## Hookups

*Youth sexuality and social change*

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# SEDUCTION COMMUNITIES: YOUNG MEN'S RESPONSE TO HOOKUP CULTURE

In hookup culture, relative to traditional dating, restrictions for women to engage in casual sex have diminished, although research shows that a tenacious sexual double standard exists (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009; Allison and Risman, 2013). Within hookup culture, the new norm is that men and women alike engage in sex outside of a relationship context. On the surface, such a sexual culture corresponds with a prevailing male fantasy of an abundance of sexually available young women. However, research indicates that only a small fraction of young men hookup (England et al., 2008; see also chapter three). In contrast to the prevalent myth that casual sex with young attractive women is available to all (Kimmel, 2008:172), most young men find that their own sexual experiences fall dramatically short of this cultural fantasy. The sexual opportunities within hookup culture are not equal but depend on sojourners' relative erotic status.

Studies on heterosexual young men show that sexual relations with women are quintessential to performing a 'competent' masculine identity (Kimmel, 2008: 205-208; Sweeney, 2014). This construction of manhood gives rise to new challenges for young adult men. Within the context of hookup culture, young men can no longer hide behind the adage that women are sexually unavailable, and thus, they need to have sex with women in order to prove their masculinity. Young heterosexual men have reacted in diverse ways to these new challenges of hookup culture. Within the college arena, for instance, young men join fraternities, which enforce men's interests by controlling the social scene on campus and impose a 'definition of the situation' (Goffman, 1990[1959]:21) of college parties that foregrounds casual sexual coupling in a state of severe intoxication (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013:88; Harris and Schmalz, 2016; Wade, 2017:2012). Other men retreat from this dominant masculinity and form alternative constructions of manhood, for instance evangelical Christians and Goths (Wilkins, 2009). Others try to individually heighten their erotic status in the sexual marketplace through physical workouts and self-help.

The 'seduction community' is precisely such an arena in which men aim to heighten their positions in the erotic game through the meticulous practice and study of heterosexual competences. 'Seduction communities' are both horizontally structured, as a network of men that assist one another in the 'game', and vertically structured, as an industry in which (semi-)professional 'pickup' coaches teach their clientele about sex and relationships with women. These communities are found around the world and were brought to mainstream attention by Neil Strauss' bestselling *The Game* (2005). In this novel, which is framed as an autobiography, Strauss reports on his fantastic transformation from a man with limited sexual options to a renowned *pickup artist*.

My research interest in 'seduction communities' concerns whether participants learn the heterosexual competences necessary for successfully navigating the challenges of young manhood within hookup culture. The answer to the question will be split in parts. Within this chapter, I explore what sort of sexual relations 'game' practitioners seek. Do they actually want to hookup? Or, do they prefer different intimate arrangements? In the following chapter, my focus will be on the tactics and techniques that 'game' practitioners learn and enact. A discussion of these practices will give insight into the commonly enacted sexual script of 'game' practitioners within urban erotic contact zones.

A number of social scientists have recently studied the peculiar male subculture of the 'game'. Almog and Kaplan (2015) argue that the 'worldview' of 'seduction communities' resonates with the logic of (video-)games. 'Courtship is construed as a 'standardized, rule-governed social skill' (2015:1). This conceptualization of heterosexual flirtation and sexual escalation appeals to 'geeky' men, and this worldview dehumanizes all participants and 'suspends moral considerations' (Almog and Kaplan, 2015:1). Others argue that 'seduction communities', concomitant to much other self-help, combine hedonistic aspirations with an 'inner-worldly asceticism', and that as participants get more immersed in the 'game', the goals of self-improvement win over the immediate aspirations of sex with women (Hendriks, 2012). I argue that the immediate goals of forging sexual relations with women indeed are suspended when neophytes become 'game' practitioners, but their arising aspirations are about the acquisition of heterosexual competences. Moreover, the 'game' is a competitive field in which status, honor and money can be won through an ostentatious display of 'pickup' skills, which can be done through an enactment of the hookup script. This professionalization of heterosexuality results in a reconfiguration of the relation between manhood and sex.

