Sprinkle:

An undergraduate journal of feminist and queer studies

Vol. 8 – Spring 2015

The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy

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California Polytechnic State University – San Luis Obispo

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Editorial:

Some Perspective

I am honored to present this year’s volume of Sprinkle, a collection of essays and creative pieces from across North America. Unsurprisingly, it is a collection of differing voices, beliefs, ideas, cultures, lived experiences, and hopes for the future. Sprinkle continues to thrive as a journal of creative and revolutionary scholarship where students engage with the world.

But, this year, more so than ever, Sprinkle is a site of emerging and turbulent voices. Each author, although deeply committed to changing and improving the world, differs from the next. In spaces of feminist and queer studies, authors debate one another, struggling to make sense of the world, and argue with one another to find an answer. From textbooks to classrooms to courtrooms to history itself, a debate rages on between feminists and queer studies scholars. It should come to no surprise that the authors in this volume find themselves in the midst of a much larger tradition of debate and discourse.

Every year, Sprinkle hosts research and scholarship that is not only insightful but also innovative. Some of these pieces engage with medical technology, some of these pieces engage with emotions as sites of resistance or oppression, and some of these pieces call for redefinitions of ideas many of us take for granted. And most of all, some of these pieces are locked in a larger debate. Debates that span continents about what is progress, what are root causes of certain problems in society, and what should be done about it.

I am proud to say that the authors represented here and the editorial board at Sprinkle do not shy away from these new areas of research or these divisive debates. This year, Sprinkle openly frames itself as part of this debate and does so with the hope of changing the future in mind. We should never forget that what we do -- whether it is
research or publication -- is a political act, a call to action. Rather than reject this truth, we embrace it in the hopes that it will yield resistance, change, and liberation.

Before going further, Sprinkle would like to thank those who have supported Sprinkle and its efforts to create a safe, inclusive, and diverse space for academic inquiry. A special thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Meyer for her tireless support and insights. Even more thanks to California Polytechnic State University for its support. And to our fellow students and editors who have given their stories, their voices, and their bravery for tackling such complex and difficult questions.

Fight on,

Sean Martinez
Associate Editor
Editorial: *Sprinkle* growing

I am so excited to be preparing to publish volume 8 of *Sprinkle*. It has developed so much since our first publication in 2007 with papers exclusively from students in a Sexual Diversity Studies course at McGill University. I have enjoyed seeing the editors here at Cal Poly develop more independence and autonomy as they get more familiar with the publishing process. I am also thrilled with the growing number of quality submissions from diverse programs and institutions. We had close to 50 submissions this year and had a hard time narrowing it down to the manuscripts included here. There were so many quality texts that we had to defer several for publication in volume 9. Please keep spreading the word about *Sprinkle*; as the strength of this publication grows, we hope to expand to producing two volumes a year.

As you read this year’s volume, we hope you remain open to the new ideas and diverse perspectives represented here. Some of the strengths of feminism and queer theory lie in the ability to work with unresolved ideas and to explore our own discomfort as we push at the boundaries of normative cultural expectations. As bell hooks reminded us in her recent visit to Cal Poly, we must always be attentive to the intersecting ways that imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy situates discourses. This awareness drives me to explore ways in which we can work in coalition for the greater good of everyone who is caught up in this web of oppression. We hope you will find inspiration for new ideas, new collaborations, and new action in the words of this volume.

Elizabeth J. Meyer, Ph.D.
*Editor-in-Chief*
“The Personal is Political”: The Potential for Emotions and Feelings for Feminist and Queer Studies
Marriage Equality and “It Gets Better”: Neoliberalism and the absence of political feeling

By Kristi Carey

ABSTRACT. The fight for marriage equality and the “It Gets Better” campaign exist as two activist movements within contemporary gay liberation politics. This paper will understand these iterations of activism as both emanating from and perpetuating our neoliberal and capitalist present. Through striving for the politics of inclusion, both marriage equality and the IGB campaign merely rearrange the societal and rhetorical plane rather than undertake structural change—that which critically questions the very structures that individuals want to be included into. Using Foucault’s (1976) exploration of the repression of sex within marriage, as well as Cvetkovich’s (2012) theories of depression, I ask the reader to consider the space of emotional impasse that is sacrificed at the expense of these iterations of activism. Through critiquing the movements as absent of feeling and part of the veil of “progress,” this paper hopes to open up spaces for us to think together about what activism—saturated in feeling and with queer temporality—might look like.

The United States’ contemporary political, economic, and social climate can be characterized by the rise of neoliberalism and accumulation of capital. We live in a society that calls for multiculturalism, but disregards the need for reparations for slavery, promotes the inclusion of gay marriage but mandates the exclusion of employment non-discrimination clauses, and posits agency in the emergence of charter schools while enacting a war on public education. The materializations of activism that attempt surface-level change (e.g. multiculturalism, gay marriage, charter schools) are a palatable response to the symptoms of our neoliberal and capitalist present. In an
era that is also marked by inclusion/tolerance for some and exclusion/intolerance for others, these activist movements and their goals are, themselves reflective of the structural here and now. Given the recent histories of the inclusive and hopeful rhetoric of the LGBTQ\textsuperscript{1} rights movement, this paper will draw upon the fight for marriage equality and the “It Gets Better” campaign as two materializations that emerge out of and perpetuate the neoliberal present\textsuperscript{2}.

The following paper will argue that while exchanging the pain of histories of marginalization, abuse, and exclusion for the presence of happiness, inclusion, and optimism is unsurprising in the current political climate, that exchange serves to maintain contemporary power structures and further marginalizes transformative political activism. These two movements, in dismissing the emotional/political impasse of feeling, contribute to the image of a “clean” society while reproducing normative models of who does and does not belong. Employing Foucault’s (1976) theories of the History of Sexuality to marriage, and Cvetkovich’s (2012) theories of depression and public feeling to the “It Gets Better” campaign (IGB), I will argue that Berlant’s (2007) imagery of being “starved” is critical to how one might think about these two forms of activism and their productions, marginalizations, and limitations. This paper will ask the reader to think about futures beyond activism that deals primarily with the politics of inclusion/exclusion, and rather, to consider the necessity of feeling in transformative politics.

As has been argued by queer and feminist studies scholars (e.g., Spade, 2011, Whitehead, 2012, Conrad,

\textsuperscript{1} It bears mentioning that although these two movements are posited as the fight for LGBTQ rights, both have been similarly co-opted by the rights for the gay, white male in their inclusion/exclusion of certain bodies and the focus of their goals.

\textsuperscript{2} I want to be clear that while this paper will prove to be critical of both of these movements, this isn’t to say that they are driven out of love for the community or love for individuals. However, this paper is a statement on the movement’s political lives, and how those are enacted/ing in the present.
2014), the fight for marriage equality has become the priority of the gay rights movement, often distracting from pressing issues of healthcare, employment rights, and other plagues that affect the LGBTQ community most heavily. While I subscribe to this argument, what I am interested in deconstructing in this paper is how sex and sexuality are not discussed as part of the institution of marriage, in general. Per Berlant (2007), sex is spoken about as a relation or a tie to kinship; the act is rather disavowed in order to organize identities by way of marriage. It is cleaned in a way that makes it legible to the productive mechanisms (i.e. family, normativity) of society. Similarly, Foucault (1976) terms the “repression hypothesis” in describing how the discourse of sex and sexuality has historically served a sanitizing function—to repress or limit sex as raw desire. By regulating how sex could be talked about, and with whom, the act itself became defined not by desire, but a technology of politics and the economy. It is spoken about with concern to marriage, birth and death rates, and population survival. Therefore, the push for gay marriage represents an exchange of feeling for inclusion into societal structures. That is, for the years of history of oppression and abuse for sexual practice and preference, (certain) gay couples are granted access to marriage rights and are simultaneously attached to warm ideas of what it means to be a “happy” family. Sex becomes legible only inside of marriage. Those who do not subscribe to marriage equality as substantive change are then considered too radical, and those unmarried and having non-heteronormative sex, are “perverted” and further marginalized. The question remains as to what possibilities get lost in the portrait of “happiness” to which perhaps

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3 One might consider thinking about how activists are often pathologized as “crazy” or mentally unstable, also. Further, and in conversation with the contemporary political climate, it can even be seen as intentional—it’s easy to prescribe these people as crazy so as not to disrupt the social and political order. It creates a sense of distrust around certain identities that feeds power to the state.
those who are too radical or perverted are in tune, and of which the bulk of populations are starved.

Turning to the IGB campaign as a second iteration of surface-level/optimistic reform, I argue that while the discursive shifting that the campaign advocates for and tries to instill is important, it does not take the place of structural, political activism. Teens are told to believe that it gets better without the affirmation that political activism is unfolding in a way that will make it get better for even those that fall outside of the identities and preferences of white, middle-class, men. They must trade in the years of bullying and torment they’ve experienced in exchange for words of encouragement so that they may “move on” to a “happier” place. Again, there is an exchange of feeling forced without the transformation of structures that produce and re-produce that feeling. Drawing parallels to how the recognition of marriage forswears the act of sex, similarly, the IGB campaign halts the conversation surrounded around active and equitable political transformation. Cvetkovich (2012) speaks to an idea of “polite recognition,” meaning that at the expense of examining histories of oppression and saturations of pain, individuals are asked to move forward and accept the hope articulated through discourse (p.12). She further states that those who refuse or are not able to live up to the demands of the present are then pathologized/medicalized as depressed, and their lack of being able to “overcome” is prescribed as their own, personal problem. In the same way that radical politics and/or identity is presented as too perverted to be included in society, depressed identities are similarly medicalized as lying outside of the possibilities of inclusion.

Marriage equality and the IGB campaign were born as a response to the symptoms of the structurally violent and exclusive present. Lauren Berlant (2007) describes certain political iterations of looking for “ways out”—what one might interpret as activism for change—as “motivated by a hunger not for satisfaction but for help in articulating different materializations of a scene” (p. 435). That is, in a
time where neoliberal and unsustainable solutions are proposed for historically entrenched problems (e.g. gay marriage and the IGB campaign), the way out becomes guided not by structural overhaul, but a rearranging of the societal plane—rhetoric of inclusion and recognition rather than transformation. The “hunger” that Berlant illuminates is, in some ways, a projection of that which we wish made us feel satisfied (e.g. justice, equality) but instead leaves us empty in the wake of their praxis. Both marriage equality and the IGB campaign serve as examples of “way[s] out” that rid the complexity of historical legacy in hopes of looking for immediate remedy. They resonate as the only option when life seems helpless, otherwise. Thus, in a time where these types of antidotes have become commonplace (e.g. multiculturalism, charter schools, the non-profit industrial complex), it is unsurprising that these two movements have been co-opted and rendered legible by the state as “progressive” action.

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4 The emergence of these “immediate” responses to political struggle parallels to how pills and other treatments are immediately prescribed to treat depression. That is, both of these responses disregard the need for an evaluation of a larger politics—marriage equality/IGB and medication as both surface and/or superficial remedies to deeper, society issues.

5 Here we can draw on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and how power acts as productive (see Foucault, 1991). It is not only unsurprising that these movements arise with certain time-space interaction, but it is also intentional. Power is productive in the sense that it has the capacity to regulate how one might think about “activism” within the confines of society—it produces and gives rise to only certain kinds of movements. Lauren Berlant (2011), in her book *Cruel Optimism*, offers a paradigm that could be interesting to apply to society’s attachment to these two movements, as well. In defining cruel optimism, she states that it is a relation to objects that inhibits our own possibilities of the very thriving that motivates this attachment. In other words, marriage equality and IGB (as the objects) can be seen as kinds of optimistic reform that are provide “hope” as derived from pain (the motivator) in their wanting to achieve equality, but are ineffectual at addressing root causes of inequity. While the attachment is optimistic, it is cruel in that it is also disappointing—it doesn’t produce the “change” that one might desire. Thus, not only is it that we come to depend on these kinds of neoliberal political reforms, but we also begin to be
In both of these manifestations of forced exchange of pain for happiness, there exists a space of feeling that is all too easily dismissed. Referred to by Cvetkovich (2012) and Berlant (2007) as impasse (depressive and sexual), this space of feeling is one that is disorganizing, unstable, and painful. It asks for people to sit in the stuckness of what it means to feel, without trading those feelings over for ideals of happiness so quickly.

To contextualize this in terms of marriage equality, sex needs to exist as an entity outside of kinship—as a space of decomposition in itself. As per Foucault (1976), sex has a liberatory power were it not to be so attached to its discursive formation. That is, because of its pairing with the economic regulation or marriage, the act of sex is no longer thought of for what it is—a disorganizing, messy, and enigmatic act (Berlant, 2007; Foucault, 1976). Thus, we lose that sexual impasse and what it means to feel sex—what it means to be stuck in the chaotic mess of human interaction driven by uncontrollable desire. Foucault argues that sex has the capacity to be decompositional and a space of possibility beyond the current human condition. However, this space of pure feeling and sensation is disregarded and lost in our comprehension because of contemporary society's own neglect and preservation of that feeling.

In the IGB campaign, I have already mentioned that a similar exchange of pain and hope takes place. The impasse of feeling, here, can be best understood through Cvetkovich’s (2012) concept of political depression. In her work, she attempts to “depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a possible resources for political action rather than as its antithesis” (p. 2). Cvetkovich understands depression not as a personal problem, but rather as feeling the effects of the very unjust systems that blinded to the possibilities of something more—of radical change. To break away from this kind of reform, when it is the only “hope” that one can see, is world-destroying. However, so is to stay with the movements. They are simultaneously loving and destructive.
we exist within. She presents depression as “historical category, a felt experience, and a point of entry into discussions...about how to live” (p. 23). The impasse, then, comes in when we begin to saturate in the feelings of this political depression. Rather than understand negative feelings as a kind of hopelessness, Cvetkovich encourages individuals to sit in that emotion, to understand feelings as public, and letting those public feelings open one’s imagination to the possibility of structural transformation and action. In the same vein as Cvetkovich, Berlant (2007) describes her search for political transformation not as a “way out” (re: marriage equality/IGB campaign), but instead as a “way in”—a searching for a way to let pain and creative conceptions of temporality guide action.

As Berlant (2007) notes, cited in Cvetkovich (2012), “An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold but opens out into anxiety...An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the lag one hopes to have been experiencing all along (otherwise it's the end), it marks a delay” (p. 20, emphasis original). This space of impasse that Cvetkovich attaches to political depression, and that Foucault (1976) attaches to the possibilities of sex, is what has the capacity to reach outside of the normative, legible limits of societal change. It is framed as a space of stuckness and potential—considering the idea that slowing down and moving in non-linear time (as time gets messy with feeling and emotion) may not signify failure, but rather, possibility.

The fight for marriage equality and the IGB campaign exist as an eradication of that impasse—as a palatable response to the symptoms of our neoliberal and capitalist present. In logics of efficiency, productivity, and increasing privatization, it is somewhat commonsensical that these spaces of stickness or public feeling are not reproduced or preserved in the spirit of “progress.” The erasure of impasse is also productive. On one hand, there exists the image of the “polite” and “happy” agenda into which sex and gay liberation need be included. This is one that aligns with the logic of capitalism, and continues to
benefit the state in how they are rendered legible. However, and simultaneously, non-normative identities or feelings are pathologized as further marginal to the society. As Foucault (1976) argues, with the normalization of certain bodies into a polite imaginary, there exists an increased focus on the world of perversion that exists outside of this realm. And, similarly as Cvetkovich (2012) states, individuals that are deemed to be either crazy or (politically) depressed are told to seek medication, and kept outside of the realm of polite society, as well. In both the push for marriage equality and the IGB campaign, there is negativity surrounding those who do not participate in the inadequate and surface remedies that are offered by gay liberation politics, when in fact it is the saturation of impasse of feeling that is needed for political transformation.

Berlant (2007) offers that we are “starved” in relation to the lack of feeling that sense of sitting with our emotionality—that to which these “pervasive” identities are so in tune. In the case of sex, she relays that we miss the “emotional time of being-with” that gets lost in the relationality of sex to reproduction and the family (p. 440). In terms of depression, one can similarly state that in the forced exchange of pain for optimism, individuals are asked to give up that space of sitting with feeling. The “formal suspension that can allow for spreading vigilance in sociality,” meaning the impasse that fosters emotional awareness of societal injustice, is what has the capacity to drive transformative action—a politic that does not merely look to find hope in inclusion (p. 440). Rather than attempting to be part of the “polite recognition” or sanitization of a present happiness, what would it look like to embody queer politics and allow feeling to lead the struggle for a transformative kind of activism?

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6 Sara Ahmed (2010) speaks to this idea of the pursuit of happiness and ignorant wonder as having a sanitizing function in society—that is, eliminating that which is “unclean” or intolerable, and therefore perpetuates a similar condition of social and political purity.
Transforming the dichotomy of the un/productive time and space, this action would embody a radical politic worth fighting for—a future drenched in desire, feeling and basic human rights.

Kristi Carey is finishing her B.A. in Educational Studies and Peace & Conflict Studies at Colgate University. Her research interests lie in the political lives of institutions (e.g. the state, the school, the family) and their cultural and discursive productions and epistemologies. Moreover, she is interested in the potential for queer theory to disrupt the violence such institutions do onto individuals through their daily and systematic interaction. When not thinking about ways to enact a transformative politic, she is an avid fan of hot sauce, frolicking, and thunder storms.

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Psychosomatic Disorders in the Queer Community

By Tanner Gill

ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes and evaluates why psychosomatic disorders are present in such higher rates in the queer community than in other communities. To assess this issue, this report supplies research on the intersection amongst various sexual and gender minorities within the community, three psychosomatic disorders (eating, anxiety, and mood disorders), and the heteronormative and homophobic society in which the aforementioned items are positioned. These disorders are linked to the feeling of societal marginalization in communities where heteronormativity and homophobia are prevalent and predominant, and also the bullying, hate, and stigmatization that coincide with such social institutions. To combat the rapid onset of these psychosomatic disorders in the queer community, society must both recognize and also make efforts to mitigate the pernicious effects of heteronormative and homophobic mindsets.

In modern American society, homophobic actions and ideologies still run rampant throughout the aisles of conservative courts and the alleyways of mean-spirited metropolises nationwide. An alarming trend in today’s society is to find rising numbers of homeless youth in these alleyways; an even more somber norm dwells in the fact that “[t]irty to 40 percent of homeless youth living on the streets are teenagers who were thrown out or left their homes because they are homosexual” (Helminiak 17). An extensive list of grievances could be made on behalf of the queer community; this is why it comes as no surprise that members of the queer population are more susceptible to diseases of the mind and body, known as psychosomatic disorders. Psychosomatic disorders are “psychiatric disorders that are displayed through physical problems. In
other words, the physical symptoms people experience are related to psychological factors rather than a medical cause”; this family of psychological disorders can be “triggered by strong emotions, such as anxiety, grief, trauma, abuse, stress, depression, anger or guilt” (“Psychosomatic Illness”). In a country corrupt with homophobia where queer people are “frequent objects of satire, hostility, and contempt” and “lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are subject to widespread discrimination and social disapprobation”, this information may explain why the queer population may be most prone to these disorders (Mann 19; Schüklenk et al. 8). These disorders know no boundaries when infecting the queer community; this is why it is beneficial to approach this issue with an intersectional lens. Intersectionality, as defined by scholars Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, is “an integrative perspective that emphasizes the intersection of several attributes, for example, gender, race, class, and nation” (qtd. in Gibson, Alexander, and Meem 202). In this paper, an intersectional lens will be applied to investigate how three different types of psychosomatic disorders—eating, anxiety, and mood disorders—converge with the queer community specifically to create a pernicious climate for all its members.

The stresses compounded on queer youth are many: the fears that are an integral part of coming out to friends and family, societal acceptance, and maintaining a warm social network are unique to this community. An untoward result of these special stressors is the widespread development of eating disorders amongst the queer population. An eating disorder, as defined by the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), is a disorder that “include[s] extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding weight and food issues . . . that can have life-threatening consequences . . . [and] that affect a person’s emotional and physical health.” NEDA, informed by the American Psychiatric Association’s Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, discusses the various types of eating disorders. The three
most prevalent disorders are anorexia nervosa, characterized by “inadequate food intake” and “obsession with weight”; bulimia nervosa, characterized by consuming large amounts of food, “followed by behaviors to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting”; and binge-eating disorder (BED), characterized similarly to bulimia, but different in that no behaviors are developed to prevent weight gain. It is important to note that all three are inherently inseparable from feelings of low self-esteem as it relates to body image (National Eating Disorders Association). Poor individual body image is a redoubtable indication of physical dysmorphia to come.

This low self-esteem, in combination with a variety of other psychological, interpersonal, and social factors, demonstrates symptoms of a psychosomatic disorder. As a rule, the aforementioned sources of stress begin outside of the mind; however, they eventually penetrate an individual’s mental boundaries after much reinforcement and begin to implant themselves into the psyche until they become rooted in one’s everyday beliefs in a nefarious fashion. Once this process has taken place, the debilitating thoughts start to manifest themselves as somatic ailments. For individuals who exhibit disordered eating, this entails an increased risk of heart failure, reduction in bone density, muscle loss, kidney failure, dehydration, gastric and esophageal rupture, tooth decay, ulcers, and others. The most dire outcome is death, which occurs in the highest rates among individuals with eating disorders compared to all other psychiatric disorders (National Eating Disorders Association). With the looming threat of death as a noted and chief outcome of eating disorders, it is of paramount importance that society develops countermeasures to the onset of these illnesses.

In appreciation of the gravity of the development and somatization of eating disorders, it is even more startling how these life-threatening disorders affect the queer population specifically. In addition to the unique stressors of the queer community mentioned earlier, queer individuals also experience physical violence, gay-bashing,
bullying, and discrimination in schools and the workplace. More related to body issues, queer minorities are at greater risk for dealing with “[d]iscordance between one’s biological sex and gender identity,” “body image ideals within some LGBT cultural contexts,” and the “lack of availability of culturally-competent treatment [for eating disorders]” (National Eating Disorders Association). This is especially true for transgender youth. By nature, their outward appearance contrasts with their inward mentality. This in effect can incite a tumultuous war on the physical body. In a sample of sixty-five transgender youth, seventeen percent reported having experienced an eating disorder, and sixty-two percent expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies. Of the latter group, over half attributed their dissatisfaction to “gender-related issues” (Letizia). Body image issues are not restricted to transgender individuals, however. Both Austin et al. and NEDA are in agreement that all sexual and gender minorities are more likely to develop symptoms of eating disorders than their heterosexual, cisgender peers. Austin et al. find that “[s]exual minority girls had 2 to 4 times the odds of purging and diet pill use compared with heterosexual peers, and sexual minority boys had 3 to approximately 7 times the odds of these behaviors” (e18). In conjunction, NEDA reports that “lesbian women experience less body dissatisfaction overall” and that “gay men are disproportionately found to have body image disturbances and eating disorder behavior.” They continue by stating, “Gay men are thought to only represent 5% of the total male population but among men who have eating disorders, 42% identify as gay” (National Eating Disorders Association). As it currently stands, queer individuals command a staggering percentage of those affected by eating disorders while also representing a minority percentage of society in total.

These statistics and studies highlight only a small percentage of the repugnances that occur in the queer community in relation to disordered eating. It is clear that members of the queer community are much more likely to
develop an eating disorder than their heterosexual peers—a sign that points to minority stress and the relative heterosexual privilege that pervades society. A palliative, NEDA notes, is that “[a] sense of connectedness to the gay community was related to fewer current eating disorders.” This information alone points directly to the powerful and beneficial effects a strong and resilient queer community can have on its members. In this way, the queer community acts as a life vest for queer castaways adrift by the heteronormative flagship. Because of this, it is crucial that society not oppress the queer community, but that they foster it; this in turn ensures that society’s youth will be less prone to virulent eating disorders.

Just as anxiety and fear dominate the minds of individuals with eating disorders, these symptoms are also major components of both anxiety and mood disorders. Anxiety disorders are “mental illness[es] defined by feelings of uneasiness, worry and fear”; while everyone may experience feelings such as these irregularly, people afflicted by an anxiety disorder feel “an inappropriate amount of anxiety more often than is reasonable” (*HealthyPlace*). Examples of anxiety disorders are generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), characterized by an untargeted source of anxiety or dread; social anxiety disorder (SAD), characterized by fear and worry surrounding social situations; and simple phobias, characterized by fears of a known source (*HealthyPlace*). It is often remarked that anxiety disorders and mood disorders present themselves conjointly: “People with an anxiety disorder often have co-occurring mental health problems, such as depression” (*HealthyPlace*). This is why it is challenging to isolate anxiety disorders from mood disorders, and even eating disorders. Mood disorders are mental handicaps that disturb the normal mood of an individual. Mood disorders encompass a wide range of emotions: bipolar disorder, characterized by fluctuations in mood; and depression, characterized by a “persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest” and having “trouble doing normal day-to-day activities” (*Mayo Clinic*). Because
anxiety is common in those who suffer from depression and vice versa, it will be advantageous to discuss them simultaneously.

As psychosomatic disorders, anxiety and mood disorders are not simply maladies of the mind; they wreak havoc on the body, too. As a direct result of these disorders, researchers have documented somatic infirmities such as sleeping too much or too little, lack of energy, muscle tension, sweating, heart palpitations, low libido, changes in appetite, weight fluctuation, slowed thinking, back pain, headaches, and more (HealthyPlace; Mayo Clinic). Perhaps the most extreme somatic affliction in relation to these disorders is suicide. Both HealthyPlace and Mayo Clinic recognize suicide and suicidal ideation as lamentable possibilities of both anxiety and mood disorders.

The severity of anxiety and mood disorders cannot be overstated, especially when discussing its junction with the queer community. In many studies on this intersection, researchers often document the high likelihood of “poor mental health, suicide and self-harm, eating disorders, and substance abuse in LGBT populations” (Biddulph 18). Others assert that “the odds of major depression and conduct disorder were 4 times greater among . . . LGB youths than they were among . . . heterosexual youths” (Mustanski, Garofalo, and Emerson 2426). NEDA attempts to explain the discommoding rates of anxiety and depression among queer individuals by linking the mental disorders with “their sexuality or gender expression.”

