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Chapter 22

Straight Girls Kissing: Heteroflexibility in the College Party Scene by

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Abstract: Why do presumably straight women kiss other women in the college party scene? The dominant notion is that it is solely a way to attract male attention. Although most girl-on-girl making out in this context is no doubt a performance for the male gaze, this chapter focuses on erotic interactions women engage in for their own purposes. Using the case of one progressive public research university, we argue that male-dominated heteronormative hookup culture can make room for at least some women's experimentation, bicuriosity, or heteroflexibility. Interviews with diverse women students make clear that heterosexual women's options for same-sex physical intimacy are expanding, although still with limits.

From Katy Perry's 2008 hit "I Kissed a Girl" to Rita Ora's controversial 2018 song "Girls," the phenomenon of presumably straight girls kissing and making out with other girls has staying power in contemporary popular culture. The dominant notion is that men, especially in the alcohol-fueled college party scene, egg women on for their

own enjoyment, and women indulge them solely as a way to attract male attention. But increasingly we have come to recognize that there is more going on than meets the male gaze: that what the boys are watching might be experimentation, bi-curiosity, heteroflexibility, or some other aspect of sexual fluidity. And might have little to do with the watchers.

We focus here on erotic interactions women engage in for their own purposes in the straight college party scene. Using the case of one progressive public research university, the University of California, Santa Barbara, we argue that heteronormative hookup culture can make room for at least some women's non-heterosexual experiences. Heterosexual men's erotic interest in girl-on-girl action—primarily between conventionally attractive feminine women—and the social acceptability of women's sexual fluidity create the conditions for women to engage in same-sex sexual interactions without necessarily challenging their heterosexual credentials.

Women's sexual fluidity, the hookup scene, and sexual markets

We know that sexual desire, behavior, and identity do not neatly match in contemporary U.S. society, especially for women. Among women and men who identify as heterosexual, 13.6 percent of women and 4.6 percent of men report attraction to members of the same sex, and 12.6 percent of women and 2.8 percent of men have had some sexual contact with a same-sex partner (Hoy and London 2018). Even more striking, of all the same-sex desire and behavior reported in national surveys, the majority is accounted for by those who identify as heterosexual, and especially women: 61.9 percent of same-sex attraction and 65.2 percent of same-sex sexual behavior. For men, the comparable figures are 52 percent and 43.4 percent (Hoy and London 2018). This

intriguing way of looking at heterosexual identity and same-sex desire and behavior supports the notion, advanced by scholars over the years, of women's greater sexual fluidity (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Budnick 2016; Diamond 2008; England, Mishel and Caudillo 2016; Golden 2006; Moore 2011; Ott et al. 2011; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Rust 2000a; Rust 2000b; Tabatabai 2015).

The hookup scene on college campuses is a profoundly gendered and heteronormative sexual field (Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012; Armstrong, Hamilton and England 2010; Currier 2013; England, Shafer and Fogarty 2007; Hamilton 2007; Pham 2017; Reid, Elliott and Webber 2011). Yet the party 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 (Rupp and Taylor 2010; Rupp et al. 2014). In this context, race and class dynamics determine where, and which, women may engage in sexual acts with other women, particularly on selective elite college campuses (Budnick 2016). As previous research shows, women arriving on these campuses with the right forms of cultural, social, and economic capital are more apt to gravitate towards campus "party pathways" occupied by class-privileged others who emphasize partying as part and parcel of a standard college experience (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; McCabe 2016; Stuber 2011). The campus party scene's location in particular campus spaces and its association with student populations marked by greater financial and social capital (e.g., Greeks, athletes), combined with the tendency for these environments to be controlled by white men (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006), regulates who is likely to access these spaces. Finally, the campus party scene's emphasis on drug and

alcohol consumption and casual sex informs women's behaviors when participating in the party scene, including their sexual interactions with other women.

The ubiquity of the party culture belies the racial, gendered, classed, and heteronormative dynamics inherent in its construction. Yet, visible or not, those dynamics affect who may transgress these dynamics through engaging in same-sex sexual behavior. Campus party scenes can be theorized as distinctive "sexual markets," or spatially and culturally distinctive environments facilitating the process of sexual partnership between similarly positioned others (Laumann et al. 2004; Pham 2018). As we argue, women's strategic use of the party market on college campuses is an expression of women's sexual fluidity and is facilitated by the norms of the male-dominated heteronormative hookup scene.

