Our Voices

Through our eyes, *Dissenting Voices Volume 5* gives readers a chance to see how race and gender have played a role in our lives. This work seeks to give voice and agency to those of us whose experiences and wisdom have been historically cast aside, and to empower writer and reader alike through the sharing of knowledge. Our autonomy in body and mind are basic rights that stretch across many intersections and are important to fight for and secure. Navigating our experiences through the eyes of women helps us to better understand the world around us. Let’s work together and not against each other. Gender segregation is everywhere. Through our lens, our voices, and our words, equality begins here.

*Ronieka Burns,* ’16
*Brooke Love,* ’16
*Christina Mahagan,* ’16
*Natalia Manhertz,* ’16
*Brooke Ophardt,* ‘17

Dissenting Voices Cover Art

Photos by Leslie Hannon, lehannon@gmail.com
Note from the Editor

I am thrilled to introduce volume five 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 the 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 five showcases five diverse authors who employ traditional essay format to analyze an array of topics important to the Women and Gender Studies discipline. Opening the volume is a remarkable essay that uses a queer lens to examine ways concepts of female masculinity and male privilege operate in lesbian identity and lesbian relationships. A well-timed critique of cyberbullying in feminist spaces follows, where the author interrogates ways performance of gender norms exacerbates cyberbullying and cyber victimization among women and girls. Centering the volume is an important reading of women and the Black Lives Matter movement where the author considers the significance of past and present Black feminist activism. Two essays bookend the volume. The first is a reflective look at the exclusion of women in the medical field. The closing essay offers a powerful writing on body autonomy during pregnancy where the author argues that market and government commodification of reproduction are increasingly stripping women of personhood rights.

Using a critical lens with an eye toward feminist reform, volume five challenges power structures that privilege some while exclude others. Students’ writing straddles deep-seated ideology that inscribes identity in an effort to diffuse the many societal structures and policies that complicate gender equality measures. Whether research scrutinizes sexuality and gender performance, troubles cyborg navigation, traces Black feminist
activism, dissects gender segregation of work, or assesses body commodification and autonomy, writers in this volume ask: How can we confront and counter patriarchal dominance and oppression, and how might we better see and locate the agency and voice to level gender equality outcomes?

Similar to prior semesters, and as an extension of in-class work, students engaged in several activist projects including a One Billion Rising Revolution flash mob, Career Conversations with artist Endia Beal, a collaboratively designed Clothesline Project installation, a Fannie Barrier Williams ceremony, and a Susan B. Anthony House visit and tour. The e-Journal concludes with a photo essay that documents these women and gender-informed activities. Bridging theory with praxis, 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 2016 class, is this dream forward.

Barbara LeSavoy, PhD
Director, Women and Gender Studies
Executive Editor, Dissenting Voices
Opening Voices

Lesbians, Masculinities, and Privilege: The Gendering of Sexuality and the Privileging of Gender ................................. 1
Brooke Love

Cyberbullying: Feminine Vulnerability in Anonymous Spaces ...... 25
Christina Mahagan

Women and the Black Lives Matter Movement: Relevance Past to Present ................................................................. 43
Ronieka Burns

Women in Medicine: Exclusions in Practice ................................. 63
Natalia Manhertz

Body Autonomy During Pregnancy: Where Did It Go? ................. 79
Brooke Ophardt

More Voices

WMS 421 Spring 2016 Activism Photo Essay ................................. 95
One Billion Rising: V-Day Stop Violence against Women
The Clothesline Project
Career Conversations with Endia Beal Lecture
Fannie Barrier Williams Women of Courage Celebration
Susan B. Anthony House Visit and Tour
Dissenting Voices Editorial Board

Executive Editor
Barbara LeSavoy, PhD, The College at Brockport

Managing Editor
Pat Maxwell, MLS, The College at Brockport

Editorial Board
Tristan Bridges, PhD, The College at Brockport
Barbara Mitrano, EdD, The College at Brockport
Megan Obourn, PhD, The College at Brockport
Lesbians, Masculinities, and Privilege:
The Privileging of Gender and the Gendering of Sexuality

Though LGBTQ individuals, experiences, and communities have been increasingly recognized as valuable subjects of research, the existing body of research on and about this population is still significantly lacking. In a field so young and full of controversy, it is vital that research be done that gives voice and agency to LGBTQ individuals, their experiences and lifestyles. This paper will introduce readers to the concept of “female masculinity” and, specifically, the complicated relationships many lesbian identities have with different configurations of masculinity. I will introduce the concepts of “butch” lesbian identities and “femme” lesbian identities as well as their relation to one another. I will dispel stereotypes about butch/femme identities and behaviors, and explore some of the diversity of lesbian identities and gender performance in which gay women have participated within the community. Using existing research and scholarship on the subject of lesbian masculinity, this paper expands the academic discussion on the ways that gender identity is performed in lesbian spaces. I will explore and explain the current theoretical and empirical research related to the subject of lesbian masculinity, summarize contributions to this scholarly dialogue, and incorporate my own vision for the future of queer studies.
Introduction

Academic and scientific fields of study have historically devalued and ignored the experiences of women as a whole. This is especially true for women who belong to marginalized categories of identity, such as women of color, impoverished women, and gender and sexual minorities. This lack of representation has resulted in a deficit of knowledge on the experiences, opportunities, and lifestyles of people in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) communities and a scholarly need for research and discussion that will help to validate LGBTQ identities and experiences. This particular paper summarizes research on the experiences of lesbian women, their relationships with masculinity, and the ways that their relationships with masculinity affect their personal relationships and the lesbian community more broadly. I determine whether lesbians who exude “masculinity” through style of dress or behavior may gain access to the kind of privilege that is typically reserved for men who achieve a version of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) or the culturally idealized configuration of masculinity. I also examine the ways that lesbian masculinities disrupt commonly accepted understandings of gender as well as how this impacts lesbian relationships. These alternative masculinities not only dismantle the biologically reductionist notion that masculinity must be reserved for male-bodied persons, but the variety of masculinities among lesbians also refutes the heteronormative assumption of the necessity of gendered roles within romantic relationships.

Scholars have often argued that butch identities and lesbian masculinities are merely reflections of heterosexual gender relations or that they reproduce heteronormative gendered scripts. I argue, however, that the kinds of gendered behavior and relationships among and between lesbians are unique to the lesbian community. Rather than simply reproducing straight relationships and identities, masculinity within the lesbian community demonstrates one way in which gendered behavior is challenged rather than merely reproduced. While masculine lesbians may participate in a form of heteronormative gender presentation, there is different meaning attached to their gender presentation inherent in the context of their identity as queer. Lesbian masculinities are explicitly at odds with and challenge the
very notion that masculinity is inherently male-bodied or biological in nature. Thus, merely through their existence, lesbian masculinities disrupt and trouble theories of gender in so far as they provide an inherent challenge to biologically deterministic theories of gender. While gender and sexuality are usually thought of as being rooted in particular bodies, masculine women’s ability to separate masculinity from biological maleness demonstrates the instability of the commonly accepted conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality.

Current scholarship demonstrates an attitude by many feminist and gender scholars that masculinity in women’s (and specifically lesbians’) bodies is actually something quite different than the masculinity performed by men. Examining female masculinity as it is experienced by women who date women is an opportunity to consider the ways that sex, gender, gender expression, and sexuality come together to create individual identities within the context of competing societal understandings of gendered behavior, sexuality, and the interactions that support and challenge these belief systems.

Our society continues to support and perpetuate an attitude that men and women have different roles and that they must experience masculinity and femininity as both entirely separate and entirely opposite. Scholars who study gender have demonstrated a number of ways in which this societal understanding of a true or natural gender dichotomy is not only flawed, but even nonexistent (Butler, 1990, 1993; Halberstam, 1998; Rubin, 1975/2011). The disruption of this dichotomy implicit in butch lesbian performances of self forces scholars of gender and sexuality to consider what masculinity and femininity mean in a new light, how they are enacted, who can participate, and the consequences of participation for different groups of people.

This paper will first acknowledge the language used to discuss gender identity and presentation among lesbians, defining terminology that scholars have used previously and that I use within this paper to describe and explain the appropriation of gender. I will then describe my own background and qualifications for writing on this subject by informing the reader of my history and identity and explaining my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. After this introductory section of the paper, I will present the scholarly work that has informed this research and the
conclusions I draw from it by comparing and contrasting theories and perspectives that various scholars have developed. From here, the paper will analyze the aforementioned scholarship and describe the reasoning behind my conclusions.

Terminology
The following words and phrases will be used throughout the text and are important to understanding the topic as well as the argument made by this paper. Though this brief section is not able to truly capture the complications of these words and their history and meaning, within the context of this research, operationally defining this terminology will help to make complex concepts easier for readers to grasp. The definitions provided are simplified summaries of vast concepts that will gain meaning and dimension within the context of my writing, therefore, readers should expect to gain only a rudimentary understanding of the fundamental principles of these terms and concepts from this section alone. This list is in no way an exhaustive list of all language or jargon used in gender or queer studies, but rather, an introduction to concepts that will be addressed within the body of this paper. I have selected these particular terms for explanation because I believe them to be of significant importance for comprehension of the arguments made within the paper. This section helps to clarify these concepts so that readers can appreciate the ways in which I will be drawing connections between a diverse body of existing scholarship.

Gender: The term “gender” refers to the identity attached to characteristics that culture delineates as masculine or feminine in behavior and presentation. Gender encompasses the character traits and behaviors that a given society often associates with a social and legal status as “man” or “woman.” Although gender as masculine and feminine are personified through unique behaviors that are not tied to or linked to sex statuses (such as male and female), gender as a behavior lacks physicality and only gains meaning as it is placed on or performed by bodies.

Sex: The term “sex” is often mistaken for a synonym for “gender.” In this paper and more broadly, sex refers to categories of male, female, or intersex based on biological factors including chromosomes, hormonal profiles, and the presence of specific internal and external sex organs.

Gender Performance: Gender theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1993)
explains gender as a performance that is accomplished by all individuals to demonstrate and express their own sense of identity. Butler (1990, 1993) understands gender performance to refer to a continuous repetition of actions and patterns of behavior that accumulate to form what we understand as “gender.” Rather than being an inherent element of an individual’s being, gender is an identity constructed and performed in such a manner that those around them as well as the actor themselves believe the performance to be their true identity. Butler also draws an essential distinction between the “performance” and “performativity” of gender. Calling gender a performance refers to the ways that we actively create gender categories and meanings. To refer to gender as performative is to claim that the performance itself provides the impression that there is a gendered subject behind that performance—the idea that we have a true gendered, core self. Butler (1990) suggests that this belief is itself a product of gender performance, and to that extent, she calls gender “performative” and believes gender to be real only to the extent that it is performed.

**Butch:** This term is difficult to summarize and highly flexible. Use of this term is incredibly dependent on context and personal preferences. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using “butch” to describe lesbian women who self-identify as “butch” or who others identify as “butch.” Butch is a masculine lesbian identity that is often cast as the opposite of the more feminine lesbian identity, commonly referred to as “femme.” This lesbian vernacular term is used to describe women who are generally more comfortable identifying with masculine traits and gender performances including style. Butch women are masculine presenting, often wearing men’s clothing, cologne, sporting short haircuts, and sometimes further minimizing markers of femininity such as flattening their breasts or intentionally lowering their voices. Butch lesbians distance themselves from femininity typically by avoiding makeup and jewelry associated with femininity and participating in behaviors and rhetoric often reserved for heterosexual men. Butch women often participate in bodily motion, positioning, and other behaviors more often culturally linked to masculinity (possibly including sitting positions, posture, and stride) (Halberstam, 1998).

**Femme:** Like the term “butch,” femme is difficult to describe with only
one definition, as it is understood and experienced differently by many individuals. In the context of this paper, “femme” will be understood as a particular configuration of lesbian identity. “Femme” here is used to describe women who identify themselves or who others identify as feminine lesbians, often portrayed as the opposite of butch lesbians. Femme lesbians’ gender expression is characterized as feminine, often meaning that they appear to most people to approximate (or even exaggerate) heterosexual feminine norms. They typically have long hair, dress in clothing marketed to women, and wear makeup and jewelry. Femme lesbians happen to embrace and enjoy socially sanctioned versions of feminine appearance and behavior and celebrate this enjoyment in their performance of gender (Eves, 2004).

Masculinity/Masculinities: The terms “masculine” and “masculinity” or “masculinities” will be used to refer to traits and behaviors stereotypically considered to be ascribed to men or most commonly participated in by men. Though it is fairly uncommon to encounter the term “masculinities” outside of feminist and queer scholarship, it is vital that I use it within this paper to acknowledge the true abundance of possible forms that masculinity can (and does) take. Different people experience masculinity differently, and these different masculinities may look vastly different on each one of them (Connell, 1995).

Femininity/Femininities: For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to use the terms “feminine” and “femininity” or “femininities” to refer to the traits and behaviors that are stereotypically considered for or enacted by women. As with the term “masculinity/masculinities,” the pluralization of femininity – femininities – is used to acknowledge the multiplicity of forms that a feminine identity may take. One can be feminine in a number of ways, and what constitutes femininity may vary depending on culture and identity and look very different on different individuals (Schippers, 2007).

Female Masculinity: Female masculinity refers to instances in which individuals who identify as female participate in dress, behavior, or conversation that society attributes to and proscribes to men. The leading scholar on female masculinity, J. Jack Halberstam (1998), introduces the idea that female masculinity is masculinity without men, or masculinity experienced and performed by female-
bodied persons. Halberstam (1998) explains that “in alternative models of gender variation, female masculinity is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity,” but rather “the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce wildly unpredictable results” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 29) The analysis of female masculinity contains the potential for new understandings of gender and gendered behavior, as female masculinity challenges the assumption that conventional models of gender conformity demand.

**Hegemonic Masculinity:**
Sociologist Raewyn Connell (1987) first theorized masculinities as plural in an attempt to make sense of variation among (as well as between) women and men alike. She perceived that there were different configurations of gender practice that exist in a hierarchy and as an important social dynamic through which gender inequality is reproduced (Connell, 1995). To make sense of this hierarchy, Connell (1987) refers to the most culturally idealized form of masculinity as “hegemonic masculinity,” a configuration that exerts power over and dominates all other configurations of gender practice. This configuration is constantly shifting, but often is associated with specific characteristics that position someone as an authority who is capable of violence (Connell, 1987, 1995).

**Heteronormativity:**
Heteronormativity describes the manner in which it is assumed that a person is heterosexual by default and the way in which society is organized to accommodate and reward heterosexual identities. To be heteronormative is related to the idea that heterosexuality is the only acceptable or natural form of sexuality, while in fact there are many different sexual orientations and complex romantic identities among multiple configurations of sexual identity.

**About the Author**
It is important for me to acknowledge that I do not approach this subject free of bias. My research and this paper are undeniably and heavily influenced by my own opinions and life experiences. For these reasons, I feel that it is important for the readers of this paper to understand a little bit about its author. I am a feminine, white, middle class, 24-year-old woman who has been dating women since the ninth grade. I grew up in a charming town in the Finger Lakes region of New York State, was one of approximately three “out”
lesbians in my large high school, and have spent my college career learning about gender and sexuality to provide women like myself with a voice to contribute to the academic conversation about our identities and communities. For these reasons, I am personally and deeply invested in this topic and my standpoint has value for the future of queer studies.

The unique perspective from which I write this piece certainly has an important impact on the arguments made in this paper. My position as a lesbian and a feminist inform my existing knowledge on the subject matter and influence my choice in topic. While I am a lesbian, I do not identify as “butch” and I am sure that other lesbians would not identify me as such. I would describe myself, and most likely, other lesbians would classify me as “femme” based on my appearance, dress, and behavior. Though I may not be a butch lesbian, my writing and research on this subject are influenced by my relationships, both romantic and platonic, with masculine women and my own experiences navigating what I am referring to as “female masculinity.”

Though the details of my dating history and my friendships may not seem relevant to you the reader or to the research on female masculinity, it is through my experiences with other lesbian women that I have come to realize my fascination with masculinity and develop the perspective on the subject that I now have. Kristin G. Esterberg’s (1996) chapter, “A Certain Swagger When I Walk: Performing Lesbian Identity,” discusses the manner in which research on lesbians has often failed to include actual empirical accounts of lesbian women’s experiences and identities. Thus, not only has the existing body of research “failed to reflect the very real and complicated ways in which lesbians and gay men think and talk about their lives” (Esterberg, 1996, p. 260), but it has failed to validate the very identities and experiences of the subjects. As I have developed my sense of self, my identity as a lesbian and a feminist, and my participation in the LGBTQ community over the years, I have made interesting observations and been able to consider female masculinity from within the community. This means that while I did not engage in participant observation for this research, it is entirely appropriate to claim that I have been an “observing participant” for roughly half of my life. Through the way that I have experienced my own identity as lesbian, and as an insider of the community, I am able to write from
a place of experience and involvement within my subject matter. My education in Women and Gender Studies has provided me the research, language, and the theoretical framework within which I now understand, question, and discuss these observations and explore the existing research and theory on the concepts within this paper. Through this paper, I hope not only to describe the complexities of lesbian masculinities, but to provide voice and agency to the members of my community who have been spoken over by those who research their lives.