While NEDA is correct in assuming that the queer community is more susceptible to anxiety and mood disorders because of their sexuality and gender expression, their wording places too much of the onus on the queer people themselves and not on the homophobic and heteronormative culture to which queers are exposed. The disdain for the queer community on behalf of a homophobic culture is the primary source for any psychological malfunction in queer individuals.

One way the homophobic mores of society are guilty of inflicting psychological harm on queer people is
evidenced by bullying in schools. Bullying occurs when one or more persons purposefully targets another person or persons with the intention of making the victim feel subhuman and socially inadequate. Many researchers have noticed that “[t]he consequences of bullying may last a lifetime and include loss of confidence and self-esteem, becoming withdrawn and nervous, reduced ability to concentrate, fall in academic achievement, truancy and school-phobia. Links have also been made with post-traumatic stress disorder” (Biddulph 18). Many queer youth are bullied because of their identity each year. This presents them with a choice: they can either stifle their self-expression and conform to the heteronormative culture with no penalty, or they can rebel in the face of adversity and face overwhelming retaliation in return. The lack of neutral ground is the most revealing of the oppressive culture in which queer youth are situated. Greene, Britton, and Fitts, in their study of bullying as it relates to the queer community, discovered that

“[h]omophobic bullying related to fears of relationship intimacy, feelings of being an outsider in social situations, perceived lack of a positive future, difficulty expressing emotions to others . . . [and] fears about meeting new people or facing new situations” (406).

The list of demoralizing side effects of homophobic bullying progress to even more perturbing outcomes, like “depression, suicidal ideation, [and] decreased life satisfaction . . .” (406). It is obvious that, while bullying in schools is a serious issue for all youth, it is particularly troubling for queer youth. In “normal” bullying, an out-of-place fashion choice may be the object of scrutiny; however, in homophobic bullying, bullies debase and denigrate a victim’s identity and thus their very soul in ways that can render them permanently scarred.

The bashing of queer individuals does not halt after graduation, though. Members of the queer community face backlash and violence in all areas of their lives. Arguably
more damaging than homophobic bullying are sexual-orientation-based hate crimes, in which victims are targeted and assaulted based solely on their sexual orientation or romantic preferences. In 2009 alone, approximately 1,482 queers reported being the victim of a hate crime based on sexual orientation (Griffin and Schuberth 109). Griffin and Schuberth make claims that sexual orientation-motivated hate crimes feature “more violent and brutal forms of aggression” than non-hate crimes; as a result of this higher level of homophobic hostility, these hate crimes “tend to have a greater impact on victims” than non-bias hate crimes (109; 114). Psychological ruin has been noted in association with sexual orientation hate crimes, as Griffin and Schuberth also report: “LGBT individuals who were victims of bias crimes . . . reported greater levels of psychological distress than their non-bias crime victim counterparts” (114). They continue by stating, “Furthermore, this psychological distress tended to be longer lasting and more severe,” and that “levels of depression, fear of one’s safety, nervousness, and intrusive thoughts were all significantly higher” (114). Therefore, hate crimes aimed toward the queer community exist as a formidable catalyst for the development of psychological symptoms related to anxiety and mood disorders. It is possible that, with these impending psychological torments mounted, suicide rates will also increase in the queer community. Helminiak cites that already, “Thirty percent of teenage suicides are among homosexual youth. Proportionately, this figure is at least three to four times higher than for other adolescents” (17). This number as it stands is far too great and needs desperately to be reduced, or at least contained, before society loses valuable queer voices. Griffin and Schuberth offer that “LGBT victims of hate crimes are more likely to report less belief in the benevolence of people.” Society should take immediate action to address the animosity toward the queer community as a result of its ingrained traditional social mores, then, lest the prior quote becomes its defining quality and legacy.
As gleaned from modern publications on psychosomatic disorders in the queer community, queer persons are developing eating, anxiety, and mood disorders at an unsettling rate. This accelerated materialization of both physically and psychologically deleterious disorders is rooted in homophobic and heteronormative attitudes amidst society. The implications of these disorders in the queer community are far-reaching and must be quelled before they become unstoppable epidemics that compromise the integrity of the community. Much like the AIDS epidemic of the twentieth century and the government indifference toward the plight of the queer community, ignorance and apathy toward these disorders is essentially purposeful negligence of a minority population. Therefore, it is crucial that society stirs from its complacency toward the queer community and its issues, for fear that society yet again must witness its queer people’s health suffer.

Tanner Gill, from Wilmington, NC, is a junior at Appalachian State University located in Boone, NC, where he is pursuing a double degree in English-Professional Writing and Communications-Public Relations and is actively involved with the Red Flag Campaign and the Henderson Springs LGBT Center. His interests include issues surrounding gender, body, sexuality, and interpersonal violence. Outside of academia, he enjoys hiking, movies, going to the beach, and playing with his two dogs.

References


Subversion of the Transgender Gaze Through Cisnormativity

By Debra Beight

ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes Halberstam’s interpretation of the transgender gaze as it applies to the character portrayal of Brandon Teena in the film Boys Don’t Cry. An oppositional approach examines the idea of a cisgender gaze that compromises the subjectivity of not only the character of Brandon but extending to dismissiveness towards trans identity as a whole. Dissecting the reveal scene from the film highlights Halberstam’s process of the transgender gaze and allows for a focus on cisgender interpretation and demands that illustrate cisnormative expectations on trans bodies and behaviors. Connecting these demands is the concept of abjection as described by feminist-philosopher Julia Kristeva, and how this liminal placement further erodes Brandon’s subjectivity in the eyes of a cisgender audience.

The Transgender Look by J. Jack Halberstam (2005) examines visual representations of gender ambiguity in motion pictures and coins the term, transgender gaze, as a reinterpretation of Laura Mulvey's male gaze. In Mulvey’s (1989) male gaze paradigm, women are either the fetishized object of male observation or they appropriate the active desire of the masculine subject who is doing the observing. Halberstam (2005) dissects the transgender movie portrayal of Brandon Teena from Boys Don’t Cry; the idea in this film is that a transgender gaze allows the audience to follow a specific narrative, the traditional male gaze and the female appropriation of it to establish points of identification, and yet replaces these with a gaze that permits a queer perspective. While the film is about presenting the tragic rape and murder of the transman
Brandon, it does provide moments where the audience takes on Brandon’s gaze and reads an ambiguity as both male and female (Halberstam, 2005). Although Halberstam defines the male, female and transgender gaze elements of the film Boys Don’t Cry, the unsettling notion of a cisgender gaze, one that demands explanation and verification in order to establish identity in terms and concepts that are acceptable to non-trans individuals is the concentration of this paper. This cisgender gaze feeds into cisnormative thinking in ways where even resistance is co-opted and cisnorms are given priority in narratives meant to honor trans lives.

Halberstam (2005) denotes the transgender identity in film as a paradox due to both “visibility and temporality” (p. 77). Visibility is affected in that there is the ever present precariousness of passing while under the constant threat of exposure. This paradox is highlighted during the film’s revealing bathroom scene; the antagonists John and Tom, who suspect that Brandon is not really a male, drag him into the bathroom and forcibly remove his pants to see biological confirmation of Brandon’s body (Kolodner, Vachon, & Peirce, 1999). Visibility and temporality converge when the exposure of Brandon’s physical identity occurs in the present even though the audience has already accepted Brandon as male, accepted him as passing throughout the initial narrative, making this their past and now the audience has to prepare for what is to come next in this unmasked future where Brandon’s new visibility is equated with danger and harm. During this scene, Brandon’s agency is being taken in this moment and we, the audience, suddenly switch to his point of view as he begins an out of body experience. He stares at the crowd of onlookers standing at the bathroom door and sees, “a fully clothed Brandon, a double, who returns the gaze of the tortured Brandon” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 88). This back and forth sequence between the stripped and castrated Brandon and the fully realized transgender one, highlights “the transgender gaze as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places at the same time”
(Halberstam, 2005, p. 88). The female Brandon seeing the male Brandon. This double view of transgender and its gaze, destabilizes the spectator’s sense of self and gender stability. It’s a non-fetishized way of seeing that looks with instead of looks at the trans body, at least, according to Halberstam’s interpretation.

In this scene Brandon is stripped from the waist down and a cisgender gaze is claimed by not only the perpetrators John and Tom, but by the audience as well with instance of looking and demanding a view of Brandon’s vagina. While Halberstam presents the queer perspective of the transgender gaze being served in this scene, the insidious nature of the cisgender gaze that demands to look and reveal what Brandon really is, is also present. Although there has been a temporality in the audience’s experience with Brandon through the film, the audience has accepted to this point that Brandon is male even with the clues to the contrary, it is this demand to see biological proof that the audience insists upon to fully understand his experience and the results of his rape and murder. The subjectivity of Brandon is abandoned for the visual confirmation that this is really a female we have been looking at and it is a female that will be raped and killed in the remainder of the film. We are excused from seeing Brandon as male any longer and we are able to truly pity Brandon’s experience and violent end because now we understand that it happening to a female body, and now it is inexcusable. This is how violent and intrusive a cisgender gaze can objectify Brandon’s corporality into a narrative that eases and assuages non-trans guilt at the resulting tragedy of his death.

This cisgender gaze also presents itself in the contrasting structures of John’s and Tom’s presentation of masculinity against the masculine performance of Brandon. Each performance, John’s, Tom’s, and Brandon’s, reinforce cisgender expectations and further buttress the effects of a cisgender gaze. John and Tom are portrayed as hyper-masculine, aggressive, brutish and simplistic caricatures of male dominance. They meet all expectations of the
cisgender gaze in that the audience needs confirmation of their villainy through their rough behavior, crude humor and language and constant reaffirmation of their actions that promote female subjugation. Brandon by contrast is presented as performing a type of chivalrous masculinity, decidedly less assertive and raw than John and Tom, but still following a normative thread in how gentlemen are expected to act (Hird, 2001). This is evident in his manner of dress, hairstyle, language and behaviors. It meets the demanding nature of the cisgender gaze because it confirms for the audience that Brandon is as male as he can possible be in his presentation. The act of transgressing feminine norms locks Brandon into masculine norms that serve to categorize him for public acceptability and accountability. It is the lack of ambiguity that propels the cisgender gaze and allows it to define expectations of both subjectivity and objectification.

Cisgender individuals, even those who consider themselves allies, align with ideas of identity politics and establish themselves as either/or. This binary of cisgender or non-cisgender or transgender or non-transgender creates an opposition that doesn’t bridge the gaps of difference, rather it enhances and underlines difference. It creates an other and a means with which to dis-identify as much as a means to identify with an individual or group of individuals. In the case of Brandon in the film, the audience is privy to his struggles and accomplishments in passing for male, his performance of male is rewarded by the acceptance and non-questioning of his existence. The audience views Brandon as devoid of affect because his actions are seen as only mimicry and imitation; we are permitted to join Brandon in his performance by sitting back and knowingly understand that this is the female actress Hillary Swank and she is doing a great job tricking us into believing that she is pretending to be a boy and we allow her to fool us because deep down we know better. This privilege of playing this game is at the heart of cisnormative existence because for us it is a game and for trans individuals it is, literally, in most cases life or death.
Even when we are presented with the horrific death of Brandon, we are excused from real empathy because we had the advantage of a cisgender gaze, seeing the ‘real’ Brandon, the physical body that was really female. Our empathy is engaged for this poor woman being raped and killed because she was found out rather than the rape and murder of a young man that was assumed to be not normal, a threat to a cisgender way of life and a failure of gender performance trickery where his death was incumbent upon his failings and not those of our society’s.

A function of the cisgender gaze and its relation to cisnormativity is apparent in what Julia Kristeva defines as abjection. The basis of cultural norms with respect to fixed differentials between the subject and the object is also dependent on the abject, that which is not an object yet not completely other to the subject (Kristeva, 1982). A cisgender gaze sees the murkiness in the boundaries between the transgender individual and struggles to find an understandable placement. Objectification of Brandon’s body is not a comfortable vantage point in that there is a knowing of what violence is about to be placed upon it. Brandon’s subjectivity is too foreign a concept for the cis individual and so the act of abjectification takes its place. There is a proximity to the subject, the gaze sees the humanity of the individual and resists harm inflicted upon it, but the familiarity in its strangeness, the inability to identify outside of the physical presentation of forms is what pushes the audience closer to seeing Brandon as almost an object to be studied (Kristeva, 1982). Inside this liminal existence, at the heart of cisnoms is the abject nature of trans identity. It disturbs identity itself, the systems, and orders in place and is not cognizant of borders, positions and rules (Kristeva, 1982). Subjectivity, objectivity collapse in on themselves in an abjective response that permits the audience distance while still insisting on explanation.

The demands of normality push the audience away from seeing Brandon as whole, in and of himself, without the reveal, without the confirmation, without the instance
on passing for our own comfort. The audience is immersed in a disingenuous semblance of empathy because in the end we just want to see and know how to classify Brandon. How different would the story have been, how would the film’s reception been shaped if the reveal scene was constructed in a way in which the audience was not privy to Brandon’s anatomy? Halberstam’s transgender gaze would have remained a vision for the trans community rather than something that was assimilated for the benefit of cisgender consumption. The look that is divided within itself is still a place of preservation for Brandon’s subjectivity, a place where he is permitted to look out and see himself reflected in his past and his future regardless of the demands the audience imposes on him.

Debra Beight is a recent graduate of The Ohio State University, earning dual degrees in Communication and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Beginning autumn of 2015 she will be pursuing her master’s degree in Public Health at Lund University in Sweden. Her research interests involve transgender/intersex person’s health, LGBTQIA individuals and the media, and safe-sex practices featured in pornography. Recently her work examined cisnormative policies in the medical industry and she is continuing her work in the area of pornography consumption and its impact on viewer’s safer-sex behaviors. She has been an active participant in gender and sexuality issues and women’s rights through NARAL, Planned Parenthood and The Straight Spouse Network.

References


Under the Knife: Trans and Intersex Identity Issues in Medicine
The Case of M.C. – An Argument for Legal, Medical, and Social Recognition of Ambiguity

By Debra Beight

ABSTRACT. This paper is an examination of the interconnectedness of juridical, medical, and social constructs surrounding intersex/DSD (Difference/Disorder of Sex Development) sex assignment surgeries. Looking at a pending court case involving a child that was in state custody at the time of their sex assignment surgery, we can observe the influences of the medical industry’s tendency to treat intersex conditions like disabilities, as sites of therapeutic interventions. These pathologized intrusions become government-sanctioned interventions that are supported by, and in turn bolster, societal expectations of conformity and normalcy.

The Case of M.C. – An Argument for Legal, Medical, and Social Recognition of Ambiguity

Awaiting trial in a South Carolina district court is a case involving a nine year old boy referred to in court documents as “M.C.”. Physicians and social service employees from the state made a decision to operate on M.C.’s ambiguous genitals and assign M.C.’s sex as female; however, M.C. has grown up identifying as male rather than female. The suit involving M.C. was brought forth on his behalf by his adoptive parents and they are suing the

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7 The suit specifies violations under the Fourteenth Amendment “that no State shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law”; there was no inquiry or hearing convened prior to the decision to operate on M.C. (M.C. v. Aaronson et al., 2013).
doctors and government officials in an effort to vindicate his rights to “bodily integrity, procreation, liberty, and privacy” (*M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* 2013). This case illustrates the imperative critique needed on the obligations of the medical community to serve the best interests of their patients, it questions who has the right to bodily autonomy, what influences those decisions, under what circumstances is that right removed from an individual, and what steps need to be taken to protect intersex persons from medically unnecessary interventions.

M.C. was born prematurely, along with a twin sister, in November of 2004; his sister died a few months after their birth and M.C. remained hospitalized until February of 2005 (*M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* 2013). While the South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS) had concerns about the parental fitness of M.C.’s biological mother and father, one week after his release from the hospital, M.C.’s parents voluntarily relinquished their parental rights and M.C. was placed into the custody of SCDSS (*M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* 2013). M.C. lived in foster care until his adoption by Pam and Mark Crawford, but was considered still in the legal custody of SCDSS until August of 2006. With legal custody came access and authorization of any and all medical treatments and procedures regarding M.C.

M.C. had been born with a condition called “ovotesticular DSD (Difference/Disorder of Sex Development)” which is characterized by the “presence of both ovarian and testicular tissue” (*M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* 2013, p. 12). M.C. was assigned as male at birth; he had a testicle, an ovotestis, which is a gonad that contains both ovarian and testicular tissues, as well as other male and female internal reproductive organs. He had an adequately large phallus and elevated testosterone levels but he also had a small vaginal opening below his phallus and “scrotalized labia” (*M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* 2013, p. 12). Following numerous hormone tests and an exploration of his internal sex organs, Dr. Amrhein, one of the defendants, defined M.C. as a “true hermaphrodite” and advised that
M.C. needed to be assigned a specific gender and undergo “surgical correction” of his ambiguous genitals (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013, p. 13). Dr. Amrhein\(^8\) collaborated with Dr. Aaronson, and Dr. Appiagyei-Dankah, co-defendants, in the decision to assign a female sex to M.C. and to perform the sex assignment surgery that would alter the external appearance of M.C.’s genitals. While it was determined that M.C. could have been assigned either sex from surgery, “due to the nature of his external genital anatomy”, the choice was still made to alter M.C.’s genitals as female and to remove all testicular tissue (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013, p. 14).

Dr. Aaronson, who performed the actual sex assignment surgery, had noted in M.C.’s medical records concerns of the child’s testosterone levels and that the possible effects from performing an “irreversible feminizing surgery...would be devastating... on a child who might ultimately identify as a boy” (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013, p. 15); what made his observations ironic was that in 2001 Dr. Aaronson had published a paper in which he acknowledged that feminization surgeries were simply easier to perform, and most importantly, he outlined that if feminization surgery were performed on an infant that later identified as male, it would be “catastrophic” to the individual’s well-being (Aaronson, 2001, p. 189). Even with this knowledge, the team of physicians recommended SCDSS to authorize the surgery so M.C. could be raised as a girl. In April of 2006, when M.C. was sixteen months of age, SCDSS gave authorization to perform the surgery and M.C.’s genitals were altered and all testicular tissue was removed (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013).

In June of 2006, Pam and Mark Crawford viewed M.C’s profile on the South Carolina’s adoption website and contacted SCDSS to begin the adoption process; Mrs.\(^8\) Dr. Amrhein filed a separate appeal to be removed as a defendant from the case stating justification for the surgery was based on the fact that M.C.’s birth mother (who had already relinquished custody) had told him that she always had wanted a baby girl (M.C. v. Amrhein, 2013).
Crawford had some familiarity with intersex conditions and indicated that they did not want sex assignment surgery performed on M.C. but it was already too late; the Crawfords took custody in August and the adoption process was finalized by December of 2006 (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013). While the Crawford family initially raised M.C. as a girl to support his gender/sex assignment, it became obvious that he was showing “strong signs of developing a male gender” (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013, p. 19). With support from family, friends, and community, M.C. is being raised as male. The resulting suit against the physicians who made the decision to operate on M.C. and against the SCDSS9 employees who were responsible for his health and welfare, hopes to not only receive validation that M.C.’s rights were violated, but to also prevent this type of standardized practice that violates bodily autonomy of intersex individuals.

Nearly all of these kinds of procedures are medically unnecessary, performed on infants and children who are incapable of giving informed consent, and they cause more harm to intersex persons than should be accepted. M.C. and the Crawfords are seeking juridical relief, and while legal power is one element of influence in the management and monitoring of intersex persons, medicalization of intersex conditions exist as a fundamental administration that shapes the law and at times, supersedes it. When one is structuring an environment of intelligibility out of assumed norms and practices, it is often medical edicts that govern our means of recognition and modalities of authenticity that can forcibly define the comprehensibility of persons in a society and subject them to the law.

Is it a boy or girl? This is the first question pondered when one learns of a new pregnancy. Secondary are thoughts of health and happiness, which underline

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9 Seven defendants from SCDSS were named in the suit for acting as an agent of the state while making medical decisions on behalf of M.C. that were not medically necessary (M.C. v. Aaronson et al. 2013).
assumptions of self-sufficiency and prosperity, but it is the initial desire to classify the sex of this future child in order to adequately imagine a proper future for him or her. The imaginary future is assumed to be able-bodied, mobile, self-sustaining as well as heterosexual, capable of continuing a lineage and the family name. Unless the parents have a disability themselves, or identify as queer, the assumption of normality is never called into question. Research shows that 1 in 2000 births can result in intersex conditions; this can present as a baby designated female with an abnormally large clitoris, one designated male with a micro penis, or a baby with no immediate designation because it does not have easily recognizable male or female genitals (Astorino & Viloria, 2012). Although medical guidelines have shifted to recommend psychological support first and surgical intervention only if requested by the intersex person in question (Astorino & Viloria, 2012), the perceived visibility of the condition and the reaction that is standardized from the medical community and an expectant society, puts pressure on physicians and parents to repair these bodies at an early age. An intersex baby creates a space where parents are confronted with the collapse of a “traditional sex/gender divide” and experience a “failure at what was supposed to come naturally” (Holmes, 2009, p. 5). The fear is that the parents will experience, first a critical doubt in producing a child with a deficiency seen as a disability, which extends to doubting the future that had been imagined for this child, and then a precipitous desire is to correct the body and thereby correct the path for this child to ensure their sustainability once again.

Alison Kafer (2013) offers a framework of critique from her observations of the exploitation of disabled and impaired bodies, such as featured in the For a Better Life (FBL) campaign. This narrative centers the visibility of disability and the ways in which this view of the body is interpreted by the public as elements of deficiency. Marking a body as deficient, lacking, or broken, gives rise to opportunities to repair, optimize and ultimately to monitor.
In terms of intersex individuals, those persons born with physical or chromosomal traits that defy placement into singular, binary categories of male or female, it is how society views that bodies are not only supposed to be gendered a particular way but also sexed in a particular way in order to make sense of an individual, to map out life expectations for them and to bring comfort to those who must interact with these persons. Public demands are placed on a private issue in order to ensure this individual lives up to the expectations of privatized living and to not rely on or bring questions of identity to the public sphere. The unbridled messiness of genitals, hormones and assumed gender roles conflates the private matter of sex classification into a public debate of normality and acceptability.

The medicalization of intersex conditions treats variance of sex characteristics in the same vein as children born with visible disabilities. The primary purpose is corrective, to repair what is wrong with this individual and make them more “normal”. It comes from not only a place of medicalized urgency but also from one of “social urgency” (Feder, 2014, p.1). In Dr. Aaronson’s 2001 article, he specifies this urgency in designating the proper functions of male and female sex assignment as being aligned with societal expectations and legal recognitions. He notes that untreated intersex conditions could lead to an inability to “form lasting heterosexual relationships” and with girls expressly can increase “incidence of bisexuality and homosexuality”; his primary focus resides in the necessity to “marry and have children” (Aaronson, 2001, p. 189) as the only way to fully integrate effectively into society. An individual’s obligation is not only to fit in to their community but to obey and support structures of dominance and this is done first by normalizing their physicality to solidify gender roles and responsibilities set forth by the medical community and societal expectations overall.

Harkening back to the expectant parents and their vision for their child’s future, it is brought into question
with the inability to determine if their child is a boy or girl. This classification is the linchpin of self-sufficiency and is not meant as just the sufficiency of the impaired individual but for the family, community, state, and nation overall. For intersex individuals it is taking their place in the proper social order and in propagating a hegemonic way of life which relies on marriage, children, normalcy and unquestioning adherence to authority, including medical authority. The thought is that this can only be accomplished when one is definitively sexed and gendered as either male or female.

Social theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault presents the “process of problematization” (as cited in Feder, 2014, p. 200) which examines how and why certain issues, in this case bodies and identities, are interpreted as being a problem to be corrected. A medical intervention means that intersex individuals are seen as disabled bodies; they are problems in and of themselves in their own corporeality, and as a problem for the rest of us in society. Corrections must be made to ensure others feel comfortable and can continue perceptions of the way things are supposed to work without having assumptions challenged. So a child that presents with ambiguous genitals must be defined as either male or female in order for society to continue functioning uninterrupted. The choice for the medical community is then to perform normalizing surgery and administer needed hormone therapies (Holmes, 2009) to ensure the child grows up with definitive sex and gender expectations. At this point it is not just the medical profession exerting power over an individual, it is the parents of this child abdicating power to society and physicians in order to achieve a child that will not upset the demands of a binary defined system. In M.C.’s case, it was not the parents abdicating power to doctors, but the agents of the state itself.

Into these social relationships, between doctors and patients, parents and children, and families and society, legibility protocols that influence distribution of visibility and power are at play in the recommendations and
decisions made on behalf of intersex children. It is assumed that intersex bodies must be made normal lest further concerns erupt over sexual identity, sexual preferences, sexual functioning and propagation of normative life structures. Every facet of an individual’s life including their ability to marry and reproduce becomes a primary function in order to sustain the social stability of their family and by extension, the country. This can only be done if one understands themselves as a body and an identity, without ambiguity or distraction to the contrary; an overt implication of normalcy placed on individual subjectivity. To maximize one’s contribution to the family and the state, one must function unencumbered by confusion of physicality and with clear distinctions made of one’s own sex. At least this is supported by the medical industry that preferences corrective measures to intersex conditions. Along this line of thinking it is in the state’s best interest to legally support structures that maintain the functionality of intersex bodies in ways that maximize utility and minimize impediments, as defined by medicine and by society.

In trans activist and legal scholar Dean Spade’s (2011) discussion on the decentralization of power in terms of incorporated monitoring and “ways of knowing” (p. 21), it is an internalization that contributes to the abdication of autonomy over to medicalized power, a willingness to imbue physicians with authority to designate what constitutes acceptable in our social structures. A body that reads as ambiguous through atypicality of sex, presents a challenge to normative functions of a contributing citizen. The idea of being a burden is highly stigmatized and is often seen as not just an inability to participate meaningfully in current structures but also an unwillingness to participate; if one would only try harder one could become self-sufficient and not need familial support or continued medical assistance to function properly

This indicts intersex persons in that there is expectation to have ambiguity corrected so they will function normally in society and not be a burden, not draw
attention to their condition, not complain of steps made to correct them and to be grateful of the steps taken to make them normal. Intersex persons that criticize treatments made, without consent, are seen as problematic in the sense that they are ungrateful to a system that sought to spare them difficulty of growing up different in a society that prizes conformity and normality (Holmes, 2009). Challenging an identity placed upon them does not serve the public good in that it would require “normal” people to address uncomfortable inconsistencies around gender and sex roles. This could interfere with an individual’s assimilation into conventional practices because if they are not maintaining the status quo, which is easier and more beneficial for the larger society, then intersex persons are calling into question society’s obligations to those outside of the norm, the marginalized entities that are easier forgotten and disregarded.