The study

The University of California, Santa Barbara, with an undergraduate population of just over twenty-one thousand students, sits atop a picturesque coastal mesa on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, about 90 miles north of Los Angeles. Currently 62 percent of undergraduates are students of color, mostly Latinx (it has been designated a Hispanic Serving Institution) and Asian American, and 42 percent are first-generation college students. This has changed rather dramatically in the last decades as the university worked hard to recruit and retain students of color and students from low-income families. The campus ranks high as both a party school and as queer-friendly, with a rowdy party scene in the adjacent predominantly student community of Isla Vista and a large, visible, and diverse queer community on campus. Although sexual markets are shaped by the histories and institutional environments of universities (Pham 2018), so

that UC Santa Barbara is by no means representative of all U.S. campuses, there is also no reason to think that it is unique. Pham's research points to the similarities as well as differences between UC Santa Barbara and the University of Pennsylvania, both progressive research universities with party school reputations and strong queer communities.

Two different empirical studies of same-sex sexuality at the University of California, Santa Barbara, provide the evidence presented here. Rupp and Taylor, with coauthors, are studying the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, and other women with non-heterosexual identities on campus (Rupp forthcoming; Rupp, Taylor and Miller 2016; Miller, Taylor and Rupp 2016; Rupp et al. 2014; Rupp and Taylor 2010). Pham's project (2018) traces the development and experience of three different sexual markets—the party market, student of color market, and queer student market—at UC Santa Barbara and the University of Pennsylvania. We draw from 126 interviews from the Rupp/Taylor study conducted between 2006 and 2012, some by students in classes and the rest by undergraduate and graduate research assistants, and 27 UC Santa Barbara students interviewed by Pham in 2016-2017 for her dissertation.

For the Rupp/Taylor study, students in the courses located their own interviewees, and research assistants mobilized their personal contacts and snowball sampling to find students willing to be interviewed. In terms of race and ethnicity, the students interviewed are close to the current campus profile: 55 percent are students of color and 45 percent white. Sexual identities include bisexual, lesbian, queer, fluid, pansexual, gay, uncertain, and none. In addition to the 120 interviews for the main project, we make use

of six interviews for a student project in one of Rupp's classes with heterosexual students specifically focused on kissing in the party scene.

Pham recruited participants through in-person advertising in undergraduate sociology courses, flyers in public campus spaces, print ads in student newspapers, and social media posts on Facebook. She deliberately oversampled for students of color, who represent 74 percent of her UC Santa Barbara sample, and for queer students, who make up 40 percent, with identities including bisexual, queer, pansexual, questioning, bicurious, and heteroflexible. All of the names used here are pseudonyms. Although both sets of interviews covered a wide range of topics, we concentrate here on women's strategic use of the heterosexual party scene for the purposes of same-sex intimacies.

The party sexual market

What is most distinctive about UC Santa Barbara is the adjacent community of Isla Vista, a densely populated area where students live on the ocean's edge in crowded and overpriced housing. Isla Vista's party scene consists of fraternity parties (although Greek membership is relatively small, just twelve percent of the student population), large open house parties, and what the students call "kickbacks," or smaller gatherings with friends. Alcohol flows freely, drugs are available, women sport skimpy clothing, and students engage in a lot of hooking up. Zoe, a pansexual Chinese student, juxtaposed the large open house party, where "you know maybe two people," to kickbacks, "more of a group of friends . . . pretty much everybody there knows each other." The environment of these gatherings is more muted than the raucous, dance-filled "raves" found at fraternity or large house parties. "If I were to break down parties I would say there are "DP" parties

[located on Del Playa Drive, which borders the Pacific Ocean], which is just loud techno music and people in a backyard dancing and whatever,” Ellen, a bisexual Asian American student explained. “And then there are house parties, which are more chill, a kickback kind of thing. People are playing beer pong or chilling on the couch or smoking.”

