

Power & Mercy Amid Hookup Culture

Anthony F. LoPresti
Salve Regina University
May 2, 2021

When I was hired by Salve Regina University in 2003, one of my principal responsibilities was to teach a long-standing and popular course titled “Christian Marriage.” First offered in 1978, the course examined “the nature of Christian marriage and conjugal love,” giving particular attention to “the new attitudes toward sexuality, responsible parenthood, divorce and remarriage.”¹ Over the years and under the stewardship of my predecessor, Dr. Frank Maguire, the class had expanded its aims to address ministry to engaged couples, friendship and love, and family life.² While that course is still offered in a somewhat modified form, it was not long after my arrival at Salve that I realized that student attitudes towards sexuality were continuing to evolve. Debates over the propriety of premarital sex had become *passé*; Monday morning gossip about who had “hooked up” with whom had become *de rigueur*. Salve students—and no doubt the vast majority of students at every Mercy college or university—had come a long way from probing the nature of conjugal love.

With the passage of time and the continued evolution of student experiences—facilitated over the past decade by the rise of social media—it has become increasingly evident that the sexual culture in which students are immersed has become more intense and pernicious. The stories that circulate today are not just about students who have hooked up or had multiple partners; they often include descriptions of harm endured through culturally-scripted sexual expeditions. This harm can take various forms along a wide spectrum of sexual

injuries: from loss of self-esteem as a result of being objectified and abandoned to deeply-seated psychological wounds due to poor choices or enduring sexual trauma.

In 2009 I began to teach a course titled “Sexual Ethics” and at the start of each semester I ask students to write a paper on the values they hold which pertain to their sexual lives. The assignment often prompts students to mentally recollect their sexual history and ascertain which values may have been guiding their choices. Recently, one of the first papers submitted began this way:

At a young age, I learned about sex and the intimacy it brings forth between two people. At the time, I thought sex meant being in love with someone, but throughout my journey of life, I now see that sometimes, sex is just sex. In high school, I went through the ups and downs of “relationships” where a boy acts like he is interested in me when it turns out he only pursued me for sex. At that time, I had a hard time saying no. I thought that if I said no, I would be labeled as a prude or a loser or someone of insignificant status. I wanted to be liked so bad that I didn’t realize the labels for actually saying yes were even worse. During those experiences, I never enjoyed myself. I actually would study the clock in hopes it would be over soon. Sex in high school was not pleasurable, it led me to misinterpret the values of sex. I never had fun, it never felt intimate, it lacked romance, and certainly was absent of love.³

This paper, the first of several revealing pieces this student would write, was the first indication of a deep woundedness she has been carrying for a number of years. Unfortunately, she is not alone. After over a decade teaching “Sexual Ethics” and more recently a sequel course titled “Friendship, Love and Romance,” I have become very familiar with heartaches, injustices, and character-damaging decisions that surround teenage and young adult sexual lives. Though they frequently pass these off as “learning experiences” that helped to make them who they are today, the memories are enduring and the wounds still bleed. Of course, not every undergraduate can be classified as part of the walking wounded; some arrive at college with their virginity still intact and they avoid the hookup culture like the plague. Others are engaged

in long-standing, healthy relationships that are clearly a boon to their lives. Yet another group—more often males than females—enthusiastically embrace the hookup scene and report that it has served their interests well. To these students, college life has delivered what is so often advertised: a continuous stream of parties where the alcohol flows abundantly and the sex is there for the taking. But the majority of the students I meet are more likely to have dabbled in the hookup culture that surrounds them and found its pleasures to be fleeting, shallow, and often regrettable. As one of my students poignantly put it, “I have found as I have matured through life that I do not enjoy hooking up or sleeping with people who I don’t know that well, because for me it seems to take a little part of myself away.”⁴

This sentiment is not uncommon. Regardless of how experienced or comfortable they might be with casual sex, virtually all students agree that sex with someone you care about is far more satisfying than the sex that is typically experienced through hooking up. Young adult researcher and prolific author Donna Freitas forcefully captures the experience of many young people when she writes,

Hookup sex is fast, uncaring, unthinking, and perfunctory. Hookup culture promotes bad sex, boring sex, drunken sex you don’t remember, sex you could care less about, sex where desire is absent, sex that you have “just because everyone else is too,” or that “just happens”...The more students talk about hooking up, the clearer it becomes that it has less to do with excitement and even attraction than with checking a box off a long lists of tasks, like homework or laundry. And while hookup sex is supposed to come with no strings attached, it nonetheless creates an enormous amount of stress and drama among participants.⁵

My experience with Salve Regina students is consistent with Freitas’s research. The most frequent, semi-positive comment I read is that hooking up, even when it turns out badly, can lead to valuable lessons in self-awareness or instructive experiences regarding what one might

enjoy in bed. Most do see some value in the physical release or excitement that is generated, but they are usually quick to add that the benefit is short lived and the underlying yearning for true intimacy remains unsatisfied.

Of course, young people experimenting with their sexuality is not a 21st century phenomenon—today's teens actually have *fewer* partners than their counterparts in the Millennial and GenX generations had at similar ages⁶—but most observers agree that the sexual atmosphere on college campuses today is qualitatively different than it was as recently as twenty years ago.