## CASE AND METHODS

The first internet news group on 'pickup' in the Bay Area allegedly emerged in the early nineties, as was the case in many other American metropolitan areas. This platform was started by a group of men who had met on a seminar hosted in the South Bay by a self-proclaimed 'pickup' coach called Ross Jeffries. They used this Yahoo group to stay in contact with each other and discuss the heterosexual competences that they had learned at the event, as well as their experiences enacting these within the 'field'. Years later, one of my informants, Terry, took over the administration and changed the newsgroup into a forum called the 'San Francisco Seduction Community' –this is a pseudonym- and recruited a group of volunteers to run it. This group hosted a monthly outing in the urban erotic contact zone of San Francisco on which men practiced the 'game' together as well as seminars at which professional players from all over the US –and later from all over the world– lectured an attentive audience on heterosexual skills. Additionally, practitioners met regularly to discuss 'challenges' within the 'game', which was often followed up by an 'in the field' practice session. When I started researching this community in 2008, it comprised over 6000 participants, of which approximately three-hundred were active users. In the subsequent years, much of this original infrastructure disappeared, but other online communities directed at 'game' practitioners in the Bay Area emerged. Some of these were aligned with commercial 'pickup' instructors and included forums on which practitioners discussed the 'game' and met fellow players. Others comprised non-commercial groups on Facebook, Meetup and WhatsApp and were run by volunteers and directed at men that wanted to learn the 'game'.

The communities of 'game' practitioners in the Bay Area were hierarchically structured on the basis of heterosexual skills –like in other 'seduction communities'- with a large group of neophytes at the bottom and a small group of 'experts' at the top of the pyramid. Many of this latter group worked as professional 'pickup' coaches. For some, this was their main source of income, while for others, it was a part-time venture. Despite the hard-pressed myth within 'seduction communities' that anyone can excel in the 'game', the truth is that only a tiny fraction of neophytes become skillful players (of the eighty-three players I met in total, eight had consistent sexual adventures).[4] Dedicated ascetic labor is not enough to excel in the 'game'. Appearance is a decisive factor for achieving success in this specialized field. According to one of the moderators of the 'Bay Area Seduction Community', ninety percent of its members were software engineers. Although this estimate seems inflated, many of the men I met during fieldwork worked as engineers in the burgeoning

software industry. Moreover, ten of the twenty-two men who I conducted formal interviews with worked as programmers. Part of this heavy involvement of software engineers is specific to the Bay Area, with its large tech workforce. Another part of the story is that the worldview of 'seduction communities', in which sexualized interactions are envisioned as a rule-governed environment where success depends on the knowledge of the codes and skills to bend these rules to one's advantage, resonates with a particular fraction of the knowledge workforce, and specifically with engineers. Additionally, most men that flock towards 'seduction communities' have very little heterosexual experience and most have had relatively few opportunities to meet women via conventional channels, such as classes/college and work. As one of my interviewees explained, the large presence of software engineers was: 'Because they need it most, man. Our whole life is software, keyboards, so few human interactions'.

The 'seduction communities' in San Francisco comprised mostly men identifying as Asian or White. Nine of my interviewees identified as White, nine identified as Asian, and four as Latino. During fieldwork, in which I attended many of the offline events hosted by 'seduction communities' in the Bay Area, I met eighty-three practitioners in total. Forty-three identified as White, thirty as Asians, nine as Latino and only one as African (not African-American).

Playing the 'game' is a pursuit of young, middle-class adult men. Most dedicated players I met were between twenty-five and thirty-five (with eighteen to forty-five being the total age range of all 'game' practitioners I met), college educated, white-collar professionals (and not college students as Almog and Kaplan (2015) suggest). In the 'game', players aimed to accumulate heterosexual competences', which in most cases demanded much practice. Playing the 'game' is a middle-class endeavor, open to those with the resources to have an abundance of leisure time. This is illustrated by the number of interviewees with a middle-class background. Of the twenty-two men I conducted formal interviews with, three had a working-class background, nineteen others were from the middle class. I made this classification on the basis of their parents' professions and their own professional attainment.

I spent a total of ten months researching 'game' practitioners in the greater Bay Area, over three different periods of fieldwork between 2008 and 2014. I conducted formal interviews with twenty-two 'game' practitioners, with whom I conducted between one and five interviews. Of these interviewees, four worked as professional 'pickup' coaches at the time of the interviews, two men moderated the forum and had worked as coaches on the side, seven men were dedicated 'game' practitioners who had been involved for between one and three years, and nine men were neo-

phytes of the 'game'. The names of respondents have been anonymized.

