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Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar at The College at Brockport

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Our Voices

In declaration, we come together, calling for all who experience the intersection of oppressions to have the opportunity to claim and use their own Voices. *We dissent!* Our work looks to empower others through education and awareness across a range of topics including sexuality, race, education, ability, class, and nationality. We include all people in our quest to build a community based on equality and diversity as we continue the mission of *Dissenting Voices* through our own feminist research and activism.

*Celeste Cooper, ’14; Michele Haddad,’14; Kelsey Mahoney, ’14; Andrea Moore, ’14; Lucienne Nicholson, ’14; Ben Roberts, ’14; Cherrie Watson, ’14.*

Dissenting Voices Cover Art

Lucienne Nicholson, ’14, and Oliver Haynes
Note from the Editor

I am thrilled to introduce the third edition of Dissenting Voices, a student engineered e-Journal collaboratively designed, authored, and published by undergraduate Women and Gender Studies majors as an extension of their Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar at The College at Brockport.

Dissenting Voices grows out of a course learning structure where Women and Gender Studies students reflect upon their undergraduate experience in the discipline, and through engagement, activism, and synthesis of acquired knowledge, establish a theoretical foundation to inform future feminist practices. Course readings comprise students’ discipline-specific interests, enabling an intellectual forum in which students dialogue on a women and gender focused topic. This work culminates in a meaningful capstone project grounded in contemporary and emerging feminist scholarship.

Dissenting Voices volume three is substantive and robust. Diverse student authors straddle an array of women and gender topics, writing in traditional essay format that infuses theoretical depth and dimension into the volume. Two remarkable essays open the volume. The first is an analysis of gender and sexual identity as lived by a gay man who was a 1954 graduate of The College at Brockport; the second interrogates race and gender, teasing out paradoxical behavior codes that society inscribes on Black female identity. Four distinctive essays center the volume. These include an analysis of microfinance and women’s empowerment, a study on sexual responsibility and hook-up culture, an assessment of abstinence only and comprehensive sex education approaches in sex education, and a chronicle of gaining voice among Deaf culture domestic violence survivors. Bookending the volume is a compelling essay that interweaves film and autobiographical analysis of women as domestic laborers, theorizing intra-feminist oppressions as “Pink-transgressions.”

Intersecting our semester long coursework and writings, students staged several activist projects including a One Billion Rising for Justice flash mob and poetry reading, an interactive Love Your Body Day information table, an International Women’s Day salon, and a collaboratively designed Clothesline Project installation. The e-Journal concludes with a photo essay that documents this salient women and gender-informed activism.
Similar to the prior two *Dissenting Voices* publications, essays in this volume bridge feminist theory with praxis as writers contest structures of power and privilege framing the borders and margins under which we live and learn. In the spirit of feminist collaboration, students’ activism and writing embody the impassioned resolve that is women and gender studies. *Dissenting Voices* preserves the authenticity of student voice, sanctioning a wide range of ability and talent that students’ senior seminar coursework engenders.

In my early role as Brockport’s Women and Gender Studies Director and faculty developing a new Women and Gender Studies senior capstone course, I had what seemed a pipedream in conceptualizing a student journal. Semesters of dynamic student activism and thought inspired me to imagine a women and gender studies publication that would bring to light undergraduate creative agency realized on the cusp of feminist knowledge.

*Dissenting Voices*, as named and populated by its 2012 student founders, and pioneered onward by this 2014 class, is this dream forward.

Barbara LeSavoy, PhD
Director, Women and Gender Studies
Executive Editor, *Dissenting Voices*
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Gay New York:
From Bars to Bathhouses

This project is an analysis of the manner in which gender identity development was experienced by non-heteronormative people in the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the experiences of gay men, with particular focus on the life of Anthony (Tony) Mascoli, a Rochester native and 1954 graduate of the Brockport State Teacher’s College, now The College at Brockport. Tony’s journey from a lower middle class, socially conservative, and mostly closeted lifestyle, to an upper class, extremely liberal, and totally open gay lifestyle sheds light on the manner in which American society’s view of homosexuality has evolved and on how heterosexism and classism intersect in both Tony’s life and in the formation of gay male identity as a whole. This research includes analysis of gay history, theories of gender identity and development, and personal experiences of identity as related in interviews and personal histories.

Opening Thoughts
Imagine living in upstate New York and being a gay, white, lower middle class male in the 1940s. Could you be out with this identity, or would you feel the need to stay closeted? What would life be like if you did choose to live openly as a gay man? These questions are central to understanding the life of Tony Mascoli, a gay male who grew up in western New York and lived there for most of the period from 1930 to 1954 when he graduated from the Brockport State Teacher’s College, now The College at
Brockport. This paper looks at Tony’s life with a particular focus on the history of gay life and knowledge about gender and sexual identity as it evolved in American history.

Introduction

When many people think about the current state of gender and sexual identity in America, they see a climate that is problematic, but one that is moving toward a state of greater acceptance. One way to measure this is the legal status of gay couples in the United States. Between 2012 and 2013, six more states made gay marriages legal, bringing the total from eleven to seventeen (States, 2013). The general feeling is that we have made leaps and bounds from a previous (and original) state of hostile intolerance, making the current hodgepodge of acceptance and hate at least a step in the right direction. This feeling betrays an ignorance of varying levels of tolerance and acceptance of non-heteronormative lifestyles, both throughout history and in the relatively short history of the United States of America. In his text Gay New York, George Chauncey states “heterosexuality was an invention of the late nineteenth century” (1994, p. 100) and asserts that the identification and demonization of homosexuals was a result of an identity crisis among middle class American men of that era. Men believed that middle class masculinity was under assault not just from homosexuals but from other economic and social issues. The rise of the corporate business structure deprived many middle class men of their identity as independent breadwinners. Women were fighting for the right to vote and leading temperance movements and other campaigns against “male vices” (p. 112). Chauncey further writes that “heterosexual and heterosocial imperatives” (p. 117) were growing, reaching their peak at the end of the first third of the twentieth century.

This environment, the emphasis on heteronormative gender and sexual identity as normal behavior, and the stigmatization of homosexuality as abnormal, is the climate into which Tony Mascioli was born. Given this setting, this project uses a combination of historical documents, theoretical frameworks, and personal interviews to explore how gender and sexual identity development was experienced by one man in 1930-1950s America, focusing on the life of Tony Mascioli.

A Discussion of Homosexuality through the 1950s
One of the many factors that problematize frank discussion of non-heteronormative genders and homosexual identity in our culture is the presumption that these are relatively new and newly perverse ideas. Conservatives of all stripes assail the recognition of non-heteronormative genders and the acceptance of homosexual behaviors as a sign of the growing corruption of our world. A current example of this is the manner in which FOX News columnist Todd Starnes leapt to the defense of David and Jason Benham, conservative Christians whose show on the Home and Garden Network was cancelled after David Benham’s anti-gay beliefs were revealed through statements like “we have pornography and perversion; we have a homosexuality and its agenda that is attacking the nation… we even have allowed demonic ideologies to take our universities and our public school systems” (Starnes, 2014). The main problem with this criticism is that both non-heteronormative genders and homosexual behaviors have been a part of human society for millennia, even if those terms did not exist to describe them. I am particularly fond of David Halperin’s (1990) analogy to the ancient world’s experience of gravity. He explains that even though neither the concept of gravity nor the term itself existed, gravity was a force present in the lives of the ancients. In the same way, non-heteronormative gender and homosexual behaviors were present, even if they were not identified with those terms. Halperin cites Plato’s Symposium, a 4th century B.C.E. treatise on the nature and meaning of love, which is primarily concerned with love and sex between men, as proof of this.

Skipping ahead to the Renaissance, James M. Saslow states that homosexuality was by this time (around 1400 C.E.) “a widely observable and documented social phenomenon” (1990, p. 90). Moving to the 1800s and the United States, several authors noted that homosexual relationships and people who expressed gender in non-normative ways existed, with the implication that both of these things were more common than they are mentioned in current history books, which is usually not at all. Martin Duberman (1990) writes of “writhing bedfellows” (p. 153) in 1826 South Carolina, while Robert K. Martin (1990) analyzes “male love” as seen in writings from Moby Dick and Calamus to the “popular fictions of mid-nineteenth-century America” (p. 169).

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth
marked a disturbing turn in both our culture’s awareness of and its discussion about gender and homosexual identity. I narrow my temporal focus to that time period and my geographical focus to the state of New York, because these are the times and places most important to the gender and sexual identity of my subject, Tony Mascioli. They mark a sea change in the discussion of human sexuality, as New York was one of only two prominent areas where relatively open acknowledgement and discussion of homosexuality existed. As mentioned previously, Chauncey (1994) states that the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” only came into use as descriptors of sexual identity in the late nineteenth century. Chauncey describes a tremendous amount of confusion about whether gay or bisexual men should be primarily classified based on their preferred gender (male or female) or their choice of sexual object (man or woman). Chauncey’s description of the debate includes “queer” men “who identified themselves primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status;” he also makes reference to “gender persona” (pp. 100-101). I believe that the behavior of these womanlike gay men, known as “fairies,” was what Judith Butler (2007) calls gender performance and what would later, due to repetition of gender behavior over time, become known as gender performativity. This concept is particularly relevant here as the repetition of stylized actions which gave these non-heteronormative men their labels underscores the performative nature of gender.

Butler (2007) described a similar disconnect between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance, drawing a clear distinction between, for example, a man who desires to have sex with men and a man who behaves as though he is a woman (Butler, 2010). Julia Serano reinforces the difference between gender identity and sexuality, making the further distinction that gender identity is less subject to cultural and societal influence. Speaking of gender and sexual identity, she states “While the latter is heavily influenced by language, culture, and ideology, the former appears to exist somewhat independent of one’s culture and socialization” (2013, p. 149). The distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and sexuality is important because, prior to the twentieth century, homosexuality was almost exclusively understood as a physical sex act. To quote John D’Emilio, “Homosexual behavior,
however, is different from homosexual identity” (1993, p. 470). D’Emilio is describing colonial America as a place where there was “no ‘social space’… that allowed men and women to be gay” and “society lacked even the category of homosexual or lesbian to describe a person” (p. 470).

Whether or not a gay man was a “fairy,” a “queer” or “trade” (this latter category being comprised of the “nominally ‘normal’ sexual partners of queers”) was important because in the early twentieth century, these were the only options. (Chauncey, 1994). The majority of gay men of that time were characterized as queers, but the flamboyantly effeminate fairies captured the “dominant public image” of gay men. The relative tolerance of these categories of gay men was firmly tied to their economic and social class. Chauncey states that “men at the highest and lowest social strata… were more likely than those in the middle class to tolerate other men’s homosexual activity” (p. 110) This class aspect of gay identity is highlighted in the graphic below, taken from the online version of The Atlantic: (Gritz, 2014).

Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Sarah Ome Jewett

Pictured above we have a president, a legendary poet, and a wealthy writer who were “writhing bedfellows” like Duberman mentioned earlier, and all members of the social or economic elite (1990, p. 153). Whether or not the
physically intimate same-sex relationships that the three people pictured above had with their close companions were explicitly sexual, they undoubtedly had more freedom to pursue those relationships than those of the middle class. While gay men from the lower socioeconomic class may have not had the power to freely engage in homosexual relationships, these men were freer from the threat of social or economic consequence from their actions than gay men that the middle class absorbed (Chauncey, 1994).

Middle class American men came to perceive homosexuality as either the privilege of a debauched elite class or the depredations of an immoral lower class. In the midst of this dichotomy, they also felt a “growing antipathy… toward both fairies and queers at the turn of the century [that] was closely tied to their growing concern that the gender arrangements of their culture were in crisis” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 111). This concern was caused by a number of factors. The emergences of the corporate business model emasculated many middle class men, as they were no longer working for themselves but were subservient to other men (Chauncey, 1994). D’Emilio (1993) notes that the emergence of capitalism “gradually undermined the material basis of the nuclear family by taking away the economic functions that cemented the ties between family members” (p. 473). Not only were men no longer in charge of their financial destiny, the economic conditions that made a traditional (father-mother-children) family necessary were dissolving. Middle class men also felt threatened by women’s actions in the form of the women’s suffrage movement, temperance movements, other campaigns against “male vices,” and the growing fear that women taking over early education would “eliminate the role of men in the socialization of youth and threaten to produce a generation of sissified boys” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 112). In addition to these specific threats, there was also a perceived threat to their status and prerogatives as men (Chauncey, 1994). This led to a climate where “preoccupation with threats to manhood and with proving one’s manhood became central to the rhetoric of national purpose,” exemplified by President Theodore Roosevelt, who made the “quest for manhood central to his speeches” (p. 113). The cumulative effect of these threats was the rise to prominence of “heterosexual and heterosocial imperatives,” which enabled middles class men to claim normalcy simply because they were
heterosexual (p. 117). The degree to which heterosexuality had become enmeshed in middle class identity is revealed in a 1930 New York Times Book Review which referred to society as a place where “young people” could “develop normally (italics mine) to heterosexual adulthood” (Katz, 1990, p. 19). So thorough was this association that “Homosexuality, a new gender-sex category, had been distributed from the narrow, rarified realm of a few doctors to become a nationally, even internationally cited aspect of middle class life” (p. 19-21).

The final ingredient to the heteronormative soup brewing in the first third of the twentieth century was the emergence of “hetero-homosexual binarism in middle class medical discourse” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 120). Chauncey implicates doctors in the value judgments made against gay men, as they belonged to a “professional class whose manliness seemed increasingly in question” (p. 121). Fairies were labeled as sexual invert. Scientific arguments at the time relied on the supposed universality of physical differences between men and women. Men who desired men must be hermaphroditic in some way or simply “less than men” (p. 122). Some doctors went so far as to declare fairies an “intermediate sex between men and women” for whom attraction to men was normal (Chauncey, 1994, p. 122). These men were then classified as invert, while otherwise normal men who sexually responded to fairies were classified as pervert. The difference here is crucial as incarcerated invert were to be medically treated while pervert were to be punished for their behavior (Chauncey, 1994). All of the above circumstances led to a world in which gay men were lumped into the single, monolithic category of homosexuals and subjected to harassment and hostility. This is the world into which Tony Mascoli was born in 1930.

**Anthony (Tony) Mascoli**

Tony Mascoli was born on December 14th, 1930. Born into a Catholic-Italian family, Tony knew he was gay at an early age. In his own words:
I was sexually motivated from the time I was six. And I’ll… I just kind of knew a couple of people that I thought were in the club, so to speak, in high school. But we never really got too thick. I had my own friends. I was very much in love with a straight guy, but it seems like I got out of high school and I was old enough to get served – 18. then – I started going to the Glass Bar I’d go in there and buy one drink and within five minutes I’d have five or six beers, that’s [sic] was the style back then. People were sending me all different -- I was a hot little ticket.

(Bailey, 2013)

Tony came out as gay in 1948, when he was 18 years old, “at the earliest possible moment when I got out of high school” (Bailey, 2013). It is important to note that this coming out did not initially include his family. Tony was terrified of his father and worried that his mother would be unable to cope with the news. Tony was so afraid of his family finding out about his gay identity that, after absconding to Canada with a steelworker he had met (before he left Rochester for New York City), he hid out for a week in a room over a bar after his brother-in-law spotted him with his lover. This story coincidentally underscores the unsubstantiated and often fabricated link between gay bars or clubs and criminal activity, as Tony mentions that his brother-in-law was rumored to be associated with the mafia, and thus, had contact with people in the establishments Tony frequented. These associations are an example of the way in which homosexuality and other forms of criminal behavior were often connected in the public mind. Later in life, Tony gained economic power and social influence to engage in some extralegal activity of his own, using the money and connections acquired through his social networks to keep several New York City clubs that he came to operate
open when similar clubs were forced to close.

As a young gay man finding his way in the world, Tony’s choices were limited. Staying with his family would have meant continuing to, at least outwardly, conform to their heteronormative expectations. Like many young men with limited economic and social options, Tony decided to try and make it in the big city. Tony’s decision to leave Rochester was likely influenced by his desire to no longer need to perform a heteronormative male gender on a daily basis. As Chauncey (1994) tells us, the lower middle class society that Tony belonged to was growing increasingly intolerant of gay men, fashioning the labels of heterosexual and homosexual to clearly define what was normal and what was not. In spite of this pressure and despite the lack of any social forces shaping his homosexuality, Tony knew that he was gay, aware of what Serano calls his “subconscious sex” (2013, p. 149). Had Tony remained in Rochester, he would have faced much greater pressure to conform to gender and sexual norms, regardless of his class status. Unable to fit in at home, Tony sought both a more open social setting and the economic means to live as he wished in New York City.

Tony left Rochester for New York City in the latter part of the 1940s. He was motivated not just by the “gay scene,” but by the possibility of a career in the dramatic arts. Tony wanted to become a playwright. Unable to make it in show business and facing a draft board for service in the Korean War, Tony returned to Rochester in 1950 or 1951. In an interesting side note, Tony’s father insisted that he bring x-rays of his flat feet to his physical examination. This resulted in a 4-F (physically unqualified for service in the Armed Forces) rating. It is entirely possible that Tony’s father was motivated purely by concern for his son’s safety and that his insistence on bringing the x-rays was no different than the desire of any parent to keep their child out of harm’s way. That being said, I cannot help but wonder if Tony’s father knew on some level that his son was gay and that military service during that era could have been even more dangerous for him as a result. Having fully expected to be drafted, Tony was now back in Rochester without a plan, and once again, his individual socioeconomic circumstance and that of the Rochester area in general placed limitations on his identity expression. Although it is unlikely that Tony explicitly pursued power and
wealth, he sought to find a way to improve his class status, and thus, his freedom to live as he chose, by climbing the economic ladder. His first step would be earning a college degree.

The Brockport Years

Tony attended The College at Brockport, State University of New York, then known as Brockport State Teacher’s College, from 1951-1954, graduating from an accelerated three-year program. While at Brockport, Tony served as a reporter for the Stylus, the school newspaper, first as a reporter, and then as a feature reporter writing an entertainment column entitled “Doing the Town.” Tony was also on the staff of BSTC’s literary magazine “Vistas,” serving as Editor-in-Chief his senior year, and given credit for saving the magazine from extinction that year.

In his senior year, Tony was involved in a censorship battle with one of the senior class faculty advisors for the play *Hangover Breakfast*, which he had written and directed for the senior class. Other than “a minor concern” that “Tony’s
play was not up to the quality of some of Broadway’s smash hits,” the “major objection to this play was that it included too much sex” (“Hangover Breakfast Goes on Uncensored [Editorial], 1954). The author of this editorial believed that the decision by Dean Drake to let the play be performed uncensored “could prove a turning point in the history of this college” by breaking “a tradition of antirealism and hypocrisy… a tradition of stifled thinking where the basic issues of life are concerned” (“Hangover Breakfast’ Goes on Uncensored” [Editorial], 1954). Though there is nothing to suggest that the sex mentioned in Tony’s play was anything but heterosexual, I believe that Tony’s fight to put on this play was part of a broader struggle to bring controversial aspects of sexuality to society’s attention. Tony was by this point well aware of his sexuality, but
any play or literary work featuring homosexuality would have been dead in the water in 1950s Brockport. The fact that the play was allowed to be presented illustrates a trend toward “greater heterosexual freedom” that Jonathan Katz argues was used to combat the “dire threat of homosexuality” of the time (1990, p. 19). As was typical in that era, there is little if any evidence of Tony’s sexuality being publicly known while he was a student at the Brockport State Teacher’s College. According to Chauncey’s (1994) description of the time period, Tony was still not free to be openly gay. He was still required to perform, sometimes literally, a gender that was not his own.

