

CHAPTER 1

## SEX AND SOCRATIC EXPERIMENTATION



### Where It's At

Young people have been experimenting with sex for a long time. Since the 1960s, colleges have become a laboratory for sexual experimentation. In addition to a perennial curiosity about sex among the young, social conditions have changed to allow for a wider range of experimentation. In college, students are free of parental supervision, and colleges no longer act *in loco parentis*. With stu-

dents of the same age, with the same urges, and now often living in coed dorms, the conditions are ripe for experimentation not only with sex but with varieties of sexual relationships. Alcohol and drugs are readily available that can lower inhibitions for experimenting. (It is important to note that experimenting with sex and sexual relationships occurs at younger ages from high school even into middle and elementary school.)

Changes in social mores and technology have also affected attitudes about sex. Divorce no longer carries the stigma it once had. In light of the high divorce rate and second marriages, parents of current college students have had more sexual experiences than their parents and are likely to espouse more liberal attitudes: witness the surge in acceptance of gay rights. Sexual explicitness is evident in films, advertising, and contemporary dress. Significantly, the discovery and easy access to the contraceptive pill freed women from fear of pregnancy, so they could more safely

engage in sex. Only the deadly reality of AIDS slowed the free love movement. Pornography is now easily accessible on the Internet that shows varieties of sexual acts that in earlier times were available only in esoteric books and art works, and so are “how to” books more graphic than the *Karma Sutra*.

Not only have attitudes changed about sex itself, there is a subtle change between sex and romantic love. In the “old days,” sex was legitimate only within marriage. It then became acceptable (with grudging parental acceptance) for couples to live together, to have a love-sexual relationship that mimicked marriage except for the absence of state or church sanction. Living together, like marriage, presumed commitment, especially sexual fidelity, for both parties. Now, it seems, there is a further development in the connections between sex, love, and marriage or committed relationships: not only is there widespread acceptance of sex outside marriage, sex has become detached from both love and committed relationships. “Hooking up” and “friends with benefits” are new phenomena in the history of sexual relationships. Sex is no longer doing something special with someone special – it is a matter of “getting off” or “busting a nut,” even if you have to “put a pager bag over his head.”

The Internet has affected changes in sexual practices. If a student wants to check out a potential love or sexual prospect, Facebook will give information about whether the person is hot or not. Facebook has also changed the meaning of “friend.” When many people on Facebook have long lists of friends, sometimes in the hundreds, “friend” no longer means a person one knows intimately and can count on for support. Also, texting has changed the landscape of human expression, closeness, and privacy. If a student can find a hot Facebook person and immediately text a brief message about hooking up, the landscape of relationships has certainly changed. Hooking up differs from wife swapping of an earlier generation, insofar as swapping maintained the marriage commitment and presumed a love commitment even as it allowed for variety in sexual partners. Hooking up is sex, free of love expression and relationship commitment.

In this essay, we will use the practice of hooking up to consider in what sense college students experiment with sex. Since experiments can go wrong, our main focus will be on a different kind of experiment, a Socratic one, as a way to make a significant healing change in one’s troubled sexual life. We will describe the experiment format and give examples of two students’ experiments.



## Let's Experiment

Generally understood, experimentation includes any action motivated by curiosity or the intention to change something old or experience something new: for example, to try being a friend with benefits. A more carefully constructed practice of experimentation occurs in the sciences. It includes such general components as a field of inquiry with a background of theory and history, a scientific community with standards for data, objectivity, and, more specifically, evidentially supported inferences about hypotheses, based on controlled and replicable experiments that result in new knowledge or modification of accepted knowledge. At first glance, a student's experimentation with sex seems quite different from scientific experimentation; however, like scientists, students are motivated by curiosity. They seek new knowledge. They have a community that shares background beliefs about sex and relationships, shares "data" about sexual experiences, and makes inferences based on the results of their sexual encounters. So, a practice like hooking up at the individual level looks like a kind of experimentation, although it differs from Masters and Johnson's experiments that involved hooking up: they hooked up monitors to a female subject's anatomy, like a Plexiglas dildo (named Ulysses), to document a vaginal sexual response.<sup>1</sup> They also hooked up people, in the contemporary sense, for further experimentation that included watching subjects having sex. Their objectified approach to sex in *The Human Sexual Response* is more like college students' practice of hooking up and both are different from another attitude-changing book, *The Joy of Sex*.<sup>2</sup>

College students may not be objective like scientists. If they were subjects for self-experimentation, their self-interest in sexual pleasure would bias results that have general scientific credibility, though they may make discoveries about what pleases them. In contrast, a social scientist might study hooking up as a group phenomenon with conformity pressures. Accordingly, hooking up might also be seen as an individual's initiation rite into an elite group, "bad" college student or "cool" individual or, more simply, being a real student, not a "goody-goody." As a different kind of initiation rite, hooking up allows females to enter into the males' world of power and privilege by acting like horny males eager to get it on with virtually anyone.

