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**“Can I watch?” Sometimes women kissing women isn’t about you:  
New research on the hook-up scene and sexual fluidity-forthcoming from *Gender & Society***

January 28, 2014: **Is there more going on in the hookup scene than meets (men’s) eyes?** The college hookup scene is typically understood as a male-dominated environment—where men are mainly in charge of sexual initiation, parties are often centered around fraternity houses, treating women as sex objects is common, and women engage in sexual displays, including kissing each other, in order to arouse male interest.

Yet, in the forthcoming April 2014 issue of *Gender & Society*, a team of researchers observes that for some women the super-straight environment of college hookups is also a setting “to explore and to later verify bisexual, lesbian, or queer sexual identities.” Turns out public kissing and threesomes play an important role—and that not all of that sex play is about performing for men’s pleasure.

In a recent survey of college students about hooking up,

- 40 percent of women who called themselves lesbians had had oral sex or intercourse with men;
- Two percent of women who identify as straight report having had oral sex with a woman;
- Compared to straight women, more women who indicated they were not sure about their sexual identities had same-sex sexual experience: 15 percent have given and 18 percent have received oral sex from a woman.

**A novel study on same-sex hooking up.** The *Gender & Society* study, “[Queer Women in the Hookup Scene: Beyond the Closet?](#)” took a novel approach to investigating bisexuality and sexual fluidity. Researchers Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor (University of California-Santa Barbara), Shiri Regev-Messalem (Bar Ilan University, Israel), Alison Fogarty (Stanford University), and Paula England (New York University) used the Online College and Social Life Survey (OCSLS) of over 24,000 college students from 21 four-year colleges and universities that was designed to study how college students approach hooking up, dating, and relationships. To this large data set, the researchers added 55 in-depth interviews with women students at Stanford University and the University of California, Santa Barbara who had had some romantic or sexual experience with other women, to learn more about same-sex activity occurring in hook-up settings that are mainly understood to be heterosexual.

Study co-author Paula England—who developed the OCSLS study—explained, “‘Hooking up’ was defined in our survey as ‘whatever definition of a hookup you and your friends use,’ but we know from talking to students that what they usually mean by a hookup is some sexual activity—ranging from kissing to intercourse—outside of a committed relationship.”

**Hooking up, women with women, and a puzzle.** The investigators reported that of the 14,128 women surveyed in the OCSLS, 94 percent identify as heterosexual. Though identifying as “straight,” these women’s behavior did not always line up with that—instead, women had more sexual fluidity.

Because of this sexual fluidity that the women surveyed ended up revealing, the investigators conducted in-depth interviews. In particular, the interviews focused on women who identified as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or some other non-heterosexual identity in order to learn more about how encounters in the hookup scene played a role in developing their current sexual identities. They learned that, since women making out with other women and threesomes between two women and a man are acceptable as a turn-on for men, this allowed women to expand and explore their sexual identities.

As study coauthor Verta Taylor points out, “Some students are embracing fluid identities and calling themselves ‘queer,’ ‘pansexual,’ ‘fluid,’ ‘bi-curious’ or simply refusing any kind of label. The old label bisexual no longer fits because even that term implies that there are only two options: lesbian/gay or straight.”

**Women kissing women.** In tune with the Katy Perry song, “I Kissed a Girl”, the interviews revealed that for some women, public kissing—typically seen as for the enjoyment of men onlookers—is a key *opportunity* for exploring same-sex attractions.

Often alcohol played a role in women’s opportunities to explore same-sex attraction, just as it plays a significant role in hooking up in general. While some women who make out with other women in public had a previous same-sex attraction, others told interviewers about experimenting when they had had no previous sexual attraction to women. In sum, the authors note that “Kissing can result from or lead to emotional connections with women. It doesn’t always—but *sometimes* it leads to more exploration.” The interviews confirmed that public same-sex kissing in the hook up scene is one pathway into same-sex desire and behavior.