The Bathhouses

After graduating from Brockport, Tony attended Columbia University in New York City, where he obtained a Master’s degree in Drama. After moving around a bit, in 1964 Tony returned to New York City. Though he took full advantage of the limited opportunities for gay men in the Rochester area, Tony was irresistibly drawn to “the high life” of big city living (Bailey, 2013). In 1974, following a period of “little stupid jobs,” Tony and his cousin Bob (Robert DeBenedictis) opened the Wall Street Sauna, a small club where men could meet and have sex. Tony was forthright about his reasons for opening the club: sex and money. Tony liked businessmen, and he knew that there was a demand for a safe, protected space for gay men to meet and have sexual encounters. Tony describes a world in which gay men furtively sought each other’s company in the stairwells and bathrooms of New York’s financial district. He created the Wall Street Sauna to cater to the needs of men who did not have the time, because they had to catch the five o’clock train home to their wives, or the inclination to visit the larger, more party-oriented bathhouses of that period. Tony’s business took off and in 1976 he opened the East Side Sauna, also known as the East Side Club. Tony’s club intentionally catered to a high-class clientele by providing touches like Juilliard-trained musicians playing music in the sauna room. It is important to note that, while Tony unquestionably provided a needed service by providing gay men a safe place to meet, his establishments were not entirely legitimate businesses. Socialization and relationships were not the only goals; these were clubs where men went for sex, and this focus on sex as the primary goal increased over time.
One example of the shift that occurred over time is the difference in the way the clubs advertised. Tony described an early club advertisement in a gay magazine that showed only a dejected woman sitting alone at her dinner table while the text explained that she was pining for her husband, who was spending his time at one of Tony’s clubs (Mascioli, 2011). In contrast, the following is one of a series of sexually charged images that adorns the current website of the East Side Club:

![Image from eastsideclubnyc.com, March 13th, 2014](Image from eastsideclubnyc.com, March 13th, 2014)

Having a positive attitude about or being open about one’s desire to have sex is not in any way shameful, but these clubs operated with an almost willful ignorance of the dangers of sexually transmitted infections. For example, a manager of the Wall Street Sauna claimed that “crazy sex acts” were not happening in the club in 2004, and a manager of the contemporary East Side Sauna stated, “we do not condone multiple-partner sex” while simultaneously describing a room designed for groups of men as “the orgy room” (Friends of Ours, 2010). Perhaps even more damning, an entry in the 2003 *Betty and Pansy’s Severe Queer Review of New York* describes the contemporary East Side Club as a place where the management makes announcements against drug use and provides condoms, yet many patrons engage in drug use and unprotected sex (Friends of Ours, 2010). Tony did not
publicly address his attitude towards safe sex practices or the AIDS crisis among gay men that emerged in the 1980s, other than a statement in which he described agreeing to inspections and monitoring as a condition of staying open, as well as a statement that he volunteered to help with “blood draws” (Bailey, 2013). On a positive note, Tony’s success in the bathhouse business enabled him to invest in real estate on Long Island where he operated several establishments that catered to gay men (Bailey, 2013). Taken together, these ventures made him a wealthy man and enabled him to make large donations to organizations that had touched his life, notably the Gay Alliance of the Genesee Valley and The College at Brockport. Towards the end of his life, Tony finally began to slow down and returned to Rochester for the sake of his health. To use his own words, “To be honest with you, New York just got to be too much for me” (Bailey, 2013).

Current Status of Gay Identity

It is interesting to consider Tony’s life within the landscape of gay identity today. The first thing that must be said about the current status of gay identity is that homosexuality no longer stands alone as the primary Other to heterosexuality. Beginning in the 1990s and 2000s, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer movements have emerged to challenge the old concepts of heteronormativity and the gender binary (Stein, 2012). For example, the term queer now represents not a narrow, pejorative classification of men that have sex with men, but a nearly limitless range of gender and sexual identity. There is also growing awareness of the statistically significant number of intersexed individuals in our society (Bloom, 2002; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). I believe the explosion of movements supporting non-heteronormative people can be traced in large part to thinkers and theorists that directly attacked the concept of the gender binary, challenging the assumption that our only choices were gay or straight or male or female. My touchstone for the fight against heteronormativity continues to be Judith Butler’s (2010) concept of gender performativity. Specifically, I follow her argument that a person’s anatomical sex, their perception of their own gender, and the way in which a person chooses to act out that gender are three irreducible factors that are not necessarily related to sexual desire (Butler, 2010). This creates a multitude of gender and sexual identities that renders the hetero-
normal Othering of male homosexuality almost quaint.

The failure of the suddenly heteronormative middle class to come to terms with the gender-performing “fairies” of early twentieth century New York, and the resultant rigid categories of gay, straight, male, and female, contributed to the formation of a society in which men like Tony Mascioli were left without choices and forced to gather outside of heteronormative culture. The continuing existence of the East Side Club as an outlet for mostly casual sex is an enduring testament to this fact. Tony’s rise through the middle and upper classes drastically increased his choices and opportunities for homosexual and homo-social interactions. His education and his ability to master the capitalist process gave him wealth, and his choice of clientele gave him powerful customers. His wealth eventually enabled him to live comfortably and openly as a gay man. Had Tony not been an educated white male with the ability to pull himself up the economic ladder, his choices and his lifestyle would have been far more limited. Tony’s rise through the middle class enabled him to choose more freely where and how he would live, but he continued to seek out gay-friendly spaces. It appears that Tony was not able to completely avoid the need to code-switch from being an openly gay man in New York City while remaining largely closeted to family and straight society in the Rochester area, until he had climbed all the way to the upper class. This class-based inequality reflects the stratification of status and wealth that Chauncey (1994) describes in *Gay New York*, and it helps us understand the degree to which class and wealth continue to impact ways in which gay men and other non-heteronormative people are free to be true to their own gender and sexuality.

**Conclusion**

While there are still many challenges facing gay men, society has begun to accept gay identified individuals as valid. Federal law now recognizes gay marriage. Many states have formally recognized gay unions, and many states have legislation protecting gay marriage that preceded federal statutes. The battle is not over, but the world is changing. Rochester, a place Tony Mascioli once thought of as woefully lacking in opportunities for gay men, has become a place with a rich history of LGBTQ culture and organizations, such as the Rochester Gay Liberation Front (1970) and the Gay Alliance of
the Genesse Valley (1973) (Jordan, 2012). In interviews given for the film, Shoulders to Stand On (2011), Tony marveled at the fact that gay marriage was legal in New York and commented on the “extraordinary progress” made in terms of gay rights (Bailey, 2013). Tony stated that he personally was “not in the shadows” anymore, that everything was wide open, that he thought many more people were comfortable with being “out” (Bailey, 2013). Most tellingly, Tony saw that “gay and straight society are mingling” (Bailey, 2013), signaling an end to the “heterosexual and heterosocial imperatives” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 117) that characterized the New York of his youth.

(Tony Mascioli on Nov. 29th, 2011. Image from Shoulders to Stand On documentary)
References


Lay Down Your Cross

If the strong Black woman is to ever gain visibility, then we need to be strong enough to allow ourselves the opportunity to rest. The implications that we are insurmountable beings have meant that Black women are routinely denied considerations by society. A host of Black feminist thinkers have indicated the unique spaces of oppression which the Black woman has occupied and continues to struggle within because of this institutional neglect. Black women have been the bridge which, not only supports the change that we wish to see, but also maintains the disparaging stereotypes which obstructs our efforts towards self-definition. The frustrations weigh heavily upon Black women, as they are forced to surrender need and charity in order to protect the utility of our families and communities. It is my belief that Black women need to lay down this burden of being everything to everyone, if we have any hope of experiencing the kind of freedom which have been liberally extended to others. Cast-off the shame that has silenced the strong Black woman; there is power to be gained when we stop allowing others to determine our worth.

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.

(Alice Walker)
That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

(Sojourner Truth, 1851)

Purpose

I have witnessed both the need and the frustration of Black women as they attempt to define themselves against the ongoing historically constructed ideal of “the strong Black woman”. Society expects this particular woman to be powerful and sturdy within considerably defined public and family roles, yet society also holds her institutional authority hostage. This resilient Black woman has been born out of unspeakable misconducts and oppression. The burdensome task of having to be strong while caged makes the battles of this disenfranchised group significant as they lash through racism and sexism in order to gain visibility. For many African America women, frailty has never been an option; rather these women struggle to obtain a space of refuge under weighty stereotypes which inscribe ethnic inferiority. American society reserved the right to pass up the Black woman’s need for charity and empathy by reinforcing the Eurocentric ideals of beauty and femininity through gendered socialized traits of passivity, meekness, and domesticity. This narrow and objectifying way of being a woman has eluded our grasp, and as we fight for space and recognition, Black women in the United States sink deeper into a place of discontent.

I am an African American woman who has experienced generations of teachings around the need for the strong Black woman to be firmly planted at the center of Black families and communities. Lena Elizabeth
Caldwell, my maternal grandmother, was born the oldest of thirteen children in 1928. Her family was raised in Eau Gallie, Florida during a time of extreme racial turmoil. She married Lawrence Sheffield in 1944 and they began a family of their own which would consist of seven daughters. Despite the fact that the military had little respect for enlisted minorities then, my grandfather took advantage of the discipline, monetary benefits, and professional experience it would afford him and his family. The hegemonic atmosphere of the Navy, which produced hierarchies of white, male, military rule, influenced the way power and control was distributed within this family which was comprised of one male and eight females. That authority that the military rankings granted to my grandfather was quickly transferred to his civilian life as his wife and daughters became the platoon under his instruction.

The institution of marriage reinforced patriarchal authority, so for better or worse my grandmother surrendered her autonomy for the collective good of the family. She knew the matrimonial role she was to play was to be supportive, submissive, and undervalued, yet she also knew that her subverted identity was essential for the survival of her household. The paradoxical nature of being needed yet expendable is the riddle which the Black feminist movement seeks to address. Black women need refuge from the torrential force of patriarchy which has been furthered compounded by racism and from the fundamental male-chauvinistic ideologies which took root in the Black power movement within 1950s American history.

My grandparents made the decision to relocate their family of nine to Rochester, New York in 1954 in order to pursue the promise of hope and opportunity sold to many minorities who were being trampled by prejudice and discrimination in the southern half of this country. Transplanting this sizable family to the North had its challenges. Without the support of extended family ties, my grandmother began her sentence as a stay-at-home mother to her seven daughters. Since the family had no savings, my grandfather was forced to work long shifts in multiple jobs. This meant the burden of family and domestic life fell on the shoulders of my grandmother, and she obediently honored her obligations as wife and mother. Her tireless efforts are a testimony to the indispensable nature of the strong Black woman, but her obligatory labors did
not answer her call to remain pertinent as an individual.

As a Black woman born into captivity, Sojourner Truth struggled and fought to make others acknowledge her relevancy. I cannot help but associate the words of Sojourner Truth with the feelings that my grandmother must have concealed. As I remember the body of my diligent grandmother lying in a coffin, I wondered how many times in her fifty-nine years that she needed help but societal codes that expected her strength shamed her into silence. Had she decided to speak out, would her cries have fallen upon deaf ears? It is my belief that if exhaustion had not compromised her health, then her silence would have been the attributing cause of death. Black women are routinely denied rights and privileges extended to whites. This vocal stillness must be broken if the liberties, freedoms, and wellbeing of African American women are to be recognized and applied to the habitual strong Black women everywhere.

Feminist Audre Lorde (1984) is a fundamental voice authenticating the experiences of Black women within the margins as she attests to ways sexuality, class, age, and race play a pivotal role in determining women’s prospect for equality. It is important to consider Lorde’s thinking as a backdrop to Kathryn Scantlebury’s (2005) work. Scantlebury is a feminist researcher who studied a group of African American female students in a Philadelphia public school. Scantlebury acknowledges that her identity as an educated, White, middle class female places her within the margins of this school culture, and that it is this privilege which insulates her from many of the tyrannical forces that Black women feel. The students in Scantlebury’s study are often said to be loud, emotional, “ghetto fabulous” females. Their class, age, and race have excluded them from the considerations of society. I see these same conditions within the Rochester City School District where I am a mentor to the underserved young ladies in my community. As I continue my quest to insert the needs of Black girls onto a public platform, I am inclined to borrow a term taken from the works of civil rights and women’s rights activist Pauli Murray’s 1970 essay entitled, The Liberation of Black Women. It is here that I first heard the term “Jane Crow”, which refers to the “entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements which have robbed women of a positive self-concept” (p. 200). Hostile indignities force many girls to internalize these
negative beliefs and the consequence to these externally imposed ideologies creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, realized in the Black woman’s dampened efforts towards upward mobility.

As a Black woman, I have had very few positive entitlements, just as is the case with the girls of Scantlebury’s 2005 study. Circumstances of sexism and racism have caused others to disregard me and ignore my needs as a person. I dissent! My knowledge and perseverance is a tool which enables me to cut through the intricately woven entrapments which confines others in my group to occupy a place of submission. Lorde (1984) believes that we all lead lives where multiple factors impact how people see us and how we are treated. Being young, Black, and female exposes this group to unique hardships, and we see that society continues to devalue and demote the Black female identity. The early feminist agenda, which was concerned with suffrage, property rights, and political equity, has no immediate impact on the lives of these marginalized girls. The disconnections that separate women from other women occur not from these differences in race and identity, but from our inability to celebrate our diversity. Addressing issues of poverty and other societal deficits along with discriminatory institutional practices captures the actions needed to improve the circumstances of young Black women.

Kiri Davis (2005) is a 17-year-old Black female who directed a documentary on the struggles that her friends have had trying to live up to standards of beauty and the promotion of “whiteness” in our society. Her refusal to conform to ill-conceived constructions of Black identity, color, and gender, specifically to the deconstruction of Black womanhood, is reassuring. The film, A Girl Like Me (2005), portrays an overwhelming number of minority girl’s experiences and battles with self-love and acceptance. These young women in Davis’ (2005) film made a conscious move towards a path of self-discovery and self-definition. Their journey was a replica of the one I embarked upon more than ten years ago. It was that moment when I first realized that my eleven-year-old daughter was struggling, and needed me to demonstrate how she had to go about negotiating her acceptance into mainstream society while remaining authentic. The ambiguity that America had become a colorblind nation where the color of a
person’s skin was no longer an indicator of character or ability challenged the simplicity of this task: but how far has our nation really come?

Equality, as written into law, is the prerogative for every man, woman, and child; however, the perceptions of the privileged has not conceded to the equality decrees. I decided to teach Black girls by rebuffing the limitations placed upon me by others. Psychologist Claude Steele (1997) asserts that women of color may choose not to subscribe to disparaging labels of Black girls being unteachable, raunchy, hyper-sexual, and idle. But there is still evidence which suggest that Black women may fall victim to a “stereotype threat,” defined as the process of internalizing the destructive label society places on minority women even though the individual personally rejects these stereotypes. The power to overcome such realities is an anomaly; and yet, here I am. Along with my own personal triumphs, the young women in Davis’ (2005) film also progressed to a state of confidence and began embracing their reflections, showing that it is possible for Black women to reject the negative hype societal codes impose. The use of voice, emotion, and individuality helped the girls of this disqualified group to learn and test their knowledge. Their outspokenness is beneficial as it bestows validity and credibility to their understandings and it endorses the work that Scantlebury is doing with young Black females. Their willingness to express individuality flaunts self-confidence essential to counteracting the negative portrayal that these marginalized young ladies encounter in the media and popular culture.

Scantlebury was able to effectively show how the daily experiences among the young Black cohort that she studied impacted their learning and ultimately their success opportunities. Personalities of African American students who society at one time ignored and misinterpreted are re-evaluated as vital adaptations to the harsh realities of many urban minority communities. Their circumstances will not command their attitude. The forces that knocked them down did not hold them there. These girls are resourceful, imaginative, and resilient, and they have found a way to reimagine their role in society: They are strong Black women.

What is the definition of a strong Black woman? Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), the author of Sister Citizen, states:

The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials...
and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection (p. 21).

Perry’s depiction is vivid, and though she specifically attaches a color to this woman, history shows us that it could be any woman. The prevalence of black-suffering is the undoubted determinant that this remarkable woman is, indeed, a strong Black woman. I live in this matrix, as did my mother. I have gone to the edge and back again to provide for my family the necessities, often without the advantage of any considerations. Society never acknowledged my protests of exhaustion, and therefore, I never spoke of this fatigue.

Feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) developed the theory of intersectionality, which attempts to explain how the experience of being a Black woman intensifies the overbearing state of oppressions for women of color. Using Crenshaw’s intersectionality framework, biases in the categories of race, sex, age, class, and sexual orientation interact both on multiple and often simultaneous levels to create exclusive impediments for Black women. As a group, our embodiment of the beast-of-burden has done us harm. Our daunting strength has in many ways expelled us out of femininity. Patricia Hill Collins, professor of African American studies and a Black feminist thinker, suggests that, “the heroic portrayal of the strong Black woman fosters the perception that Black women need no help because we can take it” (2008, p. 287). Society has seduced the Black woman into accepting the notion that we must be everything to everyone. But what does this role actually cost us?

A Black feminist theoretical lens helps me see the escalating cost of labeling young Black girls (hooks, 1994). Minority communities have been hit hardest by poverty, crime, unemployment, and violence. As a Black woman I have not had the privilege of staking claim to anything other than slavery and suffering in this country; an entitlement that I vehemently reject. Circumstances of sexism and racism have caused my status to be rated as discounted, and therefore, unworthy of respect. Even as I strive to bypass these spaces of
oppression, as a Black woman I face an intricate woven entrapment of dogmas and policies which confine my being to a place beneath others. Collins (2008) and other black feminist thinkers argue that it is empowering to simply gain critical consciousness to unpack the hegemonic knapsack carried by the dominant class. I fight against blind obedience in order to dislodge the lethal chokehold patriarchy has placed around women, and using a feminist lens, I contest submission to the white ideal which induces the need for black feminism and activism. Though theory allows my voice to be heard, at this point, it rings with no institutional power, and without this authoritative potency, it becomes part of the diluted cries of the many great Black women who came before me.

The spiteful and dishonest portrayal of Black women in America is not the narrative I want to represent the awesome legacy of strength, tenacity, and courage which have been handed down to me from my mother and to her from her mother. The stereotypes of mammies, sexually promiscuous teenaged girls, and lazy welfare mothers which run fervently throughout our subconscious, and which have been referenced in order to justify mistreatment of the Black woman, must be obviated. Civil rights activist and educator Maya Angelou, in her work Inaugural Poem said, “History, despite its wrenching pain,/ cannot be unlived, and if faced/ with courage, need not be lived again” (1993, 73-75). The hardships of the strong Black women that came before me will not be in vain. I appreciate that to some who read this, it may seem as though I am conceding and asking Black women to throw up both hands and succumb to the greater powers that be. I argue that it is precisely the opposite. I understand the importance of laying down the cross that I have been subjected to carry. I can choose to no longer be the mule for the masses. It is my argument that this cumbersome task of being everything to everyone denies the Black woman her very mortality. Learning to respect our own limitations as people may help others to finally see our humanity. The imperishable strong Black woman that Harris-Perry’s (2011) introduction pays homage to, though accurate in many accounts, has stirred up a mix of contradicting emotions. There is no denying that such an individual exists; I know her. I see and often try to imitate this “virtuous woman” in my own daily habits and behaviors. The introduction of Sister Citizen is concluded with a poem by Donna Kate.
Rushin (1981) entitled *The Bridge Poem*. This piece of literary work voices the frustrations I and other Black women experience as we embark on the road of self-discovery.

I’ve had enough
I’m sick of seeing and touching
Both sides of things
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody
Can talk to anybody
Without me
Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends’ parents …

Then
I’ve got to explain myself
To everybody
I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Forget it
I’m sick of it

I’m sick of filling in your gaps

Sick of being your insurance against
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people

Find another connection to the rest of the world
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your human-ness
I’m sick of reminding you not to
Close off too tight for too long

I’m sick of mediating with your worst self
On behalf of your better selves

I am sick
Of having to remind you
To breathe
Before you suffocate
Your own fool self

Forget it
Stretch or drown
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful (“The Bridge Poem”)

This poem resonates with me because I am a bridge to others. I realize the responsibility I have to share the wisdom which my education in Women and Gender Studies has afforded me. The weight of that huge obligation has had extreme consequences for me as for many other Black women. Growing up, I could not find it within myself to ask for help. As I witnessed struggle and hardship all around me, I felt as though adding to the burdens of others was selfish and cruel. My bumps and bruises would be the evidence of my toil and perseverance. And while they made my triumphs sweeter, these scars indicated to others that I can be excluded from the considerations of support and compassion. Within the human domain, there is an inevitable space to be occupied by frailty, vulnerability, and loss. It is difficult not accepting such a strong affirmation as a much-deserved badge of honor. The fact that I have been born into this non-optional and exhausting role of responsibilities that most dominant groups are shielded from, has left me malevolent, and chasing reciprocity; a recoupment that I am uncertain as to whether society can ever fully compensate.

hooks (1994) explains that the privilege of definition and interpretation within a patriarchy will always rest with the dominant group, and thus, we must utilize feminist theory to transform the mind from a state of confusion to a place of understanding and healing. This tells me that, as a strong Black woman, I do have recourse. I will choose to no longer be the world’s mule. I can save myself and other women of color by emphasizing the power we will gain by simply saying no! Never in my history have I been able to define my existence. The authority to state my position has been pardoned unto me; however, how society chooses to interpret my placement in the world will be in accordance to the color of my skin. My behaviors and social roles have continued to be indiscriminately decided by others and assigned a respective value.

I had many expectations placed upon me during my life. One recurring theme was that hard work would pay
off. I have come to a point in my life where I must develop the confidence to allow my voice to be heard. The knowledge that I have acquired is fluid; it is constantly being challenged and reworked. Knowledge will never yield to the misconducts of others. Reflecting back on life and the reality that I have lived, I realize White-male dominance controls the movement of the oppressed from the margins to the center (hooks, 1994). Whiteness epitomizes power in this country, and Black feminism challenges that.

