

Catholic Social Teaching and College Hookup Culture: Interrupting the Perpetuation of Gender Essentialism

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CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND COLLEGE HOOKUP CULTURE: INTERRUPTING THE PERPETUATION OF GENDER ESSENTIALISM

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Abstract: College is a time of identity-seeking and personal formation, and for many students the first opportunity to establish themselves as individuals independent of the influence of their parents or guardians. The social environment on college campuses, however, is not conducive to the free exploration of one's identity. On many college campuses, including that of my own university, "hookup culture," or an ethic of casual sex with no strings attached, is pervasive. Rather than being a source of freedom, the social norms associated with this culture perpetuate male power, female objectification, and binary gender roles that construct our social reality before, after, and throughout one's college experience. The college hookup culture is constructed on the ideology of gender essentialism, presenting binary gender scripts, and enforcing campus-wide conformity through social influence and structures of power. Rather than conform to rigid gender standards, this article suggests that we can reimagine gender roles and sexuality to encourage greater openness and authenticity. Based on the foundations of Catholic Social Teaching, we can first begin a dialogue about the harmful social environment on many college campuses. We may then take transformative action by addressing language; challenging normative behavior; and emphasizing affirmative, enthusiastic consent. This article concludes by proposing that transformation can also extend beyond the college campus by encouraging an affirming, non-judgmental environment throughout childhood in which the exploration of one's gender identity is encouraged.

Introduction: What is College Hookup Culture?

In her 2008 ethnographic study of college hookup culture, Kathleen Bogle of La Salle University noted that college students "were unsure whether the specific way they used the term [hookup] reflected how the student body in general used it... the meaning of hooking up depends on whom you ask."² The ambiguity surrounding the implications of a "hook up" leaves details up to the imagination, allowing students to make assumptions about the behavior of their peers and maintaining an aura of secrecy and mystique around the idea of "hooking up." In general, Bogle concluded, a hookup is defined by some form of "intimate connection," which ranges in student definitions from "just kissing" to intercourse and any sort of physical interactions in between. Such interactions come with no promise of an

* Emma Saart is a recent graduate of Boston College with a B.S. in biochemistry and a minor in Faith, Peace, and Justice. She would like to thank Professors Kristin Heyer and Joshua Snyder for their support, encouragement, and advice throughout the writing process.

² Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 25.

ongoing relationship and can be considered “an outgrowth of how college students socialize today.”³

Student ethnographers observing their peers have similarly noted key elements of hookup culture, including with women dressing in ways that suggest sexual availability, high levels of alcohol consumption, and the “scoping out” of potential sexual partners among friends.⁴ Student ethnographers also frequently reported “men acting aggressively in the pursuit of a hookup; such behavior appeared to be the norm of college parties,” and that in the cases of women being the aggressors they were perceived as overly “slutty” or drunk.⁵ These standards are related to gendered expectations of the body and behavior; indeed, words used by students to describe the idealized male image include “strong, independent, courageous, aggressive, powerful, and dominant,” while the ideal female is described as “fragile, weak, thin, sexy, obedient, and submissive.”⁶ Based on these stereotypes, 66% of student ethnographers asserted that male students held the power in the typical college hookup, with women actively cultivating their body and image to “work at getting the attention of men and keeping it.”⁷ Thus, while the specific details of a hookup are ill-defined, the overall dominant culture has key features including power dynamics and binary gender standards for both appearance and behavior.

Oppressive Social Scripts and Gender Binaries

College hookup culture presents itself as the dominant form for relating between men and women on college campuses, with heterosexual students expecting their peers to follow certain “social scripts.” Sociologists have explained “scripting theory” as individuals serving as actors in social situations, playing out roles defined by cultural norms.⁸ Social scripts construct the hookup interaction, from the ill-defined nonverbal “vibe” that initiates the hookup to determining how far the interaction will go.⁹ Power dynamics play a key role in these interactions: men are expected to initiate the hookup and this contributes to the

³ Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 25-29.

⁴ Jennifer Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19-24.

⁵ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 39.

⁶ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 80.

⁷ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 85.

⁸ Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 8.

⁹ Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 33-37.

expectation that he is in control of the interaction. Women are consequently uncomfortable asserting their desires, from questions of moving the hookup in the direction of a long-term relationship to asserting her equal right to a pleasurable experience.¹⁰ Popular culture writes the social scripts and leads students to assume what their peers are doing and what their role should subsequently be, despite the fact that students' perception of their peers is often a distortion of reality.¹¹

Why do college students engage in hookup culture? Who writes the social scripts? A major factor influencing student behavior is depictions of sexual interactions in popular media. Television shows, movies, rap music, and pornography portray "prescribed roles" for both men and women, with women depicted as "seductive" and/or "submissive" and men as enjoying positions of power.¹² Men are held to standards of masculinity involving competition and displays of aggressiveness; maintaining one's social status often includes an expectation of sleeping with many women. This behavior can be understood as "toxic masculinity," and it is unsurprising that such aggression and dominance is harmful to those who experience the social pressure to behave in this way, as it is harmful to those who experience the effects of it. Women, too, have a "feminine script," embracing their role as a sexual object and displaying themselves as available and submissive.¹³ These expectations are expressed through the dominant media and adopted by young males and females, and thus are put forth as social norms to be followed for the attainment and maintenance of social status. The gender norms presented are typically framed as strict binaries that are harmful to both males and females who struggle to conform, as well as those who do not conform to strict binary definitions of gender.