College today has gone from being a place where hookups happened to a place where hookup culture dominates student attitudes about all forms of intimacy. The hookup has become *normative*, and hookup culture a monolithic culture from which students find little chance of escape. It is the defining aspect of social life on many campuses; to reject it is to relegate oneself to the sidelines of college experience.⁷

Through much of my academic career I have observed the powerful cultural currents which envelope student lives and consume so much of their thoughts, time and emotional energy. Over the years I have read literally thousands of student papers which largely confirm the data and observations offered by social scientists and other professional researchers. With my training in theological ethics and with a pastoral concern for the students' wellbeing, the question I want to consider is this: *In light of the power-full, sex-infused culture in which young people today are reared, how can a Mercy education help these emerging adults form intimate relationships that are satisfying as well as just?* Answering this question adequately will involve my presenting three descriptive pieces. First, an exploration into the concept of power and how it operates in diffuse ways. Second, an overview of some of the primary powers that shape the behavior of undergraduate students. Third, an outline of what I currently believe to

be the most effective and merciful way to address the issues my analysis surfaces. More specifically, it is my contention that an education grounded in mercy will seek to cultivate critical awareness, enhance students' freedom, and point to the virtues of empathy, vulnerability and love which are foundational to intimate relationships.

Types of Power

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines power as “the ability or capacity to act or perform effectively”; it is derived from the same Latin root (*potēre*) that gives us the word “potential.”⁸ Power may be actualized and observable, or it can lie in reserve, yet to be fully developed. For the purposes of this analysis it is important to take note of the relationship between power and freedom. A person is likely to have a very difficult time performing effectively if his or her freedom is significantly compromised.⁹ Those who live under various kinds of constraints, either personal or social, often have their power diminished. When considering the lives of undergraduate students as sexual beings, constraints to freedom can assume many different forms; among the most common are: mental health conditions; residual impediments from previous trauma; lack of self-awareness; occasional or chronic inebriation; insufficient exposure to positive role models; ignorance of useful criteria for making moral decisions; peer pressure; captivity to toxic social media messaging; and unconscious adherence to unhealthy social scripts. All of these diminish freedom and ultimately curtail the individual student's power.

Power is often linked with some kind of leader or authority who exercises power, either beneficently or oppressively. Politicians, military personnel, police officers, and religious leaders are among those who are often perceived as exercising power in contemporary society.

Christian theologians speak of God as all-powerful (omnipotent) and the Bible can be profitably understood as a collection of human interpretations of how God's power has been experienced, ranging from destructive floods in the days of Noah to miraculous healings in the age of the apostles. Jesus, the sublime image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), exercises power through empathetic acts of mercy and love. It is through his life, death and resurrection that Christians would say that the power and character of God are most clearly revealed.

Theologically speaking, "human power is participation in God's power and confronts us with the choice of using that power in the service of our neighbor...or for prideful self-assertion."¹⁰

More fully understood, power is not just a quality possessed by an individual, but "a process of interaction between persons" which either "create or threaten human community and enhance or restrict the growth of persons."¹¹ Contained within these descriptions is the fundamental vocational question that all college students face: "How will I use my power, both actual and potential, to enhance my life and live amicably with others?" In and of itself, power is neither good nor bad, but how power is exercised is the crucial point and a principal area of moral inquiry.

To illuminate the ways that personal and social power interacts with student lives—both for better and for worse—I am going to utilize the elaboration of power developed by the existentialist psychologist Rollo May. Defining power as "the ability to affect, to influence, and to change other persons,"¹² May distinguishes five forms of power classified in this manner:

- 1) **Exploitative Power** is the most destructive kind of power. It relies on force or the threat of violence to curtail freedom and subject others to the will of the one in power. It is power *over* others.
- 2) **Manipulative Power**, though not as destructive as exploitative power, nevertheless relies on psychological means to exercise control *over* others.

Often hidden and contrary to the good of those subject to it, manipulative power “may have originally been invited by the person’s own desperation or anxiety.”¹³

- 3) **Competitive Power** is typically at work in athletic contests or job searches or other kinds of rivalries that pit one person *against* another. Coming at the midpoint in the spectrum of power that May describes, it represents a shift to a constructive form of power.
- 4) **Nutrient Power** is power used *for* the benefit of others, exercised by parents, educators, physicians, therapists, and even well-intentioned politicians. Relying on a power differential that presumes inequality, nutrient power always originates out of concern for another person’s freedom and wellbeing. May notes that “at its best, teaching is a good example” of nutrient power.¹⁴
- 5) **Integrative Power** involves power *with* another person or group. It leads to growth through encounter and always aims for the betterment of others.

Later in this essay I will highlight the ways in which two of these modes of power are at work in my context, but for now I will note that according to May “the goal for human development is to learn to use these different kinds of power in ways adequate to the given situation.”¹⁵

In order to engage power effectively one must understand something about power dynamics, or the ways in which power operates in human interactions. Rollo May’s schema describes the modes in which power can be used; another insightful perspective comes from Michel Foucault whose analysis reveals the ways in which different loci of power interact. I find Foucault’s analysis of power particularly valuable when thinking about the elaborate networks of relationships and cultural messaging which surround young adult lives in this digital age. Foucault’s primary analysis of power can be found in his 1976 volume *La volonté de savoir* (*The Will to Knowledge*) which, in its 1978 English translation, is known as *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume 1*. Therein he writes

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of **force relations** immanent in the sphere in which they operate and

which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a **chain or system**, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various **social hegemonies**.¹⁶ (emphasis added)

With its sometimes peculiar-sounding vocabulary and complex sentence structure, Foucault's writing can be difficult to decipher, but this paragraph holds the key to grasping the essential elements of his theory of power. I will try to explicate it in a way that brings light to campus sexual dynamics.

By "force relations" Foucault is referring to anyone or anything that exerts some influence in the sphere of one's social interactions. By Foucault's reckoning, there are many such force relations, a "multiplicity" of them, and they act on us in different combinations and at different strengths, each with their own aims and objectives, i.e., "their own organization." "Power is everywhere," Foucault writes, "not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."¹⁷ An example might help to clarify the meaning behind Foucault's words.