Using theory to define the pain and toil of the human condition solidifies the possibility for change and improvement. Theory authenticates feminist thought and supports the call into action. Collins (2008), as an author and feminist thinker, often speaks on the intersecting powers of our country’s social institutions which have the jurisdiction to define and regulate the roles of Black women. It is simply not sufficient to speak of the forces of racism and sexism on an individual level where the impact is minimal. It would also be misguided to presume generalizations when it comes to the needs and expectations of all women. What Black feminism is hoping to accomplish is to redirect the perceptions that equality can be attained for this group without acknowledgment of compounded and concurrent powers which diminishes the Black woman’s chances to successfully move from the margins and acquire greater status. Whether there is truth in the notion that Black women must be twice as good, and work twice as hard to achieve half as much, we must recognize that because of our color, we are subjected to prejudices and the way in which we experience that oppression limits our access to opportunity and resources. Society must stop socializing our daughters to accept the belief that it is the role of the Black woman to place the needs and cares of the world on our shoulders. Lay down that cross. The burden is not ours to bear. As women, we must understand that there is no shame in failing to be strong every moment of our lives. Vulnerability is a component of our mortality. Occasionally, meekness is a requirement of the human condition. It is time for the strong Black woman to rest.
References


Microcredit: A Model of Empowerment for Women?

Patriarchal cultures all over the world oppress women within their communities and their own homes. Microfinancing and microcredit show potential as ways to help women empower women. However, one must question if microfinancing and microcredit are as promising as they seem to be. This paper looks at case studies and analyzes different aspects of microcredit programs and concludes that microfinancing and microcredit are not the answer to women’s economic problems. Microcredit programs have some promising aspects. For example, they give individual women financial security and more respect within their communities and families. Overall, however, microcredit can do more harm for women than good, as it can lead to an increase in domestic violence, and in some instances, greater debt for certain women.

Introduction

A great deal of recent research positions microcredit and microfinancing as the way to solve the world’s problems with money. It is often depicted as a cure-all, saving women from domestic abuse and children from malnutrition. Problematically, in many cultures around the world women have limited freedoms even within their own households. Microcredit programs specifically go against many of the ideals within the cultures of the countries where these programs are most needed. Initially, development initiatives concentrated primarily on men, inaccurately assuming helping men would help
everyone else. Microcredit programs proceed from an alternative perspective; the recognition that supporting women’s economic endeavors can have reverberations within communities, cultures, and nations. Despite the positive promises associated with microcredit programs, numerous women face more domestic abuse and sometimes even more financial problems when they try to better their lives by joining a microcredit program. These facts are perhaps surprisingly not as public as the more positive aspects of microcredit programs and initiatives. This paper explores the definitions of microcredit and microfinance, and whether they really do what they advertise—alleviate poverty and empower women—or, whether they might work in ways that harm women more than help them.

**Microfinance and Microcredit: Definitions and Origins**

Although the terms microfinance and microcredit are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. Microfinance is the broader term and includes microcredit as well as “micro-savings,” and sometimes, “micro-insurance” (Siraj, 2012). Ideally, microfinance institutions should be able to support themselves without government or private support (Rahman, 2010). As of 2009, there were more than seven thousand microfinance institutions in more than one-hundred-and-forty-three different nations (Siraj, 2012). Microcredit is the act of lending small amounts of money, typically to women, often with high interest rates for short terms (Eisenstein, 2009). The high repayment and interest rates are what makes microcredit successful in certain areas (Rahman, 2010). Simply put, women pay these loans back. The loans are undertaken with the understanding that the women will use them to support microenterprises that will make them financially better off than they were prior to the loan and that these women will remain self-sufficient once the loan is repaid.

Microfinance and microcredit are universal in our world today. They are what we as Americans perceive as finance, but on a much smaller scale. Microcredit also exists in America, but the perspective is quite different. What Americans think of as “micro” are loans that are typically anywhere from $1,500 to $8,000 (Dewan, 2013). Comparatively, in one of the case studies examined later in this paper, a woman from northern Burundi was able to create her own successful
business starting with a loan of only two dollars (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

The idea of microcredit originated in the early 1970s (Rahman, 2010). While teaching at Chittagong University in Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, a professor and social entrepreneur, became concerned with the “implications and manifestations of poverty on rural people” (Eisenstein, 2009, p. 152). People in the area were forced to borrow from middlemen to make goods out of bamboo, just to sell them back to the same middlemen at the end of the day. Beginning in 1976, Yunus began loaning money to local people living in the town of Jobra in Bangladesh. Through small loans, people were able to buy their own materials and sell on their own terms. People were finally able to make a profit, which successfully broke the cycle of poverty (Rahman, 2010). Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his work with microcredit, and microfinance has been celebrated ever since. Many of today’s microfinance programs, while adopting different loan and interest rate structures, have modeled themselves after Yunus and his pioneering work with the Grameen Bank.

Who do Microcredit Programs Target?

The main purpose of Muhammad Yunus’ program was to help alleviate poverty. For this reason, it is no surprise that microcredit programs are aimed at women. Seventy percent of the world’s poor population is female (Siraj, 2012). As of 2012, eighty-eight percent of the clients reached by microfinance were women. In the original microcredit model that Yunus created, the Grameen model, there are over four million borrowers, ninety-five percent of them women as of 2009 (Eisenstein, 2009). Women are the poorest group for three main reasons: they are “more likely than men to be credit constrained, have restricted access to the wage labor market, and have an inequitable share of power in the household” (Siraj, 2012, pp. 1-18).

Importantly, microcredit does not alleviate poverty or empower women as much as many of us have been led to believe. As a United Nations gender specialist stated, “I don’t think it [microcredit] is about empowerment. It’s about introducing modern economic forms into the deepest rural areas, the penetration of capital away from the capital cities into rural areas, and transforming the way rural societies
are structured” (Isserles, 2003, pp. 38-57). Microcredit was not created as a way to empower women, but rather, as an attempt to try to eliminate the world’s extreme poverty through introducing economic ideas into areas that were being taken advantage of by the individuals who had more money.

Using microcredit as example, women typically have higher repayment rates than men because research has shown women to be more susceptible to group pressure, and a group loan model that relies on peer pressure is common to many microcredit systems. The purpose of having a group of women serve as collateral for each other when taking out loans assures the financier that their loans will be repaid, if not by the woman who took out the loan, than by the group. The groups provide a kind of positive peer pressure helping individual women to pay back their own loans because they do not want to have to pay for each other’s loans or to have others pay for their own. The responsibility that women have shown within microcredit lending systems is why so many microcredit models use groups of women. The United States Agency for International Development has created legislation aimed at helping women, as they were often critiqued by feminist activists for aiming most prior development policies towards men (Eisenstein, 2009).

Another reason that microcredit targets women as borrowers is that women have been shown to put money back into their families and communities more often than men (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Women tend to put money towards food, preventative medicine, and housing, while men often spend “extra” income on themselves (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Education is also a key area in which women invest. Some of the poorest families in the world spend ten times as much on “alcohol, prostitutes, candy, sugary drinks, and lavish feasts as they do on educating their children” (p. 192). Men, more often than women, tend to spend money on something that will give them immediate pleasure. Many men would rather buy themselves beer, which they see as a necessity, than buy medicine for their children (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Although these ideas of where women and men put their money reinforce existing stereotypes about men and women, research has shown that when it comes to microloans, women are a better bet.

Cultural limitations are one of several factors that cause women to need microcredit loans. Ideally, microcredit loans should give women
the opportunity to make their own money and build their self-confidence so they are able to have a say in their own families and communities. Stereotypical feminine traits and roles, such as the idea of being seen and not heard, having to focus on the family, and simply not being given the same opportunities as men, are reasons why women in many cultures are searching for a way to help themselves and improve their circumstances. Society typically provides men more opportunities in education and occupations. This recreates the norms of masculinity that reinforce men’s need to feel in control of the family, often with violence. As discussed later in this paper, domestic violence increases for some women who borrow from microfinance institutions. As a group, women all over the world have the most difficulty finding opportunity. Women have also proven to be the most responsible, largely because of their caregiving roles, for paying back any money that they borrow as well as for investing their profits into their families and communities. This is why women have become the targets of microcredit programs.

**Microcredit Models: Grameen, FINCA, Kashf Foundation, Kiva, and CARE**

Muhammad Yunus developed the Grameen model after his initial experiment in Bangladesh. Yunus aimed to alleviate poverty, but the people that most needed his loans had no collateral to offer (Rahman, 2010). Therefore, with the Grameen model, groups of nonrelated people became responsible for each other (Eisenstein, 2009). These groups are typically composed of six individuals with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Each group begins with two of the six individuals getting loans. Depending on their performance, more women from the group could later apply for loans (Isserles, 2003). Good performance means the individuals who have borrowed are repaying their loans weekly. They also must attend weekly meetings with their loan groups. At the end of the loan cycle, if the group has been successful and paid back all of their loans on time, the group and its individuals can seek larger loans.

Several other microcredit models have emerged since Yunus first created the Grameen model in 1976. Although most of the models proceed from the same premise, they have been tweaked to help enhance whatever finance and
credit aspects the funders want to embody. For instance, the Foundation for International Community Assistance, commonly known as FINCA, was created in 1984 (FINCA, n.d.). FINCA is known for pioneering the “Village Banking Method,” a village banking system that relies on support groups typically made up of ten to fifty members. FINCA provides three main services: (1) small self-employment loans, (2) an incentive to save, and (3) the community system. Within the community, the members provide support and encouragement to each other. FINCA has a loan repayment average of ninety-seven percent and is funded through the interest accrued on the loans as well as commercial capital sources and donations. FINCA helps people in poverty all over the world, including South America, Central America, Africa, and Eurasia.

Another microcredit model is the Kashf Foundation, located in Pakistan (Kashf Foundation, 2014). Kashf began in 1999 and has now “transformed itself into the first wealth management company for women from low income households” (Kashf Foundation). Kashf lends to women in groups of twenty-five or more. The groups meet bi-weekly to “make payments and discuss a social issue” (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009, p. 187). After paying back their first loan, women can seek larger loans. Kashf builds on the Grameen model by making the loan groups larger to ensure more solidarity among members and to increase the rate of repayment. After having many delinquent loans, they found that larger groups of women were associated with higher repayment rates. Requiring women to be responsible for each other makes them do their own background checks on each other, because they do not want to have to pay back someone else’s loan. The groups use the information they receive from background checks to choose group membership and to determine their own investment reliability. Kashf has virtually one hundred percent repayment, if not by the individual than by the group that
they belong to, because they are considered collateral for each other.

Kiva is the most contemporary approach to microcredit. Kiva currently operates in around thirty-five different countries (Moore, 2007). Kiva connects an average Westerner who possesses loan capital with someone who wants to start or expand their business or continue their education. Through Kiva, a lender can give a loan as little as twenty-five dollars, to an individual of his or her own choice. Interested lenders can search through the Kiva database by country, gender, or business type to find a business venture that they would like to support (Huerta, 2008). After choosing a business and making the loan, the lender can get updates from the individual about how her or his business is going. Currently, these loans are interest free, but borrowers often insist that investors know that this is not charity and they will be paid back in full (Moore, 2007). Kiva has a repayment rate of ninety-nine percent, which is interesting because there is no collateral. One thought is that perhaps these borrowers feel a greater sense of accountability because someone personally selected them and gave them the opportunity to follow their dreams. After the loans have been repaid, a lender can choose to help fund another venture. It is also important to note that through 2007 “no [Kiva] loan request has gone unfunded” (Moore, 2007, p. 24). Although Kiva is successful in helping many people, it potentially reproduces the stereotype of Westerners, specifically Americans, coming in to save the day in other countries. This is problematic as it creates a rescue narrative and reinforces the ideologies of dominant Western cultures. Many Westerners know nothing about the countries that they are trying to help, and it seems unreasonable to make an individual conform to Western ideals if they want to receive Western help.

Another model that uses microcredit in a different distribution context is the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (CARE). CARE creates Village Savings and Loan Associations in different villages across twenty-six different African countries (CARE, 2013). CARE has created over 150,000 different groups that are completely
self-reliant and run on their own investments and interest. Meeting once a week to discuss community issues, women bring small donations and can take out small loans. The groups often work together to help each other. These groups are created and organized for easy expansion to other areas. Groups often vary in size as that aspect is left completely in control of the women.

The Grameen Model, FINCA, the Kashf Foundation, and CARE all share the same microfinance premise. The Grameen Model was the start of microcredit, designed to provide small loans to the poorest people in the world, so most of the models that followed used the same goal as a starting point. Later models expanded the size of the group of borrowers, a variable that helped assure higher rates of repayment. The Kashf Foundation is somewhat different from the other models in that it operates in a single country. Kiva also is different from the other models as there is no interest and no middleman between the borrower and the lender. Lenders choose for themselves where their money is going rather than putting it into an organization where it could go to a business that is against the lender’s beliefs. There are many aspects to these microcredit programs that work well.

The larger groups allow for microcredit to be a feasible option, as there is no other way to ensure that loans are repaid. The weekly group meetings where borrowers talk about different problems that plague their communities and their microenterprise efforts is a useful variable to the microloan process. Coming together to help with each other’s ventures is important; it allows the women in the group to see what they each are capable of, celebrate each other’s successes, and support each other through struggles.

Although the necessity of high interest rates among some microcredit programs may be the only way to allow these lending organizations to accrue income, it can add a financial hardship for women as they try to pay back their loans. Also important, microcredit should provide more education to its participants. None of the microfinance models researched here discussed educating women on how to handle finances in a culture where many women have never been allowed to so much as hold money before. The following cases help illustrate some of the gains and shortfalls with microcredit programs.
Case Studies

There are a variety of benefits associated with microcredit programs which have helped women and families around the world. While these are positive results, praise of microcredit programs often comes without critical thought. When we do this, we ignore some of the consequences shown to be associated with microcredit. The following case studies illuminate some of the positives and negatives of microcredit. Research shows that asking whether microcredit promotes or inhibits gender equality side-steps an important consideration that it might do both at the same time (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009).

According to a case study on microcredit in Bangladesh, Isserles (2003) found the reason for the high repayment rate among borrowers is that women are being coerced. For instance, one of Isserles’ interviewees said, “There is a pressure to repay. The husband feels comfortable in telling the loan officer to ‘get stuffed,’ ‘I’ll pay you next week’ kind of thing, but it’s harder for her to do [the same]” (pp. 38-57). Stereotypically, women are considered weak and subordinate to men, whereas men have not had to care about the consequences of defaulting on payments to other men as much. It is not necessarily surprising then that many different cultures implicitly or explicitly instruct women not to challenge authority.

One of the other findings from Isserles’ study was a higher occurrence of domestic violence against borrowers. Isserles stated that most women already experienced domestic violence within their households and the prevalence increased after they received a loan. Fifty-seven percent of the women interviewed admitted to a rise in verbal aggression and thirteen percent admitted a rise in both verbal and physical aggression after receiving their loans. This rise in aggression toward women who are micro-borrowers is a common conundrum throughout different cultures. Blumberg (1988) theorizes that gender relations are maintained by different systems of power; therefore, when we see a rise in women’s economic power, spikes in violence against women are not uncommon as the society is in transition to creating economic equality for women. This increase in violence and women’s public work role is questionable though, as it is difficult to assess whether there is more violence around women’s economic independence or if more people were
willing to label a particular situation as violence when questioned about this. The relationship between microcredit loans and violence is what is most perplexing about microcredit. The paradox is that microcredit is shown as a way to empower women when, in many cases, it can hold women back and make their lives harder. In spite of this, the case studies that follow do show some of microcredit’s small individual successes.

Described as an “unusually successful” participant in microcredit, a woman named Saima Muhammad benefitted from a loan through the Kashf Foundation in Pakistan (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009, p. 187). Prior to her getting her first microloan, she was beaten by her husband and his brother. Her husband had accumulated over $3,000 in debt. Saima was considered useless by her mother-in-law. After taking out a $65 loan, Saima bought beads and cloth. She created beautiful embroidery to sell and was so successful that she soon was able to earn her own income. As the demand increased, Saima hired neighbors to help her. She paid off her husband’s debt and continued to send her daughters to school. Saima, who was once laughed at by her neighborhood, was quoted as saying, “Now everyone comes to me to borrow money, the same ones who used to criticize me...and the children of those who used to criticize me now come to my house to watch TV” (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009, p. 186). Saima is an example of the way that microcredit can help women face and overcome cultural boundaries. Her husband was in charge of finances when her family became deep in debt, but she demonstrated the ability to make money and pull the family out of debt. She also embodies the positive stereotype of a nurturing and caring mother, making sure her income went towards the family and to helping her daughters to continue their education in a culture where a girl’s education is not as valued as a boy’s education. Saima was able to stand up to her family and was empowered through microcredit; however, she also is described as “unusually successful” (p. 187). This underscores the point that success stories are not as common as we often are led to believe.

Another successful case is that of Beti Nachali in northern Zambia (Geloo, 2008). After getting married, Nachali had no say over how money was spent despite her fiscal contributions. Nachali joined a group of women who were given a grant to create “income-generating activities,” such as “baking,
knitting, and sewing” (Geloo, 2008, p. 26-29). She was able to expand her family’s field and increase their vegetable production with the help of the other women in the group. Nachali demanded to have a say in how money was spent as she now was contributing even more to her family’s finances. Although Nachali’s husband originally worried that his wife’s financial success would humiliate him, he now believes that they work better as a team than when she was more like a servant to him. The sincerity of the husband’s belief that he prefers working as a team with his wife is uncertain. In their culture, she is little more than an object. When considering increases in domestic violence among women borrowers, we must wonder if the husband is saying what he thinks he has to say but perhaps deeply resents the fact that his wife has become more successful than him. Situations like this that play out in cultures that support male authority could lead to domestic violence later in relationships if it is not already a problem that exists.

A third successful participant of microcredit is Goretti Nyabenda. Goretti participated in a CARE group in northern Burundi (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). Prior to her involvement with CARE, her husband often beat her and spent thirty percent of their disposable income at the bar. Even though her husband told her that she was not allowed to go to a CARE meeting, Goretti ignored his demand and joined the group. Every member donated the equivalent of ten cents at every meeting of their group. With this money, the women took turns taking out small loans. Goretti used two dollars to buy fertilizer, sold the potatoes grown with the fertilizer at the market, and paid back her loan with a little more than four dollars left over. With this profit, she bought bananas to make banana beer. Goretti now owns a successful banana beer business and two goats. Goretti challenged cultural norms by ignoring her husband’s wishes and starting her own business. Although her husband is thankful for the extra money, the sincerity of his acceptance of his wife’s new role is unclear. Goretti’s story also illuminates how “micro” the loans used in microcredit in Africa truly are. She was able to start a successful business starting with a two dollar loan; something completely unheard of in American finance and credit systems.

These three success stories of microcredit show that small victories are possible. Women sometimes are able to find the courage to stand up to
their husbands and their culture and create a lucrative business. Men sometimes are able to accept their wives as their equal partners. However, these success stories are on an individual basis. Isserles’ study of microcredit outlines the larger problems associated with microfinance that often are not mentioned when we read about microcredit programs.

Microcredit: Critiques

One of the biggest obstacles that microcredit programs face is the culture in the areas that loan programs are trying to improve. Although not necessarily a critique, it is a negative component of microcredit. Microcredit should not be at the center of a battle with culture, but it is a part of a larger issue. Simply put, money should not be positioned as the solution to everything. Many of the women involved with microcredit programs would become even more successful if they also were given education along with financial assistance.

Because of many cultural beliefs regarding gender roles in the areas that microcredit targets, founder of the Kashf Foundation Roshaneh Zafar had a difficult time simply getting women to accept the credit (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). In many of these areas, women have been told their whole lives that they have no say in anything having to do with their family finances. Therefore, the offer of money to begin or expand their own business is mind boggling for many women. Many people Zafar contacted did not want to work with her. When she tried to rent an office in a small village, no one would rent to her. As she implemented the larger microfinance options she wanted to offer home improvement loans, but only if the title of the home was in the woman’s name. Soon, Zafar found out that it took over eight hundred steps to transfer the title and additionally required a husband to sign a document saying he will never evict his wife.

Another obstacle women face with the use of microcredit loans is that no matter how hard they work they are still expected to perform their “wifely duties” (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009, p. 191). All over the world, women are expected to work a “second shift” when they decide to work outside of the home (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Women must not only work their income-generating job but also must keep the household running in cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. These tasks have always landed on the shoulders of women. This “second
shift” is pervasive across cultures and is a problem we also face in America.