The oppressive nature of college hookup culture asserts pressure not only on heterosexual relationships, but also on members of the LGBTQ community. In fact, LGBTQ students testify that "the heterosexist assumptions of the hookup culture make it difficult for them to build their own, non-heterosexual relationships."¹⁴ While there is a college hookup culture present for LGBTQ students as well, the dominance of the heterosexual hookup

¹⁰ Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 101.

¹¹ Bogle, *Hooking Up*, 87.

¹² Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 50.

¹³ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 51-55.

¹⁴ Connor Kelly, "Sexism in Practice: Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 27-48.

culture as the perceived norm reveals that hookup culture not only promotes sexist values, but also heterosexist values as well. Being perceived as deviating from the norm can be challenging for students, particularly in a college environment where social pressure is strong and students are navigating the complex process of identity formation. When the heterosexual hookup culture is presented as dominant, students of the LGBTQ community may feel excluded from their social environment.

These expectations for gender behavior are presented as compulsory for social acceptance, producing conformity to these standards of gender.¹⁵ The assumptions underlying college hookup culture brandish a narrow understanding of gender identity. When holding an individual accountable for performing their expected gender, the observer assumes that “sex” and “gender” are synonymous and have pre-determined characteristics, providing those who do not conform to such standards with a sense of incongruity.¹⁶ Despite the societal standards for gender presentation, “not all people have an internalized sense of binary accountability... some do not experience themselves as gendered at all.”¹⁷ These individuals are susceptible to frequent misgendering and discrimination, which is harmful to their well-being and identity formation at all stages of life, but may be particularly impactful during their time in college. Young adults are in a key period of identity formation, and when that is diminished by the way society perceives them and burdened by the resulting expectations, they may not be able to flourish and embrace their true identity.

Beyond stunting authentic identity formation, the refusal to acknowledge gender as a spectrum rather than a binary can have serious consequences for non-binary and transgender individuals. The U.S. transgender survey found that 24% of students out or perceived as transgender (either binary or non-binary) experienced verbal, physical, or sexual harassment at college, with 16% of these individuals leaving college due to harassment.¹⁸ Studies report that GQ students were more likely to have mental health challenges, with 47.2% first-year GQ students reporting feeling depressed as compared to

¹⁵ Helena Darwin, “Doing Gender Beyond the Binary: A Virtual Ethnography,” *Symbolic Interaction* 40, no. 3 (2017): 318.

¹⁶ Darwin, “Gender Beyond the Binary,” 319.

¹⁷ Darwin, “Gender Beyond the Binary,” 325.

¹⁸ Abbie E. Goldberg, *Transgender Students in Higher Education* (Los Angeles: UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, 2018), 2.

the national average of 9.5%.¹⁹ Institutional features that may exclude or put pressure on GQ individuals include standards of dress, appearance, gender pronouns, and sex-segregated dorms and restrooms.²⁰ College hookup culture, with its perpetuation of binary gender roles, exhibits strong pressure to conform to gender expectations in the college environment, and excludes those students who do not conform to such standards.

The Objectification of Female Bodies

Social norms do not only perpetuate strict gender binaries, but additionally contribute to the objectification of the female body. As seen in advertising, music videos, and pornography, women's bodies are overly-sexualized and presented as objects and commodities available for consumption. Objectification fuels a culture of disordered eating and cosmetic surgery, as women attempt to cultivate the idealized image put forth in popular media, also contributing to such behaviors as teenage sexting.²¹ Examples of teenage sexting have become legal battles amplified by the media in children as young as twelve years old, showing how early the culture of female objectification and sexualization is assimilated.²²

Objectification of women has even further, more dangerous consequences through its contribution to rape culture on campus. When women are seen as "sex objects" and their availability is assumed, women's agential personhood is undercut and a sexuality that fosters sexual violence is normalized.²³ The threat of sexual violence is high for women on college campuses, with about twenty percent of undergraduate women experiencing rape or attempted rape.²⁴ Instances of rape cannot be viewed as isolated occurrences of violence, but rather as indications of a broader "rape culture" that normalizes the objectification and use of coercive force over women.²⁵ One study reported that forty-four percent of women had experienced at least one unwanted sexual encounter, ninety percent of which occurred within a hookup.²⁶ The rigid social scripts and assumptions underlying college hookup culture have

¹⁹ Goldberg, "Transgender Students," 8.

