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## Queer Women in the Hookup Scene: Beyond the Closet?

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### **Abstract**

The college hookup scene is a profoundly gendered and heteronormative sexual field. Yet the party and bar scene that gives rise to hookups also fosters the practice of women kissing other women in public, generally to the enjoyment of male onlookers, and sometimes facilitates threesomes involving same-sex sexual behavior between women. In this article, we argue that the hookup scene serves as an opportunity structure to explore same-sex attractions, and, at least for some women, to later verify bisexual, lesbian, or queer sexual identities. Based on quantitative and qualitative data and combining queer theory and identity theory, we offer a new interpretation of women's same-sex practices in the hookup culture. Our analysis contributes to gender theory by demonstrating the utility of identity theory for understanding how non-normative gender and sexual identities are negotiated within heteronormatively structured fields.

Most scholars agree that the hookup scene is a profoundly gendered and heteronormative sexual field (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010; Bogle 2008; Currier 2013; England, Safer, and Fogarty 2007; Hamilton 2007; Reid, Elliott, and Webber 2011). Although queer students also hook up, they tend to do so outside the mainstream party scene, where the players are presumed to be heterosexual (Rupp and Taylor 2013). In the heterosexual hookup scene, it is men who typically initiate sexual activity, and they often treat women primarily as sex objects and admit that they are not concerned about women's sexual pleasure in hookups (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). Heterosexual hookups are regulated by a double standard that has negative reputational effects for women who hook up too much or have intercourse too readily in hookups. Hooking up on college campuses is also anchored to specific sites, such as fraternity houses, that are controlled by men (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). The parties and bars where many hookups start typically involve drinking and sexualized dancing (Ronen 2010) conducive to heterosexual activity. Yet the party and bar scene that gives rise to hookups also fosters the practice of women making out with other women in public, generally to the enjoyment of male onlookers, and sometimes facilitates sexual threesomes or group sex involving same-sex sexual acts between women (Rupp and Taylor 2010). As a result, an element of same-sex sexual behavior among women is engrained in this otherwise heteronormative sexual field.

The common claim about erotic interactions among women in the hookup culture is that they are intended purely to attract male attention. Hamilton (2007) provides evidence that, among college women she studied, what might look like same-sex practices motivated by sexual interest in a same-sex partner—women kissing and fondling other women at alcohol-fueled parties and dances—were simply strategies used by women to enhance their heterosexual appeal.

We do not discount the motive of performing for the male gaze (Mulvey 1975). Our goal in this article is to complicate this portrayal by drawing attention to the fact that, at least for some women, the gendered and heteronormative environment of the hookup scene extends the norms of appropriate heterosexual behavior far enough to provide an opportunity for them to explore same-sex attractions and new sexual identities. Although we acknowledge that most women kissing women on the dance floor never go down this path, and that participating in this sexual field is not the only way that women come to non-heterosexual identities, we argue that the hookup scene provides one pathway for affirming non-normative sexual identities. Some women discover new desires while taking part in socially acceptable same-sex behaviors, while others, already aware of their desires, find it convenient to use the hookup scene to engage in same-sex sexual behavior. That women's same-sex behaviors, as long as they are perceived as in the interests of men, are permitted and even encouraged creates space for shifts in desire, behavior, and identity. Since these core interactional practices are structured around men's heterosexual desires, men with same-sex attractions do not have the same leeway to engage in same-sex sexual activity in the hookup scene without being labeled gay (Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2011; Ward 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis combines queer theory's emphasis on performativity in the destabilization of dominant gender and sexual categories (Butler 1990; Green 2007; Stein and Plummer 1996; Valocchi 2005; Ward 2008; Ward and Schneider 2009) with identity theory's attention to individual agency and identity verification (Burke and Stets 2009; Cast, Stets, and Burke 1999; Stryker and Burke 2000; Swann 1983). While both strains of scholarship have demonstrated the malleability, situational specificity, and symbolic significance of identity, identity theory holds that, among various social identities, gender and sexual identities, while subject to change, are so

fundamental to the logic of social life that they cannot, as Plummer argues (2003, 525), “be lightly changed, performed, or wished away very quickly.” We draw on and adapt key concepts from identity theory to illuminate the mechanisms that produce identity change in some women’s sexual identities in the hookup field. Our findings contribute to gender theory and theories of sexuality by pointing to the potential of combining queer theory and identity theory for understanding the processes involved in “undoing gender” (Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009) and undoing heteronormativity. These “undoings” occur in those moments in which women and men find opportunities to stray from traditional heteronormative gender and sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973).