When females start to realize the power over men that they hold in their loins – they do not have to "give it up" unless they choose to – a



power struggle often ensues. Nonetheless, a female may still feel pressured or obligated to hook up so that the male does not move on to the next easy lay or so she does not feel guilty for frustrating him for not “getting any.”

It seems many college students do not realize that experimentation can go badly wrong. Among the many examples we know about, this one is not unusual. Denise, a freshman, from a strict home, quickly became a sex performer. After she got wasted every night, she would invite guys to her room to give lap dances and strip tease, only to be confronted, nearly naked, by her hometown boyfriend of five years. After a public fight and failed classes, she returned home under even stricter supervision.

One of the authors (Chen) conducted an experiment, based on a dare, to abstain from sex during her freshman year. A male friend predicted “the guys are going to jump all over you.” So she decided “if a guy is willing to wait a whole semester to have sex then he will prove himself worthy of being laid; the circumstances will wean out the assholes who only want sex (and want it now).” She realized the risk: “I would be missing out on the complete sexual freedom of my first semester at college; someone else may get to the guy I want first since I cannot offer anything sexual.” Although it was a hard bet, she won. Her account is as follows:

It was hard to abstain when there was a lot of alcohol and drug use almost every day of college. I have to admit there were some close calls due to a blurred conscience at times. I feel that I probably upset or frustrated a few guys because they had their hopes up about getting laid. Many guys, who are out to get laid, actually do expect to get laid. Not having sex showed me which guys are true friends and which are only out to get laid. Since promiscuous sex is so easy, there is so much of it, sex is devalued.

As a result of her experiment, Chen learned the following about herself (and transferred colleges):

I do not want sex to be cheap. Sex should have physical and emotional worth. In the past, when I have engaged in meaningless sex, I would be left feeling emotionally unsatisfied. This would leave me feeling cheap, which lowered my sense of self-worth. In relationships or hook-ups where there was consensual feelings or attachments and love, I would feel like I was worth the guy’s time and wait (to have sex). When a person I want to have sexual relations with waits to do it with me (and not other people while he is waiting), I feel special to that person.



## Hooking Up Closer Up

Hooking up is simple, consensual sex with no romantic involvement. It is not prostitution, not only because money is not involved. (Some females do hook up in exchange for “a good time out” or other gifts, especially if the male is wealthy.) Prostitution has unsavory connotations, unlike hooking up. Hooking up does involve the satisfaction of sexual desire, but since either party can initiate the “date” neither can be identified as the prostitute or the John. Neither looks down on the other as being in a lower moral class, at least in theory. Insofar as males hook up, yet want eventually to be in a relationship with a female who does not hook up, there is still a double standard that affects male attitudes about female hook ups, even as they enjoy their sexual freedom and satisfactions. The male who hooks up a lot is envied by other males and given “props.” Females will often think he is a pig or player and secretly desire sex with him. When a female hooks up with several males, other males will think that she is an easy lay, slut, or they might like to “ride the neighborhood bicycle.” Other females will think she is a slut or infested with STDs and secretly be jealous of her. Both males and females enjoy the spectacle of the “walk of shame,” when, before classes start in the morning, females are seen sneaking back to their dorm rooms, disheveled and wearing male clothing.<sup>3</sup>

While hooking up has an appeal of being edgy – “There’s a sort of thrill when it’s someone you don’t know”<sup>4</sup> – in practice it seems more subdued. In theory, hooking up is just for sexual pleasure; emotions, intimacy, spontaneity, and commitment are deliberately marginalized and not expressed. From a survey of 43 female students, one student wrote:

When I was involved in my hook-up relationship, I would never call him up for a sober booty call. It was always when I was drunk and wanted sex. This is also how I knew there was no emotional attachment because I wasn’t even interested in hanging out with the guy unless I had been drinking. He wasn’t really my type. He just wasn’t someone that I wanted to be in a relationship with. We didn’t have a lot in common.<sup>5</sup>

Almost all of the women surveyed said that alcohol was their gasoline for hooking-up sex.<sup>6</sup> As one recounted, “I was drunk. It’s almost like a free pass.” And:



Alcohol has a huge impact on my sexual activities. If I drink enough I have no moral rules with myself anymore. The next day I can wake up and make it okay by just saying, “I was drunk. It’s a sign of liberation.”<sup>7</sup>

Being drunk or pretending to be drunk allows these females to disclaim responsibility or, more radically, to pretend afterwards that sex did not happen. Drugs are used by males to seduce and enhance their experience. Hooking up also has its disappointments, as the following account indicates:

The hook-up guy never, ever, asked me how it was for me. He always quit after he finished, and there was rarely foreplay. You could tell it was strictly sex. My boyfriend always asks how it was for me; he is always worried that he is not doing it good enough.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of disappointments, hooking up is assumed to be a valuable phase in which females and males can experiment and enjoy sexual experiences as a prelude or interruption in more typical romantic relationships. However, for some people, sex, like any human activity, has unforeseen harmful consequences.