²⁰ I Goldberg, "Transgender Students," 4.

²¹ Karen Peterson-Iyer, "Mobile Porn? Teenage Sexting and Justice for Women," in *Sex and Gender*, eds. Mary Jo Iozzio and Patricia Beattie Jung (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 156.

²² Peterson-Iyer, "Mobile Porn," 148.

²³ Meghan K. McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic Response to the Social Sin of Rape Culture," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 4 (December 2018): 640-641.

²⁴ McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic Response," 635.

²⁵ McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic Response," 637.

²⁶ McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic Response," 639.

damaging consequences, not only for student identity formation and relationship building, but also for students' health and safety.

Despite their apparent willingness to conform, students are not satisfied with this dominant social climate on college campuses. When expressing their desires for college social climates in a recent study, students reflected on the need for women to dress and act however they feel comfortable, for more honest communication surrounding relationships, for acceptance of greater diversity and inclusivity, for the elimination of excessive drinking as the norm, and for freedom from the norm of hooking up as the dominant means of social interaction.²⁷ Only 10% of student ethnographers reported that students seem happy with and satisfied by the college hookup culture, while the other 90% reported that students experienced temporary happiness while intoxicated or were completely unfulfilled and dissatisfied with college hookup culture.²⁸ While individuals may experience temporary validation or satisfaction in a hookup scenario, students described the “negative psychological consequences” of a hookup, including emptiness, loneliness, and longing for something more.²⁹ Hookup culture, while presented as the normative form of social interaction on college campuses, is not regarded favorably by all students, and serves as a barrier to positive relationships with both oneself and others, creating harmful consequences for students of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

There are many issues underlying college hookup culture, including toxic masculinity, female objectification, heteronormativity, and normative gender binaries. Each of these issues requires acknowledgement and addressing, and could be analyzed and addressed individually. However, I propose that the problematic ideology underlying all of these issues is gender essentialism, or assuming certain immutable characteristics of each gender that mandate certain behavior in society. By confronting this ideology directly, we can address the root of the many challenges created by college hookup culture.

Historical Analysis of Sex and Relationships

The current reality of college hookup culture is a product of historical understandings of sex and sexual relationships. The legacy of power dynamics in sexual relationships is

²⁷ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 114-117.

²⁸ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 103-105.

²⁹ Beste, *College Hookup Culture*, 108.

deep. Biblically, women were understood as “fields into which men planted their seeds,”³⁰ making women “the servants, not only of the husband, but of the whole community.”³⁰ In Catholic contexts, Pope John Paul II’s “nuptial meaning” of the female body suggests that women are particularly well suited to passivity and receptivity, supporting motherhood as women’s primary vocation.³¹ This patriarchal framework establishes the basis for treating women as subservient in sexual relationships and generates patriarchal systems of power. As the male-female difference has served as the basis of many forms of human relationship, including sex, parenthood, and kinship, women consistently come out on the bottom in social contexts.³² Against this historical backdrop, one can see how an understanding of women as subservient in sexual relationships has pervaded society. Furthermore, these historical understandings of sexual relationships are based in a strict, heteronormative binary, insinuating that only male-female relationships are acceptable as they are the only relationships that are “fruitful” (in the child-bearing sense of the term).

The feminist movement of the 1960’s countered the dominant narrative that women’s role in a sexual relationship is merely one of a receptacle and an incubator, and that the only goal of a sexual encounter is reproduction. The “sexual revolution” promoted the idea that women had sexual needs and deserve sexual freedom. While social conservatives considered the movement an “invitation for sexual promiscuity,” the movement was based in female empowerment and reimagining the sexual relationship. The movement rejected the philosophy that only heterosexual, married sex was appropriate and instead purported that the reverse, “having lots of sex, in lots of different ways, with whomever you liked,” would be freedom.³³

The focus on sexual and reproductive rights of feminists in the 1960’s and 70’s is often referred to as “second wave” feminism, and its tenants can be critiqued on several grounds. Firstly, defining “freedom” as sexual promiscuity, while potentially liberating by alleviating the pressure for abstinence, places a new pressure to “prove oneself an acceptable sexual machine.” These standards can produce a new guilt, transferring guilt from being too sexual

³⁰ D.R. Bechtel, “Women, Choice, and Abortion: Another Look at Biblical Traditions,” *Prism* 8, no. 1 (1993): 81.

³¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan,” (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Publishing, 2009), 19.

³² Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 118-119.

³³ Rachel Hills, “Sexual Revolution Then and Now: Hook-Ups From 1964 to Today,” *Time*, December 2, 2014, <https://time.com/3611781/sexual-revolution-revisited/>.

to not sexual enough.³⁴ Such standards are prevalent in the college hookup culture, where sexual encounters can become a competitive pursuit.