### **WOMEN’S SEXUAL FLUIDITY IN HETERONORMATIVE CONTEXTS**

Most studies highlight the gendered sexual scripts and sexual double standard associated with sexuality in the hookup scene. Ridgeway (2011, 182) goes so far as to argue that “forming a heterosexual bond is a quintessentially gendered goal.” While most research suggests that women, compared to men, prefer committed relationships to casual sex and that sex for women is better in the context of committed relationships than in hookups (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Bogle 2008; Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville 2010; Friedland and Gardinali 2013; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Grello, Welsch, and Harper 2006), some studies point to the advantages college women accrue by embracing hooking up as an alternative to entangling sexual relationships that distract from their studies and future careers (Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Reid, Elliott, and Webber 2011). In light of the media attention attracted by the practice of girls kissing girls (Diamond 2005), it is surprising

that research on the hookup scene has failed to address the participation of women who do not identify as heterosexual.

The phenomenon of women engaging in same-sex sexual behavior—making out or engaging in threesomes—in the hookup scene is less surprising when considered in light of recent studies that reveal many women’s openness to bisexual attractions and behavior, the capacity of women to change their sexual practices and identities across time, and the lack of a tight fit between women’s erotic desire, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. This research emphasizes women’s fluidity in desire and behavior, contrasted with men’s more fixed sexual orientations and identities (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Diamond 2008; Golden 2006; Moore 2011; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Rust 2000a, 2000b).

Sociologists have focused primarily on the social contexts that facilitate the adoption of lesbian or bisexual behavior and identity. Studies of lesbian feminist communities point to the role of feminist ideology, communities, and institutions in the identify verification process that contributes to coming out as lesbian (Krieger 1983; Ponse 1978; Stein 1997; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Wolf 1979). Research also documents the significance of individual experiences, including falling in love with or developing crushes on a friend (Esterberg 1997; Morgan and Thompson 2006); learning about lesbian and gay lives (Golden 2006); interacting with non-heterosexually identified women (Esterberg 1997); and participating in threesomes or group sex involving men and women (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977).

That heteronormative sexual fields have facilitated love and sexual activity between women in different times and places is clear from historical scholarship (Rupp 2009). The existence of intimate sexual relationships between co-wives in polygynous households in China and the Middle East, romantic friends in heterosexual marriages in the Euro-American world of

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and “girlfriends” in avant-garde cultural environments such as Greenwich Village and Weimar Berlin in the 1920s suggests that bisexual behavior between women has flourished in a variety of societies where women’s same-sex desires and sexual behavior did not pose a threat to the gender order. While it has long been the case that people have initiated same-sex sexual activity in heterosexual fields, what is different in these cases is that the activity is socially approved as a complement to heterosexuality. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that gay, lesbian, transgender, and other non-heterosexual actors frequently “arrive at sexual identities and practices not in spite of heteronormativity, but because of it” (Green 2002, 540). This literature leads us to ask whether hooking up might provide opportunities for some women to participate in same-sex practices and affirm new identities.

## **THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

### **COMBINING QUEER THEORY AND IDENTITY THEORY**

Our analysis links queer theory’s emphasis on the power of heteronormative gender/sexual binaries for ordering, classifying, and regulating sexual desires, practices, and identities with identity theory’s attention to the *identity verification* processes people use to confirm their own conceptions of themselves. Queer theory advances the claim that binary gender (male/female) and sexual (hetero/homo) classification systems are historically constructed and fail to reflect the full range of sexual and gender identities and practices present in every society (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1999). Yet binary systems exert tremendous power over individuals because the logic of the “heterosexual matrix” that assumes alignment between sex, gender, and sexuality organizes all facets of social life and has regulatory

power over bodies and subjectivities. The hallmark of queer theory has been its emphasis on the identity performances and narratives people use to resist, challenge, and subvert heteronormativity (Butler 1990; Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras 2012; Gamson 1995; Green 2007; Muñoz 1999; Valocchi 2005). Queer theorists have been interested in genders, sexual practices, and identities that do not fit neatly into sex and gender binaries. Sociologists have frequently criticized queer theory for failing to supply the theoretical tools necessary to explain how it is that individuals are able to construct and maintain sexual identities that do not conform to the binary categories imposed by heteronormativity as a macro-level structure of power (Green 2002; Maloney and Fenstermaker 2002).

Structural identity theory in social psychology (Burke 2004; Burke and Cast 1997; Burke and Stets 2009; Stryker and Burke 2000) is a useful lens for examining the social psychological processes involved in the construction of sexual identity. Identity theory seeks to understand the way stable identity categories tie people to society but, at the same time, acknowledges that self-conceptions are malleable and subject to change through social interaction and interpretive processes. According to identity theory, an identity is the set of meanings a given individual claims in a social role or situation. Such meanings define what it means to be this individual in a particular role or situation. For Burke and his colleagues, identity is a function of the relationship between an individual's unique meanings of the self and the role performances and social identities prescribed in particular situations. When these are aligned, identity verification exists. Research on identity verification has found that when individuals' self-meanings fail to match dominant identity categories, they are likely to engage in behavior that attempts to restore self-perceptions (Stets and Burke 2005). One of the ways that people ensure the stability of their identities is by seeking out, creating, and endorsing information that is consistent, and avoiding



and rejecting information that is inconsistent, with their self-conceptions (McCall and Simmons 1966; Swann 1983; Swann and Hill 1982). Swann refers to this as “developing an *opportunity structure*” (1983, 36). In sum, by linking queer theory and identity theory, we are better able to understand how the hookup scene serves as an opportunity structure that allows at least some college women to experiment with, act on, and embrace bisexual, lesbian, and queer sexual identities.

