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Our Voices

Our dissenting voices call for the dismantling of all identity-based power hierarchies that silence and oppress marginalized voices. We attempt to understand how the invisible forces of a binary world put women into roles of “lesser”. Our writings bring attention to gender segregation that controls everyone’s lives and why this segregation is so problematic and limiting within our society. We strive to empower youth through dress and redressing the rules and regulations within systems, and to reflect on the many identities that make us unique beings. Our voices dissent to open the ears and eyes of the privileged by providing voice to those who society beats up. Collectively, we can break away from patriarchal rules that govern women of color by looking through the lens of intersectionality. We seek to give voice to female victims silenced for so long under patriarchal values. We hope readers will look at diverse communities as valuable. Our voices inform the world; don’t stifle us.

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Dissenting Voices Cover Art

Image by Women and Gender Studies Senior Seminar at The College at Brockport, blesavoy@brockport.edu
Note from the Editor

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

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

*Dissenting Voices* volume seven introduces nine authors who write across a diverse range of topics salient to Women and Gender Studies. In “Opening Voices”, two essays introduce the volume. Essay one is a complex reading of psychological and sexual coercion analyzed using Jean Jacque Rousseau’s (1762) *Emile* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1792) *The Vindications of the Rights of Women*. Essay two uses an outside looking in lens to address the reasons women have for reporting or not reporting domestic violence and sexual assault. “More Voices” centers the volume where five authors tease out stories of dissent. Essays in this section include a critique on gender segregation of majors in higher education, a narrative on intimate partner violence among LGBTQ individuals, research on ways society sexualizes women’s bodies through school dress codes, life experiences as a woman veteran returning to college, and a study of ways gender power hierarchies form in cultural “blank-slate” territories such as Antarctica. “Closing Voices” bookends the volume with two book reviews. The first explores transgender identity in Kate Bornstein’s (2012) memoir, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*, and the second interrogates gender, race, and ethnicity using Stacyann Chin’s (2009) memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise*.

Collaborative, conscientious, and compassionate are words that best describe this WMS 421 collection and the diverse and remarkable authors who penned this year’s volume. From their very first sentences to their final compositions, the writers here lived and inspired their texts in ways that lifted up themselves and each other. The journal cover, a distinctive handprint of each author, captures the sense of feminist community that was present in our classroom and that spills into and gels the pages of the essays in the volume.
Their research sheds light on the origins and cures of gender, racial, and sexual inequality while their words offer us courage in the face of bias and adversity. Writing on the cusp of a revolution, the essayists champion the need to look below the surface as we reach for a more just and equitable world. The #MeToo photo essay at the end of the volume is one example of ways authors enacted the radical feminist causes for which they write. 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 2018 class, is this dream forward.

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

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#MeToo
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I share this story to illustrate an example of psychological sexual coercion and the power dynamics that allow such coercion to exist. We must understand that the root of this problem lies in the nature of power between men and women. I do not think that these dynamics are born to us naturally. The biology of men and women has nothing to do with the nature of the power dynamics that can exist between them. This power dynamic is one that has been engrained into our society through generations of separating the public and private spheres of work.

The morning after Halloween in 2015, I laid in bed with my boyfriend. The night before I had hosted my first party as a legal drinker. I had put together my costume weeks in advance, taking painstaking detail and care. I was a white-tailed deer, the front of a tan shirt adorned with a white felt circle. My antlers had become the crown jewel of the costume. Having applied papier-mâché over a pair of real deer antlers, I carefully ran an exact-o knife over the hardened plaster of paris mold. I repaired the opened seams with paint, taking hours to properly portray the spectrum of browns that colored my real example. When finished, they leaned heavily on my head. At the last minute my boyfriend decided to be a hunter, showing up to the party in camo and bright orange, toting a fake rifle. Before the night began, I was overjoyed and excited he was finally participating in something I felt was important. There was a sheet dripping with fake blood hanging in my dining room. From the corner, a fog machine steadily provided an
ominous ambiance; the lights were off, and faces were illuminated by candles alone.

I had expected the night to be full of drunken memories to look back on. In reality, I spent my time worried that I was talking to my guy friends too long or looking at them a “certain” way. I prayed as we sat closely, catching up, they would not touch my arm, or playfully hug me as they had done in the past. I spent my time trying, and failing, to interact with the friends my boyfriend had brought. As people dispersed and the alcohol ran dry, I found myself completely sober and miserable, exhausted from the balancing act I kept up in order to please my boyfriend. Before that night, I had failed to put my finger on how he made me feel. I failed to understand why I wasn’t sleeping well, or why I felt restricted when we were in public. Why I was constantly aware of the strangers I was looking at, interacting with, and not wanting to be accused of staring, flirting. Liking some other guy,

texting some other guy,

hooking up with some other guy,

fucking some other guy.

Are you mine?

Tell me you’re mine.

Say you’re my girl.

You’re mine.


As the night ended, I told him I wanted to end our relationship. I discarded my antlers to my bed as the argument heated up. I backed away, the knobs of my dresser pressing lightly against my back. He took steps towards me, he shouted from above me. Feeling his presence, always much bigger than mine, to be bigger than ever before.

He stopped and turned to leave. After my door closed behind him, I stood frozen with my toes curled into my green carpet. I began to cry and wipe at the white spots smattering my cheeks. Marks meant to show my naivety, but only for one night of pretending. Despite the tears, I finally felt lighter, and more than anything, a sense of relief flooded me.

Just as I began to let relief sweep over me, my bedroom door opened again, and he was back. The darkness of the hallway softened the edges of his large body. He could not accept our break up, he said. Short of falling to his knees, he begged, told me he would change. Told me I was his girl and he needed me. Asked me, accused me, how could I leave him? When he needed me most? When this, that, and the other thing, was going wrong for him

I,

me,
who claimed to love him,  
   was supposed to be his girl.  
   Please.  
   Please.  
   Please!  
   Please!

I knew he had had a rough life, really rough. I knew in his lifetime that no one had shown him undying love; I knew love was powerful. I relented. I told myself that being tired of this relationship was nothing in comparison to the trauma he had undergone. As he pressed on with accusations, I began to question myself: Was I flirting? Was I staring? How could I claim that I was his “girl” if I was going to leave him? And just like that, with only several pleading lines and one convincing voice crack, I had become his hunter and he the fawn. Yet, our costumes that night had told a different story. Almost as if casting a spell, he had made me a bad guy, a bad girlfriend, and I believed it.

The next morning, he told me he wanted me. I clung to the memory of mere hours before. I could not believe I had almost been freed and then lost my nerve. In that moment, connecting sexually was not what my heart desired. I did not want to have sex with him. He verbally pushed me, telling me how much he wanted me, how badly he needed me. Needed to feel me, needed to know I was his. He needed something. If I were to withhold it -- despite the fact I did not want this same thing -- did that make me the terrible person he had painted me to be? I wanted to give him what he needed, despite my own needs. I gave in.

**Wollstonecraft and Rousseau**

Instances such as these would go on between us for another year. What I now can identify as an abusive cycle would turn and turn and turn, and I would end up on my head every time. He would walk away the victim of my cold heart, and I would walk away, feeling the noose around my neck growing taut. That additional year of convincing myself his needs were greater than mine were and using his trauma as a reason to excuse his behavior left me with trauma of my own.

Years later, I still wake up in the morning having spent the night streaming nightmares in which he stars.

I share this story to illustrate an example of psychological sexual coercion and the power dynamics that allow such coercion to exist. We must understand that the root of this problem lies in the nature of power between men and women. I do not think that these dynamics are born to us *naturally*. The biology of men and women has nothing to do with the nature of the power
dynamics that can exist between them. This power dynamic is one that has been engrained into our society through generations of separating the public and private spheres of work. Early on, a way of gendering the sexes emerged, leaving women less than men socially, politically, and economically (Garbacik, 2013). The ways in which we raise both boys and girls, under the social constructs of a patriarchal society, leaves a grown woman with a perceived or real lack of power when negotiating intimacy. This allows for acts of leveraging, such as psychological sexual coercion.

What is most troubling about our current societal expectations for men and women is that this current code is reminiscent of expectations of women in the 1700s. In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) argues in his novel *Emile*, that he has not only found a way to construct and rear the perfect man, Emile, but he has also hypothesized Emile’s perfect mate. This mate is one that is subservient, whose first concern is that of her husband and children, and who is not intellectually trained as is her husband. One of the earliest feminist thinkers, Mary Wollstonecraft, famously debates *Emile*. In her book, *The Vindications of the Right of Women*, Wollstonecraft (1792) argues for the equality of men and women in all realms, including education. And yet the power dynamics as theorized by Rousseau (1762) are the same ones that allow psychological sexual coercion today. How is it that from Wollstonecraft (1792) to today we still find antiquated ideologies prevalent in allowing the abuse, rape, and killing of our women through gender-based violence?

**Emile and Sophie**

“We have attempted to paint a natural man, let us try and paint a helpmeet for him” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 326). Rousseau (1762) wrote this as he attempted to paint a female partner for his perfectly reared, perfectly strong (and I would assume, perfectly chiseled Emile). Affectionately named Sophie, she is the ideal mate for Emile and is Rousseau’s (1762) idea of what a woman should be striving for in life. “Sophie [is] truly a woman as Emile is a man” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 321). Thanks to Rousseau, (1762) we know what it takes to rear the perfect boy from infancy through manhood. We know men should be strong, they should be educated, and we know the exact path to take in order to lead them there. In one of the more bizarre parenting tips, Rousseau (1762) explains that male babies should not get too accustomed to warm baths. Rather, they should gradually be bathed at
“every bearable degree” of hot and cold so that in time, “[they] shalt scarcely feel this [varying temperatures] of the air” (p. 26). The reader, now steadfast in their trust of Rousseau’s tips for new parents, moves into his ideals on the roles of women. Although they are not subjected to cold baths, Sophie has been “made to please and be in subjection to the man” (p. 322). The ideas that Rousseau (1762) lays out for what men should expect, and what woman should aspire to, were theorized hundreds of years ago. Although admittedly not as pronounced and bold as Rousseau’s original beliefs (1762), we can identify his ideals for men and women in society today. Rousseau (1762) writes:

Men and women are made for each other, but their mutual dependence differs in degree; man is dependent on woman through his desires; woman is dependent on man through her desires and also through her needs; he could do without her better than she can do without him. She cannot fulfill her purpose in life without his aid, without his goodwill, without his respect; she is dependent on our feelings, on the price we put on her virtue, and the opinion we have of her charms and her deserts (p. 328).

My focus on this passage lies on the way in which Rousseau (1762), when describing what he believes is the natural way between sexes, puts women at the mercy of men. Most importantly, he attributes woman’s worth to what men believe of their “virtue,” “charms,” and “deserts” (p. 328).

Rousseau (1762) also remarks, in order to keep men, women must fulfill their man’s desires. And because the man is far less in need of her than she is of him, she better be damn good at it. In turn, if a woman does not fulfill her husband’s every desire, she will then lose all that his aid, goodwill, respects, and feelings fulfill in her (Rousseau, 1762, p. 328). In this passage alone Rousseau (1762) tells women that not only is their worth dependent on the views of men, but without the positive view of a man, they are helpless as they are incapable of depending on themselves for fulfillment.

Dependence is an important piece to understand in Rousseau’s (1762) theory because it is the key to men having their every whim and desire fulfilled. How does he ensure this dependence? To ensure that women rely heavily on their husbands, Rousseau (1762) paints women as inferior to men. This includes the obvious physicality: “Far from being ashamed of her weakness, she is proud of it; her soft muscles offer no resistance, she professes she cannot lift the lightest weight; she should be ashamed of being strong” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 323). With these words,
Rousseau (1762) encourages women to be proud of their frailty. He goes further in stating that women are also morally inferior to men (Rousseau, 1762). This moral inferiority demands that a woman assures her husband, as well as “his friends and neighbours, … [of] her fidelity; she must be modest, devoted and retiring” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 325). She must convince her entire social circle of her fidelity because, “she alone can win the father’s love for his children and convince him that they are indeed his own” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 324). *Without this love, where would the woman be?*

In response to *Emile*, Wollstonecraft (1792) comes to the defense of Sophie, criticizing a fate in which she is nothing more than a “helpmate.” Wollstonecraft (1792) wastes no time as she begins the chapter titled, “Animadversions on Some of the Writers Who Have Rendered Women Objects of Pity, Bordering on Contempt” (p. 105). Her opening line, “I shall begin with Rousseau” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 105), sets the stage for her vehement disagreement with the author. Throughout the argument, she exposes pitfalls in Rousseau’s (1762) logic, rendering his depiction of the sexes as inaccurate. Overall, Wollstonecraft (1792) argues against the core of Rousseau’s (1762) thesis that women are by nature the inferior sex:

Modesty, temperance, and self-denial are the sobering off-spring of reason; when sensibility is nurtured at the expense of understanding … but give their activity of mind a wider range, and nobler passions and motives which govern their appetites and sentiments (Wollstonecraft, p. 110).

The idea that Wollstonecraft (1792) proposes is that women have been nurtured to be inferior as they have not been given the same access to knowledge and opportunity as men. If women were granted this access, then they would in fact be equivalent to men intellectually, and thus, have the same value as men. She prods Rousseau (1762), “but all sacred rights of humanity are violated by insisting on blind obedience; or, the most sacred rights belong only to man” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 111). She questions Rousseau (1762) here, wondering, are women no longer considered human? She also evokes the response of women with this statement, the underlying text asking, ‘how does it feel to not be considered part of humanity?’ Wollstonecraft (1792) exposes the fact that men have something to gain from women “naturally” being inferior, but that men end up sacrificing something much larger. “Beauty, he [Rousseau] declares,
will not be valued, or even seen after a couple has lived six months together” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 117). Wollstonecraft (1792) concludes that Sophie cannot truly be a mate to Emile if the partners cannot connect with one another intellectually. By rendering women helpless, Wollstonecraft (1792) believed that you are bringing not only a detriment to women, but also to the men they are partnered with. In her counter to Rousseau (1762), she not only made the case for women, but also their male counterparts by questioning, “Why does he say that a girl should be educated for her husband with the same care as for an eastern haram?” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 117).

Wollstonecraft’s (1792) inversion of Rousseau’s (1762) argument was a powerful start in dethroning the ruling views on sex. What was not accounted for was the lethargic nature of change and the institutions that have kept old systems in place. Rousseau (1762) showed us that the sum of a woman’s parts is dependent on the view of the man. This view is thus contingent on how well his desires have been fulfilled. It could require a woman’s entire life to adequately and properly fulfill her husband’s desire. While this might seem anachronistic compared to gender relations in 2018, I recall the Halloween night I spent attempting to fulfill the desires of my own boyfriend, and the next morning, again fulfilling his sexual desires when I felt I had failed him otherwise. How has the man’s view changed? How could someone like me, raised with all the opportunity and education in the world, still fail to recognize the gendered trap I had fallen into?

Gender and Situated Coercion

How do psychological sexual coercion tactics have the ability to wield power? Why doesn’t a woman just say “no”? In order to understand the power of psychological sexual coercion, we must first understand how sex and intimacy is situated within gender. A deep unconsciousness to gender must also be exposed in order to understand the power of coercion. Unlike Rousseau (1762), who very explicitly laid out roles for men and women, most of us were not given a rule book on gender. Rather, we learned from the world around us. In her 2013 book, Gender & Sexuality For Beginners, Jaimee Garbaik (2013) writes about the construction of gender. She concludes that not only is gender constructed within your home, it is also constructed by those you interact with such as extended family and teachers. Gender is constructed by the other
children you see, what they wear, and how they act; it is constructed by the media’s portrayal of men and women, and everything from job titles to outfit choices. She writes, “From noticing who inhabits which roles in a household, to pronoun usage, clothing, hairstyles, and gender-appropriate behavior, we begin to note gender coding around us very early on” (Garbaik, 2013, p. 75). We are given roles as male and female, but the parts we play are not presented as such, they are presented as nature. Garbacik (2013) warns:

So while today people often think of color-coding and gender markers in clothing and toys as simply suiting boys’ and girls’ personalities and preferences, they were once a way to actively enforce the gender archetypes that now are coming into question once again (p. 75).

Because a gendered society is regarded as the “natural” expression of boys and girls, this gendering goes unnoticed. These ideas in turn become engrained within us. This deep-seeded, and yet unconscious knowing, means we play the parts we believe are expected of our genders.

The unconscious acting of gender is something that feminist theorist Judith Butler has built a substantial body of work on. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* written in 1990, Butler addresses this unconscious gendering with her theory of gender performativity. This theory considers the unconsciousness to gender, as we live in a world in which we are not given any other choice. The ideas of being “masculine” and “feminine” are not inherent to gender and perhaps are not truly authentic to our identity. Butler (1990) argues that this performativity comes from “gender fables [that] establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts” (p. XI). Feminine and masculine cannot be applied to assigned sex as they can be to gender. From there, gender does not naturally operate on a binary as society and culture has constructed it. This binary gender then takes on meaning as we apply it to “the body” which, “appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed” (Butler, 1999, p. 8). This cultural inscription of the body through gender means that the body itself now becomes part of the hierarchy in which masculine (men) are valued over feminine (females). These bodies have been inherently pitted against one another as opposites and the hierarchy of value dictates that one should dominate the other.

This unconscious acting of gender was studied in men’s ability to self-report sexually aggressive and coercive
behaviors. In the study, “Discrepant Responding across Self-report Measures of Men's Coercive and Aggressive Sexual Strategies”, Strang, Peterson, Hill, and Heiman (2013) found men were largely unable to define their own behaviors that were sexually aggressive and coercive. The study explored the consistency of men's responses with two distinct, but similar, measures of sexual coercion and aggression (Strang et al., 2013). In both cases, participants' responses were largely inconsistent across two measures (Strang et al., 2013). Because the men could not adequately report said behaviors, it is clear they did not fully understand that they were themselves perpetrators. Barrie Levy (2008) corroborates this lack of understanding in citing accounts of professionals responding to gender-based violence:

In their daily work lawyers, advocates and counselors who see men and/or boys charged with acquaintance rape, intimate partner violence, or other violence against women observe perpetrators shock and disbelief that anyone thinks they have done something illegal or wrong (p. 28).

Where does this lack of knowledge, this shock, come from? It is obvious here that some men do not understand the crimes they committed. They have been taught to operate in a way that perpetuates gender-based violence, and yet this way of operation is unconscious in its gendering behavior.

Legal scholar and feminist theorist Catharine MacKinnon (1989) is outspoken on the topic of coercion and female sexuality, taking extreme stances on things such as sex work and pornography. In her 1989 book, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, she argues that sexuality does not exist on its own:

…a feminist theory of sexuality that seeks to understand women’s situation in order to change it must first identify and criticize the construct ‘sexuality’ as a construct that has circumscribed and defined experience as well as theory. This requires capturing it in the world, in its situated social meanings, as it is being constructed in life on a daily basis (p. 417).

Rousseau (1762) provided us with plenty of theory, but how has this theory helped to construct sexuality in the world? Gender becomes the building blocks for sexuality as it is situated in the world. What we see is that the construction of gender in our modern day is not unlike the theory that Rousseau (1762) provided us with when he gave us Emile and Sophie, “The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other offers little
resistance” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 322). Both the construction of Emile and Sophie, as the ideal boy and girl, is instrumental to the survival of psychological sexual coercion.