On the opposing side of the sexual freedom movement is “purity culture,” often associated with American evangelical Christians. Purity culture encourages young people to control their sexual desires until marriage as “a way of being faithful to God’s plan for human sexuality and relationships.”³⁵ At first glance, such a theory may appear to encourage young people to identify with their faith communities and morals and exercise choice over their bodies and relationships; however, purity culture has been critiqued for being “paternalistic (emphasizing male control of women’s sexuality) and because it too simply links a woman’s moral goodness to her ability to refrain from sexual activity (emphasizing passivity).”³⁶ Equating a young woman’s value with her virginity is comparable with the objectification of women as sexual objects, since both tie a women’s worth to her body. Furthermore, considering a young woman who has lost her virginity as “used goods” is entrenched in patriarchal ownership, with a father handing over his “pure” daughter to her husband.³⁷ We need a revolution in our understanding of human sexuality. Neither promoting sexual freedom nor demanding purity give respect to the full worth and autonomy of all people. This includes resisting a heteronormative vision of sexuality, requiring the consideration of what the “good” of a sexual relationship is, and what power structures serve as obstacles to truly free sexual expression.

Catholic Social Teaching and College Hookup Culture

Analyzing the college hookup culture in dialogue with Catholic Social Teaching (CST) challenges the assumptions underlying the college hookup culture. CST is grounded in the inherent dignity of all human beings, and obligates us, as social beings, to respect the human dignity of others. CST suggests a certain way for existing in a social world, that we cannot seek our individual good without tending to the good of others. College hookup culture demonstrates the inherently social nature of human beings, and that our behavior and our

³⁴ Hills, “Sexual Revolution.”

³⁵ Bridget Burke Ravizza, “Feminism a Must: Catholic Sexual Ethics for Today’s College Classroom,” in *Women, Wisdom, and Witness: Engaging Contexts in Conversation*, eds. Rosemary P. Carbine and Kathleen J. Dolphin (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 150.

³⁶ Ravizza, “Feminism a Must,” 151.

³⁷ Ravizza, “Feminism a Must,” 152.

ability to flourish are highly dependent on our social environment. Furthermore, examining the social analysis previously addressed, many social factors contribute to a restrictive understanding of gender identity and expression. When placing the current college social environment in contrast with the vision for our flourishing social selves suggested by the tenants of CST, we can identify the flaws in the college environment and thus where it needs amelioration.

To suggest ways that CST can be used to critique college hookup culture, we must first establish the flawed nature of college hookup culture from a Catholic perspective. Analyzing the hookup culture on college campuses requires addressing it as a problem of both social and structural sin. Social sin may be understood as “the unjust structures, distorted consciousness, and collective actions and inaction that facilitate injustice and dehumanization.”³⁸ Such sinfulness specifically devalues other individuals, including through systemic racism or sexism.³⁹ While individual persons are the agents of sinful behaviors, these actions are informed by larger social structures. In terms of college hookup culture, individuals are devalued and treated merely as means to an end (sexual pleasure or social status). Additionally, it devalues students by placing assumptions on gender presentation and does not respect their full human dignity in self-identification and expression.

Social sin is both a cause of and result of individual sin. As such, any behavior that participates in and perpetuates the dominant gendered hookup culture contributes to social sin, even if the action is not inherently sinful in itself.⁴⁰ This includes failures to resist traditional beliefs of masculinity and femininity in everyday life, from the shows we watch to the jokes we make, to the way we dress and the way we speak about one another. All of the social influences explored in the social analysis, including media and sex education, contribute to social sin.

Structural sin is a more specific definition under the broader umbrella of social sin. A structure of sin can be understood as an institution or collective practice that promotes self-interested behavior over the common good due to social idealization or economic

³⁸ Kristin E Heyer, “Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 413.

³⁹ Heyer, “Social Sin,” 414.

⁴⁰ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 650.

incentive.⁴¹ Thus, while social sin encompasses all social influences on sinful behavior, structural sin is specifically tied to “causal power” implemented by institutions or collective practices.⁴² Such structures operate by using authority to skew one’s perception of morality or limit free will.⁴³

College hookup culture can be seen as a structure of sin, as it operates through collective practices that skew reality so students believe that such behavior is normal or even necessary for social acceptance. Such collective practices have been explored in previous sections of this paper, including the deferential behavior of females in a party setting, the drinking behavior encouraged by toxic masculinity, and the binary assumptions underlying such behaviors. Social sin can be understood as the broader social environment promoting toxic masculinity, feminine availability, and binary gender expression, including media influences or limited sex and gender education. Structural sin, however, is tied to the collective authority that normalizes this culture, operating through the collective buy-in of students to the perceived norms. As individuals participating in social and structural sin, we have an obligation to interrupt it and to foster a culture that fosters the flourishing of all members of society.