Fieldwork consisted of attending the aforementioned events hosted by the 'San Francisco Seduction Community' as well as accompanying key informants on their 'pickup' sessions. During these 'in the field' sessions, I made observations of their 'pickup' attempts and the techniques and tactics they used within interactions. The events hosted by the community of 'game' practitioners allowed me to meet a large group of players, which resulted in countless informal conversations, which I documented and which also inform my analysis. Fieldwork, at times, also entailed a mimicry of the more accomplished players, some of whom were (semi-) professional 'pickup' instructors. Additionally, I attended five commercial 'pickup' boot camps. I visited three key informants at work regularly, in order to get a better understanding of their work environment and their professions. I also accompanied these informants on leisure activities, such as dinners and travels. This allowed me to get a better understanding of their social life outside of the context of work and the 'game'. Some of my informants also wrote extensive posts on the 'San Francisco Seduction Community'. These posts were an additional source of data. I also read many of the self-help books that my informants recommended, which helped me to get a better understanding of their worldview and the information that informed it.

## PICKUP AS A BODILY CRAFT

'Pickup', according to players of the 'game', is a technical, skilled craft, comprising: body movements, the positioning of bodies in space and in relation to other bodies, vocal tonality and pacing, glances, verbal scripts –banter, stories, questions, games- and interactional strategies and 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979). 'Pickup', according to players of the 'game', is primarily a bodily craft, learned in the interaction order through myriad approaches and is only secondarily a bookish trade, cultivated through learning scripts, pop-psychology theories and interactional gambits. This challenges the impression that the industry of professional 'pickup' coaches helps to foster through capitalizing on sales of 'how-to guides' and upholding the idea that the 'game' can be learned via meticulous study. The 'game', as with other bodily crafts, is learned within practice (Desmond, 2006; Spencer, 2009; Wacquant, 2004). Embodying the sexual competences of flirtation, according to 'game' practitioners, takes strenuous and repetitive practice; through the repetitive performance of *routines* of the 'game', hundreds or even thousands of times, these slowly become habits of the body and the mind.

*If you learn to walk is that natural? Yeah, once you can. But if you really break it down, what is it? Bend your knee, stretch your leg, etc. It's a process and just because it comes naturally it doesn't make it less of a process. […] Whatever method you use, there has to be a certain structure to it. Somehow you have to get the girl interested in you and then you have to be that guy she wants to talk to next week. It is all these steps you have to go through and just because it's natural it doesn't mean the process is not there (Nathan).*

The common ritualistic pursuit of women by men in the nighttime arena is most often performed for an attentive audience of onlookers to signal a competent heterosexual identity to a public (Grazian, 2007). However, the immediate presence of other men in the 'game' is primarily to benefit the 'pickup' pedagogy.

*I was going out with a couple of guys that I met there [at a 'pickup' boot camp] first, and I was trying to bring the guys that I met in the Meetup group, who were going out at night, to the daytime, but surprisingly they were extremely uncomfortable with daytime […]. After a couple of weekends with wingmen, I realized that I was better by myself, because they were not at all that motivating […] and I was freer and more fluid by myself. I could go anywhere I wanted, and I'm sort of adventurous. I felt this surprising comfort being by myself and just navigating through my day, you know, it was almost like 'work', more like practice, almost in a professional sense (Matz).*

Players of the 'game' often practice their trade collectively, but their relation is primarily instrumental. It can be about multiple things, such as assisting a player as a *wingman* in his 'pickup' attempt, scrutinizing his efforts and giving him valuable feedback, holding him accountable to set targets, offering emotional support, or showing sexual competences to an attentive public. For a 'pickup' apprentice, the goal of finding sexual partners is suspended, and the acquisition of heterosexual competences takes priority.