The pathologicalization of alternative bodies gives way to how medical intervention is seen as neutral; the medicalized view is not perceived as an agenda setting entity that seeks to destroy uniqueness but as one set on correcting abnormality and encouraging individuals the ability to thrive. These interventions are predicated on a narrow scope of defining normalcy, gender and sexuality in heteronormative terms as established by a patriarchal system that expects individuals to thrive in order to become invisible into a collective society. Unlike disabled bodies that are meant to serve as a warning or an inspiration, as seen in the FBL campaign, intersex bodies are designed to be kept from public view. It is not to be discussed in public; no confirmation surrounding the details of one’s genitals is necessary because it is assumed they should look and function normally and it is an individual’s problem to fix if they don’t. It is the privatization of a pervasive public assumption. This seems to be both the best and worst that state sanctioned ideals have to offer the intersex body; reconstruction to function as an anonymous individual or remain whole and risk ostracization and stigma from being impaired. A parent, or
in this case, a social services agent, accepting a doctor’s recommendation at normalizing surgery would see reconstructing a child as being the best decision for the child’s future happiness.

Issues surrounding intersex individuals can serve as a bridge between legal, medical and social critiques; they are seen as an impairment while existing as a conflation of socially contracted gender and sex roles. As ideals of normality are predicated on survival of the fittest and just as disabled bodies are at a perceived disadvantage here, so are intersex bodies because they can’t survive without medical intervention to ensure their placement into a functional social structure. While a “division of the sexes has been taken to be foundational to social order” (Feder, 2014, p. 206) it is the challenges to these entrenched views that give insight to seeing bodies in all their glorious variations as not just ambiguously sexed or deficient, but as differently abled and not simply impaired and in need of correction. Addressing the discrepancies of who qualifies as able-bodied or normal is the first step in reevaluating terms of self-sufficiency and burden. Intersex bodies must be valued in and of themselves for their own variance without regard to imagined futures of marriage, procreation and contributions to state formulated systems. Embracing the messiness of genitals, chromosomes, and gender roles can lead to points of resisting normalization of bodies and the ability to find dignity in physical anomalies that would allow intersex persons to carve out a space and revel in their ambiguity to reclaim so-called deficiencies as merely alternatives on a broad spectrum of physical options.

For M.C. and individuals like him, the law functions as an “institutionalized piece of gender accountability” (Meadow, p. 818) based on a gender classification system established in medicine and validated by society. While judicial classification appears as a neutral agent, one that describes identity and formulates relational statuses to the identity, there are systematic underpinnings that sustain hierarchal constructions of power and validity that act as an extension of medicalized policing and social monitoring.
We are trained to accept that particular relational formations and essentializations of gender and sex roles are the only means of recognizing the legibility of certain bodies and the way those bodies relate to other bodies.

Although we are conditioned to defer to medical science as being expert in areas of biology, endocrinology, manifestations of physicality, etc., we are also conditioning our legal systems to this same deference. If no one questions this cycle how can we realistically expect radical changes to a system that embraces the binary as a driving force? The case of M.C. argues on one point that physicians and social workers made the decision to operate without the benefit of a pre-operative hearing or review by an ethics board. The question must be posed that if a hearing had been convened or a board consulted and the same conclusion was drawn, does that suddenly make it justified and the entirety of this case moot? In this realm, bioethics still exists as “another source of power” (Spurgas, 117) so decisions of the self are still abdicated to an authority without investment of the outcome. Traditional binary metrics are employed across the spectrum of interventions, medical and judicial and as long as intersex or even trans persons are seen as only facsimiles of authentic persons, there will be rectifications and narrow interpretations of practices and laws without real systemic change and radical improvement. The question becomes, “can a legal paradigm that embraces scientificity also provide room for individual notions of self and relationship” (Meadow, 830) and the answer must be, only when we demand that it does.

As agents of biosociality, both medical and juridical institutions create gender and sex as tangible resources based on biological conditions without acknowledging the artificial construction of biological dictates. This manufactures sanctioned bodies that exist in fixed amounts likened to fabricated products that are controlled and distributed by the state. Any population that is in tension with the reproduction of cis-heteronormative practices is at risk and must be freed from institutional constraints that allow the repetition of limiting norms rather than
embracing one's unique embodied subjectivity; intersex bodies, trans bodies, disabled bodies, colored bodies, non-citizen bodies, or any bodies that require recognition from medical or legal entities, will only benefit from a total reevaluation and restructuring of these systems, rather than an integration or assimilation into them. M.C. should be afforded judicial relief as a first step in acknowledging that the system failed not only him, but it is failing everyone in the margins and must be held accountable; then, the work must continue.

Debra Beight is a recent graduate of The Ohio State University, earning dual degrees in Communication and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Beginning autumn of 2015 she will be pursuing her master's degree in Public Health at Lund University in Sweden. Her research interests involve transgender/intersex person’s health, LGBTQIA individuals and the media, and safe-sex practices featured in pornography. Recently her work examined cisnormative policies in the medical industry and she is continuing her work in the area of pornography consumption and its impact on viewer's safer-sex behaviors. She has been an active participant in gender and sexuality issues and women's rights through NARAL, Planned Parenthood and The Straight Spouse Network.

References


Between Autonomy and Alienation
Creating the Self via Sex-Reassignment Surgery

By Annthony M. Duffey

ABSTRACT. Upon a consideration of self-creation and the introduction of the gender binary a potential limiter of autonomy, sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) beckons significant reconsideration by the biomedical-ethical field, ranging from the transpersons who undergo it to the preoperative processes that oversee it. Autonomy does not underlie a majority of SRS on prevailing biomedical hypotheses; SRS is granted to those candidates who report symptoms of dysfunction and denied to candidates who do not confirm such suspicions. This research proposes that, upon his or her failure or refusal to demonstrate some understanding of the potentially limiting influence of the gender binary, a candidate should be denied SRS for lack of autonomy. Despite disadvantages of the proposal, it attempts to facilitate and preserve autonomy in transpersons’ projects of self-creation via SRS, indict the gender binary as a limit to autonomy, and estrange notions of ‘dysfunction’ and ‘inauthenticity’ currently associated with transpersons.

Keywords: sex-reassignment surgery, transperson, autonomy, self-creation

Between Autonomy and Alienation:
Creating the Self via Sex-Reassignment Surgery

Though transsexuality is not an entirely new concept, nor is it strictly a medical or Western phenomenon, transpersons have much cause for concern as subjects of a biomedical-ethical field that views them as genuinely dysfunctional. Some physicians, psychologists, and queer theorists alike hypothesize that transpersons are
inauthentic and suffer from a false consciousness. Many transpersons rebut that their transitions fall between self-creation and revelation of their true selves; on wither view, that which is being created or revealed is an authentic self. Can the biomedical field, through prohibition and nosology, dictate what an authentic self is or what are appropriate means for actualizing it? As a culture, we have the opportunity to seize upon this situation and learn about ourselves and better understand our dance with gender itself by investigating the institutions and cultural conventions that attempt to govern projects of authentic self-creation and the interstices where they overlap.

In his book *Human Identity and Bioethics*, in a chapter entitled “Human Persons: Narrative Identity and Self-Creation,” David DeGrazia investigates the notion of self-creation. After some explanation of and rebuttal against determinist arguments, he finds and specifies the following condition of autonomous action: that identification with one's desires “has not resulted primarily from influences that [one] would, on careful reflection, consider alienating” (DeGrazia, 2005).10 This condition of autonomy raises the question of whether sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) is a means of authentic self-creation and solidifies the conception of autonomy with which I work throughout this research. In this research, I examine the role of autonomy (as conceived by DeGrazia) in SRS-candidacy and how it might be best preserved amidst many biomedical-ethical concerns associated with SRS. I also investigate the roles of society and of the biomedical field in SRS-candidacy and the implications of this research for SRS as a means of self-creation. On the current state of affairs in the biomedical field, SRS is perched between corrective measure for genuine dysfunction and concession to alienating influence, thus leaving no room for the interpretation of SRS as a genuine means of self-creation or of transpersons as authentic selves. I argue that, on the

current state, the biomedical-ethical field also ignores significant costs in offering SRS to some candidates. I follow these arguments with a proposal for the biomedical field’s preservation of DeGrazian autonomy in SRS and its role in indicting the gender binary.

The chapter referenced above includes the following examples of self-creation: a teenage nerd who changes his social milieu and exercise habits, a mediocre physics student who accumulates genuine expertise through consistent hard work, and an unattractive woman who undergoes cosmetic surgery for more confidence and a more active love life (DeGrazia, 2005). Though the first two individuals seem to pose no issues for DeGrazia’s account, he suggests that “the only genuinely troubling case, morally, is that of the young woman who transforms herself” via cosmetic surgery (DeGrazia, 2005). The concern, he notes, lies in a question of the autonomy and, therefore, the authenticity of her self-creation project. DeGrazia asks whether “she [is] capitulating to social forces that largely determine her choice,” and whether “she would consider [such forces] alienating…and choose differently were she more perceptive” (DeGrazia, 2005). Though DeGrazia does not address SRS until a later chapter, his third example here highlights the conception of SRS-candidates with which I am concerned. Are SRS-candidates undertaking an autonomous self-creation project? Are they capitulating to social influences that they might consider alienating upon careful reflection? Can SRS be a genuine means of self-creation for transpersons in light of these questions? Can the persons that are created through SRS be interpreted as authentic?

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11 Ibid., pp. 110-111.
12 Ibid., p. 111.
13 Ibid., p. 111.
I. SRS Across and Beyond the Gender binary

To begin answering some of these questions about SRS as means of autonomous self-creation, I consider the work of Gunnar Lund. In “Across and Beyond: The Semantics of Transgender Identity,” Lund offers a profile of two types of transpersons or SRS-candidates: those who identify across the gender binary and who are “bounded by the male and female binary...[and] must identify as either male or female,” and those who identify beyond it and feel that their identity is not captured by the terms ‘male’ or ‘female’ (Lund 2012). I will hereafter refer to a transperson who identifies in the ‘across’ sense as a “tpA” and to a transperson who identifies in the ‘beyond’ sense as a “tpB”. Lund references the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program’s findings to portray a tpA as “a person experiencing the wrong-body phenomenon,” wherein one purports to be an individual of the opposite physiological sex ‘trapped’ in their current body (Lund 2012). It seems that, in order for this condition to be a genuine dysfunction and such reports to be literally true, there must be a functional “essence” of either manhood or womanhood existing within the transperson. This notion is far from credible according to Sarah Salih, who cites queer theorist and philosopher Judith Butler’s argument that the gender binary is a performative, social convention (Salih, 2002).

In her book Judith Butler, Salih investigates Butler’s theory that gender is a performance. Sailh builds on Butler’s ideas to tell us that “there is no ‘natural body’ that pre-exists its cultural inscription,” that is to say, the inscription of male into ‘man’ and female into ‘woman’ (Salih, 2002). She quotes Butler’s claim that

15 Ibid., p. 8
17 Ibid., p. 62.
“[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being;” according to Salih herself, “gender is not something one is, it is something one does” (Salih, 2002).\(^{18}\)

Salih also describes Butler’s position on the oppressive nature of the gender binary, noting that “Butler is not suggesting that the subject is free to choose which gender she or he is going to enact” but, rather, that it is “always already determined within this regulatory frame” (Salih, 2002).\(^{19}\) Finally, and in regard to the wrong-body phenomenon, Salih quotes Butler’s claims that

“gender proves to be [performative, that is,] constituting the identity it is purported to be” and that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Salih, 2002).\(^{20}\)

These theories suggest that those tpAs who experience the wrong-body phenomenon do not actually have a man or woman “trapped inside” but rather feel that their bodies do not match the pattern of performative behavior that society has assigned to and expected of them as dictated by the gender binary. It is necessary to state here a paramount assumption that I make throughout this work: that the gender binary is an alienating influence for some SRS-candidates. Gender is revealed to be a cultural convention and imperative, as evidenced by the consequences met by

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 62.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 63.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 62.
those who go there against. It is not ontologically essential to human persons but, instead, a norm to be adopted and obeyed. While many people have little difficulty accepting their gendered fates, it is a coerced fate, nonetheless, enforced by the threat of social opprobrium.

Upon my assumption, we can distinguish two groups of tpAs. Were preoperative processes to require some demonstration of understanding of the gender binary and its potential to be an alienating influence, the group of tpAs would split into two subgroups of SRS-candidates: (1) tpAs who acknowledge, appreciate, and can demonstrate understanding of the gender binary and its potential as an alienating influence over motives of self-creation, and (2) tpAs whose desires for SRS remain the result of alienating influence for failure or refusal to acknowledge, appreciate or demonstrate understanding of the same. Keeping in mind the criteria of DeGrazian autonomy, I will refer to this latter subgroup as “alienated tpAs;” it does not include genuinely dysfunctional SRS-candidates described later. Should the biomedical field heed this suggestion and meet the challenge to distinguish non-alienated tpAs from alienated tpAs, the prospect of SRS as means of autonomous self-creation would become much more promising than it is currently.

The SRS-candidacies of all tpAs are currently affirmed by the biomedical field because of the authority of programs like the Stanford Program and of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association. Such authorities seek the eradication of disorder, illness, and dysfunction in efforts to achieve or maintain health. If transpersons are indeed dysfunctional as the biomedical field currently maintains, then SRS is less a means of self-creation and more a corrective measure for a genuine dysfunction. In her article “Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID)—Is the Amputation of Healthy Limbs Ethically Justified?” Sabine Müller offers an analogy that demonstrates the concept of tpAs’ dysfunction and the implications of such a classification (Müller, 2009). Müller discusses the
neuropsychological disturbance BIID and argues that, according to the prevailing hypotheses of the biomedical field, desires for medically unnecessary amputations are “either obsessive or based on a... delusion,” and that surgical procedures that would fulfill those desires must be “regarded as severe bodily injuries of patients with a substantial loss of autonomy” (Müller, 2009). Müller’s conclusion is relevant to my investigation because of her analogizing BIID patients to transpersons on the grounds of “identity disorder...[as in] a neurological conflict between a person’s anatomy and body image” (Müller, 2009). She supports this analogy by citing medical research that shows that “males seem to be more likely affected by BIID... especially homosexuals and transsexuals,” and that “many of the people who utter the desire for the amputation of a healthy limb are [male-to-female] transsexuals” (Müller, 2009). Müller cites more findings that seem strangely akin to the situation of the tPA suffering from the wrong-body phenomenon; she cites the research of Michael First as one of his subjects claims that “[he] felt like [he] was in the wrong body” (Müller, 2009). Finally, she cites an online BIID support group that “explain[s] the desire for amputation in analogy to the desire of transsexuals for [SRS]” (Müller, 2009). Müller’s analogy suggests that an alienated tPA’s SRS-candidacy cannot be autonomous—as it is the result of either compulsion or delusion (i.e., BIID, wrong-body phenomenon) or of ignorance to potentially alienating influences. It is a lack of autonomy that links alienated tPAs to BIID patients and underlies the ethical impermissibility of their SRS. Therefore, SRS ought not to be granted to all tPAs since, for

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22 Ibid., pp. 36-37.
23 Ibid., p. 37.
24 Ibid., p. 37.
25 Ibid., p. 38.
some, it is not a means of autonomous self-creation but a form of treatment that is ethically problematic at best and deeply immoral at worst. To so grant SRS is to entrench the biomedical field’s interpretation of transpersons as genuinely dysfunctional.

This conclusion, according to which some tpAs non-autonomously seek treatment, is not reflected on the current state of affairs in the biomedical field. There is inconsistency between ideally autonomous SRS-candidacy and the authority of the biomedical field and its adoption of the gender binary. Despite Müller’s demonstration of genuine dysfunction which would merit corrective treatment, some alienated tpAs do not suffer from such dysfunction; instead, their desires for SRS are the result of the alienating influence of the gender binary. Their experience of the wrong-body phenomenon is viewed by the biomedical field as a genuine neurophysiological dysfunction while, as Butler suggests, it is mere adoption and performance of the gender opposite that which the binary dictates (Salih, 2002). Lund suggests that “the medical community...appear[s] to have defined transgender in the across-sense” (Lund, 2012) As a result of the Stanford Program’s findings, Lund notes that “the medical community came to deem transsexuals as only those who wish to fully assimilate as the other sex” and that “the medical community nearly universally recognizes transpeople in the across-sense” (Lund, 2012). The assumption that all SRS-candidates are dysfunctional makes it impossible to offer SRS as means of autonomous self-creation because the gender binary is not considered an alienating influence by the professionals overseeing SRS-candidacies. Furthermore, the biomedical field thereby excuses the gender binary from indictment—where its

26 Salih 2002.
27 Lund 2012, p. 11.
28 Ibid., p. 11.
influence may undermine the autonomy of some tpAs’ desires for SRS—and aids in its entrenchment in society.

In response to the false assumptions made by the biomedical field and preoperative processes, let us consider the SRS-candidacy of tpBs. Lund profiles tpBs as transpersons who transcend the gender binary; they feel that “the wrong-body phenomenon does not describe their experiences” and that “genitals, which surgeons can only understand as a binary [and devoid of their cultural significance,] are of little importance in one’s identity” (Lund, 2012).30 Such individuals seem to be the more autonomous candidates for SRS as they refuse to identify with or be defined by the gender binary. For them, the gender binary is too insignificant an influence to be considered alienating. Lund says that many tpBs feel they “must follow a ‘script’ where they claim to feel the wrong-body phenomenon;” they report feeling coerced into affirming pre-ordained symptoms of self-loathing, impotence, and sexual-preference (Lund, 2012).31 He continues that “this reinforce[s] the doctors’ notion that a...transperson must feel as though they have the wrong body...and disservices the individual who must hide their identity” (Lund, 2012).32 Finally, Lund presents real-world consequences for tpBs, reporting that if they “continue to exhibit both male and female traits, [they] cannot get hormonal medication or surgery” (Lund, 2012).33 Despite tpBs’ seeming autonomy and situation as the subgroup most immune to the potentially alienating influence of the gender binary, they are often denied SRS because they exempt themselves from the gender binary upon which the biomedical field places too much importance.

II. Proposal to Preserve DeGrazian Autonomy in SRS

This series of observations suggests that what is needed is a more thorough consideration of SRS-candidacies, in which SRS should be viewed as means of autonomous self-creation for tpBs and non-alienated tpAs, and in which SRS should be viewed as a corrective measure, albeit an ethically problematic one, for alienated tpAs. However, I suggest there are two reasons why this outcome would be an imperfect state of affairs for SRS-candidacy. First, it would fly in the face of alienated tpAs’ phenomenology—the authority of their own subjective experience. Talia Bettcher tells us that to deny first-person authority—whereby we would, on this proposal, deem the desire for SRS as non-autonomous for some tpAs, as they remain alienated by the gender binary—is analogous to rape (Bettcher, 2009).\(^{34}\) She explains this analogy by referencing instances where a man who “disregards a woman’s refusal...acts as if his own assessment about her attitudes were authoritative;” according to Bettcher, “this suggests...the complete absence of [ethical first-person authority]” (Bettcher, 2009).\(^ {35}\) Secondly, it would risk coercing alienated tpAs into ‘scripting’ their SRS-candidacies.

Based on the above considerations, I maintain that the biomedical field should not deem SRS as a means of autonomous self-creation for alienated tpAs and grant it only to tpBs and non-alienated tpAs on grounds of DeGrazian autonomy requisite of self-creation. Despite its disadvantages, this proposal would offer three significant benefits. First, and of the most immediate benefit, it would facilitate and preserve SRS as means of autonomous self-creation where the potential for such exists currently—with tpBs and non-alienated tpAs. Secondly, it would draw


\(^ {35}\) Ibid., p. 113-114.
attention upon and combat the social perpetuation of the gender binary that produces social and psychological victims daily. Third and finally, this proposal would affirm SRS as means of self-creation (not as corrective measure) for a greater number of SRS-candidates than upon the current state of affairs, thus weakening the notion of ‘dysfunction’ currently associated with transpersons and esteeming alternative therapies where genuine dysfunction exists.

III. Criticism, Defense, and Conclusion

I now anticipate and respond to three criticisms that would undermine my conclusion that the social and biomedical stakes are too high to maintain current preoperative practices. First, one might ask whether alienated tpAs can become more informed and thus autonomous in their desires for SRS; such a possibility would circumvent my proposal and portray alienated tpAs as more similar to DeGrazia’s unattractive woman than to Müller’s dysfunctional BIID patients. Certainly, the biomedical field has a practice, informed consent, which attempts to ensure patients’ autonomy in their agreement to undergo or forgo some procedures, especially regarding risks and consequences associated therewith. Malcolm de Roubaix surveys the practice of informed consent in the biomedical field where specific requirements include “assuring contextual understanding and promoting rational deliberation” (Roubaix, 2008). He also notes, like DeGrazia, that “autonomous choice in cosmetic surgery [, which we have likened to SRS,] is an extension of personal choice on how to beautify ourselves...based on personal world-views,” thus basing autonomy on one’s values (Roubaix, 2008). Furthermore, Roubaix reduces

37 Ibid., p. 380.
autonomy to informed consent, and informed consent to competence (Roubaix, 2008). He notes, however, that the possibility exists for "competence [to] be limited by circumstances intrinsic to the patient...and extrinsic (Roubaix, 2008).” Roubaix cites this possibility as an inherent tension in the practice of informed consent and “a price tag of [patient] autonomy (Roubaix, 2008).” It is my view that the gender binary is such an extrinsic circumstance and does have the potential to limiting one’s competence and, thus, one’s autonomy, specifically for alienated tpAs.

Next, we might investigate informed consent’s likelihood of fostering DeGrazian autonomy in general. If it can so foster autonomy, it my proposal is thwarted on the grounds that autonomy is present where informed consent is obtained. Informed consent, if practiced in conjunction with other biomedical-ethical principles, is an efficient standard of ensuring sufficient autonomy for the biomedical field; however, in the real world, informed consent is often the field’s means of avoiding liability. Roubaix’s profile of informed consent leaves open the question of its efficacy in ensuring DeGrazian autonomy. Roubaix portrays informed consent as highly consequence-oriented—respecting advantages, disadvantages, variables, and risks associated with a procedure. DeGrazian autonomy, however, requires more than knowledge of the aforementioned. Whereas informed consent is consequence-oriented, DeGrazian autonomy is motive-oriented, requiring one to understand the reasons for which they act and not just an action’s possible outcomes. The biomedical field is rarely privileged to such insights into patients’ lives. Although preoperative processes attempt to ensure the appropriateness of candidates’ motives, the current state of affairs affirms motives that entrench the gender binary and candidates

38 Ibid., pp. 370-372.
40 Ibid., p. 381.
who concede to being interpreted as inauthentic or dysfunctional. Informed consent ensures only tpAs’ “freedom of action [which] does not entail autonomy” (DeGrazia, 2005).41

Third, informed consent cannot make alienated tpAs into autonomous SRS-candidates, for the difference is based on their respective values regarding the gender binary. Were it so able, then my proposal would be similarly frustrated. Let us suppose, then, that informed consent is a sufficient condition of DeGrazian autonomy. Would the biomedical field then be obligated to perform SRS on an alienated tpA? Both DeGrazia and Roubaix cast doubt upon the absolute privilege of such persons’ autonomy based on ‘poor’ values or inappropriate desires for surgery. In a later chapter, “Enhancement Technologies and Self-Creation,” DeGrazia revisits the notion of cosmetic surgery as a means of self-creation. He argues that, although “some desires for major self-change may be [improperly] motivated...this does not justify preventing [it]...It does, however, provide ample reason for individual practitioners, such as the surgeon...to decline requests” (DeGrazia, 2005).42 Similarly, Roubaix asks, “who are we to interpret and judge their...world-view?” while he suggests that “responsible doctors steer clear of involvement [with such improperly motivated requests]” (Roubaix, 2008).43 Both DeGrazia and Roubaix offer a ‘yes but no’ conclusion when pushing their commitment to the absolute privilege of such values where surgical self-creation is concerned. This conflict implies that some requests may be so improperly motivated—and, for the present purposes, some desires so alienated—as to discourage the involvement of a medical professional and, therefore, that the patient’s autonomy ought not to be honored in all cases.

Furthermore, DeGrazia explains that granting some

41 DeGrazia 2005, p. 95.
42 Ibid., p. 235.
43 Roubaix 2008, p. 381.
procedures to non-autonomous candidates, even with informed consent, risks “complicity with...problematic social norms,” such as the gender binary (DeGrazia, 2005). DeGrazia suggests that “someone who desires a major change in physical appearance may be more satisfied in the long run by eliminating...the insecurity underlying the desire” (DeGrazia, 2005). DeGrazia also notes the risk of “fostering social quietism,” and he uses an example of psychopharmacology to caution that “patients may accept drug-induced complacency over active struggle to change the social conditions that contribute to their discontent, leaving these problems untouched” (DeGrazia, 2005). DeGrazia’s caution applies to the current topic; SRS may pacify an alienated tpA and others in his or her life, but it leaves the gender binary—the social construct that influenced his or her desires—unaddressed. Such risks are inherent in granting SRS to non-autonomous candidates. These disadvantages presented by DeGrazia are more than mere risks; they are realities of the current state of affairs. Finally, SRS “to make one more at peace with oneself” (DeGrazia, 2005) neglects a host of alternative therapies such as Müller’s suggestion of “adapting the body image to the body...by movement therapy, [Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation], or electrical stimulation of the brain” (Müller, 2009.)