## **METHODS**

Most research on sexual identity is based on small samples due to the difficulties of drawing random samples from hidden populations (Golden 2006; Moore 2011; Rupp and Taylor 2013). In an effort to address some of the limitations of prior studies, we draw on survey data as well as semi-structured interviews and combine quantitative and qualitative data in the analysis. The quantitative data are derived from a national survey of the sexual practices of college students, and the qualitative data are based on interviews at two campuses, Stanford University and the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The Online College Social Life survey, which included both universities, is the largest national study to date of sexual practices in hookups among college students (see Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012 for a detailed description). We analyzed the responses of the 14,128 undergraduate women from 21 four-year colleges and universities who took the 15-20 minute survey administered online between 2005 and 2011. Recruitment took place in a non-probability sample of sociology classes, with most instructors providing course credit for participating, so that a virtually 100 percent response rate was ensured in most classes. Any non-representativeness within universities emerges from self-selection into participating classes.

Both Stanford and UC Santa Barbara are relatively progressive Research I universities on the West Coast, with top rankings as queer-friendly on the “campus pride index”<sup>2</sup> and only a little over 10 percent of students in fraternities and sororities. Stanford, an elite private university, has about 7,000 undergraduates, over half of them students of color, predominantly Asian American and Latina, and 14 percent first-generation college students. Most students live on campus all four years, so partying takes place in dorms, residential houses, and fraternity houses, where many parties are open to all students. UC Santa Barbara, a public university, enrolls close to 20,000 undergraduates, over half of them students of color, mostly Latino and Asian American, and about a third first-generation college students. With Isla Vista, a densely populated, predominantly student residential neighborhood, adjacent to the university, UC Santa Barbara has a reputation as a party school. We are not suggesting that these campuses are representative of the whole range of colleges and universities in different areas of the country, but neither is there reason to think that the dynamics we analyze here are unique to these schools.

The qualitative analysis is based on interviews with 55 women students, including 18 interviews with Stanford students conducted between 2006 and 2008, and 37 from UC Santa Barbara conducted between 2006 and 2010. Interviews at Stanford focused on hooking up, dating, relationships, and sexual activity throughout the college years. Interviewees included all women in a probability sample of seniors who made reference to any same-sex sexual behavior or to having a sexual or romantic interest in women. Because so few women identified as homosexual or bisexual in the probability sample, we also used snowball sampling to construct a purposive sample of interviewees who identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or otherwise non-heterosexual; we used these data to delve more deeply into how women’s sexual relationships in the hookup scene influenced shifts in their sexual identities. At UC Santa Barbara, the non-

random interview sample was obtained through snowball sampling of women students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or otherwise non-heterosexual. The 55 students interviewed on the two campuses were diverse in terms of both race/ethnicity and sexual identity (see Tables 1 and 2). At least on these two campuses, the hookup scene transcends racial/ethnic differences. In virtually all cases on both campuses, interviewees were graduate and undergraduate students, based on the premise that similarity of age and student status would facilitate rapport. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The names used here are pseudonyms.

[TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

The quantitative analysis provides descriptive statistics from the 21-campus survey pertaining to the frequency of hooking up, students' sexual identities, and their participation in different sexual acts with both men and women. Comprehensive insight into how same-sex practices might have influenced shifts in women's sexual identities required the depth that only qualitative data can provide. Using NVivo software, we coded the qualitative interviews for different pathways into same-sex sexual behaviors and for shifts to and from different identities. Because almost all of our interviewees identified as non-heterosexual, our data do not allow us to reach conclusions about those women who make out with other women in public and/or engage in threesomes purely for male enjoyment.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE SAME-SEX INTIMACIES AND  
VERIFY QUEER IDENTITIES IN THE HOOKUP SCENE**

Our analysis concentrates on two practices in the hookup scene that facilitate sexual interaction between women by providing normative opportunities for same-sex behavior and desire otherwise deemed inappropriate in the larger society. Drawing on identity theory's precept that people are sometimes able to find social situations that conform to their self-defined meanings (Riley and Burke 1995), the analysis focuses, first, on how two sexual practices serve as *opportunity structures* for engaging in same-sex sexuality. The second portion of the analysis provides deeper insight into the way same-sex experiences in the hookup scene influence women's own identity appraisals and are used to verify non-heterosexual identities.