Lack of education and the mix of day-to-day societal hardships are other factors that can hold many women borrowers back. Death and disease can hinder some women from benefiting from microcredit opportunities. AIDS is prevalent in many developing countries where microcredit is common, so going into an agreement with a woman who could get sick and die holds many women back. For example, in some microcredit models, the borrower must attend a weekly repayment meeting. If the borrower is sick and unable to attend a meeting, as insurance, the whole group must stay until she arrives, which can impose severe hardship on the group (Isserles, 2003). Additionally, many husbands expect their wives home quickly. Women could consequently be beaten if they are late returning from the meeting. As shown in one of the previous case studies, there is an overall rise in domestic violence for women who are explicitly going against gender norms to gain independence. This reinforces the paradox mentioned earlier in which microcredit offers economic stability but oftentimes at the cost of personal safety.

Microcredit has other risks. As with any investment, something can go amiss. If a woman invests her loan into her crops, there could be a drought (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). If she invests in animals, they could be eaten by a bigger animal or stolen during the night. These hardships could leave women with debts that they cannot pay back. When women do fall into debt, they often rely on moneylenders to help pay back loans. Although we hear so many positive statistics about repayment rates, some data has shown that perhaps as much as “fifty-seven percent of the weekly installments were paid from sources other than investment profits” (Isserles, 2003, pp. 38-57). Women also may be coerced by male relatives to get the loan. In many cases, the women bring the loan home and never see any of it but are still responsible for paying it back. In this example, “the women may act as vessels for men’s economic activity” (p. 38-57). There is no way to assess a woman’s true intentions for getting a loan through a microcredit program, but even if the programs knew the money was going to go to a man, it is possible that denying her the money could make her situation more dangerous. Many men in the areas that microcredit targets are used to getting
what they want from women because of culturally imposed gender norms. If a woman failed to get the loan her husband demanded, it would not be unusual for him to react violently. There is no way to ensure a woman’s safety within the microcredit model without a complete overhaul of gender-divided cultural values within these credit borrowing communities.

Microcredit loans can have many negative impacts for women, but the biggest concern is culture. The main factor that holds back women in many cultures is their lack of education, nutrition, and medication. This is a result of the lack of respect and equality that these women face within states and nations where cultural beliefs and practices reinforce women’s subordinated roles in structures of work and family. There is no way for microcredit to fully realize its potential without other major changes within cultures that oppress women.

**Conclusion**

Despite its obstacles, microcredit has many positive results. Women often use microcredit meetings to trade tips about their businesses, how to resolve conflicts within their families or neighborhoods, or even how to manipulate their husbands (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009). These meetings provide spaces similar to the “consciousness raising groups” common among groups of middle-class women in the United States during the start of the second wave of the feminist movement. Having the opportunity to come together and share private struggles is a powerful way to recognize those private struggles as part of larger issues that structure women’s and men’s lives in complex ways. Beyond this, women attending microcredit meetings learn more about staying healthy and about vaccinations. Women have opportunities to take HIV tests, and some programs include literacy classes. With microcredit profit, women are able to support their children’s education. Microcredit does help some women out of poverty in varying degrees and does provide empowerment to some women (Siraj, 2012). Yet, research has shown that microcredit is clearly not all that it is advertised to be (Isserles, 2003).

Microcredit does not alleviate poverty or empower women to the extent that many of us have been led to believe. Microcredit was not developed as a tool to empower women (Isserles, 2003); rather, Muhammad Yunus created microcredit as a way to alleviate poverty and suffering and to bring basic
economic practices to poor regions. Women are often given money to start a business with no education or training. Organizations give women money without finding out their whole story, allowing it to reach the hands of the men in their lives. It is important to point out that there are larger case studies that present the negatives of microcredit whereas the positive case studies are only about individual women. This illustrates that we have not found the solution to poverty, but we have made great strides in the right direction.

Microcredit, when paired with the proper training and meetings, has the potential to alleviate poverty. Many models of microcredit are still being developed further, and we do not have a perfect model yet. Despite this, microcredit is a program worth our continued investment. It is a work in progress. The following poem, Poverty, by Jane Taylor, further reiterates the poverty that many women who turn to microcredit programs face.

Poverty

I saw an old cottage of clay,
And only of mud was the floor;
It was all falling into decay,
And the snow drifted in at the door.

Yet there a poor family dwelt,
In a hovel so dismal and rude;
And though gnawing hunger they felt,
They had not a morsel of food.

The children were crying for bread,
And to their poor mother they’d run;
‘Oh, give us some breakfast,’ they said,
Alas! their poor mother had none.

She viewed them with looks of despair,
She said (and I’m sure it was true),
‘Tis not for myself that I care,
   But, my poor little children, for you.’

O then, let the wealthy and gay
  But see such a hovel as this,
That in a poor cottage of clay
  They may know what true misery is.
And what I may have to bestow
  I never will squander away,
While many poor people I know
  Around me are wretched as they.

- Jane Taylor http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182540

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Reframing Sexual Responsibility: Hooking-up

“Hook-up” culture can be seen as an outlet for women’s sexual freedom. For centuries women have not been allowed to express or have equal rights as men. Some feminists believe that women have grasped this “hook-up” culture as a way to gain sexual freedom and thus become more equal to men, but did this phenomenon backfire? This paper traces the historical emergence of “hooking-up” as a courtship ritual, explaining where it came from as well as what is new about it. The paper addresses the three themes of drugs and alcohol, sexual satisfaction, and the psychological well-being as lenses to assess hook-up practice and its relationship with sexuality. The paper also examines whether or not hook-up culture is empowering or disenfranchising for women.

Introduction

We live in a culture in which social media and mediated depictions of sex and sexuality are virtually omnipresent. Popular culture is overflowing with sexualized and sexualizing depictions of women, and increasingly, men as well. Some argue that the pervasiveness of these kinds of depictions do more than reflect the reigning sexual
values in our culture. Rather, these depictions play a key role in eliciting the very sexual identities and behavior they claim to reflect including uncommitted sex (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). While some feminist scholars and activists are opposed to the sexualization of culture, of which uncommitted sex is one small piece, this kind of uncommitted intimacy is celebrated by others (e.g., Rosin, 2012). Feminist Hanna Rosin (2012) celebrates the “hooking-up” culture as sexual freedom for the next generation. As a feminist and a college student, I am not opposed to women gaining and maintaining their sexual freedom through “hooking-up,” but I do not believe that women who hook-up are truly getting all the things they think they want.

As a culture we are influenced in diverse ways. The plots of movies, themes in books, television shows, and lyrics of popular music have all taken a permissive turn with respect to representations of sexuality among consumers (Garcia et al., 2012). Sex has also increasingly become digitized, making it easier to access and harder to avoid. We now have access to apps on our smart phones like Grindr and Tinder made for the sole purpose of connecting sexually with strangers in close proximity with the mutual intention to “hook-up.” Uncommitted sexual encounters—more commonly referred to as “hook-ups”—are becoming progressively more engrained in popular culture, reflecting some transformations in sexual predilections and changing social scripts surrounding sexual identity, behavior, and intimacy (Garcia et al., 2012).

This paper considers feminist scholarship on hooking-up. Is this a phenomenon we should be celebrating or are skeptics right to be worried? I trace the historical emergence of “hooking-up” as a courtship ritual, explaining where it came from and what exactly is so new about it. I also address three distinct themes in “hooking-up” research to better assess the practice and its relationship with sexual equality and to determine if hooking-up and its associated outcomes empower or disenfranchise women. These themes include the role of drug and alcohol use with hooking-up; whether, how, and whose sexual satisfaction results from hooking-up; and findings related to psychological well-being and hooking-up. As I show in this paper, hooking-up fails to deliver all that it promises, at least to women. Though men may receive many of the benefits associated with
“hooking-up” as delineated by social and political expectations of male dominance, it is not surprising that women are not benefitting in all of the same ways. This research paints a very different picture of hooking-up and gives us new reason to pause and consider the meanings and consequences of the “hook-up” practice.

What Is Hooking-up?

Hooking-up is a broad, widely used phrase among young adults, and it carries many different meanings. The invention of the term “hooking-up” was not an accident by any means. It is no accident that definitions of the term, particularly among the group of individuals who invented it, are not vague as a matter of bad definition; rather, “hooking-up” is better understood as intentionally obscure. “Hooking-up” allows some to understate what happened (e.g., “No, we just hooked up”), others to overstate (e.g., “Yeah, we hooked up!”), and possibly everyone to conceal information. Operational definitions of hooking-up differ among researchers (Garcia et. al, 2012). One of the most popular definitions of hooking-up among college students refers to a man and a woman pairing off at the end of a party or a night out at a bar to engage in a physical/sexual encounter (Bogle, 2007). In most cases, women end their night going off to the man’s house or apartment with the intentions of engaging in sexual intercourse.

“Hook-ups” can involve anything from kissing to sexual intercourse or anything seen as falling in between these two ends of the sexual spectrum. Regardless of what happens sexually, a hallmark of hooking-up is that there are “no strings attached” to the encounter (Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Other researchers have described the term hooking-up by focusing on the uncommitted nature of a sexual encounter rather than which behaviors do or do not “count.” The ambiguity of this term may allow individuals to manipulate each other’s perceptions of their sexual behavior (Garcia et al., 2012). Indeed, the ambiguous nature of the term is one of its most defining characteristics. Other researchers define hooking-up as casual sex outside of a formal relationship, a sexual encounter, usually only lasting one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). In a hook-up, some physical interaction exists, usually a sexual encounter between two people who are not dating or in a relationship,
and where a more traditional romantic relationship is not an explicit condition of the encounter (Garcia et al., 2012). From a more behavioral definition, hooking-up is described as an event where you are physically intimate with someone whom you are not dating or in a romantic relationship with at the time and with whom you understand there is no mutual expectation of a romantic relationship (Lewis, Granato, Blayney, Lostutter, & Kilmer, 2011). As we see from the diversity of definitions and scholarly disagreement, the term itself resists qualification. There are many different ways to define what hooking-up is, and many different ways to participate. Where did for such an obscure term come from, and importantly, what are the historical origins of this form of courtship?

History of Hooking-up

Many people believe that the behaviors of hooking-up have replaced other courtship practices, like “dating,” altogether. As we have seen over the past sixty years, the prioritization of traditional forms of courtship and pursuing romantic relationships has shifted. The most popular question that feminist researcher Bogle proposes is: “when did traditional dating lose its dominance and hooking-up begin to emerge” (2012, p. 777). Most argue that the shift took place in the 1960s, during the sexual revolution. This was a time where there was a dramatic change in sexual behavior (Bailey, 1988). The shift from dating to hooking-up occurs primarily within the college culture. Prior to the 1960s, social life revolved around dating life; today it is the complete opposite where social life determines whether you are or are not hooking-up. One way to look at hooking-up is to consider that there are fewer formal rules, or, to some, no rules at all today compared with the past. But hooking-up has social norms, roles, and expectations as well, though these may be less carefully spelled out and perhaps followed with less commitment (Bogle, 2007; 2008). As the world of dating changes dramatically, the older and outdated ideas and rituals of dating are replaced with new ideas about relationships and views on dating. Throughout virtually most of contemporary American history, monogamy was the standard and anything that fell below that standard was frowned upon. Women have never really had the sexual freedom to explore and experience sex as they please, though men have never had to follow these same restricted standards. Even if they broke these standards, they were
not looked at any differently. A lot more pressure is put on women to adhere to the monogamous relationships whereas men are freer to do as they please.

As the 1970s came to an end, the ideas surrounding dating also began to change. This was a period known as the sexual revolution, which was a social movement challenging traditional dating and sexual behaviors. Our dating world today is extremely different from the dating world between the 1920s and 1970s. In the 1970s, youth began rejecting the formal rules and rigidity of dating, fundamentally transforming the meanings and practices associated with intimacy (Strouse, 1987). Many young adults within current college culture might not even be able to tell you the standards or rules that dating held. The idea of men wooing just one woman and following these past traditions today are almost nonexistent. As I mentioned earlier, the rise of and advances in technology have made engaging in hook-ups and communicating with each other through texting, emailing, Skyping or face timing much more accessible. This allows couples to be in contact initially without physical intimacy or contact. We also live in a generation where online dating is the new phenomenon, allowing people to date and have relationships via the Internet. The intimate aspect of dating is slowly diminishing, leaving people with ongoing opportunities for engaging in hooking-up. Considering these factors, is “hooking-up” something feminists should celebrate or challenge? The alcohol and drug-fueled crutch that facilitates “hook-ups”, the sexual satisfaction (or lack thereof) that comes with “hook-ups”, and the mentality that women hold prior to, during, and post “hook-up”, are important considerations.

Under the Influence

There are many different factors that go into reasons why people elect to “hook-up.” Drugs and alcohol seem to be one of the most common things that come to the surface when you hear a hook-up story. No good story begins with, “this one time when I was sober…” right? That is because within many campus cultures, sex, drugs, and alcohol are basically everywhere. Drugs and alcohol are known as ways to boost one’s confidence to go over and talk to that really pretty girl or maybe even an excuse as to why you hooked up with that frat boy the other night; it was probably those “beer goggles” making him seem so cute and charming. Drugs
and alcohol play a significant role facilitating hooking-up among adolescents and young adults. In most cases both parties consume alcohol, lowering their inhibitions and making the hook-up more likely to happen (Bogle, 2012). Without alcohol as a social lubricant, it is less likely that college students would be able to signal interest in a hookup and deal with the potential for rejection, so alcohol helps make hookups possible within the college culture (Bogle, 2012). My research uncovered two principal issues. The first includes the ways drugs and alcohol make a hook-up more likely to occur, so environments structured by drug and alcohol use and availability are environments where we ought to expect a lot of “hooking-up.” The second is that drugs and alcohol make it more likely that sexual intimacy in a hook-up will be engaged in less safely both in terms of STIs and contraceptive measures and with respect to issues of consent and mutual interest.

**That feels good…Or does it?**

One of the main reasons people hook-up is because it feels good, right? No one wants to do something from which they do not get some enjoyment. But are women getting as much sexual pleasure from hook-ups as men? And are hook-ups simply a new way young men and women are experiencing the sexual revolution? A great deal of research has attempted to answer these questions, which meant asking difficult questions about how exactly to measure sexual satisfaction. Most of this new body of scholarship (Bogle, 2012; Cross & Morgan, 2003; Bailey, 1988) finds that women are *not* getting as much pleasure out of hook-ups as men.

As we have already learned, hooking-up is very common among college students and young adults. Most young people have an agreement on what hooking-up involves (even if only implicitly), and that it is outside of an exclusive relationship. But who is this really benefiting? Most research suggests that hook-ups benefit men at the expense of women. This suggestion is based on the assumption that a committed relationship is the most likely context for pleasurable sex, especially for women (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012). In one study, Armstrong et al. identify four ways that prior research has theorized the sources of women’s sexual satisfaction in heterosexual sex:

1. …deploying the right practices to achieve genital stimulation;
2. …relationship-specific skills acquired by a partner over time;
3. Good sex as a

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consequence of commitment and affection, and (4) considerations of how gender inequality may degrade women’s experiences of sexuality (pp.2-3).

All of these are considered substantial points for female sexual satisfaction.

The identification of women’s sexual satisfaction relies on the orgasm as an outcome of genital stimulation. But “women had orgasms much more in relationships than in hook-ups and reported enjoying relationship sex more” (Armstrong et. al., 2012, p. 1). Within heterosexual intercourse, research has discovered that many men are unsuccessful in making their female partner orgasm during hook-ups. This does not mean that men are trying and failing to please their hook-up but rather they are unaware of ways to satisfy their partners sexually within the hook-up. This is the discrepancy within heterosexual hook-ups known as “the orgasm gap” (Armstrong et al.). Men and women both are more likely to orgasm if they engage in a greater number of sexual practices with the same partner (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997), and hook-ups are by definition primarily associated with people who have never intimately interacted before, or not much, and certainly not often. Studies have shown that eight percent of women orgasm without intercourse during a hook-up and 24 percent of women orgasm with intercourse during their hook-up (Armstrong et al.). Within relationships, orgasm increased up to 53 percent without intercourse and 75 percent with intercourse. As sexual knowledge increases so does sexual satisfaction while health problems diminish (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2009; Parish et al., 2007, as cited in Armstrong et al).

The following script from the film Friends with Benefits (2011) helps capture and illustrate ways that the hook-up culture plays out:

**Tommy:** What, you guys going out now?

**Dylan:** No, no, no, we’re just friends. We’re... messing around a little bit.

**Tommy:** What do you mean?

**Dylan:** Sleeping together. But it's just sex.

**Tommy:** That never works bro. She's a girl. Sex always means more to them even if they don't admit it.

**Dylan:** Jamie's different.

**Tommy:** Does she have a penis where most girls have a vagina?

**Dylan:** No penis.

**Tommy:** Then she's no different.

---Friends with Benefits

This dialogue between two of the male characters in the film Friends with Benefits shows a popular example of how today’s generation not only
glorifies the casual nature of sex, but also implies that females cannot just have sex without having a deeper meaning to the encounter. This prompts the question, are women really personally benefitting from this new form of sexual freedom in today’s hook-up culture?

**Act like a Lady, Think like a Man**

So are the behaviors and actions of hooking-up really beneficial to women? As with anything else, there are pros and cons embedded in the hook-up culture. Women have made incredible gains with respect to sexual liberation (Rosin, 2012). Women have progressed onto more equal paths, such as becoming more educated and maintaining their spot in the work force. Rosin compares it to the introduction of the birth control pill or legalizing abortion during earlier decades, but with a whole new landscape of sexual freedom. For the first time women are able to explore and utilize their sexual freedom without losing sight of their education and future careers. Despite these facts, the negative stereotypes surrounding women are still relevant and affect their experiences of the sexual intimacy available within “hook-ups.” Even though many women are embracing hook-up culture and taking it by the horns, they are still seen as “easy” for doing it. This shows that the labels associated with participation in hook-up culture are not the same for women and men.

As journalist and blogger Jessica Valenti wrote: “If you have a vagina, chances are someone has called you a slut at least once in your life. There’s just no getting around it” (2008, p. 14). The pejorative “slut” is never used in the correct terms or situation. Despite the ubiquity of “slut,” it is a term primarily used to refer to women. Men are less likely to be tagged as sluts; men simply are not judged like women when it comes to sexuality. If men are hooking-up with more than one person, we have a separate list of words. Virtually all of them are celebratory. Slut has a condemning connotation: sluts are “bad women,” but players are “good men.” Society clearly values one role over the other. Purity is pushed on women, yet not required of men.

Women are not as vulnerable as society has made them out to be within the hook-up culture. Surprisingly enough, it is women, not men, who are often initiating and perpetuating the hook-ups. Some women, especially college women, explain hooking-up as “empowering to have that kind of
control,” “guys were texting and calling me all the time and I was turning them down. I really enjoyed it! I had these options to hook-up if I wanted them, and no one would judge me for it” (Rosin, 2012, p. 3). A lot of young women understand hooking-up as sexually and personally liberating, but that is often not how others perceive their actions. By explaining hooking-up solely as “empowering” or something over which they “have control,” they own their sexual freedom within the hook-up culture.

Many women enjoy the idea of casual sex and all of the things that factor into it. Still, at the end of the night after the meaningless hook-up, the thought may cross a woman’s mind that she wants something more than a meaningless, casual hook-up. About 66 percent of women say that they wanted their hook-up to turn into something more (Rosin, 2012). Women do not want to be slutty, but they do want the same sexual freedom that men have. There is no secret that society expects most women to be generally more sensitive and emotional than men, which can cause them to become more emotionally attached, especially after having intimate relations with someone. But does that make them slutty? I do not think that slutty would be the fair nor correct term, especially when she is doing the same exact thing as her male partner. When we consider the factors that impact hooking-up, the topics of sex education and practicing safe sex are important.

**History of Sex Education**

Beginning in the early 1900s, America believed in the purity of women, whether it was good for them or not (Cross & Morgan, 2003). America celebrated the idea of purity, but mostly just for women. Men were allowed to have the want, need, and desire for sex while women had to suppress it and act as though it did not even exist. It seems not much has changed in today’s society. As we gradually shifted into the 1920s and the hemlines of skirts rose, the sexual behaviors of adolescents changed as well (Cross & Morgan, 2003).

The 1920s was an era where sexual desire was not so maligned. The behaviors, dating rituals, and sexual desires of adolescents slowly evolved over the years. These eventually took us to a complete explosion of and shift in sexual behavior that would mark a permanent change in women’s sexuality: the birth control pill. Worshiped and embraced by women everywhere, the Food and Drug
Administration approval of the birth control pill in the 1960s completely altered women’s sexual behaviors forever (Cross & Morgan, 2003). Studies today show that 60 percent of college students use or have used the birth control pill as their preferred method of preventing pregnancy (ACHA, 2013). From its inception, the birth control pill was a popular choice for college women who wanted to pursue their education and be sexually active without the risk and fear of getting pregnant. The rise of promiscuity, the birth control pill, and people slowly becoming more comfortable with the topic of sex, resulted in an increase in the number of sexual partners and premarital sex. Just two years after the birth control pill hit the market, 1.2 million women were on it, rising to 2.3 million in the third year (Nikolchev, 2010). This was just the beginning of the 1970s, an era that was known for casual and spontaneous sex (Peterson, 1999). After the 1970s burned out and the 1980s came into play, so did Acquired Immunodeficiency Deficiency Syndrome, also known as AIDS. This sexually transmitted infection heightened the awareness of the dangers of unprotected sex and changed the sexual behavior of many people. Going from this carefree attitude about sex to the awareness that sex could kill you completely changed the sex lives of people everywhere, making any type of sexual intercourse between individuals less likely.