In conclusion, a more thorough preoperative measure affirming SRS as means of autonomous self-creation for tpBs and non-alienated tpAs while maintaining SRS as corrective measure for only alienated tpAs seems to most fully accommodate transpersons (with respect to SRS) and to be the best way to weaken notions of dysfunction and inauthenticity associated with transpersons. Otherwise, on the untouched state of affairs, SRS remains

46 Ibid., p. 217.
48 Müller 2009, p. 41.
viewed by the biomedical field as merely a corrective measure of genuine, neurophysiological dysfunction or the coerced affirmation thereof. Should the biomedical-ethical field fail to take some measure to preserve autonomy where it exists in transpersons’ projects of self-creation, then all persons who are created through means of SRS remain interpreted as inauthentic and less than genuine persons. I have demonstrated that my proposal offers three benefits—facilitation and preservation of DeGrazian autonomy in SRS, scrutiny drawn upon the gender binary, and affirmation of SRS as autonomous means of self-creation where it can and ought to be so affirmed—in trade for the biomedical field’s willingness to tolerate its two disadvantages—disregarding the phenomenology of some transpersons and encouraging alienated tpAs to script their SRS-candidacy.

We have the opportunity to seize upon this situation—where medical and biological sciences attempt to dictate which persons are authentic and which products of self-creation are genuine. Though this research makes only one suggestion toward the cultural imperative to defend the authenticity of transpersons, there remains much work to be done.

Annthony Duffey recently graduated as a Bachelor of Arts from the University of West Georgia where he majored in philosophy and concentrated in gender and pre-law studies. He currently works as Director of Publications at a mental health consulting practice in Griffin, Georgia and plans to soon begin a program of Master’s study in Social Work at Georgia State University. Duffey plans to become licensed as an LCSW and to specialize in work with and for transsexual and gender-non-conforming populations. He also hopes to someday earn a Ph. D. in Women's Studies and teach at the graduate and clinical levels.
References


Grotesque bodies: Transsexuals’ struggle for truth in Iran

By Marie Lecuyer

ABSTRACT Many western commentators have been shocked by the legislation addressing transsexual’s’ right to transitioning and sex reassignment surgery in a strictly-gendered regulated county like Iran. As if all of a sudden Iran rose among countries of the Middle East as a paradise for transsexuals. Other recurrent narratives depicted the Iranian members of the LGBT community as victims of a purely theocratic and authoritarian regime, forcing non-gender normative individuals to change sex to fit in society. Rather, the space given to transsexuals now allowed to function more freely and be at peace with themselves reshapes the LGBT community’s relation to the larger society. This paper looks at the current discourse on transsexuality in Iran and I argue that while the knowledge produced by the state apparatus on the trans subjectivity is forced upon transpersons, trans people have tended to claim ownership of this knowledge to advance their rights and legitimacy in society. They have tried to turn the current discourse to their advantage and define their identity in contradistinction to other non-gender normative groups such as homosexuals.

Looking at Persian miniatures, characters’ faces and body lines make gender identification ambiguous. In contemporary Iran, such sex and gender ambiguities are not tolerated and individuals identified as transsexual are allowed to be cured to fully adopt one of the two gender identities and thus fit into the gender-segregated society that is Iran. As such, the Islamic Republic is the world’s second leader in sex reassignment surgery (SRS) after Thailand (Terman, 2014). Non-gender normative people are often the target of violent crimes related to homophobia, but in addition to that, trans people are also
subject to heterosexism as a structural form of violence by which power is being reenacted in their bodies. Technologies, in the Foucauldian terms (1977), such as the medical and religio-legal establishments, create knowledge and discourses that ultimately dictate what social deviancy is, what counts as mental illness and how such issues ought to be addressed. In other words, such discourses "determine individual meanings" (Swarr, 2012) and deprive people of their agency. While the fatwa issued in 1984 by supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has allowed many transsexuals to come to peace with themselves, the medico-legal institutions forms a surveillance apparatus, setting in motion a process of abnormalization by which transgender individuals are "repressed administratively or forcibly killed off" as Mbembe puts it (1990). As such, trans people have to cooperate with the system and many have incorporated the label of 'abnormality' to their own identity and used it to their advantage to assert their existence as legal and legitimate citizens. However, this strategy has been pursued in contradistinction to Iranian homosexuals and thus led to further discrimination against them while reifying gender binaries.

Technologies of Submission

In 1984, the supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a religious and legal pronouncement after Maryam Hatoon Molkara – a male-to-female transsexual - lobbied him directly, making transsexuality and sex reassignment surgery (SRS) legal. This was not the first time Khomeini expressed his opinion on the issue. He did so twenty years earlier from Iraq, in his Arabic treatise. However, the barrier of the language and the fact that he was not the political authority he would become fifteen years later limited the forcefulness of his pronouncement (Terman, 2014). In a society where in the public realm gender is strictly regulated, legal legibility improved the life of many families and benefited many transsexuals who
could now find ‘inner peace’.

However, the process of certification and transitioning remains conditioned to the government’s supervision and knowledge so as to protect gender dysphoric people from themselves since indeed "there have been cases of patients wrongly regarding themselves to be transsexuals" (Javeheri, 2010). The diagnosis and transitioning process requires much time and determination on the part of applicants who have to go through the labyrinths of the Iranian bureaucracy. They go through a process of ‘filtering’ by which they are differentiated between ‘true transsexuals’ and ‘true homosexuals’ or victims of other psychological problems (Najmabadi 2013) so as "to see whether hormone therapy and surgery are necessary" (Javaheri, 2010). After successful identification as trans, applicants receive a certificate they will carry around to move more feely within the gender segregated society. Ultimately, this certificate makes trans persons eligible for sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Although there is no obligation for them to go on the operating table, it remains necessary if one wants to change legal status (Terman, 2014). The process for obtaining a certificate starts at the Tehran Institute of Psychiatry (TIP) with thirteen sessions for self-identified transsexuals and a series of questions and tests applicants often find absurd. From color and sport preferences to what kind of watch they wear or if their legs are shaved, all are gender clues enabling psychiatrists to evaluate their patients along male/female lenses (Najmabadi, 2013). Some applicants recounted moments of brutality and abuse where once the therapist got impatient and threw an ashtray at his patient. Some of those abusive behaviors are said to be part of the diagnosis process to test people’s (wo)manhood (Najmabadi, 2013). If the applicant satisfies the demands of the TIP, the case is sent to the Forensic Medicine Organization (FMO) who must confirm the Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis, after which the Administrative Court of Ministry of Justice delivers the certificate (Najmabadi 2013). With documents certifying their stat of liminal
gender, they will be protected from police harassment and accusations of being a transvestite, breaking Iran’s gender rules and dress laws (Terman, 2014). Many trans would still be "picked up by the police on suspicion of ‘moral corruption and sexual deviancy’. The big difference was that [they] would be released after [they] showed [their] papers" (Najmabadi, 2013).

The medico-legal institutions work as a system of surveillance conditioning people living outside of the binary gender norms. Transgender minorities are neither free to assess their identity by themselves, nor to entirely freely ‘function in society’ on a daily basis (Swarr, 2012). Medical treatments that aim at delineating gender identities are in most cases the ultimate alternative for liminal genders to finally fit in society, be freed from discrimination (Swarr 2012, 94) and thus live "livable and loving lives" (Najmabadi, 2013). Many non-gender normative Iranians end up undergoing sexual change surgery as a result of all the constraints and impossibilities a state of liminal gender causes in a society where heterosexual marriage is a huge "key imperative ... the determinant of one’s life plot" (Najmabadi, 2013). One male-to- female transgendered person recalls that she was willing to have the surgery "so that [she] could expediently get a husband and save [herself] and [her] family from all this humiliation and disgrace" (Najmabadi, 2013). The frustration of not being able to do simple things like going to places and hotels, adopting a child, and to love and live like a couple, with the full rights that husband and wife are granted is also an important factor pushing many to sacrifice their identity.

What leads many to transitioning may not be the direct state coercion but rather the institutions and embedded norms on sex and gender that leaves little choice to trans people but try to fit in (Foucault, 1977). But the way knowledge interacts with transgender subjects is not unilateral. In their interaction with the various establishments, trans people incorporate the knowledge and discourse created about the self. As a result, they
ultimately come to think of themselves as sick people.

**Discourse of Affliction**

State and social control over sexual normativity operates by a process of abnormalization whereby the state’s discourse on non-heteronormativity as a pathology becomes socially taken for granted and defines trans persons’ sense of self. As such one cannot freely self-identify as trans. Instead, "the truth of that designation depends on documented affirmation by some other-than-self authority" (Najmabadi, 2013). The Iranian government and medical establishment officially frames transsexuality as a disease: the Gender Identity Disorder or gender dysphoria – a sense of one’s own gender identity not matching the gender one has been assigned at birth (Javaheri, 2010). In 2011, the disease officially ceased to be classified as a mental disorder and was famed as a glandular disorder. The transfer from mental to bodily disorder somehow reduces the discrimination (and especially from employers) transgender/sexual people usually face in society (Najmabadi, 2013). Being trans thus means to be classified as sick and therefore be of inferior status. Had the discourse been different and less reductive, there may not be as many people going through transitioning and SRS. In Iran, transsexuality and homosexuality are the only two non-heteronormative categories discussed. Homosexuality is somewhat acknowledged (and/since it is banned) and framed as a pathology and moral deviancy. Transsexuality, though pathologized, is God’s fault, He made trans persons born this way by getting the soul or the body wrong (Saeidzadeh 2015). Trans people may use religious explanations like this one, or believe in a somatic etiological discourse to argue that "transsexuality is not a deviation, it is very normal, it is deep in our genes, it is embedded in our brain" (Najmabadi 2013). Although pointing at the cause of people’s sexual orientation and different gender identities does not solve the problem of unjust discrimination in any ways (and could well be used
against them), they use those narratives to make their
gender and sexual condition more legitimate for some: "If
cancer is not a shameful disease, why should transsexuality
be?" (Eqbali, 2004).

These kinds of discourse convinced many members
of sexual minorities that they were trans and had to go into
transitioning. But many who underwent SRS have come to
regret their choice as they realized they had been
misinformed and had thus misidentified themselves. Once
confronted to the reality of a new body and to new
discourses about gender and sexuality, they may not
identify as trans anymore. Although it may be rare people
admit their regret openly (A. Parsi, personal
communication 2015), an interviewee shares his sorrow:

I have committed a huge mistake. Why did I want to
become a woman? I didn't even become a woman, I've
become something deficient, and I would give anything to
go back to my previous state. In another incident, I was at
a doctor's office and encountered two transsexuals who
were begging the doctor to operate them to go back to
their previous state (Change sex or die, 2007).

In Iran the heteronormative discourse identifies and
manages sexual deviants: they get diagnosed and
sometimes cured to fit into society. The process of
normalization that promises non-heteronormative
individuals to live in harmony with themselves and society
costs many lives - literally and figuratively - and
abnormalizes non-normative sexual identities as sick
people. Although transsexuality is tolerated and
transitioning from one gender to another is allowed, the
discourse of pathologization imposed on them greatly
reduces one’s power over one’s self-identification. But
whether they buy into it or not, many transsexuals
cooperate with the dominant discourse in the hope this will
further their legal recognition and improve their lives. As
an interviewee puts it, "the more we participate in such
activities, the more seriously our demands will be taken.
We will be seen as respectable people. It will also teach TSS
how to act as responsible people" (Najmabadi, 2013). The current dominant discourse medicalizes non-gender normative individuals and as such creates more deferential bodies, who accept their condition, relieved from the threat of embodying sin. As one FtM explains in an interview with Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Once I was diagnosed as trans, I started having sex with my girlfriend without feeling sinful" (2013). While the current discourse is being forced upon them, many trans persons have integrated it to their own identity, for better or for worse. What is more, many claim ownership of the current knowledge created about them and brandish the current discourse to push for more rights and legitimacy.

**Strategy of heteroperformativity**

Members of the trans minority engage with the dominant discourse so as to have a say in the national narrative while playing by the rules (Castle 2008, 125). In fact, as the Foucauldian notion of power suggests, power comes through the imposition of knowledge and discourse. Thus, by mastering the dominant narratives at play in society, "the newly capacitated actors [become] able to access full inclusion in public life" (Castle 2008) and challenge "dominant ideas about who can and should not participate in the public forum" (Castle 2008).

In Iran, where gender identities are highly visible due to strict dressing codes and gender-segregation, trans persons create their sense of being by performing (wo)manhood. They reiterate narratives of heteronormativity and perform gendered habits and activities. For example womanhood is proficiently performed through "clothes, makeup, cooking, doing what women do" (Najmabadi 2013) and is peer-regulated when "one MtF says reproachfully of another MtF: ‘even real women do not walk/talk/gesticulate/use makeup like this’" (Najmabadi 2013).

Some trans people are somewhat resentful of homosexuals playing with the system made available only
for trans. Individuals who get certified as trans but don’t go into the transitioning process are said to be abusing the system and "to be really same sex players" (Najmabadi 2013), meaning not trans, not legal nor legitimate. Homosexuals are ostracized and punished for not "agreeing to believe in [those productions of gender]" (Butler, 1990). As a result, some trans believe they run the risk of being associated with other non-heteronormative minorities and homosexuals in particular. By pretending to be trans to the legal and medical authorities while not performing as such - not adopting the heterosexual codes that trans in Iran tend to replicate – homosexuals ‘imposters’ are said to be making it harder for trans to gain acceptance and legitimacy from the larger society because homosexuality - a cardinal crime - remains unaccepted by society and banned by the government (Javaheri, 2010). Cognitive pronouncements such as ‘I am trans’ are fundamental designations that regulate, delineate and ultimately protect the trans community from harmful association with homosexuals who threaten the heteronormative order of things - an order out of which the trans community has managed to carve a space to finally live in (Najmabadi, 2013). The meaning of the pronouncements and performances by trans individuals depends on the tacit collaboration with the larger society (Butler, 1990). Society receives the trans community as a "team of performers" to use Goffman’s words (as cited in Najmabadi, 2013) and is more likely to accept transsexuality as it enacts the pre-existing categories of men and women. Even for transsexuals themselves, "the tight binarization and the indistinction between sex/gender and sexuality makes it difficult to conceive of postoperative sexuality as anything but heterosexual" (Najmabadi, 2013), as if the only point of undergoing SRS was to become the other gender and not be categorized as non-straight or non-(wo)man.

As Imre puts it, "homosexuality is heterosexuality’s very precondition in that identity is always based on exclusion" (2008). Thus, if asserting one’s identity consists in not being someone else, members of one minority
perform their identity by excluding other groups and emulating the system of values of the majority or state’s ideology so as to be considered legitimate members of society. Similarly, Puar says homosexual subjects ‘allying’ with the heterosexual majority against Muslims in the United Kingdom "are complicit with heterosexual nationalist formations rather than inherently or automatically excluded from or opposed to them" (2007). It seems that Puar and Imre’s points can be applied to the case of Iran where a number of transsexuals have been complicit with heterosexual subjects in distancing themselves from homosexuals and by emulating heteronormative performances in order to gain acceptance from state and society. As one MtFs interviewee insists, "we are women, not same-sex players" (Najmabadi, 2013).

Forms of heteronationalism emerged during the war effort against Iraq. During the 1980-1988 years, any non-heteronormative behavior was "marred as a betrayal of national and Islamic values at a time when the very fate of the Islamic Republic and the integrity of the national domain were seen under attack" (Najmabadi 2013), and was thus "insulting the blood of the martyrs of the sacred defense" (Najmabadi 2013). But two dynamics were at play in the newly formed Islamic Republic of the early 1980s. On one hand in post-revolutionary Iran new regulations imposed strict heteronormative dressing and gender segregation in public, while on the other hand, successful lobbying convinced Ayatollah Ruollah Khomeini to allow transitioning states and SRS for transsexuals. From then on, transsexuality became more socially acceptable than homosexuality. Transsexuality was thus framed as a born disease that could be cured by adopting the correct gender attitudes and performances or/and ultimately having a sex surgery done, whereas homosexuals were labeled as morally ill, afflicted by a ‘willed deviancy’ (Najmabadi 2013) and were (and still are) people for whom psychotherapy and repression are the only solution to keep them in check. We certainly all remember Ahmadinejad’s famous speech at Columbia University: "We don’t have..."
homosexuals like you do in your county" (Iran president in NY, 2007). So like Puar claims about ant-Muslim gay individuals, one could infer that some trans in Iran have followed heteronormative narratives as a way "of reclaiming an otherwise withheld national belonging - to be [Iranian] is (quit forcibly) to be [anti-homosexual] - while maintaining their exceptional identity" (Puar, 2010). Claiming one's right to exist as a trans- or, for that mater as a sick person - in Iran needs one being pragmatic. Although "the Islamic law considers sex change a human right" (Jawaheri, 2010), trans activists in Iran have made clear that on the contrary they have chosen not to politicize the issue and would rather "work within the limits to avoid pressure from the government" (Saiedzadeh, 2015). It thus seems that heterosexuality (or heterosexualites) even if redefined by trans people's efforts to gain recognition, remains the limit in Iran.

Conclusion

The legislation allowing transgender people to obtain precious documents certifying their trans identities, giving them access to sometimes much wanted medical treatments and surgeries, grants trans people and some members from the wider LGBT community more space to better 'function' in society. However, the current knowledge on gender and sexuality embedded in the various institutions such as the medical, legal, but also family and religious establishments in Iran has very much conditioned and constrained - sometimes disastrously so - the ways trans people could become full members of society. It has also meant for the trans community cooperating with the current reductionist discourse of affliction labeling them as 'legitimately sick' and thereby reducing them to an inferior class of citizens. Although reductionist, many trans individuals have brandished this label so as to advance their rights, build their legitimacy and identity in contradistinction to "same-sex players" widely seen as repulsive. This strategy allows them to
further negotiate terms of heteronormativity without threatening to much the current ‘order of things’ in a society where gender codes are highly visible. However, while some trans claim to belong to the binary order, they also reify the heteronormative discourse and reinforce abhorrence of homosexuality.

**Marie Lecuyer** studied political science and international development at McGill University. She focuses on issues of violence emanating from the state and society, sovereignty and foreign policy.

**References**


liberation is not wearing a bra to the gym

By Maggie Deagon

sometimes, i don't swallow my food
i chew it up and halfway through
spit it out. other times, i put it in my mouth
knowing i won't keep it down.

it's not a disorder
it's a habit
but it's disordered.

my friend commented on a store's mannequins,
snarling, "like anyone is really that skinny,"
but all i could mention was their pointed nipples
poking triangles into their shirts.

i cannot disparage bodies
because for others
i see no need for change.

when i was eight, my classmate compared me to a whale,
asking if my blubber acted as an insulator.
a while later, his friend taunted the size of my lunches,
so i threatened to eat her up.

my vision is distorted
by history, my pain
authors lies in my mirrors.

i have apologized to men for the shape of my breasts,
deflated by weight loss and scarred from growth.
i see pouches and pooches where others see muscle, bones,
and the memory of a chubby face--permanent.
my body is imperfect
but in womanhood
it is extraordinary.

for hips, we are blessed; in curves, we find strength,
and legs and lips and eyes that are marked
by our struggle against the images that stalk us
in magazines and on tv and inside our heads.

i am imperfect
but i am fighting
and trying.

i reach an arm around my side, to caress myself,
beneath my shirt, my surfaces are varied,
scars like braille tell the stories of my suffering
but blood seldom reaches my fingertips.

my throat is itchy,
my stomach too full,
but i will overcome.

**Maggie Deagon** is a junior at the University of Southern California. She is pursuing a double major in Spanish and Social Sciences with an Emphasis in Psychology and a minor in Korean Studies. She currently works as a creative editor for the Social Justice Review, a national undergraduate journal that seeks to highlight creative and academic voices on current social issues. She is an assistant to administration and publicity at Kaya Press, an independent publisher of Asian diasporic literature. Her passion is empowering others, especially young women in underserved communities, and she accomplishes this through Women and Youth Supporting Each Other (WYSE), which creates mentoring relationships between USC women and middle school girls to facilitate conversations about identity and sexuality.
Gender Work:
Gender Performativity Reconsidered
Gender Work: Survival, Subversion, and Subjectivity for Queer and Trans Youth

By Josie Wenig

ABSTRACT. Gender play as a mode of exposing hegemonic gender norms has become over determined and circumscribed within queer discourse. Subversion becomes only possible through hyperbole, drag, and performance. We play with gender, we fuck with it, and that’s that. What would a different framework, one that accounts for the very real labor of gender, look like and how would this redefine resistance? Discussions of “gender play” leave some things to be desired: an intersectional understanding of how people negotiate gender presentation, and a way to talk about how gender can be intentional, strategic, and still subversive. These considerations become even more pressing for queer and trans youth who perform extensive labor to navigate through and between hostile spaces. With these gaps in mind, I introduce the term gender work. Gender work describes the often unseen negotiations with gender that LGBTQ youth are constantly managing in order to balance identity and queer subjectivity with systems that seek to eradicate them. Culture, race, and class create differing and shifting hurdles for queer and trans youth; often, “invisibility” can be an intentional, agentic decision. This paper argues that gender work, despite its subtlety relative to gender play, is a crucial form of survival and subversion for LGBTQ youth.

Gender theorists (Butler, Geertz, and Thorne, to name a few) have used the idea of gender “play” to describe a process of gender disruption through non-normative presentation. Gender play most often occurs in public and
includes crossing or maneuvering across or between genders, mixing gendered markers, or performing a parody of gender (Pascoe 2007). Because of its confrontational, theatrical style and explicit critique of the gender binary, gender play has been offered as a site of social change and activism. Especially for youth, gender play can be a tool for thinking critically about gender presentation, binary, and fluidity, as well as developing a sense of agency and activism. Cris Mayo offers an example of queer and trans teens engaging in gender play by going to a local Wal-Mart store after an LGBTQ meeting in drag, confronting bystanders with their presentation and later uploading photos online (2014). Gender play should not be mistaken to include the fairly regular occurrences of straight, cisgender male teenagers engaging in female drag, as these performances usually employ (trans)misogynistic tropes and serve to bolster the performer’s masculinity in contrast to his abject display. Gender play is primarily informed by an understanding of gender inequality, which lends it its political cogency.

It is not my intention to completely dismiss gender play as a conceptual tool, but instead to point to its shortcomings and suggest another framework for thinking about gender presentation: gender work. Gender play can be useful but its theory relies on false assumptions of how race, class, and context affect gender presentation and visibility. It overwhelmingly produces white, middle-class subjects and erases the logics of commodification and capitalism that render gender play visible or subversive (Hennessy 2000). Gender play does not attend to the daily labor queer and trans youth expend on their gender presentation, nor the issues of context or survival that demand such labor.

Discussions of gender play do acknowledge the difference between public and private space, in that a public, heterosexual audience is assumed in order to give
the act of play its subversive quality, but fail to understand that these are not discrete boundaries. In Mayo’s Wal-Mart drag example, she emphasized that the teens knew others working at the store that could defend them if they were challenged (2014). These private connections are inextricable from their public action, complicating the easy distinction.

Not only are the public/private boundaries not discrete, they are rarely static. Queer and trans people learn early that every situation must be carefully read for possible dangers or potential allies (Mayo 2007). Shifting spaces, cohabitants, experiences, traumas, and intersecting identities of the queer/trans subject complicate the ideas of “public” and “private” spaces. It is more accurate to describe the landscape of spaces as a unique patchwork of rules, whether explicit or unspoken, that each LGBTQ person has memorized. Even in this patchwork categories are dynamic, and moments of negotiation “may freeze play,” (p. 186). A framework solely focused on gender play oversimplifies the context and the ambiguity that such subversive action necessarily occurs in. Instead, I would like to offer the term gender work.

Although the idea of subversion appears throughout this paper, it should not be understood as indicating merely exposure of the constructed nature of gender. In a gender work framework subversion looks like many different things, or it might look like nothing at all. In this world that seeks to eradicate queer and trans youth, subversion is any process of self-love and survival that endures.

Gender work deals in negotiations. Gender work understands that for queer and trans youth every moment, no matter how mundane, is a negotiation of gender presentation and audience. To some extent all youth begin engaging in gender work by learning and navigating gender expectations and dynamics (Mayo 2014). Straight and cisgender youth (particularly girls) also face consequences for transgressing these norms, but their humanity is less often contingent on their gender presentation. For queer
and trans youth, careful and deliberate execution of gender work is compulsory for survival in hostile spaces that view their bodies as deviant, contaminated, and in need of correction or punishment (Cruz 2011).

Disidentification, as discussed by José Esteban Muñoz (1999), is a useful corollary to this definition of gender work. Here are just three of his descriptions of disidentification:

1) “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere,” (p. 4)
2) “Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology,” (p. 11) and
3) “Disidentification is about managing and negotiating trauma and systemic violence,” (p. 161).

These three descriptions were chosen because they closely mirror my idea of gender work and its utility. Gender work is a strategy of navigating hostile spaces as “minority subjects”, namely queer and trans youth. In some ways gender work uses dominant ideology, normative gender presentation, to achieve survival in spaces where nonconformity (queerness and transgender) is severely punished. At the same time, using normative gender presentation is working against dominant ideology in that it allows for the thriving of queer and trans youth. Finally, like disidentification, gender work is precisely about managing systemic violence and collective (or personal) trauma inflicted upon queer and trans people.

A core component of gender work is the struggle to recognize one’s self, to be recognized (or not) by others, and to maintain a sense of privacy or safety. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), what she calls gender free play is mediated by the desire for self-recognition, especially for those “who experience their bodies as not just problematic, but stigmatic,” (p. 18). Queer and trans students have exactly this kind of relationship to their bodies, exacerbated by the efforts, in school or at home, to contain or control them. Gender work is both
circumscribed by this matrix of self-recognition and institutional suppression and the very thing that makes it navigable for queer and trans youth. Queer and trans youth, especially youth of color, are continually inventing a language and iconography for themselves that allows them to recognize themselves and others like them while enjoying a modicum of privacy. A lot can be expressed through things like slang, a handshake, gesture, or a rainbow bracelet, which might seem insignificant to the untrained eye (Decena 2011; Cruz 2011). These tools straddle the public/private binary and are examples of gender work in small spaces, serving as signals for LGBTQ teens in unfamiliar or unsafe environments.

How can a concept of gender play be applied to the daily labor of trans youth? It surely cannot. Though trans youth may engage in a theatrical form of gender play, trans lives are dominated by constant deliberations about when, where, and how they can present. Trans lives are “about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shoe fixed...not about making a critical intervention every waking second of the day,” (Namaste 2005, p. 20). Sometimes being trans is about making critical interventions, but privileging this function of gender presentation (as gender play discourse does) forgets trans people whose survival depends on subtlety. “Passing” isn’t about conforming to oppressive gender expectations, but taking advantage of those expectations in order to exist. José Esteban Muñoz (1999) tells us that “At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere,” (p. 5). Gender work complicates and complements ideas of gender play. Neither one is definitively the best tool for gender disruption, but by remembering both we can arrive at a clearer picture of the complexities of performing gender in different spaces.