## Problems and Socratic Experimentation

One of the authors (Hole) teaches a course titled “The Philosophy of Love and Sex.” As part of the course, students conduct an experiment to engage in a meaningful change, definitely one of their own choosing.<sup>9</sup> The first format item for the Socratic experiment is to “briefly describe a change you are willing to make and evaluate what you are currently doing about it.” Below are two sample experiments and their results.

### EXAMPLE I

I have realized an unhealthy and self-destructive pattern in my love life that is directly related to alcohol. I seem to attract or get myself into one unstable and unhealthy relationship after another. In each relationship I find myself trying desperately to do whatever it takes to make the other person happy. I avoid the fear of being alone by trying to escape it by drinking or becoming involved with people



that I know will only bring stress and sadness into my life. My last attempt at a relationship failed because of this reason, and I cannot keep making the same mistake.

I would like to stop this cycle and be happier with other things in my life like school, my friends, and my future plans. I would like to be a wiser lover to myself by slowing down and only allowing healthy things and people into my life and my body.

## Results

I was honest with myself and I asked, “Am I really accomplishing everything I want in my life?” My answer was no. Drinking was one factor that was getting in the way of being healthy. When I started the experiment I had to find an alternative to drinking when going out and socializing. I could no longer escape myself in that way, instead I did the opposite. Not drinking forced me to really take a look at myself and really see the people who surround me. I saw good people who were just as lost and confused as me. I never noticed how thoughtless I was until I took a step inside. I did not feel alienated from my wider circle of friends like I thought I would. I actually had conversations with my close friends that connected us on a deeper level. I replaced desperate attempts to finding a romantic relationship with stronger friendships.

I was honest with myself and redefined some of my core values. It is important for me to have stability in my life and routine; drinking was getting in the way of that. It weakened my morals and gave me excuses in romantic relationships. I feel that eliminating alcohol will keep me on a more stable romantic relationship path by giving me time to think and do things that are healthy. Even after two weeks of not drinking I have felt more emotionally stable and confident in myself.

## EXAMPLE 2

One change came to mind when I first received this assignment, and it deals with my inability to trust people. I have an extreme difficulty opening up and sharing myself with another person. For the last few years my life has been following Murphy’s Law, and when I was given the assignment, it had not even hit the peak of things “that could go wrong.” I decided to change the relationships I have with men, because I feel that it has the greatest impact on my emotional wellbeing, which



is rocky at best. I do not allow myself to become close to men in the emotional aspect, but have no problems being physically close to them. This creates relationships purely based on sex with a highly “no strings attached” policy. For the past few years, since a devastating break up with an abusive ex, I have not been able to trust a man past the point of getting my pants off. I am willing and able to change that part of me, because I feel that I hurt men with revenge in mind, punishing them for actions of my ex-boyfriend. At the time the assignment was given, I was seeing two men at the same time, neither of which I am extremely attached to.

## Results

I have seen Mr. M every day since Halloween and about three times before that. He is now my boyfriend, and the experiment worked pretty well. On our first “date” we went out for Chinese food, and he began to ask me questions about my previous lovers. Normally when people ask me these kinds of questions, I either do not answer or I lie, because I’ve cheated on pretty much every boyfriend I have ever had. I told him the truth, explained a few of the situations and he seemed to understand. He loves me already I think, and I am positive it is because I started caring. I also slept with him (like fell asleep with him) which I never do, ever. When I am asleep, I will answer any question and tell anyone anything they need to know because I am a talker to the extreme. There is no way not to avoid my sleep talking, and I get nervous that people are going to ask me things while I sleep that I do not want to answer. (Paranoid, I know.) I have spoken to both of my other lovers since I started the relationship, and actually slipped up once. In the very beginning I started to get discouraged because I am a very negative person. I had sex with one of my usual men and felt terrible afterward. For the first time, I felt guilty for sleeping with someone else who I was not even dating at the time. I barely knew this person before I decided to experiment on him and from just the beginning, to let him into my life, I started to gain a deeper love relation than I had ever had.

These examples are far more serious than the usual ones, though many touch on troublesome aspects of a love relation, though not necessarily romantic love, since we consider many kinds of love. Many focus on a frozen relation with a parent or on self-love.





How did these two students make such significant life transitions? In the experiment format, after identifying their desired change, students plan their experiment by responding to the following items:

- State specifically what you will do, with whom, when, where and for how long.
- State what obstacles or excuses you anticipate in carrying out your experiment.
- Estimate how committed you will be in completing your experiment.
- Identify what risks are involved, both in doing your experiment and not doing it.
- Predict the results of your experiment, both positive and negative. Indicate what difference it will make if you are successful in your experiment.