**Implications: Sex Education**

Popular media has become a primary source of sex education, filled with inaccurate portrayals of sexuality (Collins et al., 2006; Strasburger, 2005; Ward, 2003). Whether or not the media is filling our heads with accurate information is a different story. It is important for education on sexual behavior to be discussed in a serious matter in the household as well as within the school system. Sexual responsibility when hooking-up among college students is a public health issue that colleges and universities must address to ensure student safety and success. The views, beliefs, and knowledge behind sexual responsibility vary from person to person. As previously emphasized, sex is something that is everywhere, especially on college campuses, and it is something that needs to be discussed in a more educational manner. Even the use of the term “hooking-up” is an attempt to avoid such conversations. College students are some of the most
intelligent human beings around, but they are also quite vulnerable to peer influence. College students have an “I already know everything” and “This won’t happen to me” mentality. The hard truth is that they do not know everything, and that negative hook-up experiences can happen to them.

College students today have so much knowledge, access, and education on topics like birth control, STIs and AIDS, that they are much safer yet more experimental than previous generations. The experiments are beginning earlier and earlier. Most students are entering college with pre-established sexual behaviors and in most cases without their virginity. With the increase of students participating in sexual activity, the age at which they are doing so seems to be decreasing (Remez, 2000). This gives colleges and universities more of a reason to educate their students about sexual responsibility, making the decision of whether or not to hook-up and to be more concerned with safety when they do. The more educated our students are, the less likely it is that hook-ups will have negative consequences, making the hook-up culture even more appealing than it already is.

**Conclusion**

The college years are seen as the prime years within the “hook-up” culture. Like most things that you experience when you are young and in college, it is just a phase in life. These are seen as your selfish years, and hooking-up is something to do when you are either bored, experimenting, or do not know any better. After touching on all of the aspects that factor into women and their sexual freedom, the question remains: is the hook-up culture and its associated outcomes, empowering or disenfranchising to women? People view this topic from many different lenses. I see this phenomenon as being both empowering and disenfranchising. Even though women have taken control of the hook-up culture and their sexual freedom, they are still being discouraged, tormented, and name-called for doing so. Women have forever been a part of this double standard with men and within the hook-up culture. Will this ever change? Or maybe a better question is, Should it?
References


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Peppermint Patty: 
A Mint or a Vagina

Sex education is a subject that all adolescents inevitably encounter. Abstinence-only and comprehensive sex educations are the two core foundational curricula that are being taught to most high school students in the United States. On the surface, both of these methodologies teach conflicting information about sex which perpetuates gender inequality and rape culture. Abstinence-only programs’ emphasis on women’s purity stigmatizes teens through heterosexual normative teachings and misleads teens and young people on the logistics of sexual health. Conversely, comprehensive sex education does not teach “real” sex education because it includes very basic understandings of human sexuality rather than teaching about men’s and women’s sexuality equally. Analyzing the flaws in both teachings can be a step forward in decreasing adolescences’ pregnancy rates, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, rape culture, and gender inequality.

Introduction

When I think back to sex education in my high school and middle school years, it is all a haze. What sticks out in my mind are the marquee events of sex education: traumatizing pictures of several STDs to discourage premarital sex, watching a video of a woman giving birth, and learning how to put condoms on bananas. I did not truly have a grasp on human sexuality until I went away to college and began learning through my own personal experiences. Unfortunately, millions of teens across the country are
contracting STDs and getting pregnant because sex education in America is vastly inconsistent. Due to the lack of “real” sex education in American schools, many adolescents have conflicting or no discourse about sexuality and sexual health, which perpetuates gender inequality and rape culture.

**Basic History of America’s Sex Education**

Sex education was initiated when education systems and the government began to distinguish adolescence as a separate and legitimate stage of life (Schwarz, 2007). Industrialization extended the initial age of marriage and employment beyond the teen years and subsequently the amount of time between sexual maturation and marriage increased significantly. The effort to include sex education in America’s schools first functioned as an initiative to encourage sexual restraint during the extended period of time between sexual maturation and marriage. During the twentieth century, educators remodeled sex education to discourage sex before marriage and also to prevent venereal diseases. During this time period, sex education was to be considered “highly prescriptive and moralistic” (p. 119). The health needs of American soldiers during World War I and World War II, as well as changing demographics and sexual practices, swayed the development of sex education beyond chastity and disease (Schwarz, 2007). Towards the end of the twentieth century, sex education began to branch out beyond abstinence to public health concerns which created a slightly more expansive view of sexuality in the United States.

The federal funding of abstinence-only sex education programs began in 1981, under President Ronald Reagan. Within the year, abstinence-only programs received just under four million dollars; that figure radically increased over the course of thirty years. The Adolescent Family Act (AFLA) was the first major achievement for abstinence-only advocates, which was signed into law in 1981. This act was signed into law as Title XX of Public Health Act to encourage sexual restraint and self-control through a family-positive methodology. In 1996 abstinence-only supporters succeeded in gaining another source of funding by having Title V, Section 510 (b) of the Social Security Act, also known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or welfare, contribute money (Schwarz, 2007). The largest federal abstinence-
only funding resource is the Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE). This regulation was enacted in October 2000 and started funding in 2001; by 2007 CBAE collected $20 million (SIECUS, 2013). The intense influence and financial support of the Republican administration made abstinence-only education common throughout the nation. Unlimited amounts of money and support gave abstinence-only education programs leeway to teach youth what they wanted and believed they should know about sexual activity. Unfortunately, this also denied important information to teens who became sexually active despite an abstinence-only approach to sex education. Before 2010, the federal government did not dedicate funding for comprehensive sex education. For almost thirty years, one and half billion dollars of tax payers’ money went to abstinence-only programs; mostly under the George W. Bush administration (SIECUS, 2013). In 2004, Representative Henry A. Waxman requested a comprehensive assessment of the content of the abstinence-only education used by grantees in the Special Programs of Regional and National Significance Community-Based Abstinence Education (SPRANS) (Waxman, 2004). Through SPRANS, the Department of Health and Human Services provides grants to community organizations that teach abstinence-only education to young people. The curricula used in SPRANS and other federally funded programs are not reviewed for accuracy by the federal government (Waxman, 2004). The Waxman Report proved that abstinence-only programs contain false information about the effectiveness of contraceptives. For example, one curriculum said that “the popular claim that ‘condoms help prevent the spread of STDs,’ is not supported by the data” (p. i). The Waxman Report also found that the curricula included false information about risks of abortion. For example, one curriculum falsely claimed that five percent to ten percent of women who have legal abortions will become sterile and that premature birth is increased following the abortion of a first pregnancy (p. 13). The Waxman Report also showed that abstinence-only curricula mix religion and science. For example, it portrays the belief that life begins at conception as a scientific fact without scientific data to back it up (p. 15). Additionally, the Waxman Report found that abstinence-only education treats stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific facts. Examples
include telling youth that women need financial support while men need admiration and that women get their happiness and judge their success on their relationships while men’s happiness and success hinge on their accomplishments (p. 16-18). The Waxman Report also showed that abstinence-only programs contain medical errors. For example, one abstinence-only curriculum erroneously listed exposure to sweat and tears as risk factors for HIV transmission (p. 19).

This situation changed dramatically when a Democratic administration took over. Finding that abstinence-only programs were not effective and were in fact harmful for American adolescents, President Obama eliminated two-thirds of abstinence-only funding from CBAE and AFLA (SIECUS, 2013). Presently, the federal government has three separate funding sources for comprehensive sex education. In December 2009, President Obama signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2010, which followed the President’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPPI) and now receives $110 million a year (SIECUS, 2013). In March 2010, President Obama signed the health care reform legislation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act which led to creating the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), which now receives $75 million a year to help reduce teen pregnancy and HIV/STD rates among American teens (SIECUS, 2013). Finally, in 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) started funding $40 million a year to help build the infrastructure for HIV/STDs and sex education (SIECUS, 2013). All of the data from the Waxman Report became public knowledge and shed light on the ways in which abstinence-only education approaches youth. This data showed problems in the way sex education was approached in abstinence-only teaching and recommended that America realign sex education priorities and resources to ensure that sexual health information presented to impressionable adolescents is reliable.

**Abstinence-only**

Abstinence-only sex education curricula promote abstinence as the only feasible option for America’s adolescents. All federally funded abstinence-only programs are obligated to follow the federal definition of abstinence education under Title V of the Social Security Act (Appendix A).
This includes teaching adolescents that the only way to avoid premarital pregnancies and STIs is to be completely abstinent. They also teach youth that any sexual activity outside of marriage will have harmful psychological and physical effects on the individuals engaging in premarital sex. Also, abstinence-only stresses that babies born “out-of-wedlock” hurt the infants, the parents, and society as a whole (Schwarz, 2007). The three major concerns with abstinence-only sex education programs are that they stigmatize millions of teens, provide inaccurate information to these teens, and perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Given this, it is difficult to see how an abstinence-only sex education curriculum can provide a healthy foundation for American youth regarding their intimacy and sexual health. Abstinence-only advocates use intimidation, fabrication, and manipulation to scare impressionable and vulnerable adolescents away from sex. This reinforces sexual activity as negative, which leads to a host of additional obstacles constructed around sexual inhibitions among otherwise healthy teens, many of whom do become sexually active.

The lessons of abstinence-only programs stigmatizes millions of teens. Fifty-six percent of teens between the ages of 15-17 and 85 percent of teens and young adults between the ages of 18-24 have been sexually active; nearly half of all high school students and 80 percent of all college students have engaged in sexual intercourse (SIECUS, 2013). Based on these statistics, it is important to realize that it is unreasonable to suggest that marriage is the only context in which sex occurs in America. Procreation, intimacy, and sexuality happen between humans outside of marriage. Policing sex as only acceptable within marriage suggests that most people who have sex outside of marriage, a large percentage of people as the above statistics show, are corrupt. Teaching that marriage is the only socially acceptable venue for sexual intimacy further stigmatizes millions of teens and young people such as teens who are born to unmarried parents, those who have engaged in sexual activity, those who have been sexually abused, and teens who identify in the LGBTQ community. Each year, almost 750,000 women aged 15-19 become pregnant. According to the Guttmacher Institute (2013), two-thirds of all teen pregnancies occur among older teens aged 18-19. U.S. teen pregnancy rates continue to be the highest in the developed world. In
2006, 68 to 1,000 American teens, aged 15-19, became pregnant. The low end of this American statistic is considerably higher than the 28 to 1,000 pregnancies among Canadian teens and the 31 to 1,000 pregnancies among Swedish teens. Although 15-24 year olds stand for only one-quarter of the sexually active population, they count for nearly half of the 18.9 million new cases of STIs each year.

In addition to noting the high pregnancy rate among teens, the Waxman Report (2004) found that abstinence-only programs teach inaccurate medical and sexual information. The Report showed that 80 percent of the curricula had forged, deceptive, or unclear information about effectiveness of contraception, the transmission of HIV, and risks of abortion (SIECUS, 2013). By fabricating information about HIV and STDs, these programs expose teens to greater risk of STD infection as they promote ignorance of the risk of STD transmission through non-coital sexual activity. This is evident in the fact that HIV infection rates have remained constant in teens while their pregnancy rates have lowered (Schwarz, 2007).

Abstinence-only education contributes to sexual stereotypes by obsessing over women’s sexual purity, which it treats as the sole determinant of their worth (Valenti, 2009). Friedman & Valenti (2008) introduce the idea of the purity myth, which is “the lie that sexuality defines how ‘good’ women are and that women’s moral compasses are inextricable from their bodies” (p. 299). Most abstinence-only programs propagate “male pleasure and female shame, male recreation and female responsibility, male agency and female passivity, and male personhood and female parenthood” (Schwarz, 2007, p.117). The message that both girls and boys get from any abstinence-only lesson is that women’s sexuality is defined and policed by educators, legislators, and media makers, not by women (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). Because the federal government successfully funded abstinence-only programs across the country and made it mainstream, it is difficult to undo the damage this biased ideology of adolescent’s sexuality did to America’s culture.

**Comprehensive Sex Education**

Comprehensive sex education betters abstinence-only education by including materials on contraceptives, sexual development, and reproductive health. Comprehensive sex education varies, but the programs have a common goal
which is to take a “multi-faceted approach to adolescent reproductive health” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 118). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States structured a national task force that put together four primary goals regarding comprehensive sex education programs. The gist of this program is to guide teens on values and provide information to promote good decision-making regarding intimacy and sexual activity (see Appendix B).

The comprehensive sex education approach to educating America’s youth on sexual activity directly opposes abstinence-only teaching. Many kids have a difficult time speaking with their families or support systems about the topics of sex and sexuality. Schools that practice comprehensive sex education advocate for adolescents who do not receive any sexual knowledge from their parents to figure out their emerging sexuality. The comprehensive sex curricula has done well with presenting accurate medical information by not having a biased opinion of what is being presented to these adolescents. The more youth can talk and learn about human sexuality in a healthy educational setting, the better opportunity they have to learn different perspectives about sexuality and how to be safe and healthy with their bodies. The four goals under SIECUS have a recurring theme of legitimately educating young people about their physical and emotional sexuality.

While comprehensive sex education provides adolescents more substantial sex education information when compared to an abstinence-only approach, there is definitely room for improvement. Comprehensive sex education absolutely needs to be more regulated and funded by the federal government. Having the federal government mandate and regulate standards for comprehensive sex education across the nation will create a more cohesive curriculum. This is desirable because while the goal of comprehensive sex education is to be unbiased and completely medically accurate, having lenient regulations on this education can create leeway for educators to turn this program back into abstinence-only education and repeat the cycle of depriving youth with sexual knowledge.

One major flaw in comprehensive sex education is that it does not truly teach “real” sex education. According to Kulwicki (2008), “Real sex education requires, in addition to teaching about protection, teaching sex as a normal and healthy part of life that is carried in
terms of both preferred partners and preferred acts” (p. 305). What comprehensive sex education consists of now is necessary and consistent but there are some additional forms of sex education knowledge that should be included. For example, the clitoris needs to make more of an appearance throughout sex education. According to Kulwicki (2008), comprehensive sex education can present a scientifically precise and sensible description of birth control, condom use, vaginal intercourse, and other sex education topics without discussing the clitoris. When the clitoris is removed completely from the curricula, it presents that area of a woman as unimportant and invisible. Comparatively, in any discussion of intercourse and pregnancy, there is no escaping a male orgasm (Kulwicki, 2008). “Real” sex education can promote smarter sexual choices. Teaching that sexuality is natural and varied underscores the fact that there is sexual activity other than heterosexual intercourse. For example, masturbation, mutual masturbation, oral sex, and many other sexual acts can help lower the risk of pregnancy or STDs and also convey the understanding that sex is for sexual pleasure as opposed to solely for procreation (Kulwicki, 2008). Sex is often taught as being a technical, reproductive process through certain discourses like teaching a child the ‘Birds and the Bees’ (Jones, 2011, p. 140). Teaching a child this discourse on sexuality educates about how people procreate but maintains the image of innocence and purity by using a bee pollinating flowers and the fertilization of bird eggs (Jones, 2011).

Also important, real sex education would help support anti-rape education. Preventing sexual violence is not spoken about enough in adolescents’ lives. The expectation of female consent, rooted in heterosexual reproduction as the outcome, leads many women to slowly walk into a society where rape culture is the norm as young adults step into sexual activity (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). If both boys and girls learn that sex is gratifying for both genders, not just for boys, and that it is not just for reproduction, they will be less affected by the sexual stereotypes of purity and female submissiveness that can contribute to sexual violence (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). The following maps helps depict how dire of an issue sex education is in this country:
States That Don’t Require Sex Education

Note: Sex education typically includes discussion of STIs. In Illinois, sex education is not mandatory, but health education is required, and it includes medically accurate information on abstinence. In Mississippi, localities may include topics such as contraception or STIs only with permission from the State Department of Education. In Tennessee, sex education is required if the pregnancy rate is at least 19.5 or higher per 1,000 teen women ages 15-17.

Sources: Guttmacher

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States Where Sex Education, If Provided, Must Include Information On Abstinence, But Not On Contraception

Note: Utah prohibits teachers from responding to students’ spontaneous questions in ways that conflict with the law’s requirements.

Sources: Guttmacher

THE HUFFINGTON POST
The Gap: Rape Culture and Gender Inequality

Gender inequality and rape culture are recurring themes in much of American culture. Both abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education approaches to sex education perpetuate these problems through intense gender stereotyping. The idea is that if girls and women are not “pure” or do not want to be, their bodies are not worth respecting, and so if a female happens to get raped or assaulted, she was “asking for it” (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). An example of this ideology is a law from Maryland that said after the moment of penetration, “a woman could never be ‘re-flowered,’ [and] that gave rise to the principle that, if a woman consents prior to penetration and withdraws consent following penetration, there is no rape” (Friedman & Valenti, 2008, p. 300). That example completely fuels rape culture by being obsessed over sexual purity which then creates the gendered stereotypes of men having uncontrollable sex drives and women obligated to be “gatekeepers of chastity” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 138). Males are able to make negligent sexual decisions and females have to accept
the majority of the sexual and reproductive consequences, which in turn, denies females the opportunity to understand their sexual needs (Schwarz, 2007). What is daunting is how violence against women is so common that it has become a normal part of life in our society, because this violence is being carried out by “normal” people. Almost all of sexual violence is committed by someone close to the victim (Valenti, 2007). Sexual inequality through gendered stereotypes is rooted in the obsession of sexual purity. This thought creates the foundation of rape culture, which leads to a prevalence of sexual violence. Both abstinence-only education, in denying sexual activity, and comprehensive sex education, in reinforcing heterosexual norms, overlook teaching about sexual behaviors that reproduce sexual violence and about sexual behaviors where gender equality is central.

Because comprehensive sex education is newly funded and only recently recognized by the government, its curriculum has not been mandated everywhere and is not heavily regulated. Leaving the choice of how to teach their students up to individual schools districts creates a wide spectrum of comprehensive sex education instruction that is delivered unevenly across the country. In many cases, abstinence-only practices replace comprehensive sex education approaches because of idiosyncratic variables such as teacher or schools preferences. An example of this is when the state of Mississippi finally implemented a policy requiring schools to teach sexual education in class but many teachers refused to discuss the subject with students (Hess, 2014). According to Hess, Mississippi school district teachers put on a purity exercise where they asked students to take a chocolate covered mint and pass it around the class to witness how dirty it became from the circulation. A Mississippi public worker and parent told the Los Angeles Times “They’re using the Peppermint Pattie to show that a girl is no longer clean or valuable after she’s had sex—that she’s been used…That shouldn’t be the lesson we send kids about sex” (Hess, 2014, p. 1). Even though comprehensive sex education is gradually becoming more funded and more mainstream, abstinence-only teaching lingers on, with the emphasis on “only.” This only emphasis sneaks into comprehensive sex education, which negates its purpose. Having more regulations on the curricula to ensure unbiased teaching will help lessen the gender
stereotypes of purity and virginity that can lead to rape culture. The pictured graphic “Why WE need Sex Ed Now” (Willis, 2014) demonstrates why comprehensive sex education is crucial for America.
Conclusion

There is no way to avoid sexuality in our society because it is what keeps the human race going. There are two conflicting methodologies that the United States uses to educate youth about sexual activity. Due to the large gap between abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education approaches, it is no wonder that rape culture and gender inequality outcomes fall into this information breach. What comes out of abstinence-only education, on the surface, is one and a half billion dollars of tax payers’ money over the course of thirty years that did not help American adolescents based on teen pregnancy and STDs rates still being the highest in the westernized world. Abstinence-only education indoctrinates through intimidation, fabrication, and manipulation using inaccurate medical and sexual information and it reproduces sexual stereotypes through encouraging sexual purity. Comprehensive sex education offers medical accuracy and unbiased education for schools who do not take advantage of how unregulated this curriculum is nationwide. Unfortunately, comprehensive sex education often only teaches mainstream heteronormative sex education without exploring other areas of human sexuality. America can implement comprehensive sex education, but without regulation on the curriculum, it leaves the opportunity for schools to abuse the lenient guidelines on how comprehensive they allow it to be. Abolishing the approach that abstinence-only sex education presents, and adopting comprehensive sex education that is broader in content and includes discourse on female and male sexual pleasure beyond heteronormativity, would create a new, less gender divided view of human sexuality in America.

