The year is 1952. The town is Smallsville, Indiana on a Friday night and the football team just won homecoming. Jack and Jill drive toward Victory Lane, the local lovers’ lane. Jack is glad the Wolves won the football game; otherwise he would have never been able to talk his dad into letting him borrow the family car. He parks the car and begins to neck with Jill while Frankie Lane is singing “Diana” on the radio. Jack smiles to himself, figuring he will score twice tonight. The song’s refrain—“Diana, oh Diana. . . .”—barely fades as the song comes to a sudden halt due to a warning on the radio. An excited announcer warns that a crazed killer with a hook instead of a left hand has escaped from the nearby mental institution. The killer, notes the reporter, has a history of preying on young couples that park in isolated spots to engage in sins of the flesh. Stony and Buffy squeal with delight as they engage in rip-roaring sex. After the two lovers arrive at Buffy’s house, Stony tells her good night and reminds her not to forget to take her pill. As Buffy opens the car door to let herself out, she discovers a hook swinging on the door-handle. She casually tosses the hook into the bushes, thinking to herself: “Because of the pill I’m off the hook. I can’t get pregnant.”

The first of these two narratives is a retelling of the original urban legend “The Hook,” popular with adolescents in the 1950s and 1960s. Like all legends, this one “represents an articulate dramatization of cultural meaning . . . capable of triggering in the audience a rich and complex set of deeply shared cultural values” (Iwasaka and Toelken 43). As an urban legend, “The Hook” in many ways articulates the fears and anxieties of the society in which it circulated. In particular, it expresses deep-rooted concerns about the possible consequences of teenage sexuality—namely, teenage pregnancy and public disgrace. In order to avoid this fate, teenage girls would tell the hook legend to each other, as well as to their boyfriends, to warn against the dangers of promiscuous adolescent sexuality (Dundes 30). But “The Hook” as an urban legend diminished in importance during the 1970s (Ellis 65-66) as the social strain that the story addresses was alleviated, at least in part, by new social policies that focused on women’s bodies and sexuality. These policies all but eliminated the fear of unwanted pregnancy by “giving women control over their sexual and reproductive lives” (Bailey 560). The rise and fall of the “Hook” legend not only reflects a major change in American sexual mores, but also suggests that an urban legend can effectively bring a social issue into the public spotlight, identify it as a pressing social problem, and contribute to its resolution.

The legend of the man with the hook took hold of the popular imagination in a relatively conservative era. Tracing the emergence of “The Hook” to the late 1950s, Jan Harold Brunvand provides a version of the legend as it appeared in a column written by Abigail Van Buren on Election Day 1960. He notes, however, that the “teenage oral-tradition underground had done the
job [of popularizing the legend] well enough long before the election day of 1960. Teenagers all over the country knew about ‘The Hook’ by 1959” (Brunvand 49). Bill Ellis agrees with Brunvand, citing research offered by Linda Dégh that places the legend in Indiana in 1958. Ellis also notes that one of Dégh's sources suggests that his wife first heard the legend as early as 1951 (Ellis 63). He further observes that the popularity of “The Hook” peaked in 1960 and declined in the 1970s, “with the last traces of its circulation vanishing by 1980” (65-66).

But what did “The Hook” mean to its original audience, and why did such a popular urban legend become obsolete? Previous interpretations of the urban legend vary. Brunvand argues that “The Hook” is just a horror legend whose “scare appeal is universal” (Doberman 70). To Dégh the legend represents a “natural dread of the handicapped” and expresses prejudice against handicapped people (qtd. in Ellis 64). In fact, some variants of the legend dwell on the terrible looks of the hook-man (Ellis 64). Dundes offers a Freudian psychological analysis of the legend, arguing that it summarizes the fears that teenage girls have about parking with teenage boys. Like the crazed man with “the hook,” these boys might lose control and have their hands (hooks) all over their girlfriends—or even worse, might try to get their “hooks into them.” The girl, mindful of her own sexual potential, might be afraid that she could lose control over the situation and give in to the boy. In either case, according to Dundes, “the hook” is a phallic symbol, erect and ready to penetrate the body of the girl. Thus it is not the fear of an escapee from a mental institution that frightens the girl, but the “sexual attack of the girl’s date which provides the emotional raison d’etre of the story” (Dundes 30-31).