**Butch: A Brief History**

Before examining the literature on the complexities of masculinity and lesbian identity, it is essential to consider the history of the lesbian community in the United States of America, how these identities came to be understood and recognized, and how they may or may not have changed over time. Though the history of LGBTQ identities stretches back far beyond the scope of this paper, this section of the paper will consider the development of lesbian women’s identities from the 1930s until the 1970s. These particular decades are important to the development and understanding of this essay because it was during this period of time that modern understandings of homosexuality began to emerge and when the beginnings of contemporary lesbian subcultures began to develop (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy & Davis, 1993).

In their examination of an oral history of the working class lesbian community, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (1993) introduce a brief history of the formation of lesbian identity during the early 1900s. Beginning in the late 1930s and extending until the rise of the gay liberation and the feminist movements of the 1970s, Kennedy and Davis (1993) discuss the transformation of lesbian identities, communities, and sexualities, specifically those that were developing in Buffalo, New York. In its infancy in the 1930s and early 1940s, when women began to move out of the private realm of the home for employment and social purposes during the second World War, the lesbian community emerged out of the surge in women’s autonomy and their new opportunities to meet one another. By the time the war was over, communities had formed around these women’s “explicit sexual interest in other women,” and these communities continued to develop over the following decades (Kennedy & Davis,
With the development of community came the maturation of lesbian identities and expression of self. Lillian Faderman (1991) explores the details of these years and their rich historical significance to the development of lesbian gender identities, discussing the difficulties that faced a community of women who previously had neither identity nor community. Indeed, in a way, homosexuality did not exist before this time, and was certainly not a characteristic belonging to individuals. It was at this point in history that homosexuality moved from a medical diagnosis of behavior (or what would have been classified at this time as symptoms) to a social and sexual form of identity. This was the emergence of the dichotomy that we continue to see today between groups who identify as “hetero” or “homo,” “straight” or “gay.” Faderman (1991) describes this shift in social definition, explaining that for the first time, lesbians “not only loved homosexually; they were homosexuals” (p.156). Kennedy and Davis (1993) also call attention to the significance of this change, describing how behaviors and desires previously considered pathological due to their difference gradually became indicators by which women organized themselves into communities with other women who “experienced themselves as different” and recognized that “this difference was a core part of their identity” (p. 8). This shift in the understanding of homosexuality created a whole new category of identity, one in which same sex attraction was not an ailment of the mind, but a thing that a person could actually be instead of have.

Though this newly formed classification of identity gave lesbian women a term with which to describe themselves, their behavior, and desires, it did not protect them from the stigmatization of their communities and they were still considered deviant and perverted by overarching American culture at the time. This discrimination, along with the newly emerging sense of community that stemmed from a common identity category, resulted in the formation of lesbian subcultures united not only against the “common enemy of homophobia,” but in the challenge of conceptualizing themselves and their identities from scratch (Faderman, 1991, p. 160). With essentially no history against which to define themselves or to use as guiding principles in the formation of their new community, lesbians were both free to imagine whatever they wished as well as limited to what they were able to
conceptualize based on the world they knew (Faderman, 1991).

Faderman’s (1991) explanation of how “butch” and “femme” emerged from this period of plasticity follows a somewhat essentialist theory of gender. Her explanation for this categorization of lesbian women reasons that, without any other models on which to base their identities, lesbians were forced to rely on heteronormative ideas of gender roles by default in the formation of their subculture groups (Faderman, 1991). Because heterosexual relationships and male and female gender identities were the only examples that lesbian women had ever observed, they were limited in that “a functioning couple for them meant dichotomous individuals, if not male and female, then butch and femme” (Faderman, 1991, p.167). The world, at this time, was divided strictly into masculine and feminine, and even within the context of a homosexual lesbian community, there were no other options.

Kennedy and Davis (1993) also note the prominence and crucial significance of butch-femme roles during the development of lesbian communities in the 1940s and 50s. The authors acknowledge that these roles were, in a number of ways, derivative of the common heterosexual gender model. They discuss the manner in which butch and femme identities, behaviors, and symbols were “embedded in the dominant society,” specifically, the heteronormative and patriarchal society (Kennedy & Davis, 1991, p. 11). They explain:

During this period, manipulation of the basic ingredient of patriarchy – the hierarchical distinction between male and female – continued to be an effective way for the working-class lesbian community to give public expression to its affirmation of women’s autonomy and women’s romantic and sexual interest in women. (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 6)

While Kennedy and Davis (1993) appear to agree with many of Faderman’s (1991) theories about the origination of butch and femme identities, the authors challenge Faderman’s implication that the lesbian women at this time were passive participants in the creation of their own history and identities. Rather than writing of women as “active forces in history” (Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 13), Faderman (1991) discusses the creation of lesbian subcultures as if it were an inevitable happening outside of
the women’s control. Kennedy and Davis (1993) contest the assumption that a heterosexual model was utilized out of convenience and recreated the conventional patterns of dominance seen within heterosexual romances, explaining that butch women’s masculinity actually “usurp[ed] male privilege in appearance and sexuality” and their relationships with other lesbians “outraged society by creating a romantic and sexual unit within which women were not under male control” (p. 6). In this context, the butch-femme relationships and roles are not merely an imitation of the surrounding straight and sexist society. While the roles of butch and femme individuals may have been derived of the surrounding heterosexual world, they helped to shape an authentically and specifically lesbian lifestyle and community (Kennedy & Davis, 1993).

Even within this analysis of the history and development of what are currently understood as butch and femme identities, it is clear that scholars are divided on the origins and meanings of lesbian behaviors and relationship models. The arguments made by other scholars demonstrate the different understandings of what it means to be butch, the consequences of butchness, and how butch-femme relationships reflect upon heterosexual ones. It is the consideration of this notion – that butch and femme lesbian identities simply rely on the preexisting heteronormative model of gender and relationship roles – that many gender scholars disagree upon and that this paper will examine in greater depth.

Lesbian Identities, Heteronormativity, and the Transgression of Gender Norms

While the idea of women and girls participating in, expressing, and experiencing masculinity or masculinities is not entirely new, it is still an emergent area of scholarly literature without easily identifiable boundaries. Scholarship and theory on the subject is relatively scarce, but what is available is a fascinating collection of work discussing essentially what femininity and masculinity really mean and how lesbian identities and relationships interact with these meanings. There has been controversy over butch identities and lesbian masculinity since women began to openly express and label these qualities. Radical and lesbian feminisms have had an unfriendly relationship with masculinity as a whole that is often directed specifically at masculine lesbians (Tong, 2014). The argument
seems to be mostly over whether women’s participation in masculinity is promoting heteronormative and heteropatriarchal gender roles and imitating heterosexuality common to heteropatriarchy or challenging these concepts. There have been compelling arguments written for both conclusions over the past few decades and this portion of the paper will explore and analyze the main points and arguments of the existing texts. Feminist scholar Rosemarie Tong (2014) summarizes decades of compelling arguments that divide radical cultural (female centered) and radical libertarian (androgyny centered) feminists’ theoretical frameworks to qualify ways these thinkers and writers consider the social and political dimension of lesbian gender and sexual identity. I use this existing literature to examine the complicated question of if or how butch lesbians might have access to privilege via their masculinity.

Possibly the most influential author on the subject of female masculinity is J. Jack Halberstam, professor, author, and gender scholar, whose book *Female Masculinity* (1998) has had an enormous influence on this paper as well as countless other works by gender scholars in all fields. Halberstam’s (1998) work is possibly the most in-depth analysis of the subject of female masculinity that exists to date. In his scholarship, Halberstam (1998) argues that rather than masculinity being a quality inherently belonging to the male sex, it is really a group of character traits and behaviors that may exist within and upon bodies of all sorts. Not only does he describe the ability of women to participate in and enact masculinity, but he also analyzes the assortment of virtually infinite gender expression possibilities among masculine women. Halberstam (1998) reaches for new understandings of masculine identities and breaks down queer scholarship on the subjects of masculinity, homosexuality and their relationships with one another.

Judith Butler (1990) is also among the leading gender scholars who writes about the ways that gender manifests upon bodies and is performed by the individuals who reside within those bodies. Butler’s (1990, 1993) theories of gender performance and performativity challenge the commonly accepted notion that gender is something that is inherent in the human body and experience and argue instead that one’s learned performance of femininity or masculinity is an act or performance, one that is compulsory due to heteronormative and
heterosexist society. Based on this philosophy, in which gender is an entity independent of biological sex, “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body and a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 1990, p.10). Butler’s (1990, 1993) theories are of extreme importance to arguments made about gender because of their radical rejection of conventional notions that sex and gender are inextricably linked to one another and are fixed within the body. This understanding disconnects masculinity from biological maleness and femininity from biological femaleness, permitting the existence of marginal identities such as butch lesbians whose gender identity contradict essentialist gender theories.

Another author who has attempted to tackle this topic in a piece titled “Patriarchy, Power, and Female Masculinity” (2008) for the Journal of Homosexuality is Athena Nguyen. Nguyen (2008) explains that butch women have been abhorred for bringing an undesirable masculinity into what some lesbian women consider to be a community that is meant to be a kind of sanctuary from men and the power of masculinity. In their contact with other women, especially femme women, butch lesbians are seen as “colluding with the patriarchy through treating women as men do, such as by objectifying women, by wanting to be the physically stronger or dominant partner, or by pursuing women as sexual ‘conquests” (Nguyen, 2008, p. 668). This description captures part of one feminist argument against butch identities and female masculinity. She continues to explain that female masculinity is particularly frowned upon by such theorists when performed by a butch lesbian because lesbian feminists tend to observe and analyze her actions as participation in patriarchal masculinity adopted with an intention to enjoy male privilege and power through participation in practices that subordinate other women (Nguyen, 2008).

Nguyen (2008) is not alone in her analysis of feminism’s critique of butch identities. This idea of lesbians coveting masculine traits and behaviors in order to somehow fake their way into a privileged space at the disadvantage of other women is a popular theory for feminist scholars who opt for similar argument. Further explanation of the aversion to female masculinity can be seen in work by Carrie Paechter (2006) and Evelyn Blackwood (2012).
Paechter’s (2006) piece, entitled “Masculine Femininities/Feminine Masculinities: Power, Identities, and Gender” explores the idea of butchness allowing access to male privilege, describing the manner in which women can claim power by distancing themselves from stereotypical configurations of femininity. She writes that by rejecting classic forms of the feminine, butch women and tomboys reject what she refers to as the disempowerment that comes along with a feminine identity (Paechter, 2006). Paechter (2006) claims that masculinity performed by female-bodied individuals and the “adoption of a form of hegemonic masculinity” leads to a “claiming of a share of male power through acting as an honorary boy” (p. 257). By this logic, in distancing themselves from a form of gender identity that they observe to be underprivileged, these women knowingly employ a strategy through which they may gain access to privilege that they would otherwise be denied.

Yet this is complicated when the female individual is also a lesbian. Paechter (2006) discusses the manner in which butch women are both attracted to the feminine qualities that they see in their partners and sort of internally opposed to femininity, although I would argue that this statement is presumptuous and in no way true for all butch women. She also goes on to explain that butch as a gender identity, just like men and masculinity, requires “the feminine as its Other” (p. 10), making butch not much of anything and certainly not “transgressive” without the stereotyped femininity with which to compare itself (Paechter, 2006). Similarly, Evelyn Blackwood (2012) explores the same issues in a slightly different manner, describing the idea that butch and femme lesbians may have trouble envisioning something outside of the realm of the strict gender dichotomy offered by the dominant culture. Hence, the dichotomy of butch and femme is so often situated as mirroring heteronormative ideals. Blackwood (2012) explains that while masculine women transgress gender norms, their participation in masculinity often serves to “reflect the dominant ideology in their presentation of masculinity” because of the kinds of “masculine” behaviors in which they may participate (p. 95). In this way, rather than queering the gender binary, as scholars often think of the kinds of gender expressions enacted by lesbian identified women, Paechter (2006) and Blackwood (2012) suggest that the gender binary of masculine men and
feminine women is reinforced despite being enacted by same-sexed bodies. Though each of these arguments appears to discredit any validation of female masculinity in lesbian bodies, both Paechter (2006) and Blackwood (2012) discuss and situate butchness as something quite different than the masculinity performed by men, a point that is extremely important to identify.

The work of Halberstam (1998) argues that rather than being some sort of imitation of machismo, lesbian masculinities are really manifestations of genuine merged gender identities. Halberstam (1998) writes of “gender outlaws” and “gender warriors” whose existence functions to dispel gender conformity and challenge the notion of compulsory gender. While feminism and queer scholarship have brought some awareness and a small sense of change to perspectives on gender, and some men and women are feeling increasingly empowered to experiment with the limits of masculinity and femininity, our culture still dictates that we script gender for male and female bodies in “remarkably consistent and restrictive ways” and cling to a strict dichotomy of gender in which only two opposing kinds exist (Halberstam, 1998, p. 118). It is important to identify that female masculinity and lesbianism are not synonymous terms, but equally important to understand the strong force that masculinity has historically had within lesbian experiences and identities. In Halberstam’s (1998) words, “because masculinity has seemed to play an important and even crucial role in some lesbian self-definition, we have a word for lesbian masculinity: butch” (p. 120). Here, it is clear that rather than being the same masculinity that is experienced by male-bodied individual, being butch means to experience a unique masculinity or masculinities. Women design, enact, and name new kinds of masculinities unique to their female bodies, and while at times these new masculinities may be “produced as new renditions of male masculinities; sometimes they are produced as original forms of a growing sub-culture” (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 276-277). Like performances of drag, the emergent forms of masculinities that Halberstam (1998) documents are not exactly carbon copies of masculinities among males. Rather, they rework the form, meaning, and content in ways that are unique to female masculinity. Thus, like Butler’s (1990, 1993) discussion of drag as offering a potential site of transgression rather than reproduction, female masculinities also offer an interesting
site of potential transgression and transformation. Whether that potential is realized is both a theoretical and empirical question.

Lillian Faderman’s (1991) *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* differentiates between male masculinities and butch masculinities within a specifically historical context. Following her aforementioned exploration of the notion that the butch/femme dichotomy is shaped with the male/female or masculine/feminine dichotomous mold, Faderman (1991) addresses the proposal by lesbian historians like Joan Nestle and Judy Grahn that, as Halberstam (1998) will come to conclude, butch lesbians are not in fact copying men but offering a new and different way of experiencing womanhood. The historians assert that butch and femme roles in the 1950s were not based on the social and sexual models that lesbians grew up observing, but rather “on natural drives (such as ‘butch sexuality’ and ‘femme sexuality’) and on lesbian-specific, lesbian-culturally developed behavior” (Faderman, 1991, p. 169). While butches and femmes were left with little choice but to use descriptive language modeled on the way that heterosexual couples spoke to and of each other, and the resulting roles were often similar to roles expected from heterosexual men and women at the time, the dynamics of a butch-femme relationship were fundamentally different than the heteronormative model (Faderman, 1991). It was not that butch women desired to be men, Faderman (1991) declares:

It was rather that for many of them in an era of neat pigeonholes the apparent logic of the connection between sexual object choice and gender identification was overwhelming, and lacking the support of a history that contradicted that connection, they had no encouragement at that time to formulate new conceptions. (p.170)

This sentiment was reiterated within the testimony of the lesbians interviewed in Faderman’s (1991) research for her book. According to one butch woman, the strategy of modelling lesbian gender roles in the 1950s on traditional male-female roles was essential to the emerging lesbian community as lesbian women were “too busy trying to survive in a hostile world to have time to create new roles for ourselves” (Faderman, 1991, p. 167). While these statements were made
specifically about the kinds of lesbian gender roles that were emerging within lesbian subcultures in the 1950s, they help us to understand the way in which a dichotomy may have formed within the lesbian community due (in part) to heteronormativity but not simply through the imitation of heterosexuality. While the limitations of language and the lack of models on which to base their relationships left lesbian women divided into identities that seemed to look a whole lot like traditional relationships between men and women, in reality, the lesbian “genders” that emerged at this time were an expression of the articulation of “active and complex desire between women” (Halberstam, 1998, p.115). The signification of this desire manifested through butch and femme roles, and rather than reinforcing the gender roles created within the heteropatriarchy, this formation of tangible lesbian identities produced “new and fully functional masculinities, masculinities, moreover, that thrive on the disjuncture between femaleness and masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p.119). In this way, by using roles that may have originated from the most rudimentary notions of the heterosexual world (dichotomy of identities, roles, masculinity, femininity), lesbians were (and are) still rejecting heterosexuality and relationship roles.

Adding to the explanation of the critiques on butch identities, Athena Nguyen (2008) describes the way that butchness represents the transformation of masculinity rather than the rejection of femininity. Nguyen (2008) argues that “butch” is really its very own sort of gender within the lesbian community – a configuration that is neither distinctly male nor distinctly female or even just masculinity displayed on a female body as some of the feminist critiques imply. As Nguyen (2008) states:

To conceive of butch women as simply being women who have adopted masculine characteristics is too simplistic;…[it]presumes a default feminine/female body that has been perverted in various ways through the attempted adoption of masculine traits…[and] fails to recognize how masculinity is the means through which the butch body becomes gendered and comes into being (p.672).

