Hooking up or dating: Who benefits?
7 April 2010

As hooking up takes over from dating as a means of heterosexual interaction on university campuses, more women than men continue to prefer dating whereas more men than women rate hooking up above dating. Both genders however perceive similar benefits and risks to dating and hooking up. Carolyn Bradshaw from James Madison University in Virginia, US, and colleagues explored the reasons that motivate college men and women to hook up or to date, as well as the perceived relative benefits and costs of the two practices. Their findings are published online in Springer's journal Sex Roles.

Typically, dating follows a predictable pattern whereby the man is active: he asks the woman to go out with him, organizes the date and at the end of it may initiate sexual activity; whereas the woman is reactive: she waits to be asked out on a date and accepts or rejects the man's sexual overtures. They know each other or want to get to know one another and there is the prospect of a future relationship. In contrast, a hook up is a casual sexual encounter, which usually occurs between people who are strangers or brief acquaintances. For instance, two people meet at a party where they have been drinking; they flirt and engage in sexual behaviors from kissing to sexual intercourse, with no commitment to a future relationship.

Bradshaw and team exposed 150 female and 71 male college students from a southern, public American university to a variety of dating and/or hooking up situations, such as when there was potential for a relationship, when their partner had a great personality and when drinking was involved. They asked the students the extent to which they would prefer dating or hooking up in each situation. The participants were also asked to pick the top three benefits and top three risks associated with dating and hooking up from a checklist, as well as provide details of their dating and hooking up activities over the past two years.

Even though men initiated significantly more first dates than women, there was no gender difference in the number of first dates or number of hook-ups. For both men and women, the number of hook ups was nearly double the number of first dates.

Overall, both genders showed a preference for traditional dating over hooking up. However, of those students who strongly preferred traditional dating, there were significantly more women than men (41 percent versus 20 percent). Of those who showed a strong preference for hooking up, there were far fewer women than men (2 percent versus 17 percent). However, context mattered: when considering the possibility of a long-term relationship, both women and men preferred dating over hooking up; however, when the possibility of a relationship was not mentioned, men preferred hooking up and women preferred dating.

On the whole, men and women agreed on the benefits and risks of dating and hooking up. However, there were some notable differences:

- Women more than men seem to want a relationship. They fear, both in dating and hooking up, that they will become emotionally attached to a partner who is not interested in them.

- Men more than women seem to value independence. They fear that even in hooking up relationships, which are supposed to be free of commitments, a woman might seek to establish a relationship.

More information: Bradshaw C, Kahn AS, Saville BK (2010). To hook up or date: which gender benefits? Sex Roles; DOI:10.1007/s11199-010-9765-7

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