Trans youth and students face particular challenges and complexities navigating between home and school, public and private spaces. Any given trans student could
experience varying degrees of outness and acceptance in different spaces. Leaving for school, going back home, hanging out with friends, and going to work are just a few possible moments where a trans teenager is forced to ask themselves, “Who am I going to be around? How can I present?” Trans students may face considerable pressure to present as their assigned gender at school, or, if they are out to some degree, to present as a normative version of their identified gender (Mayo 2014). Some students may have a change of clothes on them at all times so they can switch outfits as they switch spaces. The only generalization that can be made in good faith about trans students is that they all must engage, internally or externally, with the daily considerations of gender work.

In light of how this labor is often erased, it is important to consider that gender work may be happening even when we don’t see it on the surface. A high school classmate and friend of mine, a white trans man, used processes of gender work in an unexpected way to survive the emotional demands of presenting as a woman in school. After coming out, when asked how he could handle dressing up in the hyper-feminine dresses that were uniform for choir performances he said lightheartedly that he thought about it as performing in female drag. By reimagining it in this way, the choir performance becomes no longer a triggering or conformist space but one of reclamation. Even though he was forced to present as his assigned gender, the gender work he accomplished enabled him to retain agency. This experience is illegible to a gender play framework because there were no crossings of boundaries or confrontations, in fact almost no visual clues that a struggle with gender was occurring internally. But Rosemary Hennessy (2000) reminds us that what is deemed legible or visible is not indicative of what exists, but of the way visibility is created—in this case through the commodification of conspicuous gender play and the erasure of the gender labor of certain people. Attention to small victories of gender work renders the invisible visible.
Just as trying to “pass” should not indicate a conformist desire in a trans person, gender work aimed at preserving familial and cultural ties should not indicate a conformist desire in a queer or trans youth of color (QTYOC). For QTYOC, home and family become at once safe and unsafe spaces; home is a safe space from racist, colonialist institutions, but potentially hostile to their queer and/or trans identities. These spaces must be traversed carefully, so as not to lose the support network they offer. While all trans and queer youth learn to read and navigate spaces in complex ways, QTYOC often learn to exist in even more fraught spaces out of a need for their community and respect for cultural, familial, and religious beliefs (Mayo 2014). Potential economic ties become an especially prominent influence for queer and trans immigrants, who may need to depend on their families for economic support, job opportunities, or resources to learn English (Decena 2011). Engaging in gender work to maintain these relationships allows for the survival of QTYOC in the practical sense, in the procurement of resources, but also in the personal sense, in the strengthening of familial bonds that could decrease feelings of isolation. It is crucial to remember not only these practical or sentimental ties to family and culture, but also the different ways being “out” manifests in different spaces. For families of various nationalities, faiths, and races, a queer or trans youth may be out in all but name. In these families, respect and love can mean leaving the issue ambiguous and uncontested (Decena 2011). A nuanced gender work paradigm is attentive to these cultural differences and complications, and resists the idea that coming “out” in a space necessarily makes that space better or more real for queer and trans youth.

C.J. Pascoe’s book Dude You’re a Fag offers a prime example for critiquing gender play discourses and distinguishing between gender play and gender work. As part of her study of masculinity in high school Pascoe compares the masculine presentation of two groups of girls at her research site, the GSA Girls and the Basketball Girls,
and the subversive potential of what she calls their gender play or gender maneuvering. The GSA Girls, a largely white
group, embodied the traditional idea of gender play by
dressing in non-normative ways, mixing masculine and
feminine markers, and coupling their presentation with an
explicit social justice agenda. The Basketball Girls, by
contrast, were a group of girls of color who were not
involved in activism within the school but dressed and
acted in masculine ways on a daily basis. Their specific
form of gender play leads Pascoe to conclude that the GSA
Girls hold the most serious potential for subversion of the
gendered order within their high school. She states that the
Basketball Girls reinscribe gendered power and uphold
misogyny in their gender maneuvering. This analysis fails
to understand the complexity of gender presentation by
privileging a particular definition of “gender play” and
ignoring the kind of gender work that the Basketball Girls,
and doubtless other students, executed. Furthermore it fails
to understand factors of race, class, and culture in any
meaningful way.

The Winter Ball is a good place to examine and
expand on Pascoe’s gender play analysis, or gender play
discourse in general. Pascoe states that the GSA Girl’s used
this and other heteronormative school rituals as a “time to
challenge gendered norms,” by wearing gender- bending
outfits such as Genevieve’s combination of a feminine dress
and a more masculine tie choker (p. 145). While this is a
moment of subversion and gender play, at the same time
Pascoe’s analysis overlooks the gender work that the
Basketball Girls must undergo. Many of the Basketball Girls
are unable to present in the masculine way they usually do
due to familial or financial restraints. One of the girls,
Michelle, wanted to go to the Winter Ball in a tuxedo but
couldn’t afford to go. This is one instance in which, by
locating subversion in the act of theatrically non-normative
presentation, gender subversion becomes inaccessible to
those who can’t afford to engage in gender play. A gender
work framework acknowledges the daily gender decisions
someone like Michelle makes; a gender play framework renders her labor invisible.

Rebeca, a Latina Basketball Girl, faces pressure from friends and family alike and forsakes her masculine presentation for a dress and makeup at the Winter Ball. Pascoe finds Rebeca’s claims that her mother prohibited her from wearing a suit “unconvincing,” (p. 130). This conclusion is disrespectful and simplistic. In order to navigate the space of the school dance, Rebeca faced conflicting feelings of discomfort with what she was wearing, familial pressure, and the obvious social rewards for presenting normatively. With this in mind, Rebeca’s feminine presentation is not an act of conformity or secret feminine desires, but an act of survival. As a young queer girl of color, Rebeca’s power to present in the way she desired is limited by financial, familial, and community ties. Wearing a dress and makeup is gender work, the labor necessary to survive in a hostile space.

Pascoe’s GSA Girls/Basketball Girls dichotomy and her rendering of the Basketball Girls as non-subversive makes the gaps in gender play discourse all the more glaring. The Basketball Girls are engaging in daily gender work, negotiating female masculinity and presentation, in a way that should not be read as anything but subversive for themselves as students and queer girls of color. Pascoe could have benefited from Cindy Cruz, who writes that a researcher must look for queer youth resistance in small spaces (Cruz 2011). The Basketball Girl’s method of resistance may have been less organized or planned than the GSA Girl’s, and the intentionality of their gender work may have been easy to undercut, but it does not erase the meaning of their resistance. The Basketball Girls were subversive in their mere existence as masculine girls of color navigating a highly heterosexual, white supremacist space like a school.

Gender play is not a strategy without utility. Especially for LGBTQ youth in a space such as a school, gender play can be a tool of public gender disruption and personal experimentation. But the discourse surrounding
gender play inevitably, misguidedly ascribes particular motivations and conclusions to a wide range of public action. Drag and other forms of play are nearly always viewed through a paranoid lens; they are said to denaturalize, expose, and critique gender as a process. Consciously engaging with gender means always exposing, critiquing, and subverting. Even recent scholarship on gender play and subversion that do acknowledge transgender identities privilege expressions like drag, genderqueer, and genderfuck because of how they expose and hegemonic gender norms (Rupp, Taylor, Shapiro 2010). Surely there must be other modes and motivations that are no less critical nor subversive. Especially in the context of youth, it should not seem so outlandish to suggest that those engaging in play might be doing just that—playing. But Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) warns that claiming so would mean admitting a “self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo.” (p. 26). Trans youth (and adults) are accused of as much for their gender work.

Outside of the academy, we can’t all be the perfect post-modern subjects. For queer and trans youth, negotiating gender is not always about critical interventions—it’s about playing, surviving, struggling, thriving, and so much more. Sometimes play can be fatally serious and work can be blissfully fun. Gender work recognizes the complicated relationship of public/private and the difficulties of navigating hostile spaces. Gender work resists the dichotomy of subversive visibility or conformist shame. Gender work understands that daily decisions about gender presentation are about safety, privacy, and culture, but they are also about the resiliency and transgressions of LGBTQ youth.

Josie Wenig is a student at Indiana University, studying Gender Studies and Law and Public Affairs. They are passionate about activism, intersectional feminism, and trans politics. They believe in keeping knowledge accessible and queering the Midwest.
References


Bending the Binary: LGBTQ Sex Workers’ Gender Presentations

By Nicole White

ABSTRACT. The lived experiences of LGBTQ sex workers are largely unknown. Of the few representations of LGBTQ sex workers in media and academia, most are shrouded in inaccurate and dehumanizing stereotypes. Through qualitative interviews with eight LGBTQ sex workers in Denver and Boulder, Colorado, this thesis attempts to portray an accurate view of the way LGBTQ sex workers negotiate their gender and sexual identities. LGBTQ sex workers were found to balance their queer and trans identities and presentations with clients’ perceived desires for hegemonic gender presentations, maintaining a unique blend of authentic presentation and marketability.

Introduction

Sex work has long been debated in academic, feminist, and mainstream discourse. Shrouded in stereotypes and moralistic claims, representations of sex work often swing between polar extremes. At one end of the spectrum, dominance feminists claim that sex work is inherently oppressive, often portraying sex workers as helpless victims of patriarchy and/or capitalism (Showden 2012). In an attempt to combat this harsh view, sex positive feminists began describing sex work in a more positive light, sometimes going as far as claiming that the sex industry is inherently queer and progressive (Barton 2001; Mai 2012; McKay 1999; Read 2013).

Given these focused views and general claims about the sex industry as a whole, it is not surprising that little research has been conducted on sex workers’ actual lives and experiences, As such, most studies on sex workers focus on their risks of contracting sexually transmitted
infections and/or facing physical and sexual violence (Begum et al. 2013; Gorry, Roen, and Reilly 2010; Jackson, Bennett, and Sowinski 2007; Mai 2012; Vanwesenbeeck 2013; Weitzer 2010). Additionally, research focused on LGBTQ sex workers specifically is rare (Barton 2001; Smith and Laing 2012). Barton (2001) theorizes that most scholars studying sex workers avoid talking about gender and sexual orientation out of fear of alienating their informants. Rather than protecting informants from feeling shame, however, researchers contribute to the stigma LGBTQ sex workers face by perpetuating their invisibility in academia (Smith and Laing 2012).

Thankfully, new definitions and conceptualizations of sex work allow for the diversity of sex workers’ lives to be more accurately represented. Scholars are now contending that a singular sex worker identity does not exist (Orchard et al. 2013). Additionally, philosophical debates about the morality of sex work are often dehumanizing and patronizing. As such, this thesis will explore the rich experiences of LGBTQ sex workers, a group that lives on the crux of many complex socio-cultural contexts (Smith and Laing 2012). LGBTQ sex workers illuminate the importance of intersectionality with their multiple oppressed identities and can teach us much about gender identity, sexuality, identity management, authenticity, and performativity. By listening to their stories, we can greatly increase knowledge in the fields of queer theory, feminism, sexuality, and identity.

With this approach, I hope to emphasize that individuals’ gender/sexuality identities and presentations, within both their working and non-working personas, are varied and mutable (Ocha and Earth 2013). LGBTQ sex workers, like all other individuals, can “enact multiple, overlapping, intertwined, contradictory and simultaneous identity roles” (Read 2013:244). LGBTQ sex workers do not oscillate between an ‘authentic’ self, where workers would theoretically present their gender and sexual orientation as they do in everyday life, and an ‘inauthentic’ self, where workers would conform completely to clients’ expectations.
Instead, LGBTQ sex workers integrate various aspects of themselves and their lives at different times in their work, as all individuals bring out diverse parts of themselves in varied social interactions (Webber 2013). I hope to let my participants speak for themselves to reveal the complex, diverse, and rich lives of LGBTQ sex workers.

Methods

I used a qualitative in-depth interview design to explore how LGBTQ sex workers think about and present their gender and sexual orientations. I conducted interviews from January to March 2014 with LGBTQ current and former sex workers living in the Denver-Boulder area of Colorado.

Eight individuals were interviewed in my sample, all of whom I assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. (See Table 1 for a description of participants’ identities.) Their ages ranged from 21 to 34 years old, with an average age of 26. Four participants identify as cisgender women, one identifies as a transgender guy, one identifies as gender queer on the masculine spectrum, one identifies as gender fluid, and one does not identify with gender. Four participants identify as white, one identifies as white with some Native ancestry, one identifies as Latina, one identifies as bi-racial, and one identifies as Mediterranean. All eight participants identify as queer. Six participants identify as polyamorous and two identify as non-monogamous.

The individuals in my sample represented many different branches of the sex industry, and most have worked several different jobs. The different types of sex work that participants have done include being a sugar baby\(^{49}\) \((n = 3)\), escorting\(^{50}\) \((n = 3)\), web camming\(^{51}\) \((n = 3)\),

\(^{49}\) Sugar babying involves going on dates, talking, or having sexual interactions with a sugar daddy or sugar mommy. Sugaring normally replicates a dating relationship, instead of exchanging money for a single service.

\(^{50}\) Escorting involves having sexual interactions with a client.
stripping\(^{52}\) (n = 2), giving erotic massages\(^{53}\) (n = 2), being a financial domme\(^{54}\) (n = 2), and performing in porn\(^{55}\) (n = 2). The average age of entry into the sex industry was twenty years old. At the time of being interviewed, three participants were currently working in the sex industry, while five were not. Only one participant expressed that she did not want to do sex work again in the future.

Findings

Each of the participants in my sample struck a careful balance between authenticity and playing a role when it came to presenting their gender to clients. They incorporated their personal identities, personal emotional needs, the desires of their clients, and the demands of the sex industry into their work. Each LGBTQ sex worker felt pressured to present as more “vanilla” and heteronormative than they would like in order to be successful in the industry. Regardless of their personal gender identities, MAAB (male assigned at birth) sex workers acted more in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, while FAAB (female assigned at birth) sex workers acted more in accordance with hegemonic femininity. However, they each found ways to weave their queer identities into their work.

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\(^{51}\) Web camming, sometimes shortened to ‘camming’, involves talking, stripping, masturbating, or modeling online, usually in a live chat with clients.

\(^{52}\) Stripping involves dancing at a strip club or at private parties, such as bachelor parties.

\(^{53}\) Erotic massage involves giving a full body massage to clients. The ‘erotic’ component can come from the sex worker being partially or fully naked, giving the client manual sexual stimulation, engaging in other sexual interactions, or a combination of the three.

\(^{54}\) Financial domination involves extorting money from consenting clients, usually in a BDSM context.

\(^{55}\) Porn performers involves being filmed having sex with others. Amateur porn usually involves filming yourself having sex, as opposed to working for an outside company that sets up the filming.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Gender Pronouns</th>
<th>Sex Work Done Over Lifetime</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Relationship Orientation</th>
<th>Gender Identity with Gender</th>
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<td>Zoe</td>
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<td>Polyamorous</td>
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<td>Laine</td>
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<th>Erotic massage</th>
<th>Stripper, escort, sugar baby</th>
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<td>Stripper, escort, sugar baby</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>Non-monogamous</td>
<td>Latina</td>
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Table 1. Selected Characteristics of the Sample
All of my participants stated that they identified themselves as cisgender to most, if not all, of their clients in order to appear more mainstream. These identifications seemed to be based largely in clients’ perceptions of gender and sex. The cisgender women had the privilege of having clients guess their gender correctly, since they all presented as feminine and female. The genderqueer and gender fluid individuals allowed clients to misgender them as males or females, in accordance with the sex they were assigned at birth. Shane, a gender fluid person who formerly did webcam and sugar baby work, explained how clients assumed their gender identity. They stated,

“Most people aren’t even aware that you can be anything other than a cis woman or a cis man. Like, I didn’t need to put on this big show to prove that I was a woman or anything, it was just, ’you have boobs, you’re a girl.’”

On the other hand, Cameron, a trans man who does erotic massage, experienced much more conflict surrounding his gender identity. He explained how he manages presenting as a cisgender woman to clients while taking testosterone:

People can tell that I’m not quite a woman at this point because of hormones, but they can’t totally figure it out. They’re not really sure what’s going on or what it is, so they just assume that I’m a trans woman. So this guy came in and he was like, ‘Are you a man?’ And I was like, well the answer is kind of yes, but not in the way that you’re thinking.

Since Cameron’s hormones have changed his secondary sex characteristics, including deepening his voice, clients occasionally think that he is a trans woman. It is interesting to note how Cameron must balance transitioning into a man in his everyday life and appearing as a cisgender woman in his work, especially since most previous research on transgender sex workers has focused on individuals who present themselves as transgender within their work.

Although they presented as cisgender in most circumstances, some LGBTQ sex workers have been more open about their gender identity. Cameron has a section on
his website about gender bending. Although he says that few people request him to dress up like a boy, it does happen occasionally. Laine, a masculine-of-center genderqueer individual, explained that he recently had a client who broke his rule of presenting “strictly as male and masculine” in his work. Laine was able to admit that he wore women’s clothes to a client after that client asked open, non-judgmental questions about gender.

In accordance with previous research that has found that sex workers utilize beauty practices to appear conventionally beautiful, the individuals in my sample tended to adhere to more stereotypical gender presentations (Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013; Spanger 2013). Since almost all studies on beauty in the sex industry have focused on individuals who present as cis and trans women, it is important to recognize that the male-presenting sex workers in my sample felt pressured to conform to gender stereotypes, as well. Most of the sex workers in my study explained that they wore more feminine (for FAAB sex workers) or masculine (for MAAB sex workers) clothes while working than they did otherwise. Lilith, a cis woman who used to be a financial domme, said, “I dressed super sexy [for work]... And, I mean, you can see me now, I’m wearing a baggy t-shirt and I’m not wearing a bra. When I’m online, I definitely wear a bra.” Riley explained how he toned down his normally “flamboyant” appearance for work. He stated, “Normally I’ll wear my hat to the side, but I might flip it back. And I’ll take out my piercings and dangly stuff.”

However, many found ways to incorporate their own personal style into their work outfits, or chose not to alter their clothing at all. Although Jolene, a cis woman who is a sugar baby and used to strip and escort, has felt pressure to dress in more stereotypically feminine or sexy ways, she does not change her clothing for clients. She stated, “I don’t really put on a show for anybody these days.” Laine, on the other hand, has found a more subtle way to weave his authentic self into his working attire. He explained, “I wear clothes that are really masculine, except
sometimes I’ll wear women’s jeans and women’s shirts. I just do it in hidden ways that no one would really recognize.” Laine is thus able to portray himself as masculine to clients, while secretly expressing his more queer gender identity.

One of the few beauty rituals that the LGBTQ sex workers in my study did not participate in was choosing a strategically gender-normative haircut. This is in contrast to previous research that emphasized the importance of sex workers having stereotypically feminine or masculine haircuts (Rivers-Moore 2013). This may be because most research examines cisgender sex workers, who may have non-deviant haircuts to begin with. Within my sample of queer and trans sex workers, however, only one person, Cameron, expressed that he waited to get a certain haircut out of fear that it would reduce his marketability. Many of the participants in my study had eccentric, short, or dyed hair. The tendency for LGBTQ sex workers to feel less restricted in choosing a haircut may be because haircuts are more permanent markers of appearance. It is easy to change one’s clothes and makeup for a few hours for work, but maintaining a work-friendly haircut would impede on individuals’ abilities to express their queer or trans identities in their everyday lives. Thus, sex workers are less likely to consider clients’ reactions when deciding how to cut their hair.

While few of the sex workers expressed distress over choosing their clothing and hair—most found those processes to be somewhere between slightly annoying to fun—many of the feminine-presenting sex workers had complicated feelings about shaving. Four out of the six feminine-presenting individuals in my sample expressed that they normally do not shave their armpits, legs, or pubic hair. They seemed to be anxious about how clients would react to their body hair. This is certainly understandable, since women are usually expected to have hairless legs and armpits and are frequently demonized if they do not shave.

The feminine-presenting sex workers in my sample seemed well aware of this beauty standard. Each of the
feminine-presenting sex workers who did not shave tried to work out a process for hiding their body hair from clients. Shane expressed, “When I was camming, I just set the lighting up so my leg hair wouldn’t show and I just, like, never raised my arms. I don’t think anyone noticed.” Cameron employed a similar tactic with clients. He stated, “I kind of just keep my arms down...but I don't think people are too weirded out by me not shaving my armpits. Not shaving my legs is a much bigger deal. I wear thigh high stockings at all times when I’m working.” Jolene is much more open about her body hair. She stated, “[My sugar daddies] know that I don’t shave my armpits because I wear short sleeves. Nobody’s said anything.” Still, she stated that she thinks she will need to confront her sugar daddies about her unshaved pubic hair if they start to have sex.

The main reason individuals altered their appearance was to fit what they believed were the demands of the industry. Sex workers tend to assume that most clients prefer to see young, traditionally attractive workers, and so they feel they must adhere to those standards to succeed (Marvin and Grandy 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013; Trautner 2005). Ariadne described how clients influenced her gender performance to be more conventionally feminine when she was webcamming. She said, “When I would get on one-on-one chat, that's what people wanted a lot of the time, was for me to do things that were more feminine... I got requests to put on heels and to put on lipstick, too.” She explained this phenomenon of clients requesting feminine presentations by stating, “I think it’s this ideal that people are paying for.” Zoe summed up her tendency to appear more feminine very succinctly. When asked why she alters her appearance, she simply responded, “Because that's what the demand is for.” Although Laine did not have as many aspects of his appearance to change for sex work as the feminine-presenting sex workers, he still felt pressured to present in a masculine way to be successful. He stated, “I default to almost a caricature of a gay sex worker identity... I don’t
feel at liberty to express gender in a variety of ways at work. I think that undermines my marketability.”

These motivations did not stay static over time or across participants, however. I found that individuals who have been in the sex industry longer and who have more economic privilege were less likely to adhere to gendered scripts. Those who have done sex work for several years slowly began incorporating their authentic selves more into their work, and found that they were still able to retain clients. Those who were wealthier or had income from other jobs, on the other hand, felt they could take risks with how they presented themselves because they would not be negatively affected by losing clients.

**Conclusion**

Most previous research on sex workers’ gender and sexual presentations has focused on individuals whose personal and working identities overlap (e.g. cisgender women who present as cisgender women for work). Since my participants all identified as queer and have varying gender identities, I found that they possessed many more opportunities for expressing or hiding their queerness in their work than previously thought. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study managed their personal identities, individual preferences, and the desires of clients to construct their gender performances.

In accordance with previous research, my participants felt pressured to present themselves as more stereotypically masculine or feminine in order to retain clients. However, each individual found ways to weave their queer and trans identities into their presentations with clients. Despite much criticism of the sex industry for being patriarchal and heteronormative, making decisions about what beauty norms to adopt was not a helpless process of succumbing to hegemonic gender roles (Mai 2012; Read 2013; Rivers-Moore 2013). Rather, LGBTQ sex workers skillfully balanced their needs for being authentic, having fun, and making money in choosing how to present their
gender at work. These findings point to the complex natures of gender, sex, and the sex industry.

This study contributes significantly to academic understandings of LGBTQ sex workers. Previous research has offered limited portrayals of LGBTQ sex workers steeped in stereotypes, inaccurate claims, and dehumanizing assumptions. My research shows that there is not a singular sex worker identity (Orchard et al. 2013). Each individual working in the sex industry develops their own tactics for presenting themselves and interacting with clients. Although it is understandable to want to condense individuals’ experiences into easily digestible themes, making claims about how all sex workers are exploited, powerful, heteronormative, or queer violates how actual sex workers live their lives. The LGBTQ sex workers in my study wanted to be viewed primarily as normal people with complex experiences and identities. Rather than fitting into a simple dichotomy of oppression or empowerment, queer and trans sex workers simultaneously reinforce, subvert, are subordinated by, and overcome heteronormativity within their work.

Nicole White graduated from the University of Colorado, Boulder in May 2014 with a double major in sociology and psychology. They currently work with Sex Workers Outreach Project, Denver. They are interested in using ethnography as a tool to benefit marginalized populations and they hope to pursue a PhD in sociology or women’s studies.

References


“I didn’t think you could be any more butch”: Gender Performance, Expressions of Masculinity and Rape in Veronica Mars

By Chelsee Bergen

Introduction

Though it accumulated critical praise, developed a cult fan following, and has become hugely relevant in American pop culture,¹ there is a general lack of scholarship delving into the teen drama and modern noir Veronica Mars. While this lack of academic analysis is disappointing on many fronts, the absence from narrative studies of gender is especially glaring as Veronica Mars is rich with complex and contradictory constructions of gender. The most prominent of these paradoxes can be seen in the titular Veronica Mars—a high school student and part-time private investigator—who often straddles gender norms, performing femininity while also rejecting it. Though female bodied and feminine in appearance, easily read as a perky blond, Veronica is also fiercely independent, assertive, and at times aggressive—traits commonly associated with masculinity and the heteronormative male identity. While these traits are helpful to Veronica in her work as a PI and as a means of distancing herself from personal trauma, they also isolate her peers, making the formation of healthy relationships and community difficult.

This case study seeks to situate Veronica Mars among television studies and scholarship on constructions

¹ 11 years after the cancellation of the show a fan-funded Kickstarter campaign was able to raise over $5,700,000 for a Veronica Mars feature film, shattering numerous Kickstarter records in the process.
of gender on mainstream television. Focusing primarily on the third season of the show, Veronica’s gender performances are examined in terms of physical appearance and clothing, dialogue, and verbal/non-verbal interactions with other characters. While at times the use of ironic or self-reflexive performances of femininity allow Veronica to undermine male dominance, genuine femininity— which is to say, unaware or non self-effacing femininity — is consistently framed as a liability. By playing against her assigned gender and exhibiting qualities associated with masculinity, Veronica is able to gain autonomy and agency. However, no performance of masculinity is able to help her evade the vulnerability of her female body.