The idea of “butch” as an identity does not exist without both a female sexed body and the ability of that body to perform masculinity, making masculinity really the means by which a
butch identity comes to be in the first place. Similar to Butler’s (1990) suggestion that all gender is performative to the extent that it relies on and radically reinterprets the very bodies of those engaged in gender performance, butch identities are also performative. While we certainly feel that our unique identity is the source of our behavior and actions, Butler (1990) contends that our sense of independent agency and subjectivity is really a consequence of the enactment of a social understanding of what gender is and means. Within the lesbian community, as a population of female sexed bodies, there can be a difference in gender, somehow both reinforcing and destroying the strict gender binary to which our culture still clings. Nguyen’s (2008) explanation seems complex, but further writing on this idea addresses this issue in greater depth.

Other scholars follow the same path, explaining initially what kinds of arguments exist against lesbian butch identities and then, explaining how these identities might actually be something different altogether. Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis’ (1993) *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* explores such butch identities. Kennedy and Davis’ (1993) work demonstrates that butch and femme identities challenge and explore gender meanings rather than imitating heterosexual gender expectations. Butch women experience their gender identity as neither conventionally man nor woman. Rather than relying upon or imitating heterosexuality, butch masculinities and appearances are cultivated with the intent of publicizing their difference from heterosexuality and their explicit interest in other women. The visible expression of this gender difference is truly a resistance to the heterosexist, heteronormative world, signifying the ways that butch women transgress gender (Blackwood, 2012).

Kennedy and Davis’s (1993) historical research also addresses the issue of whether or not butch-femme relationships and communities reproduce the kind of hierarchies among men that can be observed in the heterosexual community as well as divisions among women or whether they actually challenge men’s claim to power. Their argument is that while butch women may not challenge gender polarity directly and are able to acquire male privilege to a certain extent, they are radical because their lives as women living like men leaves them vulnerable to exposure. While the butch-femme
dichotomy is certainly derived in part from heterosexual gender models and expectations, they are far more complex than a simple imitation and are a “specifically lesbian culture and lifestyle” (Blackwood, 2012, p. 97). This conclusion is supported by Nguyen’s (2008) work, in which she describes that:

Being butch does not consist of an assumed access to masculinity; rather, it is a defiant claim of masculinity. Butch is often performed defensively, encompassing both the defensiveness that women within a sexually violent patriarchal society may feel, as well as the defensiveness of being lesbian within a violently heteronormative society. Therefore, butch is not an unaltered imitation of masculinity, where imitation is the highest form of flattery, but rather butch masculinity sits in an uncomfortable and antagonistic relation to hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, challenges the privilege of masculinity as being accorded to men (p. 674).

While many butch lesbians may refer to themselves as “one of the guys” through their masculinity and access to friendships with men that feminine women may be denied, their relationship with masculinity is much more complicated. Some butch women describe this complexity by explaining that while they cannot and do not wish to achieve the identity of a man, they “can be absorbed into their world a little bit more and be accepted” in ways that other women would not be (Wright, 2008, p. 107). The ability of these women to so authentically identify with qualities that have been culturally classified as strictly for men challenges our ideas about gender as a whole. Judith Butler (1990) argues that “gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscriptions of meaning on a pregiven sex… gender must also be designated the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (p. 11). This argument is demonstrated through the butch woman’s ability to gender her body as not man, but butch. While we associate traits like “a strong degree of independence, self-direction, and self-esteem” along with tough attitudes and a masculine physical appearance with higher measures of masculinity in an individual, is it possible that these traits are independent of gender identity (Finlay & Scheltema, 1999)? And would it be so bad or strange if they were?
According to all of these arguments, some lesbians who are happy to be identified with masculine traits may, in fact, experience some benefits in certain situations compared to feminine women, but only within the context of their homosexuality. Their masculinity is not really an attempt to gain access to the kind of privilege held typically by white straight men, though it can give them the illusion of a similar privilege if they are around other marginalized individuals such as feminine lesbians or, really, other women in general. Rather than being the motivation for female masculinity, privilege is actually the consequence of female masculinity on some occasions. Though privilege may be associated with butch identities under certain circumstances, this is not the result of an intentional quest for access to privilege, but an inadvertent result of heteronormative culture and heteropatriarchy. By obtaining and performing masculinity for themselves, butch lesbians are not merely mimicking heteronormative gender roles, they are changing the meaning of those roles as well as the meaning of gender itself.

**Disrupting Dichotomy**

This transformation of masculinity as it appears on the butch lesbian body is something that I have observed in my own life for many years, though it is difficult to describe outside of the realm of gender theory. In my past relationships with butch lesbians, I found myself often challenged by the idea that participation in a butch-femme relationship, or even friendship, placed me within a heteronormative relationship model that had been culturally prescribed to me. I felt for a while as though, rather than escaping from relationships in which an imbalance of power existed based on gender roles, I had simply replaced one gendered dichotomy and one imbalance of power with another. Without the education or experience to truly understand this thought, it lingered with me for many years, and I was left without the language to describe it or even the capacity to really define my unease.

As I began to take interest in feminist literature and theories of gender and sexuality, I found myself drawn to the topic of masculinity. I gained some perspective, relationship and social experience with other lesbians, and became gradually better versed in gender theories and the Women and Gender Studies field as a whole. As I gained this perspective, I began to develop a new understanding of the
true depth and complexity of that indescribable thing that I felt. It came from a place that may be experienced by all people who do not comfortably fit within this societies’ gender rules, or possibly, from a unique femme lesbian context, but what I came to understand was that my problem was really with gender itself.

While some before me have felt this same unease in terms of lesbian masculinity, they have defined this feeling as a sense of loss of power, something that butch lesbians take from them through their appropriation of masculinity. While I felt similarly at one point, through my in depth study of masculinity and lesbians, I have come to understand that this is a false sense of blameworthiness placed upon butch lesbian identities who are truly disrupting the gender dichotomy and power imbalance of heteronormative gender and heteropatriarchy rather than upholding it.

**Conclusion**

As lesbian communities and identities developed from the early twentieth century and to this day, the formation and understanding of the butch identity has received a large amount of attention from feminists and scholars. The butch ability to queer gender – to acquire, embody, and utilize masculinity as a means through which to understand and express themselves as people as well as themselves as homosexual - has fueled decades of discussion on what it means to be masculine, feminine, man, woman, heterosexual, or homosexual. It is at these intersections that a butch identity can begin to be truly understood, considering not only her identity as a woman, but her construction through masculinity and her visible identity as a lesbian.

Feminists in the 1970s and some still to this day scorn the butch identity as a means by which some lesbian women attempt to participate in patriarchy as the patriarch rather than the oppressed (Tong, 2014). These accusations place butch identities as the feminine enemy, favoring femme lesbians as real women while displaying contempt for masculine lesbians who they believe appropriate masculinity in search of privilege. The flaw inherent in this argument, however, is the assumption that all masculinities are identical – that masculinity performed by a lesbian woman is a simple replica of masculinity performed by heterosexual men.

The analysis of masculinity and lesbian identities within this paper has demonstrated the numerous flaws in
the understanding of butch women as oppressor rather than oppressed, revealing the ways in which masculinity is more appropriately understood as the plural – masculinities, - which may be experienced differently by different people and different bodies. The notion that all masculinities play the same role in gender relations and are granted access to the same privilege is presumptuous and ultimately incorrect. Rather than considering masculinity as a characteristic of people with male anatomy, masculinity and femininity alike should be reconfigured as to more appropriately encompass their flexibility and permeability. Butch lesbian masculinity, specifically, should be reimagined not as an attempt to take from men, but as the tool through which masculine lesbians produce their visibility, gender identity, and sexuality.

Postscript

What if we gendered people according to their behavior? What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime – what if someone began life as a boy but became a boygirl and then a boy/man? What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don’t know what the hell is going on? … What if you begin life as a queer mix of desires and impulses and then are trained to be heterosexual but might relapse into queerness once the training wears off?

(Halberstam, 2013, p. 8)

References


Cyberbullying: Feminine Vulnerability in Anonymous Spaces

In this paper, I examine the need for research on how cyberbullying and cyber victimization affect women and girls along with what tools women and girls use to cope with these affects. I also look at how ideas about the performance of gender and related societal norms exacerbate the problems of cyberbullying and cyber victimization for women and girls. In addition, I explore the theory that early lessons of gender affect identity and relationships in ways that matter in relation to cyberbullying and cyber victimization vulnerability, responses, and accessible networks of support.

Introduction

Cyberbullying is a growing epidemic that affects many people across the world, however there is a distinct lack of research about how women and girls are uniquely impacted. Consequently, there is very little known about the specific coping mechanisms that women and girls use to deal with cyberbullying. Learning about coping mechanisms and how effective they are is important to negating the affects of cyberbullying. Doing research in the area of coping mechanisms can shed light on why some girls seem to deal with cyberbullying easily while others cannot cope, resulting in disastrous consequences. I believe that our society’s normalization of the ‘mean girl,’ the obsession...
to meet the standards of physical beauty portrayed by the media, and other lessons related to behavior and appearance during girlhood, leave women and girls more vulnerable to cyberbullying. At the same time, these lessons during girlhood impact identity and the formation of relationships that are important when coping with cyberbullying and other types of cyber victimization. Adolescence is “when individual, developmental and cultural factors combine in ways that shape adulthood” (Pipher, 1995, p. 26). Ortega et al. (2012) also agree that “some of the emotional and cognitive schemes that will shape our ‘adult personality’ are being developed” during adolescence (p. 354). Therefore, what girls are taught about being a girl affects their ability to handle life situations from girlhood through adulthood.

This topic is personal and important to me because a girl that I love has been deeply affected by both cyberbullying and bullying, and as a result, has dealt with various mental health issues. While I am not here to tell you her entire story, I am here to discuss how her experience was shaped by the lessons of girlhood, and how her experience could have been different if she had the tools to cope with cyberbullying before it occurred. In addition, I want to bring attention to how little we know about the effects of cyberbullying on women and girls and how they cope with these impacts. Within the topic of cyberbullying, I am an outsider. I have not experienced cyberbullying nor have I experienced many of the mental or physical affects that are a result of cyberbullying. Although I do not have experiential knowledge in this particular area, I can relate to this topic in other ways: I am a woman; I was a girl; I experienced bullying. My observations and personal experience as a feminist woman also inform my topic, therefore, I am both an outsider and an insider within the subjects of this paper (Collins, 2004). Based on my own personal experiences and observation understanding both the ways in which women and girls are cyberbullied and how they cope are important to maintaining both mental and physical health.

**Terminology**

In the context of this paper, I define cyberbullying broadly: bullying via electronic means. This wide-ranging definition includes all forms of bullying from interacting with personal electronics such as cell phones and gaming systems to the internet and
social media sites. Because there is not one solid definition, not all women and girls recognize what they experience as cyberbullying. If you cannot identify the root of a problem, then it is difficult to come up with ways to cope with it. There is also a sense of normalization of cyberbullying. Much in the same way that people say, “boys will be boys,” there is an assumption that cyberbullying is something that just happens and it should be brushed off. Cyberbullying should not be something normal, something that is considered a “rite of passage,” especially considering that this can happen throughout a lifetime.

The term cyber victimization is also key to understanding how and why girls react to and cope with cyberbullying in the ways that they do. For the purpose of this article, I am defining cyber victimization as when cyberbullies prey upon women and girls in a sexual or criminal manner in a cyber environment. Scenarios of cyber victimization include situations where the victims are asked to provide sexually explicit pictures, videos, and sometimes conversation. The request for sexually explicit material can progress into further exploitation, such as online prostitution. Cyber victimization is different from cyberbullying in that there are clear criminal and legal consequences for the actions of the perpetrator when/if they are caught.

An important issue to address when discussing cyberbullying is identifying and defining the coping mechanisms that girls and women use to get through the experience. For the purpose of this article, I define three types of coping mechanisms: self-support, social support, and professional support. Self-support includes things such as reading and exercising. But not all coping mechanisms under self-support are good or healthy such as self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. Essentially, self-support is anything a person does on their own (not necessarily alone, but rather, without the prompting of others). Social support is the reliance on friends or family members for advice. Interestingly, social support can also come from cyberspace sometimes in the form of support forums. The final coping mechanism, professional support, includes seeking professional help through physicians, mental health counselors, psychiatrists, etc. It is important to know where women and girls learned about specific coping mechanisms, because this tells us not only who they are relying on for
support, but also, what support systems are most accessible.

**What Research Tells Us**

Current research into the cyberbullying phenomena is in a fledgling stage; there is still much that experts have not discovered about the effects of cyberbullying and how to combat it on a large scale. Although various methods of cyber technology have been around for many years, the harmful effects related to this technology are just now being realized. The topic of cyberbullying and cyber victimization is currently a highly discussed issue due to news media coverage highlighting the often fatal consequences that these situations create. Cyberbullying is much like regular bullying, however, cyberspace gives a bully confidence via anonymity. Cyberbullies can act in whatever manner they wish to without consequence. Although not all cyber platforms are anonymous, cyberbullies still believe that there are no consequences for their actions. Due to the almost unlimited access people have to electronic communications, cyberbullying can happen in an instant, spread quickly, and be vicious, particularly in the case of women and girls.

One problem with research on cyberbullying is that it is often overly generalized in that it primarily tells us about the effects it has among adolescents or adults. By generalizing, researchers miss important issues that are related not only to specific ages but to gender as well. In addition, most research involving cyberbullying is quantitative, focusing on the number of people who have experiences instead of what type of experiences people have. Without understanding the circumstances around cyberbullying events, the feelings that people have, and outside influencing factors, such as socio-economic status, lifestyle, and even family make up, there will never be a full understanding of what cyberbullying does to people and why coping mechanisms work differently for different people and situations.

One key to understanding the circumstances of cyberbullying events is who experiences it. Does gender matter? Not all research about cyberbullying in relation to adolescents takes into account gender differences. In research about cyberbullying that does indicate a difference between male and female adolescents, there is no focus on the cause of difference in experiences based on gender (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Lenhart, 2007). In
addition, there is little research that focuses specifically on women and girls. Of the little research reported on the cyberbullying phenomenon that even mentions gender differences, researchers cannot agree as to whether or not adolescents experience cyberbullying at different levels in relation to gender (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Chisholm, 2006; Machackova, Cerna, Sevcikova, Dedkova & Daneback, 2013). However, in a study on cyberbullying by the Pew Research Center, Lenhart (2007) notes that girls were more likely to experience cyberbullying than boys. Additionally, girls in the fifteen to seventeen-year-old age range specifically were more likely to be cyberbullied; those who used social media experienced higher levels of cyberbullying (Lenhart, 2007). Later research by Machackova et al. (2013) and Carter and Wilson (2015) indicate that girls are still affected by cyberbullying more than boys, possibly due to the increase in social media use. In addition to cyberbullying, girls are more vulnerable to cyber victimization, often in the form of sexual exploitation or harassment (Chisholm, 2006). It is clear from these studies that there is a need for research into the experiences that girls have online, specifically related to cyberbullying and cyber victimization.

Adding to the void in knowledge, available research focuses primarily on how the actual act of cyberbullying is performed, not the causes nor the consequences (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Lenhart, 2007). There is some research available on the coping mechanisms to deal with cyberbullying however it does not deal with the tools used to cope with both the mental and physical affects (Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2011; Machackova et al., 2013). The affects of cyberbullying and cyber victimization can manifest in many different ways including depression, emotional distress, and eating disorders (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Ortega et al., 2012). In addition, the affects can also manifest through acting out, low self-esteem, anxiety, sexual promiscuity (and often exploitation), substance abuse, suicidal ideations, and ultimately suicide (Chisholm, 2006; Davison & Stein, 2014). Despite the affects of cyberbullying and cyber victimization being serious in nature, most often professional support is not sought out. Paris et al. (2011) focus on how adolescents rely primarily on avoidance, acceptance, justification, and social support as ‘reactive’ coping mechanisms to cyberbullying. However,
they do not indicate what happens when adolescents actually recognize that cyberbullying is causing mental or physical harm, nor how they cope with those effects. Research done by Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, and Alsaker (2012) looks at whether or not there are coping mechanisms that ‘buffer’ symptoms of depression in children who are victims of cyberbullying, however, this research again does not cover the wide variety of physical, mental, and emotional effects of cyberbullying.

It is clear from the current research on cyberbullying that a large portion of the research with respect to both gender and the coping methods associated with the mental and physical affects of cyberbullying is incomplete. I believe that further research should be completed that also looks at the feelings and experiences of all parties involved in cyberbullying. In a situation such as this, I believe that we need to forget what we think we know about cyberbullying from generalized and one-sided research, and instead, go forward acknowledging that gender does matter. There are many other factors that affect personal experience with cyberbullying such as race, class, and sexuality. Although intersectionality is important to any research, fully exploring the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality with regard to cyberbullying is outside the scope of this paper.

**What Experience Tells Us**

Standard research on cyberbullying is missing the ‘human factor,’ what it means to be female and bullied online in our culture. Our culture is one in which people are supposed to look and act in certain specific ways based on their perceived gender; when they do not, they are ridiculed. This performance of gender is a large factor in not only cyberbullying and cyber victimization itself, but also, in the way that girls and women cope with it.