Suppose a female college student is shopping for a costume to wear to a Halloween party, an occasion which frequently prompts creative and sometimes risqué outfits. The decision regarding what to wear will likely involve multiple considerations—"force relations" in Foucault's terminology—some inclining her in one direction, others in another. Imagine the barrage of questions that might come to mind as she browses the PartyCity [website](#): *How will I get people to notice me at that party? How much skin can I show without being written off as "slutty"? Will my friends disapprove if I choose that "Sassy Maid" costume? On the other hand,*

is Matt the rugby player more likely to talk to me if I spring for the more expensive “Dragon Slayer” costume? Will he think I want to hook up with him? Will people judge me if someone posts a picture on their Instagram? How can I even compete when all you see is Kylie Jenner pics on social media? Suppose my sister shows it to Mom; how will she react? Do I really want to spend \$75 on a costume? Maybe I should just make up my own costume from old clothes lying around, or would people think I’m cheap then? All of these questions, and undoubtedly many more, will influence this student’s decision on which costume to purchase and wear to the party. They involve her relations with different individuals and groups, all of which place some degree of force on her, some greater, some less, all subject to fluctuation. One force might ally with another forming a “chain or system” as Foucault might say, creating a certain directional momentum. Other forces enter the power dynamics by introducing oppositional ideas which might weaken or replace what came before (“Maybe I should make up my own costume”). “Where there is power, there is resistance,” writes Foucault, noting that

these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal...Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable...The points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definite way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior.¹⁸

The weighing that goes on in this student’s mind, not to mention the back and forth which occurs at a subconscious level, is part of a “process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses” the interplay of the force relations.

“Power,” writes Foucault

is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the

interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations...[it] is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement...[Power] is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”¹⁹

When we look at the Foucault’s analysis of power through a wide angle lens, what we find is endless movement from the micro-level to the macro; from specific, individual force relations as they undergo processes of transformation, to the networks that their interplay produces, ultimately culminating in complex, systemic “hegemonies.” In Foucault’s framework, power is something that is always in the air—like the weather—continuously affecting us, varying in its intensity, liable to change at a moment’s notice, and subject to resistance when we act to defend ourselves from malign intent. “Power, as Foucault observed, is insidious and productive. It typically operates not by overt interdiction or coercion, but by creatively and “consensually” shaping our self-conceptions and (thereby) our views of what is normal and desirable.”²⁰ In the case under consideration, the hegemony is a dominant campus culture where gender scripts interact with personal insecurities and hookup sex is nearly impossible to resist.

Powers which Influence Student Sexual Behavior

In this section I will name some of the major “force relations” which drive the power-fueled sexual dynamics that are present on most college campuses today. Some of these forces are well known and have been influencing adolescents and young adults since time immemorial; others work in a more subtle, sometimes invisible way and are particular to the age in which we live. While there is a complexity of forces at work that fuel motivation and influence choices, the power that I believe to be the most consequential is that of *attachment*

styles which I will describe shortly. Collectively, this multiplicity of force relations forms a “social hegemony” whose characteristics correspond with Rollo May’s description of manipulative power, i.e., a power which exercises control by using psychological means that are often hidden from view. Ultimately, this amalgamation of force relations limits the young person’s freedom and mitigates the power of empathy and vulnerability, virtues which are crucial to the formation of healthy, intimate relationships.

As might be expected, some of the forces which propel young adults into sexual encounters are a natural part of the growth from adolescence into adulthood—hormones, curiosity, the lure of the forbidden, romantic attraction, and the sheer pleasure that arises when skin meets skin and the arousal system kicks in. Additionally, those involved in enduring relationships are typically motivated to express their feelings through sex. Although some students may take it slow during their high school years, it would be highly unusual to find college students in a romantic relationship where intercourse was not on the menu, so to speak, and probably selected early and often.²¹ Not surprisingly, the end of a long-term relationship can likewise trigger a sexual spree as the need to deal with the breakup pain fuses with the lure of physically-satisfying, no-strings-attached sex—a concatenation of force relations as Foucault might put it. One of my male students who followed this path recounted his experience this way:

After a terrible break up in February of my senior year [in high school], the number of girls I had been with went from six to about twenty-five in the span of only five months. I did this mostly out of anger, jealousy, sadness, desperation, and revenge...I just wanted to feel better about myself. No, I just wanted to feel something other than pain. And in those 20-30 minutes, I felt free. I felt that everything was going to be better from that moment on. But afterward, I just missed my ex. I missed love.²²

The young man in this example is submerged in a multiplicity of force relations: the power exerted by the various emotions he names; the natural, hormonal inclination to sexually bond; the pain-easing promise of escapist, hookup sex; and—though it goes unnamed here—the status that accrues to males when they are perceived as a chick magnet (at another point he wrote “All the girls were beautiful and made me look good”). While there were certainly many other shrouded forces involved in this student’s motivation system that we cannot ascertain from his essay, there is one power we can count on with certainty to exercise a formidable role in any person’s sexual choices: attachment style.

Introduced to the world in the second half of the 20th century by British psychologist John Bowlby, attachment theory explains how our experiences with caregivers in the first two years of life exert a formative influence on other types of relationships later in life. As the earliest developing social-behavioral system in human beings, the attachment system interacts with and influences the sexual behavior system when the latter is activated in adolescence and continues into adulthood. Almost without exception, students find the insights of attachment theory to be compelling and the identification of their own attachment style to be invaluable. Briefly summarized, what they learn is this: If the child’s primary caregiver(s) is responsive to the child’s cries, body language and needs, that child is on track to develop a *secure* attachment style. On the other hand, if the caregivers are inconsistent in their responsiveness—sending mixed messages about the trustworthiness of other people—the child would be prone to developing a more *anxious* attachment style. And if the caregivers were distant, preoccupied or incompetent, the child will likely lose faith in the dependability of other human beings and develop an *avoidant* attachment style. Genetics and adult romantic experiences can also

influence attachment styles, but 70 to 75 percent of the population retains the same attachment style “from cradle to grave,” as Bowlby was wont to say.