While women of all races describe immersion in Isla Vista’s party market, women of color were more apt to describe these party environments in racialized terms, to include reflecting on standards for entry that tended to privilege hegemonically feminine white women. This was particularly prevalent within the fraternity circuit. “I have noticed... the frats tend to favor, of course, the white girls more,” shared Marie, a Latina senior who described herself as an avid partier. Jenn, an Asian American senior, also noted that girls who are “extremely hot” tend to be given priority getting into fraternity parties. The large “open” house party presents prime opportunities for fraternity members or athletes to fill their houses with desirable women, with the hosts of these parties determining who can gain entry.

At Isla Vista parties, the practice of presumably heterosexual women kissing and making out with other women is widespread. As Maria, a white bisexual student, reported, “It’s just normal for most people now, friends make out with each other.” The student newspaper sex columnist in October 2008 began her column, “I kissed a girl and liked it,” recommending “if you’re a girl who hasn’t quite warmed up to a little experimentation with one of your own, then I suggest you grab a gal and get to it.” She posed the “burning question on every male spectator’s mind . . . Is it real or is it for show?” (Perez 2008). Most of the time it is for show, but as it turns out, some students

also take advantage of the scene to experiment with same-sex activity and to act on acknowledged desire, sometimes with women who consider themselves heterosexual.

Performing for the male gaze

We do not doubt that most of the kissing and making out in the party scene is a performance for men, as queer students well know. And, of course the boys are interested only in what they consider attractive and feminine women they can imagine having themselves, a dynamic which, in a predominantly white party scene, may afford class-privileged, white women greater license to engage in same-sex kissing than women of color and/or those who present as less hegemonically feminine. Stacy, a white heterosexual student who admits to giving her friend what she calls “love pecks” and engaging in some “booby grabbing” says “I think it’s mainly for attention definitely. It’s usually girls that are super drunk that are trying to get attention from guys or are just really just having fun like when my roommate and I did it at our date party... It is alcohol and for show. Not experimentation at all.” Shana, a white heterosexual woman who was clear about her dislike for the party market, recalled the one party she attended as a student. “People flipped their shit when two girls started making out. So I saw that and thought ‘okay, you are just doing that for attention, I am out of here.’” A straight Asian American student, Rachel, says “the majority of girls that hookup at parties are actually heterosexual, or identify as such... it’s the attention that they get.” Heterosexual women describe pressure from men to engage in sexual acts with each other. “It just seems like it’s kind of something that is stereotypical,” shared Roxy, a white bisexual. “Oh, you want to be cool, you want the guys to look at you make out with a girl.”

Queer women students have different opinions about the “straight girls kissing” scene: some are annoyed, thinking it trivializes their desires, and some are convinced women are really experimenting or acting on real but unacknowledged desires. And some, if they can pass muster, are willing to take advantage if drunk straight women come on to them or otherwise signal availability. So, for at least some participants, there are more reasons than wanting guys to look at you for women making out with other women at campus parties.

Experimenting with desire

Sometimes performing for the boys turns into something else. Elena, a white student who identifies as straight, says “I have kissed girls on multiple occasions.” One night she and a friend were “hammered, walking down the street, and we’re getting really friendly and just started making out and taking pictures,” which they then posted on Facebook. “And then the last time, this is a little bit more personal, but was when I actually had a threesome. Which was at a party and obviously didn’t happen during the party.” She mentions “bisexual tendencies” as an explanation, in addition to getting attention: “I would actually call it maybe more like experimentation.” Another white student, Kira, who calls herself straight “with some bi-curious tendencies,” says girls do it for attention, but also, “It’s a good time for them, something they may not have the courage to express themselves otherwise, if they’re in a room alone, it makes them more comfortable with it because other people are receiving pleasure from them.” She told us about being drunk at a theme party (“Alice in Fuckland”), where she and her friend ‘Maria’ “just started going at it in the kitchen. And this dude, he whispers in my ear,

‘Everyone’s watching. People can see you.’ But me and ‘Maria’ just like to kiss. I don’t think it was like really a spectacle thing, like we weren’t teasing anybody. We just like to make out. So we might be an exception to the rule,” she giggled.