Social and structural sin on college campuses deviate significantly from the vision of CST. CST calls us to consider the common good of all fellow human persons and the promotion of collective flourishing. A foundational component of CST is human dignity, the belief that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Because of this foundation, all human lives are bestowed with inherent worth. The dignity of all is violated by college hookup culture as an example of social sin, which devalues and takes advantage of certain groups and thus violates their human dignity. As asserted by Meghan McCabe in her analysis of college rape culture, it is the responsibility of the Catholic Church to “identify the social systems that threaten human dignity and work toward their deconstruction so that those that promote the dignity and flourishing of all persons.”⁴⁴ Thus, an understanding of college hookup culture as a perpetuation of social and structural sin should indicate that CST demands a response.

⁴¹ Conor M. Kelly, “The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 301.

⁴² Kelly, “Structural Sin,” 301-303.

⁴³ Kelly, “Structural Sin,” 305-308.

⁴⁴ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 636.

McCabe explains that college hookup culture denies students of their full human dignity, as students of all gender identities are “inhibited by social expectations that limit which gendered and sexual ways of being are possible.”⁴⁵ By perpetuating a sinful social environment in which students’ self-expression and relationships are restricted by harmful norms, the human dignity of all students is violated. CST calls for a collective response to such disrespect of human dignity, to foster an environment in which all may flourish.

Another tenant of CST that specifically addresses social and structural sin is solidarity, which calls for a response to past and current suffering with actionable support, demonstrating an “incarnation of Christian love” in concrete form.⁴⁶ The goal of solidaristic action is to transform the social and cultural environment to develop “a reality in which suffering and violence are no longer present.”⁴⁷ Because we are all complicit in perpetuating social and structural sin, we are all called to solidaristic action to address it.

What does solidarity look like in the case of college hookup culture? As the gender norms and power dynamics shaping hookup culture are manifest in the daily social and sexual lives of college students, the context of the everyday is extremely relevant.⁴⁸ Interrupting the scripts dominating social and sexual interactions requires commitment to questioning and restructuring dominant language and beliefs, both by being conscious of oneself and being willing to confront others. Calling out a peer on their use of harmful sexist language (e.g., referring to a female as a “slut”), or on their heteronormative assumptions, (e.g., asking a male peer about their female interests), are simple examples of solidarity to disrupt structural sin.

In his analysis of the college hookup culture, Conor Kelly asserts that language has an important role in combatting structural oppression, as it is the means for asserting identity and can serve as a means to empower the silenced.⁴⁹ Thus, he suggests that an essential first step to subverting college hookup culture is “allowing men and women to voice their own concerns in a culture that functions to silence frank conversation.”⁵⁰ It is essential to add to

⁴⁵ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 645.

⁴⁶ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 653.

⁴⁷ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 653.

⁴⁸ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 654.

⁴⁹ Conor Kelly, “Sexism in Practice: Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2 (2012): 45-46.

⁵⁰ Kelly, “Sexism in Practice,” 45.

this assertion that students of *all* gender identities should be welcome to voice their concerns, not limiting the conversation to men and women. Language as a means of solidarity is in alignment with CST's vision of flourishing for all.

Students experience true harm at the hands of college hookup culture. The promotion of toxic masculinity harms students who feel pressure to adopt these outward gendered displays and those who suffer from the results of derivative actions. The assumption of female availability contributes to the normalization of rape on college campuses. The promotion of gender-based expectations for social behavior isolates those who do not identify with binary understandings of gender. Once we are aware of this suffering, solidarity demands action. The CST principle of solidarity calls us all to "respond to the suffering of the past and the present, for the sake of fostering the full personhood of all people."⁵¹ It is through solidarity that campus cultures may be restructured to "embody new gendered norms that recognize the full personhood of all and reject the patterns of masculine domination and feminine submission."⁵² Students must look inward to how they embody and accept gender norms on campus, determining how they wish to present themselves and encouraging others to do the same. Because of how deeply conditioned we are by virtue of pervasive social and structural sin, discerning how and when to engage in such interruptive solidaristic action is challenging, requiring the use of conscience. Conscience is understood as the force of responsibility that guides us towards morally good action, allowing us to make judgments of what is true and what to do in light of that truth.⁵³ Thus, guided by conscience, students may discern what action can effectively disrupt the patterns of hookup culture in everyday life.

Unveiling the Social Reality and Opening Dialogue

All individuals deserve respect for their inherent dignity, and similarly deserve the right to seek relationships that enable their flourishing. The current social and sexual culture dominating most college campuses does not make this possible. Hookup culture operates upon strict binary standards for gender expression that are harmful to the relationships and identity formation of all students. Such a social climate encourages female objectification

⁵¹ McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic," 653.

⁵² McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic," 654.

⁵³ McCabe, "A Feminist Catholic," 654.

and male dominance, fails to honor the authentic personhood of all students, serves as a barrier to just sexual relationships, and, most dangerously, contributes to rape culture on college campuses. The social scripts displayed on college campuses is a reality that all members of society participate in and perpetuate, and thus social transformation requires collective action.