This idea that women should fulfill men’s desires in order to be whole and loved is disconcerting, but it pales in comparison to the ideals that society expects of boys. Jackson Katz has devoted his work as a feminist to the study of hyper-masculinity within culture. In his and Earp’s documentary, Tough Guise; Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity (1999), he unpacks a culture that has created a narrow view of masculinity. He states, “The culture in general tells boys that you become real men through power and control. That respect is linked to physical strength and the threat of violence and the ability to scare people” (Katz & Earp, 1999). From this view of masculinity, Katz believes “Violence isn’t so much a deviation as it is an accepted norm” (Katz & Earp, 1999). Just as girls are taught the traits valued in grown women, boys are taught what traits are valued in grown men. These values are ones that they would hope to recreate in order to be “accepted within their peer groups” (Katz & Earp, 1999) and to become successful adult males. There becomes a very dangerous “flip side to submissive femininity” in which, “masculinity is defined by power, control, dominance and sometimes violence” (Katz & Earp, 1999). With culture both defining and perpetuating this “narrow manhood,” we can make an unsettling connection within the expectations of boys and men. Men are praised for their strength and conditioned to think that it is their largest asset. They are also conditioned to think of women as sexual objects, and that the actual woman is a means to the end, having sex with her. For men to connect these ideals means that a man will use any means possible, including leveraging his strength, in order to have what he believes is already his. This connection then plays out within intimacy in many forms including psychological sexual coercion.

Keeping gender in mind, this is a situation where a woman is not just being coerced by her partner but is one in which she must go against what she feels makes her female. This “femaleness” is her identity. Just as the man followed what he believed society expected of him, the woman is compelled to do the same. We transpose the act of sexual intimacy beyond pleasure or procreation into a social sphere where identities are negotiated and possibly betrayed. As MacKinnon (1989) points out, we must take into
consideration the social meaning of this sexual interaction. If a woman does not consent to the act, what is she losing? Will she lose what Rousseau (1762) believes she needs to thrive: the aid, goodwill, respect of a man? Will she lose her financial stability? Will she lose her life (Levy, 2008)? There are real and perceived losses a woman will undergo if she does not consent to this act and she is coerced into intimacy beyond the pleading words of a partner. Because one must consider outside factors, the woman now becomes “willing” to go through with whatever intimate act her partner requests. And yet, does she truly have will in this case? We claim that as humans we have free will and yet the actual act of coercion is taking away that will. She no longer possesses her own autonomy as she is coerced by the words of her partner AND by the code of her gender. She is not able to define her true feelings because she is told and shown from birth to be passive, be weak, be quiet, be slim, be small, be subservient, be ladylike. She is told to put the man before herself. She is told it is her duty to prove herself to the man. To go against this covenant of ladylike behavior means she is no longer a woman as society defines her. She may no longer be a woman as her male partner defines her. And so, as everyone has already defined her, the answer ‘no’ was never hers to give.

**Sex and The Patriarchy**

Why can we not educate men on sexually aggressive and coercive behaviors in order to stop it from happening? Although a comprehensive sex education should be available to all adolescents, I believe this is only a start to fixing a deeper problem. Feminist theory concludes:

Rape and the threat of rape are tools used in our society to keep woman in their place. This fear keeps women in traditional sex roles, which are subordinate to men’s. The social, economic and political separation of the genders has encouraged rape, which is viewed as an act of domination of men over women (Carroll, 2015, p. 448).

I have laid out how psychological sexual coercion is also deeply rooted in power held over another, and this power is one that exists in all spheres of a patriarchal society. From her book, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett (1970) writes, “[Sex] is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes” (p. 191). Similar to MacKinnon (1989), Millett (1970) believes that intimacy is something that
cannot necessarily be separated from the world beyond your bedroom door. So, if an imbalance in power exists outside of intimacy, is it possible to eliminate the leveraging of power sexually without eliminating it publicly? Could education effectively disrupt an invisible system engrained in us from our first Barbie doll or toy truck?

This approach, one that would utilize education to reform psychological sexual coercion, is nothing new to the feminist movement. In fact, it is a staple of liberal feminism throughout time. Feminists with these ideals strive not to change the overarching system, but rather, to fit women into it equally (Tong, 2018). In this way, a proper sex education would be the solution that allows women to fit into intimacy as equal partners to men. Wollstonecraft (1792) believed that education was the key to women’s equality. Her stance, shared in the Vindications of the Right of Woman, was simple, “Men and woman must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 77). Wollstonecraft (1792) believed that once women had been given the right to an education, they would gain an instantaneous equality with their male counterparts. Then theorists such as Rousseau (1762) would be eating their words while women became revered chemists, scholars, and mathematicians, won awards, supported their families, et cetera, et cetera. What Wollstonecraft (1792) did not consider is that “gaining the right” cannot conquer patriarchy. Within feminist movements over the years, this issue has resurfaced several times. Liberal feminists in favor of reform-based policies for gender equality are adamant in opening doors with things such as equal education, the right to vote, and equal pay. We know these movements are necessary, and these are the first steps, but where do we go after reform goals have been met? How do we give girls equal opportunities within classrooms? How do we represent female voices equally in government? How do women become CEOs and make their way into male-dominated fields such as computer science? The door we have now opened floods us with another set of what seems like insurmountable issues that detain the equality of the sexes.

What is beyond the door of sex education as a solution to equality in sexual intimacy? What lies beyond the door is Rousseau (1762), reaching from the past in order to construct men and women of today. Without first deconstructing archaic gender roles, and uneven power dynamics that follows
them, we can never fully eliminate the power of psychological sexual coercion.

A History That is Not Over

So where do I stand currently in relation to my own story? When trying to consider my current state, my mind has betrayed me by suddenly moving backwards. My memories firing in images.

I sit at my spot at the table
Place my plate in front of me
I hold court over the
Left side
Back to the kitchen
My father moves past me; he sits in his spot at the table. The head of the table. No one sits at this spot, but I never consider this because I am too busy on the left side of the table, my back to the kitchen.

The sun shines deep into the summer evening. Buffet style, my aunts lay out the meal they have spent hours making for us. My family is a hungry conga line, moving from one dish to the next, deciding how to compose their plates. The sun begins to disappear, my aunts and female cousins stand from the table
Methodically,
clear plates,
wash plates,
wrap scraps,

soak kettles,
and then there is dessert.

There is a history here that cannot be ignored as we tell our narratives. There is a way of life that has been accepted, “women [as] relatives, only registered as existing in relation to men” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 216). Not only is my spot at the table relative to my father’s as it is positioned, it is relative as it is considered in my existence. That Halloween night is not only a night on its own, it is a culmination of a lifetime of memories. It is a lifetime of our seats being relative to our fathers, brothers, boyfriends, lovers, and husbands. Bosses, co-workers, and male family members. Strangers, on the street, the hope we will make it home safe. It is my school-aged mother, forced into skirts and dresses. It is her illegal abortion. My kin that could not find homes inside her. It is my grandmother, a waitress raising six kids by herself. My great-grandmother raising my mother when my grandmother could not. That night is not a night on its own but rather a lineage, a history, a lifetime of the oppression of women. When asked where I stand now, I stand as a woman. Proud of who I am. I stand, ready to fight for those who came before me, and those who will come after me. “I am not
willing to get over histories that are not over” (Ahmed, p. 262).

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The Outside Looking in: Examining Reasoning Behind the Choice to Report Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

“I realized that, in this world, there would be many instances where my body would not feel like my body.”

(Heather Burtman, “My Body Doesn’t Belong to You”, 2010)

This essay looks into reasons women have for reporting or not reporting domestic violence and sexual assault. While this topic has received a considerable amount of research from scholars, it still has not received the attention it should. When the #MeToo movement went viral, these issues started to become more salient in society, however there was still backlash, insinuating that there is still a large amount of misunderstanding around the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. In this paper, I use my outsider looking in lens to examine reasoning behind the choice to report. Through looking at previous research in addition to my own case studies, I discover personal and institutional reasoning involved in the choice to report, in addition to details such as severity and assailant.

Introduction

This paper addresses the reasons women have for reporting or not reporting domestic violence and sexual assault. While this topic has received a considerable amount of
research from scholars, it still has not received the attention it should. Reasons behind reporting are quite interesting, in my opinion, and amidst the rising #MeToo and Time’s Up™ movements, the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault have become more and more salient. Indeed, through these movements, we have been lucky enough to see a revolution beginning in our era. Women have come together in solidarity to show one another that it is okay to speak up about lived experiences with domestic and sexual violence. There are people willing to listen, understand, and sympathize with the unfortunate narratives hidden for so long, as if they are crimes that the women committed onto themselves.

Despite these gains, a backlash against the movement exists simultaneously. Conservative groups and individuals, in particular, have voiced that they believe the movement is an attack on men. A particular argument that those opposed to #MeToo often bring up is the idea that those who have been violated or assaulted in the past should have brought it forward directly after the attack occurred, not now. Another argument public opinion often brings forward against the movement is, why should we believe these women? Just because the women say that this happened to them, does that necessarily make it true? What if they simply want something, such as money or fame, and are lying in order to receive it? At the 2018 Women’s March in New Jersey, the state’s first lady, Tammy Murphy, told the crowd in her speech that she had been sexually assaulted in the past. The comments I found underneath an online article pertaining to Murphy’s speech were simply appalling (Carrera, 2018). One man in particular responded, “No she wasn’t. There’s no way in hell somebody was that goddamn desperate.” He accompanied his comment with a GIF that read “WHORE.”

Why is it so difficult to believe victims of domestic and sexual violence? Why are these crimes so different from others in terms of credibility? A very possible explanation is that women often speak out about the issue. Immediately after a woman comes out with her story, the audience must first look at who she is, what she looks like, and her sexual history in order to make the choice for themselves if this really happened or not. This topic is important because women deserve to have their voices heard rather than drowned out by these sorts of assumptions. I hope readers of this essay will begin to understand better that there is more to a story than what one sees on
the outside, particularly in cases of sexual assault and domestic violence.

In this paper, I use my lens as an outsider looking in. I ask: what is it like to be a woman who has had a fortunate life of never personally experiencing violence against women while consistently hearing stories from those that have? Since I cannot know what motivates women to report or not report from my own lived experiences, I examine case studies of two female victims of sexual assault who attend a public college in western New York. I use these case studies to gain insight on what factors in particular point women in the direction that they take after their incident. Only through stepping into the shoes of someone who has experienced domestic violence or sexual assault can we all understand what goes through the minds of victims both during and after the occurrence. It is important to note, however, that these crimes are by no means exclusively directed towards women; men, transgender, and non-binary individuals also regularly suffer from these acts. However, this study specifically focuses on women as victims due to my own status as a woman who is on the outside looking in. As part of my case study analysis, I discuss previous research on reasoning women have for reporting or not reporting their sexual assault/domestic violence cases, and what led me to want to research this topic using an outsider-looking-in stance.

Prominent Factors for Why Women (Do Not) Report: Severity and Assailant

What factors operate in a victim’s decision to report or not report an incident of sexual assault? Scholars point towards several contributing factors. Interestingly enough, Sable, Danis, Mauzy, and Gallagher (2006) state that the same reasons that kept individuals from reporting their cases decades ago are still very much relevant today, despite institutional efforts to dismantle those barriers. A commonly cited reason to not report is that the attack simply was not severe enough to be considered an issue that needed reporting (Felson, Messner, & Hosken, 2002; Spencer, Mallory, Toews, Stith, & Wood, 2017). Spencer et al. (2017) found this to be the most common reason why victims did not report their incidents. This gives way to the idea that certain kinds of abuse and violence are acceptable, and therefore, women do not identify them as malicious “enough” to report. This mentality could come from previous educational experiences dealing with violence against women. Such education
may have implied that only actions that are physical, violent, and severe can fit into the definitions of domestic violence and sexual assault.

In addition to severity, another prominent factor in reporting or not reporting one’s case is the perpetrator him/herself. Jones, Alexander, Wynn, Rossman, and Dunnuck (2009), Spencer et al. (2017), and Sable et al. (2006) found that victims often cited that they did not want the assailant to get in trouble, or go to jail. This desire to protect the assailant may stem from knowing the person, and therefore, feeling obligated to keep them safe. Indeed, women are more likely to report if their attacker is a stranger (Felson et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2009). Jones et al.’s (2009) study found that about three-quarters of victims know their attacker, which is also consistent with data from the U.S. Department of Justice (Planty, Langton, Krebs, Berzofsky, & Smiley-McDonald, 2013). Since women are far more likely to know their attacker than not, this could contribute to women’s strong desire to not report because they feel as though they must keep this significant other, friend, or family member out of the hands of the law.

Aside from relationship issues, the attacker also plays a role, in that women who do not wish to report often cite fear that the perpetrator will attack again because she has accused him (Sable et al., 2006). Conversely, women may also report because of the fact that the perpetrator will strike again. This was one of the most common reasons for calling the police in Felson et al.’s (2002) study. In this way, retaliation could work either as a barrier or catalyst in a woman’s decision-making process to report or not report an assault. In sum, factors related to the assailant have the capacity to play a large role in whether or not a survivor reports an incident of sexual and/or intimate partner violence.

**Personal Factors**

Although previous literature cites severity of attack and attack assailant as large factors in the choice to report, internal or personal reasons to report or not report often play a significant role as well. Sexual assault and domestic violence are traumatizing acts that can greatly impact one’s sense of self. Deitz, Williams, Rife, and Cantrell (2015) found that victims could internalize a feeling of self-stigma, which in turn could lead to an increase in mental illness and decrease in self-esteem. This indicates that the incident could often leave one feeling ashamed and deviant, and therefore, the victim feels the need to hide it. This sense of self-stigma could be even more
salient for those who live in communities that are very conservative with discussions of sexuality. If a community chooses to paint instances of sexuality (even those that are consensual) as taboo and malicious, women would likely feel a stronger desire to keep the occurrence to themselves in fear of disgust and ostracism from her family and/or peers.

Indeed, shame and embarrassment have shown to be common reasons for a woman’s choice to not report (Jones et al., 2009; Sable et al., 2006). Though less often cited compared to environmental reasons, such as relationship with the perpetrator (Jones et al., 2009), psychological reasons are still often at play, and they indicate that many women find themselves at least slightly at fault for the attack. Perhaps they feel that they did something wrong to put themselves in the situation, or that there were tactics that they should have taken in order to get themselves out of it. This evidences victim blaming and what is known as rape culture within our society. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth (1993), editors of *Transforming a Rape Culture*, define rape culture as a society where sexual aggression by males is encouraged, and violence against women is often seen as a fact of life, even sexy.

As mentioned above, within rape culture is the element of victim-blaming, in which society blames women for being attacked rather than putting fault on the assailant for his/her decisions. A victim’s usage of drugs and alcohol at the time of the incident (Spencer et al., 2017), or even simply having a recent history of drug or alcohol usage (Jones et al., 2009), has also been shown to prevent some women from reporting violence. Again, these factors contribute to rape culture. If being under the influence contributes to one’s disinclination to report, this could be because she does not specifically remember what happened, or she believes that she should have done something to stop the attack but was not mentally or physically capable of doing so at the time. As we know, individuals who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs are not capable of sexual consent, so it does not make sense to blame an intoxicated person for not saying no. Thus, we cannot put blame on the victim herself for making the decision to be under the influence, and for not being more active rather than passive in the assault. Once again, these reasons blame the victim, and unfortunately, she internalizes them to be rational, though they put no blame on her assailant.
Institutional Factors: Who Should I Talk to, and Who Will Believe Me?

It is also important to consider the relevant institutional factors when it comes to a woman’s choice to report. Research has shown that victims of violence are concerned about both confidentiality and believability when it comes to reporting (Sable et al., 2006). This lack of trust in institutional systems could stem from a woman’s lack of understanding about the resources that are available to her if she has experienced domestic violence or sexual assault. Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016), Sable et al. (2006), and Spencer et al. (2017) all found that victims oftentimes lacked knowledge on how to go about reporting their cases. Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016) even discovered in their study based on college women that both non-victims and victims of sexual and partner violence expressed that they were not familiar with the reporting resources their campus had to offer. Why is it common for students not to know about sexual assault resources, particularly on a college campus? Perhaps colleges and universities hold other student life resources (such as offices related to extracurricular) and policies (such as zero-tolerance for alcohol and drugs) to a higher standard than those related to violence against women.

In addition to a lack of knowledge about, and confidentiality within, the reporting system, research has also shown that victims often possess a lack of trust towards the system. Jones et al. (2009) found that a significant reason for not reporting was that the victim felt the police would not be sensitive towards the situation, or would end up blaming her instead of the attacker. Likewise, Sable et al. (2006) found that victims did not see a reason to report, as the case would not be responded to properly enough for there to be a successful prosecution. Indeed, this mentality is warranted; according to RAINN (the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 2014), for every 1,000 rapes, 994 rapists will walk free. Criminal justice is known to mistreat cases that fall under the category of violence against women, and thus, women are reluctant to go through the process of reporting at all. Without trust in the prosecution system, there is essentially no reason for the reporting of abuse.

Conceptual Framework

In early September 2017, it seemed as though I kept coming across friend after friend of mine who was telling me about an incident of violence against women.
that she was currently dealing with, or that she had dealt with in the past. At the end of that day, after having listened to about four stories about male-on-female violence, I sat in my room in anger. Why was it that men felt this sense of entitlement over us? Why is it that the issue of violence against women is so extremely prevalent in our society and yet, perpetrators are very rarely brought into the hands of the law?

Due to my passion for the topic of violence against women, I decided this was an area that I wanted to better understand. I focused on the reporting aspect of the issue because, upon discovering my friends’ instances of assault and abuse, I noticed a common theme among them all: none reported the incident to an authority figure. I consistently asked myself why this might be.

To examine women’s choices to report their domestic violence and sexual assault cases, in Fall 2017, I interviewed four women at a public college in western New York about their experiences with violence and what guided their decision to report or not. I conducted each interview in a public space, mostly academic buildings, and I told participants ahead of time that they could choose to opt out of speaking with me at any time if they felt the need to do so. In this essay, I discuss two of the stories that I gathered and use these stories to gain a more descriptive understanding of ways survivors of violence describe their reporting experiences. At the outset of my research, I developed the perspective common to people fortunate enough to never have been assaulted or have a reason to report sexual violence. I believed that all women need to report their incidents immediately, in order to give themselves a feeling of closure and also to save any future victims from being hurt by a perpetrator.

I had the view of an outsider.

As an outsider, how could I possibly tell these women what their response should be? How could I develop a standpoint on the issue when I had never been a victim? I am an outsider looking in (Collins, 1986). I have had several friends confide in me about their experiences with sexual or domestic violence. Not only is this violence something that impacts me as their confidant, it is also something that I possess a good amount of knowledge on as a Women and Gender Studies student. I am able to understand these private troubles under the larger gaze of public issues, applying feminist concepts to personal narratives.
Patricia Hill Collins (1986) discusses the idea of the outsider within concept in her article “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought.” Though Collins (1986) presents the concept as related to black women looking at a male-dominated, white-dominated world, this could also apply to looking at victims of sexual and domestic violence. While I do possess a decent amount of knowledge on the topic, I am still an outsider. My Women and Gender studies make me an outsider within. Collins (1986) states that being an outsider brings a questioning process to the table and allows one to escape any “taken-for-granted assumptions” that may impact those on the inside (p. 27). Looking from the outside allows you to see things from a fresh perspective, questioning the established norms that are at play. While possessing a fresh perspective is important, equally important is listening to and understanding those who are on the inside. Injecting my own opinions into stories which I knew nothing about was not only nonsensical, it was also unfair. Only through looking into these women’s lives as that outsider within could I fully understand their narratives and reasoning.

Through being an outsider looking in, I began to better understand the viewpoint of someone who has gone through this violence. What if the victim was close to the perpetrator and did not want to see them prosecuted or genuinely believed that (s)he did not mean to be harmful? What if the woman truly believed that the action was not severe enough to report, possibly because she has been abused in the past and it is now normalized for her?

