexuality and encourages both men and women to challenge those expectations in the first place. Meanwhile, structural analysis highlights the troubling fact that the hookup culture is built upon a coercive pressure to conform and that women bear the brunt of this burden. From such a perspective, the perpetuation of the double standard exemplified in reserving derogatory labels for women alone serves as

⁹⁴ Mary E. Hunt, “Feminist Theological Ethics: Doing Justice to Justice,” in *Themes in Feminist Theology for the New Millennium (I)*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 2002), 145.

⁹⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 12.

⁹⁶ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 109.

⁹⁷ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 30.

an additional example of the injustices inherent in the structures that promote hooking up. Certainly, then, concern for social context and structural analysis promotes a critical engagement of the hookup culture while also providing useful tools for moving forward. While it is hard to argue that raising this type of awareness will radically transform the campus social scene, it is just as challenging to imagine a more just system emerging without attentiveness to social context and structural analysis.

Indeed, this is the primary value of turning to some of the more fundamental assumptions of feminist theology and ethics. The role of language in constituting the self, the link between relationality and autonomy, and the concern for structural analysis will not lead to a sudden displacement of hooking up, but they can help change the practice. Precisely because the hookup culture functions to deprive men, and especially women, of their unique voices, providing the tools and vocabulary to have an open conversation about this culture and its shortcomings is itself a change. Admittedly, even if students were to employ these resources in order to reflect on their experiences and criticize the hookup culture, there is no guarantee that things would be different. If they have no opportunity to start this process and open this conversation, however, things will undoubtedly remain the same.

Given the sexism inherent in the hookup culture, maintenance of the status quo is an untenable outcome. Feminist theology and ethics, then, can and must seek to help women and men pursue change in this realm. While it may be tempting to provide solutions for wholesale transformation of the hookup culture, there can be no one-size-fits-all answer to a phenomenon that has become a problem precisely because it assumed everyone should have the same thing. True change must come from within and the only way to support it is to help young adults think through the problems and alternatives. To this end, the three key concerns in feminist theology discussed here help by explaining why it is necessary for students to talk about their experiences and frustrations in the first place, why the goals of the hookup culture are insufficient, and why its structures are sexist. The main significance of these three resources lies in answering these questions and facilitating this conversation, which is clearly a necessary starting point. I hope this discussion will allow students to move to the next step of creating a space and system for relationships more conducive to human flourishing. At that point, feminist theologians can take pride in knowing that their work helped to chip away at a hookup culture that for all its supposed benefits is really nothing more than sexism in practice.