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# GENDERED SEXUALITY IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

## *Double Binds and Flawed Options*

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*Current work on hooking up—or casual sexual activity on college campuses—takes an individualistic, “battle of the sexes” approach and underestimates the importance of college as a classed location. The authors employ an interactional, intersectional approach using longitudinal ethnographic and interview data on a group of college women’s sexual and romantic careers. They find that heterosexual college women contend with public gender beliefs about women’s sexuality that reinforce male dominance across both hookups and committed relationships. The four-year university, however, also reflects a privileged path to adulthood. The authors show that it is characterized by a classed self-development imperative that discourages relationships but makes hooking up appealing. Experiences of this structural conflict vary. More privileged women struggle to meet gender and class guidelines for sexual behavior, placing them in double binds. Less privileged women find the class beliefs of the university foreign and hostile to their sexual and romantic logics.*

**Keywords:** young adulthood; heterosexuality; hooking up; relationships; social class

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As traditional dating has declined on college campuses, hookups—casual sexual encounters often initiated at alcohol-fueled, dance-oriented social events—have become a primary form of intimate heterosexual interaction (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). Hookups have attracted attention among social scientists and journalists (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Stepp 2007). To date, however, limitations of both data and theory have obscured the implications for women and the gender system. Most studies examine only the quality of hookups at one point during college and rely, if implicitly, on an individualist, gender-only approach. In contrast, we follow a group of women as they move through college—assessing all of their sexual experiences. We use an interactionist approach and attend to how both gender and class shape college sexuality. Our analyses offer a new interpretation of this important issue, contribute to gender theory, and demonstrate how to conduct an interactionist, intersectional analysis of young adult sexuality.

## GENDER THEORY AND COLLEGE SEXUALITY

### Research on Hooking Up

Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) and Glenn and Marquardt (2001) were the first to draw attention to the hookup as a distinct social form. As Glenn and Marquardt (2001, 13) explain, most students agree that “a hookup is anything ‘ranging from kissing to having sex,’ and that it takes place outside the context of commitment.” Others have similarly found that *hooking up* refers to a broad range of sexual activity and that this ambiguity is part of the appeal of the term (Bogle 2008). Hookups differ from dates in that individuals typically do not plan to do something together prior to sexual activity. Rather, two people hanging out at a party, bar, or place of residence will begin talking, flirting, and/or dancing. Typically, they have been drinking. At some point, they move to a more private location, where sexual activity occurs (England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2007). While strangers sometimes hook up, more often hookups occur among those who know each other at least slightly (Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006).

England has surveyed more than 14,000 students from 19 universities and colleges about their hookup, dating, and relationship experiences. Her Online College Social Life Survey (OCSLS) asks students to report on their recent hookups using “whatever definition of a hookup you and your friends use.”<sup>1</sup> Seventy-two percent of both men and women participating in the OCSLS reported at least one hookup by their senior year in college.<sup>2</sup>

Of these, roughly 40 percent engaged in three or fewer hookups, 40 percent between four and nine hookups, and 20 percent 10 or more hookups. Only about one-third engaged in intercourse in their most recent hookups, although—among the 80 percent of students who had intercourse by the end of college—67 percent had done so outside of a relationship.

Ongoing sexual relationships without commitment were common and were labeled “repeat,” “regular,” or “continuing” hookups and sometimes “friends with benefits” (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2009; Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Ongoing hookups sometimes became committed relationships and vice versa; generally, the distinction revolved around the level of exclusivity and a willingness to refer to each other as “girlfriend/boyfriend” (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2009). Thus, hooking up does not imply interest in a relationship, but it does not preclude such interest. Relationships are also common among students. By their senior year, 69 percent of heterosexual students had been in a college relationship of at least six months.

To date, however, scholars have paid more attention to women’s experiences with hooking up than relationships and focused primarily on ways that hookups may be less enjoyable for women than for men. Glenn and Marquardt (2001, 20) indicate that “hooking up is an activity that women sometimes find rewarding but more often find confusing, hurtful, and awkward.” Others similarly suggest that more women than men find hooking up to be a negative experience (Bogle 2008, 173; Owen et al. 2008) and focus on ways that hookups may be harmful to women (Eshbaugh and Gute 2008; Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006).

This work assumes distinct and durable gender differences at the individual level. Authors draw, if implicitly, from evolutionary psychology, socialization, and psychoanalytic approaches to gender—depicting women as more relationally oriented and men as more sexually adventurous (see Wharton 2005 for a review). For example, despite only asking about hookup experiences, Bogle (2008, 173) describes a “battle of the sexes” in which women want hookups to “evolve into some semblance of a relationship,” while men prefer to “hook up with no strings attached” (also see Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Stepp 2007).

The battle of the sexes view implies that if women could simply extract commitment from men rather than participating in hookups, gender inequalities in college sexuality would be alleviated. Yet this research—which often fails to examine relationships—ignores the possibility that women might be the losers in both hookups and relationships. Research suggests that young heterosexual women often suffer the most damage from those with whom they are most intimate: Physical battery, emotional abuse, sexual

assault, and stalking occur at high rates in youthful heterosexual relationships (Campbell et al. 2007; Dunn 1999). This suggests that gender inequality in college sexuality is systemic, existing across social forms.

Current research also tends to see hooking up as solely about gender, without fully considering the significance of other dimensions of inequality. Some scholars highlight the importance of the college environment and traditional college students' position in the life course (Bogle 2008; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). However, college is treated primarily as a context for individual sexual behavior rather than as a key location for class reproduction. Analyzing the role of social class in sex and relationships may help to illuminate the appeal of hookups for both college women and men.

### **Gender Beliefs and Social Interaction**

Contemporary gender theory provides us with resources to think about gender inequality in college sexuality differently. Gender scholars have developed and refined the notion of gender as a social structure reproduced at multiple levels of society: Gender is embedded not only in individual selves but also in interaction and organizational arrangements (Connell 1987; Glenn 1999; Risman 2004). This paper focuses on the interactional level, attending to the power of public gender beliefs in organizing college sexual and romantic relations.