In another interview, a white bisexual student, Jenny, described a friend as liking “boys and girls when she’s drunk... But when she’s sober she’s starting to like girls.” And another white student, Lynne, who called herself “technically” bisexual, explained that she hates that term because in Isla Vista “it basically means that you make out with girls at parties.” Before her first relationship with a woman, she never thought about bisexuality: “The closest I ever came to thinking that was, hey, I’d probably make out with a girl if I was drinking.” “I feel like being drunk, people use that as an excuse to lower their inhibitions and be like ‘oh my God, I’m so drunk, kiss me!’” explained Ellen, an Asian bisexual and a former sorority member. “Because it is actually what they want, but then they kind of use that [excuse] and you kind of laugh about that and giggle.”

These stories make clear that experimentation in the heterosexual context of the hookup culture and college party scene provides a safe space for some women, especially white women, to explore non-heterosexual possibilities.

Using and being used in the party scene

Given that there are women willing to make out solely for male attention and others experimenting with potential desire, the party scene, with alcohol flowing freely, has some possibilities for queer women, although primarily for those who can pass as straight girls kissing. Viola, a bisexual and biracial (Native American/white) student, at first identified as “one of those girls” who makes out at parties. “I may have fallen into that trap of like kissing a girl to impress a guy, but I can’t really recollect doing that on

purpose. It was more of just my own desire to be with, like to try that with a woman.” Jasmine, a queer Korean American student, kissed her best friend at a party and thought “it was pretty cool.” She explains that it wasn’t for male attention: “I wanted to kiss her so I did.” An Asian American bisexual student, Madison, says she has made out with lots of straight women at parties. Lea, a white pansexual student, had a boyfriend who thought she might be bisexual or a lesbian and encouraged her to experiment sexually, so her first year in college she made out with girls, including her boyfriend’s younger brother’s ex-girlfriend. In these cases, students acted on their desires in the public party scene.

Sometimes straight women initiate the encounters. Roxy, a white bisexual student, in her first years on campus hooked up with women she met at fraternity and house parties. “I’ve definitely made out with a lot of girls at frat parties who seem they might just be doing it because we’re at a frat party. And I kind of feel like I’m almost taking advantage of people because they probably wouldn’t be doing it normally.” Sometimes she would get their numbers and text them, but they weren’t interested in anything more. Lea says she has some friends who are “I guess pretty slutty or whatever and they’re fine with just being the experimental hookup.” For at least some queer students looking for hookups, the straight women at parties can be fair game

Although men might have little interest in watching masculine or genderqueer students kissing other women, some straight women come on to students who don’t fit the mold of straight-looking and feminine. Kacy, a masculine black gay student, says she gets hit on by women a lot at straight parties. Dro, a black genderqueer pansexual student, tells of a straight woman coming on to her at a bar and enjoying the encounter. And

Danny, a bisexual Asian American and genderqueer student, says straight friends sometimes want to make out with her when they're drunk. In such cases male attention would seem to have little to do with the encounters on either side.

But if there are opportunities to be found in the party market, queer women can also feel used by the whole scene, choosing not to kiss other women at parties to avoid drawing unwanted attention, particularly from heterosexual men. "I have friends who are bi or gay," shared Samantha, a white heterosexual senior. "They don't necessarily kiss people in public because they are either not fully out, or they are not comfortable with the fact that lesbians are used as something to ogle at here." These varied positions on kissing women at college parties juxtapose strategically "using" or taking advantage of straight women in drunken situations – a view voiced by Roxy above – with those women who do not want to "be used" as a form of entertainment for heterosexual men. For students like Roxy, not involved in the queer community, the party market works for hookups but not for anything more. Zoe prefers to seek women through online apps, given that "if I was going to a party to hit up a girl or something, it might be a little harder. At least to find somebody who wasn't trying to just experiment."

Other students agonize over whether a friend who tries to kiss them while drunk really means it. Alyssa, a Russian-born lesbian who worried about her high school friends thinking she was sexually attracted to them, went to a party at one of the co-op houses on campus known for being queer-friendly during the spring of her first year. She didn't drink but the friend she went with got really drunk and wanted to kiss her. "And I, like, freaked out and kinda stood there looking like I was having an anxiety attack because I like wanted to and I didn't know what was happening." Isabel, a queer Latina, describes

her relationship with a good friend in college becoming “more than friendly.” When they partied, “she would always push me to kiss her and I never agreed. I was scared to. One day she got me drunk enough to agree and I did.” In this case, things worked out when they realized that they weren’t drunk and were still making out and ended up together. But the uncertainty about what is going on when presumably straight women want to kiss and make out with women with acknowledged same-sex desires can make the party scene a fraught space.

