



December 13, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Demise of Dating

By CHARLES M. BLOW

The paradigm has shifted. Dating is dated. Hooking up is here to stay.

(For those over 30 years old: hooking up is a casual sexual encounter with no expectation of future emotional commitment. Think of it as a one-night stand with someone you know.)

According to a report released this spring by Child Trends, a Washington research group, there are now more high school seniors saying that they never date than seniors who say that they date frequently. Apparently, it's all about the hookup.

When I first heard about hooking up years ago, I figured that it was a fad that would soon fizzle. I was wrong. It seems to be becoming the norm.

I should point out that just because more young people seem to be hooking up instead of dating doesn't mean that they're having more sex (they've been having less, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) or having sex with strangers (they're more likely to hook up with a friend, according to a 2006 paper in the Journal of Adolescent Research).

To help me understand this phenomenon, I called Kathleen Bogle, a professor at La Salle University in Philadelphia who has studied hooking up among college students and is the author of the 2008 book, "Hooking Up: Sex, Dating and Relationships on Campus."

It turns out that everything is the opposite of what I remember. Under the old model, you dated a few times and, if you really liked the person, you might consider having sex. Under the new model, you hook up a few times and, if you really like the person, you might consider going on a date.

I asked her to explain the pros and cons of this strange culture. According to her, the pros are that hooking up emphasizes group friendships over the one-pair model of dating, and, therefore, removes the negative stigma from those who can't get a date. As she put it, "It used to be that if you couldn't get a date, you were a loser." Now, she said, you just hang out with your friends and hope that something happens.

The cons center on the issues of gender inequity. Girls get tired of hooking up because they want it to lead to a relationship (the guys don't), and, as they get older, they start to realize that it's not a good way to find a spouse. Also, there's an increased likelihood of sexual assaults because hooking up is often fueled by alcohol.

That's not good. So why is there an increase in hooking up? According to Professor Bogle, it's: the collapse of advanced planning, lopsided gender ratios on campus, delaying marriage, relaxing values and sheer momentum.

It used to be that “you were trained your whole life to date,” said Ms. Bogle. “Now we’ve lost that ability — the ability to just ask someone out and get to know them.”

Now that’s sad.

E-mail chblow@nytimes.com

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