How significant are attachment styles in the relationships of young adults? According to the literature—which is consistently corroborated by my students—attachment styles become “core features” of one’s personality and guide a person’s “cognitive, emotional and behavioral response patterns in attachment-relevant contexts.”²³ People who develop a secure attachment style in early childhood learn that they are lovable, that other people will value and care for them, and that it’s okay to make yourself vulnerable because the world is basically trustworthy. Though they are not naïve, securely-attached persons go into romantic relationships with the expectation that their partners will be similarly trustworthy and dependable. “They’re able to communicate well about their own needs and to respond to their partners’ needs. They are not overly sensitive to rejection and do not fear abandonment. If a relationship doesn’t work out, they have high enough self-regard to believe they will find another person to love and who will love them.”²⁴ By contrast, those who develop one of the insecure attachment styles do not enjoy the myriad benefits of being secure and either inject unhelpful anxiety into their romantic interactions or avoid intimacy and interdependence for fear of getting hurt.²⁵ Understanding their own and their partners’ attachment styles, my students find, helps to explain many of the dynamics they have experienced in intimate relationships.

Through the research of multiple attachment theorists, we also know that people with secure attachment styles—approximately 50% of the population—generally look to fulfill their sexual needs within committed relationships; these individuals are at ease with intimacy and

tend to bring comfort to partners who are anxious or avoidant. They do not necessarily delay the onset of intercourse and may have multiple partners, but they are less accepting of casual sex and less likely to engage with promiscuous paramours.²⁶ Young adults who are securely attached “report relationships that are more satisfying and loving, as well as trusting, happy, and friendly.”²⁷ In contrast, adolescents with avoidant attachment styles—about 25% of the population—often put off the onset of intercourse due to their discomfort with intimacy; however, “once avoidant individuals become sexually active, there is strong evidence that they, more than their non-avoidant counterparts, engage in a pattern of promiscuous and casual sex.”²⁸ Consistent with the ethos of hookup culture, avoidants “tend to separate sexual activity from emotional closeness. Instead, they may use sex to avoid emotional intimacy by pursuing short-term relationships to confirm their self-worth and independence. As such, they are more likely than secure or anxious people to engage in one-night stands and short-term couplings,”²⁹ a.k.a. hookups.

While securely-attached individuals favor committed relationships for sexual activity and those with an avoidant attachment style are more inclined to emotionally-barren hookups, those with an anxious attachment style—roughly 20% of the population—“tend to use sex to alleviate their insecurities and promote intimacy. They sexualize their desire for affection...and use sex to gain a partner’s reassurance.”³⁰ Because they are highly motivated to preserve their relationships, they aim to please their partners sexually and can be less attentive to their own desires—a one-sided dynamic which is frequently commented upon in my Sexual Ethics classes. Like their avoidant counterparts, anxiously-attached persons “can cycle through relationships very quickly and rapidly become emotionally and physically intimate. However, because of this

style and root issue of just wanting to be loved, they find themselves (especially women) engaging in consensual, but unwanted, sexual experiences.”³¹

While attachment styles are certainly not wholly determinative of sexual behavior, in my estimation they usually point a person in a certain direction that will either be augmented or mitigated by other relevant powers. One of the more influential of these powers is gender identity, displayed through a performative script that is reinforced through years of cultural conditioning. When Professor Jennifer Beste asked what it means to be a college male in the 21st century, the answer she received from her students was clear: masculinity today involves (among other things) “being a sexually experienced ‘player’ by boasting of sexual conquests that conspicuously lack emotional ties.”³² College females, on the other hand, follow a different script. “The first criterion of the feminine ideal is to be thin,”³³ which sometimes leads to eating disorders. Second, they must appear to be “passive, weak, fragile, submissive and obedient,”³⁴ at least in front of males. Finally, they need to be “willing to embrace their expected role to appear and act as a sex object,”³⁵ all in an attempt to win “male attention and approval because their self-esteem and self-worth is intimately tied to males’ affirming their sexual attractiveness.”³⁶

How deeply young people will internalize these gender scripts will naturally vary, but in my experience, elements of them are present in most of the students I teach. Depending on their intensity, they will meld with particular attachment styles to either strengthen or lessen that style’s general tendency. For instance, when a young man with an avoidant attachment style is immersed in a masculine sports culture where pressure to be a “player” is deeply felt, he is more likely to hookup up on a regular basis than a male with a secure attachment style

who shuns the stereotypical masculine script. The latter gentleman may have more positive male role models in his life or have been moved by powerful stories shared by female friends, or perhaps even have a strong religious faith which encourages chastity and self-mastery. Similar observations could be made about women and the ways their attachment styles intermix—for better or worse—with gender scripts.

As Foucault would point out and simple observation would confirm, why a person acts in a certain way is attributable to a multitude of factors. The [collective] power which propels students' sexual choices "is exercised from innumerable points"³⁷ and the final decision to hookup or not "is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all [of] these mobilities."³⁸ To those powers already named we could point to many other factors which influence sexual decisions including the strength of one's self-esteem; the perceived attractiveness of oneself and a potential partner; the encouragement of one's friends; the messages communicated through advertisements; the sway of school-based sex education programs (which seem to vary widely in their quality and aims); and the impact of one's family of origin. The student quoted at the start of this article whose high school sexual experiences lacked romance, love or even fun, had this to say about her family dynamics and how it affected her:

I thought that since my mother was in an unhealthy sexual relationship, that it was my destiny to end up alone or with someone who hates me. This made me hate being in relationships throughout high school and college because I never thought that I was worthy or able to have a functional/happy relationship myself. So, in response I started sleeping around, having the most casual sex.³⁹

To understand where these thoughts are coming from, it is important to note that this student has a disorganized attachment style which means she would be expected to manifest tendencies of people with both anxious and avoidant styles; indeed, as the quotation shows she

does demonstrate both relationship insecurity—common among the anxiously attached—and promiscuity—characteristic of those who are avoidant. The impact of her mother’s unhealthy relationship only magnifies her anxious-avoidant inclinations.