The survey data reveal that hooking up at least occasionally is the norm. Of all women who were seniors in the national sample, 70 percent have hooked up at least once. That figure is even higher in the data for Stanford (77 percent) and UC Santa Barbara (80 percent). Moreover, the survey suggests that having hooked up is just as common among women who listed their identity as lesbian, bisexual, or "not sure." In the national sample, 78 percent of non-heterosexual senior women had hooked up, and the figures were even higher among women in this group at both Stanford and UC Santa Barbara.

The survey also shows that over 90 percent of women students in the national sample, and at both universities, identified as heterosexual (see Table 3). As expected, women are most likely to have engaged in sexual practices consistent with their sexual identities, so many lesbian or bisexual women have had oral sex with a woman, and a majority of heterosexual women have had oral sex and intercourse with a man (see Table 4). But many who now call themselves lesbians (over 40 percent) have had oral sex and intercourse with men. Despite heteronormative pressures, a few women identifying as heterosexual report having had oral sex with a woman (2

percent have given and 2 percent have received). A larger percentage of women not sure about their sexual identities have given oral sex to (14 percent) or received oral sex from (17 percent) a woman. What these statistics make clear is that it is not just women who identify as bisexual who have some form of sexual interaction with both women and men But the survey fails to tell us much about how women interpret these forms of sexual sociality and whether participating in same-sex sex in the context of hooking up has any effect on their sexual identities.

[TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE]

Turning to our interview data, a significant finding guiding our analysis is that 60 percent of women we interviewed mentioned kissing another woman in public (49 percent) and/or engaging in a threesome with a man and another woman (18 percent). We turn now to qualitative analysis of the interview data, which allows for a more nuanced account of the processes of getting involved in same-sex sexual behavior and identity construction.

### **Kissing Women**

The practice of women kissing and making out with each other in the alcohol-fueled party culture on campus is ubiquitous and socially acceptable, perhaps because of the assumption that it is intended solely for male pleasure. That drinking is a major factor in lowering women's inhibitions with regard to engaging in sex in heterosexual hookups (Reid, Elliott, and Webber 2011) suggests that alcohol might be equally as important in facilitating same-sex interactions. The interview data supports this conclusion. Gabriella, a queer African American student, tells of asking a woman student in her house whether she liked girls: "And she was, like, 'Oh, well,

depending on how many drinks I've had.” Elizabeth, who is white and identifies as bisexual, criticizes what she calls “fake” bisexuals who “make out with their friend at a party after a couple shots of tequila and really like that god-awful Katy Perry song. . . . most of the time, it is a performance for straight males.” As Elizabeth’s comment makes clear, Katy Perry’s 2008 song, “I Kissed a Girl,” brought the phenomenon of presumably straight girls kissing into the public eye.<sup>3</sup> So it is not surprising that Dana, white and queer, when asked about her first experience of same-sex desire, quoted the song in her response: “It was probably in the back of my mind growing up, but the first time I came to terms or, like, experienced it was in college... um...drinking—I kissed a girl and I liked it.” Like other women, she seized the opportunity.

Some women describe the move into same-sex intimacy in the party scene to involve drinking, dancing, and kissing. Isabel, a queer Latina, talks about partying with her good friend, who would try to kiss her. “I was scared to. One day she got me drunk enough to agree and I did.” Missy, a multiracial (Latina/Japanese/white) woman who identifies as queer, describes making out with women in high school while drunk and feeling some attraction but considering it normal, since “everyone does it.” But her first “real” experience she dates to her freshman year in college with a woman who lived in the same dorm: “We were just really affectionate and touchy people and then, eventually, you get really close and either you get drunk and you kiss or you get drunk and you say things like, ‘Oh, I wanna make out with you.’” For these women and others like them, the acceptability of same-sex kissing in the hookup culture facilitated a move from friendship to sexual, and sometimes romantic, intimacy.

Some women find themselves experimenting with same-sex sexual activity with no clear previous sexual attraction to women and no sense of an identity other than heterosexual. Vivian, an Asian American student who now calls herself “heterosexual but not against something with a woman,” told of making out with her best friend “for fun.” “We were all drunk and we’re, like,

‘Let’s take off our clothes,’ and we did. And she’s, like, ‘I want to make out with you all.’ . . . And we did.” Vivian described the incident as “an experience” but “it didn’t change my life or anything.” Sandra, a white bisexual woman, distinguishes her first sexual experience with a woman from earlier incidents of making out at parties: “Yeah, I had kissed other girls before, but it was always, like, in the party, drunk situation that everyone talks about.” Meredith, a white Jewish student who identifies as “mostly straight,” told of a game of “naked drunk spin the bottle” where she kissed two bisexual topless women and “it felt a little bit more than just sort of, like, fulfilling the game. It felt like sort of a safe way to experiment.” One of the women later sent her a Facebook message saying, “You know, your Facebook profile says you’re interested in men but your kisses say otherwise.” The pervasiveness of the practice of kissing in public makes room for experimentation, which may or may not have consequences for shifting self-definitions.