Although some 'players' practice the 'game' alone, the 'pickup' pedagogy remains quintessentially collective. Even the 'lone wolves' mirror their 'pickup' attempts on those of accomplished players, often coaches, who post an abundance of seemingly authentic videos online to show 'in the field' footage of them in action. Most of the 'pickup' pedagogy, however, happens within small groups of practitioners. This happens on the occasional, formal 'in the field' outings of 'seduction communities' in which practitioners meet up to 'play the field' collectively. And, more often, it occurs in informal gatherings of practitioners who come to practice the 'game' together. Nearly every day, calls were posted on the 'San Francisco Seduction Community'

forum to meetup and practice 'game' with other apprentices. On the weekends, a number of groups of 'game' practitioners would flock to the downtown area, and I would encounter groups of them practicing their craft together by just walking around the neighborhood. Most of these men knew each other, and when groups ran into one another, they would stop for a small conversation and discuss their experiences playing the 'game'.

The community of 'game' practitioners was hierarchically structured on the basis of 'pickup' skills and the instruction of these skills was largely provided by the groups as a whole, with different members serving as instructor and student, depending on their relative experience to one another. This is akin the pugilist pedagogy described by Wacquant (2004:113-114), in which boxers alternately take on the role of instructor or apprentice, depending on the relative skill of the player in front of him. Thus, it could be that my key informant Rohit, who had been an active player for many years –although not very successfully– and who often took neophytes of the 'game' under his wing, became an apprentice when a more skilled member stood in front of him.

> *Matz and I oversaw Rohit's pickup attempt, who was standing on the pavement a few meters from us. Matz commented on it with the expert eye of an analyst. According to him, the body language of the young woman Rohit was talking to signaled medium interest. Her chest was not completely facing Rohit but directed sideways. 'She is a little reserved', Matz said. 'Look at her feet', he commented. The young woman had her feet positioned next to each other. 'She is relatively at ease', he said. 'But it does not convey sexual interest'. Matz then demonstrated how she would stand if she was interested. He was standing on one leg with the other folded behind it, one hand supported his chin and the other arm folded in front of his chest. It was clear that Rohit did most of the talking. The young woman nodded and occasionally responded briefly. Matz thought that the interaction lacked sexual tension and that Rohit should use banter to 'spice things up'. He could, for instance, comment on the bag she wore in front of her stomach. 'That is a huge fanny pack', Matz said.*
> *Later, Rohit joined us. He was unsure about the chances of meeting the young woman again. Rohit inquired how his body language had been. Matz mentioned all the points he had previously described when he observed the interaction.*

In 'collective pedagogy' (Wacquant, 2004:112), all members train each other. This was achieved through observing the 'pickup attempts' of other practitioners, reflecting on them and giving advice, or through direct mimesis, illustrating how particular 'pickup' acts are correctly executed.

Competent players develop an 'eye for the game', an understanding of the idealized forms of the schemata of the field (Wacquant, 2004:117), which can include: the proper enactment of movements, or utterances, or the most effective strategy in a particular situation. This combination of acts generates a highly charged flirtatious interaction and possibly results in a sexual adventure.

> *[…] like I've seen naturals [men who are good in 'pickup' without ever getting involved in the 'game'] who are incredible with picking up girls, and I asked, 'How the fuck did you do that?' They'd say, 'I don't know, man. I just sort of pulled up and said, 'What's up girls!' And I'd be like, 'All right'. […] Whereas I can watch a guy in an interaction with women and I can see how successful they are dealing with it. Even if it's just a failed interaction and I can see how they are conducting themselves (John).*

The difference between a 'ladies' man' and a competent 'game' practitioner is an intellectual understanding of the techniques and strategies of flirtation and sexual escalation. Competent 'players' possessed a rich vocabulary to scrutinize the interaction in detail and advise junior practitioners on what they could do in order to enhance their 'game'.

For players, 'pickup' is a tactical game in which sex and sexual desires are at stake. In their logic, many women want to hookup but only if they are attracted to the player, feel sexually aroused and if the context allows for such an encounter. 'Game' practitioners aim to fuel desires, attenuate inhibitions, spark attraction and create those conditions in which a hookup can occur. According to players, the 'game' is akin to a sales funnel; it is about convincing the other that they want the product and to create the conditions necessary for the sale. Hence, practitioners try to read the behavioral cues of their interlocutors, to gauge their interests, and to decide which tactics and which techniques are necessary to make them committed to a sexual encounter. An 'eye for the game' implies a know-how of the schemata of the field, the techniques and tactics to optimize the 'pickup' process, and entails an aesthetic valuation of enacted practices. 'Game' practitioners, like craftsmen, come to appreciate the 'quality of enactment' of techniques and strategies. Skills within the 'game', which can shine through in individual acts, become a source of admiration.