In another sense, the hook might stand for an unwanted pregnancy. In the 1950s and early 1960s an unwanted pregnancy was a major crisis, and in many states abortions were illegal. The shame suffered by the young woman and her family was significant. Young women finding themselves with child often left town and went away to live with “Aunt Mae” until after the baby was born and they could return to school. Consent to marriage on the part of the male partners in order to “do the right thing” brought significant life consequences for them as well. They too listened to the telling of the tale with some trepidation. Thus “The Hook” as an urban legend was a cautionary tale among both sexes of teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s, even as it titillated the very same audience. If “modern urban legends reflect our concerns, our fears, our prejudices, and our delight in other people’s folly and misfortune” (Holt and Mooney 10), “The Hook” was no exception.

But over time the context of the legend changed. Concerned parties framed the social issues that “The Hook” focused on, particularly unwanted pregnancies, as social problems, and they resolved these problems through government policies. These policies addressed such thorny social issues as legalized abortions, making contraceptives widely available, family planning, and sex education programs in American schools. As Buffy in the second story notes, she is “off the hook” because she is taking contraceptives (“the pill”) to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. Buffy in 1982 has options that reduce her anxiety—options that young women like Jill in the 1950s and early 1960s simply did not have. One might argue, in fact, that Buffy’s peace of mind came about as a consequence of Jill’s terror.

Best and Horiuchi explain how unconstructed responses to a social concern become constructed as a social problem through an urban legend (495). “Urban legends, like collective behavior and social problems construction, are responses to social strain, shaped by the perception of the threat and by social organization” (488). In
other words, all cultures have beliefs, and these beliefs carry with them mores, expectations, and attitudes that influence behavior. These mores, expectations, and attitudes may also produce social strain, here defined as "discomfort caused by existing social conditions" (496). In the case of "The Hook," this means the fear among boys and girls—perhaps especially girls, who are far more likely to be victimized by rape—that parking in isolated places will lead to sex, which will in turn lead to the disaster of pregnancy.

People respond to social strain in one of three dominant ways: collective hysteria, urban legends, or social problems construction (495). Collective hysteria alone cannot explain the rise of this urban legend. Typically collective hysteria is short-lived and bound to a particular geographical area (Best and Horiuchi 495). Take, for example, the hysteria caused by the famous Orson Welles radio broadcast of War of the Worlds. People thought that the Martians were really invading. The hysteria did not last long because people realized that the threat was not real. By contrast, the issues raised in "The Hook" are as enduring as courtship itself and societal in scope.

A second response to social strain is the creation of urban legends. Best and Horiuchi note that "By repeating urban legends, people can respond to social strain, expressing their doubts about the modern world" (492). This response relieves the strain by addressing the issues that we do not want to talk about and by making us confront them head-on. But unlike constructed social problems, discussed next, urban legends give representation to unconstructed social problems. They are unconstructed for three reasons. First, the social strain expressed in the urban legend is not real (i.e., false threats). Second, claims makers—those who argue that certain conditions are social problems (Best 11)—have not attempted to raise the social strain to the policy level. Third, the discussion of the social problem remains informal and relatively indirect (Best and Horiuchi 496). Applied to the "The Hook," Best and Horiuchi’s analysis suggests that this popular story arose as a response to social strain, particularly among teenage girls. While the threat of a maniac with a hook attacking young couples while they were parking was not real, the oral and informal transmission of the urban legend was a way to discuss the issues associated with dating, sex, and courtship. And "knowing what the aggregate of people are doing, saying, and meaning is at the very heart of understanding culture" (Iwassaka and Toelken 50).