In some cases, women who engage in the socially acceptable practice of kissing other women already had an awareness of same-sex sexual desire and a nascent non-heterosexual identity. Molly, a white lesbian who fell in love with another girl when she was fourteen, had her first kiss with a woman her freshman year at college. “We were both really drunk, but she did that frequently with girls and she’s at least part bisexual. So, almost four years after I figured out I was bi I had my first sexual experience, or made out with a woman.” Brittany, a white bisexual, describes making out with girls in high school: “But they were mostly, like, just for show and I’d get really pissed off, I’d be, like, ‘Well, I actually like it, you’re just doing it for all the boys.’ And I was really pissed.” In these cases, the acceptability of kissing other women in the hookup culture facilitated sexual behavior with women that was rooted in desire, attraction, and/or love, and facilitated an acknowledgement of a non-heterosexual identity.

Clearly, the phenomenon of “straight girls kissing” in the hookup scene can mean many different things for participants. Kissing can result from or lead to emotional connections with

women, and it may or may not lead to more extensive forms of sexual interaction or to the adoption of a non-heterosexual identity. But it is one pathway into same-sex desire and behavior, often instigated while drinking in heteronormative spaces.

### **Threesomes**

A smaller number of women describe same-sex physical intimacy resulting from engaging in a threesome with another woman and a man. Although not as common as kissing and making out at parties, threesomes do emerge from the eroticized party scene. Although we do not know how many women college students participate in threesomes, almost 20 percent of our interviewees have done so, often seeking out such encounters in order to act on their desires and, in some cases, to verify queer, “fluid,” or bisexual self-conceptions. Melissa, a white student who identifies as “fluid,” says that if she kisses her girlfriend at a straight party, they “would get ten guys swarming on you, like, ‘Hey, you wanna do a threesome?’ or ‘Let me get in on that,’ or ‘Let me watch.’” Sometimes threesomes are initiated by men for their own purposes, other times by women as a way to ease more safely and comfortably into a same-sex sexual encounter. That threesomes allow same-sex pleasure without the stigma of a non-heterosexual identity is the point of a popular *Saturday Night Live* sketch featuring Lady Gaga in a three-way with Justin Timberlake and Andy Samberg. The men sing, “It’s OK when it’s in a three-way/It’s not gay when it’s in a three-way/With a honey in the middle there’s some leeway.”<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Allison, a multiracial bisexual, her boyfriend initiated the threesome with his ex-girlfriend because it was “hot,” but then Allison kept on having sex with the woman while excluding her boyfriend. Claudia, a white student who calls herself a “heterosexual-practicing bisexual” or “a straight person with bisexual tendencies,” described a “fivesome” the summer after her first year of college. It started at a party with a lot of drinking and developed into group



sex among Claudia and the guy she was hooking up with, her bisexual woman friend who was hooking up with Claudia's boyfriend's best friend, and a "newly bisexual" girl. Ali, a white student who calls herself "bisexual/heterosexual/questioning," hooked up with a man and another woman on Valentine's Day, "just because we were all really lonely—and drunk." She described it as not "that sexual," although "there were some clothes coming off." Missy describes her first same-sex sexual experience as "kind of" a threesome, although she did no more than make out with the man while the woman "went down on me." As these cases make clear, threesomes or group sex often develop in a party scene with heavy drinking.

Other students who already identify as bisexual are explicit about their physical desire for women and seek out threesomes to satisfy these desires. Kara, an Asian American woman, had her first experience with a woman coworker who was bisexual and a swinger and romantically involved with a man at the time. Kara describes her as "everything that I wanted in a woman," so she had sex with both her and the boyfriend. Melinda, a white woman who had had minor sexual experiences with other women while in a long-term relationship with a man, regularly took part in a threesome over a period of months because the woman was "just hot." She found dating both a man and a woman "very interesting" in "starting to understand my sexuality." For Kara and Melinda, having sex in a threesome fulfilled their bisexual desires.

A number of women report that hooking up simultaneously with both a man and another woman is an easier way into same-sex sexual experience, revealing the hookup culture as an opportunity structure for same-sex intimacies. Mia, a white student who identifies as lesbian/bisexual, said it was "super easy" to hook up with boys and then say "'Oh, I like girls,'" and then do "the threesome thing. . . . I was too shy to try and hook up with girls all by themselves." Whitney, a white lesbian, also used a threesome as the easiest way to have sex with another woman. Carey, a white student who identifies as "fluid," was attracted to a friend:

In order to feel comfortable with chasing her down, basically . . . we both kind of brought in this other third party male and so it was more of a threesome, but as soon as the threesome had kind of gotten underway I kind of realized I didn't want him there; I was, like, "You're superfluous, go away," you know, but it then was too late.