Sometimes women both use and are used by the party scene when they engineer threesomes with a man and another woman when interested only in the woman. Kissing another woman often provokes offers of a threesome. Melissa, a white student who identifies as fluid, says 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.’” When Carey, also white and fluid, found herself attracted to a friend, she hesitated to come on directly so “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.” Kara, an Asian American student already identifying as bisexual, had a crush on a coworker, a swinger romantically involved with a man, so sought out sex with both of them. “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,” she explains. Threesomes, whether prompted by men’s or women’s desire, can serve as an opportunity for women to experiment with or act on desire, but women can also end up in what may be at least a partly unwanted sexual encounter.

The difficulties some queer women experience meeting other queer women makes the party market a possible place to find partners, although there the difficulties are magnified since it is not always possible to tell if a woman is really interested in a sexual encounter. Alcohol and the interest of men in girl-on-girl action confuse the picture. As a result, queer women both use and feel used in the party market. But their participation shows that the dynamics are more complicated than drunken women making out for the pleasure of men.

Heteroflexibility

What does all of this tell us about heterosexualities? We know that sexual desire, sexual behavior, and sexual identity are not totally aligned for either women or men, and that women in particular exhibit a great deal of sexual fluidity. Certainly, the women who identify as heterosexual but are into kissing and making out with other women reveal the role of sexual fluidity in the hookup scene. Says Tessa, a Greek American straight-identified student, “It’s not like they’re way different from anyone else. They’re just making out.” About her own experience, she says, “It’s just like it’s okay because we’re both drunk and we’re friends. It’s not like we identify as lesbian in any way.”

As Tessa suggests, making out with another woman can have no impact on one’s identity as heterosexual. Kira says, “And yeah, I imagine a lot of the girls that you know just casually make out with their girlfriends would consider themselves straight. I consider myself straight.” Stacy would agree: “I would still think they’re straight girls. Unless I saw some, like level of like emotional and like attraction there.” That’s where the line begins to blur. Viola thinks “they’re definitely bi-curious at the least... I think that a woman who actually does it for ‘enjoyment and like knows that she likes that and

that she desires it again, I would say would be more leaning towards bisexual.” Lynne describes kissing her girlfriend at a party “and some guy came up and poured beer on us and said something like ‘stop kissing her you bitch,’” suggesting that any sign that women are kissing for their own pleasure puts them over the line.

So, although girls who kiss girls are not “different from anyone else,” if they have an emotional reaction or *really* enjoy it or want to do it again, then they’ve apparently crossed the line of heterosexuality. Straight college students today can make out with women or engage in threesomes and call themselves “bi-curious” without challenge to their heterosexual identity, but the same kind of flexibility does not extend to lesbians. Kira explains that she doesn’t think “the lesbian community would accept me right off because I like guys too much, you know.” And she doesn’t think she has “enough sexual experience with the women to be considered bisexual.” Molly, a white lesbian, says her first girlfriend, who was straight when they met, says “she’s bi but I’m really sure she’s a lesbian, cuz she does not hook up with guys.” A white bisexual, Michelle, is adamant that you cannot be a lesbian and sleep with men. Queer white Rachel, because she still finds men attractive, finds it “hard for me to call myself a lesbian.” Hannah, an Asian American lesbian, identifies that way “because I am only attracted to females and I honestly know this because I am not physically, sexually, or emotionally attracted to guys.” Students seem clear that lesbians are attracted only to women, even if they have had heterosexual experience prior to coming to call themselves lesbian. Identities such as queer, pansexual, and fluid, as well as, of course, bisexual, are less rigid, which may be why they are increasingly embraced by students at UC Santa Barbara.

Straight women, then, can be “heteroflexible” or “barsexual” or “bi-curious” or “mostly straight,” but too much physical attraction or emotional investment crosses over the line of heterosexuality. What this suggests is that heterosexual women’s options for physical intimacy are expanding, although still with limits. The experiences of women on campus help to make sense of the national data on the sexual desires and behavior of women who identify as straight. Straight girls kissing may be a turn on for men, but they are also a sign of the times.

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