References


Violence in Deaf Culture:
My Story, My Voice

I am a survivor of domestic violence. I also am Deaf. Domestic violence is aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner. It can come in many forms: physical, mental, verbal, and emotional abuse. Most commonly, domestic violence is targeted against women. I am sharing my story as a survivor because of my time in Vera House, which is a shelter for battered women. My time at Vera House fired my passion to correlate my personal experience and informative research to raise awareness by educating others about the unique needs of Deaf domestic violence survivors. I hope that my story will awaken the hearing community to the fact that Deaf victims need allies on their side to make a change for Deaf domestic violence survivors.

Often in the world of Deaf Culture, it’s not the silence of our voices that is deafening; it’s the silence of actions that speak the loudest because violence is a “hidden” problem in the Deaf community at large.

(L. Valentine, March 8th, 2014)

Introduction

I am Deaf. I also am a survivor of domestic violence. Domestic violence is aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner. It can come in many forms: physical, mental, verbal, and emotional abuse.
Most commonly, domestic violence is targeted against women. Ninety-two percent of women surveyed list reducing domestic violence and sexual assault as their top concern (Domestic violence statistics, 2014). I am sharing my story as a survivor because of my time in Vera House, which is a shelter for battered women. My time at Vera House fired my passion to correlate my personal experience and informative research to raise awareness by educating others about the unique needs of Deaf domestic violence survivors. I want to help their voices to be heard. The statistics I found did not reveal the percentages of domestic violence survivors who are Deaf. However, domestic violence occurs every day: “Every nine seconds in the US a woman is assaulted or beaten” (Domestic Violence Statistics, 2014).

Domestic violence information is very accessible in the hearing community where there is a common awareness; hearing individuals are able to seek refuge with support, resources, and access to communication within their reach. This is not the case for Deaf women. Too little information is available for these survivors, and the lack of studies regarding the needs of these women makes them and their needs invisible. The Deaf community within the domestic violence support system spends too much time educating the hearing providers on the victims' unique communication and cultural needs, rather than sharing their abusive experiences and receiving help to overcome their issues for their mental health and wellness needs (Domestic violence within the Deaf community, 2014).

**My Story**

I was married for twenty years. I thought I had a fairy tale marriage because I had married my childhood crush. We knew each other since elementary school. However, we lost contact because we both moved away from our hometown. We reconnected after eleven years when we both moved back to our hometown, where we met at a Deaf fundraiser event. We chatted briefly, exchanged phone numbers, and started dating in the summer of 1991. We were married in the spring of 1992. It was the happiest day of my life, but at the same time, I felt in my gut that I may have made a mistake. I thought I was lucky because he wanted me and loved me. Most guys I had dated were hearing; he was the first Deaf person that I dated. The communication was smooth and easier than dating a hearing guy. I was only twenty-four years old
and was naïve about the ideology of a perfect marriage. I wanted a white picket fence, a big house, and a large family. I did not know what I was in for. It was like I was in a spider’s web that coiled slowly until the web got bigger and bigger.

I felt trapped with no awareness of the signs that led me to realize I married the wrong man. There were many detours, and our stormy relationship was like a roller coaster. Even though I was never raped by my husband, I felt violated in many ways because of his treatment toward me. Brownmiller (1975), a renowned scholar who writes on gender and violence, captures how I felt about our marriage and how I want to raise our daughters:

As I see it, the problem is not that polarized role playing (man as doer; woman as bystander) and exaggerated portrayals of the female body as passive sex object are simply ‘demeaning’ to women’s dignity and self-conception, or that such portrayals fail to provide positive role models for young girls, but that cultural sexism is a conscious form of female degradation designed to boost the male ego by offering “proof” of his native superiority (and of female inferiority) everywhere he looks (pg. 389).

I often had to look good for my husband so he could brag to say, “I have a hot, beautiful, and thin wife.” He presented me as a trophy and never looked at me as a woman who was worthy of love and attention.

I looked back on our twenty years of marriage and tried to remember the first sign of things going wrong. It was in May of 1993. It was my husband’s birthday, and I was so excited with a cake, card, and a gift. My husband came home from the bank and was delighted to see me. We greeted each other with a kiss and talked briefly about how our day went. He then saw the surprise and appreciated that I took the time to celebrate his birthday. My husband opened the card which said, “Daddy to be and happy birthday.” His expression suddenly changed from happy to angry. I realized he was not happy about us having a baby, and I did not like what I saw. As my belly took the form of looking very pregnant, my husband rejected me. He did not embrace me as a beautiful wife, because I was not thin anymore. After his rejection, I began to wilt like a dying flower, feeling unwanted and unloved, with no hope of redeeming our once blissful marriage.

After our first daughter was born, I dived into the role of motherhood with joy and focused all my energy on her because my husband was not interested in me or being the father to our
daughter. That was my first cue about his true nature, but I had no support and felt no love from him. I thought maybe our marriage would get better and he would get over it. His resentment toward me grew, and I never knew why he resented me or what I did to make him turn away from being my husband. I was afraid to voice how I felt because I had no college degree, no income, and no job to be able to take care of our daughter or myself. So I stayed. I had no awareness of domestic violence in the Deaf community; I had no education about the patterns, cycles, and the signs of domestic violence.

When our daughter was three years old my husband decided to go back to college to obtain his bachelor's degree. He did this because he felt he was not going anywhere with his bank job where he worked for three years without a raise or a promotion. I, as a dutiful wife, supported him and encouraged him to pursue his dreams to get his degree. I was pregnant again with twins, and this time, he was okay with the pregnancy. He spent so much time in his studies and at the library at college, that he was only home in time for dinner. I was always busy at home being a mommy to our three year old daughter and being pregnant with twins, and I resumed the role that a good wife would. Our twin daughters were born at 25 weeks. Both of them weighted only two pounds and one ounce. One daughter died two weeks later on Thanksgiving in 1997. I was heartbroken but had no emotional support from my husband. My mom and stepdad stayed with me at my house the night my daughter died. That was my second cue to realize that my husband was not there for me. He was absent and emotionless. He spent all of his time focused on his studies or in the library. During the five months that our second daughter was in the hospital, he visited her maybe four or five times. I visited her twice every day for five months until we brought her home on Easter weekend of 1998.

I was becoming a restless mom at home and wanted something more from my life. I told my husband that I wanted to return to college and obtain my bachelor's degree in social work. My husband was not supportive and made comments, such as, “You are not smart like me,” and “Who will take care of our daughters?” I ignored his remarks and applied to college without his approval. I only lasted one semester. I then dropped in and out of colleges five times because of his continual emotional and mental abuse. He used
our children to pressure me to stay home, saying, “We can’t take turns watching the girls, and we can’t afford daycare.” I believed him when he said I was not smart and a failure as a wife, mother, and student. I felt worthless, unloved, and unimportant. I could not share my problems with my Deaf friends because we were well known in the Deaf community. He was intelligent, charming, and distorted anything I said to make himself look good. He was a narcissist who was all about himself.

In Deaf culture, an abusive partner uses tactics of isolation to make the significant other feel alone, and the victim has no support, because the partner can read the victim’s pager or watch videophone conversations. The partner also controls which Deaf friends the significant other talks to and removes him or her from the Deaf community to isolate him or her. The partner demands the significant other discuss issues with the partner before discussing issues with others in the Deaf community in the fear that the significant other will reveal problems in her or his relationship. Also, the partner tells the significant other that no one will believe him or her because the partner is well respected in the Deaf community. If the significant other tries to leave the abusive partner, the partner tells him or her that the shelter will not accept him or her because she/he is Deaf. This gives the abusive partner the power to keep the significant other with him or her in fear of feeling unloved and unwanted (Reis, 2007).

I fell into this trap of abuse because of the imbalance in power between myself and my husband. As the years went by, I let myself go. I gained weight, did not care whether I lived or died, and had no resources or awareness of support groups for Deaf domestic violence for women. I felt hopeless, was in a very dark place, and suffered from major depression. I had nothing to look forward to except the love of my children, which kept me going. I did not want anyone to know my affliction with my crumbling marriage, so I put up a front, smiled, and pretended that we were a happy and strong ideal Deaf couple in our Deaf community. I wanted to be the ‘perfect’ wife who could hold everything together. It was 1999, and I should have seen the third cue coming, but I was naïve and passive. I had my first job at a school for the Deaf in Texas as a teacher assistant. I never saw my paychecks. All of my checks went straight into my husband’s bank
account. I never learned how to pay the bills or how to use online banking. My husband often said, “I think it is better if I take care of the bills; you will spend it in wrong places and you are not good with math.” Again, I had feelings of worthlessness, uselessness, and unimportance. I did not want to argue with him, because when I did, he would not stop until he won the argument. So I just let my husband control our finances as a way to save the peace in our house for our daughters.

I spent fourteen years accepting my husband’s power over me. I thought it was normal and he was the man of the house. In my blind love, I was willing to do anything for him and loved him despite how he made me feel. I believed that I had no way out of the marriage, my only option being to try to do anything I could to make him happy; even try to change my looks and my weight. I did everything for him to make him love me. He got his power knowing I was vulnerable. An abusive partner uses the Deaf community or school as a reason why the significant other has to stay with him or her to support their Deaf children. It is very common for Deaf parents to put a guilt trip on their partner by stating they have to look good for the community and save face for their Deaf children and portray the ”perfect Deaf family.” The partner also uses prestige as a leader or position of power in the Deaf community to discredit the significant other’s story about the violence (Domestic Violence Within the Deaf Community, 2011).

Things kind of went along in our lives. In 2001, we were living in Frederick, Maryland. We both had jobs and bought our first townhouse. I was a teacher assistant at school for the Deaf, but again, I did not see my paychecks. I loved my job; I made friends and enjoyed working with special needs Deaf students. I loved the idea of balancing my motherhood and work and felt better about myself than I had in a long time. A few friends I made at work sensed I was not really happy, but I never told anyone how I was treated at home. I kept it all to myself. But I felt like I was dying inside. I felt hopeless and in a dark place in my life with my marriage. I wanted love like other people. I was starved for attention and wanted to feel worthy of something. This was the first time I actually thought about leaving my husband. I began asking general questions about how Deaf women can seek help with house payments, what programs they have available, and how I might seek a way out of the marriage.
Friends started to suspect why I was asking questions, but I quickly covered this up by saying my questions were to help a friend. I was not educated or aware of any domestic violence services for Deaf culture. Typical of abuse in the Deaf community, my husband took my social security checks to make sure I was trapped in the relationship. I also worried that he would spread rumors about me to ruin my reputation. This is very common in the Deaf community, especially when working in Deaf schools. This prevents the significant other from obtaining a job and helps keep him or her at home. Similar to my circumstances, this gives the abusive partner full control of knowing that the significant other cannot get help or socialize with other people (Reis, 2007).

I became pregnant with our third daughter in 2004. I felt even more trapped in my marriage. I could not take care of three children, along with the house payment, car payment, other bills, and food on my small income alone. My husband decided to quit his job without my knowledge or any discussion. I experienced my first physical abuse when I was seven months pregnant because my husband found out I was trying to seek information to leave him. I was shocked. I never thought that his mistreatment of me would escalate to physical abuse. When he quit his job, he realized that we could not afford the house payment anymore, and we had to sell our house and relocate to our hometown in Alabama. This made me happy because it meant moving closer to my mom and other family members. Upon returning to Alabama, we stayed with my mom while we looked for a house. After three months of house hunting, we bought a gorgeous 2,070 square foot home with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, formal dining and living room, a fireplace with built in shelves, a good sized kitchen, and a huge garage that was transformed into a playroom for my daughters, plus a Jacuzzi and beautiful enclosed porch in the front of the house. I felt we were finally living the dream I had wanted for so long, but I realized that a big house would not bring me happiness. During the three years that we lived there, our marriage began to deteriorate quickly with constant arguments and more physical abuse. Every time I attempted to leave him, he would promise to change. I had not reached out to anyone or told anyone about the ugly truth of how my husband treated me. He told me all the time, that if I left him, no man would want me. I thought no one would believe my story.
On a horrible night in the fall of 2005 he tried to stab me with a knife, and I screamed. Our two oldest daughters heard and ran out to see what the noise was all about. My oldest daughter called the police, but I told her to hang up, and I called my mom to see if we could stay at her house. The police did show up anyway, but I was ashamed and did not request an interpreter because it was a small, closely knit Deaf community, and I did not want what happened to us to spread in the Deaf community. My hesitation to get help illustrates the many barriers that exist for domestic violence survivors, particularly among Deaf victims negotiating help in a hearing world, and it shows some of the coercive threats that a Deaf abuser exerts over a victim. A Deaf person using American Sign Language can use many forms of intimidation to make the abused victim afraid. The abusive partner uses gestures, facial expression or exaggerated signs, but denies any aggressive behavior by justifying it as part of Deaf language. Another common example of this aggressive behavior is pounding on the table or door, and floor stomping if the victim looks away, but hearing culture often misses or misreads these abuse signals (Reis, 2007).

Once at my mom’s house, my mom learned the truth about my marriage and my many years of abuse. She was very supportive and said we could stay at her house as long as we wanted. That is when I realized that I was not at fault and I did not deserve my abusive relationship. Still, after living with my mom for several months, I began to miss my husband and the life we had together. I was afraid to be alone with no job, no degree, or income. I returned home with him and our daughters, but our oldest daughter refused to move back in with us and stayed with my mom. There are many reasons why Deaf women like me are likely to stay in an abusive relationship. Often in Deaf communities, people attended the same Deaf school or mainstream programs; they know each other as a second family. When a Deaf woman is abused, the information she shares will spread like a fire and it is impossible to water down the truth (Leigh, 1999). As a result, Deaf victims often keep the abuse to themselves to protect their and their partner’s reputation, to avoid grapevines or embarrassment, and to prevent the possibility that the Deaf community would not believe a victim’s story (Bartle, 2007). Like many victims of abuse, Deaf women remain loyal. They
often love their men and can communicate with them in sign language. A Deaf couple shares the same culture and values and a victim is afraid that if she leaves her abuser, she will lose this familiar form of communication. She may also fear that if she seeks help outside of her comfort zone, that no domestic violence program will understand or relate to her because of lack of communication and knowledge of sign language (Reis, 2007).

Many Deaf women are afraid to report abuse to police officers because of law enforcement’s lack of knowledge of sign language and the need to request a sign language interpreter. As a Deaf woman, this causes fear and intimidation. When the Deaf woman reports or tries to explain abuse to hearing police officers, the officers often explain in brief details and dismiss the severity of the situation, because it takes a lot of time, patience, and effort to explain the abuse. This is often because of ignorance of Deaf culture among police officers and their lack of understanding and knowledge of the unique needs of Deaf individuals. Also, many Deaf women do not hold college degrees or have a good paying job. They often depend on their live-in boyfriend, partner, or spouse for additional support, and thus, feel trapped and hopeless with no way out of the relationship (Domestic violence within the Deaf community, 2014). As my own circumstances evolved, I began to feel that living in Alabama was not doing us any good. The resources for the small Deaf community were limited in job opportunities and the public school system in Alabama was not great. I ran into an old high school best friend who was in town for a Christmas party and she began to tell me about Rochester, New York; how the Deaf community was huge with many Deaf resources. I told my husband about Rochester and thought maybe it would be a good change for us. I thought the environment would improve our marriage and we would have better opportunities for jobs. For once, he researched and agreed with me. I thought was a good sign.

I flew to Rochester in June of 2008, and I stayed with my friend for a month while my husband and daughters stayed behind to finish school and sell our house. I went job hunting and apartment hunting as well. I found a job cleaning houses where I was living. I felt free for a month without my husband mentally, emotionally, and physically abusing me. My friend sensed
that I was unhappy. I was shocked that she kind of knew this, and I spilled my whole story to her. She was the first friend I told the truth about my marriage. She believed me when no one else in my hometown did, and she renewed my courage, which I never knew I had. One month later, my husband and children joined me in Rochester, and we moved into the apartment I rented. I left my house cleaning job because I had to be at home taking care of my daughters. My oldest daughter returned to Alabama to live with my mom because she hated her dad for constantly treating me badly. After we sold our house in Alabama, I began to tell my husband about my unhappiness and suggested that we live apart. For the first time I felt in control and wanted my life back, but he still powered over me.

Many friends encouraged me and pushed me to go back to college, but I was afraid I would fail. I kept rewinding my husband’s words, “You will not amount to anything, you are stupid in math and you won’t succeed like me.” My feeling of unworthiness persisted, but I decided to try school again, and in 2009 I enrolled at Monroe Community College. I was juggling motherhood and being a full time student, but to my surprise, I made the Dean’s list. This lit my fire to continue with school, and I was determined to obtain my degree. Being on the Dean’s list gave me self-esteem, and finally, I realized I was smart after all. Many examples in my own life illustrate ways an abusive partner makes fun of their significant other’s language or English skills, making the other person feel small and not smart. This gives the partner a superior feeling of being the smart one. Another example is when the abusive partner puts his or her partner down by saying he or she is acting “hearing” because the significant other is not fluent in American Sign Language or does not have a strong identity as a Deaf person (Reis, 2007).

Once I began to take courses in social work at college, I began to realize there are programs for domestic violence survivors. But I still did not know who to contact or where to seek information on how to receive help. I learned a lot about signs, read books, and heard stories from many hearing women through interpreters in classrooms. I simply did not want to face the truth that I was in a domestic violence relationship. I did not want to be one of those women. Also, I thought I was the only Deaf woman who was a victim of domestic violence, because I had not heard other Deaf women talk about it.
or share their stories. Therefore, I kept my secret in the dark and only a few people knew about my marriage. Even if I did tell, I feared that the Deaf community would not believe me because in public, my husband was very charming and intelligent. A week after Easter in 2012, one night after the girls were in bed, my husband flew off the handle because he found out that I was telling a few friends about our marriage and how he treated me. He threw me against the wall and tried to choke me. He said, “You are not going to take the girls with you, and stop telling everyone lies about me and get out of my house!” I cried and said, “I will be a good wife if you let me stay with the girls, please I do not want them to think I left them.” He replied, “You should have thought of that,” and pushed me out of the apartment and locked the door. I spent two weeks staying with a hearing friend that I met at college, depressed, hopeless, and feeling empty without my daughters. I did not know what to do or how to seek help until I spoke to an advisor whom I admired and looked up to. She gave me a number to contact at Vera’s House, a shelter for battered women. Initially, I was afraid and did not want to go to Vera’s House, because I did not know what to expect. But I gradually changed my mind because I needed to get my life together and get my girls back.

To my surprise, Vera’s House was nice. They provided food, a place to stay, offered support groups, art therapy, and counseling. Yet I still felt isolated, alone, and without support, because all the women there were hearing. I had to request an interpreter for support groups and house activities. I spent more time educating hearing sponsors about my needs than I did talking about my experiences and how domestic violence affected my life and the life of my children. This is a common problem for many Deaf women. Also, Deaf women are afraid to leave behind links to Deaf forms of communication such as videophone, visual alarm clocks, alert light systems, and other needed equipment. These devices offer comfort, familiarity, and protection at home, and a connection to the outside world. If Deaf women have the courage to leave, they do not want to stay at the shelter because of lack of communication and support systems they need, which can increase feelings of isolation. It is hard for Deaf women to interact with hearing women who do not use or understand sign language.

When my husband learned that I was able to get resources and programs to
help me get a fresh start, I got my daughters back. He realized that I was empowering myself with education, knowledge, support from families and friends, and that I would not return to him. By September 2012, I was ready to move forward with a new chapter in my life. In July 2012, my daughters and I moved into a two bedroom apartment in Brockport. I was afraid that I would not know how to pay the bills or take care of my two daughters, but I learned how to set up my own banking account, pay my bills online, and manage my money. It was a struggle, but I realized that I was capable of doing many things without needing my ex-husband, and that I could take care of myself and my daughters. My daughters and I did not have much, but we were happier being free from the abusive environment, and I finally was able to give my girls a stable home life. Even though I was happy, had my children back, and had a fresh start, I still felt something was missing in my life, because I had no connection with other Deaf women facing similar circumstances as my own.

In overcoming my own challenges, I learned that there was an organization for Deaf women in domestic violence situations, Advocacy for Deaf Victims of Domestic Violence, located in Rochester, New York. However, there still is not a shelter for the Deaf women. Hopefully someday that will happen. I started attending their fundraiser events, I shared my story, I met other Deaf women, and I came full circle, feeling whole again. Advocacy for Deaf Victims of Domestic Violence formed an alliance with Vera’s House in Syracuse, and they started to work together to raise awareness of Deaf domestic violence victims’ needs and educate the hearing community to provide the same help and services to Deaf people that are provide to hearing people. My story, my voice, is being heard, but it will take more than my voice to make a social change for Deaf women in the domestic violence community, for them to have fully accessible services and equality with hearing people. Awareness by educating others about the unique needs of Deaf domestic violence survivors is a start to help Deaf voices to be heard.