Drawing on Sewell's (1992) theory of structure, Ridgeway and Correll (2004, 511) define gender beliefs as the "cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender." By believing in gender differences, individuals "see" them in interaction and hold others accountable to this perception. Thus, even if individuals do not internalize gender beliefs, they must still confront them (Ridgeway 2009).

Ridgeway and coauthors (Ridgeway 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2004) assert that interaction is particularly important to the reproduction of gender inequality because of how frequently men and women interact. They focus on the workplace but suggest that gendered interaction in private life may be intensifying in importance as beliefs about gender difference in workplace competency diminish (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Ridgeway 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). We extend their insights to sexual interaction, as it is in sexuality and reproduction that men and women are believed to be most different. The significance of gender beliefs in sexual interaction may be magnified earlier in the life course, given the amount of time spent in interaction with peers and the

greater malleability of selves (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995). Consequently, the university provides an ideal site for this investigation.

The notion that men and women have distinct sexual interests and needs generates a powerful set of public gender beliefs about women's sexuality. A belief about what women should not do underlies a *sexual double standard*: While men are expected to desire and pursue sexual opportunities regardless of context, women are expected to avoid casual sex—having sex only when in relationships and in love (Crawford and Popp 2003; Risman and Schwartz 2002). Much research on the sexuality of young men focuses on male endorsement of this belief and its consequences (e.g., Bogle 2008; Kimmel 2008; Martin and Hummer 1989). There is an accompanying and equally powerful belief that normal women should always want love, romance, relationships, and marriage—what we refer to as the *relational imperative* (also see Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Martin 1996; Simon, Eder, and Evans 1992). We argue that these twin beliefs are implicated in the (re)production of gender inequality in college sexuality and are at the heart of women's sexual dilemmas with both hookups and relationships.

### **An Intersectional Approach**

Gender theory has also moved toward an intersectional approach (Collins 1990; Glenn 1999). Most of this work focuses on the lived experiences of marginalized individuals who are situated at the intersection of several systems of oppression (McCall 2005). More recently, scholars have begun to theorize the ways in which systems of inequality are themselves linked (Beisel and Kay 2004; Glenn 1999; McCall 2005). Beisel and Kay (2004) apply Sewell's (1992) theory of structure to intersectionality, arguing that structures intersect when they share resources or guidelines for action (of which gender beliefs would be one example). Using a similar logic, we argue that gender and class intersect in the sexual arena, as these structures both rely on beliefs about how and with whom individuals should be intimate.

Like gender, class structures beliefs about appropriate sexual and romantic conduct. Privileged young Americans, both men and women, are now expected to defer family formation until the mid-twenties or even early-thirties to focus on education and career investment—what we call the *self-development imperative* (Arnett 2004; Rosenfeld 2007). This imperative makes committed relationships less feasible as the sole contexts for premarital sexuality. Like marriage, relationships can be “greedy,” siphoning time and energy away from self-development



(Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). In contrast, hookups offer sexual pleasure without derailing investment in human capital and are increasingly viewed as part of life-stage appropriate sexual experimentation. Self-protection—both physical and emotional—is central to this logic, suggesting the rise of a strategic approach to sex and relationships (Brooks 2002; Illouz 2005). This approach is reflected in the development of erotic marketplaces offering short-term sexual partners, particularly on college campuses (Collins 2004).

In this case, gender and class behavioral rules are in conflict. Gender beliefs suggest that young women should avoid nonromantic sex and, if possible, be in a committed relationship. Class beliefs suggest that women should delay relationships while pursuing educational goals. Hookups are often less threatening to self-development projects, offering sexual activity in a way that better meshes with the demands of college. We see this as a case wherein structures intersect, but in a contradictory way (Friedland and Alford 1991; Martin 2004; Sewell 1992). This structural contradiction has experiential consequences: Privileged women find themselves caught between contradictory expectations, while less privileged women confront a foreign sexual culture when they enter college.

After discussing the research design and data, we show how women's experiences are shaped by gender beliefs. We then develop an intersectional analysis of college hookups and relationships, including a discussion of how the experiences of less privileged women differ from those with more class privilege. Finally, we highlight the power of our interactional and intersectional perspective and outline some directions for future research.

## METHOD

The strength of our research strategy lies in its depth: We conducted a longitudinal ethnographic and interview study of a group of women who started college in 2004 at a university in the Midwest, collecting data about their entire sexual and romantic careers. Like McCall (2005), we see an "intercategorical" approach to intersectionality as ideal; however, space and data limitations prevent us from theorizing structural intersection along all axes of inequality and analyzing the experiences of all of the various possible locations in relation to these structures. However, the richness of our data allows us to reveal taken-for-granted gender and class beliefs organizing the college sexual arena. While the data are at the individual level, our goal is to illustrate how the intersection of gender and class as structures creates dilemmas for college women.

## Ethnography and Longitudinal Interviews

A research team of nine, including the authors, occupied a room on an all-female floor in a mixed-gender dormitory. When data collection commenced, Laura was a graduate student in her early twenties and Elizabeth an assistant professor in her late thirties. The team also included a male graduate student, an undergraduate sorority member, and an undergraduate with working-class roots. Variation in age, approach, and self-presentation among team members allowed for different relationships with participants and brought multiple perspectives to data analysis—strengths of team ethnography (Erickson and Stull 1998).

Fifty-three 18- to 20-year-old unmarried women (51 freshmen, two sophomores) lived on the floor for at least part of the year (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup> No one opted out of the ethnographic study. All but two identified as heterosexual.<sup>4</sup> All participants were white, a result of low racial diversity on campus overall and racial segregation in campus housing. Sixty-eight percent came from middle-, upper-middle-, or upper-class backgrounds; 32 percent came from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds. Forty-five percent were from out of state; all of these women were from upper-middle-class or upper-class families. Thirty-six percent, mostly wealthier women, joined sororities in their first year.