When women and girls experience cyberbullying, it is often based on personal appearances and imagined behaviors that are outside societal norms. I believe that what happens to girls during the formation of their identity is a key part of how girls react to cyberbullying. As females, the first lessons of girlhood are often that our appearance is most important to our feminine identity. At birth, girls are dressed in pink with ruffles to announce to the world that they are female, and it just goes down hill from there. Appearance is so important to proclaiming gender that our bodies are
wounded by ear piercings as babies just to differentiate girls from boys. As Butler (1993) notes, the performativity of gender is not just one “act” but it is the “reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to an extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (p. 241). Being forced to wear pink with ruffles and having our ears pierced may seem like individual acts, however, they are just part of the larger process of performing gender. Eventually, girls are taught that “‘good girls’ are polite, traditional, asexual, cute, cheerful, obedient” (Martin, 2008, p. 39). This ‘good girl’ persona is often promoted, or perhaps projected is more accurate, by adults who want their daughters to behave in a certain manner. Although second-wave feminism argued “that being a ‘good girl’ was actually an oppressive, unnatural state – that it endangered women’s capacities to develop real personalities and genuinely happy lives,” the ‘good girl’ ideal still persists today (Martin, 2008, p. 43). It is important to note that the formation of identity, especially at such an early age, relates to the creation of self-esteem and to how girls feel connected to others. According to Orenstein (1994), “girls with healthy self-esteem have an appropriate sense of their potential, their competence, and their innate value as individuals” (p. xix). When women and girls do not value themselves, they are discounting their abilities and limiting their own agency. While this is largely a consequence of parental input, parental influence is not the only thing that shapes the identity of girls.

One of the first environments that shapes the identity of girls is the educational system. Things that happen within the school environment lead to ideas about the values and traits that girls should have which ultimately affect self-esteem (Orenstein, 1994). Educational institutions frequently teach girls that they are incompetent in math and sciences, regardless of whether or not they actually have the aptitude for these particular subjects. Often, girls hide their intelligence because this trait makes them stand out, leaving them subject to criticism from their peers. The desire to blend in with peers exacerbates the issue of teachers who fail to acknowledge male and female students equally. Orenstein (1994) describes this underlying message of inequality in the education system as a “hidden curriculum” which teaches “girls to value silence and compliance, to view those qualities as a virtue” (p. 35). This “hidden
curriculum” also reinforces the ‘good girl’ ideal and makes girls feel inferior to boys in a place that they spend a majority of their formative years. The education system also affects girl’s self-esteem through the lessons taught about sex, sexuality, and gender.

As girls get older, their performance of gender is based on visual consumption; they must look like the examples they see in popular culture or else they are not ‘feminine’ enough. We live in the age of technology where we are constantly connected to media, so girls and women are bombarded with images of the ‘ideal’ look and behavior that is supposed to be the standard. According to Milestone and Meyer (2012), “the beauty ideal is very narrow: girls should be small, thin, have silky hair and be conventionally pretty” (p. 93). In order to obtain this beauty ideal, girls are encouraged to ‘fix’ themselves by wearing makeup, exercising, dieting, and having cosmetic surgery. According to Pipher (1995), the “gap between girls’ true selves and cultural prescriptions for what is properly female creates enormous problems” (p. 22). The societal expectation to live up to this unnatural beauty ideal often leads to obsessions that are detrimental to the health of girls and women; these include eating disorders, over-exercise, and plastic surgery addictions, along with various mental health issues. Orenstein (1994) notes that eating disorders (and presumably other bodily addictions) can only survive in a culture that will allow or encourage them. This is exactly what our society does with the media-perpetuated feminine beauty ideal. Ultimately, this beauty ideal leads to self-esteem issues that leave women and girls susceptible to cyberbullying and cyber victimization.

Another aspect to the visual consumption of gender is the over-sexualization of women and girls. One component of the beauty ideal is being ‘sexy,’ but who are women and girls told to be sexy for? Men. Women and girls receive the message that they have to be ‘sexy’ not only through their peers, but through the media that they consume. Everything from children’s cartoons that are designed with a sexual undertone, to popular music, television, and social media, tell women and girls that latent sexuality is essential to being female. We are told that we have to be sexually appealing to men yet we cannot be ‘too sexy’ or we are labeled with an assortment of derogatory names, the most popular being “slut.” It is interesting that being ‘sexy’ also correlates to being sexually active, sometimes even before girls are
teenagers, in that you are supposed to appear to be sexually active, yet if you are, and happen to mention this, then you are again labeled a slut. In Orenstein’s (1994) study on middle school girls, she notes, “a ‘slut’ is not merely a girl who ‘does it,’ but any girl who – through her clothes, her makeup, her hairstyle, or her speech – seems as if she might” (p. 51). Essentially, you are supposed to follow all of the mandates of being a girl or woman; however, you cannot do it too well. Our society puts women and girls into a position where they are damned if they do and damned if they do not conform to these socially constructed sex and gender expectations.

To cope with their personal experiences, women and girls often seek to control their own body as that is the only thing that they can have control over. This bodily control presents itself in various ways including limiting or increasing food intake and outtake, physical self-harm such as cutting, and self-medicating with alcohol and drugs. The eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia, result not only from an obsession with the ‘beauty ideal,’ but from the need to control what happens to the body because outside life factors cannot be controlled. Physical self-harm is done again to have control, however, Pipher (1995) sees it “as a concrete interpretation of our culture’s injunction to young women to carve themselves into culturally acceptable pieces” (p. 158). Regardless of how it is viewed, self-harm becomes an addiction that brings a sense of release or catharsis. In addition, teenage girls often find chemical use to be the quickest way to cope with their feelings, immediately replacing bad feelings with chemically induced good ones instead. There are different substances that bring good feelings about certain things. For example, alcohol and mood altering drugs, such as marijuana, are popular because they result in an instant good feeling while other drugs, such as diet pills, bring good feelings because taking them means that physical changes will happen (Pipher, 1995). These primary coping mechanisms used by girls during adolescence continue to be the coping mechanisms used later in life.

Where Research and Experience Connect

There is a complex, multifaceted connection between the performance of gender, cyberbullying, and cyber victimization. The lessons that women and girls learn about being female often take a toll on how they view themselves, their level of self-esteem,
how they interact with others, and how they seek approval. According to Bordo (1993), the contemporary notion of femininity is a “double bind that legislates contradictory ideals and directives” (p. 95). If what we are being taught about being female is contradictory, then how are we supposed to gain confidence and self-worth? Pipher (1995) notes that “many [women] have tried to be the perfect women and failed. Even though they followed the rules and did as they were told, the world has not rewarded them. They feel angry, and betrayed. They feel miserable and taken for granted, used rather than loved” (p. 25). These feelings of anger, betrayal, and being used lead women to feel insecure. When we are insecure about our place in the world and ourselves, we are more open or vulnerable to criticism. It is this vulnerability that cyberbullies and cyber predators take advantage of, and that can harm and exploit women and girls. When girls cyberbully each other, they use appearance and behavior of their target as the reasoning for their actions; the victim falls outside of societal norms or the specific norms of their peer group. Interestingly, not all victims actually fall outside the societal norms. Often the cyberbully just thinks they do.

Due to the nature of our connectivity, one instance of cyberbullying quickly becomes something uncontrollable. One hateful comment on a picture posted on a social media site such as Facebook or Instagram can spawn hundreds or even thousands of similar responses in less than twenty-four hours as the image is shared repeatedly. While the subject of the hateful comments varies, the tone and words used do not. Some of the more prevalent comments include things along the lines of “you’re worthless so go kill yourself,” “everyone hates you so you should just disappear,” “I hope you kill yourself,” “you’re so [insert physical descriptor here] you should kill yourself,” and the list seems to go on infinitely. It is also very easy for cyberbullying to change to face-to-face bullying as the harassment escalates. As cyberbullying is perpetuated, it becomes almost like a game to those who are doing the bullying; who can say the most hurtful thing to cause a drastic reaction from the victim. All too often cyberbullies push their victims relentlessly until the victim feels that they have no other choice but to die to escape the feelings associated with being cyberbullied.

**Why Does It Matter?**
The disconnect between what research and experience tells us matters because cyberbullying is like a disease, an epidemic that is killing girls before they can even become adults. There are many girls, just like the girl who inspired me to do this work, who have been unable to get help coping with their cyberbullying, ultimately taking their own lives. While I cannot share the details of the cyberbullying that the girl who inspired my work experienced, I can tell you about what happened to other girls who experienced cyberbullying and cyber victimization. It is all too common to see stories on the nightly news about children, especially young girls, committing suicide as a result of cyberbullying. In the moment, the news stories are shocking, however the shock soon fades, we do nothing, and then we forget. We forget that girls like Rebecca Sedwick, Phoebe Prince, Megan Meier, and Amanda Todd did not need to die because they were cyberbullied.

Rebecca Sedwick was a normal, twelve-year-old girl who in December 2012 began to experience a combination of bullying and cyberbullying by up to fifteen other girls her age. On September 9, 2013, Rebecca could no longer stand the cyberbullying, and chose to end her life to escape it (Newcomb, 2013). Phoebe Prince was a fifteen-year-old girl who emigrated from Ireland and settled in Massachusetts. She committed suicide on January 14, 2010, after weeks of cyberbullying via Facebook and text messaging. Even after Phoebe committed suicide, the cyberbullying continued on a Facebook memorial page created in her memory (James, 2010). Megan Meier was a thirteen-year-old girl from Missouri who was targeted on Myspace by an adult woman pretending to be a teenaged boy. The hoax, started by Lori Drew, led to vicious cyberbullying that resulted in Megan’s suicide on October 17, 2006 (Maag, 2007; Orenstein, 2012). Amanda Todd was a fifteen-year-old girl from Canada who was cyber victimized through blackmail and sexual exploitation on Facebook, physically bullied, and then cyberbullied. The anxiety, panic disorders, and major depression that resulted from the traumatic cyberbullying that Amanda Todd experienced ultimately led to her suicide on October 10, 2012 (Ng, 2012). What do all of these stories have in common? The self-worth and confidence related to their personhood and femininity was targeted by others in such vicious ways that the victims could only see their torment ending through
death. While the stories of Rebecca Sedwick, Phoebe Prince, Megan Meier, and Amanda Todd are tragic, these are but a few of the many stories where girls and women have suffered due to cyberbullying and cyber victimization.

Navigating the vast spaces within the cyber world is complicated in that there are opportunities for liberation while oppression is also magnified. Cyberspace is an environment much like Donna Haraway (1985) describes a cybernetic organism to be, a combination of organism and machine that is “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (p. 344). Cyberspace gives women and girls a way to explore and create themselves by ‘trying on’ different personas, imitating people and traits they aspire to while at the same time learning to interact with others, not just their own peer group. In essence, in this cyber space, women are real-life cyborgs that are “actively rewriting the text of their bodies and societies” (Haraway, 1985, p. 352). Given the ability to choose their online persona, and the anonymous environment cyberspace can afford, women and girls are free to be and express themselves in liberating ways, especially in comparison to face-to-face interactions more common to offline environments. However, according to Orenstein (2012):

Young people’s real-life identities are becoming ever more externally driven, sculpted in response to feedback of networked ‘friends,’ therefore the space that is liberating can also be oppressive in that there is a need to conform to the will of others (p. 165).

During the examination of self within cyberspace, women and girls are vulnerable in both identity and place. The struggle to discover who you are and where you fit in at that particular moment alters your perception about what is right and wrong, good and bad. Predators of all kinds look for these vulnerabilities to target and attack their victims. While I focus primarily on the culture of girlhood, making girls more vulnerable in online spaces, the ways in which power and dominance shift from the real world to cyberspace also contribute to this vulnerability. Cyber-technology has also oppressed women and girls in other, subtler ways. The social reality created in cyberspace is a replica of our society, therefore the structures of power and dominance are the same. The people who create the means of electronic communication and dictate the use of those communication
methods are part of heteropatriarchy. So the question then becomes who controls cyberspace? The heteropatriarchy that created it, the decisions of individual users, or the social reality that was created by the replication of our society as a whole?

**What Can We Do?**

Cyberbullying and cyber victimization are phenomenon that are growing increasingly common in our society. In order to decrease the instances of cyberbullying and cyber victimization with regard to women and girls, research must be done specifically about how victims are affected and how they cope. We need to look at what electronic means are used to cyberbully, what are the tactics used to perpetrate cyberbullying, and what is the basis of the cyberbullying. In addition, how women and girls access the tools they use to cope with cyberbullying needs to be looked at in conjunction with how their sense of self makes an impact on those specific tools.

While cyberbullying and cyber victimization are large social problems, the underlying causes are part of an arguably larger social problem. Ultimately, societal norms about the performance of gender for all people, not just women and girls, need to be looked at and altered in a way that makes performance of gender less rigid. We have socially constructed the performance of gender into a binary system where people can only be one gender or the other by following societal guidelines in very specific ways. Butler (1990) notes “that gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notion of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity … conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restrictive frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 444). Therefore, we must recognize that our replication of femininity and masculinity is an illusion that is problematic; there is no right or wrong way to perform gender. Halberstam (2012) agrees that rigid gender structures are problematic because they control sexuality, strip away individuality which is dangerous, and do not reflect how we actually live our lives. In the book *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam (2012) discusses the idea that gender as we know it is something that can change overtime and what would happen if we no longer gendered people based on appearance but
behavior. The idea of gender fluidity is a valid point, however, if we gendered others based on behavior, then society would still fall into the pattern of policing others.

The idea of policing others also needs to be addressed on a large scale. As Bordo (1993) notes, “through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity …--female bodies become docile bodies-- bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (p. 91). This concept of policed bodies becoming docile bodies can be applied to the policing of any gender. Policing is oppression, and oppression silences our legitimate voices. In cyberspace, the policing of bodies, appearance, and behavior leads to the oppression of women and girls in a way that is highly detrimental to their health and well-being. It is not up to society to police others when it comes to performance of gender or any other attributes associated with individual identity.

Conclusion

Through my work exploring gender, identity, and vulnerability in cyberspace, I have realized that as a society we have to do better in many different ways. We have to do better research on significant social issues. The research that has been done with regard to women, girls, and cyberbullying is one sided, incomplete, and possibly biased because it does not take into consideration the identity of who is being studied, nor how they are uniquely affected by cyberbullying. If we do not have reliable research, then we cannot understand the scope of the problem and come up with ways to fix it. We have to recognize that gender is not binary or fixed, and that it can be performed in any manner we choose as individuals. When we recognize that the performance of gender is something that is personal and individual then the societal norms that are taught during girlhood will change too. In turn, women and girls would be more likely to have higher levels of self-confidence and feel more secure with both their identity and place in the world making them less vulnerable across the board, not just in cyberspace. Our societies obsession with policing others has also created a world in which everyone must be the same. By accepting that there are variations in the performance of gender (and many other things), then there would be less judgment and policing of others. In addition, if expressing your individuality or true self is not bound by societal norms regarding the
performance of gender, femininity, and masculinity, then a large portion of cyberbullying could be eliminated because those traits are things that cyberbullies target. Changing the societal view on the policing of others can also change the distribution or balance of power and domination that exists today both online and in real life. Ultimately, being open to and accepting differences both as individuals and as a societal collective would make a large impact on many aspects of life for everyone, not just women and girls.

The only way to disrupt the status quo is to take back our individual and collective power and address issues that affect personhood, especially with regard to women and girls. We matter. Our physical and mental health matters. How we feel about our place in the world matters. How we feel about our identity matters.

References


Women and the Black Lives Matter Movement: 
Relevance Past to Present

Traditional white American society wonders why the Black Lives Matter Movement is even taking place, since many Americans argue that racism doesn’t exist. This paper explores why women in the Black Lives Matter Movement are needed and relevant. This paper sets out to open readers’ eyes to the fact that, although this is the year 2016, the same trials and tribulations that have taken place throughout our nation’s history are still taking place. We still have a long way to go to end racism and sexism.

Introduction

In this paper, I will explore a genealogical history of powerful Black feminist women in the equal rights and black liberation movement such as Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, and Patricia Hill Collins. These women paved the way for African-American women such as me to have a voice in society. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the anti-racist activism was called “Black Power” movement; now in the 2000s, it’s called Black Lives Matter Movement. The name has changed but it’s still the same struggle and the same fight, just in a different time zone. I argue that there are similar and different aspects between the earlier Black Power and the current Black
Lives Matter movements. Some of the similarities are the goals to push the awareness of racism and oppression of the African-American people and also to receive equality and justice. The big difference that I see is the fact that the Black Power Movement was militant and forceful in the streets, whereas the Black Lives Matter is more tech-savvy using social media. Race, class and gender represent oppressions that affect African-American women, and when these categories of oppression intersect, it’s called intersectionality. According to Collins (1990), “Using a social structural analysis of race, class, and gender turns your attention to how they work as a system of power, systems that differentially advantage and disadvantage groups depending on their social location” (p.61). This quote explains why the African-American culture is the most affected, particularly, its women as often experiencing a triple threat to one group of people.