Another female student with an anxious attachment style points to the way social media sets standards of beauty which impact both males and females:

Personally, I feel like the media has influenced my attitude about sex and my body image in a very negative way and I know many girls who have the same feelings. On social media, all you see is Kylie Jenner and Instagram models just posting half naked pictures and I know that is what all guys like. Media has set such high standards for what guys think is sexually appealing and I definitely feel like it makes me insecure even in my own relationship with my boyfriend. I feel as if what is sexually appealing is constantly being pushed in your face by today’s culture...I know it influences girls today and the way they dress and how they carry themselves.⁴⁰

In this case what the student is viewing on social media is reinforcing her attachment anxiety. Unlike the previous student who “started sleeping around,” this student experiences anxiety within the relationship with her boyfriend; she would likely be inclined to use sex to both relieve her distress and keep him happy and close by.

While the student quoted in the previous paragraph made the claim that guys like “half naked pictures,” there’s little doubt that guys also frequent sites with *fully* naked pictures (and films). Pornography on college campuses is not regularly discussed, but according to my students one can reliably assume that within the last 48 hours, at least 90% of the males in the dorms have viewed something pornographic.⁴¹ Although that figure is only anecdotal, few would dispute that watching porn is a regular pastime of a large number of college-aged males with access to a smartphone. Working out of a Foucauldian paradigm, pornography should be understood as another power that is concatenated onto the others previously mentioned,

presumably reinforcing tendencies to sexualize and objectify others and encourage a deeper dive into hookup culture. In the words of a recent male graduate, consuming porn can “manipulate the reward circuit in the brain, lead you to blend fantasy and reality, objectify women as entities of lust and, in general, lower one’s respect for women.”⁴²

Yet another layer of cultural conditioning emanates from the digital age in which we live. Everyone owns a smart phone and three-quarters of my students report spending 2-6 hours a day gazing and texting and swiping; the remainder are so transfixed that they habitually blow past the six-hour mark.⁴³ I take encouragement from the fact that most of the young people I talk with realize that they have become highly dependent (if not addicted) to their phones and have an inchoate understanding of their deleterious effects. According to sociologist Julie Albright, “research suggests that long-term excessive electronic exposure can have severe consequences to the development of nonverbal communication skills, empathy, and interpersonal relations. Those who spend more time staring at screens—particularly playing violent video games—may even ‘turn off’ the switch to empathy in their brains.”⁴⁴ Practically speaking, lack of empathy fuels callous sexual behavior and functions as a barrier to true intimacy which, in my class, we define as “a caring, interdependent relationship where the other is truly seen, deeply known, and maturely loved.”⁴⁵ Unless one gives signs of an empathetic disposition, there’s a low probability that anyone will let down their guard long enough to be truly seen or known, let alone loved. Similarly disruptive to intimate relationships is a reluctance to make oneself vulnerable, a widespread phenomenon that goes beyond those with avoidant attachment styles. According to my analysis, the discomfort with vulnerability can be traced to the social conditioning brought on by a ceaseless stream of social media

feedback. Virtually everything that is posted on Instagram or YouTube or Twitter or TikTok is either liked, commented upon or ignored, and the infiltration of these platforms into daily life creates the sense that one is constantly being judged by an audience trained to scrutinize every tweet, post or utterance. Fear of judgment can lead to anxiety and defensiveness, and all of these discourage vulnerability. When empathy and/or vulnerability are in short supply, intimacy is in peril.

In summary, when the emerging adults of Salve Regina enter my classroom each semester, they are living within a cultural concoction of force relations that variously interact in complex and hidden ways. A large majority have at least dabbled in the hookup culture—a few gladly, most ambivalently, a handful regretfully—but virtually everyone has come to accept that hooking up is a standard part of collegiate life, much like writing papers and crashing parties. They know much more about sex than their parents did at their age, what with Google at their fingertips and Pornhub only a few clicks away. The psychology majors are familiar with the concept of attachment styles, but hardly anyone can name their own or speak of its effects. Socializing mechanisms are similarly underappreciated. It is rare to meet a young adult who truly grasps the extent to which they are a product of their culture; most regard themselves as unique individuals, personally distinctive in a world where “everyone is different.” Further complicating matters, more and more young people these days are living with debilitating mental health issues and some are recovering from previous sexual trauma, the effects of which linger indefinitely. While I have never taught a Sexual Ethics course that did not enroll at least one virgin, it is more common to find young people at the other end of the experience spectrum, some able to tell tales involving dozens of partners.

All told, the personal, psychological and cultural powers I have described effectively impede student freedom and impair their ability to engage in healthy, humanizing relationships. Too often they get caught in a web of exploitation and injustice and they lack a time-tested moral framework to objectively evaluate their own or others' behavior. Although family values or religious faith or even a distaste for no-strings-attached sex might mitigate the pull of hookup culture, it remains a power that is difficult to tame or for young people to escape. As one of my students recently explained, "I'm an emotional person who really thrives off of connection, yet I find myself conforming to the culture, which makes me angry. I tend to be a person who likes to go against the grain, so it frustrates me that I feel the need to participate in something that has been encouraged by my environment. I wasn't peer pressured by a person; I was peer pressured by social media and the culture."⁴⁶

Is this student's frustration just a sign of the times or is there a way to ameliorate the conditions under which she and other undergraduate students live? In the final part of this paper I will describe the mercy-filled approach I have taken to bring a greater measure of freedom to young adult lives, an approach which tries to mitigate some of the debilitating forces whose power is not well understood.