Some women explicitly contrast the familiarity of the heterosexual script with their anxiety about approaching women on their own. As Ali, who had her first interaction in a threesome, put it, "I kinda know how the script goes" with men. Kara, adventurous enough to have a threesome, says, "I am too chicken-shit to make the first move, or I'm too shy to approach girls, or I never know if they are queer or not." Eileen, white and identifying as bisexual despite her lack of a same-sex relationship, also says, "It's not clear how you would initiate a relationship with a woman." Carey, who had early attractions to women but her first experience at college in a threesome, echoes other women about the ease of interacting with men:

I'll meet a woman and just be blown over backwards by her beauty and definitely attracted to her, and then I kind of shrivel up, I get really scared, I'm like a 16-year-old boy . . . . I'm really inexperienced in chasing women, rather more experienced at chasing men, so it's kind of like skiing or snowboarding, I do skiing more often 'cause I'm better at it. Still would like to snowboard, still like to, would love to learn to snowboard.

As these data suggest, threesomes provide opportunities for women to experiment with or verify fluid and bisexual identities in a variety of ways. Although threesomes may begin with male desires, they introduce women to new sexual pleasures or allow them to act on same-sex or

bisexual desires. For some women, these heterosexual practices that are available in the hookup party scene serve as opportunity structures that allow them to explore sex and romance with women and to shift their identities.

### **Verifying New Identities**

Whether women start with public kissing or a threesome, engaging in same-sex sexual behavior does not pre-ordain the adoption of any particular identity. The process of identity verification is complex in this context. But as women talked about their experiences kissing women or having sex with women in threesomes, it became clear that the availability of these two practices in the heteronormative hookup scene led some women to develop non-heterosexual identities or verify identities that were already nascent.

Two of the women who described kissing their friends in the party scene came to understand their desires as having consequences for their identities. Isabel, whose friend talked her into kissing while drunk, explained, “So that turned into, okay, when we were drunk we’ll make out and soon enough we realized, okay, we’re not drunk and we’re making out. So we started a bit of a relationship and I never looked back.” At first she just told her friends that she had a girlfriend and was not sure what that meant, but within six months she “knew for sure” she was queer. Likewise Missy, who made out with her close friend, went on to say, “But, eventually we became, well, we were really, really close and then I fell in love with her, so that’s when I knew for sure that I was into women.” For her, that meant adopting a queer identity. Biracial Viola (white/Native American) says, “I always thought I was straight and I never thought that I’d ever have a sexual experience with a woman,” even though there were “a few times when I was intoxicated and I was at a party where . . . I just made out with one of my friends on the dance

floor.” She “may have fallen into that trap of, like, kissing a girl to impress a guy.” But “it was more of just my own desire to be with, like, to try that with a woman.” After several sexual experiences with women, she concluded, “So, I guess I would consider myself, like, bisexual at this point.” When Kara was involved in the threesome with the bisexual swinger she described as “perfect,” she thought of herself as bisexual. She later adopted the identity of queer as a means of avoiding labels she found too restrictive. For these women and others like them, the opportunities available in the hookup culture culminated in adopting a queer identity.

Of course, whether a woman who has enjoyed same-sex sexual activity in the hookup scene verifies a new non-heterosexual identity depends also on factors outside the college hookup sexual field: cultural meanings, and reactions to particular identity labels by family, friends, and the woman herself. Some women, as we have seen, adopt new identity terms that express bisexual attractions. Jessica, an Asian American student who came out on her sports team as bisexual, says, “I actually am pansexual.” Another Asian American student, Kim, identifies as fluid “because I constantly switch all the time. . . . And my attractions change.” Abigail, white and queer, identified as straight until she started dating her first girlfriend: “And then, I guess I identified as bi, and then I identified as a lesbian, and now . . . I feel like queer is mostly how I identify but, like, I can fall into, like, lesbian, bi, pan, queer, whatever, depending on who I’m talking to.” Gabriella says, “Sometimes I’m lesbian. And I used to be bisexual. . . . Then after that I guess I was fluid. I still am fluid, kind of. And then it’s lesbian—it was lesbian, and then I was fluid again. And now I’m just queer. . . .it does change all the time. But it’s never heterosexual.” Emma “used to think I was straight, and then I thought I was bi, and then I stopped having crushes on guys, so I thought I was a lesbian, then I got a crush on a guy and I dated him so then I was bi again, and now I just say I’m queer.” Lynn, who is white, explains

that “bisexual” at UC Santa Barbara “basically means that you make out with girls at parties.” Asked if she had thought of herself as bisexual before her first relationship with a woman, she responded, “No, no, no; the closest I ever came to thinking that was, hey, I’d probably make out with a girl if I was drinking.”