We must first lift the veil and the silence about hookup culture. Sex does not need to be a taboo subject. Encouraging dialogue and educating young adults is an essential step in their flourishing. Seminars that engage students in conversation about the reality of the college hookup culture will reveal the highly gendered social scripts that dominate the college experience, and empower them to reject these scripts. Opening up spaces for dialogue on college campuses will empower students to undergo their own discernment process to determine what kind of sexual encounters and social presentation promote their flourishing.

This process of lifting the veil necessarily challenges traditional methods of sex education exclusively emphasizing abstinence. A renewed sexual ethic should be developed to accommodate the reality of college social environments and encourage the flourishing of all students. Margaret Farley suggests a framework for renewing Christian sexual ethics in *Just Love*, wherein she highlights the importance of developing a “living tradition.” She suggests that “beliefs and theologies that interpret beliefs can be challenged by new experiences, cultural shifts, and new perspectives on the past,” a process that takes the “usable past” and admits new insights to develop “new and better rationales.”⁵⁴ Farley grounds her proposed sexual ethics in justice, which, in her definition, requires that all people are “affirmed to their concrete reality, actual and potential.”⁵⁵ As emphasized by CST, our personhood and inherent dignity imply an obligation to be treated well by others as an end, never a means; to have free choice; and to be connected through nourishing relationships in order to achieve flourishing as human beings.⁵⁶

Another sexual virtue proposed by Farley is fruitfulness. The virtue of fruitfulness applied to sexuality is traditionally understood in the procreative sense, but also can be

⁵⁴ Margaret A Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 187.

⁵⁵ Farley, *Just Love*, 209.

⁵⁶ Farley, *Just Love*, 213-214.

reimagined to apply to a greater range of sexual relationships. “New life” can be produced in other ways, through “nourishing other relationships; providing goods, services, and beauty for others;” and other such fruitful activities.⁵⁷ Other virtues may also be applicable; applying the process of discernment, grounded in our inherent dignity and relationality, can be used to develop a fulfilling virtue-based sexual ethic.

Reimagining sexual ethics in this way is likely to be met with resistance, particularly on Catholic college campuses. However, it is important to keep in mind that the Catholic tradition is not stagnant, but is rather a “living tradition” meant to adapt to the circumstances of the contemporary world. As such, moral theology involves the practice of deliberation by employing “the skill of practical hesitancy.” Hesitancy and scrutiny inherently produce uncertainty, opening the door for “the possibility of development.”⁵⁸ Indeed, moral theology can be used as a “mode of deciphering what is most important for the person” in their attempt for “survival in a crisis of suffering.”⁵⁹ Thus, acknowledging the true suffering of students under current sexual expectations can facilitate legitimate, constructive questioning of how we have come to understand the Catholic tradition, just as others. Following the mission of CST to respect human dignity and uplift the suffering, we must be willing to revise our long-held beliefs to address the reality of the broken society we inhabit.

Bridget Burke Ravizza of Saint Norbert College has described her efforts to create a course addressing the issue of sexual ethics on college campuses based on virtue ethics. In her course, she works to provide students with tools that allow them to discern their path to flourishing in a college environment. She arms students with magisterial teachings and balances papal proclamations with the challenges of living out such principles in a broken world.⁶⁰ She also presses students to consider their “gender boxes,” the socialization of gender, and potential methods of resistance.⁶¹ She grounds her teachings in virtue ethics, which she believes “affirms the autonomy and relationality of students, calling them to live with integrity and set expectations high for themselves and their relationships.”⁶² Her efforts

⁵⁷ Farley, *Just Love*, 227-228.

⁵⁸ Raphael Gallagher, “Catholic Medical Ethics: A Tradition Which Progresses,” in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, ed. James F. Keenan (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 273.

⁵⁹ Gallagher, “Catholic Medical Ethics,” 280.

⁶⁰ Burke Ravizza, “Feminism a Must,” 154-157.

⁶¹ Burke Ravizza, “Feminism a Must,” 159.

⁶² Burke Ravizza, “Feminism a Must,” 165.

highlight the importance of arming students with knowledge and empowering them to reflect on how they can best seek fulfillment in the college environment.

Virtue ethics primarily explores the questions of “Who am I?” and “Who am I called to be?”⁶³ Thus, college students, who are at a pivotal time of self-determination, are poised to delve into a virtue-based discernment process around sexual relationships. Does a hookup culture based on gender binaries assuming male dominance and female submissiveness foster mutuality? Equality? Does it allow both parties to be vulnerable? Does it ensure free consent? By providing students with the tools of ethical discernment, they may discover and employ the tools of virtue ethics to foster fulfilling relationships.

The virtue-based approach to developing sexual ethics is not a sufficient response to the current social climate on college campuses. Burke Ravizza’s educational approach based in virtue ethics is limited to individual sexual encounters, without addressing the “broader social, cultural, and political context in which individual sex acts take place.”⁶⁴ This approach places more emphasis on individual behavioral choices, rather than addressing the underlying social and structural sin that perpetuates the gender essentialism inherent in the college social environment. The collective buy-in of students is key to perpetuating the structural sin promoting college hookup culture, thus it is important to lift the veil on such structures influencing behavior to give students true autonomy.