Assessment of class background was based on parental education and occupation, student employment during the school year, and receipt of student loans (see appendix). We refer to those from middle-, upper-middle-, or upper-class backgrounds as “more privileged” and those from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds as “less privileged.” There were distinct differences between women in these groups. Less privileged women did not have parents with college degrees and struggled to afford college. In contrast, more privileged women had at least one, and more often two, parents with degrees. They received a great deal of parental support, keeping their loans to a minimum and allowing most to avoid working during the year.

The residence hall in which they lived was identified by students and staff as one of several “party dorms.” The term refers to the presumed social orientation of the modal resident, not to partying within the dorm itself. Students reported that they requested these dormitories if they were interested in drinking, hooking up, and joining the Greek system. This orientation places them in the thick of American youth culture. Few identified as feminist, and all presented a traditionally feminine appearance (e.g., not one woman had hair shorter than chin length). Most planned to marry and have children.



**TABLE 1: Characteristics of Participants**

	<i>Ethnography</i>	<i>Wave 1</i>	<i>Wave 2</i>	<i>Wave 3</i>	<i>Wave 4</i>
Median year in school	1	1	2	3	4
Percentage middle-class or higher	68	73	76	74	72
Percentage out of state	45	49	46	43	47
Percentage sorority	36	39	41 <sup>a</sup>	46	44
Percentage U.S. born	98	98	97	97	98
Total	53	41	37	35	43

a. Three additional women joined sororities starting in their second year.

We observed throughout the academic year, interacting with participants as they did with each other—watching television, eating meals, helping them dress for parties, sitting in as they studied, and attending floor meetings. We let the women guide our conversations, which often turned to “boys,” relationships, and hooking up. We also refrained from revealing our own predispositions, to the extent that women openly engaged in homophobic and racist behaviors in front of us. Our approach made it difficult for women to determine what we were studying, which behaviors might be interesting to us, and in which ways we might be judgmental. Consequently, we believe they were less likely to either underreport or exaggerate sexual behavior, minimizing the effects of social desirability.

We conducted interviews with 41 of the 53 women on the floor during their first year, 37 the following year, 35 when they were juniors (two were seniors), and 43 when they were seniors (one had graduated, and one was a fifth-year senior). Forty-six (87 percent) women were interviewed, producing 156 interviews. Most interviews were conducted by Laura, who forged strong ties with a number of the women. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and a half hours and covered partying, sexuality, relationships, friendships, classes, employment, religion, and relationships with parents. This holistic approach enabled us to see how sexual and romantic interactions intersected with the rest of the women’s lives. In collecting data over time, we saw women move back and forth among hookups and relationships—expressing dissatisfaction with both.

### **Data Analysis, Presentation, and Overview**

We used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to organize and code interview transcripts and ethnographic notes. We identified patterns

across interviews and looked for counterexamples. We then developed hypotheses, checking them against our multiple data sources and refining our theories. The source of each piece of data is identified in the text. All interviews are followed by a number indicating the participant and wave of the interview (e.g., 37-3). We select quotations from participants across the full range of sexual experience and attitudes. Given the nature of our data, men's beliefs and actions appear only indirectly, through women's experiences with them. This is a limitation of our data and in part reflects lack of knowledge about young men's experiences with romantic relationships, an issue we discuss later.

Our goal is not to generalize from the experiences of our participants but rather to bring an interactional and intersectional approach to college sexuality. However, it is useful to offer a brief overview of participant sexual and romantic careers. Thirty-three of 44 women (75 percent) from whom we collected complete trajectories reported at least one hookup by their senior year. All but one (95 percent) reported at least one college relationship, and 32 (72 percent) reported relationships of six months or longer. Living in a party dorm may have encouraged hooking up, and the women we studied may have been particularly sought after as girlfriends. Yet rates of participation in hookups and relationships are consistent with the OCSLS data. Thirty-three women (75 percent) cycled between both over the course of college. Ten participated in relationships only, and one had no sexual or romantic involvements. Relationships typically involved sexual intercourse, while sexual activity in hookups ranged from kissing to intercourse. All but four (91 percent) had intercourse before college graduation—a rate that is higher than in the OCSLS.

### **THE POWER OF GENDER BELIEFS**

A battle of the sexes approach suggests that women have internalized a relational orientation but are unable to establish relationships because hooking up—which men prefer—has come to dominate college sexual culture. Rather than accepting stated individual-level preferences at face value, we focus on the interactional contexts in which preferences are formed and expressed. We show that gender beliefs about what women should and should not do posed problems for our participants in both hookups and relationships.

### The “Slut” Stigma

Women did not find hookups to be unproblematic. They complained about a pervasive sexual double standard. As one explained, “Guys can have sex with all the girls and *it makes them more of a man*, but if a girl does then all of a sudden she’s a ho, and she’s not as quality of a person” (10-1, emphasis added). Another complained, “Guys, they can go around and have sex with a number of girls and they’re not called anything” (6-1). Women noted that it was “easy to get a reputation” (11-1) from “hooking up with a bunch of different guys” (8-1) or “being wild and drinking too much” (14-3). Their experiences of being judged were often painful; one woman told us about being called a “slut” two years after the incident because it was so humiliating (42-3).

Fear of stigma constrained women’s sexual behavior and perhaps even shape their preferences. For example, several indicated that they probably would “make out with more guys” but did not because “I don’t want to be a slut” (27-2). Others wanted to have intercourse on hookups but instead waited until they had boyfriends. A couple hid their sexual activity until the liaison was “official.” One said, “I would not spend the night there [at the fraternity] because that does not look good, but now everyone knows we’re boyfriend/girlfriend, so it’s like my home now” (15-1). Another woman, who initially seemed to have a deep aversion to hooking up, explained, “I would rather be a virgin for as much as I can than go out and do God knows who.” She later revealed a fear of social stigma, noting that when women engage in nonromantic sex, they “get a bad reputation. I know that I wouldn’t want that reputation” (11-1). Her comments highlight the feedback between social judgment and internalized preference.