It follows that, from the origin of "The Hook" as an urban legend in the 1950s to the beginning of its decline in the early 1960s, the primary stakeholders in this conversation (teenagers) used an unconstructed approach (the urban legend) to resolve social strain as they experienced it in American culture. Ellis suggests that "The Hook" served no popular function after the 1960s, but this is not to say that the legend is altogether dead. The legend of the hook survives, but now it is swapped by adults and told to children at structured events such as Halloween parties (Ellis 66). If this is the case, what made the legend a relic of the past? What became of the social strain that gave it currency in the first place?

The third method of addressing social strain in society is through "claims making." Individuals and/or groups make claims that an issue or condition is in fact a social problem—that is, they construct or recognize the social problem. A number of important concepts are associated with the constructionist approach: interest, resources, and ownership (Best 11-12). What interests are the claims makers promoting? How might they benefit? Do the claims makers possess enough resources (time, numbers, money, political influence, etc.) to mount a successful campaign? Do the claims makers have authority over the issue and thus "own" it? Do those in power accept them as legitimate spokespersons? Best also notes that claims makers can be "insiders" or "outsiders" (13-15). Insiders are "regular players" in politics such as lobbyists; outsiders might be "cranks," dissidents, or social movements. Not surprisingly, outsiders will have a harder time in getting their claims placed on the policy agenda. Often they must use the media to raise the public’s awareness about the issues or conditions in order to get their claims addressed. Finally, Best suggests that since all claims must compete in the "social problems marketplace," some issues/conditions receive attention and others do not (15). Such is the nature of political discussion. If successful, however, claims makers
will construct a social problem and government policy will relieve the social strain.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, "The Hook" as an urban legend allowed teenagers to handle the social strain associated with adolescent sexuality. This unstructured approach to managing social strain became widely accepted by teenagers and probably even condoned by adults. The urban legend sent the right social and cultural message: "If you park, the Hookman will get you." Or, as the legend is interpreted here, "If you park, young lady, you may get pregnant." This is the message teenage women were relaying to other teenage women and their boyfriends through the oral transmission of "The Hook." Then, beginning in the 1960s, the culture that teenagers lived in started to change very rapidly. They found themselves in the midst of changing social values, and many of them participated in the Civil Rights, the anti-war, and the feminist movements. They found high-ranking public policy makers advocating significant changes in civil liberties for people of color and women. For example, the United States Supreme Court in the 1960s and 1970s handed down significant decisions that affected women's rights.

Perhaps the most important of these cases was Roe v. Wade in 1973. "This decision established a woman's right to seek an abortion and prohibited states from making abortion a criminal act" (Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir 149). This legislation helped to render "The Hook" obsolete as an urban legend. The social strain of an unwanted pregnancy could now be resolved legally in all 50 states. In 1973, the first year of Roe, 745,000 legal abortions took place; by 1977 the number had grown to 1.3 million (Gelb and Palley 132). The Food and Drug Administration had already approved an oral tablet called "the pill" as a contraceptive in 1960, which became available to a woman with a prescription from her physician. By 1969 approximately 8.5 million women in America were using the pill, and "By giving women greater control over their sexual and reproductive lives, this new contraceptive technology helped change the meaning and experience of sex in America" (Bailey 560-61). It also paved the way for Roe v. Wade.

Many events occurring in the socially tumultuous 1960s and 1970s helped to transform the issues embedded in "The Hook" from an unstructured response to social strain.
to a constructed social problem. In the long and arduous battle of women's groups, claims makers found support in the cradle of liberalism of the 1960s. The Supreme Court was a socially liberal court, and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson supported socially liberal policies, including equal pay for equal work for women. The time was right socially, economically, politically, and culturally for claims makers long denied access to legislators to press their demands and gain passage of social policies to ease the social strain that young Americans had been experiencing. In the grand scheme of things, what happened in terms of women's rights in the mid-1960s and 1970s was nothing short of monumental. Though the fear of unwanted teenage pregnancy is still part of our culture, the Buffy of today has replaced the Jill of 1952 as the poster girl for social reality.

Works Cited