This paper examines why the topic of Black Lives Matter is just as important now as it was during the Civil Rights Movement. I think readers will see how African-American women are affected when they intercept. According to Crenshaw (1991), “because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (p. 1244).

**What Do I Mean When I Say ‘Black Lives Matter Movement’?**

Black Lives Matter Movement means that throughout the history of African-Americans, we have had to fight for everything that should have been a natural human right. White power and control that started during slavery are responsible for this oppression. ‘Black Lives Matter’ does not mean that all lives don’t matter or that I’m pointing out one group in particular, but rather, it is to bring awareness of all the hardship, turmoil, and injustice that African-Americans endure on a daily basis. I feel that it’s an obligation not to let the earliest activists down for all their contributions and hard work. I feel like if everybody does their part, we can have a tremendous amount of success in fighting racism. I’m not saying that we should be doing the same things as earlier civil rights fighters such as invent an underground railroad or create a Black Panthers group, but as long as we’re fighting for the rights of the voiceless and underprivileged, then we are making a difference. I believe both of the movements were and are relevant to
how society treats African-Americans. The Black Lives Matter Movement mission states,

#BlackLivesMatter is an online forum intended to build connections between black people and our allies to fight anti-black racism, to spark dialogue among black people, and to facilitate the types of connections necessary to encourage social action and engagement (BlackLivesMatter, 2016).

This movement is so important today; in order for you to capture society’s attention you have to adapt to the new way of thinking.

Why?

There are a lot of reasons why the Black Lives Matter Movement and the intersections of racial and gender equality are important topics that need to be addressed today. In order to know where we are going, we have to know where we come from. There was so much work started by black feminists in the 1800s, 1960s, 1970s, to now in 2016. Many strong, educated black women paved the way in activism. This is one of my passions because I would love to be a person to carry the torch forward, to be somebody who’s going to continue the movement for African-American women’s rights. This topic is so important to me because I am an African-American woman, and I understand the struggle that we go through on a daily basis. I have experience with discrimination in racism, sexism, poverty, and being a teenage mother. I am also an activist who fights for justice, equality, workers’ rights, and fair wages. These are all inequities that affect African-American women at the highest rates. The goal that Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, and Patricia Hill Collins had in mind was to stop and cease abuse towards African-American women as a whole, and this is what needs to be continued and passed along by young activists such as myself.

Just a few days ago I met with a few white, male Senator politicians at their office in Albany, New York, regarding the fair wages issue. My goal was to explain to them that a decent wage is totally different from a living wage. Rochester, New York, is known for having one of the highest poverty rates in the United States, even while people are working a full time job. In December 2015, the U.S. Census Bureau released statistics noting that Rochester had an increase in poverty from 32.9% to 33.8%, making it the
fifth poorest city in the United States among the top seventy-five metropolitan areas (Rochester Area Community Foundation, 2015, para. 2). While trying to make my point with the Senators, I noticed that they didn’t even look at me while answering my questions; they looked at the male counterparts who were with me. This situation took me back to the struggle among many early black women activists who fought to get their point across in meetings and other male-dominated spaces. In order for black women to make a point and let it be heard, we must have allies across race and gender, a support group so people can go and express how they really feel about the discrimination that they endure, and a community to back us.

All representation in the community is needed, including white politicians. Conversely, a white male can make one statement and everybody will listen and support his claims. Many white male politicians are just like white male slave owners in that they don’t care what black women have to say because they see these women as beneath them in the eyes of society. In the eyes of white men, we are not on the same level and we never will be. I bet Angela Davis and Fannie Lou Hamer felt similar in the 1960s and 1970s as they were trying to make their points for the rights of African-American women. Black women have yet to gain full respect from white men, and this is extremely difficult considering they are making the laws that affect us. One of Hamer’s famous quotes states, “If the white man gives you anything, just remember when he gets ready he will take it right back. We have to take for ourselves” (Brooks, 2014, p. 17). This quote is saying: Don’t be foolish and believe everything a white man says, instead work hard and get it yourself because we have the power.

The Past

Harriet Tubman was a powerful a woman who was born a slave and died a civil rights activist. She led hundreds of enslaved people to freedom using the Underground Railroad. Tubman worked in the United States Civil War as a nurse and scout, spy, women’s suffragist, and a humanitarian (Angie, 2016). She joined with other powerful civil rights activists such as Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and John Brown, to expand her work. Even in the 1800s, African-American women were fighting for equal rights for the oppressed groups using only their God-given resources. Tubman’s most memorable appearance was at the
organizing meeting of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 in Washington D.C. This is when two generations came together to celebrate the strength of black women and to continue their struggle for a life of dignity and respect (Angie, 2016). This situation was powerful because it demonstrated that when we come together and unite we can accomplish great things. This is very important to me because it shows that Tubman wanted to pass the torch to the next generation and also that she was thinking about the future. One of the biggest things an activist can do is train

and pass down the knowledge to people coming behind them. This is also an opportunity to give respect to Tubman and let her know that we appreciate everything she has done.

Fannie Lou Hamer was also a powerful black women activist and a philanthropist who came to prominence around the civil rights era. Hamer was born in Montgomery, Mississippi, during the era of legalized racial segregation. She helped African-Americans register to vote, and she also helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party. Hamer knew that it was time to have a voice. She asked how African-Americans can have their voices heard if they couldn’t vote. How could they have a say in making the laws that affected them? Alongside seventeen others, some from the organization of Students for Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and some from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, all wanted to make a change and prove a point as they got on a bus and went to the courthouse to register to vote. Even with all the cops beating and calling them horrible names, they still proceeded. This shows courage, bravery, and dedication. Like most activist women, Hamer endured hardships and laws that prevented her from realizing her rights as a citizen. Hamer was fired from her job, her house was burned down, and she was beaten so bad that she had kidney damage, but she didn’t stop championing gender and racial equality.

Figure 1. From “Harriet Tubman,” by National Geographic Kids, 2016 (http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/history/harriet-tubman/#harriet-lg.jpg). In the public domain.
causes (Biography.com Editors, n.d.a). She kept fighting until the day she died.

I work with groups that focus on voter registration. We travel all around the state registering people to vote in elections. People should be reminded of African-American women like Fannie Lou Hamer, who fought for the right to vote and how this right should not be taken for granted. Without her fight, African-American women like me probably wouldn’t be able to vote now. We can learn a lot from Fannie Lou Hamer such as dignity and aspiration. She fought against male dominance during the civil rights era, a fight that we are still fighting today. She taught us that no matter what is thrown our way, stay strong and don’t give up. Hamer also left a legacy to remind ourselves that it’s not all about us but about the ones coming after us as well.

Right around the same time that Fannie Lou Hamer was working hard for suffrage, there was an activist named Shirley Chisholm. In 1968, Shirley Chisholm became the first black Congresswoman. She was elected in New York State to the U.S. House of Representatives, and she served for several terms (Biography.com Editors, n.d.b). Chisholm served on numerous committees while in office; she was the first black women on almost all of them. Not only did she serve on the committees, she also voted and represented minorities in a major way while doing so. She became one of the founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus (Biography.com Editors, n.d.b). She fought for equal education and labor. Chisholm decided that more work needed to be done on a higher level, and so, in 1972, she ran for United States presidency. She made it past the primary election, and then ran against a Republican named James Farmer, to whom she lost. The way Farmer handled the campaign was degrading because he argued that "women have been in the driver's seat" in Black communities for too long and that the district needed "a man's voice in Washington," not that of a "little schoolteacher" (as cited in History, Art

_Figure 2. From "Fannie Lou Hamer Biography", by Biography.com Editors, n.d.a. (http://www.biography.com/people/fannie-lou-hamer-205625#death-and-legacy). In the public domain._
This statement shows ways patriarchal society thinks women are supposed to be lesser than men. Farmer and Chisholm were both fighting for the same issues, but once Farmer introduced gender into the equation, Chisholm began to lose. Race and gender oppression are two of the barriers that Chisholm tried to knock down. Even though she gave it a good fight, it didn’t happen. One of the great things about Chisholm is that while in Congress, she continued to champion what she started as a community activist. This is so powerful to me, because she didn’t let her surroundings get in the way of her passionate activism for the good of the people. Most politicians change when they are elected and cave to dominant political norms, but not Chisholm, and this is why I have utmost respect for her and would love to follow in her footsteps.

Angela Davis is a civil rights activist who fought for the rights of African-American women. Born in 1944, she grew up during the Jim Crow era. Davis was influenced by her parents, who actively participated in anti-racist marches, and she also had involvement with communist party members (Nagel, 2015). Davis’ goal was to fight for the rights of African-Americans in order to reduce mistreatment and injustice. Davis also is a profound scholar and writer who teaches at the University of California at Los Angeles. In order for change to take place, there has to be a leader to take a stance and decide that enough is enough. In this case, Angela Davis saw the mistreatment that African-American women were facing in their daily lives, so she started to question why do women have to go through this when we should all be equal. Davis joined the Black Power Movement alongside the Black Panthers (Nagel, 2015). Just like Fannie Lou Hamer, Davis was arrested for her

Figure 3. From "How are you celebrating Shirley Chisholm Day?" by A. Newman, 2012 (http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/how-are-you-celebrating-shirley-chisholm-day/). Copyright by The New York Times.
activist work. One of the things that drew me to Davis was her passion for the people as a whole and this is something that I can relate to considering I’m a young activist in the making, and I feel like you have to tackle society as a whole to make a huge impact. In the article, “Angela Davis and Women, Race, & Class,” Barnett (2003) states, “When the personal, political, and professional struggles and the significant political, academic, and scholarly contributions of Angela Davis are examined, we can see that her life work as an activist-intellectual has earned her the label of a ‘pioneer’” (p. 11). To be a pioneer is to set standards and elevate the bar for the next generation coming after you. Angela Davis is a pioneer because she is among the first to work for justice for political prisoners and also to push for black women’s equality. She is one of the pioneers to do grassroots work to push the agenda for the African-American community, even if it means going to jail and sacrificing her freedom. This lifelong legacy is a personal goal of mine. I know it won’t be easy, but it’s worth the cause and efforts to help people that are voiceless.

Patricia Hill Collins is an African-American scholar and sociologist. She is a professor at the University of Maryland where she teaches sociology. As an author of several books and numerous journal articles, Collins uses her work as a scholar and activist to reach the minds of the unspoken, by educating them on how the connection is related to them and their communities. Collins is known for her book Black Feminist Thought (2000) and her theory on intersectionality, the connection of race, class, and gender, and sexuality. Collins goes into depth on how black feminist thought is important to understand the structures of dominance and oppression in the African-American women’s life. In her book, Collins states “Race, class, and gender represent the three systems of oppression that most heavily affect African-American women” (p 248). She theorizes these societal oppressions as the “matrix of domination” (p. 276), and this is important because in order

Figure 4. From "All Quiet This Time," by M. Daily, 2011 (http://magazine.ucla.edu/exclusives/all-quiet-this-time/). Copyright UCLA Magazine.
for us to fix a problem, we have to get to the root of it so it is necessary to understand how the roots are interconnected. Collins’ work helps us see ways the roots of African-American women’s oppression are connected in economic, political, and ideological ways. What I like best about Collins’ work is that she has solutions on how to fix the problems she brings up. In the chapter “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination”, Collins (1990) states:

First, black feminist thought must be validated by ordinary African-American women who, in the words of Hannah Nelson, grow into womanhood in a world where the saner you are, the madder you are made to appear. To be credible in the eyes of this group, scholars must be personal advocates for their material, be accountable for the consequences of their work, have lived or experienced their material in some fashion, and be willing to engage in dialogues about their findings with ordinary, everyday people. Second, black feminist thought also must be accepted by the community of black women scholars. These scholars place varying amounts of importance on rearticulating a black woman’s standpoint using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Third, Afrocentric feminist thought within academia must be prepared to confront Eurocentric masculinist political and epistemological requirements (p.8-9).

These are words and actions that I can use while I’m trying to be an effective activist. Collins’ quote is important to me because it touches home knowing that I am the woman she is talking about. Because of my race, class and gender experiences, I’m really mad at

Figure 5. From "Patricia Hill Collins - 'Morgan Lecturer'", by University of Maryland, 2015 (http://clarke.dickinson.edu/patricia-hill-collins-2/). In the public domain.
society. I’m really mad at the many trials and tribulations I had to face in my life, but at the same time, I learned from them. Understanding Collins has forced me to do something about it in an educational way. This can affect me while trying to be a contemporary activist, just like previous Black feminist activists.

**What’s so Special About Women in the Movement?**

Not by any means is my paper trying to knock all the hard work that men did for the civil rights movement, but rather, to acknowledge and appreciate all the great work that black women have done that has not been fully recognized. They sacrificed and performed services to help propel the civil rights movement forward. Black women see society as a whole unit, and they realize that you can’t treat one problem without fixing another, and so they look at the whole picture. While being in a marginalized position as a black woman, you realize you can’t treat one social inequality without addressing race, class, and gender. Women stand for what’s right from the heart which is why it’s important to let women voices be heard. We need to be able to leverage the voices and have a mutual point across the board. For many years, women have been putting in the footwork by the sides or in front of men helping with the civil rights movement, but they get little to no recognition for all of their hard work. According to Nelson (2011),

> With the exception of Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat one day; we rarely see images of black women from that era or “freedom sisters” as they have come to be known sitting at the table of negotiation, decision or action (para. 6).

This treatment towards black women was done intentionally because of sexism and racism. It means that black women are supposed to be seen and not heard, and silent and supportive all in the same setting.

In my own work, I try my best to make sure that black women have a voice. I try to make sure that every organizational table that I sit at has a representative for black women. This gives the opportunity for a diverse mindset, and this also allows black women a chance to voice their opinions on decisions that affect them. The more that I am an activist in the community, I understand the power of having a voice and how it actually changes situations.
Sacrifices

Sacrifices by Tubman, Hamer, Davis, and Collins had to be made in order to make the point that African-American women are equal to everyone else, but sadly, mistreatment rather than liberation followed. Women going to prison were just as equal as men if not more during the Civil Rights movement, but black women in the struggle for racial equality were not talked about or shown on television as frequently as men were. Tubman had an award for her death or capture (Biography.com Editors, n.d.c). Hamer was beaten so badly that she had permanent kidney damage, and her house was burned down (Biography.com Editors, n.d.c). Davis was arrested, and in her early career, fired from her job as a professor for speaking her mind. All of these women sacrificed their lives to make a difference. According to Nagel (2015):

During much of her pre-trial incarceration (of sixteen months) Angela Davis was kept in solitary confinement. The other activist woman featured in this essay, Assata Shakur, was broken out of prison precisely because she feared for her life -- not by other prisoners, but by the state’s agents” (p. 43-44).

Like many wrongly committed activists, some of them were killed or local community agencies helped get them out. Once a person is in prison, it’s extremely hard to get them out, considering the federal government was trying to make a point and they are the ones who uphold the laws. It all has to do with power and control. This is where the Black Lives Movement is related to historical movements and activists. Both waves of movement called out transgression for black women. It also proves that having a voice and activism matters. There are a few things that are different today, such as laws that are put into place to protect human rights, whereas in the civil rights era, many women were beaten, raped, jailed, or even killed.

Present: Why this is Important to Me

There are many black liberation and anti-racism activists who are active today. They might not say they are with Black Lives Matter, but it’s still the same struggle. There is an increase in injustice, mistreatment, police brutality, racism, and discrimination today. We have always seen racism in black communities but there seems to be a
little bit more police brutality visible today. Sadly, history shows repeated brutality: master slave, lynching, and rape. Due to technology, it is being exposed and talked about more. I personally went through some rough situations in my life such as being a teenage mother, living in poverty, and experiencing injustice in the workplace and in the community. No matter the hardships and sacrifices that had to be made for equal rights, many brave women did not give up fighting, and I won’t either. Most of the African-American women activists fought until they died, and this shows dedication and it is powerful and inspiring to those who follow to make a difference. It’s time for people like me and you to continue the movement of what they started and pass down the torch to the next generation.

**My Struggles/ My Life**

Sometimes I sit back and think of all the obstacles that I have had in my life. I grew up in the inner city projects, in the middle of the ‘hood’ between Joseph Avenue and Clinton Avenue in Rochester, NY. My community was known for having the highest amount of poverty. Growing up, my family always said it’s not where you come from, but where you’re going. One of the things they pushed for was education. Almost all of my family graduated from high school and some even went to college including my mom and dad. Considering the statistics in my community, these are the things that usually don’t happen in an area that I’m from. The 2014 high school graduation rate for the City of Rochester is 43.4% (Barnhart, 2014). The sad part about this is it has a domino effect on the community, such as a decrease in college degrees, increase in crime, and an increase in teenage pregnancy.