A Different Kind of Power

In her frequently revised and regularly republished book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search of Meaning, Purpose and Faith*, Sharon Daloz Parks writes "It is my conviction that in the cycle of human life the central work of young, emerging adulthood...lie(s) in the experience of the birth of critical awareness and consequently in the dissolution and recomposition of the meaning of self, other, world and 'God.'"⁴⁷ While there

are many ways to mentor emerging adults, I believe that good teaching, which includes “exposing people to ideas and experiences that challenge their expectations and worldviews,”⁴⁸ is a promising way to bring forth the critical awareness that can foster thoughtful reappraisals and challenge the hegemony of hookup culture. Envisioned through a lens of Foucauldian power, the pedagogical tools that a professor employs—the texts, assignments, feedback and class atmosphere—are the “force relations” that support one another and form a “system” (i.e., the course) where students are confronted, strengthened and transformed due to the “strategies” which find their “institutional crystallization” in the syllabus.

Moving beyond Foucault and speaking as a faculty member of Salve Regina University, I will maintain that teaching courses like “Sexual Ethics” or its sequel is an *act of mercy* to emerging adults precisely because they are immersed in a milieu... that idealizes and promotes casual sexual exchanges over other kinds of romantic encounters.⁴⁹ While some students may find this environment attractive and do not have a felt need for mercy, for many it can be quite a chaotic scene, well captured by this graduate of the sequel course “Friendship, Love and Romance”:

My relationship history has just been around sex, and I hate it, but I also don’t know how to get out of it. Like how do you get people to stop looking at you as an object?...Guys have just used me for sex way too many times that now I have no trust. When a guy tries talking to me, I automatically think they are trying to sleep with me, and sadly, I’ve been right and have fallen for the trap. I hate feeling like an object or a hoe. I hate having my body count so high that people think I like that...well news flash...I hate it.⁵⁰

These words came from a young woman with an anxious attachment style who, at her core, just wants to love and be loved. But clearly she is frustrated, her body overworked and her spirit undernourished. It is the biblical psalmist who wrote “*Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am*

languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my body is in terror" (Psalm 6:2), but it could just have easily been the student quoted in the passage above. In a more colloquial translation that equally hits the mark, the tormented pleads for mercy because "I'm so starved for affection."⁵¹ These are my students, particularly those with insecure attachment styles, with bodies that have been used for sex, but the kind of sex that lacks intimacy, a sex without love. If one follows the Jesuit ethicist James Keenan who holds that mercy is "the willingness to enter the chaos of others to answer them in their need,"⁵² then it is not difficult to see that engaging such students with a thoughtful and relevant pedagogy is a mercy that is sorely needed.

In the Bible, the English word "mercy" is used as the translation for three different Hebrew terms, and in Psalm 6 the Hebrew word used is *hēn/hānan*, which carries the sense of mercy as a "grace" or "favor." This sort of mercy is considered to be a "free gift, with no mutuality either implied or expected. Not necessarily enduring, this quality is dependent solely on the giver and usually occurs between unequals."⁵³ I believe this sense of mercy accurately captures the teacher-student dynamic that is present in my courses. Almost all of the students who visit my classroom are there for a single semester; in most cases we do not have an enduring relationship. While I do learn from listening to their experiences and observations, we are certainly not equals or peers; I have had much more formal education as well as life experience and consequently, I hope, acquired more wisdom. They are dependent on what I give them, and I give freely of what I have learned.⁵⁴ Finally, it should be noted that what I am describing is very much in concert with what Rollo May refers to as *nutrient power*, a power that is used for the benefit of others that presumes inequality and originates out of concern for

another's freedom and wellbeing. "At its best," May notes, "teaching is a good example" of nutrient power.⁵⁵

What, then, are the nutrients which nourish these hungry students? My seminar-style courses⁵⁶ feature an eclectic set of texts drawn from multiple disciplines. We begin with a brief introduction to moral foundations, privileging virtue ethics for its attention not only to what we should do, but also to who we want to become. During the first week of study I present an anthropology that locates individual identity at the intersection of three influences: our biological and psychological characteristics; the environmental forces which impact us; and the choices we make that shape our destinies. I explain that they have arrived at a point in their lives when their power to choose has never been greater, unless, of course, their freedom is somehow constricted. At first, they don't necessarily believe that their freedom is appreciably compromised; however, by the end of the semester they have usually revised their judgment, though in the process of doing so they have paradoxically grown in the very freedom whose limitations they now recognize. When they are free, I argue, they will pursue true intimacy for that is what we all desire and need to thrive. Of course, some of us run away from intimacy for it requires that we make ourselves vulnerable and for many people—particularly those with an avoidant attachment style—vulnerability can be frightening. Some students know this from first-hand experience.