“Under That ‘Angry Young Woman’ Shell There Is A Slightly Less Angry Young Woman”

Central to the construction of Veronica Mars as a character, and key to her expressions of gender, is that prior to the events of the series she was sexually assaulted. As the audience learns via flashback in the pilot episode, Veronica was drugged and raped at a party in her sophomore year of high school. This event is framed as stripping her of her innocence and pushing her toward the conclusion that the world is a dark and grimy place. In the harshly lit flashback Veronica wears a white dress, a key signifier of purity and femininity; in the present any suggestion of purity is gone, replaced with an abrasive attitude and a grueling stare. The very look of Veronica changes in the aftermath of her assault— her hair becomes a choppy bob, dresses are traded for jeans and a tee shirt, smiling turns to a stern expression. As Alaine Martaus notes in her essay “‘You get Tough. You Get Even’: Rape, Anger, Cynicism, and the Vigilante Girl Detective in Veronica Mars”, “By pairing a scene of an innocent Veronica with one of the

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now-disillusioned detective Veronica ... the show emphasizes the centrality of the rape in creating Veronica as the vigilante girl detective” (74). Essentially, there is no ‘Veronica Mars: heroine and hardboiled detective,’ without the violent destruction of ‘Veronica Mars: wholesome young girl.’ The audience does not get a great deal of information about pre-rape Veronica, but her depictions in flashbacks tend more toward naive. Veronica’s transformation in attitude and sartorial sense are unmistakable coping mechanisms. If Veronica as virgin and female is weak and fragile, vulnerable to assault, her most viable route for self-preservation is to become antithetical to her former self— strong, biting, and masculine. As with many heroines before her, performances of masculinity allow Veronica to become outspoken (Harper 514). Veronica’s assertive, unyielding nature— traits often rewarded in male gender performance— gains her no social cache. Rather, these performances of masculinity and rejections of privilege are considered by her peers to be a break from the natural order, furthering her status as a pariah for disobeying social norms (Dowd 5). In the Pilot episode, Veronica watches her former friends laugh and enjoy themselves at lunch while she sits alone.

Veronica’s gender performance is never so transgressive as to include cross-dressing or any outright denial of her female gender assignment, instead she utilizes exaggerative performances of femininity as a tool in her work— playing the dumb blond or love struck girl (Martaus 80). As Weevil notes of Veronica after she uses an overtly feminine head tilt as a means of getting what she wants, “There you go with that head tilt thing. You know, you think you're all badass, but whenever you need something, it's all [mimics Veronica's head tilt] ‘Hey.’” To which Veronica responds, “You're lucky I don't hair flip. I'd own you” (Ruggiero “An Echolls Family Christmas”). Veronica is well aware of the power of feminine performance and body language— it is one of the many tools in her P.I. toolbox. Such performances are a means to an end, discarded when Veronica has gotten what she wants. As Veronica might say,
though she looks like a duck, she doesn’t quack like one.

“You Want to Know How I Lost My Virginity? So Do I.”

Rape and the weakness of femininity continue to haunt Veronica, both in the form of emotional trauma from her own assault and in recurring sexual assault plot lines. As Andrea Braithwaite notes in *Triple Threats: Young Female Detectives and the Crimes of Postfeminism*, “founding moments [of sexual assault] linger in the chick dicks’ consciousness, recurring throughout the series in ways that suggest such moments haunt and inform the protagonists’ investigative work” (25). Indeed, while sex crimes are littered throughout the series, never are they so prominent and influential in Veronica’s life and work as in the third and final season. The major storyline for the first nine episodes of the season find Veronica at Hearst College, alongside a serial rapist who doses women with GHB (the same drug used in Veronica’s own assault), assaults them and shaves their heads to leave them with a physical signifier of the attack. While Veronica may have believed that the transition to college might provide a respite from the torments of high school, these rapes reaffirm the previously established “gendered dynamics of sexual and social power” that exist in the world around her (Braithwaite 21). Whatever differences women might have, be they social, economic, or otherwise, they share a similar vulnerability to physical and sexual trauma.

Indeed, in college femininity seems even more closely linked to vulnerability as fraternities seek out intoxicated girls to score points on— as in episode 3.02 “My Big Fat Greek Rush Week,” when Veronica discovers that the Pi Sigma Sigma (Pi Sig) house has a “point system” for its members, wherein female sexual conquests are assigned

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4 See Braithwaite 21-27 for a more extensive investigation of rape in the female P.I. narrative.
a point value based on physical characteristics— including extra points for a handicap⁵— and the sex acts performed. Simultaneously, girls are attacked in their own bedrooms while a serial rapist evades both campus security and local police. Dick Casablancas, a member of the suspected rapist Pi Sigs defends the house and the fraternity system at large against the accusation, arguing “why rape the cow when you're swimming in free milk?” (Ruggiero and Elen). While Dick might have intended to illustrate that there are no shortage of consenting women and thus no need to assault someone, his metaphor better demonstrates a clear misunderstanding of the aggressive and controlling motivations behind sexual assault (as opposed to a strong desire to ‘get laid’), as well as the conquest driven attitude dictating the relationship between men and women on campus. Whether assaulting or ‘scoring points,’ both scenarios resemble an animal hunting for prey, positing women as antelopes to be picked off as soon as they stray from the herd.

From the start of season three, Veronica is positioned as inherently interested in the assaults—a fact which draws her into the purview of the rapist as a threat and potential target. In the season’s first episode, “Welcome Wagon,” Veronica accidentally walks in on her classmate Parker having sex in a darkened bedroom. Veronica quickly excuses herself— only to later find that Parker was actually being raped. As Veronica laments in voice-over while Parker is interviewed by police, “the thing about being roofed and raped— you might not remember the who, where, and why, but you definitely remember the what” (Ruggiero “My Big Fat Greek Rush Week”). Her words seem to suggest a kind of camaraderie, a connecting experience of shared trauma. Indeed, the assault survivors of Hearst College, and their allies, do form a kind of community in the wake of

⁵ “My points are in order, courtesy of Miss Bonnie Capistrano. Her curvature of the spine is hardly noticeable, but I still got the handicapped bonus.” - Dick Casablancas (Ruggiero “Lord of the Pi’s”).
violence— an alternative sorority — but Veronica remains on the outside. Parker goes so far as to suggest that her assault is Veronica’s fault, and expresses disgust after Veronica helps to clear the Pi Sig fraternity from being held responsible for the rapes (Ruggiero “My Big Fat Greek Rush Week”; Ruggiero and Elen). Veronica faces similar criticism and scrutiny from other women on campus as well. As noted in Diana Blaine’s binary categories, women and the feminine are associated with community and dependence, but in divorcing herself from the feminine Veronica is positioned as failing in her feminine duty to other women. In contrast, though the masculinity Veronica performs is associated with clarity and control, as a woman she can never fully embody these qualities (Blaine). Veronica occupies a contradictory space wherein she is unable to appropriately perform femininity or masculinity.

Though Veronica’s own rape— and the anger she felt in response to it— is framed as catalyzing her to take control of her self image and “re-creating herself in contrast to her former innocent victim self,” the Hearst rape survivors are not framed as withdrawing from femininity or developing masculine fronts in the same way (Martaus 84). In part this difference of response may be due to the fact that the Hearst assault survivors attacks are recognized as legitimate— in contrast with Veronica’s assault, which was ignored by authorities. 6In earlier season, Veronica attempts to convince female peers to adopt a more aggressive and commanding presence to protect themselves, saying, “you get tough. You get even” and that “if you want people to leave you alone, or better yet, treat you with respect, demand it, make them” (Wallington; North). Yet none of the other women of the show follow Veronica’s lead or adapt in the same way. Perhaps

6 After reporting her rape in “Pilot” the local sheriff coldly asks, “Is there anyone in particular you’d like me to arrest, or should I just round up the sons of the most important families in town?” This ties in with the fact that— though it is outside the purview of this discussion— class is a factor constantly at play in Veronica Mars.
Veronica’s peers lack a desire to subvert their femininity—
a tool which has had mixed results for her. Unfortunately
the interior lives of the other assault survivors are largely
lacking from the show, making it impossible to examine
alternative methods of adapting after trauma. Parker is the
only survivor given any significant screen time, but she is
largely written off by Veronica because of her overt
displays of femininity.

Veronica’s own discomfort with feminine gender
identity appears to often inhibit her from forming
significant and personal relationships with other women.
Rather, Veronica is constructed as the perpetual defender
of the fallen woman— a relationship that favors problem
solving over intimacy. Veronica’s quest to help sexually
exploited women can be read as an attempt to make up for
the women who failed her\(^7\) and an expression of the
masculine imperative that one protect dependents (Dowd
34). This same protective imperative is displayed by
Veronica’s boyfriend, Logan— particularly when, after
Veronica refuses to stop investigating the rapes, he hires a
bodyguard to protect her without her knowledge. When
Veronica finds out and confronts him, Logan asserts, “I
don't give a rat's ass if it's right or fair. I don't care if you're
angry. I care that you're safe.” To which Veronica responds,
“that's all sweet and great, but it doesn't really work that
way” (Ruggiero “Lord of the Pi’s”). There is a definite
parallel between the unrequested ‘help’ Veronica receives
from Logan and the relationship between Veronica and the
Hearst rape survivors. While when referring to her
investigation Veronica might say that “my nose kind of
belongs wherever I decide to put it,” she does not extend
that imperative universally. Having divorced herself from
the feminine for anything more than playacting, for
Veronica passivity or indirect action are not viable options.
Veronica does not care that the women of Hearst are angry.

\(^{7}\) In “Pilot” after being raped Veronica finds the word ‘Slut’ emblazoned
across her car, written by a female classmate.
she cares that they are safe.

“I'm just taking what you would have happily given; that's hardly a crime.”

The Hearst rapist, an ancillary character named Mercer Hayes, continually evades Veronica and even tricks her into helping him get out of jail with a fake alibi. Although there is little evidence that Mercer is smarter or more cunning than Veronica (or any of her previous foes), he bests her repeatedly. Using Blaine’s binary categories as a lens through which to examine Veronica’s relationship to Mercer, one can see that while Veronica usually occupies the side of the binary associated with power and masculinity, when faced with Mercer she is forced to the other side of the binary. While Veronica may be able to perform masculinity, she is not a ‘real man’ and is therefore vulnerable to men like Mercer, who firmly occupy the positions of the masculine— invulnerability, agency, and mind. Veronica, on the other hand, is allocated the roles of the feminine— vulnerable, victim, body, naked (Blaine). The other rape survivors embody these same feminine weaknesses, but none are so apparent as in Veronica— given her usual behavior. While when performing masculinity Veronica is able to defend herself against “verbal attack and physical threats,” being female bodied means that she remains susceptible to sexual violence (Martaus 75). The degree to which Veronica is vulnerable is apparent in episode 3.09 “Spit & Eggs” when Veronica confronts Mercer in an attempt to stop him before he can assault another woman. Throughout the series Veronica’s Taser proves to be a useful tool, allowing her to defend herself against various (male) assailants. However, when she attempts to use the Taser on Mercer he hits her, knocking the Taser from her hand and out of her reach. As in a scene from a horror film, Veronica crawls under the bed, groping for the Taser as Mercer grabs her legs and

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8 Mercer Hayes in “Spit & Eggs.”
pulls her out. She goes on to stab him in the leg with the horn of a porcelain unicorn—throughout the series Veronica is associated with unicorns many times, a symbol of exaggerated femininity that makes a humorous contrast with her hardboiled attitude—but the injury fails to stop Mercer in his pursuit. Ultimately, Veronica is only able to avoid being drugged and raped for a second time because Parker rallies a crowd after hearing Veronica blow one of the rape whistles handed out on campus. Parker, the picture of femininity, fulfills her feminine duty in the way Veronica could not and prevents a further assault. For women, there is only safety in numbers.

**Conclusion**

The transformative role of rape in *Veronica Mars* is a complex one, and is situated in a narrative tradition which positions rape as a catalyzing occurrence. The surface narrative of *Veronica Mars* supports Veronica’s rejection of femininity, framing masculine qualities as a means of gaining power and control, yet upon closer inspection it is clear that masculine performance also comes at a great cost to her, eroding her relationships and ability to connect. Future analyses would benefit from examining Veronica’s relationships—especially her romantic entanglements—as they are directly influenced by both the experience of her assault and the coping mechanisms she develops in the aftermath. A refusal to fit cleanly within the confines of her assigned gender is a major source of conflict in Veronica’s relationships. For Veronica, her rape is a transformative and driving event, one which some might argue brings her to a place of self-actualization and ultimate empowerment. However, to directly associate assault and empowerment is both simplistic and problematic, especially when one account for the fact that even an ‘empowered’ Veronica is still yoked with the feminine weakness of the body. Whether or not the narrative allows for other ways in which Veronica might gain agency without divorcing herself from femininity remains open for discussion, but no
alternative is immediately apparent. Though performances of masculinity benefit Veronica on many fronts, they ultimately never allow her to gain the full spectrum of male privilege or invulnerability to sexual violation.

**Chelsee Bergen** is a bibliophile and socio-anarchafeminist, who grew up in Las Vegas, NV. Her pursuit of a life of grassroots publishing, artivism, and community building is supported by her work in Critical Studies at the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Chelsee was a Semifinalist in the Research Category in USC's 2014 Undergraduate Writers Conference and was selected for a senior thesis, focusing on constructions of gender and motherhood in the science fiction television programs Fringe and Orphan Black. Additionally, Chelsee is a fan of drinking from mason jars and the un-ironic use of chat speak in everyday conversation.

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A Contemporary Debate on the Status of Women in the Workplace
For Those on Glass Cliffs: 
The Nature of Women in Power as 
Explored through Frozen, 
The Abramson Effect, and "Let It Go"

By Raelissa Glennon-Zukoff

ABSTRACT This paper seeks to explore the link made by Deborah Spar in her recently published piece The Ambramson Effect: Tales of Women Who Topple From Power between the effects of the glass ceiling and glass cliff effects on women in the topmost positions in American businesses, organizations, and corporations and the ascension to power of Queen Elsa in the Disney motion picture Frozen. By incorporating media reports on merchandising and animation, as well as scholarly research, this paper places Spar's theory into a more accessible space. Furthermore, by referencing the lyrics to the feature power ballad from the animated film, it more closely aligns Elsa's tale with those of women such as Jill Abramson herself, for whom Spar's piece is named. While no formal criticism or research has been published on the Abramson Effect thus far, the exploration of the glass ceiling effect and the glass cliff effect in this work establishes a theoretical basis from which it is possible to conclude that Spar's assessment of the current state of affairs in the American workplace is entirely accurate.

The snow glows white on the mountain tonight, 
Not a footprint to be seen.

The relationship between women and power has a long, dynamic history. Although one may speak vaguely of women being powerful, when one considers the notion of
women in power, a significant barrier presents itself. In *The Abramson Effect: Tales of Women Who Topple From Power*, Deborah Spar uses the Disney hit, *Frozen*, as a means of conceptualizing the rise to, fall from, and nature of power.

If the landscape of power could be made analogous to one of the many snowy mountains in *Frozen*, we would see more heavily trodden trails of familiar names and faces -- Michelle Obama, Gloria Steinem, Oprah Winfrey -- of well-known women who are openly recognized as extraordinary. But beyond that, these women's steps fade out, covered over with a fresh dusting of snow as the years pass by. One finds oneself standing at the edge of an untouched blanket of snow indicating the unmarred potential for exploration and growth, for travel towards the looming mountain of success. But which way should one climb? And, perhaps a more concerning query, what became of the women whose footsteps have faltered and disappeared in the near distance?

**A kingdom of isolation and it looks like I'm the queen.**

Queen Elsa, who ascends the throne after the death of her parents, is precisely the kind of woman that little girls wish to emulate. A *Wall Street Journal* article examining *Frozen* merchandising notes that the sales of Elsa dolls, dresses, and other novelties have far surpassed that of her younger sister, Anna. A clear explanation for such a dramatic difference emerges through a young girl's interview, "Elsa has powers and she's pretty" (Byron and Ziobro, "Elsa Dominates Anna in ‘Frozen’ Merchandise Sales"). This striking statement clarifies that Elsa's character embodies the characteristics that many young girls hope to exude and, further, indicates the importance of the simple conjunction "and." Women in high level positions cannot simply have powers of intellect, strong business sense, or any other career-related attributes, they must also be conventionally attractive.

In that vein of argumentation, *TIME* recently published a piece entitled, "Do Female Animated Characters
Need to be 'Pretty'?" which explores ideals of beauty that have become imperative in the realm of popular animation. The head animator of Frozen, Lino Disalvo, caused an uproar when he stated that female animated characters were more challenging to animate than their male counterparts. While there is significant room for misinterpretation here, returning to the original quotation offers the opportunity for insight: "Historically speaking, animating female characters are really, really difficult, 'cause they have to go through these range of emotions, but they're very, very -- you have to keep them pretty..." (Stampler, TIME).

Thus, women are not only struggling against institutionalized barriers to reach the highest positions in their respective field, they are expected to complete the same feats as their male contemporaries while maintaining a fresh face. If this is true of animated princesses, how much more so does this affect the women who live in a kingdom far, far from Arendelle?

The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside. Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried. Don't let them in, don't let them see.

Spar opens her piece with the striking example of Jill Abramson -- for whom the piece is named -- and her dismissal from the role of executive editor at the New York Times in May of 2014. After eleven years at the paper and four years at its head, Abramson was fired openly in the newsroom. Spar follows Abramson's tale with mentions of women such as Sallie Krawcheck (former finance executive at Bank of America and Citigroup), Ann Curry (formerly of the Today Show), and Tina Brown (creator of The Daily Beast). Each of these notable women was dismissed publicly with little or no explanation of their removal and then promptly forgotten. The memory of these once-powerful women was easily glossed over with a fresh coat of historical veneer by the organizations and publications.
that seamlessly replaced them, an act that is becoming a standard practice in nearly every field.

Be the good girl you always have to be. Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know. Well, now they know!

Besides holding high ranking positions, Spar points out another set of common denominators for the women mentioned, "All these women, like Elsa, were initially heralded for their power, their magic, and, yes -- in nearly all cases -- their looks. And all, in the end, were toppled from the cliff" (Spar, 140). And, thus, the formula for success and subsequent disaster emerges: an initial praise of power, the possession of great skill, and the display of socially accepted beauty. How is it that these qualities -- the same that make a woman a prime candidate for a high-ranking position -- are the same that makes her a likely victim of "the glass cliff" (Spar, 118) effect? Such a woman can climb this cliff, perhaps without realizing how high she has risen until she is primed to fall, and is subsequently overthrown by those who fear her power or find fault in the exercise of such power.

In an interview with the Harvard Business Review, Susanne Bruckmüller explains what feminist scholars mean when they speak about the glass cliff effect. Citing two researchers at the University of Exeter, Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam, she explains,

"Ryan and Haslam called this phenomenon of appointing women in times of organizational crisis, the "glass cliff...One could say that they have managed to break through the glass ceiling and so now they're on top. But their situation is more risky and more precarious than it would be if they were leading in a successful organization. So just like standing on top of a cliff, it's more dangerous than standing on top of a mountain. That's why it's called the glass cliff. In parallel to the glass ceiling metaphor, but also to show the precariousness and the risk that these women face" (Harvard Business Review, 2011).
Let it go, let it go!
Can't hold it back any more.
Let it go, let it go!
Turn away and slam the door.

And what, precisely, occurs when a woman like any of those mentioned by Spar "let's it go" and fills the role she has worked for, using her talents as she is finally able to? In most cases, she is reprimanded, ridiculed, or removed. In such instances, these women are not slamming any doors at all, unless it is the one they must close behind them on their way out.

In their collective book, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, Ann Morrison, Randall White, and Ellen Velsor indicate that the glass ceiling effect is still very present in modern office politics. Despite the Department of Labor's "Glass Ceiling Initiative" in 1989, women continue to face invisible barriers to success and ascension through the ranks of executive leadership. Issues include "lack of opportunities for...women to take advanced education programs and career-enhancing assignments, and the lack of accountability of equal opportunity within the leadership ranks" (Morrison, White, Velsor, 1994, xiii). Even with legislative support for women and minority groups, then, they continue to face difficulties in achieving and retaining topmost positions.

I don't care what they're going to say.
Let the storm rage on.
The cold never bothered me anyway.

And when they must relinquish their role, they plunge from the glass cliff they had fought for so long to summit, perhaps without initially realizing that only a glass ceiling awaited them at the top. While Elsa may not have cared what was said about her, it is unlikely that she would have faced the widely publicized onslaught of insults and criticism that have become possible in the modern day. Abramson, for example, was called a "source of widespread
frustration and anxiety" (Spar, 19), "stubborn and condescending" (Spar, 19), and -- disappointingly -- "bitchy" (Spar, 19). Perhaps this is where the analogy of Frozen begins to differentiate itself from the lived reality of women in power: the cold of unemployment, of a ruined reputation, and of the loss of power are certainly more than bothersome.

**It's funny how some distance, Makes everything seem small.**

Between 1967 and 2009, the number of women in the workforce rose from 14.8 million to 43.2 million. As Spar indicates, however, they are present in a way that is "much broader than deep" (Spar, 56). Furthermore, "they are not presiding in any way that even approaches equality" (Spar, 56), emphasizing the horizontal spread of women through the annals of the American workforce. From the topmost position of any given field, it is even clearer for women that they are truly alone, accompanied only by their female counterparts working far below them. From the peak of the glass cliff, it is certain that several things must seem small: the number of women beside them, the space between themselves and the glass ceiling they are ceaselessly approaching, and the margin for error.

In their collective research on the glass ceiling effect, David Cotter, Joan Hermsen, Seth Ovadia, and Reeve Vanneman define four criterion for establishing the presence of a glass ceiling. First, "A glass ceiling inequality represents a gender...difference that is not explained by other job-relevant characteristics of the employee." Second, "a glass ceiling inequality represents a gender...difference that is greater at higher levels of an outcome than at lowers levels of an outcome." Third, "A glass ceiling inequality represents a gender... inequality in the chances of advancement into higher levels, not merely the proportions of each gender...at those higher levels." And finally, "a glass ceiling inequality represents a gender...inequality that increases over the course of a career. (Cotter, Hermsen,
Ovadia, and Vanneman, "The Glass Ceiling Effect", 2001, p. 657-659, 661). While it is unclear whether Spar adheres to this criteria when she indicates that a glass ceiling was certainly present in all of the examples cited, it does serve as a general research framework for future research on the Ambramson Effect.

And the fears that once controlled me, can't get to me at all  
It's time to see what I can do,  
To test the limits and break through.  
No right, no wrong, no rules for me.  
I'm free!

As Elsa rises to power, "she induces fear in the men around her and looks fabulous while doing so" (Spar, 128). Our icy heroine belts the very ballad woven throughout this piece as she breaks all the rules set for her by the society in which she exists. Acting as the reigning monarch of her kingdom, however, she has a significantly greater ability to test her limits and, certainly, a far better chance of breaking through to whatever lies beyond.

For the women of today's workforce, there is a right, a wrong, and a significant number of rules that box them in. Besides what is ethically possible for them, they must also adhere to ideals of beauty and feminine behavior. While it is certainly possible for them to shirk such seemingly extraneous principles, there are disadvantages to this rebellious action. Any display of radical action may cost them an important invitation, a significant raise, or a desired promotion. At the rapid rate women are currently being hired and fired from positions of leadership, it seems that there is no opportunity for differentiation which could jeopardize their place or justify their ultimate dismissal.

Let it go, let it go.  
I am one with the wind and sky.  
Let it go, let it go.  
You'll never see me cry.
As the cycle of hiring, firing, and replacement continues, we must consider the group who perpetuates it and what they are seeking in potential candidates. Spar puts it plainly, "[men in power] will tend to replicate their own traits when considering those who will succeed them" (Spar, 109). So which characteristics catch the attention of men in search of a suitable successor?

Here I'll stand, and here I'll stay.
Let the storm rage on.

But what can women do? How can they bear the force of the storm that presses down on them as they struggle up that infamous glass cliff? They must stand. They must stay. What choice do they have in the storm's continuation or direction?

My power flurries through the air into the ground.
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast
I'm never going back; the past is in the past!

The skill, education, and intelligence possessed by women rising to the heights are not by any means diminished by the force of the icy blasts of institutionalized sexism they face. Their efforts may not result in permanent positions for themselves, but slowly they can effect the tide of history and create a place for women at the top. They must refuse to allow the workforce to return to its previous state, to allow themselves to be taken from power without leaving a mark, or to be silent when their voices have such great power.

Let it go, let it go.
And I'll rise like the break of dawn.

This trend of hard climbs, brief summits, and hard falls must cease for the betterment of our society as a whole. Who better than women to bring it about?

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Let it go, let it go
That perfect girl is gone
Here I stand, in the light of day.

While women who "dare to climb the towers of power get destroyed, cut to shards by the very organizations over which they once reigned" (Spar, 31), the fact remains that they continue to rise. There is an admirable resilience in women who are aware of the incumbent risks of their rise up the career ladder and pursue it regardless of the danger. If men seek strength of mind, ability to withstand criticism, and success in spite of barriers, their eyes should be upon those women scaling the glass cliffs below them. If day is going to break over the darkness of our current state of affairs, there must be a torchbearer and it is my firm belief that she and her fellows are climbing now.

Let the storm rage on!
The cold never bothered me anyway...

Although Elsa's story reaches a neat conclusion, as all fairytales must, the accounts of women who have risen and fallen are not silver-screen-ready. They are messy, they are uncomfortable to consider, but more than that, they are significant. Women seeking to rise certainly recognize the chance of a fall and having the ability to continue to climb is a privilege we must recognize. We must look up, but we should also look back, seeking to aid those behind us. The storm is raging on and we must press forward.

Raelissa Glennon-Zukoff is a sophomore at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts. She is currently pursuing a double major in English and Women’s and Gender Studies, as well as a minor in Philosophy. Raelissa is an active member of her college community, serving as a student mentor, first-year seminar lead facilitator, and
president of the Honors Liaison. Following her graduation in 2017, she plans to study law and eventually practice in the New England area. While still an undergraduate, she hopes to publish further pieces concerning gender, sexuality, and literature.