Having the advantage of an okay family structure didn’t mean that I didn’t have obstacles such as peer pressure. At the age of ten years old, I had my first period. I honestly can say that I learned about periods from school rather than at home. One of the biggest criticisms that I have of my mother is that she really didn’t explain periods, sex, boys, and pregnancy to me. I think she assumed that I knew all about them or maybe she was ashamed because she had me at the age of seventeen years old. I think this contributed to my next event. I became pregnant at the age of fifteen and had a baby at the age of sixteen years old. This led to a chain of events. I was scared to tell anyone about my pregnancy including my friends because
I feared judgment from others. I always had been the favorite kid in my family; I couldn’t disappoint them, so I kept my pregnancy to myself. Then one day after school, I walked to Planned Parenthood. Not knowing what I was going to do, I automatically assumed that I was going to have an abortion. When I went to Planned Parenthood, they asked me questions that I really didn’t know the answers to, such as when was my last period. Come to find out, my pregnancy was past the time frame where I could have an abortion. Now, I had no choice but to tell my family. Here I go having a baby at the age of sixteen off of a one night stand by a guy who was twenty years old, five years older than me. I was so ashamed. During my pregnancy, I only left the house to go to school and work.

Despite my personal challenges, I graduated from high school on high Honor Roll, and with college advancements while my two-year-old daughter watched from the audience. From that day forward, I promised myself that I would never put myself in that predicament again. My daughter Jahmanique and I got our first apartment when I was eighteen years old, and since that point, I have never returned to my childhood home. I started working at Strong Hospital as a Patient Care Technician, which is where I still work today. As a Strong employee, I experienced many work policies and procedures that I didn’t agree with, so I started speaking up and challenging the ones that I felt were wrong. I reached out to my union delegate, curious to see what I could do as a member, and after a few times, one of the union representatives came to me and said: “I like your fire and your willingness to help everyone and not just yourself; this is what we need as a union delegate.” Needless to say, I have been a union delegate for the past ten years now. Netta Elzie, a community activist during the Ferguson riots said, “I didn’t know I was an activist until someone told me” (Berlatsky, 2015, para. 3). This is exactly how I felt when I was approached to be a delegate. I have never been the one to hold my tongue when something wasn’t right, and I always had it in my heart to fight for the people.

Being a union delegate for 1199 SEIU (United Healthcare Workers East) has allowed me to stand up against what is wrong and fight for workers’ rights. It also has allowed me to take extensive training such as learning the state laws, worker’s rights laws, and labor laws. In my role as union delegate, I meet with
supervisors and managers on a daily basis, sometimes to represent them due to discipline from the supervisors or managers or sometimes to help get their point across or just push the collective bargaining unit contract. After five years, I worked my way up to being a Chief Delegate in the union. This higher role has allowed me to do things such as train other delegates, file and run grievances, and sit on the negotiation committee. This is when we sit down with management and try to come up with a reasonable contract agreement. The things that we fight for include wording on respect and equal rights in the workplace, raises, healthcare, and childcare.

I tell my story so readers can understand where I come from and why the topics of poverty, education, teen pregnancy, and racial and gender injustice are important to me. I faced a lot of turmoil in my life, which is okay and not all bad, because we learn from what we live through. I wish for my kids, brothers, and sisters, and anybody coming behind me not to endure all the same obstacles that I had to growing up, and these are the reasons why I fight.

My activist work at Strong led to an expansion of my role as a delegate outside of the hospital. I realized that a lot of the labor problems that we were having were bigger than Strong Hospital. A lot of it had to do with laws and politics. I started getting involved in politics, took a leave of absence from work a few times, and took on a role as a political organizer with collaboration between my union and Monroe County Democratic Party Headquarters. This gave me the chance to start working on political campaigns in which I was able to have a voice on what needed to be said. I addressed politicians on topics of childcare funding, healthcare for all, and increase in the minimum wage just to name a few. My activism came at an all-time high. I learned how to persuade and lobby around laws that affected the lower/middle class workers and women’s rights such as Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), fight for $15 (minimum wage), Women’s Equality, and the Childcare Act. One of my passions is voter registration, because I feel it’s so important to have this voice, especially since abolitionists and feminist civil rights activists before us fought for our right to vote. When we vote, we are exercising our right to let our voices be heard by people who are making laws that are affecting us and our community. I also took opportunities to sit on some Executive Boards and committees such as
Coalition of the Black Trade Unionist (CBTU), AFL-CIO Labor Council, National Coalition of Building Institute (NBCI), Young Leaders @ University of Rochester, and a few others throughout Monroe County. I learned that my work on these committees was another way for me to push the agenda forward for working families and women.

My activism has led me to appreciate women such as Harriet Tubman, Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Patricia Hill Collins even more. They have done a tremendous amount of activist work all in different views but for the same cause. They helped us continue the work that they have started for the oppressed groups of people. These women have paved the way for me and other modern activist such as Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garzato, the wonderful women who started the #blacklivesmatter movement. Without the previous women’s work, modern day activists would not have a platform to stand on. If you look back over the issues, you would see that the same problems, such as poverty, racism, unfair education system, and injustice, that have existed since the slavery days still exist today. This proves that there is a need to continue the fight that previous black women have started. There is a historical genealogy connection between the Black Power Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement because they both involve and need clarity in letting society know about intersectionality. This is because black women are the lowest in the pyramid in all aspects of life, home, work, education, and sexual assault. The conversation needed to happen back then, as much as right now.

**What’s Next?**
The Black Lives Matter movement today, like movements before it, gained
momentum as new awareness began to surface in response to police injustices directed at African-Americans like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Marissa Alexander, to name just a few. People became increasingly upset and frustrated at the way African-Americans were being killed by law enforcement and the ways justice among African-Americans was not being served. This period of unrest has resulted in more organized protests that continue to address the criminal justice system and the media on issues of racial inequality. All of these factors combined have produced a movement that social media has taken by storm. According to Judith Ohikuare (2015), “The organizers continue to work in distinct, but parallel, initiatives to amplify the voices of less heard populations, from undocumented immigrants to incarcerated youth” (p. 1). Their goal is to push for change across the board, the same goal as the seasoned black feminist civil rights activists who ushered in a movement for gender and racial equality in the 1960s. Sadly, this shows that the problems that existed in the Civil Rights era of Angela Davis, Shirley Chisholm, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Patricia Hill Collins, still exist now. This means there is a lot more work that needs to be done.

I plan on continuing the work that has already been laid out for me from the past to the present. I would love to make sure African-American women are treated as fairly as any other group. The biggest problem is education. I feel if we educate our children at home, school, churches, and in the community, it will keep the awareness going and eventually seize the discrimination. After I graduate, my plan is to get more involved in the community by organizing, bringing more awareness, and eventually starting my own not-for-profit. According to Patrisse Cullors,

The organizer is the person who gets the press together and who builds new leaders, the person who helps to build and launch campaigns, and is the person who decides what the targets will be and how we’re going to change this world” (as cited in Ohikuare, 2015, para. 7).

This quote is so powerful, and I get so warm inside when I read it, because I find it motivating and confirming of what I already feel in my heart. We have a lot more work that has to been done,
and yes, we have come a long way, but we also have a long way to go.

**Conclusion**

As I think back on all the issues that have taken place regarding African-Americans lives and communities, I begin to smile and say we have come a long way thanks to the wonderful African-American women who have paved the way, but then again, we have a long way to go as well. In the 1800s there was a struggle for freedom and equal rights in which Harriet Tubman decided to do something about it and succeeded. In the 1960s, Fannie Lou Hamer demanded equal rights for voter registration for African-American’s and made an impact. From the 1970s to now, Angela Davis continues to fight for injustice for African-Americans through her learning and teaching, and she has used her thinking and words to educate people on how they should be treated fairly. From the late 1970s to present, Patricia Hill Collins contributed by educating women on their rights, theorizing on ways we understand power and dominance, and letting us know that we can make a difference by educating ourselves about ways systematic oppressions operate in society.

While working on this paper, I truly learned what hard work and dedication really means by the actions of these powerful women before me. I have learned that sometimes it’s okay to be behind the scenes to make a difference; sometimes it is okay to be aggressive to prove a point; sometimes it is okay to use your words to educate people; and also, sometimes it’s okay to collaborate with different groups of people to get the job done. This research has also shown there is a fight that has to be fought for the African-American people now, just as much as it was fought in earlier times of racial and gender segregation. It reminds me of what we say on the protest lines, “same struggle, same fight,” because we are all in it to make a difference for the good of the people. Hopefully, this paper will call out to younger activists to help continue the movement with the same dedication as our previous and powerful African-American sisters did.

Help can come in many forms such as joining a community board in your neighborhood or church. You can get involved in voter registration by making sure that everybody you meet exercises their right to vote. In my eyes, one of the biggest things an activist can do is educate children, at home, in church, in school, and in the community. Just like
Angela Davis’ parents took her on the protest lines as a kid, the same thing happened to me when my mom was involved with the Rochester Housing Authority board. We both learned from our parents to fight for what’s right. Let’s continue to make a difference in our community, just as our ancestors did.

References


Women in Medicine:
Excluding Women

Throughout history, society has pushed women out of the public sphere of work and into the private sphere of home. The medical field is one example of this gender segregation of work. Even though the medical field today is not as male-dominated as it once was, different sub-specializations in medicine are gender segregated. My goal for this essay is to focus on gender segregation in the workplace to show how the field of medicine has been masculinized with a particular focus on the subspecialty area of surgery. This paper will discuss these two points from a personal point of view and explain how this affects me, being a woman of color who one day plans to be a part of the medical field. This research will look at the gender segregation of medicine and examine what factors, if any, are shifting to allow more women to enter male-dominated professions such as surgery.

Sex Segregation

Women have always been healers, so it’s interesting to see this switch where men are now primary healers and women seem less confident in their ability to take on the same roles as men. Women were considered the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of western history (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). They did everything medical related, but for some reason, women as practitioners are very limited in certain areas of medicine today. According to Ehrenreich and English (1973), one reason for the switch from female healers to male healers is witchcraft. An aspect of the female has been associated
with the witch, and an aura of contamination has remained, especially around the midwife and other women healers (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). This shows an early exclusion of women from independent healing roles, and from ever since, health care seems to be the property of male professionals. Gayle Letherby (2003) speaks on women characterized as witches, finding that

Some writers have made links between the campaigns against witches and the suppression of female healing and argue that in the fourteenth through to the seventeenth centuries those who appeared to threaten religious gendered ideology were branded as heretics and accused of witchcraft. (p. 25)

It is interesting to consider why women were singled out, and that this is one of the variables as to why medicine emerged as a male profession that suppressed female healers. It seems that there is never a legitimate reason as to why women are excluded from certain acts. Why pull someone away from something that they are very good at? This tug-of-war between men and women in the past became issues that society never fully resolved, so what we face today are consequences of this unresolved struggle.

In researching gender segregation of medicine, I thought it would be a good idea to go back to the foundation of the segregation of women in the public sphere, and what better place to start than with arguments about the male and female anatomy. Londa Schiebinger’s (1986) article, “Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth Century”, on the anatomy of the male and female skeleton, was both interesting and surprising to me at the same time. I am stunned that people would go so far to show how the female body is made to find ways to criticize it and say it is inferior to men. The purpose of Schiebinger’s article was to analyze social and political circumstances surrounding the eighteenth-century search for sex differences. Everything from the female skull to the size of the female pelvis was used to create arguments as to why females should be kept from participating in the public sphere. To me, this is where it all starts with males being considered superior to females. If the way a woman’s body was created does not match up to how a man’s body was created, then automatically women are regarded as inferior. Society
criticized women based on how their body is made up and subsequently regarded women as inferior to men. Even though we know that the female body is anatomically different from the male body, and that there are things that a female body is made to do that a male body is not, the work that Schiebinger (1986) analyzes does not mention this. In fact, it analyzes the criticism of the female anatomy instead of praising the wonderful things the female body can do that the male body cannot.

Sex segregation in the workplace is one of the most visible signs of social inequality (Bielby & Baron, 1983). One could argue that sex segregation starts from birth. As newborns, we are automatically placed in a category based on what our genitalia look like. As we grow older, we are then told what toys to play with and what kind of jobs males and females should have. Males are known to be pilots, lawyers, and doctors. Females are known to be nurses, teachers, assistants. Females are known to have jobs that always have them working under the dominance of another individual. Because of this social construction, children grow up with the idea that male and females belong in specific professions. This can cause individuals to choose a career in the field where they feel they belong and this contributes to sex segregation in the workplace. Segregation is more than just physical separation. From the time women and men first went out to work, they have done different jobs. Segregation is a fundamental process in social inequality. “The characteristics on which groups are sorted symbolize dominant or subordinate status and become the basis for differential treatment” (Reskin, 1993, p. 241). From this, we can tell who belongs to the dominant group in surgery based on the fact that there are more men in the field than there are women. Segregation has always been around, and women and men have always had different jobs. This just tells me that segregation is just in progression because it exists in the workplace today in full effect.

**Women as Patients**

Many could argue that medical research is flawed because of the lack of women subjects and practitioners in medicine. Medicine, which is governed and practiced primarily by men, has based its research on a “norm” of a white male (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). Although most medical research has been done on male patients, the results are generalized to all persons. Studies have been done
on cholesterol and heart disease in men, and studies on the potential benefits of aspirin to prevent heart attacks in 22,000 men versus women as heart patients (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). Researchers have also shown that there’s often a gender disparity in how men and women are treated when it comes to pain (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). A few studies (DiLonardo, 2015) have also shown that of nearly 1,000 people who visited an emergency room, women waited longer to receive their pain medication than men did. Another study (DiLonardo, 2015) shows that of 30 males and 30 females who had bypass surgery, male patients were given medication more frequently than female patients, and the women were more likely to be given sedatives (DiLonardo, 2015). What’s good for a man is not always good for a woman. Both bodies are made up differently and one may be prone to something the other is not. These are just a few examples to show how women are not only excluded from medicine as healers, but also as patients. It’s one thing that men are treated for their pain more frequently, but why are women given medication to fall asleep? Why is women’s pain frequently linked to women being hysterical? It seems medical professionals hold a stereotypical view of men and women; therefore, women are not taken as seriously as men. These are situations that concern women, yet women compared to men are less involved as subjects of research or as researchers. If medicine is being tested more on men, then it is easy to believe that the care of the female body does not matter.

According to the Institute of Medicine (2015), every cell in our bodies has a sex, which means men and women are different at a cellular level. This also means that diseases and treatments might affect the sexes differently (Westervelt, 2015). If this is the case, then why is there a tradition of ignoring gender when it comes to health research? This same study states that the reason women have been excluded is because they do not know what effect it would have on a woman’s fertility and if tests were done on infertile women, the results would be irrelevant to fertile women (Westervelt, 2015). Though this makes some sense, I would argue that these same tests could be done on pregnant animals to see how it affects their fertility or pregnancy. Even if there is an issue, this goes more into showing that women are not thought about because one would think a woman would be the first subject to test on since the female body
is complex. Since the female body is a means for reproduction, one would think that the female subject would be first thought of when it comes to health research. When it comes to medical diagnosis for women, their pain is usually taken less seriously than men’s because doctors tend to label women as hysterical. Even though research shows that major endocrine changes throughout a woman’s life (including puberty, menopause, and pregnancy) have been linked directly to increased risk for depression, this does not mean that all women’s pains are linked to an emotional factor. Although women have more factors that put them at a greater risk for depression than men, fewer than 45% of animal studies on anxiety and depression use female lab animals (Westervelt, 2015). It’s bad enough that health research overall does not take women into consideration, but for a health issue that more women are affected by still not to be tested mainly on women is an issue. What this tells me is that women are not taken very seriously in medicine, whether they are patients or whether it’s their profession. All practitioners should acknowledge and speak on women being excluded from health research. When it comes to health, everyone should be taken into consideration.

My Story

I’ve always known that I wanted a career in the medical field. I decided this because it is a field that will always be in high demand. People will always need medical attention. I am choosing to focus on obstetrician-gynecologist, because babies are born every day and I am interested in helping other women. I also find the female body very fascinating for what it is capable of doing. Coming into college, I didn’t realize at first the amount of time and some of the struggles that I would have to face with wanting to become a doctor. After two years into college, I decided to pick a career that is still medical focused, but one that will take less time to complete. I decided that I want to become a physician assistant as an obstetrician-gynecologist. Choosing this career path was not because I didn’t want to do the necessary work for medical school, but I thought about how competitive it would be being a woman, but also as a woman of color, to succeed in the medical field. Not that it is impossible to accomplish this, but I also thought about all the financial and time investment that I would have to put into this career, and I realized that
in the end, I may end up being discriminated against because of how I look or because of my gender.

I’m choosing to focus my research on gender segregation in the area of surgery, because as part of a summer research project, I shadowed a male neurosurgeon at a hospital in New York City. This was a great eye opener for me. With this experience I realized that the women at this hospital who worked in this field were not surgeons. They were secretaries, nurse practitioners, and nurses or professionals who worked in some other field. Not that there is any issue with the many jobs that the women I encountered occupied, but why weren’t there more women in the higher status medical jobs? The health care profession is essentially sex-segregated, as 84% of physicians are male and 97% of nurses are female (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014).

At the time that I was doing my internship-shadowing experience, I didn’t really pay attention to this gender segregation pattern. I was more excited about the fact that I was in a medical setting and that I was able to have this shadowing opportunity. On the floor of the hospital where I observed, I would say there were about three women of color. Of these three women, one was the assistant to the neurosurgeon I was shadowing, another worked at the front desk making appointments, and the other was a nurse practitioner. Looking back at this scenario now, makes me question if being a person of color and a woman makes you more oppressed than being just a woman. As a woman of color, I feel I am potentially oppressed twice and looking at how I went from wanting to become a doctor to becoming a physician assistant (PA) makes me wonder how many women of color or maybe just women my age have had similar thoughts and experiences. In a way, this may seem like we are oppressing ourselves for not pushing further, but like I mentioned in my case, there are other aspects that people may not think of such has being able to afford to go further in my education for longer amounts of time. Maybe I do not want to start my career when I will be well in my thirties and in debt are variables that I am wrestling with as I consider my career options in the medical field.