Mutual attraction is commonly perceived as a serendipitous happening, when two souls meet randomly and 'click', instantly feeling attracted to each other, potentially leading down a path of romance. According to 'game' practitioners, flirtation, and the sexual scripts of which it is a part, is a highly structured interaction that progresses in a uniform pattern. In the initial stage, *attraction*, in the argot of the 'game', defined as physical and emotional captivation, arises, fostered by lightheart-

ed banter. From then, a buildup of trust and amenity occurs, referred to as *comfort* in players' argot, through exploring each others' life-biographies, sharing tastes and preferences and experiencing events together. This takes place while periodically spiking attraction and progressively intensifying sensuous touching. This is followed by *seduction*, the phase in which sexual escalation happens.

A 'pickup' apprentice often focuses on learning and practicing one particular tactic or technique at a time. Practitioners frequently meet to play the 'game' collectively, which is a rather strange encounter since most men would have met on an online 'seduction community' platform and proceeded to meet within the city at a designated spot to practice 'pickup' together. The session often starts with an introduction round in which players list their experience in the 'game' and their *sticking points*, which are reoccurring barriers within the process of a 'pickup'. This is followed by individuals offering advice on how to progress past these *sticking points* and setting clear goals for the session. Neophytes, for example, often struggle to instigate a flirtatious interaction with a stranger in a public setting, suffering from *approach anxiety*, and other players advise them on how to deal with this, for instance, by approaching a woman of interest within three seconds of seeing her. The neophyte is then asked to set clear targets, such as committing himself to a fixed number of approaches, and the others will hold him accountable. Another common *sticking point* of apprentice players is that their interactions are rather mundane and dull, and their female interlocutors have no erotic or romantic interest, since conversations lack the playful insinuation of successful flirtations. Other players would share interactional scripts, for instance specific banter lines, and tactics such as expressing a clear erotic interest, to help these apprentices create more energetically and sensuously charged and enticing conversations. The apprentice again would set targets, for instance to practice these interactional gambits at least a certain amount of times in that session, and the others will see if he succeeds.

Understanding 'pickup' as a rather uniform process that evolves through different phases and which depends on practice and skill, results in a particular outlook on and experience of practice in which players set small goals and feel emotionally rewarded when these are achieved. I recorded the following fieldwork notes when I joined two neophytes of the 'game' in their practice session:

*I accompanied Fred and Nick on their walk through the downtown area. It was Saturday afternoon, and the streets teemed with people. The two men had a rule: They took turns approaching women on the street. It was Nick's attempt next. A gracious, tall young woman passed us. Nick looked at us and turned around and ran after her. He quickly caught up with her, then adjusted his pace to her tempo, walked beside*

*her and spun around. She stopped for a brief instance and then continued her path. Nick returned. 'It was good', he said excitingly, although she had not stopped to talk to him. Nick was glad that he had worked up the courage to 'approach her'. Fred petted him on the back. 'Well done', he said.*

Just as gym practitioners set goals about lifting an additional weight and find the achievement of such a seemingly tedious endeavor rewarding, 'game' apprentices set small goals that offer a sense of accomplishment upon completion.

*I arrived at the bar where I was supposed to meet the 'game' practitioner a little later than usual. A couple of guys were already there. I recognized Jimmy, a long-term practitioner, and Brian, who hosted this weekly session. They were accompanied by two chaps who I had not seen before, named Lorentz and Simon. They stood in a circle and talked about the goals for the night. Jimmy wanted to get better in 'gaming' big groups. His goal for that evening was to acquaint a group and 'game' a girl in the group. I asked Lorentz and Simon if they frequented this gathering more often. Lorentz had been twice, Simon three times. Then I asked them about their goals. 'That's a good question' Brian said animated. Tonight, Lorentz's goal was to 'open at least ten sets'. Simon had other goals: 'To get laid', he said. Brian immediately corrected him. It was not about the results but was about 'optimizing the process' of a 'pickup. Moreover, neophytes should start with 'easy targets', such as talking to at least ten different women.*