Gender beliefs were also at the root of women’s other chief complaint about hookups—the disrespect of women in the hookup scene. The notion that hooking up is okay for men but not for women was embedded in the organization of the Greek system, where most parties occurred: Sorority rules prohibited hosting parties or overnight male visitors, reflecting notions about proper feminine behavior. In contrast, fraternities collected social fees to pay for alcohol and viewed hosting parties as a central activity. This disparity gave fraternity men almost complete control over the most desirable parties on campus—particularly for the underage crowd (Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989).

Women reported that fraternity men dictated party transportation, the admittance of guests, party themes such as “CEO and secretary ho,” the flow of alcohol, and the movement of guests within the party (Armstrong,

Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006). Women often indicated that they engaged in strategies such as “travel[ing] in hordes” (21-1) and not “tak[ing] a drink if I don’t know where it came from” (15-1) to feel safer at fraternity parties. Even when open to hooking up, women were not comfortable doing so if they sensed that men were trying to undermine their control of sexual activity (e.g., by pushing them to drink too heavily, barring their exit from private rooms, or refusing them rides home). Women typically opted not to return to party venues they perceived as unsafe. As one noted, “I wouldn’t go to [that house] because I heard they do bad things to girls” (14-1). Even those interested in the erotic competition of party scenes tired of it as they realized that the game was rigged.

The sexual double standard also justified the negative treatment of women in the party scene—regardless of whether they chose to hook up. Women explained that men at parties showed a lack of respect for their feelings or interests—treating them solely as “sex objects” (32-1). This disregard extended to hookups. One told us, “The guy gets off and then it’s done and that’s all he cares about” (12-4). Another complained of her efforts to get a recent hookup to call: “That wasn’t me implying I wanted a relationship—that was me implying I wanted respect” (42-2). In her view, casual sex did not mean forgoing all interactional niceties. A third explained, “If you’re talking to a boy, you’re either going to get into this huge relationship or you are nothing to them” (24-3). This either-or situation often frustrated women who wanted men to treat them well regardless of the level of commitment.

### **The Relationship Imperative**

Women also encountered problematic gender beliefs about men’s and women’s different levels of interest in relationships. As one noted, women fight the “dumb girl idea”—the notion “that every girl wants a boy to sweep her off her feet and fall in love” (42-2). The expectation that women should want to be in relationships was so pervasive that many found it necessary to justify their single status to us. For example, when asked if she had a boyfriend, one woman with no shortage of admirers apologetically explained, “I know this sounds really pathetic and you probably think I am lying, but there are so many other things going on right now that it’s really not something high up on my list. . . . I know that’s such a lame-ass excuse, but it’s true” (9-3). Another noted that already having a boyfriend was the only “actual, legitimate excuse” to reject men who expressed interest in a relationship (34-3).

Certainly, many women wanted relationships and sought them out. However, women's interest in relationships varied, and almost all experienced periods during which they wanted to be single. Nonetheless, women reported pressure to be in relationships all the time. We found that women, rather than struggling to get into relationships, had to work to avoid them.

The relational imperative was supported by the belief that women's relational opportunities were scarce and should not be wasted. Women described themselves as "lucky" to find a man willing to commit, as "there's not many guys like that in college" (15-1). This belief persisted despite the fact that most women were in relationships most of the time. As one woman noted, "I don't think anyone really wants to be in a serious relationship, but most, well actually all of us, have boyfriends" (13-1). Belief in the myth of scarcity also led women to stay in relationships when they were no longer happy. A woman who was "sick of" her conflict-ridden relationship explained why she could not end it: "I feel like I have to meet somebody else. . . . I go out and they're all these asshole frat guys. . . . That's what stops me. . . . Boys are not datable right now because . . . all they're looking for is freshman girls to hook up with. . . . [So] I'm just stuck. I need to do something about it, but I don't know what" (30-3). It took her another year to extract herself from this relationship. Despite her fears, when she decided she was ready for another relationship, she quickly found a boyfriend.

Women also confronted the belief that all women are relationally insatiable. They often told stories of men who acted entitled to relationships, expected their relational overtures to be accepted, and became angry when rebuffed—sometimes stalking the rejecting woman. As one explained about a friend, "Abby was having issues with this guy who likes her. He was like, 'You have to like me. . . . I'm not gonna take no for an answer. I'm gonna do whatever it takes to date you'" (24-3). Another noted that "last semester, this guy really wanted to date me, and I did not want to date him at all. He flipped out and was like, 'This is ridiculous, I don't deserve this'" (12-3). A third eventually gave in when a man continually rejected her refusals: "I was like, if I go [out with him] . . . maybe he'll stop. Because he wouldn't stop." She planned to act "extremely conservative" as a way to convince him that he did not want to be with her (39-4).

Gender beliefs may also limit women's control over the terms of interaction within relationships. If women are made to feel lucky to have boyfriends, men are placed in a position of power, as presumably women should be grateful when they commit. Women's reports suggest that men attempted to use this power to regulate their participation in college life. One noted, "When I got here my first semester freshman year, I wanted to

go out to the parties . . . and he got pissed off about it. . . . He's like, 'Why do you need to do that? Why can't you just stay with me?'" (4-2). Boyfriends sometimes tried to limit the time women spent with their friends and the activities in which they participated. As a woman explained, "There are times when I feel like Steve can get . . . possessive. He'll be like . . . 'I feel like you're always with your friends over me.' He wanted to go out to lunch after our class, and I was like, 'No, I have to come have this interview.' And he got so upset about it" (42-3). Men's control even extended to women's attire. Another told us about her boyfriend, "He is a very controlling person. . . . He's like, 'What are you wearing tonight?' . . . It's like a joke but serious at the same time" (32-4).