**Threesomes.** About 20 percent of women interviewed for this study reported participating in threesomes. “Threesomes allow same-sex pleasure without the stigma of non-heterosexual identity,” the authors explained. In some cases, women said that threesomes were a way to reduce their anxiety about approaching women on their own. One woman noted, “It’s not clear how you would initiate a relationship with a woman...I’m really inexperienced chasing women, rather more experienced at chasing men.” In other cases, women explained that threesomes were instigated by male partners, but that it led to women following up—solo—with the other woman in the encounter. The authors explain, “Although threesomes may begin with men’s desires, they introduce women to new sexual pleasures or allow them to act on same-sex or bisexual desires.”

**What's it mean?** Joya Misra, editor of *Gender & Society* and Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at University of Massachusetts, notes that the study is a valuable contribution to the expanding literature on sexuality. "Rupp and colleagues' article shows us that women's sexual fluidity can be expressed in a variety of environments, and that the 'hook-up' culture does not simply support heterosexuality and male dominance. It is important to recognize the way women consider and act upon their desires, rather than assuming that they cannot escape meeting dominant ideals regarding heterosexuality."

Coauthor and historian Leila Rupp explains that this may not be so new: She points to 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. "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," explains Rupp. Whether in these historical settings or in the setting of collegiate hook-up culture, women's same-sex sexuality can flourish in tight conjunction with heterosexuality. What is new in the 21<sup>st</sup> century setting, however, are the ways in which women can go on to have the opportunity to *affirm* new identities.

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**Source:** Rupp, Leila, Verta Taylor, Shiri Regev-Messalem, Alison Fogarty, and Paula England. 2014. "[Queer Women in the Hookup Scene: Beyond the Closet?](#)" forthcoming in April *Gender & Society*.

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[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and women's studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than 10 percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on twitter: [@Gend Soc](#).

For more information, contact *Gender & Society* editor **Joya Misra**, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Misra is also affiliated with Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies and Labor Studies. Her research and teaching focus primarily on inequality. She can be reached at [misra@soc.umass.edu](mailto:misra@soc.umass.edu).

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS), currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. **Joey Sprague**, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at [jsprague@ku.edu](mailto:jsprague@ku.edu).

[The Council on Contemporary Families](#), based at the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of family researchers and practitioners that seeks to further a national understanding of how America's families are changing and what is known about the strengths and weaknesses of different family forms and various family interventions. For more information on CCF researchers, contact **Stephanie Coontz**, Co-Chair and Director of Research and Public Education, [coontzs@msn.com](mailto:coontzs@msn.com).

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**Further information: Studies on college sexuality and hooking up in *Gender & Society***

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[Trading On Heterosexuality: College Women's Gender Strategies and Homophobia](#) by Laura Hamilton in *Gender & Society*, April 2007; vol. 21, 2: pp. 145-172.

[Casual Hookups to Formal Dates: Refining the Boundaries of the Sexual Double Standard](#) by Julie A. Reid, Sinikka Elliott, and Gretchen R. Webber in *Gender & Society*, October 2011; vol. 25, 5: pp. 545-568.

[Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood: Double Binds and Flawed Options](#) by Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth A. Armstrong in *Gender & Society*, October 2009; vol. 23, 5: pp. 589-616.

[Strategic Ambiguity: Protecting Emphasized Femininity and Hegemonic Masculinity in the Hookup Culture](#) by Danielle M. Currier in *Gender & Society*, October 2013; vol. 27, 5: pp. 704-727.

[Grinding On the Dance Floor: Gendered Scripts and Sexualized Dancing at College Parties](#) by Shelly Ronen in *Gender & Society*, June 2010; vol. 24, 3: pp. 355-377.

[Monogamy Lite: Cheating, College, and Women](#) by Amy C. Wilkins and Cristen Dalessandro in *Gender & Society*, October 2013; vol. 27, 5: pp. 728-751.

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