A 'pickup' apprentice progresses in a somewhat uniform fashion. Neophytes start by practicing an 'opening', which means to initiate an interaction. Once they have mastered this skill, the next step is to learn how to banter flirtatiously. More experienced practitioners, who have mastered these skills, set other goals. Jimmy, for instance, in the vignette above, wanted to learn how to initiate a conversation with a group of people and then transition to a flirtatious conversation with one of its members. This practice is perceived as more difficult than initiating a flirtatious interaction with a woman who stands in the bar by herself. More competent players set other goals. They, for instance, go and 'play the field' to practice a quick 'sexual escalation' in an interaction. The competences of the 'game' build up, practitioners learn one skill after the other, mastering –what are perceived as- increasingly more difficult techniques and tactics. 'Game' practitioners collectively watch over this seemingly uniform progression in the apprentice of the 'game'. Brian, the most senior member of the group, corrected the too ambitious neophyte Simon. He should start with 'easier' targets, for instance initiating flirtatious interactions with sojourners in

the urban nightlife. The skills of the 'game' are unevenly and somewhat uniformly distributed through the ranks of practitioners. Every layer comprises a similar kind of skill set and builds upon the former with increasing complexity. The progression through these ranks is a rather uniform process that is enforced by the collective of practitioners as a whole.

Many apprentices have a systematic and instrumental, reflexive approach to training. I have met numerous practitioners who kept a diary of their practices, reporting on their approaches, on what they did, which *routines* they used, what went well, and which *sticking points* they encountered. Other players had spreadsheets in which they systematically documented their approaches, and others wrote detailed field reports of their training sessions and often published these on online forums for other practitioners to read, comment on and give advice on how to improve their 'game'.

For the skillful player, each gesture and each word within the 'pickup' attempt is an element for meticulous scrutiny, sublimating every single act to an idealized form of the schemata of the field. Similar to a football player who tries to perfect his kick by incessant repetition, and who can discriminate in detail between a perfect and imperfect execution of this move, 'game' practitioners take acts within the 'pickup' as gestures that can be perfected through relentless practice. Through this approach, their practice transcends the ordinary and enters the domain of the craftsman.

*I accompanied Don and Rohit on their 'pickup' session in a downtown shopping mall in San Francisco. After a number of approaches, Don and Rohit embarked on a discussion of the best opening in this environment. 'The classic approach is that you're in a faster pace than the girl', Don said, while demonstrating this approach on an imaginary other. 'You tap her on the shoulder, walk an additional four steps and turn around'. Rohit added that strong eye contact is key and to wait a few seconds before you start speaking. Let the tension build up. Also, the body posturing is important. 'You shouldn't fidget', Rohit said, 'and face her' with arms dangling besides your body, which allegedly communicates an 'open attitude'. Then follow up with a dramatic: 'I just saw you walking by and I had to say hi', making sure you pace your words.*

A cogent execution of this series of acts take novices months of incessant practice, during which they continuously repeat the same gestures in numerous consecutive 'pickup' attempts and gradually ingrain the techniques, tactics, movements and utterances on the body and mind. In an interview, key informant Matz, for instance, reflected on the time it took him to master the series of gestures described in the

above vignette. 'It took me four months to acquire a solid approach' (Matz).

As with other bodily crafts, mastery in the 'game' comes with countless hours of dedicated, repetitious and ascetic practice. Apprentice players see the sexual pursuit of women as 'work', concomitant with athletes' perception of gym practice (Monaghan, 1999:278; Wacquant, 2004:66). Going out to 'pickup' women, *to sarge*, is primarily about practicing skills and secondarily about seeking potential sexual encounters. Apprentices often go out to practice the 'game' numerous times a week, like aspiring athletes invest countless hours of training in their craft. Many (semi-) professional players I have met have gone out at least five times a week for months or years in order to practice their skills. 'I went out pretty much five days a week for three months straight and was very consistent in working on myself, until I was actually seeing results' (John). It is not surprising that most dedicated 'game' practitioners work as freelancers who largely determine their own schedules. A pickup pedagogy is a long process in which players slowly acquire the competences of their craft. However, only a tiny fraction of neophytes progress through the ranks of the 'game' to become competent players.