I also began to view the issue from an intersectional lens, taking into account the varying identities that women may possess. For instance, though women of all socioeconomic statuses may worry about the shame society places on victims, women from higher statuses may feel that discussing the violence they experienced would threaten their presumed work and home life standing. Women from lower statuses might be concerned that reporting a crime could mean losing their own or a partner’s income and further their financial troubles. Women of color, because of racism, may be afraid that their allegations will not be taken seriously and may reinforce their marginality. Lesbian women may not understand that they themselves can experience sexual assault or domestic violence due to the heteronormativity that tends to
surround these discussions. They may also fear that, if they do come forward with their case, they will have to be out with their sexuality even though they do not want to disclose this information. Women of all identities are at risk when they report their incidents. However, women whose sexual identity, race, and class intersect, such as black and lesbian for example, find themselves further scrutinized. This scrutiny creates an even greater chance of putting their work, family, and personal stability at risk.

**Case Studies**

The two case studies that I used gave me an opportunity to look deeper into the lives and situations of two victims of sexual assault/domestic violence. Both of these women had significant lived experiences to tell that were important to listen to, not only for them to release their stories, but also for the sake of providing a better understanding of women’s experience with violence and reasons they chose not to report the crime.

**Linda**

Linda is a straight, white woman whose boyfriend stalked her. While Linda was aware that occupying dominant identities such as heterosexual and Caucasian allowed her some privilege in the situation, she still chose not to report the stalking. She was afraid that her boyfriend would retaliate, especially since he had been in the military and therefore came off as an intimidating, potentially dangerous man. The primary reason Linda chose not to report the stalking was she did not see the incident as a big enough issue. Specifically, she stated that “he was just stalking me” and “he was just being annoying.” Additionally, she said that she did not even really have knowledge on what stalking was at the time. Linda was quite uncertain about the incident in general, even stopping to ask me at one point whether she was “crazy” for believing what she believed about the violence.

Linda illustrates an interesting perspective that ties in quite well with existing research. As Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016), Sable et al. (2006), and Spencer et al. (2017) found to be common among victims of violence, Linda was too afraid and confused about the situation to know how to respond to it. She did not possess the proper knowledge that would have allowed her to understand what stalking is, how to spot it, and also to understand that it is an issue. In Linda’s mind, stalking was

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1 Pseudonym
not violent but a rather mundane act, and therefore, she did not see a need to report it. This directly corresponds with research by Felson et al. (2002) and Spencer et al. (2017), which states that victims do not always see the severity in their circumstances, and therefore, do not believe that they have a reason to report. As an outsider who also possesses knowledge on the topic of domestic violence, I see this case immediately point to a need for a greater level of education on domestic violence and sexual assault, preferably starting somewhere in the middle school years. If women such as Linda continue to water down their instances of violence against women, seeing them as normal and unimportant, this allows us as both society and individuals to understand that certain acts of violence are acceptable and should simply be expected if you are a woman. In reality, however, any instance of violence, sexualization, or objectification against a woman should simply not be tolerated, as they are all perpetuations of abuses in patriarchal power and dominance.

Linda also feared for her own safety, believing that if she were to take action against her stalker he would retaliate. Again, this directly relates to research by Sable et al. (2006), which stated that women fear retaliation if they report their cases. In this way, it appears that domestic violence cases can turn into a Catch-22; whether or not survivors report their cases, they could get hurt again. Indeed, women are often cornered by their assailants to the point at which they feel there is no way out. This relates back to the need for more confidentiality and safety for women who report these cases. If a woman does not feel as though she can safely report to someone without the assailant finding out, she may lose her desire to report. This aspect of Linda’s case again addresses a need for more education about how the reporting process works. She faced several barriers in combating the violence that her partner had placed upon her, leading her to feel the need to downplay what was occurring to her and not report it.

Carly

Carly, another victim of stalking, dealt with elements of stalking in a different way than Linda. Carly is a white, lesbian student whose girlfriend was both physically and emotionally abusive. Barriers that stood in Carly’s way from reporting her abuse were that it was her

2 Pseudonym
girlfriend, so she did not want to harm the relationship with someone that she loved, and also, that her girlfriend was struggling with mental health issues, saying she would kill herself if the relationship ended. Particularly, though, Carly’s sexuality played a large role in her lack of desire to report. As a lesbian, she did not even know that she could report or file a restraining order, and she believed that people would say that she was lying and that women cannot be abusive to other women. Carly felt ashamed of what was happening, though she did end up reporting the incident when it turned to stalking, as it began to affect the relationship at that time.

Carly’s story also follows previous research results that affirm her situation. As a lesbian woman, she did not quite understand that her relationship could even be abusive, as she had only learned about abuse from a heteronormative perspective. Due to this, she feared that her situation would be looked down upon, or not even believed at all. This corresponds well with the study by Frankland and Brown (2014), which pointed out the lack of research existing on same-sex domestic violence (SSDV). Considering non-heterosexual violence has gone vastly understudied, it makes sense that little education on SSDV exists, either, creating a lack of understanding around violence in lesbian relationships.

Indeed, Carly’s incident shows us the important element of intersectionality when it comes to domestic violence—in this case, the importance of sexuality. This shows that, as predicted, lesbian women are certainly at a disadvantage when victimized. Non-heterosexual women, in general, are left out of everyday conversations of partner violence, as these discussions so often center around the idea of a man and a woman in a relationship, with the man normally painted as the abuser. Due to this stereotypical image, non-heterosexual women are led to believe that, unfortunately, if their abuser is not male, their case has no validity. Carly’s case, therefore, shows us the importance of educating on the topic of domestic violence and sexual assault with an intersectional lens. It is necessary to realize that, due to their varying backgrounds, women’s identities cause them to approach their incidents and reporting choices differently from one another.

Carly did not know where to go when she found herself in a violent relationship, corresponding with the findings of Burgess-Proctor et al. (2016), Sable et al. (2006), and Spencer et al. (2017), and she did not see a need to
even report the situation until after stalking had occurred on top of physical and emotional abuse. As with Linda’s case, this resonates with the research by Felson et al. (2002) and Spencer et al. (2017) regarding the important role that case severity plays on one’s decision to report. Moreover, Carly did not know how to respond properly to a situation where her partner was threatening suicide if Carly was to break up with her. This must have put a great deal of anxiety upon her. She did not know that the proper response was to let someone else know, so as to take this worry off of her shoulders.

Linda and Carly’s narratives give us a glimpse into the lived experiences of women who have encountered sexual assault and domestic violence. Through using my outsider looking within lens (Collins, 1986), I was able to further understand reasons behind a woman’s choice to report or not report instances of violence. In particular, these women pointed towards the relevance of severity of the case, fear of retaliation, and an overall lack of understanding when it comes to what constitutes violence and how one should go about reporting it. Also important to note, when examining a woman’s reasoning to report or not report, we must consider the stereotypes that marginalized women face. For instance, while lesbian women may not even know that they can experience domestic violence as seen in Carly’s case, it is possible that their cases may not be taken seriously. Our society tends only to see men as abusers, and thus, a violent lesbian relationship does not seem logical to some. Therefore, the expectations placed on certain groups of people can play a role in a woman’s choice to report. In sum, though these are only two case studies that cannot be generalized to larger populations, they are still valid, real-life experiences which show us where improvement is needed, both institutionally and interpersonally, when it comes to discussions of sexual assault and domestic violence.

**Conclusion**

Looking back on my perceptions of domestic violence and sexual assault from a year ago, I can see the faults with my beliefs. I thought that there was no reason for survivors not to report their case to an authority figure and that they had the moral obligation to save other women from being preyed upon. Over the course of this research, however, I learned the faults within this belief. I learned how to be an outsider looking within (Collins, 1986). I learned how to use my own knowledge on sociology and women and gender to understand and
advocate for others. This has made all the difference on my ability to empathize and show compassion for those whose voices are too often silenced.

I believe that it is everyone’s obligation to look deeper when it comes to complex social issues. It is never acceptable to say, “She was asking for it.” It is never acceptable to say, “Why didn’t she report sooner?” It is never acceptable to say, “How do we know she is telling the truth?” Now is the time to listen to women, to trust women. It is time we as a society begin looking at structures within complex issues. How can we transform the criminal justice system to instill more confidence in women, and ensure that their cases will be handled appropriately? How can we let more people know about Title IX sexual harassment legislation? How do we make sure that women understand that all cases are important, and that all perpetrators should be held responsible?

Under the same principle, it is time we start to see the oppressions of women. When I read Heather Burtman’s (2010) paper “My Body Doesn’t Belong to You” last July, it spoke to me on a certain level. Though I am not a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault, there have been times where my body has not felt like my body. There have been times that a man has led me to believe that I am an object. Feeling objectified is one of the worst things that I have ever felt. It makes me feel as though I need to shower off the comments that have been placed upon me, so that I can return to my most basic self, in which I am not defined by these oppressors. I know my worth, and I know that I am the subject of my life. To experience objectification to the extent that you are left with physical or mental scars is something that I hope to never experience. However, I know that others have experienced it. These women deserve to be the subjects of their lives. Future women deserve to be the subjects of their lives. They deserve to learn, thrive, and grow in an environment that does not teach them that a man has the ability to take their success out from under them. They deserve not to be taught that walking home alone is a death sentence, or that leaving your drink out of your sight at a party guarantees rape. As equal members of society, women deserve the equal right of simply living without a disproportionate amount of threats thrown at them from every direction.

We are all outsiders looking in, in some capacity. Whether it be in terms of identities, such as race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or in terms of experiences, like domestic violence and
sexual assault. We all possess certain unconscious biases and perspectives that are rather basic and do not take into account the nuanced structures and emotions that are involved in other people’s lives. Because of this, it is important that we listen to one another. Only through active listening and understanding can we create social change. With such change, we can allow each member of society the right to grow, without defining them based upon their marginalized identities.

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Gender’s Impact on Majors in Higher Education: The Causes and the Consequences

This paper looks at gender segregation in higher education. I am examining why certain majors are perceived as feminine and masculine, and what students experience when they study fields that do not socially align with their gender. I also summarize the impact gender socialization has on men and women choosing their fields of study and the consequences higher education gender segregation has beyond college. Feminine and masculine should not be labels affiliated with majors and they should not be a precursor for determining the value of majors.

I am tired of the phrase “It is what it is.” I do not accept that gender segregation in higher education “is what it is” when the effects it has on students are extensive. I am tired of highly important fields of study being demoted because they are “feminine” majors. I am a woman who is a part of two of these majors that are deemed feminine, social work and women and gender studies, and I have experienced the consistent devaluation of majors that are perceived as less worthy of students’ time. Yes, I am indeed tired of this devaluation and this gender segregation. As Madeline Albright (2010) said, "It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent” (para. 30). I must speak up about inequalities that are persistent in our culture and have an extensive impact.
This paper looks at the gender segregation in higher education. Within this, I am interested in examining why certain majors are perceived as feminine and masculine, and what students experience when they study fields that do not socially align with their gender. I also summarize the impact gender socialization has on men and women choosing their fields of study, and the consequences higher education gender segregation has beyond college. Feminine and masculine should not be labels affiliated with majors, and they should not be a precursor for determining the value of majors. Gender segregation in college majors has an impact on students’ experiences and on students’ futures. Simply put, there should be no divide based on gender or based on perceptions of what gender stands for as coded onto what we study and learn. Gender is not a synonym for “less” or “more” in what we study in higher education.

**Gender Socialization Preceding College**

Gender segregation, in fields of study in college, starts before students ever get to college. It starts with gender socialization. In order to understand gender socialization, it is important to have a working definition of what gender itself is.

Gender is the social status and personal identification of being feminine and/or masculine (Lorber, 2001). It is intertwined with privilege and oppression, with boys and men collectively experiencing more privilege and girls and women collectively experiencing more oppression (Launius & Hassel, 2015). Although there is a large spectrum of gender, I am focusing solely on girl/woman and boy/man genders because of the lack of acknowledgement or knowledge of other genders in fields of study in higher education. I am looking at gender using a binary lens to understand how this shapes college majors and the consequences of this segregation beyond college.

Gender is taught and internalized through interacting with others and learning from direct and indirect feedback from others (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Gender is something that is both taught and learned, which is referred to as gender socialization (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Gender socialization is the lifelong process that begins in infancy when people learn what it means to “do gender” in socially expected ways (Launius & Hassel, 2015). As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued, one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one. Gender is assigned to children and they are then taught how to perform the
Teaching how to do gender comes from gender performativity, which Butler (1999) states is the ways in which society expects men and women to behave in terms of masculinity and femininity. This gender performativity leads to gender socialization, which leads to doing gender. Boys learn that to be masculine they should be assertive, strong, unexpressive, protective, self-oriented, and in control (Launius & Hassel, 2015). Girls learn to nurture, be expressive, and to function in a world that puts boys and men in positions of authority and control. This learning becomes “doing” gender early on.

Everyone is taught how to do gender at an early age, which causes gender to seem natural starting at this very early age (Lorber, 2001; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Throughout my childhood, I played with dolls and stuffed animals. In fact, I had a collection of dolls I played with daily. I dressed them, had them interact with one another, had them work (as either teachers, hairdressers, or store clerks), and I pretended the dolls were parents. What does a doll teach a girl about gender? What does a truck teach a boy about gender? Toys are an aspect of gender socialization and have an impact, even slight, on life trajectories (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). I cannot help but wonder if the toys that I played with were cars, would I have internalized femininity less?

Parents and other important people in children’s lives also have a gender-biased perception of what their children can do, the types of activities at which they might excel, and the sorts of things with which they might struggle (Oschsenfield, 2016). For example, boys are often socialized not to show emotion or cry, behaviors that are characteristically associated with femininity. This pressure is not the same for girls. When I was younger, I was often encouraged to express my feelings. At times, I was so expressive, I was given what my parents called “Kelsi’s alone time” in order to calm down. This gave me an unlimited amount of time to work through my feelings. I also was taken to counseling with my mom starting at a young age to unpack some of my feelings. This gave me an environment to have full freedom to express my emotions. Why was I given so many opportunities to be emotional and do so in healthy ways? There was no pressure for me to). withhold my emotions and tears. Maybe my gender played a role in this, whether or not this was a conscious thought process of my parents. All of this, and more, is a part of gender socialization. Gender socialization does not stop after children are no longer young, but continues throughout adolescence, including in education preceding college. Because of
societal reinforcements, many boys feel more confident in their math skills, a learning trait stereotypically linked with boys and masculinity (Oschsenfield, 2016).

Conversely, and again because of societal reinforcements about learning traits, many girls in middle and high school seek out fields that use language and the arts and have less confidence and interest in mathematics (Morgan, Gelbgiser, & Weeden, 2013). Because of this, boys are involved in math courses more than girls, who are more likely to study other courses, particularly ones that are “people-oriented,” such as history, art, music, and English (Oschsenfield, 2016). This divide in what courses boys and girls want to study leads to some boys cultivating more skills in mathematics (Dickson, 2010). Figure 1 depicts the number of boys and girls who took advanced placement tests in mathematics and science in 2009 (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010). A significantly higher number of boys took tests in calculus, chemistry, physics, and computer science (Hill, Corbett, & St. Rose, 2010).

This impacts the desired fields of study boys and girls have when entering college (Dickson, 2010). This is referred to as the “science pipeline,” as science and math fields of study are in part determined by the science and math classes boys and girls take in middle and high school (Morgan et. al, 2013). Boys are more likely to enter this science pipeline, but when girls do enter the science pipeline, it tends to become a “leaking” pipeline because there is an increased likelihood of “dropping out along the way” (Morgan et al., 2013). The science pipeline makes me think of a relative of mine. He is a nineteen-year-old man who was very successful in high school in all of his courses, but particularly his science and math courses. For example, he received a five out of five on his Advanced Placement Calculus and Biology tests, a 100 percent on his Chemistry Regents, and a 94 percent on his Physics Regents exam. He is now going to college to study data science. His success in mathematics and science courses in secondary school, in part, led to him choosing this collegiate field of study. This exemplifies the science pipeline.

Gender socialization in education goes beyond who wants to take math and science courses. It also portrays itself within the future goals and familial values boys and girls have. Adolescent girls respond at higher rates about having a family being important to them in the future than adolescent boys (Morgan et al., 2013). Adolescent boys are continuously socialized to not be nurturing or at least not display these qualities. This leads adolescent boys to be less interested, or at least less likely to

Figure 1. From Why So Few? Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, by C. Hill, C. Corbett., and A. St. Rose, 2010, p. 6. Copyright (c) 2010 by the AAUW (www.aauw.org).
express interest, in caregiving and helping behaviors (Reigle-Crumb, King, & Moore, 2016). This impacts who goes into fields of study in college that are centered on care work. This also directly contributes to the gender socialization and subsequent gender segregation in fields of study that men and women pursue.

Constant gender socialization that starts and continues throughout childhood and adolescence leads to gendered interests and self-perceptions (Oschsenfield, 2016). This gender socialization subjects boys and girls to “ongoing, subtle, and yet powerful pressures to conform” (Morgan et al., 2013, p. 991). This pressure can be seen within fields of study within higher education.

**Majors are Perceived as Gendered**

Majors are not feminine or masculine just because of what major men and women students study. Majors are perceived as feminine and masculine because they go along with societal norms of femininity and masculinity to a certain degree (Beutel, Burge, & Borden, 2017). The masculine and feminine binary within our society leads to fields of study being constrained by this binary (Butler, 1999). “Cultural norms, stereotypes, and beliefs about gender shape perceptions of fields of study” (Beutel et al., 2017, p. 3). For example, one gender stereotype of women is that they are caring and nurturing. Majors deemed feminine often emphasize this and other gender stereotypes and beliefs about femininity. Therefore, these majors are not feminine or masculine in and of themselves, but rather, they encompass elements that our society labels as feminine or masculine.

Beutel et al. (2017) say there is a divide within college majors, where on one side, majors align with the feminine quality of caregiving, and on the other side, majors align with the masculine quality of technicality. Majors within the arts and humanities discipline are often associated with emotions, culturally linked with women (Beutel et al., 2017). For example, the social work major is an accredited field of study for a profession that is about assisting those in need, which is often deemed emotional and nurturing work. This closely aligns with behaviors associated with femininity. Conversely, physical science majors are associated with objectivity and instrumentality, which are cultural stereotypes of men and masculinity (Beutel et al., 2017).

Majors do not only become perceived as either feminine or masculine, but are also ranked based on the gender they are associated with. Ranking by gender is common within institutions and higher education institutions are no different.
(Butler, 1999). The fields of study that are associated with masculine cultural stereotypes are ranked higher than majors that are associated with feminine cultural stereotypes. The field of study of computer science, for instance, is higher within the “gender hierarchy” than the field of study of women and gender studies within our society (Butler, 1999). Society attaches more value, prestige, and capital to computer science than to women and gender studies.

How do majors continue to be perceived as feminine or masculine? There is often a rationality within our society that the gender binary is normal or natural (Butler, 1999). Have you ever heard that boys will be boys and girls will be girls? This is really saying that ‘It is what it is.’ These rationales are a part of what allows majors to continue to be perceived as feminine or masculine. By allowing cultural norms and stereotypes regarding gender to persist, gender segregation within fields of study persist (Beutel et al., 2017). This is furthered by women and men continuously choosing fields of study that have been deemed feminine and masculine respectively. These students are doing gender by picking majors that are perceived to align with their own gender (Beutel et al., 2017). Choices of college majors are structured choices, shaped by our socialization processes, the roles we imagine ourselves occupying later in life, pressures from peer groups, social institutions, and much more.

Students’ Experiences within Gendered Majors

Despite women attending colleges and universities at increasingly higher rates than any prior points in history, and at higher rates than men, there is still extreme segregation within majors being studied within college. The majority of women study social sciences, health, and education in the United States (Zafar, 2013). Men, on the other hand, dominate computer science and engineering (Zafar, 2013). When I looked at the gender makeup of majors at my own college, The College at Brockport, I found similar statistics.

I gathered data about gender within majors from the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. The data is from the fall of 2014, as this was the last year that the College published information regarding gender and majors. Figure 2 shows that the majors most dominated by women at Brockport in 2014 were nursing, dance, social work, psychology, and women and gender studies, while the majors most dominated by men at Brockport were computer science, physics, finance, philosophy, and sports management (The College at Brockport, 2015).