**Power and Control**

In hearing culture, “feminist theory focuses on power, on gender, and on the structure of relationships in a male-dominated, patriarchal culture” (Levy, 2008, p. 21). Audism is the notion that one is superior based on the ability to hear. Audism tactics frequently used by hearing people can subvert Deaf
people, because hearing people have “hearing privilege.” From the hearing culture, women are oppressed by men because men have “male privilege.” Men control women from political, legal, and economic systems. This makes it easier for men to get away with abusive behaviors because of gender role expectations in society. The social attitudes of sexism are very common toward women. Masculinity is the norm for men; they are expected to be dominant, strong, and in control while women are expected to be submissive and passive. In domestic violence situations, the power dynamics of gender differences also exist between the differences of the Deaf and hearing communities, although the specific privileges are different. Deaf and hearing women are all affected by patriarchy, class structures, and individual issues; however, Deaf women also experience additional and unique problems when they are confronted with domestic violence (Rossana, Reis, 2007).

For Deaf domestic violence survivors, hearing people often can oppress Deaf people through power and control common to hearing culture. “Hearing privilege” can come into play if the Deaf woman is married to a hearing man. A hearing husband, partner, or boyfriend might take advantage of the Deaf woman by not allowing their hearing children to use sign language. The hearing husband can take advantage of the system, which is not fully accessible to Deaf people. For example, a legal hearing regarding restraining orders can get postponed because there are no interpreters available. A hearing husband may not tell his partner when people try to call her, or he may intentionally leave her out in a social gathering with hearing people. A hearing husband might put the Deaf woman down by saying she is no good because she is Deaf. Another issue is family members who take advantage of the Deaf person. Deaf women and men do not have the power to say what they want because the hearing people can distort their stories and take advantage of that power. The hearing partner can tell hearing children that Deaf culture is worthless and that hearing culture is better and also use the children against the victim by not allowing the children to use sign language to communicate with the Deaf parent (Reis, 2007). Often in systems within a community, such as courts, police officers and legal professionals are uneducated about the needs of Deaf clients and cannot help create better outcomes for their
situations. For instance, they are not aware that by the law, courts, officers, and professionals are required to hire certified interpreters instead of using the Deaf person’s family members for hearing word translation. Sometimes, family members lie and say they are an expert at sign language to get paid for the job, but in reality, they take advantage of Deaf victims (Reis, 2007).

**Deaf Resources**

Social resources for Deaf domestic abuse victims have improved immensely by recognizing the Deaf community's accountability on raising awareness and educating the hearing community. The Deaf community provides information on how to make a difference in the Deaf community by providing better exposure and awareness in the media, increasing service providers; educating government, justice systems and law enforcement in Deaf education; and creating hearing allies. There are many ways that Deaf domestic violence victims can receive better support and resources to help them move forward with their new life. Some of the essential areas that need to be emphasized in order to better meet the unique needs of the Deaf women are worth highlighting (Family and Community Services, n.d.).

Society needs to “recognize the social media, television, print and any forms of media to educate (not glorify) about the dynamics and consequences of violence experienced by Deaf, Deaf-blind, and signing people” (Whyte & Eposito, 2011, pp. 25-29). It is vital that the media provides access to captioning, subtitles, American Sign Language, and visual representation for Deaf clients. Service providers need to make a social change through advocacy to make their Deaf clients feel comfortable and safe sharing information and not violate trust. This would include necessary services such as mental health professionals, interpreters’ agencies, social security services, and vocational rehabilitation services. It is important that service providers ensure interventions are culturally and linguistically appropriate and embrace Deaf-centered approaches. Deaf clients need to feel understood and able to relate to others without having to educate hearing people about what the Deaf victims need. Service providers need to utilize local referral resources and treatments for the abusers by providing necessary forms of communications to assure abusers receive treatment and rehabilitation. The Deaf community could be better served by a government providing
secure funding for Deaf domestic/sexual violence services and providing training to all the staff and managers to recognize the signs of domestic violence in Deaf culture. Also, the government needs to enforce laws to protect Deaf survivors and impose serious consequences to the perpetrators. In the light of the justice system and law enforcement, the biggest issue is to root out audism and bias toward Deaf clients and ensure that all the information and resources are confidential. Also, state and federal government programs such as rape crisis and abuse resources must make everything that is available for hearing survivors such as phone services and victim hotline equally accessible for Deaf survivors and ensure that the Deaf have the ability to walk into police stations without barriers. Deaf victims do not realize that they do need hearing allies in their corner, since hearing is the majority population. Having a hearing ally is essential; it provides the survivor with a supporter/friend who does not make a Deaf client feel helpless. To build these bridges, allies need to be educated about the unique issues that Deaf clients experience in domestic violence situations. Allies need to be encouraged to learn sign language. Hearing people need to stop using “hearing privilege” and seek equality with Deaf people (Reis, 2007).

Deaf people need to refrain from judgments and labeling domestic violence inappropriately. For example, it is wrong to say abuse is between the abuser and abused victim and not the community’s business. And it is problematic to enable hierarchical status of an abuser, such as a Deaf community leader, as a reason to prevent the survivor’s safety and welfare. Members of the Deaf community need to support peace and oppose violence; instead, they often take sides or remain neutral. This causes a Deaf victim’s confusion about who to trust, because she does not know whose side people are on, hers or the abuser. The Deaf community needs to use peer support to help prevent and stop violence, and to ask the victims if they need help instead of being bystanders. Very often when there is a Deaf social gathering, Deaf people often start gossiping and backstabbing. Violent and controlling behaviors are not acceptable; people need to make it clear that it is a violence free environment. People need to stop enabling the abusers and place responsibility with them instead of blaming and judging the victims for staying with the abuser. An important tool in domestic violence
situations is to respect the victims and refrain from gossiping and starting rumors.

Achieving unity in Deaf education settings requires ongoing Deaf-centered professional development for teachers, educators, faculty, and staff. With more training, the Deaf community can better respond to domestic violence in students’ lives. They should provide a Deaf-centered violence prevention program, offer conflict resolution, and promote communication skills in Deaf and mainstream programs and model those skills. Schools should offer and address bullying and dating violence to help people recognize the signs of abuse and prevent them from tolerating abusive relationships (Garvin & Jackson, 2003). Deaf education should also inform Deaf people about domestic violence, and offer sexual/violence seminars and courses in any Deaf-centered environment (Reis, 2007). The goal of human services is to help victims learn how to use critical thinking skills to help them develop healthy attitudes toward themselves. Human services professionals can help the client see irrational ways of thinking and encourage them to recognize and change to healthy relationships. They want the victims to realize that they deserve a much better life than the life they had with the abuser, where they felt marginalized, unwanted and unloved. Human services also want to help the victims process the pros and cons of leaving their partners by evaluating risk factors and possible escape scenarios. The most common goal of human services is to provide clients' individual counseling, group support, housing assistance, job coaching, and help to live independently. Funds for job placement, transportation, and childcare assistance are critical (Martin, 2011). These important tools are essential in helping Deaf domestic violence survivors both know about abuses and have the means to access and live an abuse-free life.

My Voice

The valuable resources I received from Vera House provided me with excellent information, which helped me start a new life for myself and my children. The Vera House changed my life. Because of them, I was able to file for my divorce, obtain help from a housing assistance program, and receive services from vocational rehabilitation to earn a Bachelor degree in Women’s and Gender Studies, so I can build a better future for myself and my family. Using my voice here, I hope
that I can raise awareness and educate the hearing community about the root issues in domestic violence that are represented in the Deaf community. My education has given me insight and provided me with unpredictable, eye-opening lessons and challenges. Many doors have opened for me so that I can now become part of something that I strongly believe in. I have the passion to make a difference in the Deaf community. The person I have become created a new perspective for me as a Deaf person and I have developed a new-found respect for myself as a student, mom, woman, and feminist. My life has proven to be an enriching journey. I hope that others gain insight and understanding of the unique need of Deaf domestic violence survivors. They need to have the best services, programs, and tools to heal and move toward a positive future and live productive lives. While my story is filled with hope, there is still so much work to be done. Hearing culture is still the dominant obstacle for helping Deaf victims of abuse.

Works Cited


Pink Transgressions

This paper addresses what I term “Pink Transgressions.” I coin the phrase Pink Transgression to mean any oppression of one woman over another. For this research, the area of pink transgressions is focused on domestics, examining the impacts of race, class, gender, and transnationalism using a Black feminist perspective. Using feminist theory, I construct the web that connects me to my mother and both of us to Diouana, the domestic in the film, La Noire (Black Girl) by Ousmane Sembene (1966). The movie serves as an extraction of my life in the space of an “imagined-maid.” That “imagined-maid” status brought me to this close feminist study of the people whose lenses persistently visualize a maid in me.

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This paper addresses what I term “Pink Transgressions.” I coin the phrase “Pink Transgression” to mean any oppression of one woman over another. For this research, the area of pink transgressions is focused on domestics, examining the impacts of race, class, gender, and transnationalism using a Black feminist perspective (Collins, 2004, 1998; hooks, 2004, 2000, 1996; Lorde, 1996). Using my experiential lens, I examine the multiplicity of subjugations of Black, colored, and transnational domestics in the homes of mostly white elite and professional class women. Applying my knowledge of the lives of domestics in a feminist framework, I seek to unravel the complex positioning of domestics and their mistresses using a range of feminist theoretical lenses including
materialism, Black feminist thought, feminist standpoint theory, and existentialist thinking (Collins, 2004, 1998; Engels, 1884; hooks, 2004, 2000, 1996; Lorde, 1996; Woolf, 2002). Applying this amalgam of theories, I construct the web that connects me to my mother and both of us to Diouana, the domestic in the film, La Noire (Black Girl), by Ousmane Sembene (1966). The movie serves as an extract of my life in the space of an “imagined-maid.” That “imagined-maid” status brought me to this close feminist study of the people whose lenses persistently visualize a maid in me.

**What I Believe**

Woman can be just as power hungry as men. And women, like men, do not feel allegiance to groups that do not serve their personal goals and promote their financial and social status. There are many examples in books, films, and plays which document this phenomenon. Take for example the short film, La Noire de (Black Girl), released in 1966 by Ousmane Sembene. The main character, Diouana, is a young Senegalese woman who was duped into leaving her country to take a job working as a nanny to a French couple’s three rambunctious young children. Upon her arrival to France, Diouana is enslaved. She is caged in the apartment in Antibes in the South of France; her only freedom is furtive glances of the distant shores of the Mediterranean coast captured through the glass panes that lead to a balcony; her next area of seeming freedom was in the courtyard and only when she is attending to Madame’s children. Sembene’s film is short in length but deep in meaning; it is a lesson in intersectionalities of oppression.

I chose the title *Pink Transgressions* to codify women—over-women oppressions or intra-feminine oppression. I feel compelled to write my paper in this vein because, as a student in Women and Gender Studies, I find that much of feminist research and formalized activism evolved around the state, the corporations, and what white women want from their white men. I make this claim with measured reservation. Feminine intra-oppression is a most selectively invisible transgression. I dissent from this biased practice, and I use this paper to increase the voice of dissention against this status quo. I use this paper to shatter silence by giving names and voices to the women giving life to their untold stories from the fields of pink oppressions, working as domestics in the homes of the elite class of women in America.
Pink oppressions are a towering vertical. At the bottom are women of color, and for those who are domestics, they traverse many strata back and forth as they travel the spectra of class, race, nationality, and gender. The women are an ideal prototype for the works of the few feminists who study the intersections of oppressions and the value of knowledge from a standpoint position (Collins, 2004; Lorde, 1996; hooks, 2004). It is through the lens of those scholars, in addition to Sembene’s Diouana and her voice as maid, that I develop this paper.

Transgressors and the Transgressed

Much like Ousmane Sembene’s film, Black Girl (La Noire), my mother was an immigrant Black woman who doubled as a factory worker five days a week and then as a day worker in white women’s upper middle class homes on Saturdays and Sundays. I recognize in my mother and in Sembene’s film the ongoing racialized and class-based women-on-women oppressions and the fight for identity the plot explores. Diouana is a young Senegalese woman who began work in her native country, Senegal, which was just beginning to rise from under the dust of French colonial power. Back in her country, Diouana worked for a French colonist couple and when she was invited to follow them to France, she jumped at the occasion, believing that her economic lot was about to improve and that she would be able to help her family back home. Upon her arrival in Antibes, South of France, Diouana faced harsh treatment and no pay for her services. Although she was promised a position as a nanny, Diouana was soon an enslaved domestic. The film winds up the tensions between mistress and domestic. The woman of the house whom Diouana refers to as Madame, demonstrates a deep-seated need to have Diouana perform her domestic status in all its aspects including wearing the domestic uniform of apron; her mistress’ obsession with class, race, and identity differentiation make life very difficult for Diouana. But this dominance did not silence Diouana to submission as Sembene, using a voiceover that is audible only to the viewer, gave agency to Diouana, thereby offering a window to her reclaimed liberation. This also highlights the difference in Diouana’s status between object, which is what she is seen as by her mistress, to subject in her own mind, her own voice, and her own consciousness. These apertures of freedom in subjugation lead me to conclude that Diouana never
submitted her identity to the oppressive incursions of her boss. The voiceover in the movie is critical as it lets viewers see and feel how Diouana processed the pink transgressions in the hands of her boss.

I acknowledge the legitimacy of hegemony and patriarchy and the way they control the intellectual, professional, and financial freedom of all women. But the overemphasis of this reality as a class-based binary oppression of men over women, both presumed white, limits the conversation to the very top of America’s social pyramid scheme. Here, white men continue to be the primary rule makers and white women, with education and access, are close behind. This conversation about what those elite women have already achieved and still want to gain is faulty without the voices, bodies, and faces of house workers, day workers, maids, cooks, and nannies; women who toil in the shadow of the intellectual class cleaning their babies, their toilet bowls, and making sure their husbands were fed and kept in clean fresh linen. In America at least, those other women are primarily women of color in brown, black, and red skin, women who are mostly silent and often are marginalized because of race, class, language skills, and nationality. As it was four decades ago and it is still so today, these invisible women and their contributions are indispensable to the achievement and freedom of men and women of the elite class. These unsung heroines experience a specific class of oppression; they are the women in servitude. They hire out their only tools: their hands, their backs, and their knees. These women are my mother and Sembene’s Diouana. These women are also me to the extent that I have the ability to know their racial oppression, because I share in some of the intersectionalities of oppressions they confront.

The Virginia Woolf Syndrome

Women of the elite class including many feminists who teach the canon reflect that same tunnel vision that keeps the domestics in the margins of patriarchy. A good example is Virginia Woolf’s (2002) famous writing that demands a woman have a room of her own and her own money for her own liberation. But it is important to note that Woolf lived in a house full of servants. Without acknowledging the hands that cared for the rest of the house, it creates the illusion that invisible fairies made it all possible. When Woolf transgressed in order to
subvert patriarchy and rejected her role to be caretaker, house cleaner, cook, and laundress and so on, that transgression created a vacuum in the home, and if that void was not filled by the domestic class, Woolf would not have had the leisure to develop her writing, a point raised in Blair’s (2008) article, *The Horror of Dirt: Virginia Woolf and Her Servants*. Blair (2008) highlights the importance of servants’ contributions to Woolf’s success and her liberty to be productively engaged with her writing. Light’s (2008) study of Woolf in *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* underscores Woolf’s privilege.

The use of domestic servants nearly always results in a woman-mistress lording over a woman-domestic. This is not a problem if we concede that society is shaped around systems of governance where citizens agree to work towards goals that positively benefit all members. This, however, is a huge supposition whether a woman works in an haute class home like Woolf’s (2002) or toils away in bourgeois homes in Brooklyn, New York. The life of a domestic for hire is one of subordination and self-effacement. This claim is supported by Dill (1994), who writes of the stratified existence of domestics and mistresses coexisting under one roof. Dill (1994) writes that “Low income Black women who work as domestics in the homes of middle-class and upper-class White families experience two very different life-styles; their employees and their own (p. 4).” Dill (1994) explains that Black maids are cognizant of their location in the family structure. Dill’s (1994) assessment provides a direct link into Collins’ (2004) application of feminist standpoint theory. Collins’ (2004) discussion of standpoint theory explains ways position and power relationships among differently situated individuals play out in a group. This means that my social location, for example, shapes the way I see my daily environment, and that this social location is used by others to shape external relations with me. It is therefore conceivable that Dill (1994) is correct in stating that “Black maids develop an awareness of the impact those material conditions have on them” (p. 4). Furthermore, Dill (1994) adds, these Black maids are living in two universes and that positioning “provides them with a unique lens to study the impact of race and class on the family life of two different but intersecting segments of society” (p. 4). These quotes from Dill (1994) directly coincide with Collins’ (2004) application of standpoint theory, which is
concerned with the location of people and the stratifications of power.

What I Know

Big problems arise when women design a system of governance which oppresses some at the expense of others. My intimacy with female intra-oppression in America came first through my mother’s lens. My mother lived in the enclave with other Caribbean nationals in Brooklyn, NY. Like many brown skinned women from the so-called developing world, she worked her share of long factory hours during the week. Her Saturdays and Sundays were often spent cleaning the houses of bourgeois women in far flung communities where well-heeled women with elevated educational and professional capital live. What I learned from my role as my mother’s translator is that women who slave in other women’s homes are often mistreated, disrespected, and violated by the hands of those they serve. Female domestics, also known as maids, servants, indentured servants, day-workers, or even slaves, are to my conception, invaluable to the success of the many women who strive for their piece of the patriarchal hegemonic power system. Without the knees, backs, and elbows of women like my mother, those mistresses in those fancy homes would have had to contend with a less than clean Kosher Friday. They would not have had time for a Saturday morning trek to the hair salon, or the rights to a dolce vita of Sunday morning breakfast with a long serving of the New York Times, read twice over. Yet for all that my mother did, she was sometimes cheated out of her full pay for a full day of hard work. Those cunning women used the tools of patriarchy to rob my mother, a woman who was never allowed to sit at the very table she cleaned and polished or to linger in the kosher kitchens she scrubbed and sanitized. There is a place for women like her; women who hire their hands for low wages are rewarded with a hard cold chair in the frigid doorways on frozen steps with heads made to hang over in that obedient pose as they lower their mouth to another spoonful of a lunch dead from the long commute of three, maybe four trains, and a bus to boot; dead from sitting in the cold draft of the no-man’s land between the side entrance and the kitchen door, her knees stiffened by cold draft and the unforgiving resistance of the steel chair. Still, she returns to the kitchen floor, obedient stiff knees bent to scrub the faint drops of coffee stains.
Broadly stated, while women as the commander in chief of their household can make patriarchy look kind and just, their abuses of domestic workers’ human rights are downright ugly. They are indistinguishable from the familiar model of male hegemonic oppressions that their own class of women often decries. The home is a space long regarded as the sole responsibility of the woman for the glory of her husband who comes back to a clean house and a happy wife and children. Added to those intersections is “La Bonne,” Diouana. “La Bonne” means the good one in a verboten translation from French to English. Throughout the movie, Diouana manifested Dill’s (1994) positioning of the parallel worlds of domestic and mistress. Diouana has knowledge of being subordinated and existing in two worlds under the same roof. The mistress’ world has freedom and material advantages, but the agency and access they provide were not available to Diouana in spite of her “intimate” physical proximity to those she serves. Washing the fancy dishes or making up the fancy bed do not equal ownership.

Domestic Service is Women’s Work

In Sembene’s film, Black Girl, Diouana is presented in all her Otherness. Her Black skin, her foreign language, her poverty, and her subversive streak as she strives for independence; these all collide with the fury of Madame, the oppressed, white middle class, educated mistress who stands helpless in the face of the patriarchal oppression of her husband and the hegemony of the state. Dill affirms, “Domestic service is women’s work because housework is women’s work” (p.5). Dill underscores the debased location assigned to household care on the occupation ladder when she describes that indispensable job as, “classified with unskilled labor because it has traditionally been thought that any woman knows how to do housework” (p.5). This classification gives important insight into Madame’s disdain towards Diouana’s abilities as maid. I argue, since the mistress was already devalued as the would-be housemaid, she could find no added value for the indispensable services another woman as maid can provide. Madame saw so little value in her maid’s services that she demonstrated no regrets as she withheld Diouana’s wages while keeping her imprisoned in the apartment in Antibes, France.
The strained relationship between Madame and Diouana the Black domestic required a further social devaluing of the maid because of the striking resemblance to Madame’s status as a woman and Diouana’s subordination as maid. In reality, both Madame and Diouana are members of the woman-class whose gender implies a lower social status next to men. But Madame is above Diouana in the intra-feminine strata, and unlike the domestic in Dill (1994), who does receive a low income, Madame in Sembene’s film does not pay Diouana at all. This absence of any income places her once more into the distant margin of oppression. I assert, however, that this paradoxically brings her (Diouana) closer to the status of “housewife” because as I understand Dill’s argument, it is Madame’s assigned ‘natural’ role as housewife to keep house and there is no compensation attached to this housework role.