## PICKUP AS SPORT: PROFESSIONAL HETEROSEXUALS

'Seduction communities' are organized as a brotherhood of men who voluntarily exchange knowledge on 'pickup' and as an industry in which (semi-) professional coaches are paid to teach clients. Concomitant with other commercialized sexual fields, such as pornography (Escoffier, 2003; Trachman, 2012), professionalization entails the control of knowledge and skills that structure the field hierarchically –for professional and amateur players alike– and can be taught for money. Professional 'pickup' coaches charge up to 3,000 dollars for a weekend of training in the field, teaching multiple clients per session. 'Pickup' can thus be a lucrative business for those on top of the pyramid. One's performances in the 'game' are the clearest signs of skills and knowledge of 'pickup'. This is especially the case in those instances that highlight the player's agentic capacities to sexually charge conversations, to override a woman's inhibitions about sex with virile prowess, and to direct the interaction to a desired outcome by cogent tactics. Sexual stories of 'game' practitioners shared with an audience of fellow players, and if possible validated by peers who were present, were the idiom of status games within the field of 'seduction communities'.

The status games of players centered on displaying skills within the 'game' and were played on multiple axes, pertaining to questions like *with Who? How? What?*

*And Where?* Cogent players were apt in instigating flirtatious, sexually charged interactions, and their number of sexual partners was a gauge of their expertise in the 'game'. Most players were vaguely aware of the number of sexual conquests of skillful practitioners. For instance, 'pickup' instructor Jared knew of a renowned coach who lived in a different city and whom he had met briefly on less than a handful of occasions. Although he hardly knew this man personally, he was aware of his number of sexual conquests, which was a marker of his status and expertise in the 'game'. The perceived erotic prestige of a sexual partner could also signal mastery in the 'game'. Players applied a market reasoning to hooking up and erotic prestige. Women with erotic allure in mainstream culture, such as young women who displayed a Hollywood beauty standard, were supposedly in high demand and were allegedly more selective about bed partners than peers of lesser erotic standing. Sex with women of high erotic prestige thus signaled skills within the 'game', since one outcompeted other suitors. Forming sexual relations with women who were supposedly unavailable, for instance in a monogamous relationship, was another maker of skills in the 'game'. Similarly, hooking up with women who deployed their erotic allure professionally –hostesses, strippers, escorts and porn stars– without paying for sex, signaled mastery in the 'game'.

*Where* sexual contact in a hookup occurred also signaled skills in the 'game'. Women were supposedly more reluctant to hook up with a stranger in a public setting than in the privacy of a home. Thus, many 'game' practitioners shared sexual stories about escapades within semi-public settings such as bar bathrooms, alleyways, dressing rooms and parks.

> *I remember one night, me and three wings were just warming up for the night. We were playing pool and this older woman, 32, a lawyer or something. She's attracted, she's into me, and I just pull that line out 'You want me to fuck you in the bathroom. Oh my God, you can't even wait till we get home!' And she pulls me across the table and says 'That will be so fucking hot'. So, we just finished our game of pool, and after that, I took her to the bathroom, fucked her there and she let me come in her mouth, which was cool. This is the kind of stuff that a lot of women have these fantasies, but no guy has the balls to actually do it (John).*

In the logic of the 'game', two continuums overlapped: one ordered sexual activity from 'light' to 'heavy', and the other hierarchically positioned skills. The 'heavier' sexual activity (anal sex, money shots, vaginal sex, blowjobs) signaled more expertise within the 'game'. The scenario that conveyed the most competence in the 'game' involved hooking up with two or more women at the same time, especially shortly

after meeting them. 'The holy grail [of 'pickup'] was the cold three-way pull' (John).

Seductive prowess also showed in the *how* of a 'pickup', when the practitioner showed a clear demonstration of his agentic capacities in 'playing the field'.

> *We were in the club, I would open one time, Z. [Matthew's girlfriend] would open one time. We went through about ten sets and then there were these two girls. We opened them and we were talking to them, and trying to figure out if they could come out of the club with us, and when I'm just about to pull everyone out of the club, Z. starts making out with this one girl [of the two] and this makes about fifty guys on the dance floor surrounding us, like swarms, and it was literally these guys trying to pull the girls away from me, so I ended up putting my arms, I am big enough, around all three girls, and like spinning on the dance floor, like fending off these dudes, and one of the dudes is like 'you have a girl already! Why do you want the other two?' And I cut him off and I eventually pull the girls out of the club, and one of my ex-students was in the club with us that time. So, when we found him at the entrance I handed him the girl I was talking to and went for the girl who was with my girl, because she really wanted it and the girl I was talking to wasn't. So, there were various complications, some of her other friends showed up, but we got passed all those and we got back home and we banged that girl and that was pretty awesome (Matthew).[5]*