Women also became jealous; however, rather than trying to control their boyfriends, they often tried to change themselves. One noted that she would "do anything to make this relationship work." She elaborated, "I was so nervous being with Dan because I knew he had cheated on his [prior] girlfriend . . . [but] I'm getting over it. When I go [to visit him] now . . . I let him go to the bar, whatever. I stayed in his apartment because there was nothing else to do" (39-3). Other women changed the way they dressed, their friends, and where they went in the attempt to keep boyfriends.

When women attempted to end relationships, they often reported that men's efforts to control them escalated. We heard 10 accounts of men using abuse to keep women in relationships. One woman spent months dealing with a boyfriend who accused her of cheating on him. When she tried to break up, he cut his wrist in her apartment (9-2). Another tried to end a relationship but was forced to flee the state when her car windows were broken and her safety was threatened (6-4). Men often drew on romantic repertoires to coerce interaction after relationships had ended. One woman told us that her ex-boyfriend stalked her for months—even showing up at her workplace, showering her with flowers and gifts, and blocking her entry into work until the police arrived (25-2).

### **INTERSECTIONALITY: CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN CLASS AND GENDER**

Existing research about college sexuality focuses almost exclusively on its gendered nature. We contend that sexuality is shaped simultaneously by multiple intersecting structures. In this section, we examine the sexual and romantic implications of class beliefs about how ambitious young people should conduct themselves during college. Although all of our participants contended with class beliefs that contradicted those of gender,



experiences of this structural intersection varied by class location. More privileged women struggled to meet gender and class guidelines for sexual behavior, introducing a difficult set of double binds. Because these class beliefs reflected a privileged path to adulthood, less privileged women found them foreign to their own sexual and romantic logics.

## **More Privileged Women and the Experience of Double Binds**

### **The Self-development Imperative and the Relational Double Bind**

The four-year university is a classed structural location. One of the primary reasons to attend college is to preserve or enhance economic position. The university culture is thus characterized by the self-development imperative, or the notion that individual achievement and personal growth are paramount. There are also accompanying rules for sex and relationships: Students are expected to postpone marriage and parenthood until after completing an education and establishing a career.

For more privileged women, personal expectations and those of the university culture meshed. Even those who enjoyed relationships experienced phases in college where they preferred to remain single. Almost all privileged women (94 percent) told us at one point that they did not want a boyfriend. One noted, "All my friends here . . . they're like, 'I don't want to deal with [a boyfriend] right now. I want to be on my own'" (37-1). Another eloquently remarked, "I've always looked at college as the only time in your life when you should be a hundred percent selfish. . . . I have the rest of my life to devote to a husband or kids or my job . . . but right now, it's my time" (21-2).

The notion that independence is critical during college reflected class beliefs about the appropriate role for romance that opposed those of gender. During college, relational commitments were supposed to take a backseat to self-development. As an upper-middle-class woman noted, "College is the only time that you don't have obligations to anyone but yourself. . . . I want to get settled down and figure out what I'm doing with my life before [I] dedicate myself to something or someone else" (14-4). Another emphasized the value of investment in human capital: "I've always been someone who wants to have my own money, have my own career so that, you know, 50 percent of marriages fail. . . . If I want to maintain the lifestyle that I've grown up with . . . I have to work. I just don't see myself being someone who marries young and lives off of some boy's money" (42-4). To become self-supporting, many privileged women indicated they needed to postpone marriage. One told us, "I don't want to

think about that [marriage]. I want to get secure in a city and in a job. . . . I'm not in any hurry at all. As long as I'm married by 30, I'm good" (13-4). Even those who wanted to be supported by husbands did not expect to find them in college, instead setting their sights on the more accomplished men they expected to meet in urban centers after college.

More privileged women often found committed relationships to be greedy—demanding of time and energy. As one stated, "When it comes to a serious relationship, it's a lot for me to give into that. [What do you feel like you are giving up?] Like my everything. . . . There's just a lot involved in it" (35-3). These women feared that they would be devoured by relationships and sometimes struggled to keep their self-development projects going when they did get involved. As an upper-class woman told us, "It's hard to have a boyfriend and be really excited about it and still not let it consume you" (42-2). This situation was exacerbated by the gender beliefs discussed earlier, as women experienced pressure to fully devote themselves to relationships.

Privileged women reported that committed relationships detracted from what they saw as the main tasks of college. They complained, for example, that relationships made it difficult to meet people. As an upper-middle-class woman who had just ended a relationship described, "I'm happy that I'm able to go out and meet new people. . . . I feel like I'm doing what a college student should be doing. I don't need to be tied down to my high school boyfriend for two years when this is the time to be meeting people" (14-3). A middle-class woman similarly noted that her relationship with her boyfriend made it impossible to make friends on the floor her first year. She explained, "We were together every day. . . . It was the critical time of making friends and meeting people, [and] I wasn't there" (21-2).

Many also complained that committed relationships competed with schoolwork (also see Holland and Eisenhart 1990). An upper-middle-class woman remarked, "[My boyfriend] doesn't understand why I can't pick up and go see him all the time. But I have school. . . . I just want to be a college kid" (18-3). Another told us that her major was not compatible with the demands of a boyfriend. She said, "I wouldn't mind having a boyfriend again, but it's a lot of work. Right now with [my major] and everything . . . I wouldn't have time even to see him" (30-4). She did not plan to consider a relationship until her workload lessened.

With marriage far in the future, more privileged women often worried about college relationships getting too serious too fast. All planned to marry—ideally to men with greater earnings—but were clear about the

importance of temporary independence. Consequently, some worked to slow the progression of relationships. One told us, "I won't let myself think that [I love him]. I definitely don't say that. . . . The person he loves is the person he is going to marry. . . . At the age we are at now, I feel like I don't want anything to be more serious than it has to be until it is" (34-3). Eight privileged women even dated men they deemed unsuitable for marriage to ensure autonomy. One noted, "He fits my needs now because I don't want to get married now. I don't want anyone else to influence what I do after I graduate" (33-3). Others planned to end relationships when boyfriends were not on the same page. An upper-middle-class woman explained, "[He] wants to have two kids by the time he's thirty. I'm like, I guess we're not getting married. . . . I'd rather make money and travel first" (43-3).