As might be becoming obvious, a significant portion of the semester is dedicated to growth in self-awareness. Students critically examine what has shaped them—their families, values, attachment styles, relationships, education and life experiences—and analyze their lives in dialogue with authors and filmmakers whose work speaks to their world. They generally

revel in the explanatory power of attachment theory and by the end of the semester there is universal acclaim for the insights which that tool has provided. We take a brief tour into the thought of Michel Foucault then take a longer look at the ways that the wider culture has conditioned them, particularly with regard to their ideas about sex and gender. As might be expected, we examine the dynamics of the hookup culture in which they are immersed, largely with the aid of Donna Freitas's *Sex & the Soul*⁵⁷ which also helpfully examines a vastly different purity culture found on the campuses of Evangelical Christian colleges. We clarify concepts that are regularly confused and introduce topics that are often new territory: the difference between having sex and sharing intimacy; why people choose to have sex and what it means to be "sexually intelligent"; the characteristics of infatuation as opposed to those of mature love; what healthy sexuality looks like compared to sexualization; what distinguishes good sex from great sex; and how Christianity has regarded sex in the past vs. more contemporary and positive Christian interpretations of the present. In "Sexual Ethics" we briefly touch on the ways technology usage can undercut our capacity for vulnerability and empathy, the two pivotal virtues for the development of intimacy. The semester reaches its climax when students read excerpts from Margaret Farley's *Just Love*,⁵⁸ focusing largely on her norms for "just sex" that bring to light what sex with justice looks like. In essence, what the course is both holding up a mirror to life as many of young adults experience it, while simultaneously presenting a picture of life as it could be given greater freedom and a loftier vision.

Students write reflectively throughout the semester. They share reactions to *Sex & the Soul* through online discussions, an exercise through which they often learn that there are more people than they realize who have serious reservations about hookup culture. In another,

more private venue they are provided a “safe space” to write in journals where they can process what they are learning in words that are visible only to my eyes. Frequently, after they learn the differences between infatuation and true love, students are able to review their romantic history and better understand why some relationships fizzled while others thrived. Grasping and internalizing that love is “the free decision to respond to and nurture the beauty and potential seen in another”⁵⁹ is one of the more important learning outcomes of the semester. Over the fourteen-week span of the course the students also write more formal papers where they are given an opportunity to a) articulate their values with regard to their sexual lives; b) examine the “powers” or influences on their sexual development; and c) describe their vision for a fulfilling sexual relationship as the semester draws to a close. A surprising number of students comment on how much they enjoyed writing these papers, often because the assignment offered an opportunity to examine an important aspect of their identity that had never been seriously pondered. One student put it this way: “When writing the papers for this class, I was asked to think back on experiences and feelings that I had never analyzed or honestly even thought about in any depth, but when I did this, I feel that I found a lot of answers to questions I was looking for and found out a lot about myself that I maybe didn’t know or acknowledge before.”⁶⁰ While my sense is that most students complete the assignments with considerable openness and great sincerity, some are more self-revelatory than others. When offering feedback, I try to mentally enter the chaos of their lives and respond in an empathetic and helpful way. While I try not to function as either a therapist or a catechist, my interests in pastoral ministry are clearly an asset. Sometimes my comments are quite substantial.

Having now taught continuously-evolving versions of relationship-focused courses for more than a decade, I have become comfortable with their content, format and challenges. In hindsight, I believe the introduction of attachment theory as a topic on my syllabi has been one of the more significant pedagogical developments over the course of my teaching career. Unfortunately, one is hard pressed to find any mention of attachment styles in either the academic literature on sexual ethics or in popular treatments of hookup culture.⁶¹ In my judgment, identification and consideration of attachment styles, within a wider context of personal identity development, should be an integral part of the core curriculum of any Catholic institution that aspires to the holistic education of its students. Their applicability goes well beyond what I have discussed in this paper.

Student responses to learning their own attachment style has been uniformly positive, and end-of-semester reflections on the entire curriculum are also quite encouraging. The young woman recently quoted who had come to “hate” having such a high “body count” closed out her semester with these insights:

Like I’ve said in the past, I have never had a boyfriend. I used to blame it on the guys, which is partially the problem, but a lot of it had to do with myself. I needed a class like this to show what is needed in a mature relationship and how I’m lacking in some of that. I’ve lost a lot of self-respect for myself/love for myself when I let people take advantage of me. I know I am worth so much more than what I have done. I remember the Journal Entry about Love and how I just shared all my feelings. I was given harsh, but real, advice that gave my mind that wakeup call I needed. How can I truly say I love myself when I had no respect for my worth, body, and even feelings? I sit here today, confidently, knowing the woman I am. Yes, I’m not perfect, but why would I settle for immature love when I know EXACTLY what mature love takes....and I’m capable of it...I never thought I would take a course that would benefit my future in something so necessary like friendships, love, and romance. I just want to say, “Thank You.”⁶²

In my judgment, this quotation illustrates well the restorative qualities of mercy. The first time I quoted this now hopeful emerging adult, she presented as someone duped by guys who used her for sex “way too many times,” leaving her with “no trust,” “feeling like an object” and having no idea “how to get out of” her demeaning and self-defeating situation. By the end of the course, however, she had accepted more responsibility for both her past and her future and she was empowered to claim her human dignity and pursue the type of love relationship she needed and deserved. As the chaos was giving way to some light, she recognized the gift and was grateful.⁶³ I do not offer this example to broadcast my own virtues as a teacher, but rather to highlight the transformative potential of a mercy-inspired pedagogy that encourages critical awareness. My personal interactions with this student were minimal; we have never spoken in person and what she learned in the course came just as much from her encounters with texts, assignments and classmates as from any words of wisdom that came from my lips. This course content and pedagogy could be replicated, and no doubt achieve similar results. When implemented thoughtfully the effects can be powerful, particularly when young people are able to own their innate desire for intimacy and appreciate the role of empathy, vulnerability and love in making intimate relationships possible.

Though power is often wielded in harmful and self-serving ways, it can also be used for the good of others by those of us called to mentor emerging adults. Young people in their late teens and twenty-something years present faculty like myself with numerous opportunities to exercise mercy-inspired power to facilitate a reconsideration of socially received assumptions about how relationships work and what true intimacy actually entails. With a generous spirit

and a thoughtful pedagogy, we can support our students so that they can grow in freedom, forge new meanings, and construct satisfying lives that do justice to their dreams.