Very few women choose to major in
fields where men are dominant, and the same is true of men in majors where women are dominant. For instance, Olson (2014) found in computer science classes, a heavily man-dominated field, the ratio of men to women is eight to two. Men are also two times as likely to select a major that is science, technology, engineering, or math-based; women are more than three times as likely to choose health and care majors (Morgan et al., 2013). As I previously discussed, my male relative falls within this statistic, as he selected data science. On the other hand, I am part of the latter statistic, a woman in two majors perceived as caring (social work and women and gender studies).

Women in majors dominated by men often face what scholars refer to as the “chilly climate.” Scholars describe chilly climate as an environment where interactions within the environment are uncomfortable and discouraging to women (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). This can be displayed in many ways, such as when departments establish different expectations based on gender. A chilly climate exists when faculty or other students make negative comments about
the intelligence of women, or when class discussions and activities lack inclusion of women (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). My friend, a female student majoring in chemistry, has continuously experienced this. She will often not be called on within her classes, though the men in her classes are. Her professors have also made comments in a direct manner about how women are less capable in the field of chemistry. These comments are often made in front of entire classes, but are also made during one-on-one interactions. Imagine the feelings attached to being made to feel incompetent within your classes simply because of your gender. Imagine the toll this takes mentally and physically after hearing it class after class, semester after semester.

The existence of a chilly climate within majors dominated by men leads women to switch majors of study at higher rates than women do in other majors (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). In fact, Dickson (2010) found in terms of engineering and computer science majors, “white women are almost 19 percentage points more likely than white men to switch majors” (p. 119). This exemplifies gender inequality, situating women as at a disadvantage (Lorber, 2001).

Women in fields dominated by men are not only deterred by a chilly climate, they also are strongly deterred by “stereotype threat.” Even if there is no chilly climate, stereotypes about men’s and women’s natural abilities impacts not only academic confidence of men and women in “gender transgressive” fields of study, but their performance, as well (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). Ideas of what a woman and man should be or can do are so ingrained into all of our minds, that we can even be the ones enacting gender socialization onto ourselves, which is Butler’s (1999) gender performativity thinking in action. For example, a woman in a major dominated by men might experience stereotype threat when internalizing notions that they are supposed to be working towards a career that is nurturing. Akin to Butler (1999), we keep doing gender even in our thoughts pertaining to fields of study. This stereotype threat can exhibit the severity of gender socialization within our society. Women’s ability to advance in majors dominated by men is blocked by, among other things, the chilly climate and stereotype threats (Lorber, 2001).

Challenges within majors that do not align with students’ own gender is not only limited to women in majors dominated by men. Men in majors where women are dominant also report negative experiences. Granted, the negative interactions these men experience may be to a lesser degree than the woman students talked about above. However, many men face gender
devaluation when pursuing majors and fields of work stereotypically feminine. Gender devaluation in this case is when men are seen as less manly because of interactions and choices they make (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). In terms of college majors, many men within majors dominated by women face the stigma of choosing majors that are seen as less valuable or that will generate less wealth (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). Men also face social repercussions for appearing to reject the higher status awarded to men and male-dominated fields of study (Reigle-Crumb et al., 2016). Gender devaluation for men in majors dominated by women is caused by others thinking men are not being masculine enough. Simply put, men’s worth is decreased when their fields of study is perceived as feminine. Do you see the problem here? Majors perceived as feminine are seen as less valuable, which society says is not a characteristic for men, but rather, for women.

The difference in men and women’s experiences in gender transgressive majors, however, is also different in an important way. Men’s negative experiences in feminine majors occur largely outside of the classroom and major. They have to do with cultural stereotypes that shape “feminine” majors as emasculating options for men. Conversely, women’s negative experiences in masculine majors occur inside the classroom and major as well. So, while the experiences of both men and women in gender transgressive majors are negative, they are not equivalent.

The After Effects

What men and women study in college goes beyond gender segregation within higher education. Gender segregation plays a critical role in helping to reproduce occupational sex segregation (Lorber, 2001). This gendered division of labor is equated with how our society is structured, with men at the top of the societal hierarchy (Hartmann, 1976); it reflects how gender is reinforced within our society (Launius & Hassel, 2015). Women are disproportionately concentrated in fields that have lower earnings than men (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Ma, 2009). For example, one of my majors is social work, and I will be a social worker in the near future. I will work in a field where women are dominant in a career that has significantly less value in our society than other careers. I will make significantly less money as a social worker compared to a natural scientist, too. Why? Less capital is invested in occupations our society deems less valuable, and social work is one of these.

The gender wage gap is due, in part, to gender segregation throughout college education. Who studies what affects who has what job, which impacts pay,
among other things. Ochsenfeld (2016) notes,

Since the choice of a college major strongly determines a person's occupational trajectory, and the distribution of women and men across disciplines is both remarkably unequal and inert, sex segregation across fields of study contributes significantly to the separation of women from men in the labor market (p. 117).

Gender segregation by field of study is an important factor contributing to occupational segregation after students leave school.

A person’s human capital investment, such as their educational attainment, impacts occupations and wages (Shauman, 2005). Women are less likely to choose fields that are associated with higher-paying occupations (Shauman, 2005). I am one of these women as my chosen profession is social work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) the average annual amount of money a person in the Community and Social Service Occupations field earns, which social worker falls under, is $48,050 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). That is quite a bit less than the wages of careers dominated by men. In fact, the average annual salary of a career in Computer and Mathematical Occupations, dominated by men, has the annual income of $89,810 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). When I chose social work as my major three years ago, the wages associated with this career were not a deterrent for me. The pay was not important in comparison to me doing something impactful, something I truly wanted to do. I may have chosen fields that are associated with lower paying occupations, but I know I chose a field that will reward me in other ways that I find more important. These compensating differentials, which are the rewards that are increased to make up for unpleasant aspects of work, such as earnings of social workers, are the empowerment and self-satisfaction of assisting others grow. However, my decision making process for choosing my college major and future career was impacted by gender socialization. Money was less important to me than helping others. This attitude aligns with the stereotypes associated with gender: women are expected -- and taught – to care for others.

Women dominate careers as nurses, teachers, and other caring professionals, careers associated with nurturing and emotional characteristics (Hegewisch, Liepmann, Hayes, & Hartmann, 2010). The careers that align with the majors most dominated by men, like computer science and engineering, continue to be dominated by men. Figure 3 shows the compositions of gender within occupations in the United States and
utilizes data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018). The gender wage gap is highest among those who have earned a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2017). Men who have at least a bachelor’s degree earn more than women with the same educational attainment (Women's Bureau, 2017). Women who have a college education earn only 74.3 cents for every dollar men earn (Shauman, 2005). This is in comparison to all women workers, who earn 77.8 cents to every dollar all men workers earn (Shauman, 2005). The gender wage gap widens among women of color where, for example, African American women earn 64 cents and Hispanic women, 54 cents, compared to the white male dollar (AAUW, 2018). As a whole, women of all races will earn less no matter their educational attainment, but the disparity increases as their educational attainment increases. For example, a woman with a high school degree will earn 78 percent of what a man with a high school degree earns, while a woman with a bachelor’s degree or higher will earn 74 percent of what a man with the same educational attainment will (AAUW, 2018).

Earnings are the highest within computer science, engineering, business, and management fields (Zafar, 2013), which are disproportionately the fields men study in college. The lowest earnings are within the fields of social sciences, life sciences, humanities, and

![Figure 3. Annual Averages of Employed Men and Women by Occupation in 2017 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).]
which are conversely disproportionately the fields women study in college. This is sometimes referred to as the “ghettoization” of women workers, as women continue to work in low-paying occupations, which often have poorer working conditions (Lorber, 2001; Shauman, 2006). This is despite having higher rates of college attendance and graduation. Some social workers have extremely high caseloads of twenty or more clients. Would you consider this an example of a low-wage, poor working condition?

**Conclusion**

Gender follows us throughout our lives and impacts our experiences, decision-making processes, and our life trajectories. We are socialized to be and to **do** a certain gender. After years and years of this, socially constructed ideas of femininity and masculinity are internalized. One way this becomes visible within our society is the majors’ men and women choose in higher education. Women typically choose fields of study that are perceived as feminine and men typically choose fields of study that are perceived as masculine. This gender segregation leads to different experiences as students. It leads to different careers and different wages. It leads to gender segregation to continue throughout people’s lives and gender to be continuously done and redone so that we reinforce gender and the gender binary as the gender performativity that Butler (1999) theorizes.

It is time that we stop accepting things as they are, as things that cannot be changed. It is time we starting asking the difficult questions we, as a society, do not want to answer, or do not even want to ask in the first place. Gender is impactful. It impacts who we are, what we study, and what our careers look like. And it is our society that prescribes all of this. It is time we tackle gender roles, norms, and stereotypes head on.

If you are in a major that is predominantly comprised of men or women, ask why this is and think of how others could be more included and welcomed. If you are being paid more or less than someone who is the opposite gender, ask why, and then start a dialogue with others around you. If you feel confined by your gender within your everyday life, or more specifically, within your education or work, ask yourself why you feel this way and what you and your support system can do about it.

“Your silence will not protect you... But your silence could protect them” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 260). Do not stay silent and do not simply accept things as they are. Demand the demolition of gender.
norming, which creates gender segregation in higher education and career choice.

References


Redressing Dress Codes: The Effects of Sexualized School Dress Codes

“When we refuse to be the master’s tool, we expose the violence of rods, the violence’s that built the master’s dwelling, brick by brick.”

~Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life (2017)

This paper analyzes the way society sexualizes women’s bodies through the education system. I am writing about dress codes because fellow classmates and I have been affected by this. It is important for society to understand that a sexualized view of students perceived as female can affect society as a whole. I hope that readers of this essay will want to change this system and redress the dress codes they have unwittingly followed.

Introduction

In high school, I got my first taste of institutional sexism when I was escorted out of the classroom for wearing a sleeveless shirt. As an innocent ninth grader I was mortified. I did not put on my new sleeveless shirt that morning thinking I was going to be humiliated in front of my whole class. I was confused as to why my education suffered for that class period while the boy sitting next to me, also in a sleeveless shirt, went unpunished? Why was my body being picked out and sexualized for the whole class to see? Even at the young age of fourteen, I knew this was wrong. Why did no one of higher power fight back?
Throughout my middle to high school experience, our school dress code became stricter and stricter. During the warmer times of the year, it was tremendously hard to find ‘appropriate’ clothes that were weather friendly. It was also difficult to express fashion and style with the limiting dress code. I found the dress code irritating and demeaning to the women in my class and me. Little did I know the dress code was the beginning of systematically sexualizing young women’s bodies in society. Over half of the women in my grade at some point would be taken out of class and coded for something as senseless as a shoulder showing. It was a bigger deal for a female student in my school to violate the school dress code than to actually be in class.

This paper analyzes the way society sexualizes women’s bodies through the education system. I am writing about dress codes because fellow classmates and I have been affected by this. It is important for society to understand that this sexualized view of students perceived as female can affect society as a whole. I hope that readers of this essay will want to change this system and redress the dress codes they have unwittingly followed.

A Gendered Institution

Whether you realize it or not, the American education system has gendered students from the very beginning. Early on, students are separated by activities and games that have gender specific categories. During playtime, society encourages boys to play with trucks and construction tools while encouraging girls to play with Barbies and kitchen sets. I remember walking in the halls of elementary school mindlessly following the “girl’s line” while the boys had their own separate “boy’s line.” If students went in the wrong line, the teacher would scold them and tell them to follow the “rules.” In high school, the girls went in a separate gym to do yoga while the boys got the choice of weight lifting or hockey. As a girl, you were not allowed to choose the “masculine” activities and the boys were not allowed to do the overwhelming perceived “feminine” activity, simply because these were the rules. Students rarely broke the rules because the American education system functions as a gendered institution.

According to Wade and Ferree (2015), under a gendered institution, rules and regulations enforce and affirm gender roles and performatives. These institutions enforce a gender binary of male and female, leaving little room for individuals who do not fit the mold. Students are categorized as either girls or boys, thus placing them into different categories and shown to be valued differently amongst social spaces and
activities. The gendered institutions create policies and procedures that require individuals to follow the instruction on how to appear and behave as either a man or a woman. School dress codes are one of the many formal policies that American schools use to enforce gender conformity. These dress codes support and enforce a gender binary. If an individual falls out of the binary, they are not only reprimanded by their peers, but also penalized by these codes.

In this essay, I analyze school dress codes using a gender binary lens, because the pervasiveness of the gender binary is central to my critique. However, in the end, the only way to disrupt these hypersexualized codes is to dismantle the gender binary. With disrupting the binary, we would be able to rid the schools of codes that hold individuals to rigid and different standards with regard to one’s gender. Thus, the answer to solving many of the problems within school dress code policies is to disrupt the gender binary and create a society that treats individuals of all identity as equals.

**Dress Codes Perpetuating Rape Culture**

Shauna Pomerantz (2007) conducted a study addressing the ways school dress code standards affected the case of Marcia Stevens and her community. Throughout Pomerantz’s (2007) research, she identifies the ways school dress codes sexualize and gender stereotype the bodies of students perceived as female. She does this by analyzing Marcia Stevens’s case, where she was dress-coded for wearing a low-cut tank top. Throughout this case, Pomerantz (2007) argues that Marcia Stevens was seen as a sexual object no matter what she wore because of her “large” and “bosomy” body (p. 375). This case is an example of the many ways society hypersexualizes women’s bodies. Once the school coded Marcia Stevens for her “inappropriate” neckline, (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 375) they also labelled Stevens as a promiscuous girl (Pomerantz, 2007). Pomerantz (2007) argues that school administrations enabled dress codes to hold females accountable for upholding ‘school morals.’ In the situation with Marcia, she did not hold herself to these standards, and therefore, did not fulfill her ‘duty’ as a woman. By exposing her breasts with a revealing shirt, the school administration saw Marcia as a distraction to her male peers, teachers, and administration (Pomerantz, 2007). The idea that exposing female body parts distracts men is a problem in itself.

By sexualizing women’s bodies in school, we do not hold men accountable for their actions, rather, we see men as unable to control themselves when
viewing a woman's body. In society, this can lead to a variety of problems including rape culture. Robert Jensen (2004) conceptualizes rape culture as follows:

[Ours] is a culture in which sexualized violence, sexual violence, and violence-by-sex are so common that they should be considered normal. Not normal in the sense of healthy or preferred, but an expression of the sexual norms of the culture, not violations of those norms. Rape is illegal, but the sexual ethic that underlies rape is woven into the fabric of the culture (p.55).

Unfortunately, this is the culture in which we live. As women and other marginalized genders, we grasp our keys between our knuckles on a dark walk to the car praying no one attacks us. We only go out with friends, with the hope we can keep each other ‘safe.’ We always make sure we are wearing something that does not expose too much skin, something that covers the parts we would get in trouble for if exposed in a school setting. Perhaps, this was the school’s most important lesson to all of us young and impressionable students. Nothing regarding language arts, math, or science, but everything regarding the female body and the way we can sexualize it. We learn to ALWAYS cover up, and if you chose not to, you are responsible for the consequences. Not anyone else, just you. We must connect school dress codes and rape culture because the school administration perpetuates the objectification of women’s bodies and constructs women as the problem. When school-aged boys learn from a young age that they do not have to control themselves around women because of the way they are dressed within a school setting, they will also hold themselves to this idea outside of school.

As a society, we must recognize the way we condemn women for violence against them. In studies regarding rape culture, this is called victim blaming (Valenti, 2009). If we blame women for the way they dress during school hours, and argue that this distracts boys and makes them unable to control themselves in the presence of a woman, we are also leading society to believe that a woman’s appearance is at fault when men commit crimes of rape and sexual assault. This becomes apparent in rape cases when comments such as, ‘What was she wearing?’ and ‘Her choice of clothing was asking for it’ arise.

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN, 2018), two out of three sexual assaults go unreported. RAINN (2018) additionally conducted a survey with the intention of understanding reasons associated with not reporting. It found that the majority of victims did not report because they
feared retaliation (RAINN, 2018). This can be directly connected to the social construction of stigma associated to sexual assault victims. Jackson Katz (2006) brings attention to this issue through the amount of victim blaming that resulted from the sexual-assault charge against Kobe Bryant. Quickly after the victim reported the rape, media outlets channeled all attention toward her. Katz (2006) suggests that people all over began to question her morals, mental stability, sexual practices, and characteristics. In this instance, instead of focusing on the famous basketball star who committed the abhorrent crime, society was turning the blame to the vulnerable female victim. Katz (2006) states that through victim blaming,

The primary message to girls and young women is simple enough: if you have been raped, do not tell anyone. Look at the price you will pay-- especially if the perpetrator is popular. People will not believe you. They will actually blame you for damaging his reputation (p. 156).

A similar message is sent to girls and young women who break the dress codes: if your dress attire is showing any skin at all, you are a distraction to others, and therefore, you are the problem and you will be reprimanded for it.

The Chastity Belt of Dress Codes

Regina Rahimi and Delores Liston (2009) addressed the way female high school teachers changed their views on students who had been dress coded. Rahimi and Liston (2009) conducted interviews with teachers and concluded that teachers perceived students differently after they were coded for dress attire. Throughout this study, Rahimi and Liston (2009) explored the way teachers viewed dress codes and the appropriateness of dress code policies. The authors found that many of the teachers interviewed held strong double standards between their female and male students in relation to perceptions of, or assumptions about, the student’s sexuality (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). This study suggests society’s control over female sexuality is so embedded in our culture that most of the time we do not even realize how gendered it is. This double standard is important to recognize because, as a society, we must see how we encourage young boys to have sexual experiences without negative repercussions, but when girls engage in the same behavior, we brand them with an offensive label. This study additionally recognized the way teachers saw female sexuality as a problem through the idea that women should remain pure and not express sexuality (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). The teachers not only encouraged females not to express sexuality, but they also expressed
their displeasure of female students wearing any type of clothing that did not fully cover all body parts (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Teachers’ views and perceptions of young impressionable students should be acknowledged because they can have a powerful impact on the students. For the most part, many of these teachers are the primary authority figure for students. Their role as a teacher goes further than what can be found in a textbook. Teachers have the ability to impact students outside academics and either show them acceptance or disproval. In Rahimi and Liston’s (2009) study, the teachers interviewed were showing their disproval.

Clothing is not the only way we objectify women in schools. When school districts implement abstinence-only education, they are suppressing sexuality as well. Jessica Valenti (2009) studied the effects of abstinence-only education in the classroom. She found that abstinence-only education programs misinform many students, and that the abstinence-only curriculum is based on driving fear and shame into all things related to sex (Valenti, 2009). Many of these abstinence-only lessons and textbooks reinforce the unwritten societal law that women are responsible for men’s sexual actions. In workbooks from *Sex Respect*, Valenti (2009) found lessons stating the following:

1. ‘Because they generally become aroused less easily, females are in a good position to help young men learn balance in relationships by keeping intimacy in perspective’.

2. ‘Girls need to be aware they may be able to tell when a kiss is leading to something else. The girl may need to put the brakes on first in order to help the boy’.

3. ‘A woman is far more attracted by a man’s personality, while a man is stimulated by sight. A man is usually less discriminating about those whom he is physically attracted’ (p. 107).

All of these lessons are examples of the many ways schools that implement, and those who teach, abstinence-only education are reinforcing society’s socially constructed gender roles. These programs are used to fortify the notion that blame should be put on the backs of women, thus supporting the idea that women (rather than men) should be policed for their sexual behaviors and dress attire. Valenti (2009) found an additional section from *Sex Respect* which reads, “A guy who wants to respect girls is distracted by sexy clothes and remembers her for one thing. Is it fair that guys are turned on by their sense and women by their hearts” (p.108)?