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Rational Emotion, Feminine Professionalism, and Cooperative Success: Women Scientists in Star Trek: Voyager as Challenges to the Dominant Ideology

By Kiran Mccloskey

ABSTRACT This article considers Star Trek: Voyager's portrayal of women in the sciences through the lens of Eva Flicker's 2003 review of scientific women throughout film and television from 1927 to 1999. Two core divergences in Star Trek: Voyager are identified: the absence of constraining dualities such as the rational-emotional and professional-feminine divisions, and the lack of isolation experienced by the female scientists. Such a representation would have positive effects on female viewers according to the sociological interpellation process model, which is supported by testimony and correspondences with multiple fans.

Since its debut in 1966, Star Trek as a franchise has continually challenged social and political issues of our modern society. In 1995, the fourth television series in the franchise, Star Trek: Voyager (hereafter 'Voyager') came into the spotlight when Captain Kathryn Janeway became the first woman to take the captain’s seat as the lead in a Star Trek series. However, Janeway's groundbreaking role was not limited to her position as captain, and she was not the only remarkable female character on the show to challenge the representation of women in the media. Her crew included diverse and interesting women such as Lieutenant B’Elanna Torres as Chief Engineer, Seven of Nine as lead Astrometrics Officer, and Kes as the hydroponics coordinator and medical assistant, with Janeway herself being grounded in the science division of the fictional “Starfleet” organization. These scientific
women challenged the dominant ideology of the time, which rejected female professionals by construing women as irrational, overly emotional beings who must choose between their femininity and professionalism (Sigouin, 2013a). In the sciences in particular, successful, professional women in the media were often isolated from other women in their field and presented as anomalies (Flicker, 2003). *Voyager*, however, presents an emergent, counter-hegemonic discourse, in which women are both emotional and rational, feminine and professional, and exist in an environment in which they are challenged and supported by other women in their field.

In 2003, Eva Flicker of the University of Vienna published an article in which she analyzed the role of women in science in fifty-eight movies and television shows from 1929 to 1997. She identified six main archetypes of female scientists prevalent throughout the media, in which the overall theme was a clear dichotomy between scientists and *female* scientists (Flicker, 2003). According to Flicker, characters of women in science are more strongly influenced by gender stereotypes than by occupational stereotypes. Female scientists in the professional field were shown to “bring in intuition, emotional elements, love affairs, and feelings” – a contrast to the scientific rationality of their male counterparts. These women were also subject to a duality between professional success and femininity, in which female scientists could exercise either femininity or achieve scientific recognition, but not both. Ultimately, scientific women in the media were far and in between, representing only 18% of key scientific roles, and when they worked in teams, they were isolated from other women and subordinate to their male colleagues.

In our modern communities of science and professional academia, women face similar struggles with stereotypes and representation. As of 2003 in Europe, women filled only about 10% of professorial positions, and although the situation in the US is somewhat better, it is by no means equal; 23% of American professors are women
(Flicker, 2003). The women who do go into scientific and academic fields often find themselves subject to the same dualisms identified by Flicker; for example, Meg Urry, an astronomy professor at Yale University, emphasized the professional-feminine dichotomy in her own experience by saying: “American men can’t seem to appreciate a woman as woman and a scientist; it’s one or the other” (Pollack, 2013). This situation in the scientific and academic communities may further be perpetuating the problem of gender inequality in these fields by intimidating the women who do attempt to pursue scientific careers. In the field of technology, for example, women drop out twice as often as men, and Dr. Telle Whitney, head of the Anita Borg Institute in Silicon Valley, cites the cause as being the discomfort women experience due to sexism in the technology field. Female students pursuing scientific academia, such as Kristen Pownell, an electrical engineering student at Stanford University, also claim that they feel isolated and intimidated due to the scarcity of other female scientists (“Silicon Valley”, 2013).

_Voyager_, however, represents a clear divergence from the limited, stereotyped role forced upon professional women in both the media and modern scientific circles. _Voyager’s_ progressive image of women is first evident in the way the show handles the interaction between emotionality and rationality in its female characters. On the show, women exist on a spectrum of emotionality that is independent of their gender. B’Elanna, for example, is highly emotional, and possesses a hot temper that leads her to break a fellow engineer’s nose over a scientific disagreement (Braga & Trombetta, 1995). In contrast, Seven of Nine is emotionally controlled, almost mechanical, but Seven’s lack of powerful emotional drive is not shown to make her a more capable scientist than B’Elanna. They are scientific equals, both of whom make numerous significant contributions to the ship’s functioning by effectively applying their respective sciences. Whereas B’Elanna is able to repair and improve the ship’s technological systems with efficiency unparalleled by any
other crewmember, Seven of Nine’s expertise in astronomy and knowledge of the villainous Borg make her equally invaluable.

Further, *Voyager* does not present logic and emotion as mutually exclusive, but rather as traits that can coexist and cooperate in order to develop the best possible outcome. In the episode “Parallax”, for example, Commander Chakotay argues that B’Elanna’s heightened emotion is in fact a logical response to her environment; while a member of the rebel organization “the Maquis”, B’Elanna’s temper was instrumental in functioning in the Maquis’ informal hierarchy. Throughout the rest of the episode, B’Elanna further proves that her emotion is an asset even in a more rigid command system like that of Voyager. She has the reasoning capabilities to understand their dilemma and formulate a successful solution, but it is her emotion that leads her to speak out of turn and defy the senior engineering officer. Without B’Elanna’s emotion driving her to disobey the direct order to “stay quiet”, Voyager could not have escaped the singularity, and in recognition of this fact, Janeway names B’Elanna Chief Engineer (Braga & Trombetta, 1995).

The situation of professional women in *Voyager* is also remarkable in the fact that none of the women are forced to sacrifice their femininity for their reason or professional success. Seven’s case is particularly interesting in this regard – she is dressed in a skintight “biosuit” and is undeniably conventionally attractive. In her article “Borg Babes”, Mia Consalvo describes Seven as the “sexiest member of the crew”, and states that “her body is feminine in the excess” (Consalvo, 2004). The other crew members are shown to take notice of Seven’s feminine physicality and are attracted to her, and while there are significant questions about the production choices of Seven’s costume, the fact remains that her appearance does not compromise her respectability as a scientist. In addition, the interaction between her coolheaded rationalism and her attractiveness varies with each of her would-be suitors; for Harry Kim and Lieutenant Chapman, Seven’s no-nonsense personality is
intimidating and unappealing (Consalvo, 2004), whereas the Doctor cites the same traits as being a major aspect of his attraction for her (Taylor & Braga, 1999). In this way, Voyager does not portray rationality or professionalism to be inherently inversely related to feminine attractiveness, but rather as an issue of individual compatibility.

B'Elanna's character similarly challenges the professional-feminine duality through her romance with Voyager's pilot, Tom Paris. B'Elanna's personality and professional attitude are very similar to that of the "male woman" archetype defined by Flicker (Flicker, 2003). Like Flicker's "male woman", B'Elanna is assertive and harsh, and is prone to engaging in unhealthy, self-destructive behaviors such as recklessness and self-injury, as seen particularly in the episode "Extreme Risk" (Biller, 1998). However, one of the defining characteristics of the "male scientist" is their lack of eroticism or female charm (Flicker, 2003), and B'Elanna, in her relationship with Tom Paris, subverts this archetype. She and Tom have a powerfully sexual relationship, and in the seventh season, they marry and have a child, which further cements B'Elanna's familial femininity. B'Elanna's pregnancy is further significant as her ability as an engineer is not portrayed as compromised due to her motherhood. She continues to work as Chief Engineer until the onset of labor, and pregnancy hormones are never cited as the cause of any of her decisions or emotions (Kahn, 2001).

By the end of the series, Captain Janeway was the only major female character on Voyager to be unattached, having remained distant from the rest of her crew. Her relationship status, however, is not presented as correlated to any lack of femininity on her part, but rather, as a reflection of the isolating nature of command positions. Her unrealized chemistry and feelings for her first officer, Commander Chakotay, are strongly reminiscent of the unconsummated relationship between Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Doctor Beverly Crusher in the earlier Star Trek series, The Next Generation, suggesting that her romantic isolation is more closely related to her position than it is to
her gender. And although Janeway never does engage in an official, on-screen relationship, she is nevertheless presented as an attractive, sexual woman. In the episode “Counterpoint”, Janeway engages in an erotic exchange of wits with Inspector Kashyk, in which Janeway's tactical prowess as a commanding officer is a significant contribution to her allure. Thus, like Seven and B’Elanna, Janeway's professionalism does not mitigate her femininity (Taylor, 1998).

Beyond simply the characterization of strong, developed women in scientific roles, Voyager further challenges the popular perceptions of female scientists by emphasizing their interactions with one another. Flicker identifies isolation as a prominent characteristic of female scientists in media, troubling even the most successful and competent characters, such as Ellie in First Contact (Flicker, 2003). But in Voyager, female scientists work in conjunction with one another, and their relationships are shown as intricate and remarkably powerful, which positively affect their ability as scientists. Janeway and Seven, for example, have an intense relationship that climaxes in the series finale. Throughout the series, Janeway frequently cites temporal mechanics and paradoxes as her major scientific weakness, such as in the episode Future’s End, when she states: “Since my first day on the job as a Starfleet Captain, I swore I’d never let myself get caught in one of these godforsaken paradoxes . . . it all gives me a headache” (Menosky & Braga, 1996). But in the series finale, Endgame, a future “Admiral” Janeway returns from a timeline in which Seven of Nine was killed on an away mission before Voyager returned to Earth. At this point, not only does she understand temporal mechanics, but she is even driven to create a paradox herself in order to save Seven (Berman, Biller, Braga, & Doherty, 2001). As a result, Janeway’s relationship with Seven drives her to achieve more as a scientist than she previously had been capable of.

Further, when female characters on Voyager do come into conflict, their differences are often mediated by
their professionalism. B’Elanna and Seven, for example, are frequently at odds due to their conflicting personalities, but they nevertheless respect each other as competent professionals. In addition to personal conflicts, the women on Voyager are also apt to disagree professionally. In “The Omega Directive”, the crew encounters “omega particles”, a dangerously powerful material with the ability to destroy subspace and thus render warp travel impossible (Diggs, Kay, & Klink, 1998). Janeway and Seven disagree on how to deal with the particle; Seven believes omega particles represent “perfection” and wishes to study them, whereas Janeway believes they are far too dangerous and unstable to even attempt to contain, and instead advocates for the destruction of the omega particles. They challenge each other, but by the end of the episode, they eventually concede to one another’s viewpoints. Janeway recognizes Seven’s quest to understand “perfection”, and Seven understands Janeway’s desire to protect the quadrant from the omega particles’ destructive potential. Ultimately, they both attain their goals; Seven destroys the omega particles, but in the process is able to stabilize the particles long enough to give her a few precious seconds to examine them. In this instance, Voyager suggests that scientific ideology between female scientists is not homogeneous, but through cooperation and understanding, they are capable of finding solutions that satisfy both parties’ needs (Roberts, 2000).

Kes is the final major female character on Voyager, but she differs from B’Elanna, Seven, and Janeway, because she does not represent an experienced scientist, but rather, she is a young girl with scientific curiosity and the desire to learn. Her experiences are significant, as they portray the effects that a positive, nurturing environment like Voyager’s can have on young girls. Kes is an Ocampa, a member of race of aliens with short lifespans (approximately eight years) who are sheltered and coddled underground by a powerful “Caretaker” that provides everything they need (Taylor, Berman, & Piller 1995). She is therefore a member of a “child” race, and she herself is
less than a year old – although this gives her the body of an adult, she is nevertheless quite young, in both Ocampa and human standards. But her scientific curiosity regarding the world around her drives her to the surface and to become a member of Voyager’s crew.

Voyager is an environment where Kes is provided numerous female role models in scientific positions of power, and despite her youth and inexperience, she is encouraged and respected. Janeway, for example, listens to her recommendations and allows Kes to pursue her own projects, such as cultivating a hydroponics bay, which ultimately becomes a major food source for the crew (Braga & Trombetta, 1995). Kes additionally expresses interest in medicine and trains under the guidance of the Doctor, while Tuvok helps her expand her mental capabilities. By the time Kes departs from the show in season three, she is an undoubtedly capable and powerful scientific woman (McCloskey, 2013).

Kes’ experience on Voyager is particularly remarkable because it reflects the positive influence the show had on numerous female members of its audience. According to the interpellation process model, women who watch Voyager are likely to internalize the show’s ideology of science as a legitimate career path for themselves (Sigouin, 2013b). Consistent with the effects predicted by this model, the messages of Voyager spread to its audience as an emergent discourse; Kate Mulgrew, who played the role of Janeway, reported that she had received a number of letters and calls from mothers telling her how their daughters had chosen to pursue the sciences “because of the strength and confidence they drew from Janeway’s character” (Bowring, 2004). Even as adults, many women who watch Voyager have claimed to find support and strength from the characters on the show. In a further interview, Mulgrew said:

“I’ve had young women come to me and say that before they watched Voyager it didn’t really occur to them that they could be successful in a higher position in the field of science; girls going to MIT, girls pursuing astrophysics
with a view to a career in NASA” (K. Mulgrew, personal communication, November 1, 2003).

Mulgrew goes on to describe an experience in which she was invited to the White House for a celebration of women in science. During the celebration, she was approached by a group of young women from MIT – among the most celebrated in their graduating class – who cited Voyager as a driving force in their career decision. Janeway is not the only woman on Voyager to make a difference, however; a fan by the name of Kristy reports that she identified with B’Elanna and her temper, and that B’Elanna’s competence on the ship despite having such strong emotions encouraged her to believe in her own ability (McCloskey, 2013).

*Star Trek: Voyager* presented a positive image of women in science that challenged the image of professional women advocated by most media at the time. Rather than succumbing to the emotional-rational and professional-emotional dichotomies, *Voyager* developed a number of women who were capable of embodying both ends of the spectrum at the same time. These women were able to support and challenge one another; they were not isolated. As a result, the message presented by *Voyager* was one that claimed science as a legitimate career choice for women that does not necessarily involve gendered limitation or sacrifice. This representation was a positive influence for the women who watched the show, giving them hope and confidence to believe in themselves as professionals. As one fan puts it: “it didn’t matter, in the end, that [Janeway] wasn’t a real astronaut; what mattered was that she comforted, inspired, and motivated” (Ferguson, 2013). Fictional or not, Janeway and her crew had a major impact in changing ideals regarding women in science.

**Kiran McCloskey:** I am an undergraduate student at McGill University, where I am majoring in psychology. In addition to my psychological pursuits, in which I am focused on
trauma and environmental contexts, my strong interest in female representation in popular culture has driven me to study women in media in a sociological perspective."

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Self, System, or Society?
Contemporary Debates on Sex and Sexual Violence
Nonconsensual Pornography

By Hannah McNeil

ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the issue of nonconsensual pornography and its effects on victims; a case study involving an in-depth interview of a participant who offers a personal perspective on the struggle of coping with the damaging aftermath of revenge porn. This research aims to examine how this type of exposure and online sexual harassment is harmful to its victims and seeks to raise awareness for this form of harassment in the digital age.

Nonconsensual pornography, used interchangeably with revenge porn, involves the distribution of sexually graphic images of individuals without their consent (Citron, 2014). This can include hidden recordings, recordings of sexual assault and images originally obtained with consent in the context of a consensual relationship (Citron, 2014). Nonconsensual pornography is becoming a worldwide social phenomena, affecting celebrities, with recent leaks of Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lawrence as well as non-celebrity men and women. Even though this phenomena is a gendered issue, with over 72% of the victims being female (Cyber Stalking Statistics, 2012), men can be victims as well.

Revenge porn has devastating effects on its victims by exposing them sexually in vulnerable and humiliating ways (Citron, 2014). This type of exposure can lead to a degrading form of sexual harassment toward the victim. Online harassment can range from anonymous messages that are threatening in nature to offline stalking and physical attack. The anonymity of the internet can allow users to make these threatening comments without fear of punishment.
This issue has been developing rapidly due to the recent increase in the use of technology and social media. Consequently, it has been difficult for authorities to stay informed with the laws and regulations, or lack thereof, regarding this invasion of privacy. Misunderstandings of the First Amendment and consent play a huge role in this confusion. This research will briefly discuss the global phenomena of revenge porn and explore how such harassment may affect victims based on a case study of one victim’s experience. I examined what aspects of her life were most affected and the difficulty she experienced in her repeated efforts to remove the photos from the internet. This research seeks to contribute to the understanding of the effects of nonconsensual pornography and subsequent online harassment.

Revenge porn and nonconsensual pornography are fairly new terms that are becoming more common because of this growing social issue. There is scant empirical research on nonconsensual pornography, especially regarding the effects of this type of harassment. The issue of criminalizing revenge porn has been the focus of more recent research.

States are enacting legislation that criminalizes nonconsensual pornography and the distribution of those images or videos. So far, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin (ncsl.org, 2013) enacted legislation criminalizing nonconsensual pornography. However, these laws do not protect those who are victims of revenge porn and do not address consent regarding public distribution. “Voyeurism laws in many states prohibit the nonconsensual recording and distribution of sexually explicit images of another person. However, those laws do not protect those who either consented to be recorded or recorded images themselves, but, in either case, did not consent to the distribution of those images” (Najdowski, 2014).

One of the more major points of discussion in the research of this topic is the definition of consent and the
concept of contextual consent. If one gives consent in a particular context it does not mean that they give consent in all contexts. If one possesses images or videos that were given to them with consent, it does not mean they consented to the distribution of those images (Laird, 2013). This research hopes to contribute to the understanding of contextual consent and how this type of harassment affects women.

I conducted a qualitative in-depth interview with a respondent with whom I know quite well. She has shared with me the difficulties she has encountered over five years coping with the effects of revenge porn. To protect the interviewee’s identity, I have changed her name and all identifying information in my discussion. The interview guide consisted of three sections. The first set of questions had to do with how the participant discovered her photos on the internet. Next, I inquired how this situation impacted her personally and if it affected her career. We then discussed the process she went through to get the photos removed from the internet.

When she began describing how she first found out about the photos, her reaction seemed to be shock, “...and I was just like holy cow, who did this” (White, 2014). She found out about the photos because a male friend of hers messaged her on Facebook and told her he had seen the pictures on a porn website he frequents. He sent her the links and not only were the sexually explicit photos posted without her consent, but also her personal information was posted as well. “…and it would be like full name and all this crazy information about me that I never expected to be on the internet” (White, 2014). The information posted alongside the photos included her full name, where she went to school, and links to her Facebook page. Subsequently, the participant Google searched her own name and discovered her photos had been posted on more than one site, including a popular social media website.

The participant is still in the process of removing her photos from these sites and has been for the past five years. Yet, she has only been successful with one website to
date. She has not sought legal help but has contacted Google support numerous times requesting that the images be removed from all Google searches. “...Um, all you have to do is Google my name. And that’s, for the purposes of the recording is an interesting situation because I am the only person on Google with my name” (White, 2014). The fact that these images are high on Google search hurts her even more, potentially jeopardizing personal aspects of her life and making it harder to have the photos removed. “Posting photos with the victim’s real name helps the picture get high in Google search and hurts the ability to get or keep a job” (Laird, 2013). After she contacted Google support, they sent her a disclaimer stating that they do not remove things from the internet and have subsequently not responded to her complaints.

Past feminist research has found that men in patriarchal societies regularly hold positions of institutional, social and legal power over women. Some scholars argue that one way some men assert their dominance over women is through sexual assault and rape (Whisnant, 2013). Nonconsensual pornography is a form of sexual violence and victims’ lack of legal support to remove unwanted images reflects a larger power structure of male power and control. Also present is a power dynamic between the victim and the trusted recipient of the sexual photos or videos and the violation of the victim’s trust by putting the photos online. This spiteful act is exposing the victim to extreme vulnerability, shame, humiliation, harassment, bullying and even threats. The victim is essentially powerless over who can see and use the photos or videos once they are on the internet.

Rules, laws, and institutions in a patriarchal society are structured in a way that uphold the status quo and male privilege. Google is an extension of this structure and has the power over who can see the photos and, the fact that they are not being removed is a reflection of the control they have over the victim (Whisnant, 2013). “Google is the master of the internet, just do your thing, you guys make millions of dollars, you can handle clicking a button and
making something go away” (White, 2014). Every website and social media support site that she has contacted has provided very little help and have even lied to her about taking the photos down.

The photos ended up on a new popular social media website. Once she discovered this, she contacted the owner of the blog that posted the photos and they actually did respond. He acted very sympathetic towards her and apologized, telling her that he would take it down as soon as he got to an actual computer. Subsequently, he never took them down and never responded back to her again. She contacted the social media’s site support to have the photos removed from the blog. She put in a complaint and the social media website requested that she send them a picture of her driver’s license. Immediately after, the social media website also asked for her to send them a photo of herself holding a piece of paper that read,

‘(Name of Website) this is me.’ “(Website name) emailed me back and said ‘okay. what's the link that’s a problem, okay we'll take it down.’ They never did. Um, even though that they said they did. I had to submit a photo you know, and that kind of felt invasive, having to submit a photo of myself saying ‘Website Name’ this is me. Um, because if a girl is complaining that photos are up without her consent, why do you need to see that it actually is that girl?” (White, 2014). This set of interactions, and the fact that the social media site blatantly lied to her, reflects the lack of relative power victims have to protect themselves from further harm (Whisnant, 2013).

The only time she was able to have her photos removed from a website, was when she contact the webmaster and lied that she was a minor at the time the photos were taken. Even though they never responded to her, she revisited the website and the photos were removed. That was the only successful moment she has had in the past five years.

My participant has said that she has been deeply embarrassed by the unwanted exposure and one situation in particular stood out as especially embarrassing to her. A man she was dating at the time confronted her about the photos that were posted online. A person on the internet
who was unfamiliar to my participant, starting sending the nude photos to all of her Facebook friends, including the man she was dating as well as coworkers:

“And that’s a guy I really liked, and I, you know that’s embarrassing as it is, you know, like oh god, now this girl that wants to date you has naked photos of herself online” (White, 2014). “So it embarrassed me in that relationship. It made me delete my Facebook, for about a year. Um, so that’s a contact source I was not able to use” (White, 2014).

She explains the changes in her reaction to this situation since she first found out. “And so my reaction has been, has gone from, oh shit, what the fuck, what the fuck, to oh my god not again” (White, 2014).

The fact that the harassment happens over the internet can make it worse for the victim. The internet offers a wider audience and victims can feel violated in their own homes. This type of violation is felt by victims of cyberbullying, online harassment and revenge porn (Ybarra, 2004). This can result in victims removing themselves from participating in online activities that they did for entertainment, for example when my participant had to delete her Facebook profile to avoid harassment. This is a perfect example of how this kind of exposure can affect its victims’ lives, especially regarding personal relationships and their online activity.

She also informed me that this has affected her professional life in sales. When other co-workers refer customers to her, most of them usually Google search her to find out if they want to work with her for this specific purchase. When this happens, customers almost always come across her naked photos and they will choose not to work with her. She had a co-worker tell her, “Okay well I told somebody to contact you about (participant’s career), and uh, they Googled you, and I’m sure you know where this is going” (White, 2014). This has cast my participant in an extremely unprofessional light and is also extremely embarrassing for her. To add insult to injury, she is also losing money. Again, these images are controlling aspects of
her personal as well as professional life and supports the theory that online harassment violates more than one aspect of the victims’ life (Ybarra, 2004).

We discussed the comments that she has received about her photos, and they are mostly insulting her appearance:

“One girl told me that, well not told me, told the internet that I could have gotten a manicure and pedicure before I took the photos and straightened my hair a bit and I’m just like you know, I was young and I didn’t care” (White, 2014). “But like, to say someone is a ‘butterface’ or you know just finding the smallest things to cut a person down, not thinking that they would see it, because of the anonymity of the internet” (White, 2014).

She told me that it was mostly females that would leave insulting comments on her pictures. These kinds of comments can be damaging to a victim’s self-esteem, especially if the victim is younger and the images are largely available on social media sites. “Victims struggle with anxiety and panic attacks, anorexia and depression are common ailments” (Citron, 2014).

The participant has only knowingly received one threatening comment in regards to her photos. She used to comment back to the users who were insulting her in order to defend herself. One user responded with a threat, “When I was batting back at them, uh, one person said ‘oh well, I just Googled you and I know where you live, and I know your phone number, I’m about to show up at your apartment, ha’” (White, 2014). Since she has received that comment, she has stopped trying to stand up for herself online. She considers herself fortunatae that the threatening user never came to her apartment, an occurrence that research shows can be an additional harm from revenge porn (Citron, 2014).

Toward the end of my in-depth interview, the participant stated that she has given up on trying to have her photos taken down. She seemed to almost have accepted it as an aspect of her life that she could not
control. This overall feeling of helplessness is common among victims of online harassment, who feel as if they have no control over what is happening to them (Ybarra, 2004).

Nonconsensual pornography is extremely psychologically damaging to the victim, and unfortunately, can be physically damaging as well (Citron, 2014). Education on nonconsensual pornography is important because people do not realize what this kind of sexual exposure has for victims, especially the people who are commenting, sharing, and viewing these images. The helplessness and loss of control the participant felt reinforces the fact that these photos have control over their lives and, the more images like hers are shared and re-blogged, the more control the images has over the victim’s life. It can prevent the victim from getting a job, being in a relationship, and it can even cause harm, physically and psychologically.

During the interview the participant explained how she did not know what revenge porn was before this happened to her nor did anyone ever discuss with her the dangers of sharing sexually explicit photos. Education is critical to help prevent nonconsensual pornography as well as education about consent and contextual consent with regards to sharing images online. Further research should aim to document the pervasiveness of nonconsensual pornography, as well as examine the detrimental effects it has for victims. While research on cyberbullying and online harassment assist in understanding the effects this type of harassment has on the victim, research needs to include nonconsensual pornography. Extending such research to include revenge porn can provide better evidence of how damaging it can be and further demonstrate the need to criminalize it.

Hannah McNeil is a dual major at Guilford College, studying Sociology and Political Science. She has plans to attend graduate school to study deviant behavior in the Sociology field.
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(Please Don’t) Take Me to Church
By Allie Begin

ABSTRACT. Sexual inequality has been an issue of debate for centuries. Recently, the push back against this inequality has been at an all time high. Social norms are changing and groups that have previously been marginalized are beginning to find liberation and empowerment. This drastic shift in mindset would not have been possible without the strong backing of influential people. This essay analyzes the work of Irish musician Hozier in his recent song Take Me to Church. Specifically, this piece will examine his disapproval for the way religious institutions control sexuality, polarize sexual binaries, and attack homosexuality with a negative hyper focus. Through a sociology and Queer studies lense, the lyrics of this song will be examined and presented as an intentional and powerful resistance against these oppressive behaviors.