By withholding Diouana’s earned income, Madame is clearly transgressing Diouana’s rights using race, class, and national identification as tools of oppression. Diouana has no avenue for justice at her disposal. For one thing, she is prevented from leaving the apartment. She is also unable to read and has no money to pay her way back to Senegal. An intersectionality of oppressions has predisposed Diouana for subjugation by Madame, beginning with the colonization of her country, Senegal. There she already experienced what Collins (1998) terms a “nexus of containment,” a result of racial segregation and surveillance of African Americans (pp. 22). Diouana’s freedoms of movement and association were already compromised under Colonial rule, where job availability was based on race, class, and national identity. In addition, like Black immigrant women in America who work as maids, Diouana had no formal citizenship upon reaching France. Collins describes intersectionality as a converging of “systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age from mutually constructing features of social organization” (p. 278). In spite of these oppressions, I believe Diouana was not paralyzed by the aggressions of her white mistress. I would even argue that within the framework of Collins’ (2004) outsider within standpoint theory, Diouana used her Afrocentric cultural knowledge against Madame’s Eurocentric knowledge. Diouana showed an awareness of the knowledge that was uniquely hers and could only have come from her life experience in
the social locations of her existence in both France and Senegal, and all the statuses she either acquired or was forced to accept.

Adding to Collins, Harding (2004), a well-known standpoint theorist, integrates Marxist theory of the proletariat in capitalist society to the position of women in patriarchal society. This is a framework which captures the role of Madame as over Diouana, but in which Diouana’s oppressed voice is large and visible. Hartsock (2004) adds to this by addressing the production of work and compensation allocation as well as the oppression of women in patriarchal society. Madame, from Sembene’s movie, is a member of this oppressive proletariat. Looking at the narrow casting of the generic “women” and reverting back to my argument, that all women need a color appurtenance, when feminist theorists withdraw color, there is a danger in thinking that Hartsock (2004) is theorizing for Madame and not Diouana. hooks (1996) warns of the danger of clumping all women’s lives into one lived experience and argues that women are not evenly disadvantaged since some women have more access to privilege than others. The point hooks is making is that a democratization of marginalization does not exist. hooks, in qualifying Hartsock’s universal treatment of women, points out that a shared gender is not grounds for equal subjugation in gender-based oppression. For example, hooks affirms that many white middle class women often operate as oppressors because of their privileged status in society and they often use and benefit from this dominant behavior.

The Virginia Woolf Synergy

Sembene’s Madame, in her petit bourgeois class, is truly removed from the social class of Woolf (2002), who claimed that the woman’s right to her own space within the home was wanting. Madame is unable to achieve Woolf’s status. She has not Woolf’s ideas of liberation of women. Using Woolf’s lens, Madame is not yet emancipated. She has no room and no money of her own. Sembene made Madame’s frustrations raw for the viewer but does not explicitly reveal their source. It is appropriate to contrast Woolf’s belief against Madame’s as she represents an unfulfilled woman; a woman who is oppressed and undeveloped under the patriarchy of her state, France, and her husband.
In *Black Girl*, Sembene built up well-crafted tensions to frame the close proximity of and the fluid space of power between the mistress and her “slave.” Again, since Madame has “no room of her own” to help solidify the necessary boundaries between class, race, culture, and nationality, she rages when she senses a seeming intrusion by Diouana. The subversive mood Sembene creates in the film is visible when one of the male guests transgresses by putting his white lips to the Black face of “La Bonne,” kissing both cheeks. These are the same lips that would have been kissing Madame’s own white middle class face just moments prior, at the arrival of each guest, as per French traditions. Even more, those same lips that still hold the heat of the Black slave’s face will grace the face of Madame at the closing of the night. The mistress’s dominant behavior, when she followed La Bonne to the kitchen to tell her that the white male guest’s kisses were only meant to annoy Diouana, and then barked an order to Diouana to prepare coffee, exemplifies ways Madame needed to reestablish the stratifications of her class and racial power over her slave. This is similar to Woolf’s (2002) privileged circumstances, but here, there is no “upstairs and downstairs” stratified space.

Sembene’s film and his portrayal of Madame are good examples of the oppressions recognized in Betty Friedan’s (1963) *Feminine Mystique*, a groundbreaking feminist work that theorized the dull, empty, oppressive space of many privileged, white, middle class American housewives in the 1960s. Sembene presents to the viewer a woman so frustrated and numb from her own mental prison that she never was strong enough to name her aggressor. Madame is suspended between madness and evil planning her next attack against Diouana. Madame’s freedom is tethered to her husband and the state even as she tries to control Diouana’s freedom. The system of oppression is deeply encroaching; the French state sends their patriarchy to control the “animals” as the Senegalese are referred to, and Madame is obliged to follow. The husband transgresses, the state transgresses, but Madame is too lazy and too scared to act. When La Bonne transgresses and withholds her labor, Madame cannot make her work. Madame falls into the default position of the housekeeper if not the slave to her own husband in her own home. Her case closely mirrors that of the
A white middle class woman typified in Friedman’s *Feminine Mystique*.

**The Shape of Pink Oppression: Women and Work**

The many women-on-women transgressions in the domestic realm point to one fact: women never really embraced the intellectual positioning advanced by the Marxist mode of production. Women bristled against the feminization of free labor in the private space when the obligation of public labor production also imposed on their time or when the husband is never accountable for household cares. The binary view of housework and women is articulated by Engels (1884) Marxist’ theory that the “division of labor is a capitalist construct for the partition of labor and power in the patriarchal home” (pp. 379). Engels (1884) categorized the “enslavement of wives and children as the first type of private property” (pp. 379). That private order in the home places the husband in the “bourgeoisie” role, thereby reducing the wife to the proletariat. With a desire to liberate women from the marital enslavement, Engels (1884) believed the “family form” had to be disrupted to subvert the privatization and denigration of household labor. To achieve his vision, Engels encouraged women to choose the “public world of productive work over private domestic labor” (p. 379). That is not a bad idea except for the fact that “domestic labor and childcare never became [the] public and collective responsibilities Engels envisioned” (p.379).

It would seem that modern women have aligned their beliefs with Engels. Many consider the work of the woman in the home as menial and demeaning since it is not paid work and no recognition comes with the job; it is a thankless profession. Even when the woman, as is the case with Madame in *Black Girl* (1996), is at home and provided for by the husband, she rejects her perceived role as caretaker of her own children or the cleaner of her own house. Instead, she hires the hands of a Black domestic, Diouana. Sembene’s deft cinematic execution transformed the small private space of that apartment in Antibes into a battleground for Madame, who insists on “ownership” of “La Bonne,” Diouana. What follows is a vendetta, nothing short of raw hate of the domestic who is now an enslaved girl. Hiring out her duties as homemaker could not fill the void Madame feels. She is still contained between the walls of that apartment, with the maid, under
the “bourgeoisie” privileges of her husband. The rage against her husband’s patriarchal oppression was only surpassed by her great hate for Diouana. Ultimately, Sembene’s Diouana, who takes her own life at the film’s tragic conclusion, chose death as the only available escape from Madame’s intra-feminine tyranny.

The Conceivability of a 21st Century Diouana

Diouana’s death captures the most salient problem in Sembene’s film and in the politics of women’s fight for equality. There are three real transgressors who are responsible for Madame’s atrophied existence: she, patriarchy, and the state. Yet Madame did not confront the state or her husband. The state represents patriarchy and vice versa. By confronting her husband, she confronts the state. It is the state which decides on the laws that monetize her husband’s job and deny the same financial rewards for domestic responsibilities. It is the state that invades Diouana’s Senegal and makes her a second class citizen on her own land. It is the state that stratifies labor in Senegal and creates jobs for white French citizens and relegates the natives of Senegal to servitude. It is the state that imposes a transnational agenda on Senegal. And most important here, Madame is incapable of self-examination; an intellectual capital very well developed in Diouana, the “animal,” who can only know by using “instinct.” Sembene, in offering death as liberty to Diouana, makes a bold statement about the transcendent value of freedom.

Diouana’s strong self-identity was an affront to Madame. Through verbal subjugation and threat against her physical safety, Madame tried to break Diouana to stem the flow of that seeping pride of the Black girl. The mistress was relentless in her mission to deconstruct and co-opt Diouana’s self-awareness. The mistress is a frustrated woman who is as much if not more trapped as the Black girl she seeks to confine to a prison made of walls of social status and patriarchal transgressions. Sembene sharply communicates the exasperations of Madame as she suffers what she interprets as one act after another of quiet rebellion from Diouana; but Diouana is simply a young woman determined to defend her honor. Madame’s aggravation is based on her perception that Diouana transgresses her authority by insisting to wear nice culturally distinguishable
clothes and also dress shoes that seem to elevate her to the same status as the mistress. Diouana refused to wear an ugly apron over her nice clothes, which becomes an important and symbolic point of contention. Diouana is a woman who cannot be owned; a woman who is every bit her own free agent even within the confinement of the kitchen walls, bathroom walls, living room walls, and bedroom walls. Diouana has agency that Madame can only dream of; her agency is the very reason why she can choose death over slavery and destitution over money whereas Madame can only wait for marching orders from her husband. Madame finds her voice only by denying voice to La Bonne.

_I am_ Diouana: Pink Oppression and Transnationalism

Sembene’s film was released in 1966, but I have lived Diouana’s experience in varying degrees over four decades of living in America. I recognize Diouana in my mother. Her ghost never leaves me and I can still hear my mother defending her dignity, speaking in her native dialect to the women who oppressed her. She fought her best against all the injustices I was too young, too “immigrant,” to fight against and to join her in wrestling her dignity from the lashing tongues of ungrateful women spiting strange foreign words about this window, that table, or the new speck of errant dust on that kitchen counter.

To that petit bourgeois woman in the finer side of Brooklyn who was too scared to stop her pig husband at the door and instead let him drag his muddy shoes on the clean floor; the clean floor my mother scrubbed again and again under the watchful eyes of the Mrs. I say, “Go to hell and clean your own damned mess and get the hell away from my mother!” And to that other woman who, just like a plantation overseer, stood guard over my mother, breathing down her neck, then screaming in her face in that foreign tongue because my mother mixed the dairy side of her kosher kitchen with the meat side, I say, “To hell with you and your dairy kitchen, your meat kitchen, and all these arbitrary and invisible lines. And tell your God that my mother’s hired hands are the same hands that touch and prepare the reviled pig for our own High Holiday celebrations.” Hypocrites! And all of the women who clutched between your crimson gnarling fingers that extra five dollar bill, another reduction on a wage that is already so low. I say, “Give her back her blood and sweat.” These elite
professional women cry for the Equal Rights Amendment to pass but reduce my mother’s wages to less than half of the published minimum wage in the State of New York. I remember how these women pitted one friend against another, one sister against another, in that fragile community of non-European transnationals for the top choice to clean their filth.

It’s difficult for women who hire out the domestic care of their home to see the hired hands of women oppressed in situ. Using what I call a capitalist consciousness, the woman-boss seeks to find the lowest bidder for the job. This is just like a business outsourcing undesirable jobs. As Romero (2002) writes, while the pay scale is flexible and is subject to the wishes of the employers, unfavorable work conditions and the realities of the social construct around domesticity are still fixed. The domestic space remains for the most part a “racial and class-based systems of inequality,” favoring the white female elite class (Romeo, 2002, p.199). Romero submits that as long as this intra-feminine system of oppression persists, the feminist agenda will remain stymied. Romero believes that maids should strive for improved wages and work conditions. These goals, writes Romero, are attainable through unionization efforts of household workers, childcare workers, and homecare workers. Romero believes organizing domestic workers will eradicate the practice that rewards “employers hiring poor and working class women of color, particularly undocumented immigrant women” (p. 201.) I agree with Romero that as long as immigrant women of color still need these jobs while they develop their skill for other type of work, it is necessary to organize around legalized labor practices. I do not agree with utopian feminism’s idea to defeminize domestic work. For example, employing college men who self-report as members of the middle-class, and who, by their very race and class, are coming to the job with a different consciousness, is just a temporary solution, since these college males cannot deliver the same commitment in time that can amount to decades or more of cleaning houses (Romero, 2002).

The Worth of the Human Maid: Situating Diouana

I am aghast that like Diouana, “African American and Chicana domestic servants feel despised by the people they work for because of their status as low-wage workers” (Romero, 2002, p. 204). This kind of revelation
takes me back to the scenes in the film *Black Girl* where Madame refused to acknowledge that Diouana’s melancholy for home and her enslavement could lead to depression; instead Madame attributed Diouana’s rapid weight loss to her proclivity to laziness. According to Romero, African Americans, West Indian immigrants, and Latina domestics report that they were subjected to shared bedrooms and for the most part relegated to the isolation of the kitchen to eat alone, just like Diouana. I have established that housework is women’s work and that some women do get to distance themselves from it by hiring other women who are usually of the poor and working class. In the America of the last few decades domestics are mainly Black and brown immigrants from poor developing countries. Women like Diouana are becoming more and more ubiquitous both in real terms and in the symbolic sense. Diouana is symbolic of instances in my life as an immigrant Black woman living in America. I have been offered the maid job or called the maid by some White women of the elite class. A few instances of my status as the ubiquitous maid in the United States follow.

To understand why race is so central to my paper, examine the following incident which I label, “Sunday morning Pink Elevator Pitch.” In America, there is a persistent saying that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the country. So it is only fitting that one of the most racist and class-based experiences I’ve had was on a Sunday morning as I was on my way to attend Sunday mass at a very segregated white church with a sprinkle of Black people. It was in the year 2000; a new millennium was afoot putting America at the dawn of the twenty-first century. At the time, I was living in an upscale apartment. I was elegantly attired, as were my three children, when the elevator made a stop on the way to the lobby. A well-coiffed and equally elegantly attired white woman I surmised to be some seventy something years old entered the big silver box. It took her very little time to peg me. In her eyes, I was out of place. She knew a transgressor when she saw one. She asked matter-of-factly as she was blind to our possible equality in social status, “Do you clean apartments in the building because my friend and I, we are looking for a cleaning girl?” To which I crisply responded, “No, but let me know if you do find such a girl, because I am looking for one too.” This was one of the many moments where, like Diouana, I would ruffle “pink”
feathers because I was seen as transgressing, crossing boundaries and blurring lines. There was no need for patriarchy or hegemony to find me on that Sunday morning; there are women like her, the “pink” proletariat Madame fiercely guarding their class privilege. And these are the same pink proletariat who called my mother “their cleaning girl” when she was on her knees scrubbing their filthy floors. Today they see their cleaning girl in me, the daughter who transcended, even as I am standing tall and shoulder to shoulder with them.

I can also say that I look at my experiences as oppression based on my class, race, and nationality by interpreting pink aggression to arrive at a truth that serves my own strategies for empowerment. Feminist standpoint theory is one lens by which Black women can examine their lives as a minority amongst minorities (Collins, 2004). hooks (2004) and Lorde (1996) understand my location. Like Diouana in Sembene’s movie and the Diouanas that exist everywhere, we are not expected to have the same liberties. Sometimes, we must just take them. In *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, hooks (2000) revisited the intersectionality of race and class. She reaffirmed that feminists were aware of these fragmentations by class and race differences. hooks went back to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* to contextualize the parallel worlds and thus the parallel lines of race and class which coexist but never touch. I believe that this awareness is what drives the anger of these distressed white women in the same way that the woman on the elevator insisted on taking me back to her dirty toilet filth and nasty floors. She tried to subvert me just as Sembene’s Madame subverted Diouana. From a personal standpoint, the persistence of race is still the most deterministic factor in the intersectionalities of oppressions. I believe a case study of Diouana paralleling my own life and my mother’s remains the most salient challenge and proves the pernicious use of race as an identifier to open or close access to opportunities and personal freedom.

My mother, the factory worker from Monday to Friday and the day-worker on weekends, did not replicate that status in her girls. Because we came to America after the hard earned gains of the Civil Rights struggle, I was able to get a high school education. This required busing, a dislocation that inflicted trauma on often poor, often Black or brown, and sometimes immigrant children. We were asked to
straddle two worlds in one America; one world was privileged, the other world, your world, was not. My mother had as many if not more ambitions and high hopes for all her children. Over time it became clear that a middle-class life in America was not a given outcome through equal labor just because one in the margin aspires to it. My realization mirrors La Bonne’s own expectation of a life in Antibes. Diouana believed that being in France would give her the same capital to self-actualization that the French had in Senegal. Unfortunately, she discovered that power most often flows in only one direction.

Unlike La Bonne I did transcend from one social class to the next, or so I thought. But funny things happened along the way to confirm that some women were determined to call me on my transgression time and time again. My experiences are similar to Diouana’s struggles, because she and I share the same intersectionalities and process challenges from the same personal standpoint. Like Diouana, I have met people who, based on my race, felt compelled to put me in my place. These people, like Madame would have, see my presence in certain locales or my possession of certain material comforts as transgressing.

Sembene uses many symbols or totems throughout his film to represent the oppressions Diouana endures. His totems for transgression include the maid’s elegant shoes, the lack of an apron, a nice Senegalese dress, and Diouana’s silent rejection of her subjugation. I translate these totems as my education, my middle-class life, my children’s school, the size of my house, the use of my dependent voice, and the right to name my own space. My bifurcated race and class through the Black woman’s lens is not meant to deny that poor white women do not work as domestics in white middle class homes; they sometimes do. What I am claiming here is my observation that when white people, through hard work, transcend their social class; no one questions their entrance to the next level and no one ever doubts their membership. In contrast, for brown and Black people, these inquiries are always looming in the most sacred spaces, our home and our children’s schools and concert halls, for example.

**Fighting Women to Free Women**

The genesis of this paper was to expose women-to-women oppressions. I termed these “Pink Oppressions” because it is my belief that my area of study, Women and Gender, though
long venerated for promulgating the struggle of women to overcome male domination, has not imposed the same scrutiny on intra-feminine oppression based on race and class.

Framing is everything in my field, so I use the movie Black Girl by Sembene to superimpose my own life experiences onto Diouana, the main character. Throughout the paper, I use incidents from her life as a maid or “La Bonne,” the good one, to demonstrate the tenacity of race-based oppressions and the malleability of class affiliation. I arrive at the conclusion that the experiences of women like me and Diouana are on a continuum and defy time and interpenetrate locations. Diouana’s life is my mother’s life as it is my own life. The real pages from my mother’s life and my own life experiences are fictionalized in Sembene’s film. My claim of intra-oppression between women is indubitable based on what I know to be true. Here, I testify: women are not always sisters and being woman is trumped by race and class affiliation. I believe elite white women-gatekeepers in America are the most threatening to the advancement of women of color because of their complicity with the state apparatus.

Borrowing from Lorde (1996), women not acknowledging “difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women” (p. 118). White women and Black women are not equally disfavored by patriarchy, in fact, white women benefit from it. They get enough from the system to make them willing accomplices. I posit that a white, educated woman most likely benefits from the privileged social location of the normative white males in her affiliations with fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands. Someone has to be first in a system based on surplus, a system that values some and oppresses others (Lorde, 1996). My own perception is that the binary white male and white female system is still intact, and in its current makeup, white women are still a close second to white men. Outside of a call to their compassion and the political activism of women in the margin, there is nothing else that can bring about change. The institutional machine must be deconstructed to allow more differences in order to create new, fully inclusive norms overtime. It is only with the development and establishment of that new norm that we can begin to mitigate the negative impact of pink oppression; only then can we stop the feminine
aggression of a Sunday morning elevator pitch. Only with the recognition of the rights of all to work toward self-improvement and access to the same resources can we end tragedies like Diouana’s.

**A Declaration of Sentiment**

I close with an express call to women in the margin to use that marginal knowledge to penetrate the center and to act with intentions of self-actualization; to refuse to be subjugated to the brink of self-annihilation like Diouana. I submit that I willfully transgress the boundaries of class and race. I reject the sisterhood of oppression and vow to fight it wherever I face it. American women of color, including Blacks, Latinas, Chicanas, and Caribbean, need to join the consciousness-raisings about the plight of domestics in America. I surmise that maids need a political presence. I strongly encourage third wave Black and Latina feminists to promote labor laws to protect domestics in vulnerable locations in the margins of intersectionalities of oppressions in domesticity. Join my fight. Oppose pink oppressions of maids, servants, and women trapped in forced domestic-slavery.

**References**


Student Activism:
- One Billion Rising for Justice
- Love Your Body Day
- International Women’s Day
- The Clothesline Project