This curriculum is yet again teaching the youth that a man is likely unable to control himself or be respectful because the female body is too distracting, especially with “sexy” clothes. What if, instead of teaching our female youth that
men are entitled to their “sexy” clothed bodies, we teach men and women about respect and consent? What if, instead of teaching our female youth how to avoid getting raped, we taught our youth not to rape? What if, instead of focusing the blame of rape on the victim, we actually focus our attention on the rapist who should be held responsible? What if we did not use dress codes to degrade and condemn women, but instead, to empower them? We could empower students through dress by enabling them to freely express their appearance without judgment and sexual harassment.

Rahimi and Liston’s (2009) study further examines the manner in which a young high school girl is told to behave. On one hand, school officials, churches, and authority figures express to girls that it is important to remain pure. Yet movies, social media, music, and fashion industries tell young girls that they need to look sexy in order to appear cool and well liked by peers (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). This is important to address while analyzing dress codes, because it is crucial to understand societal influences on young students. High school is already a confusing age when young people struggle to find themselves and their purpose in the world. This does not need to be further confused by enforcing a dress code that will not let a student fully express and discover who they are as a person. From my experience, students wear an outfit to school because they feel confident in it; female students are not dressing to ‘receive sexual attention’ from their male peers or the school’s faculty.

**Double Standards**

DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) discuss elementary, middle, and high school principals’ perceived necessity for school dress codes. Their study found that 85 percent of the principals believed dress codes are necessary within their school. Compared to 15 percent of principals who regarded dress codes as unnecessary (DeMitchell, Fossey & Cobb, 2000). DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) additionally found that elementary school principals were more likely to respond that a school dress code was unnecessary, while middle and high school principals saw an immediate need for dress codes. This part of the study was intriguing because in elementary schools there should be no need to sexualize girls’ bodies. This makes one think whether it is the female students sexualizing their own bodies when they reach middle and high school, or if it is the dress code of the school district that sexualizes the students. Are students breaking the code because they want to sexualize their bodies, or is the code being broken because it stands as a way to further sexualize female students?
The online student handbook for San Antonio’s Premier School District Northside ISD (2018) states the following under the ‘Dress and Grooming’ Section:

Shorts and skorts may be worn at the elementary school level. In grades three through five, they should be no more than four inches above the top of the kneecap. Shorts and skorts are prohibited in grades six through twelve (p.D-8).

In this instance, the school officials are not only restricting the dress for a child in grades three through five, but they are also completely eliminating the allowance of shorts and skorts once a student graduates elementary school. This code, and many others, is designed to bury female sexuality before it even emerges. These types of codes systematically privilege the patriarchy while simultaneously squandering the insufficient amount of autonomy a young female has remaining.

DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2009) also examined the styles of clothing that these school districts prohibited most frequently. Among these school districts, the majority of the prohibited styles were directed toward female students. At Hickory Ridge High School in Harrisburg, North Carolina, the school threatened a female senior named Summer with arrest for violating the school dress code. The school accused Summer of disobeying the code by wearing a shirt that showed her collarbone and shoulders (Sherwin, 2017). The online student handbook for Hickory Ridge High School (2017) states: “No t-shirts that have been cut, spaghetti straps, off-the-shoulder tops, mesh tops, tube tops, or halter tops are allowed” (p. 3). Because of her off-the-shoulder shirt, the school found Summer to violate this code and removed her from class, hindering her education (Sherwin, 2017). The Hickory Ridge Online Student Handbook’s (2017) particular dress code required students to follow twelve rules, with seven out of the twelve directly working to oppress the dress of female students. The rest of the rules on the list were working to limit the expression of race and ethnicity. DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) found this to be a recurring factor with the way schools implement dress codes. If the dress codes are not used to hypersexualize women’s bodies, they are used to conceal the expression of nonwhite race and ethnicity (DeMitchell, Fossey & Cobb, 2000). As this essay focuses primarily on the way dress codes sexualize the bodies of female students, further work should be done to critique the way intersectionality operates through the use of dress codes to oppress race and ethnicity.

reinforces the idea that many individuals view dress codes as a necessary way to a means because women need to be controlled and guided. Bleiberg (2003) states, “Additionally, magazine and television ads promote skimpy fashions that adolescents interpret as appropriate for everyday activities, including school” (p. 6). As a society, we tell women that they need to dress in a certain fashion to be viewed as cool. However, in a school setting, we tell women that they must not wear the types of clothing seen as cool because many of these clothes are prohibited in a school setting. This is interesting because if a woman chooses to dress a certain way, she should be allowed to make that decision. With the school district deeming what a woman can and cannot wear, the schools are in turn taking away a woman’s bodily autonomy. It is also important to look at how ads displayed on television and magazines work to sexualize women’s bodies. Frequently, the apparel in the ads are not sexualizing women’s bodies, but the way the ads are created and depicted, work to sexualize the bodies of women. In turn, this creates the idea that any female wearing tightly fitted or skin-barring clothing must be seen as a sexual object.

Bleiberg (2003) additionally states, “Adolescents who wear low-cut pants and tight tops might not realize that they are sending a message that screams of sex. Their aim is to be accepted and well liked, but not necessarily an object of lust” (p. 8). This statement is very contradictory. The author is arguing that the students dress in certain clothing options in order to be well liked but states that the students are unaware that the way the dress screams of sex (Bleiberg, 2003). If students do not realize that their outfits are screaming of sex, who is at fault? It is not the students in the outfits, but it is the individuals who sexualize the bodies of the students wearing these outfits.

**Dress Codes and Superiority**

Simone de Beauvoir (1952/1989), an author and feminist theorist, brought attention to society’s view of women as other in her book, *The Second Sex* (1989). In this book, she recognizes the ways society works to show women that they are considered less important than men are. In the introduction of the book, de Beauvoir (1952/1989) states:

> Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: ‘Woman, the relative being ...’ And Benda is most positive in his Rapport d’Uriel: ‘The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.’ And she is simply what man decrees; thus she
is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other (p. 26).

This statement helps us understand the underlying power dynamics that influence student dress codes. Beauvoir (1952/1989) recognizes that society views men first and women second. Everything that society does is first for men. She also argues that women are only seen as relative to men, which depicts women as a man’s object. This is important to observe in the dress code policies because most administrations believe a woman does not have the ability to do anything for herself. When a woman dresses in revealing clothing, societal norms conclude that she is partaking in this behavior for a man and not for the confidence in herself.

Beauvoir’s (1989) theory can illustrate ways dress codes script that a woman “appears essentially to the male as a sexual being” (p. 26). One can recognize this in dress codes because most of the reasons behind the gendered policies are due to the idea that the female body distracts men. By creating a dress code intended to prevent the distraction of males in a classroom, the school system shows female students that they are less important than male students are. The school district demonstrates that a man’s education holds greater importance in society. It is important to recognize why schools penalize women for their dress attire. We must understand whether schools penalize female students because they dressed inappropriately or if schools penalize female students because women’s bodies are so sexualized that anything they wear is considered a distraction to men. It is additionally essential to analyze the message we are sending to women when we penalize them for distracting their male peers. It stands to make women inferior to men. It holds men as society’s greatest importance and women as the “other.” The school districts are thus telling women that their education and growth is not nearly as important as men, because women are, in the end, supposed to be in the home. Through this, society demonstrates the belief that women should not care about their education because in the end they must marry a man who will be their breadwinner. Because, unfortunately, as hard as a woman works, she will never surpass the white, heterosexual, cisgender rich man that society paints as the ideal individual.

The consequence of dress codes is significant. In most cases, a female student missed class as a result of being dress-coded. Under the dress code
section in the Hickory Ridge high school student hand book (2017), it listed the consequences for violating the dress code as follows: a warning; change of attire, and parent contact; Saturday School; and 1 day of in-school suspension. We must consider whether it is necessary to take a student out of class to change their dress attire. We must further consider the necessity of taking a student out of class and making them sit in suspension during school hours for a dress code violation. We should not be taking away from a woman’s education because of the possible ‘distraction’ she could be to men. In reality, we should recognize that larger issues arise when we take a woman out of the classroom, limiting her education.

My Closet, My Sister’s Closet and Our Future’s Closet

Today, as I go to my closet to pick out an outfit, I take many factors into account. I consider who I will see, the environment I will be in, and most importantly, how other individuals will perceive me. Each setting requires a different dress attire to be socially accepted, from the clothing’s colors to the amount of skin exposure. The school system has conditioned me to take something inherently simple and turn it into a complex process.

Today I find myself following these unwritten societal rules for my own protection. I find myself covering my shoulders with a blazer prior to attending an interview and reluctantly buying the skirt that reaches my kneecaps to ensure my body is not going to be sexualized by the individual conducting the interview. I send pictures of my outfits to friends asking for their reassurance regarding the outfit’s appropriateness, guaranteeing it will not limit my chances of getting the job. I put my hair back and wear a high-collared shirt to send the message of professionalism. I follow these rules to try to receive the same opportunity as my male peers. However, my white, heterosexual, cisgender male peers may dress to look professional, but they likely do not get dressed wondering whether they look too sexual.

I search my closet for the perfect top to wear on a night out. I look for something I feel confident in, yet something that still covers the majority of my skin. I again ask for friends’ reassurance whether or not the top is too much or too little, trying to find that perfect mix. I do not wear the top that exposes most of my back without a sweater to cover. I do not wear the top with the plunging neckline to assure my innocence. I stay close to those I trust hoping no one finds our clothing to be an invitation to our bodies.
I listen to my sister cry in the dressing room because she cannot find shorts long enough to provide the amount of coverage her school requires. I feel for her as she gets frustrated with the fact that her friend was coded for wearing a dress with spaghetti straps. I stick up for her as my dad disciplines her for getting in-school suspension because of her rebellious nature. I encourage her to break the code and show the district they should not control these aspects of a child’s life.

It is time we use the education system to lift and empower students. Individuals should have the authority to wear what they feel comfortable in regardless of their gender. As a society, we should disrupt these codes individuals unwilling follow. We should give our youth a voice, and listen to this voice. We should not operate under these white heteronormative patriarchal systems anymore. We must use our voice to expose the problems gender construction creates in coding dress, and work toward change.

References


LGBTQ Intimate Partner Violence: The Invisible Relationship

I have personally experienced LGBTQ Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). My topic is important because those who experience intimate partner violence, and who are LGBT or in queer relationships, are not provided information about IPV as often as heterosexual individuals. I hope readers will learn and realize that individuals in the LGBT community can face IPV, and that this issue needs more discussion. IPV is not something that affects one facet of someone’s life; it can affect multiple parts.

Introduction

This essay is about Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) intimate partner violence (IPV). I am writing about this because I have personally experienced LGBTQ IPV. This topic is important because those who experience IPV, and who are LGBTQ or in queer relationships, are not provided information about IPV as often as heterosexual individuals. I hope readers will learn and realize that individuals in the LGBTQ community can face IPV and it is something that needs to be discussed and talked about more. IPV is not something that affects one facet of someone’s life; it can affect multiple parts. This paper provides information that specifically focuses on LGBTQ IPV because of the relationship that I share with it.

What We Know

IPV happens over and over again in relationships, as it did in mine. Many victims are sadly unaware of what is happening to them just like I was. No one should be left in the
dark about IPV. When you hear about abusive relationships, you never think it can happen to you. Further, I did not believe it could happen to me, especially because I was not in a stereotypical heteronormative relationship. The reality is that I am not the only one who has faced this. Many LGBTQ youth, adolescents, and young adults experience the same things at numbers estimated to be higher than heterosexual relationships (Messinger, 2017). Messinger also writes that of those who are in a relationship consisting of two men, over half are likely to face a form of IPV and out of all the relationships that consist of two women, about three quarters are estimated to face IPV. I wish that I had known that the reality of me being in an abusive relationship was very high. If I had known, I might have been aware sooner, and once I realized what I was going through, I might not have been as embarrassed to reach out to people to tell them what I was going through.

Without having a survey that takes all sexual orientations into account, a correct representation about IPV may be hard to come by. The idea of sexuality being fluid is a hard concept for some people to grasp. Badenes-Ribera, Frias-Navarro, Bonilla-Campos, Pons-Salvador, & Monterde-i-Bort (2014) discuss the idea of sexuality being fluid and how little to no surveys take the idea of sexual fluidity into account. A point the authors make is that although someone may be in a same-sex relationship, they may not identify as a member of the LGBTQ community (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2014). This is an important piece of information because many surveys are interested only in LGBTQ members and some individuals may not identify as LGBTQ but have same-sex tendencies (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2014).

Edwards, Littleton, Sylaska, Crossman, and Craig (2016) discuss what groups are usually surveyed when researching information on IPV in the college setting. They found that heterosexual relationships are more frequently looked at and studied whereas LGBTQ relationships are often left out. This can be detrimental to understanding intimate dating practices in the college climate. Edwards et al. (2016) estimate that “up to 18% of college student report having engaged in sexual behavior with someone of the same sex” (p. 17). This is a large number of college students who are in a same-sex relationship and could face IPV. Without studies being done on IPV in LGBTQ relationships, potential student victims may never have knowledge
about the abusive relationships they are in. Although individuals who engage in sexual intercourse with the same sex may not identify as LGBTQ, or date one another, they might still be put into a situation where they face IPV and not know this could happen to them. All of the information that I received in high school about IPV related to heteronormative society and only included heterosexual men and women. I thought that only heterosexual men and women who were together could be in abusive relationships.

According to Edwards et al. (2016), there is limited evidence of IPV in LGBTQ relationships, but they go on to note that some of the research indicates that IPV and sexual assault among college students is more prevalent in LGBTQ relationships than in heterosexual relationships. Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead and Viggiano (2011) discuss the discrepancies between studies. Older studies often estimated that IPV was lower in LGBTQ relationships than in heterosexual relationships. Messinger (2017) suggests that IPV is actually higher in LGBTQ relationships than heterosexual relationships, and also discusses the prevalence of IPV in same-sex relationships. He writes that lesbian women are more likely to face all types of IPV compared to gay men, but there is not a huge difference (Messinger, 2017). Both groups of individuals face IPV and discussions and information on the topic should be held/given on a more regular basis. Edwards et al. (2016) found that LGBT individuals are more likely to stay in abusive relationships because of the lack of information about such abuse. This same study also found a correlation between the two relationship groups and that they stay in their relationships for some of the same reasons (Edwards et al., 2016). This was true for me. I struggled to come to terms with what I was going through. As I look back on my education, it is because of the lack of general knowledge that I had about IPV that I did not realize it was something that concerned me.

Greene, Fisher, Kuper, Andrews and Mustanski (2014) discuss the importance of supportive peer relationships among LGBTQ individuals. Individuals who are supporting those LGB or someone who is queer or transgender and in a relationship should be informed that intimate partner violence does not just happen to cisgender/heterosexual people. This is something that can happen to anyone no matter who they are or what relationships they claim. Relationship violence does not occur exclusively in heterosexual relationships,
where the male in the relationship is beating his female partner. Relationship violence also happens in many different ways, not just as physical abuse. Emotional, mental, financial, neglect, and sexual abuse are all things that can happen when a person is facing IPV. Not only did I face emotional and mental abuse, but I also experienced physical abuse that I am choosing not to discuss. While I did face physical abuse, I thought that it was okay. I only ever heard of men hitting women in these situations, never two women abusing each other. Had I known that IPV comes in all forms and can be experienced by anyone I may have left the relationship sooner. IPV education needs to be taught, and needs to be taught with all sexualities included. Groups of individuals who are in non-heterosexual relationships should not be invisible.

**Invisibility of Same-Sex Relationships**

Messinger (2017) discusses the invisibility of the queer relationship within the United States and around the world. In the U.S. queer men were less likely to find an IPV agency that serves that population of individuals compared to queer women. Queer women still struggle to find help, but there is more offered to them than to queer men. This is not surprising since IPV is more commonly reported as a male on female crime in heterosexual relationship, so male victims are often overlooked in this regard. Men reporting same-sex IPV challenges masculinity and can make men afraid of speaking up. IPV services are aimed towards heterosexual women in the U.S, although queer women can still benefit from services because of that. Even with this, it is important to offer services that are specific to LGBTQ individuals. This is necessary because this group of individuals is underrepresented and not informed about valuable things that heterosexual individuals are privileged to, like sex education. According to Greene, Fisher, Kuper, Andrews and Mustanski (2014), there are no known programs that have published effective studies focused on IPV in LGBTQ adolescent relationships. This is concerning because violence among LGBTQ adolescent intimate partners is very high according to Greene et al. (2014).

Long-held perceptions and beliefs of LGBTQ relationships have affected the way people view and treat those relationships. The heterosexual ideology, and the idea that only men beat women, has created a societal expectation that IPV only happens in heterosexual
relationships. Baker, Buick, Kim, Moniz, and Nava (2012), explain that LGBTQ IPV can be a difficult idea to grasp because it shows that men can abuse men and women can abuse women. This is a difficult idea to process because throughout 1960-1976 IPV was considered ‘wife abuse’ and always portrayed as men abusing women. Messinger (2017) states that a lot of the stereotypes surrounding IPV only occurring in heterosexual relationships stem from the movement on ending men’s violence against women. He also discusses the lack of inclusion of LGBTQ individuals by the United Nations and the World Health Organization when covering topics on IPV. This is detrimental because those who are facing IPV in countries where LGBTQ individuals may not be accepted, or in countries where they are accepted but topics such as IPV in the LGBTQ community are not dealt with, do not have a set of guidelines or information to guide intervention practices. These organizations are supposed to help and support all people; how can they do this if they are not supporting LGBTQ individuals as well?

Edwards et al. (2016) found that LGBT individuals who carried out IPV as the perpetrator were almost all victims of IPV themselves before becoming the perpetrator. If individuals who face IPV are more likely to become the perpetrators, then more resources that are informational should be provided to LGBT individuals. Edwards and Sylaska (2012) discuss the disempowerment theory, which revolves around the idea that “...individuals who feel inadequate and lack self-efficiency are at increased risk of using non-traditional means of power assertion, such as violence” (p. 1722). Crossman and Craig (2016) also found correlation between internalized homophobia and heterosexist discrimination, which factored into IPV and the perpetrator who is carrying out the abuse. This can have a lot to do with overcompensating the assertion for power because an LGBT individual may feel like they have no power due to being part of a marginalized group.

Not only are LGBT adolescents at a higher risk for IPV, the lack of knowledge and acceptance by their communities of LGBTQ relationships can affect their romantic relationships. Researchers attribute homophobic control behaviors as important and pervasive to IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2014). Internalized homophobia is something that a lot of LGBTQ members face. Partners who reveal someone's sexual orientation, or reveal
an attraction that would be different to the idolized heterosexual attraction of western culture, engage in a form of IPV. This was one of the scariest things that I faced. The pain and suffering that I went through from the emotional and physical abuse does not compare to how scared I was to be outed. Being outed made me feel like I was slowly drowning in quicksand. I just kept sinking and sinking. I became worried that my family might find out, and I was worried that my best friend’s parents who were very conservative would hate me and not let us see each other anymore or have sleepovers.

Social acceptance is another factor that queer individuals have to fight against in order to receive services. Messinger (2017) states, “…the struggle to legitimize LGBTQ IPV as a genuine public-health concern is rooted in the struggle to legitimize LGBTQ human rights” (p. 18). Before society accepts that IPV is a public health concern, society as a whole needs to accept queer individuals. If same-sex relationships are not viewed as just another relationship, how can they receive the same services that heterosexual relationships do? Have we strayed from the heteronormative model? Society's binary thinking, black vs. white, girl vs. boy, rich vs. poor, and straight vs. gay can make it difficult for people who do not fit into the dominant identity to have a positive experience in their “other” identification. People who are stuck in the heteronormative mindset of society have difficulty understanding things that might be outside of the binary. This includes individuals who are transgender or those who are pansexual and attracted to all genders.