For more privileged women, contradictory cultural rules created what we call the *relational double bind*. The relational imperative pushed them to participate in committed relationships; however, relationships did not mesh well with the demands of college, as they inhibited classed self-development strategies. Privileged women struggled to be both "good girls" who limited their sexual activity to relationships and "good students" who did not allow relational commitments to derail their educational and career development.

### **The Appeal of Hookups and the Sexual Double Bind**

In contrast, hookups fit well with the self-development imperative of college. They allowed women to be sexual without the demands of relationships. For example, one upper-class woman described hooking up as "fun and nonthreatening." She noted, "So many of us girls, we complain that these guys just want to hook up all the time. I'm going, these guys that I'm attracted to . . . get kind of serious." She saw her last hookup as ideal because "we were physical, and that was it. I never wanted it to go anywhere" (34-2). Many privileged women understood, if implicitly, that hooking up was a delay tactic, allowing sex without participation in serious relationships.

As a sexual solution for the demands of college, hooking up became incorporated into notions of what the college experience should be. When asked which kinds of people hook up the most, one woman noted, "All. . . . The people who came to college to have a good time and party" (14-1). With the help of media, alcohol, and spring break industries, hooking up was so institutionalized that many took it for granted. One upper-middle-class woman said, "It just happens. It's natural" (15-1).

They told us that learning about sexuality was something they were supposed to be doing in college. Another described, "I'm glad that I've had my one-night stands and my being in love and having sex. . . . Now I know what it's supposed to feel like when I'm with someone that I want to be with. I feel bad for some of my friends. . . . They're still virgins" (29-1).

High rates of hooking up suggest genuine interest in the activity rather than simply accommodation to men's interests. Particularly early in college, privileged women actively sought hookups. One noted, "You see a lot of people who are like, 'I just want to hook up with someone tonight.' . . . It's always the girls that try to get the guys" (41-1). Data from the OCSLS also suggest that college women like hooking up almost as much as men and are not always searching for something more. Nearly as many women as men (85 percent and 89 percent, respectively) report enjoying the sexual activity of their last hookup "very much" or "somewhat," and less than half of women report interest in a relationship with their most recent hookup.

In private, several privileged women even used the classed logic of hooking up to challenge stereotyped portrayals of gender differences in sexuality. As one noted, "There are girls that want things as much as guys do. There are girls that want things more, and they're like, 'Oh it's been a while [since I had sex].' The girls are no more innocent than the guys. . . . People think girls are jealous of relationships, but they're like, 'What? I want to be single'" (34-1). When asked about the notion that guys want sex and girls want relationships another responded, "I think that is the absolute epitome of bullshit. I know so many girls who honestly go out on a Friday night and they're like, 'I hope I get some ass tonight.' They don't wanna have a boyfriend! They just wanna hook up with someone. And I know boys who want relationships. I think it goes both ways" (42-2). These women drew on gender-neutral understandings of sexuality characteristic of university culture to contradict the notion of women's sexuality as inevitably and naturally relational.

For more privileged women, enjoyment of hookups was tightly linked to the atmosphere in which they occurred. Most were initiated at college parties where alcohol, music, attractive people, sexy outfits, and flirting combined to generate a collective erotic energy. As one woman enthusiastically noted, "Everyone was so excited. It was a big fun party" (15-1). Privileged women often "loved" it when they had an "excuse to just let loose" and "grind" on the dance floor. They reported turning on their "make-out radar" (18-1), explaining that "it's fun to know that a guy's attracted to you and is willing to kiss you" (16-1). The party scene gave

them a chance to play with adult sexualities and interact for purely sexual purposes—an experience that one middle-class woman claimed “empowered” her (17-1).

Hookups enabled more privileged women to conduct themselves in accordance with class expectations, but as we demonstrated earlier, the enforcement of gender beliefs placed them at risk of sanction. This conflict gets to the heart of a *sexual double bind*: While hookups protected privileged women from relationships that could derail their ambitions, the double standard gave men greater control over the terms of hooking up, justified the disrespectful treatment of women, supported sexual stigma, and produced feelings of shame.

### **Less Privileged Women and the Experience of Foreign Sexual Culture**

Women’s comfort with delaying commitment and participating in the hookup culture was shaped by class location. College culture reflects the beliefs of the more privileged classes. Less privileged women arrived at college with their own orientation to sex and romance, characterized by a faster transition into adulthood. They often attempted to build both relationships and career at the same time. As a result, the third of the participants from less privileged backgrounds often experienced the hookup culture as foreign in ways that made it difficult to persist at the university.

Less privileged women had less exposure to the notion that the college years should be set aside solely for educational and career development. Many did not see serious relationships as incompatible with college life. Four were married or engaged before graduating—a step that others would not take until later. One reminisced, “I thought I’d get married in college. . . . When I was still in high school, I figured by my senior year, I’d be engaged or married or something. . . . I wanted to have kids before I was 25” (25-4). Another spoke of her plans to marry her high school sweetheart: “I’ll be 21 and I know he’s the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. . . . Really, I don’t want to date anybody else” (6-1).

Plans to move into adult roles relatively quickly made less privileged women outsiders among their more privileged peers. One working-class woman saw her friendships dissolve as she revealed her desire to marry and have children in the near future. As one of her former friends described,

She would always talk about how she couldn’t wait to get married and have babies. . . . It was just like, Whoa. I’m 18. . . . Slow down, you know? Then she just crazy dropped out of school and wouldn’t contact any of us. . . .

The way I see it is that she's from a really small town, and that's what everyone in her town does . . . get married and have babies. That's all she ever wanted to do maybe? . . . I don't know if she was homesick or didn't fit in. (24-4)

This account glosses over the extent to which the working-class woman was pushed out of the university—ostracized by her peers for not acclimating to the self-development imperative and, as noted below, to the campus sexual climate. In fact, 40 percent of less privileged women left the university, compared to 5 percent of more privileged women. In all cases, mismatch between the sexual culture of women's hometowns and that of college was a factor in the decision to leave.