The purpose of these questions is to focus on specific actions that are possible to engage, with respect to which a student can identify specific barriers that stand in the way of a clear sense of success. Typically, students see big barriers and give a low estimate of achieving success. In spite of their pessimism, they are often surprised at the high degree of success they achieve. They are successful because they move from entertaining a change hypothetically with negatives that inhibit action. As they identify the risks of not making their experimental change, they are better able to overcome the risks of doing it.

There are two more items to complete in the planning stage. They are to “identify one ‘big’ or essential, universal or philosophical question present in your experiment.” While they initially find this instruction vague, they are able to identify questions like “Am I really free?” “What is romantic love?” and “Can you love more than one person at a time?” The “big” questions from the two student examples are as follows: “What makes a relationship or lifestyle unhealthy?” and “What is trust?” The other item to address is:

- Describe how your experiment is related to love or being a better, wiser lover.

In answering this question, students establish a reference point for assessing their experiment. Consequently, they think about their ideals in relation to not only the details of their planned experiment, but more generally about the meaning of love from a, perhaps, new perspective of “better and wiser.” Once they complete their experiment they can tackle the following:



- Based on your experiment, describe what you have learned or concluded about your “big” question and being a better, wiser lover.

In principle, the experiments are Socratic. Students engage in a dialogue with themselves to clarify a concept at issue for them. (In the course, they are given critical thinking skills that help them to clarify meanings, test how they know what they believe is true, and reflect on their values.) They are also engaged in actions that give them results about their commitments, their assessment of obstacles and risks, and any differences between predicted and actual results. Consequently, students clarify what is involved in making a life change and explore the meaning of a concept embedded in their thoughts about the change. They often discover mistaken assumptions, like “I have nothing to talk about with my parents.”

## A Daring Ideal

Early in the course, students are asked to make a commitment that is part Zen mindfulness and part Socratic. Throughout the course, they are encouraged to adopt the ideal of being a wise lover. The ideal is both alluring and confusing. After class discussions, many students embrace the ideal and attempt to clarify its meaning in various contexts. The ideal certainly gives them pause when making choices: when they consider being a wise lover they shift from impulsive or habitual action to a more reflective perspective. In effect, they become more philosophical as they engage their “real” life. They often recognize what is obvious to an outsider: alcohol, another substance, or peer pressure has affected their capacity to make wise choices for themselves. Students typically make a distinction between academic and “real” life. Their sexual practices are often disguised or withheld in their academic discussions and not touched on significantly in course lectures. Philosophy courses can provoke heated discussion, but it seems there is only a weak connection between academic ideas about sexual practices and students’ actual sexual practices. In the standard Philosophy 101 lecture-discussion survey course of “perennial” philosophy ideas, it is easy for students to keep separate (and unexamined) their “real” life ideas and practices.

In summary, we are offering our experimental model to connect critical thinking and troublesome aspects of their lives about which they are



willing to risk making a change. They identify obstacles and excuses, like fixed ideas about a situation and about themselves, and their fears, and low expectations for meaningful improvements. Good experiments involve the virtues of honesty, courage, and foresight, which strongly contrast with the alcohol, conformist motivation, and disregard of consequences so characteristic of the college student's experimentation with sex (and other temptations like drugs). In our experience, the experiment works for many students. The two examples we have used are evidence that students can make profound changes in their lives.

We have focused on using this experiment to make changes in actual problematic areas in a student's life. It is also possible to use the experiment as a thought experiment to reflect on potentially troublesome choices facing them. By modifying the experiment format, students could imagine hooking up in detail, to consider obstacles and excuses for doing it, as well as predicted results or consequences if they did. Thinking about their "big question" and being a "better, wiser lover" in this format can be instructive for self-knowledge. In regard to experimenting in general, a big question is the value of Socratic experimenting itself. We have not presented an argument to show that philosophical thinking and deliberate experimenting is better than impulsive or compulsive experimenting. Any reasons bearing on the issue would have to appeal to examples. That is, an ideal experiment would involve trying and comparing both kinds of experimenting. So, in order to appreciate its value, we recommend experimenting with the Socratic experiment.

## NOTES

- 1 William Masters and Virginia Johnson, *The Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little Brown, 1972).
- 2 Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* (New York: Crown Press, 1972).
- 3 For a discussion of the walk of shame, see chapter 4, this volume.
- 4 Paul Joannides, *Guide to Getting It On* (Oregon: Goose Foot Press, 2009), p. 763.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 763.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 763–76.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 763.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 For an earlier version of the experiment see George T. Hole, "An Experiment To Make Your Life More Meaningful," *Teaching Philosophy* 14, 3 (1991): 223–39.