**Moving Forward**

Some people are raised not to consider LGBTQ relationships to be valid ones. People may not even be taught that they exist; therefore, many people may find the idea of IPV in LGBTQ relationships to be preposterous (Messinger, 2017). Societal discrimination is detrimental to the fight for equality for representation when discussing IPV. Discrimination and lack of representation can lead victims of LGBTQ IPV to not recognize and have validation of their IPV situations. We need to educate people in our society on these topics and issues. My goal is to help break the silence. Through continuing my education and studying for a Master’s Degree in Social Work, I can advocate and educate the people around me on issues such as this. No one should ever have to experience Intimate Partner Violence.
Currently, I have a GPA that is over 3.65. I am a double major in Social Work and Women and Gender Studies. I am looking at a master’s-level school. I purchased my own car, and I have lost love and found new love. All of these accomplishments and experiences are things that I never could have dreamed of happening without family and friends supporting me with what happened to me. I am grateful to have learned about IPV when I did, but it should have been sooner. The American education system with societal norms of cisgender/heterosexual ideology is failing its youth. IPV education should start at a young age. Children should be encouraged to practice personal bodily autonomy and know the signs of an abusive relationship. Not only should they know the signs, they should be encouraged to talk about it so it becomes a topic widely discussed.

My abusive relationship was difficult to handle on my own. What helped me through it were my friends and family. I do not know what I would do but for my friends standing by my side when I was telling my story or when I needed a shoulder to cry on. They encouraged me to educate those around me on IPV and the disparities that surround LGBTQ issues. My mom and dad give me their continued support and make me feel loved. I am so grateful for them. I thought that I would never find anyone, or that I would never trust anyone ever again. I have found love and lost love since then. I learned so much from that relationship. I learned what real love was and was not. I learned about my own strength, how to trust others, and how to persevere.

References


A Woman Veteran Student’s Perspective

This essay describes my life experiences as a woman veteran who is currently a student at The College at Brockport. My experiences and perspectives, although specific to me, are also in general terms, the same for other women veterans. I reviewed the references studying women military service members both past and present, and I have noted the lack of information available. Therefore, I have decided to tell my story with the hope that my story will assist civilian students, staff, and faculty to better understand women veteran students on the college campus.

Introduction

This essay describes my life experiences as a woman veteran who is currently a student at The College at Brockport. My experiences and perspectives, although specific to me, are also in general terms the same for other women veterans. I reviewed the references studying women military service members both past and present, and I have noted the lack of information available. Therefore, I have decided to tell my story with the hope that my story will assist civilian students, staff, and faculty gain a better understanding of the women veteran students on the college campus. I am a woman veteran who is completing my four-year degree some forty-two years after I started college here at Brockport. The information contained here is representative of women veteran voices on campus. Giving women veteran students a voice regarding their experiences in the military and at a four-year college institution expands our knowledge of and relationship
with this body of students. In a special issue of the ASHE Higher Education Report (2011), the collected veterans’ stories featured showed differences and commonalities regarding the issues these veterans and I faced. These articles highlighted the positive attitude for seeking mental health care, seeking help from tutors for class work, writing, and privacy concerns around personal records that women veterans share on college campuses.

College is a transitioning experience that shapes the perceptions of life. My college experience has helped me acknowledge and then embrace the need for education to change the current culture regarding the abuse of women in all aspects of our culture, not just the military. This essay is to inform and relate my perception of college through the lens of my military experience by asking the question, how do I as a woman veteran student describe my experience at The College at Brockport and what challenges do I experience due to my military experiences?

Books and Articles Regarding Veteran Students

Since the end of the military draft in 1973, women have entered military service in greater numbers: Women currently account for 16 percent of active-duty service personnel; by 2035, they will account for 15 percent of the total veteran population (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). The increase of women in the military and their contributions to the military culture continue to shape how men perceive and treat women in the military. More men are speaking up about abuse as they see it occurring (Kapinski, 2005).

Today the military is slowly changing the way it addresses the complaints of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape. The testimonies of military women willing to speak out about their experiences, show that the military has a long way to go to reeducate and change how male cohorts perceive the diverse population of military women. Cohen (2018) highlights how the military’s patriarchal culture addresses the issue of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape in the military. The Army now considers sexual harassment as detrimental to “good order and discipline”, and that it does not promote unit cohesion (DeGroot & Peniston-Bird, 2000). One in four to one in three military women have experienced sexual assault and/or sexual harassment while in the military. The lack of supportive officers, chain-of-command, and comrades results in women distrusting the legal and administrative avenues of reporting these issues (Weitz, 2015). Seeking help becomes a major concern, especially if women plan to continue in
the military, and this carries over upon their transition to college where they are less likely to acknowledge their need for help (Weitz, 2015).

Fear of sexual violence is a constant for women veterans. In basic training, they are directed to be aware of their surroundings, go everywhere in pairs, do not drink in excess, and to remain alert while doing their job. Many women veterans report concern about both sexual assault and their attempts to prevent it, especially during deployments (Weitz, 2015). Unfortunately, for most women veterans, it is by someone in the barracks, or area they are temporarily calling home, that they experience abuse (DiRamo, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, & Anderson, 2015). The perpetrator is someone they know and often times someone who has direct power over them. It is most typically a male, but not always; sometimes, a woman is also involved with the male oppressor (Weitz, 2015). The U.S. military treats women who accuse someone of abuse with a culture of silence. The person accused remains in the military. The accuser often has their personnel file flagged and although re-assigned, finds they experience a bias of being a problem for the unit. Several recent books written by women military officers who have nearly completed their career, and do not fear losing their promotions or pensions, speak out about this culture (DeGroot & Peniston-Bird, 2000; Hicks-Stiehm, 1996; Holm, 1992; Karpinski, 2005).

Research and evaluation of the challenges veterans experience on college campuses have only just begun (Weitz, 2015). The difficulty in studying women veterans is their ability to hide in plain sight at college because they do not self-identify as veterans. As early as 1977, Schlossberg (1997) advocated for an understanding of the decision-making processes of adult learners. The role transitions of adulthood, she asserted, “often involve crisis, conflict, and confusion” (Schlossberg, 1997, p. 77). Schlossberg (1977) conceptualized the decisions of adults in the context of transition and described her model as a way to analyze “human adaptation to transition” (p. 2). Heitzman, and Somer (2015) analyzed college choices made by women veterans based on Schlossberg’s (1977) theory and how the college choice influenced their education. By using Schlossberg’s (1977) theory in understanding veterans’ experiences, influences on the college choice female student veterans made, and women veteran’s influences around persistence, Heitzman and Somer (2015) were able to determine how women veterans made their decision on which college to attend.

Adducchio (2014) wrote regarding the multifaceted identity women veterans experience upon returning to civilian life
as another challenge. These identities can include mother, veteran, daughter, wife, world traveler, and disabled. Campus professionals need to be aware of how issues pertaining to mental health, sexual assault, and gender identity may influence how effectively women veterans make transitions to higher education. Women veterans are less likely to acknowledge their need for help because in the military they teach self-reliance (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Blaauw-Hara (2016) emphasized the current modality used is:

the deficit mindset: the focus is on remediating what student veterans lack rather than building on their unique strengths and is an alternative way of addressing veteran student education. Training programs, courses, and college interventions that acknowledge and build on the strengths student veterans bring from the military to the college will likely be more effective than those that focus solely on lack or difference (p. 818).

A number of authors, such as DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), Elliott and Naphan (2015), Heineman (2017), Sander (2012), and Semer (2015) address equipping the higher education professional with a fundamental understanding of the issues student veteran populations face such as identity, disability, childcare, and life experience.

**The Start of My Military Experience**

My dad had a blue-collar job at Kodak Park and we had a small farm. I was always required to help with the hay baling and wheat combining. Lifting fifty to sixty pound bales of hay kept me fit. When I was growing up my family watched World War II movies. My Dad (Image 1) served in the Navy in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. He endured enemy fire and lost people he knew when enemy planes attacked his ship. He did not talk about this at home and I only found out when he talked to my current husband. He was very proud of his service to his country.

When I was nineteen years-old, I met my first husband at a history re-enactment event. He was in the Army Reserve, and I went to several of the evening meetings (called Drills) with him to learn more about it. He suggested I join the Reserves. I found out about a special Army program for women with two years of college, but not necessarily a degree. As a graduate from Monroe Community College, I qualified to be a secretary in the Army Reserve unit. The program had two weeks of basic training in Ft. McClellan, Alabama (the home of the Women’s Army Corps), followed by six months of individual training with my reserve unit back home (the 98th Division Headquarters Company). This sounded good. I figured I could survive two weeks of anything the Army chose to dish out.
I did survive; in fact, I actually enjoyed the training. There are some memorable moments. We ate canned rations (C-rats is the affectionate Army name) and I was able to keep the P38 (can opener) and have it to this day. There was the gas chamber experience, where we had to take off our protective mask, recite our name, rank, ID number, and take a breath before we could leave. I survived that okay. Then there was the bivouac in the woods. It was not a big deal there until we went to fire the rifles. I scored sharpshooter, and the drill sergeant called the captain of the company over to view my target. Shooting woodchucks in the hayfield with my brothers paid off.

The next day we went on a “forced” march with a pack. No problem. I was a young, healthy, energetic twenty-year-old. I had Cracker Jacks in one of my pockets. Do you know how noisy Cracker Jacks can be when they rattle in your pocket? The drill sergeant made me throw them out or eat them. He said, “The enemy can hear you coming and they are waiting for the prize.” Then we were marched behind the firing range bunker. My squad was the last one in
line. I saw the drill sergeant hit the dirt. Word came down that the range was live fire. A tracer round had just gone in front of his nose. He was a Vietnam veteran, so we all took it seriously and low-crawled (belly in the dirt and head and butt down) to a safe area. It was exciting! Baechtold and DeSawal (2009) observed, “An individual’s introduction to military life occurs during basic training, in which the mental and physical demands are significantly different from those placed on first-year students in college” (p.39). These experiences are reflective of the commonalities I share with other women veterans. We have all experienced basic training.

I was a private first class (PFC) when I went home and a specialist fourth class (SP4), Spec4 for short, six months after joining my unit, the 98th Division Headquarters Company. Our mission at that time was to instruct new recruits on infantry and combat engineering at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. In 1978, I was sad to learn that the Women’s Army Corp was no more, and I would change my collar insignia to whatever job category I held. Pallus Athena (Image 2), the symbol the Women’s Army Corp used to identify women soldiers, was no more.

The Acknowledgement of Bias

When I was twenty-one, I married my first husband. My assignment was secretary to a one star general. During this time, I had one issue come up that related to my being a woman and not getting my field jacket. One day I deliberately wore my bright light blue jacket into the general’s office. I was sick and tired of listening to the supply section (S4) stating they could not acquire a woman’s field jacket for me. When I walked in to the general’s office, he asked me why I was not wearing my field jacket. I told him the S4 was not able to acquire one for me. He said, “You really need a field jacket. I wear mine to shovel snow in my driveway in the winter and to go hunting two stars and all.” Apparently, he mentioned in the staff meeting that night I did not have a field jacket. I received notice while in formation to report to the S4 section immediately. They gave me a man’s field jacket that was too big, but I...
had one. I made sure to wear it until I was issued one that fit.

I did not experience any bias or sexual harassment in the 98th Division Headquarters Company, and this may have been due to my husband being in the unit. After three years, I trained two weeks to be a chaplain assistant (I was a gopher and bodyguard). I was a specialist fifth class, equivalent to a sergeant. I transferred to an instructor position in a different unit after completing four weeks of active duty schooling. In my new unit, I was mildly harassed with overheard jokes (‘oh, I didn’t see you there’). However, the “good order and discipline” clause in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) was set up as a means to curtail sexual harassment reporting according to DeGroot and Peniston-Bird (2000). As women soldiers, we feared bringing complaints of sexual harassment to the Command because they could also use this clause against the person complaining, as the complaints could be detrimental to unit cohesion.

The idea of sexual harassment had not yet really hit the military in the early 1980s. The women I met in the military during those years were used to dealing with the “good-old-boy-club” and we just did our job. Most of the men we worked with held civilian jobs, had families, and presented an attitude towards women that we were strong and self-confident. The men acknowledged that women veterans were smart and knew how to do their job. We also knew how to move within the system to get things done. As Miriam Cooke (1996) wrote in the book, *It’s Our Military, Too*:

Feminist praxis gave one the courage to be an active witness whose words may serve to subvert the dominant paradigm. These witnesses are elaborating survival strategies that include the forging of alternative visions and stories. They are voicing dissension from the status quo, making visible the linguistic tactics and ideologies of patriotism, nationalism, and patriarchy, and they are examining the role of consciousness and constructing a memory responsible to the future (p. 266).

This is what I did to reconstruct the vision of a woman’s role in the military. There was very little privilege associated with our military experience. By blending in and completing our work, we maintained the illusion of equality. We stayed in separate quarters during our two-week summer training. Otherwise, our uniforms were the same, the equipment we used was the same, and our training was the same.

I became a sergeant first class (SFC) in 1985. The last time the Ready Reserves responded to a call to active duty was the WWII era, and we had no expectations this would change. Our equipment was old, and we did not have current training in our military occupational specialties (MOS) due to a lack of funding. I
remember learning to drive a two and a half ton truck that was as old as I was. Our rifles were from the Vietnam era, and the only current equipment were the typewriters. I did enjoy several opportunities that only the military could give me. I flew in helicopters, once over New York City. I experienced the sense of community living and working with women who had common goals. I lived and worked beside amazing first responders, and I saw quite a bit of the continental United States.

I was appreciated as an instructor at the NCO Academy. I was instrumental in giving several women the opportunities they were looking for in the U.S. Army Reserves, and I facilitated the retirement documentation for at least twenty Vietnam veterans. Those were fun times and I enjoyed myself.

**Army Recruiter**

In 1991, I had the chance to go full-time Army as an Army Reservist Recruiter. I spent four weeks, seven days a week, in training for recruiting. There were manuals to absorb, practical exercises to do, and I had to maintain my military basic skills (map reading, weapons identification, basic first aid, marksmanship, vehicle maintenance, and several more I cannot recall). Everyone in the Army had to show competency in these tasks every year. Only chaplains and conscientious objectors were exempt only from the weapons training portion. I then completed another four weeks of special personnel training.

The first sergeant (1SGT) of the company I reported to when I completed training was one of my abusers. He displayed his belief that women are for sex, and women in the army think they are so privileged they do not have to do the same work as the rest of the group. They must be using sex to receive a promotion or to move ahead in their field. He stated these views more than once to the soldiers at the recruiting station.

The men in my office were married; kind, strong men who were not out to prove that they were men. They were younger than I was by about ten years except for the other Army Reserve Recruiter. He had been a recruiter for ten years by then, and he stated to me that he had never had a first sergeant (1SGT) as bad as this one. The office did not like the harassment I was getting and they told me they had heard through the recruiting grapevine that this 1SGT had been harassing other females in the unit and was not going away for at least another two years. I did not last that long. The 1SGT accused me of having sex with the sergeant-in-charge (SIC) of our station/office. The SIC was a happily married man ten years my junior. I wrote a letter of complaint to the
command sergeant major (CSM), the highest ranking enlisted and the 1SGT’s boss. A letter came down from the colonel of the Command stating that the U.S. Army does not tolerate sexual harassment and there would be consequences if there were complaints. This letter resulted in the 1SGT no longer interacting with me. The Command put a master sergeant (MSG) as our office manager (SIC). The MSG’s role was to train me to be a recruiter, or more to the point, get me to fail so the Command could put me out of the service for the good of the Army, thus restoring ‘good order and discipline’ to the unit. Cohen (2018) describes the nature of sexual harassment in the military as defined by UCMJ and this was similar to my own experience. DeGroot and Peniston-Bird (2000) identify and explain the UCMJ specific sections and codes that cover this behavior.

A second abusive event happened to me during a recruitment visit at a military service member’s home. I went to interview a soldier just back from active duty as part of Desert Storm (the big sand box). The soldier was in the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) and I planned to encourage him to join the Ready Reserves. He physically tried to manipulate me into having sex. I escaped and went back to the Recruiting Station. I told my SIC and others at the office. They just said things like, “What did you expect?” I told them my neck, upper back, and arms ached as a result of the incident. They said there was no way the 1SGT was going to let me drive three hours one-way to see a military doctor. “Just suck-it-up.” I sat at my desk making phone calls, trying not to cry on the phone. I had headaches every day for months, along with pain in my neck and arms, which I ignored at work despite the pain.

My military evaluation records clearly show that I was not doing well as a recruiter. I continued to do the job; however, I lacked the ability to close the interview with a positive outcome. The 1SGT raised my recruiting goals to twice as much as any other recruiter in the company, and of course, I failed to meet mission every month but one. I asked that someone go with me when I did house calls. My request was denied. I could not sleep. My husband suggested I go back to that veteran’s house and have sex with the soldier so he would sign up. Then I could keep my job. Six months of this and the Command finally had enough evidence that I was not going to be a recruiter that could do her job so they released me from recruiting duty and began the process of cancelling my active contract. I was feeling depressed, hopeless, and physically tired. I went to see a counselor who was not part of the military system, but had been an officer in the military. Due to the need for
maintaining privacy of their records, women veterans feel more comfortable seeking counseling services outside of the military institution. I did not want the military to have access to my counseling records. This is consistent with the findings of DiRamo et al. (2015) and Baechtold and DeSawal (2009). The counselor noted that I was suicidal, dissociative (checking out of the conversation and losing focus), had headaches, emotional outbursts of tears, felt hopeless, lost, and worthless. He noted that my marriage was emotionally, financially, and physically abusive. He encouraged me to seek an answer for myself that I could live with for the rest of my life because this was not working. I started divorce proceedings and threatened to call the cops if my husband ever touched me again. That got his attention! I discovered my old unit had openings for instructors and wanted me back. I had five years until I could retire, and I was not going to lose my retirement over some asshole 1SGT.

My Fight for MY Dignity

At the end of my active duty service, I insisted on an exit physical because I was still suicidal, had headaches most days, suffered neck pain, and my arms still had numbness and tingling. The physician wrote that I insisted on the exit physical due to non-retention (code for ‘being kicked out’) and that I had previously injured my shoulder at a civilian job. When this army physician spoke with me, he focused on my not making mission and being “kicked off” active duty. We did not discuss my mental health. He sent me to an orthopedic specialist who found my physical symptoms consistent with carpal and cubital tunnel (nerve damage at the elbow and wrist) on one side. Upon my release from active duty in May 1992, I felt devastated because I was ‘fired’ from active duty. When I received my discharge paperwork, I saw that my exit physical stated, “Injury not service-connected.” My discharge record (Form DD214) reflected a “General Discharge” (in the best interests of the Army). I was not entitled to any VA benefits because my injury was not service-connected and I did not have an honorable discharge. I was still in the Reserves (Individual Ready Reserves IRR) and could return to active reserve status. The clock was still ticking towards retirement. I had until April of the following year to find and receive assignment to a unit.

I was so pissed off at the decision around my discharge that I totally feared any institutional organization. This is consistent with the findings of DiRamo et al. (2015) regarding the tolerance and stigma for seeking help and fear of institution interactions. I also had started divorce proceedings, moved in
with my parents and applied for unemployment. Being at home in a safe environment helped me to stabilize emotionally and get angry enough to start doing something for myself. It was all about getting my dignity back and moving beyond the assholes who tried to break me. I went to a congresswoman who referred me to a senator who sent a letter of inquiry to the Army Personnel Section. The Personnel Section could not justify my general discharge and changed it to honorable. They also said there were no jobs available on active duty in my military occupational specialty (MOS). I went to the VA, but they denied my request for a disability evaluation due to service-connected injury because of what was on my exit physical. I also learned that I was not eligible for VA benefits because I had not been on active duty for twenty-four consecutive months; a little known fact that is still in effect today. I enjoyed my military service for the most part and I am proud to have served my country. I encourage the readers of this essay to acknowledge the military does have abusers, but it also consists primarily of wonderful, kind and compassionate men and men who are professionals.