Logistically, isolating these conversations in an elective seminar course is likely self-selective for students interested in reflecting on hookup culture, whereas to be most effective, such dialogue must be encouraged university-wide. On Boston College’s campus, for example, it may be more effective to make a Burke Ravizza-style course required for first-year students, or as a component of the University Core Curriculum. It may also be effective to allow students to serve as peer educators in this space, leading discussion groups in the various residential life communities.

Initiating Social Transformation on College Campuses

Not all sexual activity on college campuses is freely chosen, and much of it is shaped by the existing culture rather than individual choices. This can be understood through the

⁶³ Burke Ravizza, “Feminism a Must,” 163.

⁶⁴ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 645-646.

analysis of college hookup culture as an example of social and structural sin, rather than purely individual behavior. By opening a safe space to share their stories, students may recognize the brokenness in our current social and sexual environment and be encouraged to accompany their peers who are suffering. Connor Kelly emphasizes the need for more open dialogue as “the hookup culture functions to deprive [students] of their unique voices,” and thus unveiling the cultural reality and encouraging “an open conversation about this culture and its shortcomings is itself a change.”⁶⁵ Kelly acknowledges that while opening a dialogue is no assurance of action, if no conversation occurs, “things will undoubtedly remain the same.”⁶⁶

Providing students with the tools of CST, as well as an open and non-judgmental space for discussion, provides the first step in initiating social change. The process begins with unveiling the unjust social reality, then empowering students to share their experience, and finally fostering identity and allyship with one’s peers. When we are allowed to recognize the humanity in others, we acknowledge our duty to help facilitate their flourishing. Thus, while a female-identifying student may be empowered by her ability to express the objectification that she has been damaged by in the college campus environment, she may also be impacted by hearing a non-binary student’s lack of identity affirmation experiences, or the pressure to express ultra-masculinity experienced by a male-presenting student. Once dialogue is open, the next step of “emancipatory transformation of structures” can hopefully occur.⁶⁷

One challenge that will inevitably be faced in this regard is how to encourage this conversations university-wide. As discussed previously, this may be accomplished in a classroom setting, but other environments may be conducive to free dialogue as well. A small group setting is an important component, ensuring students a safe space to feel heard. At Boston College, for example, many such small group reflection spaces exist: Freshman League and Ascend (first-year mentorship cohorts), and faith-based groups like Christian Life Communities (CLC). Creating reflection groups specifically for the purpose of discussing the hookup culture and gendered social scripts could be a positive step in

⁶⁵ Kelly, “Sexism in Practice,” 48.

⁶⁶ Kelly, “Sexism in Practice,” 48.

⁶⁷ Kelly, “Sexism in Practice,” 46.

promoting social transformation. Such reflection groups would go beyond the role of a seminar, giving students space for more equal discussion among peers and allowing them to put the tools of ethical analysis they have learned into practice. It could also allow such dialogue to occur longitudinally, rather than over the course of a single semester, and allow students time to explore their identity and environment throughout the stages of college life.

The next step in addressing the college social climate is cultivating solidarity, transforming the social environment through concrete action. One essential area of revision is language. We must change the way we speak about ourselves and others, and not allow words like “slut” or “easy” to be used in reference to females while males are referred to as “players.” We must revise the objectifying way that female bodies are discussed with an emphasis on certain features defining their desirability or worth. Furthermore, we must address language with underlying gender assumptions, including presuming he/she pronouns and using phrases like “ladies and gentlemen.” Such phrases can instead be replaced with gender-neutral ones, such as “the person in blue” or “friends and colleagues.” Students should be affirmed in their right to self-identify and receive the full respect of their humanity. Revising language is challenging, requiring conscious reflection and the willingness to correct others in their harmful use of language. It is important to note, however, that part of respecting our full humanity is to respect our capacity to make mistakes. We must give ourselves and others the grace to err, as social transformation is challenging, while encouraging dedication to improving the social environment for all.

We must encourage open conversation about our desires sexual relationships, and affirm the importance of mutuality in a sexual encounter. This includes the features discussed in Farley’s *Just Love*, including autonomy and equality of power. If students are mature enough to physically and emotionally engage in sexual interactions, they must be mature enough to have a conversation about the expectations in such a relationship. Another essential component for a just sexual relationship is affirmative and enthusiastic consent. Solidaristic action places demands on bystanders; this includes resistance to “tactics like blocking doors and pressuring drinks on women to foster their incapacitation” as well as the conversations that make light of such tactics as funny or acceptable.⁶⁸ Encouraging enthusiastic consent also requires education on what such consent necessitates. McCabe

⁶⁸ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 653.

notes that the lines between “seduction and domination, pleasure and danger, responsibility and exploitation, agency and objectification, consent and coercion” are often blurry and interpreted as part of the “normal” sexual experience.⁶⁹ Consent to one action does not mean consent to another or the same action at a different time; the presumption should be “no” until explicitly and freely told “yes.” Alcohol also blurs the lines on true affirmative consent. Education is necessary on the blurred lines between consent and coercion, and not simply at a one-time bystander education course offered to naïve first-year students.