Is Surgery Segregated? Why Women Opt Out

We know that women are increasing in the medical field in general, but when it comes to surgery, research shows that
women only specialize in certain areas. According to Mackinnon, Mizgala, representation. It’s clear that women take up nearly half the percentage of family medicine and pediatrics and are at a lower percentage in the subspecialties that have to deal with surgery. This supports the argument that the percentage of women in surgery is very low, and the data can form an argument that for the women that are in surgery, they tend to choose specific subspecialties that are more family-centered.

If it is women who are choosing to stay away from surgery, what is the obstacle? What are the variables to gender segregation in surgery? If women have the same qualifications as their male colleagues, then why are there not more women surgeons? Looking at the data that explains these gender discrepancies in medical practice can cause someone like me who is aspiring to be a part of the medical field to lose hope. To know that even your best is not good enough can cause doubt.

Research suggests that women choose surgery because they have successful role models, …or have been told that they have “the surgical personality”. Conversely, women do not choose surgery because they perceive it to be too difficult, have no role models, perceive it to be too time-consuming, feel it is not family-friendly and believe the lifestyle is not controllable (Wirtzfeld, 2009, p. 5).

I argue that certain professions such as medicine are set up for a certain type of individual, and that individual is male. Males may have more time to commit to a career like this one because, if married with a family, they often have a wife or partner at home or can afford for someone to care for their children in their absence. As stated above, there are women who believe becoming a surgeon is too time-consuming and may need this time to stay at home and care for their families. If a career is structured in a way that it doesn’t show concern for the needs of women, such as maternity leave and having to work long hours without flexibility to balance family demands, then I don’t believe that career was structured for women. Interestingly, as a comparison of career to lifestyle choices, 32% of the 21% of women who are in the subspecialty of ophthalmology were least likely to remain childless compared to general surgeons, where 58% are most likely to remain childless (Mackinnon et al., 1995). Surgeons in obstetrics-gynecology work the longest hours, and those in ophthalmology work the shortest hours (Mackinnon et al., 1995). According to these statistics, ophthalmologists have more time on their hands because they work shorter hours than physicians in the other major subspecialties in medicine. It makes sense that they are least likely to remain childless because they do have that extra time on their hands to care for a child and a home. This data
suggests that childcare could be one of the main reasons women choose to opt out of surgery because if most of their time is spent on the job, then childcare may be an issue. Both men and women are capable of the caregiving role, but women are largely burdened with childcare whereas society has largely dismissed men in assuming this caretaker role. So, because of this, a lot of working women who are caring for children are often working two jobs. For me, this is important when it comes to the career I choose because I would like to have time to see my family and be able to care for my children.

As a way to examine the professional versus personal challenges for women in surgery, I researched a survey with the objective to assess professional and personal/family life situations, perceptions, and challenges for female versus male surgeons. The results of this survey show that most surgeons would choose their profession again, but more women than men would do so; also, 75.6% of women surgeons were married and 91.7% of men surgeons were married (Troppmann, Palis, Goodnight, Ho, & Troppmann, 2009, p. 635-636). Interestingly, women surgeons and surgeons of a younger generation were less likely to have children (Troppmann, et al., 2009). More women than men surgeons had their first child later in life while already in surgical practice and the spouse was the primary caretaker for 26.9% of women surgeons versus 79.4% of men surgeons (Troppmann, et al., 2009). This data supports my argument that the surgery profession is structured for and favors males, showing that more men than women have their spouse at home caring for their children. The data jump from almost 27% of women compared to almost 80% of men helps us see that less male surgeons than women surgeons have to worry about the care of their child while working such long and late shifts. Not to my surprise, the survey also shows that more women than men surgeons thought that maternity leave was important and that childcare should be available at work (Troppmann, et al., 2009, p. 635). The study concludes by saying that women considering surgical careers should be aware that most women surgeons would choose their profession again (Troppmann, et al., 2009).

I’m not sure if most people really think about what a job comes with until they are dealing with its demands. I’ve actually never really thought about my career versus my personal life as much as I thought about having a career that I
would enjoy. Yes, I’ve chosen a career that would take less time compared to training to become a surgeon because I do want to have a personal life, but I never thought about it this deeply as to what my life would be like working and having children. Obstacles like maternity leave and time management helps explain the lack of women surgeons in many other subspecialties. Troppmann, et al.’s, (2009) survey includes many generations, so it’s interesting to see that issues from 1988 are still the same issues women are facing in surgery today.

**Women as Other**

As part of my shadowing experience, I also had the opportunity to be in the operating room and observe surgery. Alongside me were other students in the room, which included two female medical students, one female neurosurgeon who was still in the process of training, and seven males that were medical students, physician assistants, or surgeons. I did notice at the time that I was not only one of the few women among the group, but I also was the only person of color who was in the room. This made me feel a bit out of place, but at the same time, I was fortunate and grateful that I had this opportunity. I could probably count on on one hand how many women of color I saw throughout this experience. This can be a bit intimidating and discouraging because, even though I do not wish to work in the area of surgery, healthcare is the field that I want to work in.

Even though women are entering medical school in greater numbers today than in prior decades, these increases are mostly among white women (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). “Women of color, who were 3.8% of all first-year medical students in 1980, were only 5.2% of all first-year medical students ten years later” (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). For these numbers not to go up even a full 2% is scary, and to get into why the medical field lacks such diversity would be another paper in itself. The issue with the medical field now is not only that there are fewer women in certain subspecialties such as surgery (8% women), but that the women who are in medicine are in the lower-paid specialties such as general family practice, pediatrics, psychiatry, and internal medicine (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). These specialties account for 70% of all women physicians, and while women are more likely to go into these specialties, women of color are even more so likely
to choose medical subspecialties other than surgery (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014).

Hill and Vaughan (2013) studied the trajectories of female surgical medical students and found that of 19 clinical medical students, “female students’ experiences of surgery were strongly gendered” (p. 547). The study states that female students were positioned as “other” in the surgical domain, they “were unable to see or identify with other women in surgery” (p. 547). These female students lacked experiences of participation, struggled to imagine a future in which they would be successful surgeons” and because of this, they “self-selected out of surgical careers (p. 547). It is interesting to read a study like this because thinking back to when I was in the operating room, the medical students who were in the room were more to the back of the group and only called forward a few times to see what was going on. I do understand that they were just observing and not completing their residency, but I would have expected more interaction. Also, there were only two students who were female and for them to not have that female role model to look up to or make them feel comfortable in the room can give an uneasy feeling. I no longer plan on becoming a surgeon, but if I did, I’d feel very intimidated being in that room and not seeing anyone who looks like me. Seeing just one female surgeon who was still in training did not provide much motivation either.

The study by Hill and Vaughan (2013) gets to the root of the gender segregation in medicine issue; it explains how female medical students are treated in medical school. These are few of the reasons these students chose to opt out of surgery. In the United Kingdom, 60% of United Kingdom medical students are female and only 33% of applicants to surgical training are women (Hill & Vaughan, 2013, p. 548). From this example, we can see a pattern that surgery as male-dominated may start from the medical school process where women self-select out as a consequence of gender discrimination. If female students aren’t feeling comfortable going into this field from medical school, then why continue? Being treated as other may cause women to fear what will happen if they choose to continue to pursue a male-dominated medical subspecialty. This same study stated that these medical students “heard about challenges to being a female surgeon, lacked experiences of participation, and struggled to imagine a future in which
they would be successful surgeons” (Hill & Vaughan, 2013, p. 552). I can only imagine what a disappointment this may have felt like, to make it that far in one’s academic career only to learn that the career is not structured for them to succeed.

**Outlook/Conclusion**

Until 1970, women made up only 6% of any medical class in the United States or Canada (Wirtzfeld, 2009). In the United States in 1970, women made up about 5% of all physicians; this number rose to 24% in 2001 (Wirtzfeld, 2009). Even though medical school overall enrollment has increased, in 1980 women only made up 2% of all female surgical residents (Wirtzfeld, 2009). This number rose to 14% in 2001 (Wirtzfeld, 2009). While the numbers of women are increasing in medical schools, it is growing in a space with no power. “In 2010, more than 2,500 medical students applied for a general surgery residency, with 35% of the applicants being women” (McLemore, Ramamoorthy, Peterson, & Bass, 2012). Despite these improvements, women continue to be a minority in other high paying subspecialties such as neurological surgery, urology surgery, orthopedic surgery, and thoracic surgery (McLemore et al., 2012).

If women continue to enter the medical field in the same areas or the same major subspecialties, women will always be far from equal because there is no one stepping up to the plate to help push women further. What I can conclude from this is that women are increasing in surgery but they tend to stick to subspecialties that are already mostly females, which is only a few subspecialties. This tells me that women are staying in their comfort zone, and that is understandable since for women, it’s a challenge even to achieve that high of a status in the medical field. This leaves me questioning myself, even though my goal is to become a physician assistant in obstetrics-gynecology, and I do argue that it is discouraging not seeing many women in certain areas of medicine. This paper is not to discourage women who choose to go into medicine or that are already in medicine, but, I question if I’m cheating myself or giving up an opportunity to help uplift women and women of color.

We should break through gender stereotypes in work and the medical profession to help others see that women can succeed in male dominated fields, but it’s difficult to be the encouragement for someone else with so many obstacles in the way. I think
this is what discourages me, for me knowing how difficult of a journey it would be if I did decide to go this far into medicine and end up hitting career obstacles that question my worth and ability. I commend the women who have pushed through and made it and those who are still fighting to prove that they are equal even though there are obstacles. This is the encouragement I speak of to change gender segregated work practices in the medical field. We should continue to promote the advancement of women and other minority groups in surgery; this also includes positions of leadership in medicine and the work world in general.

This research has led me to see that women face many obstacles in medicine as practitioners and patients. But there are other aspects to sex segregation in surgery that this paper does not cover. I wouldn’t want to do the same work as a male surgeon to receive less pay. Being a surgeon is an important job. It involves people’s lives, so I believe women should be paid the fair amount of money for the job they are doing. Another issue with sex segregation in surgery is race segregation, as I would call it. There aren’t many women of color in the field of surgery, as I mentioned before, and even though women are increasing in the field, this increase is mostly among white women (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2014). An increase in racial diversity, as well as an increase in women overall, is needed in the medical field.

This research, along with my shadowing experience, has opened my eyes to a few of the challenges that women face in medicine as a career. Women are very few in numbers in many different areas of medicine, and they are frequently overlooked in health research. I plan to continue to move forward towards my career goal as a physician assistant. As I do this, I hope to see progress in the area of gender equality in surgical practice. I hope to see women entering surgery not only in the same major subspecialties that women usually do, but also in other high paying subspecialties such as neurology and urology. Most of all, I hope to see more women of color in surgery and as physicians in general. As a woman of color, I would like to see other women like myself progress and succeed.
References


Body Autonomy During Pregnancy:
Where Did It Go?

This paper takes a personal yet informative look at body autonomy during pregnancy, examining the laws that remove autonomy from pregnant women with a look at how that affects women overall. The paper uses feminist theory to examine how the commodification of reproduction has stripped women of their body autonomy during their pregnancies and argues how women throughout history have largely been valued only for reproductive purposes.

Introduction

The idea that women are only good for reproductive value is something that is echoed in society. We see that with the obsession with reproductive rights and freedoms in the media and all over most of the social media platforms we have today. I am a mother to two daughters. I know that for both of my pregnancies, I and any other pregnant women were the center of the office where I worked. Food decisions were made to cater to our whims, jokes were made whenever we sat too close together, or that there must have been something in the building’s water. Frankly, I never had so much attention paid to me by co-workers. Usually I just did my job wherever I was and sometimes I socialized with a few people I liked more than the others. But I was also told at both jobs that my pregnancies were keeping me from being promoted – one
employer specifically told me the promotion was waiting for me when I came back to work after having my first child. Talk about pressure to go back to work after delivering a baby two months ago! That was one of the times that I realized that my value to others was wrapped up in my reproductive actions. It made sense when our species’ prominent worry was survival, reproduction, and sustenance. But even though we have evolved past survival mode, society’s view on women and the value they provide has not moved past reproduction. We see that with the national and international policing of pregnancies resulting in forced caesareans, abortion restrictions, and the increased change of the meaning of fetus viability. In this essay, I look at how the legal commodification of reproduction has stripped women of their body autonomy during their pregnancies, compromising their personal and public lives.

**Theoretical Framework**

When you began to examine the almost infinite body of feminist thought on the various avenues that commodify the female body, it gets pretty overwhelming. There have been so many theorists who have looked at how women’s bodies have been bought, sold, and taken over both literally and figuratively throughout generations. Susan Bordo (2004) is one feminist theorist who has written extensively on the topic of body autonomy during pregnancy and how placing such a high value on reproduction ends up placing most women at a disadvantage to the fetus growing inside them. This disadvantage usually is a consequence to various legislations that give more rights to the fetus than the mother carrying it. Bordo (2004) writes that, “...the ideology of women-as-fetal-incubator is stronger than ever and is making ever greater encroachments into pregnant women’s lives” (p. 81). She explains that even though the Supreme Court banned certain policies that restrict pregnant women in the workplace through ‘fetal protection,’ the opposite was happening as she was writing her book and the nation was becoming obsessed with fetal rights (Bordo, 2004). I completely agree with her idea that our national society looks at fetuses as separate persons with equal or overriding rights to the women who carry them. We see that today in the “pro-life” movement with their position that a life begins at conception, and therefore, fetuses should have the same rights as all autonomous beings, except for pregnant women.
Once we introduce feminist theory and legislation, it is important to look into the history surrounding reproductive rights. Ricki Solinger (2013) is a curator and a historian, and even though she is not a theorist in the existential sense, she has written extensively about the laws surrounding reproduction. Solinger (2013) points out how after Roe v. Wade, a landmark ruling that made abortion in the United States legal, passed in 1973, several groups worked to have political candidates elected to offices that would work around the laws to advance the “pro-life” agenda. One of the ways legislators began to work against Roe v. Wade was by restricting Medicaid funds for elective abortions (Solinger, 2013). By setting this political precedence early on, “pro-life” activists set the path for pregnant women of lower socioeconomic status to be disadvantaged through governmental legislation. As Solinger (2013) writes, “Even today, the political culture in the United States supports the reproductive rights of women who have abundant resources far more than it supports the rights of women with few resources” (p. 159). The passing of Roe v. Wade is also when the idea of assigning ‘personhood’ to the fetus began, and Solinger (2013) theorizes that the introduction of ultrasound imaging aided in this new aspect of the “pro-life” movement. It is not hard to see the connection made between seeing the fetus growing inside of a woman’s body and wanting to assign it an identity. But it seems that with each advancement in reproductive technology, legislations that restrict pregnant women in some way followed, and the end result of all this legislative control puts the most vulnerable women at risk of losing themselves and their bodily autonomy.

bell hooks (2000) is one of the more well-known black feminist theorists who looks at reproductive freedoms through an intersectional lens of race and class. The reason why I feel it is important to bring up her thoughts on reproductive justice is that hooks (2000) explains how “the abortion issue captured the attention of mass media because it really challenged…the notion that a women’s reason for existence was to bear children,” and I think that even though her quotes are from writings that originated in the 1960s, those words still apply to the type of social and mass media that we have today (p. 27). hooks (2000) also argues that because of the fascination with abortion as the ‘face’ of reproductive rights, it has led to keeping any other aspect of reproductive injustices − forced
sterilizations and hysterectomies, for example – out of public discussion. As she puts it, abortion “…called attention to a capitalist patriarchal male-dominated medical system that controlled women’s bodies and did with them anything they wanted to…” (hooks, 2000, p. 27). And she is right – reproductive rights and freedoms usually focus on access to safe abortions and birth control, not on what rights women are afforded while they are in pre- and perinatal care. And even though I do believe that access to safe and legal abortions is a right and not a privilege, I also believe that when we focus on only one hotly contested aspect of reproduction, we leave other areas of women’s health vulnerable to legal manipulations. Other theorists (Bordo, 2004; Phillips, 2013; Solinger, 2013) have looked at this complication.

Black feminist theorist, Angela Davis (1991) writes about reproductive commodification also through an intersectional lens of class and race. Davis (1991) points at how pregnancies were commodified pre-Civil War – before surrogacy – when black slave women were forced to have children in order to (eventually) have plenty of workers for their masters. This is possibly one of the first times in American history that reproduction was actually commodified – those babies born into slavery were being produced strictly as a product to be traded, used, sold, or killed. But Davis (1991) also argues that just as reproduction value separated one class of slaves from another, the advancement of surrogacy and other reproductive technologies does the same thing among free women. Reproduction as a market variable separates women with the ability to pay for reproductive services from women who lack resources to access this commodity. Ultimately, this further separates the women who are able to and choose to provide the service of reproduction from those who cannot or choose not to engage in this type of work. Many feminist theorists (Bordo, 2004; Davis, 1991; hooks, 2000; Phillips, 2013; Solinger, 2013) have argued this point over the years. As Davis (1991) affirms,

The availability of the technology further mythologizes motherhood as the true vocation of women. In fact, the new reproductive medicine sends out a message to those who are capable of receiving it: motherhood lies just beyond the next technology (p. 455).

