

In Defense of "Loose" Women

The latest crisis on college campuses.

By Meghan O'Rourke

Posted Tuesday, Feb. 20, 2007, at 7:54 AM ET

It is the time-honored duty of the adolescent to alarm adults (parents, in particular) by having wild and often idiotic fun—e.g., streaking naked across campus, playing drinking games, throwing things out windows, hooking up with an acquaintance or a friend who, in a flush of late-night hormones, suddenly looks kind of hot. I went to college in the early days of the "hookup" culture, as it is now called, and my recollection, through the haze of years, was that the whole point of hookups was that they were *pleasurable*—a little embarrassing, sometimes, but mostly, well, fun. Either I was self-deluded, or things have gotten a lot worse. According to Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*, sex on campuses for young women today is a series of joyless encounters engaged in without either short-term pleasure or long-term reward. This pointless hedonism, in Stepp's view, turns young women into jaded depressives unable to trust or love anyone, secretly wishing Mr. Right would show up on their doorstep with flowers and a fraternity pin.

Unhooked purports to be a sweeping look at "hookup" culture on college campuses and several high schools, but, in fact, it is largely limited to a study of Duke University and George Washington University. ("Hooking up," if you've never heard the phrase, is an intentionally vague term that signifies sexual contact, ranging from a kiss to sex.) Stepp, a *Washington Post* reporter, interviewed "dozens" of young women about their sex lives. The resulting book is the story of nine girls followed over the course of a year. It is heavy on anecdote and generalization and short on information, since, as Stepp herself points out, there is a dearth of reliable evidence about the subject. What she discovered on college campuses troubled her: "Relationships have been replaced by the casual sexual encounters known as hookups. Love, while desired by some, is being put on

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hold or seen as impossible," she observes. "Some girls can handle this; others ... are exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually by it." Like a good mother, *Unhooked* strives to be less polemical than concerned. But just below its surface lurk the usual naked (and prurient) fears about girls and sex: Girls who put out are going to get hurt. Instead, Stepp argues, they should admit "the bar scene is a guy thing" and stay home to "bake cookies, brownies, muffins" — after all, guys, she confides, will do "anything" for homemade treats. (Who wants chlamydia when he can have cake?)

Certainly, the scene Stepp evokes can seem grim. She watches as packs of girls go out to bars and snap cell-phone pics to remind them who they went home with, then get so drunk they pass out. A lot of the hooking up is motivated not by debauchery but by status: One high-school girl told Stepp that it was "all about getting/hooking up with the hottest, most well-known guys, and girls will spend a lot of time strategizing and manipulating their way into getting those guys." Sorority life is also a factor. In one case, a sorority event leads to consensual sex the young woman in question doesn't remember; in another, to what the woman calls "gray rape." In a shift from victim-oriented 1980s campus culture, these women see themselves as

equal or at least *responsible* partners in the sticky sexual situations their liberated outlook gets them into.

Unhooked is suffused with the vague anxiety that is symptomatic of the teens-in-crisis genre, offset only by a handful of concrete ideas about the damage done by hookup culture: specifically, that young women involved in it are more likely to contract sexual diseases (doctors note rising rates of STDs among young women); that they often feel "awkward" and "hurt" as well as "strong, desirable, and sexy," leading to depression and poor grades; that loveless sex fails to teach women the lessons of intimacy they need for marriage. Some of Stepp's analysis is supported by students' testimonies, but, as with all anecdotal journalism, one detects self-selection and data contamination at work. One problem is that Stepp cites no longitudinal work on the subject—these girls are still in

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college—which means a lot of predictive doom and gloom with little to buttress it. When girls and psychologists defend hooking up—or argue that she's overemphasizing its downsides—she responds with rhetorical insinuations. After one girl who enjoyed noncommitted sex enthuses, "If sex was that good with Nicholas, imagine what it will be like with my husband," Stepp responds, "But how would she find that husband?" In the 1950s, parents got concerned when girls "went steady" instead of playing the field, but Stepp is convinced this "new" habit of playing the field will warp girls' hearts and make it impossible for them to settle down when the time comes. "It's as if young women are practicing sprints while planning to run a marathon," she worries.

That metaphor of practice for a grueling competition says a lot about both the phenomenon Stepp is describing and her blinkered perspective. What her own reporting suggests, but she doesn't seem to see, is that if there *is* a problem, it isn't that young women are separating love and sex. It's that they are blurring sex and work: The hookup culture is part of a wider ethos of status-seeking achievement. As one girl puts it: "Dating is a drain on energy and intellect, and we are overwhelmed, overprogrammed and overcommitted just trying to get into grad school." So they throw themselves

into erotic liaisons with the same competitive zeal they bring to résumé-building: "If you mention you think a guy is hot, your friend may be, 'Oh, he *is* hot. I'm gonna go get with him,'" Anna, a high-school student, reveals. The combination of postfeminist liberation and pressure from parents to "do it all"—as one kid puts it—has led girls to confuse the need to be independent (which they associate with success) with the need to be invulnerable. Thus, they frame their seemingly explorative sex lives in rigid, instrumental terms, believing that vulnerability of any sort signals a confusing dependence. The result? Shying away from relationships that can hurt them—which includes even fleeting obsessions that can knock them off balance.

If this is true, the last thing young women need is more assignments from those who view relationships as yet

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another arena in which they better "win." In that sense, *Unhooked* is part of the very problem it's trying to offset. While noting that a fear of "failing" makes college girls insist that they've got matters under control when they don't, Stepp offers up the same prescriptive diagnoses that get in the way of young women asking themselves what they—as individuals—might really want: "I hope to encourage girls to think hard about whether they're 'getting it right,'" Stepp says. At the same time, young men get away without such cautionary lessons: Stepp follows a long pattern of leaving them out of the picture. From at least the 1920s (when everyone thought flappers were destroying manners) on through the 1980s (when teen pregnancy rates had everyone alarmed), girls have been hearing that *their* sex lives are the symbol of generational decadence.

The truth is that even the sex-as-work ethic has an upside—one Stepp fails to see. For the first time in ages, young women are actually concentrating, in some fashion, more on their work and on their female friendships than on love and sex, and many *do* feel empowered by this. One of the studies Stepp cites found that young women feel *less* pressured to engage in sex than their male peers do. If some have a tough time figuring out what romantic or sexual pleasure is, they are nonetheless hardheaded about their

status as pioneers in a new sexual landscape. "If there's one thing that I know about adults, it's that they pounce on adolescent sexuality with zeal," says Alicia, a student at Duke, aptly pinpointing the adult impulse to scold. Stepp couldn't resist the impulse herself. Buying into alarmism about women, *Unhooked* makes sex into a bigger, scarier, and more dangerous thing than it already is. The fact is, love is a messy arena, and in it most of us make both wise and foolish choices. *C'est la vie*, if not *l'amour*.

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