Most of the less privileged women found the hookup culture to be not only foreign but hostile. As the working-class woman described above told us,

I tried so hard to fit in with what everybody else was doing here. . . . I think one morning I just woke up and realized that this isn't me at all; I don't like the way I am right now. . . . I didn't feel like I was growing up. I felt like I was actually getting younger the way I was trying to act. Growing up to me isn't going out and getting smashed and sleeping around. . . . That to me is immature. (28-1)

She emphasized the value of “growing up” in college. Without the desire to postpone adulthood, less privileged women often could not understand the appeal of hooking up. As a lower-middle-class woman noted, “Who would be interested in just meeting somebody and then doing something that night? And then never talking to them again? . . . I'm supposed to do this; I'm supposed to get drunk every weekend. I'm supposed to go to parties every weekend . . . and I'm supposed to enjoy it like everyone else. But it just doesn't appeal to me” (5-1). She reveals the extent to which hooking up was a normalized part of college life: For those who were not interested in this, college life could be experienced as mystifying, uncomfortable, and alienating.

The self-development imperative was a resource women could use in resisting the gendered pull of relationships. Less privileged women did not have as much access to this resource and were invested in settling down. Thus, they found it hard to resist the pull back home of local boyfriends, who—unlike the college men they had met—seemed interested in marrying and having children soon. One woman noted after transferring to a branch campus, “I think if I hadn't been connected with [my fiancé], I think I would have been more strongly connected to [the college



town], and I think I probably would have stayed" (2-4). Another described her hometown boyfriend: "He'll be like, 'I want to see you. Come home.' . . . The stress he was putting me under and me being here my first year. I could not take it" (7-2). The following year, she moved back home. A third explained about her husband, "He wants me at home. . . . He wants to have control over me and . . . to feel like he's the dominant one in the relationship. . . . The fact that I'm going to school and he knows I'm smart and he knows that I'm capable of doing anything that I want . . . it scares him" (6-4). While she eventually ended this relationship, it cost her an additional semester of school.

Women were also pulled back home by the slut stigma, as people there—perhaps out of frustration or jealousy—judged college women for any association with campus sexual culture. For instance, one woman became distraught when a virulent sexual rumor about her circulated around her hometown, especially when it reached her parents. Going home was a way of putting sexual rumors to rest and reaffirming ties that were strained by leaving.

Thus, less privileged women were often caught between two sexual cultures. Staying at the university meant abandoning a familiar logic and adopting a privileged one—investing in human capital while delaying the transition to adulthood. As one explained, attending college led her to revise her "whole plan": "Now I'm like, I don't even need to be getting married yet [or] have kids. . . . All of [my brother's] friends, 17- to 20-year-old girls, have their . . . babies, and I'm like, Oh my God. . . . Now I'll be able to do something else for a couple years before I settle down . . . before I worry about kids" (25-3). These changes in agendas required them to end relationships with men whose life plans diverged from theirs. For some, this also meant cutting ties with hometown friends. One resolute woman, whose friends back home had turned on her, noted, "I'm just sick of it. There's nothing there for me anymore. There's absolutely nothing there" (22-4).

## DISCUSSION

### The Strengths of an Interactional Approach

Public gender beliefs are a key source of gender inequality in college heterosexual interaction. They undergird a sexual double standard and a relational imperative that justify the disrespect of women who hook up and the disempowerment of women in relationships—reinforcing male dominance across social forms. Most of the women we studied cycled

back and forth between hookups and relationships, in part because they found both to be problematic. These findings indicate that an individualist, battle of the sexes explanation not only is inadequate but may contribute to gender inequality by naturalizing problematic notions of gender difference.

We are not, however, claiming that gender differences in stated preferences do not exist. Analysis of the OCSLS finds a small but significant difference between men and women in preferences for relationships as compared to hookups: After the most recent hookup, 47 percent of women compared to 37 percent of men expressed some interest in a relationship. These differences in preferences are consistent with a multilevel perspective that views the internalization of gender as an aspect of gender structure (Risman 2004). As we have shown, the pressure to internalize gender-appropriate preferences is considerable, and the line between personal preferences and the desire to avoid social stigma is fuzzy. However, we believe that widely shared beliefs about gender difference contribute more to gender inequality in college heterosexuality than the substantively small differences in actual preferences.

### **The Strengths of an Intersectional Approach**

An intersectional approach sheds light on the ambivalent and contradictory nature of many college women's sexual desires. Class beliefs associated with the appropriate timing of marriage clash with resilient gender beliefs—creating difficult double binds for the more privileged women who strive to meet both. In the case of the relational double bind, relationships fit with gender beliefs but pose problems for the classed self-development imperative. As for the sexual double bind, hookups provide sexual activity with little cost to career development, but a double standard penalizes women for participating. Less privileged women face an even more complex situation: Much of the appeal of hookups derives from their utility as a delay strategy. Women who do not believe that it is desirable to delay marriage may experience the hookup culture as puzzling and immature.

An intersectional approach also suggests that the way young heterosexuals make decisions about sexuality and relationships underlies the reproduction of social class. These choices are part of women's efforts to, as one privileged participant so eloquently put it, "maintain the lifestyle that I've grown up with." Our participants were not well versed in research demonstrating that college-educated women benefit from their own human capital investments, are more likely to marry than less

educated women, and are more likely to have a similarly well-credentialed spouse (DiPrete and Buchmann 2006). Nonetheless, most were aware that completing college and delaying marriage until the mid-to-late twenties made economic sense. Nearly all took access to marriage for granted, instead focusing their attention on when and whom they would marry.