¹ *The Newport College—Salve Regina Catalog 1978-80*, 116.

² *Salve Regina University Undergraduate Catalog 2003-2005*, 221.

³ “The Intensity of Values in a Meaningful Sexual Relationship,” unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. For the sake of students’ privacy, I will not be including names in citations but all student quotations in this paper are used with the permission of the students, authorized in writing.

⁴ “Experiences,” an unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

⁵ Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture Is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 2-3.

⁶ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 22.

⁷ Freitas, *The End of Sex*, 5.

⁸ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Second College Edition (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985).

⁹ In this context I define freedom to be the ability to choose or act in a voluntary way, unimpeded by forces which cloud perception or reasoning.

¹⁰ Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M., “Power,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 754.

¹¹ Ruffing, “Power,” 753.

¹² Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972), 99.

¹³ May, *Power and Innocence*, 106.

¹⁴ May, *Power and Innocence*, 109.

¹⁵ May, *Power and Innocence*, 112-13.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92-93.

¹⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95-96.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 94, 93.

²⁰ Peter Lucas, “Why the sexual objectification of men isn’t just a bit of fun,” *The Conversation*, September 18, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-the-sexual-objectification-of-men-isnt-just-a-bit-of-fun-103145>.

²¹ Colleges and universities with an exceptionally strong religious culture would have a somewhat different story to tell, though even on campuses where hookup culture is frowned upon, sex within established relationships is more accepted even if not officially condoned. See Donna Freitas’s *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) for a discussion Evangelical purity culture, and Jason King’s *Faith with Benefits: Hookup Culture on Catholic Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) for a discussion of Catholic campus cultures. In King’s analysis, the only Catholic colleges where you are likely to find very much sexual restraint is on what he calls “Very Catholic Campuses” which comprise less than 10% of Catholic colleges and universities.

²² “Experiences,” an unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

²³ M. Lynne Cooper, et al., “Attachment Styles, Sex Motives, and Sexual Behavior: Evidence for Gender-Specific Expressions of Attachment Dynamics,” in *Dynamics of Romantic Love: Attachment, Caregiving, and Sex*, ed. Mario Mikulincer and Gail S. Goodman (New York: The Guilford Press, 2006), 244.

²⁴ Peter Lovenheim, *The Attachment Effect: Exploring the Powerful Ways Our Earliest Bond Shapes Our Relationships and Lives* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2018), 18.

²⁵ Besides the anxious and avoidant attachment styles, there is a third, less common insecure attachment style known as “anxious-avoidant” or “disorganized” attachment. Applicable to approximately 5% of the population, those with this style register high on both the anxiety and avoidance scales.

²⁶ Cooper, et al., “Attachment Styles, Sex Motives, and Sexual Behavior,” 247.

²⁷ Rebecca D. Stinson, “Hooking Up in Young Adulthood: A Review of Factors Influencing the Sexual Behavior of College Students,” *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 24:2 (Feb 2010): 107.

²⁸ Cooper, et al., “Attachment Styles, Sex Motives, and Sexual Behavior,” 248.

²⁹ Lovenheim, *The Attachment Effect*, 95.

³⁰ Lovenheim, *The Attachment Effect*, 95.

³¹ Stinson, “Hooking Up in Young Adulthood,” 108.

³² Jennifer Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 51-52.

³³ Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics*, 54.

³⁴ Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics*, 55.

³⁵ Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics*, 55.

³⁶ Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics*, 60.

³⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 94.

³⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93.

³⁹ Unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

⁴⁰ Unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

⁴¹ Women also watch porn—frequently with their partners before or during sex—but research shows that male viewers usually outnumber female viewers by a 2:1 ratio. See Michel Castleman, “This Is Why Women Watch Porn,” *All About Sex* (a *Psychology Today* blog), June 1, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-about-sex/202006/is-why-many-women-watch-porn>.

⁴² Unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

⁴³ The percentages are extrapolated from surveys I have taken at the start of my classes over the past two years.

⁴⁴ Julie M. Albright, *Left to Their Own Devices: How Digital Natives Are Reshaping the American Dream* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2019), 273.

⁴⁵ This is my own definition which I share with my students.

⁴⁶ Unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

⁴⁷ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 9.

⁴⁸ Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 217.

⁴⁹ For a brief but revealing account of the hookup environment, see Lisa Wade, “Sex on Campus Isn’t What You Think: What 101 Student Journals Taught Me,” *The Guardian*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/23/sex-on-campus-hookup-culture-student-journals>.

⁵⁰ Unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student’s privacy.

⁵¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁵² James F. Keenan, S.J., *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism*, Third Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1.

⁵³ Julia Upton, R.S.M., “Mercy,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 653.

⁵⁴ In the interest of full disclosure, I do receive a salary for giving students what I have learned, but I do have great freedom to decide what to teach. The content I choose and the care with which I treat my students is not a contractual obligation; it is indeed a free gift.

⁵⁵ May, *Power and Innocence*, 109.

⁵⁶ While I teach several courses which engage the themes found in this paper, the remarks that follow will primarily focus on my "Sexual Ethics" course which is the most pertinent to these considerations.

⁵⁷ Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁸ Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁵⁹ Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, Second Edition (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1996), 140.

⁶⁰ Unpublished manuscript in the author's possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student's privacy.

⁶¹ Most treatments of attachment styles in relation to sex, love or romance are found in the scholarly journals pertaining to psychology or counseling, or in popular works on relationships written for a general audience.

⁶² Unpublished manuscript in the author's possession. Quotation used with permission, but the attribution is withheld to protect the student's privacy.

⁶³ The "harsh but real advice" that prompted a "wakeup call" refers to comments I made on her journal entry that reviewed the sexual choices typically favored by people, like this student, with an anxious attachment style.