It may take years to get our due but we persist. A case in point is the Air Force lesbian, Airman 2nd Class Helen Grace James, discharged in 1955 with less than honorable on her paperwork, who finally received her honorable discharge in 2018 at the age of 90 (Bauke, 2018). I too know the pain of fighting to receive an honorable discharge. The benefits due a veteran with an honorable discharge are significant. Without it, most of the benefits -- including health care -- are not covered.

I went for my unemployment interview. The interviewer was a very supportive veteran. He listened to my story and suggested I go back to school and learn a different type of job. He said that unemployment would pay for it. I went for two years to a community college and received two Arts and Applied Science (AAS) degrees, one a Liberal Arts degree after only one class after all my old credits from twenty years ago were added. The second AAS degree was as a medical records technician. I graduated from the community college and went to work as a medical secretary. Between 1994 and 2014, I had ten jobs. All but two fired me. I did not get along with the supervisors. I did not know it at the time but this related to my PTSD and fear of the institutional organization. I also found an instructor position in a reserve unit in South Carolina. They agreed to let me do my weekend training drills as an instructor at the local Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) academy, which was a one-hour drive from my house. I would go on my two-week summer training with them. I retired five
and a half years later as a SFC as a Gray Area Reservist. I was in the IRR until my 60th birthday when I started receiving my military retirement.

PTSD Treatment

In 2014, I had a meltdown. I was suicidal, depressed, and emotionally out of control. I had remarried and had a loving husband. We had paid off the house, bills were low, and I had a job so I was doing okay. I could not understand why my emotions were so out of control. I found out from a female veteran that the rules had changed regarding PTSD and military sexual trauma. A woman no longer had to have documentation to prove she was a survivor of sexual assault or harassment thanks to five very
brave women who testified before congress in 1990. I spoke to a veteran service officer and he suggested that I look through my paperwork to see if I had any information regarding the issue. When I went through my paperwork, it all came back to me. Everything I had stuffed down for all those years escaped like a balloon with a hole in it. I showed him the evaluations and letters from when I was on active duty. He immediately started the paperwork for a PTSD claim. I was an emotional wreck and had to sit in his office for two hours before I could drive to the VA clinic thirty minutes away to see a counselor.

My previous VA counselor called me when she heard of my emotional state. We started my treatment and her diagnosis was PTSD from military sexual trauma (MST). My paperwork claim was lost the first time it went to the VA benefit’s office. The loss of my claim confirmed my distrust of institutions. The VA did not consider the claim because I had not been in treatment at least six months. I again felt betrayed and disconnected. I went to an outside therapist and received a second opinion regarding the PTSD diagnosis. It was clear I did have PTSD and that I needed clinical treatment. I was working during this time and my emotional state was not good even though my employer and supervisors liked me a lot and appreciated the great job I was doing.

Eleven months after my meltdown, I requested family medical leave. I had a plan for committing suicide and shared this in an interview with a VA counselor. He followed protocol and called my husband to transport me to a VA hospital. This moved my date of entry into the PTSD residential program to within two months instead of waiting eight months for an opening. The PTSD program filled me with knowledge and assisted me in finding modalities to deal with my anxiety, depression, dissociation, and physical symptoms. I met one of the woman veterans who had testified at one of the senate hearings about her experience with rape while in the service, and I feel privileged to call her a friend. She still has PTSD that is nearly uncontrolled which means she is hyper-vigilant about her surroundings and still disassociates, (blank stare) while having a conversation. She has severe depression and her body is continually in flight mode. She had to change her name to protect herself from the media. She is moving on with her life and slowly finding peace.

I loved the program and had many terrific experiences in a short nine weeks. The Veteran Administration outlines their recommended treatment on their webpage. This treatment includes cognitive behavior therapy and exposure therapy (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). Several articles referenced
on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website recommend further research on examining other aspects of post trauma emotions and proactive coping methods. A very positive coping mechanism, according to Vernon, Dillon and Steiner (2009), is gratitude. I began using the gratitude model to improve my emotional well-being.

I did eventually get my PTSD claim accepted and became classified as 100 percent disabled. The VA considered my claim regarding my arms, but once again, some of the paperwork was lost. Luckily, I had a box full of all my records as well as a representative at the hearing who was a veteran and an advocate. The VA accepted me as a patient with full medical benefits. My VA medical provider recommended an MRI for my neck and arms. The MRI showed that my cervical spine had shifted so severely that I was at risk for permanent paralysis. I had two displaced vertebrae in my cervical spine most likely from the original incident. I had surgery by a specialist outside of the VA and the VA paid for it. Finally, I no longer feel the numbness, tingling, and weakness that I had lived with for twenty-five years.

At this point in my life, I was actually feeling confident and relieved. I was also very grateful for the experiences in my life. I was retired with nothing special to do each day until my husband finished college and took a job at a veteran service center. He called me one day and asked if I would come down and help with a veteran who had a problem with Social Security. I went to his office and met with the veteran. I realized that he was a great talker but he could not comprehend any of the official letters he had received from Social Security. I figured out what needed to happen. After the veteran and I made several visits to the Social Security office and attended a video hearing, the veteran started receiving his benefits again. That was when I realized what I wanted to do with the next phase of my life. I wanted to be a volunteer veteran advocate.

**Transition to College Student**

I decided to go back to college. I chose The College at Brockport because it is where I started my college journey and where I wanted to finish it. The college is only seven miles from my home and in a rural setting, which is important because of my PTSD triggers. Finances were a factor, and I looked forward to studying as a productive use of my time. Distance, setting, cost, and academics were all factors that influenced my decision to go back to college and to choose Brockport. “Participants ranked location of college the primary factor influencing their choice,” observed Heitzman and Somers (2015, p. 22). They also noted reputation and productive use of time as additional
factors (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Thankfully, my husband supported my decision 100 percent because I would have to pay for the schooling with very little help from any grants. Any VA educational benefits that I had were long since expired.

I registered at Brockport as a returning student from forty-two years ago, a transfer student from a community college, and someone with a military educational transcript as well. I received degree credit from my military education after doing my own research and advocating for myself. My faculty advisor is also an outstanding advocate who encouraged me through my studies. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) affirmed that having an advocate is an important factor for completion of degree programs by women veterans.

I am a military veteran and so much more that sometimes I am not sure who I am. I am a feminist, retired, heterosexual, cisgender, married, and looking to finish a degree that I started more than forty years ago. “When the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student” (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009, p. 40.) This is consistent with my experiences and consistent with other veterans I have spoken with here on campus. If you look at someone, you cannot tell what identities they hold. It is easy for me to hide my veteran identity, and I have a choice about revealing it. When I use reflexivity to analyze my thoughts, I acknowledge the bias I feel towards women civilians who ask about my service (Doucet, 2008). I seek to recognize the bias, accept that I am judging how that person is reacting or will react and then I need to open my heart to the possibilities and insights that person has to share. Thus I am maneuvering through the three veils of reflexivity that Doucet (2008) references.

I acknowledge that there is not another woman veteran student like me on campus due to my age, military dates of service, and my job in the Army. However, I have encountered women veterans who I can relate to because of our similar experiences during military service. I have been where they are and felt what they feel. You might ask; how can this be? Military women attend basic training and this is a shared experience. “An individual’s introduction to military life occurs during basic training, in which the mental and physical demands are significantly different from those placed on first-year students in college” (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009, p. 39). We remember drill sergeants getting in our faces, having our belongings just so, firing the rifle, experiencing the gas chamber, and bivouacking outside. We all know about marching in formations
and the special way our bodies do the parade movements. We know about keeping physically fit, the running, sit-ups, and push-ups. We have also shared the experience of some kind of sexual harassment/trauma and most of us acknowledge it.

Recruits are mostly teenagers who need a very loud and controlled environment to keep them focused on the mission. They are isolationists, out for themselves’ who must now learn team building. Movies like Private Benjamin (Meyers, Shyer, and Miller, 1980) show some of what a new recruit experiences, such as days with minimal sleep to get a crucial mission accomplished, and service members doing so under the threat of death. It is no wonder basic training is so rigorous and demands that we fully focus on the present task. Other movies such as Megan Leavey (Liddelli., Shilaimon, & Monroe, 2017), which is based on a true story, and The Hunt for Red October (Neufeld.,1990), while fictionalized, show some of the long periods of inactivity with 20 minutes of life or death action and then the return to inactivity common in the military. It somewhat equates to individual sport activities. The television series, JAG: Judge Advocate General (Bellisaro, 1995), also shows some of the day-to-day activities of military life. This particular series also shows how young adults are in charge of million dollar equipment, ships, aircraft, tanks, computers, and medical areas.

Many of the enlisted are discharged and do not retire. When they return home, they are surprised at how their childhood world has changed. They feel lost and incomplete when separated from the military. They are seeking the connections that are similar to what they had in the military. This is consistent with research published by Heitzman and Somers (2015) and DiRamio et al. (2015). These authors reference the need for women veterans to connect with other women veterans on campus to do well in their studies. As woman veterans, we have many people willing to help us, but we do not know which ones have the knowledge to do the helping and are reluctant to tell our story repeatedly until we find the person who can help. Every time I tell my story, it can be triggering, and the response from the listener has the potential to be negative and judgmental. I automatically feel less-than and have thoughts of the people around me either not believing or misunderstanding me.

The military is patriarchal and the culture of the military industrial complex reflects this mindset. Fred Borch III (2000) explains the methods used by the military to change military culture and the challenges they continue to experience. Mandatory education regarding sexual harassment and
changes made to basic training guidelines has had very little effect. Criminalization and the use of UCMJ law continue to have problems with implementation due to the right of the military commander to influence the reporting structure for sexual harassment and the personnel who deal with this issue.

The military experience also separates me from other students and professors. The military taught me by using visual and hands-on training with repetition being a significant part of this learning process. This is common among veterans, state Heitzman and Somers (2015), because of the method of instruction utilized in the military. At college, I have to learn how to find the meaning in long treatises and readings. Professors expect me to use critical thinking to evaluate history and other people’s work for validity. In the military, we used critical thinking to plan field training exercises (FTX), maneuver tanks, pilot airplanes, keep records, make split second decisions on firing our weapon (or not), and perform life and death medicine on a friend or civilian.

It is important that I build on my strengths such as my worldview. Working with diverse people in the military and experiencing their cultures affords me a valuable counterpoint to the views of traditional students. Heitzman and Somers (2015) noted other women veterans also valued their experience of varying cultures. The ability to live and work in a culture that is different from the one a woman soldier grew up in, broadens their world perspective and the diversity of the cultural experience. I define my success more broadly than traditional students do, for I know the grade point average (GPA) is only part of the picture and that social interaction with peers, students, and faculty is just as important. My service in the military included being an instructor in the classroom so I know about leadership and motivation. I use reflexivity (Doucet, 2008) when evaluating my instructors and acknowledge my limitations; I have a high sense of initiative; I maintain a professional attitude and draw on my leadership skills. Some of the 167 women veterans DiRamio et al. (2015) interviewed echo these attributes. I am also goal-oriented and mission-driven; however, my PTSD sometimes can result in a lack of focus and critical review. I need time to adjust and be with people like me who understand and appreciate where I am coming from. Some people here on campus find my way of communicating a challenge and push against it. My military style of communication is straightforward, direct, and I say what I mean.

The challenges I face as a veteran student on campus are many. I need to
feel safe and have peacefulness around me. Chaos and crowds no longer appeal
to me. I have the Veteran’s Resource Area for a peaceful environment in
which to study. I know how important it is for me to sit in a classroom where I
feel safe. I have panic attacks with physical symptoms like tears, heart
palpitations and hyper-vigilance. My body aches and my blood sugar runs
high after an anxiety attack. As I walk on campus, I talk aloud to myself as I try to
refocus on the here and now. I lose focus and cannot retain information for more
than a day. I used to be able to remember pertinent information regarding my
previous jobs, but now I have to take notes and write down everything. If you
talk too fast, I cannot follow the conversation. If I am writing notes
regarding a professor’s suggestions, I get lost in the words and lose focus. I have
discovered tools such as the various writing templates for writing college
papers. I still struggle even with the help of the Student Learning Center tutors. I
know of other veterans who have attended this college campus and had
similar issues. Those who help veterans do not have to be veterans; they just
have to know how we think.

As I move through the civilian world, I acknowledge the stereotypes civilians
still have are drawn from movies, documentaries, and the media. Frankly,
you can never comprehend the scope of military culture unless you have lived it.
Looking into a culture does not make me understand that culture. For example, I
can never know what it is like to be an intersectional black woman because I am
a white woman and have the privileges that are part of being white and living in
the United States. Even living and studying with women of color does not help me to understand their culture to
any deep degree. They have experienced life that is foreign to what I have
experienced in my white Euro-American culture. My culture is about isolationism,
competition, and selfishness. The women of color I meet teach me a better
way of being in this world. We make our own family as we move through life and
military culture is one of these families. Through shared experiences, the military
unit becomes our extended family.

**Conclusion**

I have had many different experiences in my life and these experiences have
shaped my perceptions about what is around me. By employing reflexivity
(Doucet, 2008) and relational knowing, I acknowledge my bias toward the military
as a great institution while also acknowledge the dichotomy that women
face in the military. I have specific experiences that are common to women
in the military. Like my sisters, I have a positive view of college life overall, but
miss the interactions of a military unit.
and the mentoring process used in the military. My objective towards improving the systems that affect veterans is moving forward even while there remains a need for more research regarding the similarities, differences, and needs of women veterans.

My current goal is to focus my college work on improving the services available to the student who is or was a military service member. I have written my story in an effort to advocate for myself and other military veterans on campus. My research clearly shows how my experiences on campus are not unique. My challenges as a woman veteran completing a college degree are very much the same as other women veteran students. My journey continues as I find ways to assist veterans here at the College and in my community. I am an activist for the rights of veterans in whatever community I live.

References


Freedom en el fin del Mundo: Antarctica as the Key to Renegotiating Identity-Based Power Hierarchies

In all the world’s cultures, there exists a hierarchy of power maintained through cultural norms and institutions. In every culture, however, these hierarchies exist differently. So when put into a space where our culture and idea of identity-based power hierarchies is different from the ones around us, how do we negotiate our power in that space, and in doing so, how do we diminish the power of others? By looking at cultural “blank-slate” territories such as Antarctica, we may be able to better understand negotiations of identity-based power hierarchy and subsequently be able to tear down the institutions that constitute who is equal and who is not.

Introduction

Three people walk into a bar: a black man in his mid-twenties who is physically handicapped, a white person who presents them self androgynously and looks to be in the mid-thirties, and a Muslim woman wearing a hijab who appears to be in her early fifties. I know what you are thinking: not another tasteless joke that relies on stereotypes for humor. But bear with me. Assuming this bar is in the United States, it would be likely for all three of these people to be discriminated against, whether in prejudice, bias, or pure overcompensation for trying to appear un-prejudiced or biased.
Be it because of their gender identity, race, sexual orientation, physical abilities, religion, or the perceived position on the spectrum of any of these categories, the world at large has a habit of creating binaries out of what sociologists consider “dominant” and “marginalized” identity characteristics (Table 1 provides an incomplete list of examples). In the majority of the world, this gives people who belong to “dominant” identities more advantages, such as availability of employment, absence of micro aggressions, etc. These dominant and marginalized identities are largely established and maintained through a country’s norms and institutions, as well as other factors that add up to what sociologists would consider “culture.” Deviating from the definition of society-at-large, the American Sociological Association (2018) defines culture as, “languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful” (para. 1). Though there are “cultural universals” that we recognize globally, such as a family structures, the majority of culture is community-based and varies greatly even between neighboring communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Category</th>
<th>Dominant</th>
<th>Marginalized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Cisgender man</td>
<td>Woman, non-binary, transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Person of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>LGBTQIA+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>Middle/upper class</td>
<td>Working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>High school degree/GED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Working age</td>
<td>Youth/teenagers, retirement age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>Able bodied</td>
<td>Differently abled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Identities*
Antarctica has no indigenous population. The hostile and inhospitable climate make it almost inconceivable for the continent to hold human life. Let alone for human life to thrive there, before modern technologies like electricity and temperature controlled central air. However, in recent decades, research bases have been set up to host scientists on the continent for prolonged periods of time. Most researchers stay for up to one year at a time, some for longer periods, and some for shorter. Many of these researchers return year after year to continue their studies and experiences. Due to the absence of indigenous people on the continent, it is only logical that researchers on Antarctic bases have come there from all over the world, each having an established culture in their home country with normalized power dynamics. In terms of culture, this constitutes what we will consider a “blank-slate” territory, which has slowly built up and rebuilt its culture with each influx of new researchers. “Isolated and drawn together in a hostile environment, people have developed a knowledge of the continent and its life and, as it evolved, of their own culture” (Martin, 1996, p.21).

In this negotiation, every facet of the new culture can be considered an “import” from other places in the world. Within this, sociologists identify new sets of dominant and marginalized identities and the power hierarchies that correspond. While in their naturalized culture, a person has been taught or socialized to believe that their identity brings a specific amount of power to the table, this amount of power likely differs from that of the naturalized culture of the next person. Historically, one of the most prevalent forms of power hierarchy and dominant / marginalized identity can be found almost globally within gender power dynamics. According to Nancy Bonvillain (1998), author of *Men and Women: Cultural Constructs of Gender*:

Females and males are born, but women and men are products of enculturation… we attend to the expressed and hidden ideological messages about women’s and men’s place in their families and communities and about their social value. These messages are often symbolized in religious beliefs and practices. They are conveyed as well in subtle ways through language by words and expressions that label men and women or describe their activities (p. 1).

Here, along with pointing to the distinction between sex and gender, Bonvillain (1998) outlines the ways in which our environments create binaries and power hierarchies in our day-to-day lives. These binaries can prevent women and those who are gender non-conforming (outside the gender binary) from pursuing opportunities, managing their own finances, and even speaking in
a public meeting. Originally thought to stem from divisions of labor, gender segregation and inequality continues to be perpetuated through economic means (Bonvillain, 1998).

**Women in the Antarctic**

When Caroline Mikkelsen first arrived in Antarctica in 1935, she became recognized as the first woman to ever go to Antarctica. Though she did self-identify as an explorer, Mikkelsen did not spend her time on the continent, her place on the expedition was not as such, but rather as a companion to her husband, Klarius Mikkelsen, a Norwegian ship captain. A similar scenario presented itself to Jennie Darlington (1956) who wintered-over on the continent not on her own accord, but rather on her honeymoon with husband Harry Darlington in the winter of 1947-48. As one of the first women to ever winter-over in Antarctica, Darlington (1956) recounted her misgivings as well as her liberations, having experienced blizzards, tragedy, and pregnancy alike, in her memoir, *My Antarctic Honeymoon* (Darlington, 1956).

Though they were among the first women to arrive on the continent in a “modern,” non-nomadic context, they were not the first to try. Throughout the previous century, countless women applied to scientific expedition teams in hopes to be able to participate in the “Heroic Age” of the Antarctic (1897-1922). In her publication, “Frozen Voices: Women, Silence and Antarctica,” author Jessie Blackadder (2015) discusses the many attempts by women to find room in these male dominated expeditions. Found in the records of the famed explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton (as cited in Blackadder, 2015), who made his voyage in the early 20th century, was a letter from a group of young women who had hoped to join his expedition:

> We are three strong healthy girls, and also gay and bright, and willing to undergo any hardships, that you yourself undergo. If our feminine garb is inconvenient, we should just love to don masculine attire. We have been reading all books and articles that have been written on dangerous expeditions by brave men to the Polar regions, and we do not see why men should have the glory, and women none, especially when there are women just as brave and capable as there are men (Blackadder, 2015, p. 170-171).