As the research on bisexuality has shown, women confront a variety of responses to the label “bisexual,” and such responses are part of the process of identity verification. Gloria, a white student living in the queer residence hall on campus, says, “I’ve pretty much always been bisexual,” but she has gone through phases where she was interested only in girls. “And then just recently I started being into that boy who lives down the hall who’s, like, totally awesome and amazing. So it was weird for me at first, though when I started liking him, I was, like, ‘But I live in the Rainbow House, I’m with all these lesbians, I can’t take a boy. Oh, my god, it’ll look so horrible.’” She also found resistance from girls she dated “because I’d feel like they’d always be, like, ‘Oh, you’re bisexual, ugh. Well, just tell me when you, like, are gonna start wanting dick.’” Likewise, Sandra, who is white, thinks of herself as bisexual, but after her first relationship with a woman felt pressure to claim queerness.

Parents’ responses to different identities also come into play. Sandra says that she could tell her mother that she is a lesbian, but not bisexual. “My mom has said, and she’s, like, awesome. She’s really cool and she’s really progressive in most areas, but she was, like, ‘Bisexuality is just an experiment that college kids do.’” Others have the opposite experience, finding it easier to tell parents that they are bisexual. Taylor, who is biracial (Latina/white), first identified as a lesbian and later came to adopt the identity of queer. But she told her mother she was bisexual “to lessen the blow . . . my mom cried the first time I told her I liked a girl, so I learned that bisexual was easier for her, but I knew that I really didn’t want to have sex with men

and *definitely* not have a relationship with a man again.” Regina, white and also queer, “started off identifying as bisexual because I thought that I liked men and women. But it was also internalized homophobia, as I wanted to give my mom some hope that I would end up with a guy, even though deep down I knew I wouldn’t.”

Some women themselves reject the label “bisexual.” Abidemi, born to an African mother and white American father, said, “I am currently involved with a man, quite seriously actually. But that doesn’t change the fact that I am attracted to women. So, I think I would be defined as ‘bisexual,’ but I hate that term. It just sounds like hypersexuality, kind of like I want to hump anything that walks.” Gloria thinks girls who “do the bisexual thing for boys . . . make a bad name for all of us” so “that’s why I like to use the word ‘queer’ instead.” Lynn, too, hates the connection to the kissing girls phenomenon so avoids the term, although she describes herself as “technically” bisexual.

What all of this makes clear is that there are multiple identities available to women who experience same-sex desire and engage in same-sex sexual behavior in the hookup scene. Their desires and behaviors may or may not instigate a shift in identity. While our data do not allow us to generalize about the consequences of these identity shifts over the life course, Diamond’s (2008) longitudinal research would predict continued change for most women who ever depart from a heterosexual identity. What we do know, according to prior research, is that the interactional context and social pressures—stereotypes of bisexuals (Rust 2000b), lesbian hostility toward bisexuality (Stein 1997), racial and class identity (Moore 2011), academic and popular concepts of sexual fluidity (Rupp and Taylor 2013), and pressures and expectations from parents and peers (Elliott 2012)—as well as subjective understandings of their desires and behaviors influence the identities women students embrace.

## CONCLUSION

The “sexual stories” (Plummer 1995) of college women who kiss and make out with each other at parties or engage in group sex in the context of the hookup scene suggest that there is more going on than meets the male gaze. The increased social acceptability of these practices, despite the potential for what students call “slut-shaming” given the sexual double standard, opens up a profoundly gendered and heteronormative space to women with same-sex desires and attractions. To understand how this erotic field contributes to women’s adoption of new sexual identities, we have drawn on insights from identity theory that suggest that people sometimes happen upon, and also gravitate toward, opportunity structures that offer support or verification for their self-conceptions, even when these identities may be viewed as negative. Like polygynous households and bohemian enclaves in the past, the contemporary hookup scene on college campuses is a heteronormative sexual field that makes room for same-sex sexual behavior between women by providing new and more public opportunities for women to come out that were not available in the era of the closet (Ghaziani XXXX; Seidman 2004).

The research reported here also reveals the diminishing significance of the closet in shaping sexual identity. We find that sexual fluidity is in evidence among women on college campuses, not only in the lack of fit between sexual behavior and identity and the instability of sexual identities, but also in the terms women use to describe themselves, including “pansexual,” “fluid,” “heterosexual but not against something with a woman,” “straight with bisexual tendencies,” and “mostly straight.” That some students are embracing identities that reflect queer theory’s emphasis on transgressing and moving beyond fixed, natural, and mutually exclusive sex and gender categories is not surprising, since our population is college students who are likely to have been exposed to academic and popular writings about sexual fluidity. As

students claim new sexual identities and act in ways that uncouple desire, behavior, and identity from heteronormativity, they are participating in the process of undoing gender.