'Game' practitioners made a distinction between 'getting lucky' and 'solid game'. The former referred to the sexual escapades where women took the initiative and seduced men. The latter referred to episodes where a skillful player cogently fostered a sexual encounter. Stories in which the protagonist demonstrated a stark control over the sexual encounter were the most powerful illustration of mastery within the 'game'. It was not the sexual adventure itself that demonstrated players' high-status identity, but instead, it was the competences they displayed in the sexual conquest that mattered.

## CONCLUSION

The advent of hookup culture has brought new strains and challenges to young heterosexual men. Manhood needs to be proven constantly, and among young heterosexual men, this is partly done in sexual relations within women. In this new sexual environment, casual sex is acceptable for both men and women, and young heterosexual men can no longer hide behind the adage that women are not sexually available. Many men, however, experience longing for women who are not sexually

interested in them and do not know how to flirt or to become sexual. This has led to a burgeoning self-help industry, institutionalized within 'seduction communities', that promises young men the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully navigate the hookup scene.

'Seduction communities' are collaboratives of 'game' practitioners that transmute the ordinary practice of flirtation into a skilled bodily craft. Initially, young men flock to these self-help groups in the hope of finding easy answers, but as they get involved in the 'game', the immediate goal of finding sexual partners is suspended and overtaken by the priority to learn embodied heterosexual competences. These skills of the 'game' are learned by practice and in a 'collective pedagogy' (Wacquant, 2004:99). The community of practitioners is hierarchically structured on the basis of skills in the 'game', and each member alternately takes on the role of apprentice and instructor, depending on his competences relative to those of the player in front of him. Learning happens through direct mimesis of senior players and through their advice and explanations of the competences of their specialized field. The collective of 'game' practitioners enforces a rather uniform pedagogical path, in which apprentices progress through the ranks of the 'game' in a similar fashion, systematically learning one skill after another in their specialized field. The competences of the 'game' build up and are thus unevenly distributed through the ranks of practitioners, with the higher echelons possessing more competences and also skills that are perceived as more complex. This ranking of competences can be exploited for material gain by high-status practitioners who offer 'in the field' coaching sessions.

The specialized realm of the 'game' has a competitive dynamic through which 'pickup' becomes a sport. This competitive dynamic is enhanced by the profession-alization of this field. Accomplished players, men with high status in a community of practitioners, can easily sell their expertise for money. A high status is acquired through an ostentatious display of heterosexual competences. 'Flashy' sexual encounters and a continuous string of sexual conquests offer powerful rhetoric for demonstrating expertise within the 'game'. In order to acquire high status within this competitive field, a player needs to continuously forge casual sexual relations with women. (Semi-) professional players are thus primed towards hooking up.

Through their progression through the ranks of the 'game', neophytes become competent players, and there is a change in their perception of the relation between masculinity and sex. Neophytes flock to 'seduction communities' because they do not measure up to the expectations of dominant manhood in their young adulthood, which construct sexual relations with women as quintessential to performing a competent masculine identity. Within this construction of masculinity, hetero sex is

a means to do gender, to signal a successful masculine identity to others. However, concomitant with other 'professional heterosexuals', like porn stars, professional players have an alternative construction of manhood with a different relation between masculinity and sex. Within the specialized sphere of the 'game', it is not the score, the sexual conquest in itself, by which men 'do gender' and construct hierarchies amongst one another. Hierarchies between players in the 'game' are constructed on the basis of skills displayed within the performance. Just as porn actors construct professional hierarchies on the basis of tacit technical knowledge of, for instance, the positioning of bodies in relation to lighting and cameras and the ability to 'get wood' on demand (Escoffier, 2003; Trachman, 2012), (semi-) professional players construct hierarchies amongst themselves on the basis of skills displayed in the 'game'. Expertise shows in an ostentatious demonstration of control over the sexual environment, when 'game' practitioners control interactions and strategically manipulate the emotions of themselves and others and engineer a desired sexual scenario. Within 'professional heterosexuality', a competent masculine identity is not communicated through the sexual conquest itself, but comes forth in the competences displayed in the sexual encounter.

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