It’s important to note the last sentence of this quote: “…to those who are
capable of receiving it…” Davis (1991), like Solinger (2013), is quick to remind us that not every woman is going to be able to access reproductive technology. We also have to keep in mind that access to the technology is controlled by the patriarchal and capitalist systems that modern medicine is beholden to, like hooks (2000) reminded us earlier. Importantly, these reproductive systems are known to be the most non-inclusive of social structures that exist today.

Anne Phillips (2013) is a theorist who looks at the commodification of reproduction through surrogacy, but through the lens of enforceable contracts. She writes, “It is also worth stressing the general notion of bodies as different is widely recognized in law….” (p. 82). Philips points out, like Bordo (2004), that the laws quite blatantly treat pregnant women far more restrictively than most other people. Phillips (2013) uses the example of reneging on a contract to exchange property for cash versus a contract of services rendered by a specific person via their body, and where the law would stand on contractual enforceability. Phillips argues that the very nature of involving the body illegitimates most of the bodily restrictions in surrogacy contracts, but since we have commodified reproduction in this way, we’ve come to accept that women’s bodies are purposed for reproduction, and we ignore the legal hypocrisy. Phillips (2013) also argues that this commodification of reproduction has further separated women through a class divide of women who use their body to provide a service (surrogacy) and women who pay for it (consumption). She specifically mentions India’s income gap between the surrogates and the “commissioning parents” as proof of this happening in modern society (Phillips, 2013). But the final point important to Phillips’ theory falls on the debate surrounding body autonomy and property involving the commodification of reproduction, particularly, ways the “…discomfort with the language of property amongst those whose activities otherwise seem to embrace it….” conveys “…significant indictment” (Phillips, 2013, p. 66). What Phillips (2013) means by this is that the very people we would expect to embrace the idea of self-body autonomy (the surrogates and others who perform bodily transactions), in reality, are not, and the fact that they aren’t should speak volumes to the imbalance society legally affords pregnant women during contractual surrogacy.
The “language of property” that Phillips (2013) refers to is the contractual language that surrounds transactions involving the body and how similar to property terms they tend to be. Using the property example as earlier described, pregnant women serving as surrogates are the only people whose bodily transactions are afforded the same leverage as property disputes and decided as such, where most other contracts involving body services will favor the body autonomy of the servicer. Some might argue that a women providing surrogacy services knows what she is signing up for, literally; surrogacy contracts are usually gone over extensively before final signing. But when body autonomy rights are chipped away in little pieces here and there with popular legislation in specific situations, it makes it much easier to move on to other areas of personal rights in reproduction.

Rickie Solinger (2013) concedes the awkwardness surrounding the topic of reproductive justice as we see it in today’s society. Solinger (2013) argues, “The impact of public policies and societal attitudes on the reproductive decisions of women may be a particularly difficult insight to bring into focus, in part, because of the way that personal choice has become the dominant way characterizing pregnancy and motherhood in recent times” (p. 3). What Solinger means by this is that we’ve spent so much time focusing on the fact that (some) women have choices now, choices regarding birth control and IVF treatments, that we forget that there are many women who do not have access to the same choices for various socioeconomic reasons. Phillips (2013) points out this imbalance using India as the example, as do hooks (2000) and Davis (1991) in discussing women, race, and reproduction.

Another interesting perspective to consider in the body autonomy question comes from the field of anthropology. In anthropological writings, Sweeney and Hodder (2002) discount how women have changed the way bodies have been looked at over time, and it is worth noting that other disciplines are noticing the work women’s movements have made. When Sweeney and Hodder (2002) write, “…the Women’s Movement and various forms of feminism have turned attention to the body as part of a wider critique and overturning of male control and objectification” (p.3), it feels somewhat satisfying to see women and our efforts being recognized in other, male-dominated fields of study. This writing also shows that there is a
recognition that women’s bodies are utilized in ways that are completely different than men’s bodies are and that there is work being done to change it.

Something else that I think is important to point out after discussing some of the theoretical framework surrounding women’s bodies is the span of time that these particular theorists have been discussing the commodification of reproduction. I am only looking at arguments that have been made in the last twenty years or so, and I am only using some of the authors that I am familiar with in my research. This is important to point out is because it is worth noting that we are still having this debate surrounding a woman’s right to choose what is best for her body today, just like these theorists were writing about the ramifications of women losing body autonomy in 1991, 2003, 2004, and 2013. As part of my argument about reproduction and body autonomy, I introduce two recent cases of women in the national news who both had their body autonomy stripped from them, making the women human incubators for the sake of their fetuses. The end results of both cases are disturbing to say the least, and the consequences of both cases were completely avoidable if both women’s wishes were respected regarding their bodies and medical care.

**Marlise and the Law**

One case where a woman’s body autonomy did not apply to her anymore because of her pregnancy is the circumstances surrounding Marlise Munoz and her pregnancy. Munoz was a 33-year-old married mother of one child, living in Texas and pregnant with another when she suffered a blood clot in her lungs and collapsed at her home on November 26, 2013 (Curry, 2014; Lavandera, Rubin, & Botelho, 2014). When she was admitted to John Peter Smith Hospital, in Fort Worth, Texas, it was found that both Munoz and her fetus experienced significant oxygen loss, which resulted in diminished brain activity (Curry, 2014; Powell, 2014). Because of this development, Munoz was declared brain dead and the hospital was made aware of her wishes not to be kept alive artificially (Lavandera, et al., 2014). The hospital refused to take her off of life sustaining machines, citing a Texas law that prevents pregnant women from being denied life-sustaining medical treatment for the benefit of the unborn child and statutes that stated that living wills became invalidated when pregnant (Curry, 2014; FindLaw, 2015). And let
me interject to say that yes, you read that right: a hospital in Texas interpreted the law to mean that they were legally supposed to keep Munoz on life-sustaining treatment for the sake of her fetus, even though Munoz, as the patient, was medically brain-dead, and multiple family members expressed that Munoz’s final wishes were that medical treatment not intervene.

For almost two months, Munoz’s family went to court repeatedly to challenge this law while the hospital fought back, arguing that they were following the law and that they were correct in applying it to this particular case (Lavandera, et al., 2014). In January of 2014, a judge ruled that the hospital had to take Munoz off of life support and release her body to family (Lavandera, et al., 2014), but the base of his ruling does not address the law. Judge Wallace ruled that John Peter Smith Hospital had to remove Munoz from the ventilation machines, not because the law was improperly applied, but because testing had proved that the fetus was developing so abnormally that it was no longer viable (Lavandera, et al., 2014). It is worrisome that the judge only ruled because of the viability of the fetus and not the person whose end-of-life decisions were being violated. Texas is not the only state with laws like this; almost half of the country has similar statutes. The wide variations between the states’ statutes regarding living wills and pregnancy portray the many legal complexities surrounding women and reproduction. The complete list to state statutes is significant, since there are wide variations between the states’ statutes regarding living wills and pregnancy. You can see the complete list and the wordings here: www.estate.findlaw.com.

Lucky Me?

Living in New York State meant that when I went to deliver my baby, I was asked to fill out a form to appoint a health proxy since I did not have a living will. In contrast to the tragic situation with Marlise Munoz, the hospital along with the state made sure that I would have a voice at a time when my own health could be impacted. I would hope that by taking those extra steps when admitting me for delivery of my children meant that those wishes would be honored if needed. Unlike New York State, there are 25 other states along with Texas that also invalidate a woman’s living will when they are pregnant (FindLaw, 2015). The laws and legislation surrounding pregnant women are unlike any other when it comes to autonomy,
as the multiple statutes that exist across states reveal. Susan Bordo (2004) argues that philosophically, the human body has been looked at as the one thing a person owns outright since their birth, and that the United States legal system reflects that in the legislation passed by the Highest Court over 100 years ago. As argument, Bordo (2004) cites numerous lawsuits where the judges ruled in the favor of individual body autonomy over instances involving forced blood or tissue donation. Bordo (2004) even used one specific case where the judge ruled that the possible donor did not have to follow through with donation, even though the person was so ill they died two weeks after the ruling. But Bordo (2004) goes on to explain how pregnant women are excluded from the legal protections people like that donor was afforded: “As a number of analysts have pointed out, there are no legal justifications for the discrepancies between treatment accorded to pregnant women and that given to non-pregnant persons” (p. 78). Why would pregnant women be afforded different treatment legally? Some people may argue that they need to think of the rights of the fetus growing inside of the woman, but I counter argue that when we place such importance on a fetus that is still completely dependent on the woman’s body for survival, we ultimately put women’s lives at risk. We also erase the woman and her body as person with all personhood rights.

**Why Does This Matter?**

When she was 17 weeks pregnant, Savita Halappanavar reported to University Hospital Galway, Ireland, on October 21, 2012, to receive care for a miscarriage (Darby, 2012). While she was admitted to the hospital, her membranes ruptured, meaning her ‘water broke,’ and the staff informed her that her fetus was dying (Darby, 2012; Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), 2013, p. 36). After hearing this, Halappanavar repeatedly asked for an abortion but was informed that since there was a fetal heartbeat that abortion is illegal under Irish law (Darby, 2012). She was also told by the midwife at the hospital, Ann Maria Burke, that “…Ireland is a Catholic country” (Darby, 2013), implying that Halappanavar will not be obtaining the services she feels she needs for her health and safety. Instead, Halappanavar’s care plan included monitoring her condition and to start administering antibiotics for her membranes that ruptured 21 hours’ prior (HIQA, 2013). During the
following six days that Halappanavar was hospitalized, she and her fetus’ condition deteriorated so much that Halappanavar had a spontaneous delivery of her miscarrying fetus, went into septic shock, and died from septicemia (Darby, 2012; HIQA, 2013).

It is absolutely deplorable that a woman died from septic shock due to a miscarriage while she was hospitalized for almost a week. Because of her death, members of the Health Service Executive (HSE) – Ireland’s health service providers – asked the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), Ireland’s independent firm that aids with the oversight and implementation of health and social care services, to investigate the hospital’s policies surrounding clinical deterioration (HIQA, 2013). What they found is that the hospital did not comply with several of its own protocols and missed several opportunities to intervene in Halappanavar’s care plans to make adjustments to save her life (HIQA, 2013). I bring up the Savita Halappanavar case to show that extremes using laws to protect fetal viability can ultimately kill the mother of said fetus. This was a completely preventable death; hospital personnel could have saved Halappanavar’s life a total of eleven times over the course of the four days that she was in the intensive care unit at University Hospital Galway, but they did not provide the proper care to do so (HIQA, 2013). Much like Munoz, Savita Halappanavar was viewed as secondary to her fetus’ health and there was no reason to deny her a life-saving abortion and no reason for her to die. But when women are viewed as reproductive incubators and stripped of the right to make autonomous decisions, we can expect to see more cases of pregnant women dying from easily preventable causes.

**Women, Bodies, and Reproductive Worth**

What do these cases say about how we view the actual worth of a woman when we are being reduced to body parts in close to every aspect of our lives? Women have been asking and answering this question for decades; a whole discipline in higher education arose from it. And through this radical school of thought is where Davis (1991) argues about the commodification of reproduction through slavery and the implications that has had on women, but on women of color especially. Bordo (2004) takes it a step further and looks at all the ways that the laws are
used against pregnant women, especially with the introduction of reproductive technology. One of my best friends’ favorite books is *The Handmaid’s Tale*, written by Margaret Atwood (1986). This is the novel that autonomy theorists point to as the end result of the commodification of reproduction – a society where women are separated by reproductive fitness, and the ones who can reproduce are going to be controlled, monitored, and forced to bear children for the women who can no longer do so. In the book, Atwood (1986) accurately describes the introduction of credit and debit cards as a replacement to paper money, the government falsely blaming Islamist extremists for all of America’s problems, and a presidential assassination. Susan Bordo (2004) uses this fictional tale in her writings to describe the types of laws that we can expect to see if fetal personhood rights become the norm, and I use it to show the parallels to what is happening in today’s society.

The toxic political climate that surrounds us today is trickling down into the argument surrounding reproductive rights and freedoms and leaves many women scared for what awaits in five or ten years. Some argue that Roe v. Wade is law and cannot be changed or repealed; since the right to an abortion is legally protected, what are we worried about? The two examples of restricted body autonomy during pregnancy I bring up is exactly what we should be worried about as governments across states continue to introduce other restrictive legislation that applies to reproduction. For example, what kind of message are we sending our children when they see that women are going to jail for miscarrying a child? Solinger (2013) argues:

> Finally, fetuses may be harmed most when pregnant women are defined as potential or actual violators of fetal rights. The characterization may cause pregnant women who need help to avoid prenatal care providers, health care facilities, and other institutions where they have good reason to expect to be judged and punished instead of provided with services (p. 93).

Purvi Patel went to the hospital after she miscarried her 20-plus week fetus alone and was ultimately sentenced to twenty years for feticide under new Indiana law (Chowdhury, 2015). Even though there was no evidence that she actually did anything to harm her fetus while in utero or after delivery, Patel
was punished for seeking out medical services after suffering a traumatic event (Chowdhury, 2015). She may be the first woman sentenced, but she’s not the only one to be charged in Indiana; Bei Bei Shuai, in a failed suicide attempt while pregnant, also was charged with feticide under the same law and also faced jail time before accepting a plea deal (Penner, 2013). According to Solinger (2013), “Almost forty states have ‘fetal homicide’ laws for dealing with crimes against…” fetuses (p. 93). As we see in Indiana, conservative politicians will absolutely take advantage of these laws to persecute women who may engage in behaviors some deem ‘unsuitable’ for pregnant women. This is what women look forward to when personhood laws give more rights to the fetus than the woman – policing every move every pregnant woman makes to insure complete safety and autonomy for the person growing inside of her while the laws undermine the woman’s own health and safety.

When a woman’s body is legislated and regimented to the point of depersonalization, commodification is right around the corner. We already have commodified reproduction in some ways, for example, surrogacy contracts and how they strip women of basic autonomous rights is the basis of Bordo’s (2004) body autonomy theory and Phillips (2013) surrogacy arguments. Are we ultimately going to face a society where women who can reproduce are forced to ‘provide’ for those who can’t? We may not need to have the same reproductive ceremonies that Atwood (1986) describes in her dystopian future, but forcing women to donate their eggs may not be that far off from reality and is certainly plausible with today’s technology. So is criminalizing pregnant women who transgress conservative ideologies about female bodies and reproductive utility.

**Conclusion**

In doing research for what various theorists have written about body autonomy during pregnancy, I selected writings that provided good explanations as to why focusing on reproductive justice is important to women’s studies as a whole. Monica Basile (2015) is a doula and an educator who has conducted extensive studies on the role doulas play in the birthing process and in reproduction overall. During one of her field studies, Basile (2015) quotes a doula using the pseudonym Megan Tate who says, “When women reclaim the right to birth on their own terms they might feel
more empowered to challenge other forms of oppression and discrimination in their lives” (p. 227). It is extremely important to recognize and fight all forms of oppression, but she’s right – if women do not feel like they have any say over their own bodies, how are they going to be able to fight for the rights of any other individual who are at an even greater disadvantage? And we also cannot forget, in the fight for ‘fetal personhood rights,’ we are ultimately forgetting the rights of the woman carrying the fetus.

When studying Munoz’s and Halappanavar’s cases, I came across another quote that also sums up my arguments: “Women have the right to die in dignity. The goal of fetal rescue does not exonerate healthcare givers from the duty to respect this right of the primary patient—the woman” (Dickens, 2011, p. 85). This quote perfectly sums up my argument surrounding the restrictions laws place on women and their bodies during pregnancy. We have become a society that places more rights on a fetus than the person who is actually sustaining said fetus. I think society needs to treat women with the same dignity and respect that organ donors are afforded — basic human autonomy.
Where Pregnant Women Are Forced To Stay On Life Support

In most states, terminally ill pregnant women can be forced to accept life-sustaining treatment, even when the patient has authorized a directive against it. States in dark red here have the most restrictive laws, requiring life support to be continued regardless of the progression of the pregnancy, with no exceptions for pain or physical harm caused by the treatment.

Figure 1. From "Where pregnant women are forced to stay on life support", by A. Scheller, 2014 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/08/pregnant-living-will-_n_4562964.html). In the public domain.
References


http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/20140109-editorial-let-marlise-munoz-die.ece


http://estate.findlaw.com/living-will/living-wills-state-laws.html
HEALTH INFORMATION AND QUALITY AUTHORITY (HIQA), & SOCIAL SERVICES INSPECTORATE (SSI). (2013). Investigation into the safety, quality and standards of services provided by the Health Service Executive to patients, including pregnant women, at risk of clinical deterioration, including those provided in University Hospital Galway, and as reflected in the care and treatment provided to Savita Halappanavar executive summary and recommendations. Retrieved from http://www.lenus.ie/hse/handle/10147/303139