These conclusions, of course, must be tempered with recognition of the limitations of the analysis, not the least of which is the composition of the interview samples. Although useful for gaining a deep understanding of how these women use the hookup scene to create opportunities for same-sex behavior and/or identity verification and change, the findings cannot be generalized to women who are motivated to engage in same-sex practices to attract male attention and approval. Further research is necessary to understand the ways in which there may be increasing leeway for women who identify as heterosexual to engage in same-sex sexual behavior. Also, because our study is based on samples drawn from two politically progressive college campuses on the West Coast, expanding the scope to other regions of the country may reveal more variation.

It is also critical that we learn more about the opportunity for same-sex intimacies in the sexual fields common among those not going to college. Only then can we determine whether the processes we have described here exist in other heterosexual sexual fields. We suspect that they do. Contrary to the popular image of college campuses as the only place where young women experiment with same-sex sexuality, a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that adult women who have not graduated from high school are more likely than women with college degrees to have had a same-sex sexual experience (Chandra et. al. 2011).

Finally, our analysis contributes to gender theory by demonstrating the utility of combining queer theory and structural identity theory for understanding the social construction of sexual identities that transgress and subvert normative alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality. The insights of queer theory allow us to understand the fluid and shifting identity labels women adopt to manage the lack of fit between their own sexual desires and practices and



the mutually exclusive hierarchical sex and gender categories that are legitimated and enforced through heteronormativity. Identity theory, in turn, has long grappled with the debate over the stability or plasticity of identities. Because of its emphasis on both structure and social interaction in the renegotiation of identities, identity theory is equipped to analyze the social construction of gender and sexual identity categories without essentializing. The concept of “opportunity structures” calls our attention to the ways that social actors seek out and engage in interactions that transgress and challenge gender and sexual codes, allowing us to understand one of the key mechanisms involved in “undoing gender.” Such an approach is consistent with emphasis in the gender literature (Collins 2006, Smith 1989) on bringing individual agency back into theoretical conceptions.

**TABLE 1. Ethnicity of Interviewees**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
White (n=33)	60%
Asian American (n=9)	16%
Bi/Multiracial (n=8)	14%
African American (n=3)	5%
Latina (n=2)	5%
Total women of color (n=22)	40%

**TABLE 2. Sexual Identities of Interviewees**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Bisexual</i>	<i>Queer</i>	<i>Heterosexual /Mostly straight</i>	<i>Lesbian</i>	<i>Fluid/Pan</i>	<i>Gay</i>
White	58%	12%	12%	12%	6%	0
Women of color	45%	23%	9%	9%	9%	5%

**TABLE 3. Sexual Identities of Women Students, Online College and Social Life Survey**

	<i>Heterosexua</i>	<i>Homosexua</i>	<i>Bisexua</i>	<i>Not</i>
	<i>l</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>Sure</i>
Nationa	94%	2%	4%	2%
l				
Stanfor	92%	2%	3%	3%
d				
UCSB	94%	1%	3%	2%

Note: National statistics are from the 21 four-year colleges and universities in the OCSL Survey, which includes Stanford and UC Santa Barbara.

**TABLE 4. Sexual Practices of Women Students, Online College and Social Life Survey**

<i>Sexual Identity</i>	<i>Given Oral Sex to Woman</i>	<i>Received Oral Sex from Woman</i>	<i>Given Oral Sex to Man</i>	<i>Received Oral Sex from Man</i>	<i>Vaginal Intercourse with Man</i>
Heterosexual	2%	2%	71%	71%	69%
Homosexual	59%	59%	43%	46%	42%
Bisexual	47%	48%	81%	81%	78%
Not Sure	15%	18%	72%	71%	60%

Note: Percentages indicate the proportion of women, by stated sexual identity, who report that they have ever done the indicated behavior with a person of the indicated sex. Analysis is of women undergraduates from all schools in the Online College and Social Life Survey.

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### Notes

1. Anderson, Adams, and Rivers (2012) and Ward (2008) analyze heterosexual men's same-sex interactions, but the British students in the former article define kissing as non-sexual and the "str8 dudes" in the latter engage in sexual activities in private in a way that reinforces rather than challenges their identities as heterosexual.
2. <http://www.campusprideindex.org/>, accessed May 5, 2013.
3. Singer-songwriter Jill Sobule's 1995 queerer version of a song by the same name suggests that the practice is not an entirely new phenomenon.
4. "Three-Way (The Golden Rule), The Lonely Island"  
(<http://www.lyricsreg.com/lyrics/the+lonely+island/three-way+the+golden+rule>). Threesomes between two men and a woman in the hookup scene are likely less socially sanctioned than those between two women and a man.

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