Introduction

French enlightenment writer Voltaire once said, “With great power, comes great responsibility”. When most people think of power, they think of world leaders and politicians; however, celebrities who are constantly in the spotlight also hold a tremendous amount of power. This spotlight allows them to use their craft as a platform to impact society’s beliefs and behaviors. In the song Take Me to Church, the Irish musician Hozier speaks out against the unjust social control exercised by religious (in this case Catholic) practices. Drawing from the sociology and Queer studies perspectives, this paper will analyze the way Take Me to Church challenges religious institutions for their control of sexuality, polarization of sexual binaries, and negative hyper focus on homosexuality.
Religion as social control

Religious control is by no means a new concept. When Spanish missionaries colonized California in the 1700’s, they forced Catholicism on the Native Indians in the area. Previously, these Indians had been free to explore many different sexual practices, including homosexuality. However, “Spanish church officials agreed on the need to eradicate homosexuality as an affront to God and Spanish men alike” (Hurtado 171). These principles quickly infiltrated the Indian communities who believed they had to comply to survive. This is just one of the many examples that prove religious control has deep, historical roots. In fact, sociologists have studied this phenomenon for nearly a century.

According to Chapter 59 in the Seidman text, religions like Catholicism “condemn and at times punish sexual behavior deemed deviant or inappropriate…religious teachings are key factors in enforcing the normative status of heterosexuality” (Grove 415). Take Me to Church boldly voices disapproval with the way religious practices ostracize certain people who do not fall in line: “Every Sunday’s getting more bleak, a fresh poison each week. We were born sick, you heard them say it” (lines 7-9). In these lyrics, Hozier is referring to the Catholic teachings as poison, because these beliefs are spreading the oppressive and often toxic attitudes towards homosexuals. This outlook helps keep congregations in accordance with acceptable behaviors because nobody wants to be told they have something wrong with them.

The song’s most ominous interpretation of religious control can be found in the chorus: “I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies, I’ll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife” (lines 19-20). Here, Hozier depicts Catholic believers worshipping like dogs, because of their blind obedience to officials; he also expresses disapproval of religion’s deceptive claims and ways of “forgiving” mistakes. In an interview with New York Magazine, Hozier further criticizes religious control because of its harm to
humanity: “[the church] undermines humanity by...teaching shame about sexual orientation.” Catholicism presents an inflexible framework that distinguishes insiders from outsiders, creating a binary of right and wrong. Take Me to Church challenges these binaries.

**Challenging binaries**

A common theme seen in the queer studies perspective is the notion of “[challenging] the way all of us are classified and controlled by binaries such as male/female, feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual” (Murphy 493). To most people, a “normal” man is masculine and a “normal” woman is feminine. This gender binary leaves no room for variation, thus out casting anyone that does not fit into these clear-cut molds. In regards to social norms of sexuality, hegemonic heterosexuality portrays a heterosexual person as “normal” and a homosexual person as “abnormal”. Gay rights activists spend much of their energy pushing back against the idea that heterosexuality is the only normal [Murphy].

Take Me to Church echoes many of these same beliefs: “My Church offers no absolutes...the only heaven I'll be sent to, is when I'm alone with you” (lines 10, 12-13). Here, Hozier (a heterosexual) describes his own Church where, unlike the Catholic Church, it’s not all black and white. His heaven is experienced through the love he feels for someone, regardless of the “type” of love it is. In his music video, Hozier shows a homosexual male couple—in love despite religious persecution. There are several romantic scenes between them where the gender and sexual binaries deemed acceptable by the church are overtly challenged. The lyrics coupled with the video paint many different pictures of what love can look like. Every person is portrayed as “normal” even if they do not fit the cookie cutter visions of Catholicism. In his interview with New York Magazine, Hozier also says, “The song is about...reclaiming your humanity through an act of love. Turning your back on the theoretical thing...and choosing
to worship or love... something that can be experienced.” Here, Hozier takes the attention away from the labels of binaries and stresses the importance of the feeling of love itself. There is a broad spectrum of what love can look like, and categorizing different kinds of love as normal or abnormal should not be the focus.

In the 1980’s, sexual theorist Gayle S. Rubin wrote: “It is up to all of us to try to prevent more barbarism and to encourage erotic creativity.” Thirty-five years ago, there were fewer people boldly expressing desires to push sexual boundaries. This support for “erotic creativity” implies that practices outside the “norm” should not be means for persecution. Now, decades later, these opinions have spread and encouraged others to challenge these binaries. Hozier is a perfect modern example of someone actively working to prevent the barbarity of sexual persecution, and to promote equality around sexual creativity. In Take Me to Church, Hozier is discouraging a hyper-focus on homosexuality, by introducing sexuality as an all-encompassing, fluid concept.

From homosexuality to sexuality in general

Believe it or not, there were times in history when people were free to express whatever sexual desires they pleased. Unfortunately, “The science of sexuality conceptualized our diverse somatic experiences into a coherent, organized subject called sexuality” (Seidman 10). The natural diversity of sexual behavior was stifled by the assignment of restrictive labels, and the narrow-minded practices of the church work to strengthen this societal view. In order for people to have an identity, they are often pressured into belonging to one category or another. Without these controlling categories, people would feel much more comfortable exploring sexual variety. “Queer studies shifts the focus from homosexuality to sexuality and broadens our view of sexuality to see it also as a type of social control”(Seidman 10).
The lyrics of *Take Me to Church* suggest that Hozier encourages society to view homosexuality as just one part of a much bigger picture: “There is no sweeter innocence, than our gentle sin” (line 43). In the part of the music video that corresponds with these words, a group of religious radicals are assaulting one of the men in the homosexual relationship. Hozier is speaking in defense of this couple by calling their relationship an act of sweet innocence. He views these acts as innocent because they are just an organic part of human nature. The most powerful statement made in Hozier’s *New York Magazine* interview articulates these feelings: “Sexuality... regardless of orientation is just natural... sex is one of the most human things.” An article published in *New York Daily* suggests that Hoziers powerful words “present sensuality as a path to righteousness” (Farber). This is an important point because it means that all sensual acts are good and right, not just the ones deemed good and right by religious scripture.

Sociologist Diane Richardson says, “sexuality is not determinate or unidirectional, but complex, dynamic, contingent, fluid and unstable” (464). Sexuality cannot be accurately understood if people only condone a small portion of sexual behavior. It is imperative that people zoom out and learn to respect all aspects of human sexual behavior as natural and constantly changing. This shift in mindset could be an enormous step in putting an end to sexual persecution once and for all.

**Concluding thoughts**

If human beliefs are learned, this means they can be changed. It is up to everyone to stand up against sexual inequality. In just one song, Hozier strives to change public opinion by criticizing sexual control, restrictive binaries, and narrow views of sexuality put forth by religious institutions. Luckily, these actions are starting to become more and more common. One amazing example of this happened recently when Pope Francis invited a
transsexual, who had been kicked out of his own Catholic church, to the Vatican for a hug [The Huffington Post]. These small acts of kindness are paramount for changing public attitudes. The increase in these occurrences foreshadows a promising future for humanity. We may ask ourselves how can I make a difference if I am not in a spotlight? But the truth is, these acts do not only have to come from those in power. We interact with others everyday, which means we have an opportunity to change lives everyday. It is our responsibility to find the courage to question the status quo. Through our rhetoric and our behaviors, we have the power to do something great. It is easy to sit back and think none of these things affect us, but in the wise words of Hozier, “a violation of humanity affects us all” (New York Daily News). The burden now rests on our shoulders: we must better ourselves, and better each other, so together we can better tomorrow.

Allie Begin is a fourth-year Communication Studies major at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Allie wrote this paper for her final project in her Sexuality Studies class. She plays on the soccer team and hopes to go to law school.

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Effects of School Curriculum on Sexual Health

By Emma Sturm

ABSTRACT. Surveys indicate that, when asked directly, women have positive perceptions of their vaginas and perceive vaginal, sexual, and reproductive health as important. However, when asked about their actual habits relating to vaginal health, women’s answers seemed to suggest the opposite. This disconnect between perceptions and practice suggest there may be some societal influence keeping the women from carrying out their health maintenance as well as they would like to. This paper examines the role schools play in controlling women’s sexuality, which may be contributing to the lack of accessibility to vaginal, sexual, and reproductive health.

Schools in the US teach women to suppress their sexuality through literature and sex education that encourages men’s sexuality, but shames women for theirs. This kind of education leads to sex-negative and vagina-negative attitudes in adolescence that impact lifelong sexual health. However, there are identifiable contributors to this issue, and the refocusing of school curriculum to appropriately address currently excluded sexual subjects would help make sexual health and related issues more accessible. The focus of sex education in schools excludes certain aspects of sexuality. The exclusion of these subjects leads students to assume they are deviant or shameful, and also leaves the students vastly undereducated. These views and attitudes are continually reinforced into adulthood where they impact women’s attitudes toward sexual health. Reforming the curriculum in schools to be more comprehensive and include information covering a broader range of sexualities would allow women to better address their sexual health needs.
The Influence of School Curriculum

Sex-negativity within sex education is perpetuated by the phenomenon known as the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is the cross-subject promotion of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (Miceli, 2011). Sex education in the US focuses strictly on anatomical and biological functions of reproduction, instead of covering all aspects of sexuality. One aspect often excluded from the curriculum is women’s sexuality, including pleasure and desire. Michelle Fine conducted a yearlong ethnographic investigation involving both interviews with students and in-class observations. She found three themes to be common among sex education programs in the US:

“(1) the authorized suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire; (2) the promotion of a discourse of female sexual victimization; and (3) the explicit privileging of married heterosexuality over other practices of sexuality” (Fine, 1988, p. 30).

While this seems outdated, Fine and McClelland found the lack of discourse of desire was still present in 2006. Fine and McClelland noted that discourses around girls’ desires were becoming more common, but only in popular culture and media, not in sex education (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Because of this exclusion, girls are often undereducated or miseducated on how to cope with their budding sexualities. Though desire in general is not a main learning objective in sex education, some attention is still paid to boy’s sexualities and desires. For example, anatomical functions loosely related to boy’s budding sexualities or newly emerging feelings of sexual desire—such as the unexpected erection during class—are covered, while those relating to girl’s budding sexualities—such as the self-lubrication of the vagina when aroused—are not. Focusing only on boy’s sexualities and desires perpetuates the attitude of hegemonic masculinity, an attitude which values only
masculinity as defined by the traditional male gender role of being dominant, aggressive, and promiscuous (Dean, 2011). In turn, women are expected to be the opposite: passive and virginal until marriage.

Sex education frequently discusses the sexuality and reproductive practices of heterosexual couples without mentioning any other sexual orientations or couplings. This practice, combined with the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, provides a very narrow view of what sexuality entails (Miceli, 2011). Consequently, any students who deviate from this norm may feel different or rejected. Hegemonic masculinity is presented in sex education as the only form of acceptable sexuality, often without acknowledging the existence of girl’s sexuality, desire, or pleasure. Because sex education prizes hegemonic masculinity, girls feel deviant or shameful when they have sexual desires. While receiving sex education, students are in the midst of developing an identity for themselves, including a sexual identity. This unstable identity makes students feel more pressure to conform and fit in, out of fear of being rejected by their peers or society. Though these gendered expectations are never explicitly stated, it may be inferred they are the only option, especially if the student has never been exposed to any alternatives. Conforming may include students changing their appearance or behaviors to fit in with what is considered “normal,” instead of doing what makes them happy.

At the same time, literature incorporated into the curriculum also reinforces and encourages the idea of virginal girls. Klein, Markowitz, Puncher, and Anderson, (2011) performed a deconstructive analysis of twelve commonly read books (such as The Giver by Lois Lowry, The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton, and A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L’Engle) to find common themes and interpret how they may be affecting students’ and adolescents’ sexuality. In many of the books, sexuality is portrayed as dangerous, especially for girls who are constructed as needing protection. For example, when Cherry from The Outsiders is being verbally harassed she fights back, telling
him to “Get lost, hood!” and eventually throws a drink in his face. Despite her assertiveness, the perpetrator only stops once Johnny, the shyest of the whole gang, tells him to leave the girls alone. Female characters that are characterized as sexual are often portrayed as possessing negative qualities or as undesirable to other characters. To use another example from *The Outsiders*, low income “Greasy Girls,” and especially their sexualities, are portrayed very negatively and as dangerous by pressuring boys to be sexual, getting guys into trouble through flirting, and cheating on their boyfriends when they are in jail. The wealthier girls are portrayed with none of these characteristics. Girls who are searching for an identity or struggling to fit in may look to these characters as models to shape themselves after. By modeling themselves after the characters, girls are following sexual scripts that perpetuate the narrow societal ideals of what the ideal girl should be like.

**Attitudes in Adulthood**

Women hold onto these sex-negative and-vagina negative attitudes into adolescence and adulthood which manifests themselves as an inability to properly address their sexual health out of fear of being shamed or rejected. One way this inability presents itself is through women’s apprehensiveness to talk about their vaginas and/or health issues relating to the vagina. One international study performed by Nappi, Kiekens, and Brandenburg (2006) surveyed 9441 women (18-44 years) from 13 different countries on their perceptions and attitudes toward their vaginas. Almost 40% reported they had never read an informative article about the vagina, even though 83% wanted to do so. It is unlikely that these women don’t have access to such educational materials, and they are interested in educating themselves, meaning there must be some societal pressure to fear or be uninterested in informing one’s self on the vagina. In addition, even though 79% of women went to their health care provider for contraceptive and vaginal health related advice, less than
50% of women felt comfortable discussing vaginal health related topics with their health care provider (Nappi, Kiekens, and Brandenburg, 2006). In another study, many women reported feeling anxious to ask questions during a pelvic exam and that by doing so they would be a “nuisance” (Larsen, Oldeide, & Malterud, 1997). This shows that even in a medical setting, which should be professional, objective, helpful, and non-biased, women were still afraid to talk about their vaginas.

**Prevalence and Consequences of Attitudes**

These negative attitudes are so prevalent that women begin to practice internalized oppression, as seen in the contradictory nature of their reported perceptions surrounding vaginal health. Internalized oppression is the cultural phenomenon of a group internalizing negative stereotypes and expectations about them and acting on them as if they were true (Gerschick, 2011). In other words, women may believe they should be passive about their desires and vaginal health even when they would subconsciously like to do otherwise. In Nappi, Kiekens, and Brandenburg’s previously mentioned study on vaginal attitudes (2006), the researchers asked women to choose words from a word bank to describe their vaginas. Most of the women, 72%, chose words with a positive association (ex.: intimate, sexy, mysterious). Despite indicating positive perceptions during the word bank activity, every other question in the study implied a less desirable perception. Women also didn’t appear to realize the contradictory nature of going to their health care providers for information but being uncomfortable asking any vagina related questions (Nappi, Kiekens, and Brandenburg, 2006). In one Polish study, all women surveyed stated gynecological examinations were important, yet almost a third reported going less frequently than the recommendation of once a year (Szymoniak, Cwiek, Berezowska, Branecka-Woźniak, Dziobek, & Malinowski, 2009). These three paradoxical findings suggest that
women are conditioned to be sex and vagina-negative to the point where they never recognize this negativity as a problem. Consequently, they don’t see vaginal health or the undermining of vaginal health as a problem either.

In addition to sex and vagina-negative attitudes, the attitudes and politics around sex itself may also discourage women from being comfortable maintaining their sexual health. In Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality, Gale Rubin (1984/1993) argues that socially acceptable sex falls into a “charmed circle,” defined by characteristics such as “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive” (152) and should not involve roles other than traditional male and female. Anything outside of this charmed circle is seen as bad or deviant. When a woman seeks to maintain sexual health, by going to an OB/GYN for example, it is implied she is sexually active. This goes against the traditional role of women being virginal, passive, and not seeking sex or desire. In many cases, especially if sexual health maintenance includes birth control, the sexual activity is also presumably non-procreative, a quality which lies outside “the charmed circle.” Because this sex may be then considered bad and deviant through societal conditioning, women may fear shame or judgment from the health care providers.

**Making Progress**

Without taking into account literature and other aspects of the curriculum, some groups have realized the bias and sex-negativity in sex education and are actively trying to change it. Groups like The Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) believe the current curriculum has fostered ignorance, shame, and contributed to social problems like teen pregnancy (SIECUS, 2015). Instead SIECUS advocates for age appropriate education on topics including but not limited to contraceptives, emergency contraceptives, abortion, and masturbation. SIECUS also “encourage[s] family communication about sexuality between parent and child,”
which helps to reduce the taboo around sex, as well as hopefully strengthen family relationships. Though only aimed at reforming the sex education curriculum, this healthier, more open approach helps to reduce sex negative attitudes, thereby also possibly making sexual health more accessible for women.

The attitudes toward women’s sexuality that are taught in school and further reinforced throughout women’s lifespans make addressing sexual health an unjustly uncomfortable experience. In order to address this problem further research should be done to measure the possible correlation between the degree of sex-negativity in a given population and it’s attitudes toward women’s sexual health. One limitation of the current research is a lack of studies conducted in the US on women’s perceptions of the vagina or sexual health. This should serve as further evidence of the stigma around the vagina and sexual health.

Emma Sturm is a Psychology student at California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo. She is pursuing minors in Women’s and Gender Studies, Graphic Communications, and Integrated Marketing Communications. Emma is also a peer health advisor specializing in sexuality education.

References


Sexual Assault: Whose Fault is it Anyway in a Rape Culture?

By Grace Pappas

ABSTRACT: Sexual assault has recently gained attention as a prevalent issue in American culture, particularly on college campuses. While in some places much is being done to raise awareness and end this form of gendered violence, too often fingers are pointed at possible causes rather than intertwined as hands held together in the fight against this injustice. Through an examination of empirical research, it is clear that the issue of sexual assault stems from and is perpetuated by a rape culture, a culture in which we are all a part. This paper argues that if we are to fight sexual assault, we must take a broad perspective of the issue and a critical view of our own actions in order to see the problem not as a women's problem, a men's problem, or even a Greek System problem, but rather a cultural problem, and then take the steps necessary to change this culture.

Introduction

Rape and sexual assault have recently become hot topics in America, particularly on college campuses. With studies revealing that one out of every five women has been sexually assaulted or raped (one in four on a college campus), few deny the prevalence of this issue (Rabin, 2011; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2006). What many people fail to realize, however, are the root causes of these issues and how they are perpetuated by rape-culture. Sexual assault has been looked at as a women’s problem, a men’s problem, and even more recently, a Greek System problem. Both the victims and perpetrators have been told the problem is theirs alone to deal with, a tactic that relieves the population at large from their share of the responsibility. Though gender and
sexuality based violence affects many different populations, I focus on current issues regarding the sexual assault of women in order to provide a broad perspective of the trends and realities of sexual assault, rather than dissect one single element of awareness or intervention in depth. Though honing in on the complexities of one aspect of sexual assault provides detailed explanations and opportunities for important theoretical applications, I propose that we cannot forget to step back from time to time and examine the bigger picture. I suggest that it is not only one piece that is tainting the puzzle, but that the puzzle itself isn’t always a beautiful picture, thought it is a picture that is able to be changed. If we are to raise awareness and encourage others to join the fight against sexual assault, we must first help others become aware of the part we all play in a culture that allows it to exist. From a socio-cultural perspective, I will first analyze the ways that society has blamed sexual assault on different groups and then propose the idea that sexual assault is better viewed as a product of a patriarchal society that condones hegemonic masculinity in a rape-culture that we fail to challenge.

**A Women’s Problem**

The vast majority of sexual assault victims are female (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2006). This reality, however, has not prevented women from being blamed as the cause of the sexual assault. One of the most harmful rape-myths engrained into our culture is that women deserve to be sexually victimized if they are wearing revealing clothing or have consumed alcohol (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013). After reporting a sexual assault, women are often asked what they were wearing, something the Washington Post equates to “talking about parking after a series of car break-ins instead of…finding the bad guy (Dvorak, 2014).” Women's clothing choices have been even been substituted as a form of consent. For example, the tightness of one woman's jeans was used as
evidence that the victim was asking for sex, and therefore sexual assault did not occur, though a verbal “yes” was never given (Stanley, 1999).

Hayes, Lorenz, and Bell (2013) attribute this pattern of victim blaming to the deeply rooted cultural notion that victimhood in general is a female issue. In a patriarchal society that views women as weaker than men, it becomes both expected and accepted that women are to be the victims of crimes. Much of sexual assault education focuses on what women can do to avoid being sexually assaulted, and though this is helpful advice, it addresses the effect of the problem, rather than the problem itself. This line of thinking is also reflected in the common discussion of “women being sexually assaulted.” Though true that women are often the victims, it is equally true, and perhaps more efficient, to discuss the issue as “men are sexually assaulting” (Earp et. al, 2013).

A Men’s Problem

Given that 99% of people who rape are men, it follows to label this as a men’s issue once the blame is shifted from the victims to those who actually commit these crimes (Black et al, 2011). Sexual assaults don’t happen to women out of nowhere; somebody is committing this crime, and in nearly all cases, this somebody is male. A recent study of college-aged men reported that one out of three men admitted they would force a woman to have sex with them if they knew they wouldn’t get caught (Kingkade, 2015). This statistic is nothing short of startling, as it so clearly demonstrates that a third of males would view their desire for sex as more important than a woman’s desire. Not only so, but it also shows that the issue of sexual assault stems from an issue more deeply rooted than the culturally engrained stereotype of males wanting sex more than females. In this case, the problem lies with the male desire having a stronger value than the female desire. Sex in this case is not a shared act in which two people actively participate; it’s merely a way for a male to find satisfaction,
regardless of the cost to a woman. If we are to find a solution in lowering the numbers of sexual assault cases, it would appear that the male population is a logical place to start. Be that as it may, this isn’t the whole story.

A Greek System Problem

Recently, pointing the finger at the Greek System has been one effort to get closer to a root cause of the issue by suggesting that perhaps not all men are to blame, maybe just certain groups of men. Though the number of sexual assaults that have occurred in the Greek system is tragic, blaming the system as a whole still removes the weight of the blame from the shoulders of the perpetrators. Sororities have taken it upon themselves to propose ideas such as moving the locations of social gatherings to their own houses in order to ensure the safety of the drinks being served, and to allow women to feel they have more power to ask men to leave when they have had too much to drink or are acting inappropriately (Schwarz, 2015). While this appears like a decent idea on the surface, it again shifts the focus onto something other than the perpetrators. The reality is, “no” means “no,” no matter whose house you’re in. Even if the typical “frat party” creates an environment where getting away with sexual assault is easy and perhaps even encouraged, this in no way excuses the act. Regardless of the environment, women should be empowered to say no, and men should respect women enough to listen.

A Cultural Problem…Our Problem

Labeling sexual assault as solely a men’s issue and asking men to deal with it appears to be an adequate response, one even recently adopted by Cal Poly (Wilson, 2015). However, taking a step back and examining our culture as a whole provides a different perspective. Yes, men are the perpetrators, but who tells men how to be men? Aggression and dominance are engrained in our cultural expectations of how men should behave (Dean,
2011, & Barber, 2011). At the core of the male sexual script is the idea that to prove one’s masculinity, one must “get a girl” and those who tell tales of their sexual domination are highly praised (Pascoe, 2011, p. 180). Though hidden curriculum in schools is often cited as a source of the message that masculinity and sexual dominance are one in the same (Klein, Markowitz, Puchner, & Anderson, 2011), one walk down the video game aisle at Wal-Mart and it becomes hard to deny that men are being fed the idea that violence is an acceptable form of behavior (Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012). Couple this hegemonic masculinity with the homophobic fear that if a male fails to reach this masculine ideal his sexuality will also come into question (Dean, 2011), and it becomes clear that our culture raises men in such a way that having a sexual encounter with a female appears to be the ideal way to assert the male dominance patriarchal society so highly values.

Asserting this dominance is one thing, but it becomes even more dangerous when men with this attitude are placed in a rape-culture that is callous towards sexual assault and has blurred the lines of what is or isn’t rape. The same study that found that one in three men would have non-consensual sex with a woman if they wouldn’t get caught also found that many of these men claimed they would never rape (Kingkade, 2015). This begs an important question: what is allowing these men to believe that non-consensual sex is not rape? Not only are men raised to see sexual dominance as a part of their masculinity and are encouraged to value the achievement of this masculine ideal over respecting women (Barber, 2011), our rape-culture furthermore allows men to avoid viewing these actions as criminal.

In a rape-culture, sexual assault becomes mitigated as rape themes emerge and go unquestioned in pop-culture, such as in the songs “Blurred Lines” and “She Ain’t Even Know It” (Vagianos, 2015). Though the beat is catchy, the reality is that the lines aren’t blurred; “yes” means “yes,” and if a woman “ain’t even know” you are having sex with her, chances are she’s not able to give consent. Our
culture knows that rape is bad, but tends only to recognize it by its name and not by what it entails, especially when it's hidden amongst brassy beats and bass drums. Our culture recognizes “rape” as a crime, but accepts “male coercion of females into having sex” as a natural part of masculinity. This incongruity must be recognized, and it must be changed.

**Conclusion**

If we are to end sexual assault, we must first recognize how our culture promotes hegemonic masculinity and allows for sexual assault to cease being viewed as a crime and violation of human dignity. Furthermore, we must admit our own participation in this rape-culture rather than search for others to blame. Blaming the victims of this crime exonerates the perpetrators. Blaming the perpetrators for their adherence to a cultural norm, or even pointing fingers at a sub-culture with a stronger adherence to this cultural norm, still fails to acknowledge that the norm exists first in our culture. We do, however, have the power to change our culture and to redefine what it means to be man in our society. In the words of President Obama, “It is on all of us to reject the quiet tolerance of sexual assault and to refuse to accept what’s unacceptable” (Obama cited in Somander, 2014).

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**Grace Pappas** is a third-year Psychology major with a minor in Child Development. She has been involved at the SLO Women's Shelter working as an advocate for Intimate Partner Violence victims and a crisis line volunteer. She has a passion for helping those who have been victims of abuse and hopes to pursue a Masters in Clinical Social Work after graduation to learn how to better serve this population.
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