Solidaristic action can also serve the purpose of spreading awareness of the harms of the current social climate campus-wide. An obvious obstacle remains how to engage the entire student body in the conversations previously discussed. However, if the students who are engaged in such conversations spread awareness and promote change through solidaristic action, their peers may be encouraged to do the same. There is incredible potential for spreading awareness in the modern age, and the surge in “social media activism” highlights a method that may be particularly efficacious in a college setting. It is, of course, true, however that a one-time post on social media is not the way to social change. Nevertheless, if increased awareness draws more students into dialogue, more students will then be dedicated to concrete action, and slowly the social transformation becomes possible.

Social Change Beyond Campus

Action cannot be isolated to college campuses. We must interrupt expectations based on false assumptions of gender roles and work to present new, more inclusive role models for young people as they undergo the process of identity formation. The identity formation process begins at a very young age, from the way young children are dressed to the toys they play with to the shows they watch. Toys marketed to girls, including baby dolls, kitchen sets, and princess costumes, encourage domesticity and aesthetics, while traditional boy’s toys, such as cars, action figures, and building sets, foster spatial reasoning and aggression.⁷⁰ Pigeon-holing children from such a young age can limit their later roles in society, and show them from an early age which traits of theirs are valuable and socially accepted.⁷¹

⁶⁹ McCabe, “A Feminist Catholic,” 638.

⁷⁰ Crispin Long, “‘Raising Baby Grey’ Explores the World of Gender-Neutral Parenting,” *The New Yorker*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/raising-baby-grey-explores-the-world-of-gender-neutral-parenting>.

⁷¹ Long, “Raising Baby Grey.”

Furthermore, the omnipresent gendering we undergo throughout childhood can be confusing and distressing for children who are “gender deviant,” who may spend most of their childhood and later life feeling out of place or unseen. We need to foster an environment where children feel comfortable dressing or playing the way they choose without scrutiny or nudging, to ease tension surrounding gender roles from an early age.

The idea of “gender-neutral parenting” is a controversial issue at the moment. Critics cite the challenges these children will face in the “real world,” potentially facing bullying or having no concept of gender in a society in which they will inevitably encounter it. Furthermore, critics point out that gender-neutrality may simply be another “box” or label placed upon the child, forcing them to lack a defined gender identity even if they gravitate towards one. It is important to not go to the opposite extreme when combating gender binary, limiting the child’s choices in another way by refusing them the right to self-identify as one gender if they so choose. To allow a child to explore their gender and role in society without judgement or pressure should be the purpose, by providing children with a variety of options and role models.

A primary form of indoctrination to societal norms is through media such as television and movies; thus, we need to create and incentivize more inclusive and varied characters so that there are role models for all gender identities and presentations. Such representation must be reflected in movies, television shows, advertisements, and other popular media sources that normalize structural power dynamics between genders and shape the expectations of young adults emerging into their sexual lives. From Disney princess movies to *Animal House*, young girls are presented with an image of the submissive role they are to play in relationships and society as a whole. Until the late 2000s, film and television portrayal of gender non-conforming individuals was scarce and relegated primarily to roles of comic relief.⁷² We cannot allow these representations to be the sole voice in the conversation on sexuality; we need to provide sexual education that is not only objective and scientific, or focused solely on promoting abstinence, but one that engages students in reflection on what the *telos* of sexual encounters is. The culture of college campuses is merely a microcosm of our wider society and remains open to its influence. To

⁷² Jon Mendelsohn, “Gender in the Media: The Evolution of Representation for Trans and Gender Nonconforming Characters,” CBR (CBR.com, November 20, 2020), <https://www.cbr.com/representation-gender-in-media/>.

address the social sin on college campuses, we must engage in collective action to transform our society as a whole.

Because of the centrality of identity formation that occurs in college, we must transform the college environment so this identity formation can be unhampered by harmful social expectations. College-aged students are also, it is worth noting, a new generation of young adults at the precipice of the next stage in adult life. We do not have to passively enter society as it is, but can actively create a society in which all can thrive. We do not have to remain merely products of our environment, but have the opportunity to challenge and transform it towards one that is more accepting and supportive. Transforming social norms on the Boston College campus, as any other, can essentially serve as “practice,” since the college campus is a microcosm of the social environment we live in. Upon graduating, we may leave with eyes-wide-open to the social pressure to conform to traditional gender and sexual standards, and continue to resist social and structural sin for greater transformation.

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