The two-pronged strategy of career investment and delay of family formation has so quickly become naturalized that its historical novelty is now invisible. It is based on the consolidation of class, along with heterosexual, privilege: Heterosexual men and women attempt to maximize their own earning power and that of their spouse—a pattern that is reflected in increased levels of educational homogamy (Schwartz and Mare 2005; Sweeney 2002).<sup>5</sup> Consolidation of privilege is made possible by women's greater parity with men in education and the workforce. In this new marital marketplace, a woman's educational credentials and earning potential are more relevant than her premarital sexual activity, assuming she avoids having a child before marriage. Relationship commitments that block educational and career investments, particularly if they foreclose future opportunities to meet men with elite credentials, are a threat to a woman's upward mobility.

The gender implications of the consolidation of privilege are most visible when contrasted with gender specialization—a marital strategy once assumed to be universal. Marriage was thought to be a system of complementary interdependence in which the man specialized in the market and the woman in domesticity (Becker 1991). Men maximized earning power while women accessed these benefits by marrying those with greater educational or career credentials. Gender specialization does not logically demand chastity of women; however, historically it has often been offered for trade in the marital marketplace. When this occurs, women's sexual reputation and economic welfare are linked. Although this connection has long been attenuated in the United States, it still exists. For example, the term “classy” refers simultaneously to wealth and sexual modesty.

As marriage in the United States has become less guided by gender specialization and more by the consolidation of privilege, gender inequality—at least within the marriages of the privileged—may have decreased. At the same time, class inequality may have intensified. The consolidation of privilege increases economic gaps between the affluent who are married to each other, the less affluent who are also married to each other, and the poor, who are excluded from marriage altogether (also see Edin and Kefalas 2005; England 2004; Schwartz and Mare 2005; Sweeney 2002).

The hookup culture may contribute in a small way to the intensification of class inequality by facilitating the delay necessary for the consolidation of privilege.

### **Theoretical Contributions and Directions for Future Research**

In this article, we link multilevel and intersectional approaches, using Sewell's (1992) theory of structure as a bridge. We focus on the intersection of gender and class beliefs about sexuality on the interactional level. Our approach suggests that gender intersects with a variety of other structures at all levels—the individual, interactional, and organizational. This opens up a wide range of analytical possibilities. Scholars might look at intersections occurring at other levels of structure, or with structures in addition to social class. For example, the reproduction of racial categories depends on rules limiting sexual and romantic contact across racial boundaries. A next step would be to investigate how the intersection of race, class, and gender structures shapes sexual experiences in college.

We limit variation among our respondents to social class. However, there are virtually infinite locations in relationship to the structures making up this intersection that could be examined. A closer examination of the romantic and sexual experiences of young men is of crucial importance. Much existing research focuses on men's problematic beliefs and behaviors without examining how gender beliefs pose problems for men as well as women. Research on men's experiences of relationships also lags beyond research on their experiences of sex—particularly casual sex. New work suggests that young men's experiences of sexuality and relationships are far more complex than has been assumed (Dworkin and O'Sullivan 2005; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2006). Others are exploring how men are variously situated in relationship to dominant beliefs about sexuality (Higgins and Browne 2009; Ray and Rosow 2009; Wilkins 2008). We suspect that for men, gender and class beliefs are reinforcing in ways that introduce problems. We need to know more about how young men feel about relationships—whether they want and enjoy relationships, what they think women want, and how they view relationships as meshing with their life plans.

This article focuses on how structure constrains women's sexual experiences, bracketing ways in which women actively navigate a complex sexual and romantic landscape. Sewell (1992), along with other social theorists, suggests that individuals might exploit structural vulnerabilities in ways that

change structure. Our next step is to explore how women's efforts to avoid sexual stigma may help create change. Wilkins (2008) also focuses on the agency of social actors, examining how participation in subcultures helps to manage the sexual dilemmas of young adulthood. Both approaches suggest the importance of investigating how individuals utilize structural positioning as a resource in resolving structural dilemmas.

Finally, our work pushes contemporary gender theory into the sexual arena, looking at sexuality as a key site for the production of gender inequality. Sexuality may be one arena of social life where notions of gender difference are particularly anchored (Lorber 1994). If interaction is indeed a carrier of gender, sexuality demands attention as an intimate arena for cross-gender interaction. We need to know more about how gender beliefs guide sexual interaction and how gender beliefs acquired in one arena of life may push, or even stall, gender change in others. For example, sexual interaction among youth—both in dyads and in public peer cultures—may be a source of beliefs about gender that come to guide interaction more generally.

### APPENDIX Social Class Categorization

Class Category	Mother Education	Father Education	Mother Occupation	Father Occupation	School-Year Employment	Loans
<i>Working (15%)</i>	LTC	LTC	Secretarial/ Retail	Manual Work	All	Most
<i>Lower Middle (17%)</i>	LTC	SC	Secretarial/ Retail	Management	All	Most
<i>Middle (13%)</i>	C	C	Teacher/ Management	Management	Few	Some
<i>Upper Middle (40%)</i>	COA	COA	Teacher/ Social Work	Professional	Few	None
<i>Upper (15%)</i>	C	COA	Homemaker	Executive	None	None

KEY: LTC = Less than college degree, SC = At least some college, C = College degree, COA = College or advanced degree.

### NOTES

1. Online College Social Life Survey data collection is ongoing. Thus, numbers vary slightly according to the version of the data set. This article references data prepared and distributed by Reuben J. Thomas on February 26, 2009.

2. This number is consistent with that reported by Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000). Glenn and Marquardt (2001) found lower rates, perhaps because they include students attending religious and commuter colleges. Recently, Owen et al. (2008) found that white students, those who drink, and students with higher parental income are more likely to hook up.

3. This number does not include a senior graduating at the semester, the resident assistant, or the researchers.

4. The two women who identified as lesbian or bisexual are included as they also had sex with men. How the women on this floor responded to lesbianism is explored elsewhere (Hamilton 2007).

5. As others have shown, the exclusion of lesbians and gay men from marriage has direct economic consequences (Badgett 2001).

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