Despite their best efforts, the women were barred from joining the expedition, and not for the first or last time. According to Blackadder (2015), despite expansion of exploration and technology in the Antarctic, women still were deemed unfit for expedition.

Twenty-five women applied to join Mawson’s British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE) in 1929 and in 1937 the
extraordinary number of 1,300 women applied to join the proposed British Antarctic Expedition. None were successful in being permitted to travel to Antarctica (Blackadder, 2015, p. 171).

It was not until much later on, closer to the mid-twentieth century, that women began receiving equal right to travel to the Antarctic continent. This caveat must be emphasized, because although women finally made it to the continent, this did not necessarily mean that they had achieved any sort of gender equity in doing so.

When she arrived on the continent, researcher Irene C. Peden (1998) did not do so without tribulation. Before she was the first U.S. woman to set foot in the Antarctic interior, Peden was another statistic of rejected intellect. In her publication, “If You Fail, There Won’t Be Another Woman on the Antarctic Continent for a Generation”, featured in Women in the Antarctic, Peden (1998) described this experience as a series of consistent brushes with failure and exclusion. As an associate professor of engineering, Peden was working on an Antarctic research grant through the Polar Upper Atmosphere program at the National Science Foundation. With the recognition that it would be impossible to design and implement experiments in an environment to which she had never been, Peden (1998) began the preliminary process to receive permission to travel to the continent under the grant’s protective umbrella. It was not long before she realized that this would not be as simple as originally planned. Though she had worked on the grant for several years, she continued to be denied access to the continent housing her research, based only on her gender. Peden (1998) states:

It was a particular admiral commander of the South Pacific fleet at the time, who didn’t want to take women. All kinds of bathroom problems were mentioned- no ladies’ room on the military flight, no ladies’ room in the Antarctic- those kinds of ridiculous things. I was just staggered to find that years and years later the first woman astronaut, Sally Ride, had to put up with the same stuff. When I read that in the newspapers I thought, “Oh my God, they’re still doing it” (p. 19).

Paralleling a modern conversation about restroom rights of those who identify as transgender, it seemed unfathomable to the admiral that Peden (1998) may get on just as well in nearly any restroom that serves its originated function.

Peden finally received clearance in 1970 on the condition that another woman accompany her. Peden (1998) and her new companion, Julia Vickers, a librarian and member of the Alpine Climbing Club in Christchurch, New Zealand, set off for the continent with the weight of half the world’s population on their shoulders. When they arrived, it
was not without trial from the researchers already stationed on their assigned base, Byrd VLF Station (a substation of Byrd Station). With only six weeks to complete the research they set out to do, challenges began almost immediately. A significant portion of their equipment failed to arrive on the continent, having been put on a plane separate from the two researchers. Though scheduled to arrive right after them, the plane would not arrive until just before they were scheduled to leave the continent. As the team discussed how to approach the issue, many members believed that the mistake was actually deliberate sabotage. Peden (1998) was told by the NSF station chief at McMurdo, as well as one at Christchurch, that they must continue the experiment, warning: “We’re doing everything we can; we haven’t located your equipment. You must do your experiment on time, and if you fail, there won’t be another woman on the Antarctic Continent for a generation” (Peden, 1998, p. 25).

Though they were eventually able to modify equipment to replicate the effects of the equipment they so desperately needed, they acted as a highly visible example of the ways in which marginalized identities carry the responsibility of reputation for their entire identity group. When some women could not, or would not complete expedition on the continent, what the world decided is that they also never would. As such, the women who came after them were forced to work even harder to overcome the precedent that she had set based on her own personal experiences. When Sister Mary Odile Cahoon (1998) wintered over on the continent in 1974, a member of the first team of woman scientists to winter over, she faced difficulties similar to that of any other scientist, man or woman, and yet faced an additional need to justify her presence there (Cahoon, 1998). Years later, when she was asked about her experiences, she noted:

The reason we specify that we were the first two women scientists to winter-over is that a couple of women wintered over with their husbands back in 1947. That was not a happy situation, apparently, and one of them said Antarctica is no place for a woman. Someone quoted that to me and asked, ‘What do you feel?’ I responded, ‘Well, if women are in science and science is in the Antarctic, then women belong there’ (Cahoon, 1998, p. 35).

Though women belong in Antarctica, we cannot say this without acknowledging that the problems that face them elsewhere continue to manifest in this “blank slate” world. On October 6th, 2017, the day after the New York Times published a tell-all on the sexual harassment history of film producer Harvey Weinstein, Science Magazine broke a story on geologist and
climate change researcher David Marchant, of Boston University. The article detailed a history of physically and sexually abusive behavior conducted against several women who conducted research with him on base in Antarctica (Wadman, 2017). A statement by Boston University indicated a “preponderance of … evidence that Dr. [David] Marchant engaged in sexual harassment ... by directing derogatory and sex-based slurs and sexual comments at [the women] during the 1999-2000 field expedition to Antarctica” (Resnick, 2017, para. 4) In the original article, written by Meredith Wadman (2017), encounters between these women and Marchant were outlined in detail. One of the most disturbing was committed against Jane Willenbring. Marchant:

...regularly pelted rocks at her while she was urinating. ‘She cut her water consumption so she could last the 12-hour days far from camp without urinating, then drank liters at night,’ Wadman writes. He also allegedly blew volcanic ash into her eyes to hurt her (Resnick, 2017, para. 6).

The stories of the women victimized by Marchant, as well as the experiences of the first women to fight their way onto the continent, fall in line with what we have come to understand about the gender hierarchy in the United States and in much of the world. Because of the power given to half of the world’s population, the other half becomes not only subordinate, but also exploited, abused, and oppressed. Despite the “blank slate” nature of the continent, the imported culture that arrives on the Antarctic continent makes this sexism no exception.

**Dialogues**

During my own travels in and around the Antarctic Peninsula, as well as preparing for this time before I left the United States, I was fortunate enough to find myself in dialogue with researchers who have worked on and around the continent. I was able to consult with two of these researchers about my own research. In each case, I collected a demographic survey from the consultants, as well as descriptions of their own experiences negotiating power. I asked each consultant to what degree they felt they negotiated their power on their respective research bases, what characteristic they felt this negotiation was based on, as well as whether or not they had seen anyone around them negotiating their power or being treated unfairly based on an identity-based characteristic such as gender, religion, sexuality, race, etc.. Table 2 shows the demographic profiles of the two experts I consulted.

**Consultant One** indicated that, although he had noticed some negotia-
tion of power within his research base, it was based largely on his education, research experience, and achieved characteristics rather than ascribed characteristics. There is some bias here, as the research conducted.

When considering these results, it is important to note that Consultant One by and large falls into the dominant identity categories shown in Table One. Consultant Two, with nearly opposite identities, had a much different experience. Though she indicated that she frequently found herself negotiating her power based on achieved characteristics like Consultant One, she listed several ascribed identity characteristics that played into her place in the power hierarchy, as well as observing the same things happening to those around her.

Consultant Two reported:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultant One</th>
<th>Consultant Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Cisgender Man</td>
<td>Cisgender Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 30</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race: White</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality: United Kingdom</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality: Heterosexual</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Affiliation: None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Language: English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Education Level Achieved:</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedition Experience (in years</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>since first expedition):</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Demographic Profiles of Consulted Researchers who have Worked in and Around the Antarctic Peninsula.
...the explicit and implicit bias towards me is based on my young looks, my accent and my gender. Frequently, I get asked about two things: a) do I have any family or children, and if so, who is looking after them, while none of my male colleagues get asked any personal question of that nature, and b) what is the highest level of education I achieved, and when I mention PhD it is assumed that I obtained this at a South American University. When I reply [it] is from a University in New Zealand, there is a seemingly patronizing assent of approval.

The stark difference in experience between Consultant One and Consultant Two encourages further discussion about power and privilege in hierarchical societies. This in turn creates a stronger drive to decipher exactly how these hierarchies are negotiated.

Whether Consultant One did not experience power negotiations of ascribed identity going on around him, or simply did not see them, is hard to say. Underneath this conversation of how power hierarchies come to be is another question waiting to be answered: What is the relationship between standpoint epistemology and privilege to power and privilege blindness? Women now find themselves with a relatively large degree of representation on Antarctic research bases compared to historical demographics. The phenomenon experienced by Irene C. Peden (1998) and the countless other women who have fought their way onto the continent persist in new manifestations of the same inequality. This serves to remind us that we do not, and may never, live in a post-identity hierarchy society.

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A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy who Joins the Church of Scientology, and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady She is Today by Kate Bornstein (2012): Book Review

This essay, which describes my curiosity on transgender identity, is a book review of the memoir by Kate Bornstein, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology, and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady She is Today* (2012).

A few years ago, working at a local supermarket, the manager I worked for transitioned from male to female. Right before transitioning, my manager, who was very open, honest and direct, asked me, “Is this a problem for you?” At that point I’d heard of transgender people but had never known one. I told my manager it was not a problem for me, even though I felt shocked and anxious. I needed that job. The fact that we had trust and a
good working relationship already helped. However, I also didn’t want to judge, be bigoted, or hurt my manager’s feelings, but I did feel anxious. This was all new for me.

So my manager took a little time off, and came back as a transwoman. It weirded me out. Standing near my manager, or talking work matters, I was very aware: this person had a sex change! How and why would someone do this? Raised religious in Jamaica, I wondered, is this “right?” But after a few days seeing the “new” version of my manager, I was less conscious of and calmer about the sex change. Even though my manager’s voice was changing, they were saying the same things, acting the same way as before, and treating me the same. Looking back now, it’s hard for me to understand being so worried about it all, but I know that I was at the time.

Though I never lost awareness of the sex change, I found that I could laugh with, be near, and work effectively with this person as we had before the transition. My manager seemed in most ways, except for appearance, dress and voice, to be the same person, just a little happier. I examined my attitudes. I saw myself adjust. I realized that all I needed my manager to be was hardworking, honest, and fair. None of that had changed. My manager treated me the same way as before. It was not as though I “needed” my manager to have a certain gender identity. It really did not matter at all.

This entire experience really heightened my curiosity to dig a little deeper into the transgender subject. So when I chose a book to review, I picked the 2012 memoir by Kate Bornstein, who was born Al Bornstein: *A Queer and Pleasant Danger: The True Story of a nice Jewish boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology, and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady she is Today.*

I braced myself as I began to read. I had known my store manager, but I did not “know” this author. Could I understand, accept, and adjust to a stranger’s transition the way I had with my manager? What would it say about me, a woman, a person of color, and an immigrant, if I could not relate to someone else who also faced people prejudging, stereotyping, and deciding who they were and how stranger’s felt about them before knowing them? I had felt a bit bad about how tense I had been after my store manager transitioned. I felt as though I had doubted someone I liked, and I did not like the feeling.

I was surprised that not only did I relate to the book and author, but I also found the book to be emotionally powerful. It also cleared up questions and confusion I had had about trans
people, transvestitism, being lesbian, etc. The book showed me someone very
different from anyone I have ever known personally, but, despite the gap
between her and me, I could see her as a human being with feelings, someone
who in many ways is just like me and I think like most people. As a mother
myself, I related to this loving parent.

If the book’s ideas had to be narrowed
down to only one, it would be: don’t lie.
This idea is introduced in the preface. In
a way, this book is all about lying. It is
about the pressure on people to lie to
themselves and society. To lie about who
they are, whom they love, and what they
like. The book explores the cost of lying,
and about how great it feels to tell the
truth. I realized that the fact that my
manager had been my boss probably
made me more willing to try out the new
situation than I might have been if the
roles reversed and I had been the
manager. That realization made me
understand why someone might not
want to disclose their transition. Such a
disclosure puts a person at risk for
rejection, and worse.

Another central idea from the memoir
is that despite how different Bornstein’s
life and path have been from most
people’s lives and paths, she is a person just
like everyone else. She loves her child. She
has mixed feelings about her childhood,
her family, her sibling, and her parents.
She wants to be happy and “do her own
thing,” but she also wants to please, or at
least not disappoint, other people, particularly her family. Who cannot
relate to that?

Many aspects of her life that she
mentions in the preface are things that
set her apart from most people. For
example, before writing the book,
Bornstein tattooed “You must not tell
lies” on her hand. Judaism bans tattoos,
so as a result she cannot be buried in a
Jewish cemetery, setting her apart. More
differences? Bornstein (2012) enjoyed
cutting herself, being cut, feeling her
blood flow, and sadomasochistic sex.
She drank excessively to the point of
blacking out, did street and prescription
drugs, and had various types of sex with
many men and many women. She writes
and publishes porn, suffers from
borderline personality disorder, post-
traumatic stress disorder, a slow-growing
form of leukemia/cancer, depression,
and anorexia. She has a fake knee and
piercings in body parts she was not born
with. One final way that Bornstein
(2012) announces she is different is that
she, unlike most people, tells us not to
trust her, that others say to disregard her,
and that she is seen as evil by many
people, including the Church of
Scientology, and probably by her ex-
wife.

Most people try to convince us to trust
them, conceal the fact that they are
imperfect, and ignore or conceal
criticism of themselves by other people. Bornstein (2012) does the opposite, saying, “Google her” to verify what she is saying is true, do not trust her because she lies. Lying is the central theme in Bornstein’s (2012) life. From age four when she realized (as a young boy) that she felt like a girl, Bornstein knew instinctively that society would not be kind about this, and that Bornstein’s parents would be devastated if “Little Al” was not a “normal” boy. Bornstein’s parents sent her to a relative psychologist when she was a little older because they were concerned. She tried to be everything she is not, to follow in her father’s footsteps as a wrestler, but failed miserably. She does become good at lying. Bornstein (2012) discovered science fiction, became a fan, and wrote some herself at an early age. Often in science fiction, the concept of “male” and “female” is erased or altered, an idea Bornstein (2012) found very appealing.

In high school, she got into theatre, the one place where it is OK to “lie,” to “fool people” about who you are, and also OK to be a boy but to dress as, speak as, and look like a girl. She worked on shows, had keys to the costume cabinets, and dressed up in secret as a woman. She learned makeup. She saw acting as lying and realized she was a natural liar, perhaps because she had had so much practice and been so motivated from an early age. She got into a pre-med program but dropped out, disappointing her parents terribly. Later on, she worked for the Church of Scientology, travelling all around the United States and Europe. Later, she became a professional writer of both porn and non-porn books.

Fiction writers make things up. That is what fiction is. It all ties into the lying she did her entire life. Lying that she was a boy when she felt like a girl. Lying that she wanted to have sex with specific women when she mostly just wanted to BE those women or be like them. Lying that she did not have a problem with alcohol or drugs when she drank until she blacked out and became addicted to drugs. Lying that she was just a “regular guy” when she was anything but that. Lying that she was macho when she was actually submissive and enjoyed being dominated. Her life, to a point, was a lie. Much of the lying was done to survive, to protect, to avoid upsetting parents, employers, co-workers, and other people.

One episode from when Bornstein (2012) worked as a top officer aboard a Scientology-owned ship is telling. There was a flag that got stuck high on a mast that needed to be yanked out of where it was stuck, but everyone aboard refused to climb up. It was a risky climb, and anyone who did this risked their life. Who would do such a thing? A person would have to be brave or crazy, or both.
Bornstein decided to lead by example and make the climb herself. Everyone stood on the deck below, mesmerized, watching. Bornstein had a fear of heights, which only made this feat more remarkable. Despite terrible, paralyzing fear, Bornstein made the highly risky climb, freed the flag, and was hailed as a hero and a brave man. But the whole time Bornstein was up there, she was thinking about killing herself (p. 90). What this episode reveals is that she did not feel like a brave man even though she spent much of her life trying to look like one, trying to be one, to please her father, to be accepted by society, and to feel good about herself. She looked like a man on the outside, but felt a totally opposite way on the inside. This mast climb captured the life she led until events spiraled more and more out of control. Once she got older and her marriage broke up, and was kicked out of the Church of Scientology, she finally decided, with the help of a therapist, to face her issues, stop lying, and be who she felt she was meant to be, who she felt she was: a woman, and in Bornstein’s case, a lesbian woman. Even later in life and the book, Bornstein (2012) says that she is not a man, not a woman, but something else.

After marrying three different women, Bornstein (2012) realized that she wanted to live as a woman, and she went into therapy and started to transition her life from male to female identity. In Bornstein’s case, this meant taking time off work for surgery, then going back to the same job, same office, and same co-workers she had worked with as a man, but now coming back in as a woman, wearing woman’s clothing, and going by a woman’s name. Fortunately for Bornstein (2012), with the exception of one fundamentalist Christian who was very uncomfortable and judgmental and rejected Bornstein (p. 176), her manager and co-workers supported her transition. This episode from Bornstein’s life echoed mine at work. There was quiet talk from some workers who called my manager a freak, but the talk died down a few days after my manager returned in the “new” gender. Some of this calming down was because the manager was doing the same job the same way, and the transition became “old news.” Also, people liked the manager before the transition, and were rooting for the manager to be happy. The few people who were vocal and negative adjusted. Things calmed down. To me, this suggested that people often fear what they do not know. Actually working with, meeting, and reading about transgender people in their own words has radically shifted how I feel and think about transgender people, from abstract anxiety to concrete familiarity. I have real reference points now in my life, and
I just see people. The transgender aspect is only one part of them. Just as I am more than being “just” a woman, or a person of color, or a mother, or a worker, or a student, or an animal lover, or an immigrant, transmen and transwomen are more than their transgender status. It is only one aspect, and it is not all defining.

In the preface, Bornstein (2012) states she has two goals for writing this book: “reconciliation with my daughter’s life in Scientology, and coming to terms with the ghost of my dead father” (p. iii). These goals seem very genuine, and it is obvious throughout the book that her daughter and her father are very much on Bornstein’s mind. I think these goals also are relatable to most people. Although the reader never learns whether Bornstein (2012) achieves these two goals, there also seem to be other goals: Bornstein (2012) wants to earn money, gain some fame, and advocate for people who are “different.” Bornstein (2012) wants to urge the reader to “be yourself” and not lie about who you are, who you love, and what makes you happy. Bornstein (2012) writes truth to make sense of her life. Bornstein convinces most readers to read to the end. She convinces readers that she is not a freak who is totally unrelatable and apart from everyone, but is in fact just a person with preferences and desires and tastes and issues like everyone else, trying to be happy, loving her child, doing the best she can often with no or little support. I see the book as a success and found Bornstein (2012) to be honest, relatable and inspiring.

This book would be interesting and valuable to anyone who likes memoirs or biographies. It would also appeal to someone who has experienced eating disorders, gender identity issues, parental pressure to be a square peg in a round hole, societal pressure to be thin or look pretty or strong or powerful, or who has had physical, psychological, emotional or substance issues, who’s married, divorced, had kids, loved, been loved, or wanted to be. In short, I think this book is good for almost any adult to read. It might seem as though it is about a strange person, and in a way, it is, but it is also about all of us. We all just want to be happy, try to figure things out, try to survive, want to be close with family, friends and lovers, want acceptance, but also want to be who we really are without having to lie about it.

I came across an article reporting how at risk the transgender population is for murder (Hauser, 2018). As a woman, person of color, and immigrant, I relate to being at more risk for violence. It does not feel good, but it is real. It can be deadly real, at times. Within that context, lying suddenly does not look so much like dishonesty, but it begins to look like a survival technique.
Disclosure of gender identity and sexual preference can be very risky, not just domestically, but globally. As a woman of color with an accent that reveals me to be an immigrant, there are times when I feel that I have things a little harder than some other people (for example, a white male born in America) because of these aspects. I began to wonder: In order to make my life easier, if I could conceal that fact that I am a woman, a person of color, and an immigrant, would I? And if so, what does that say about “lying” to survive? How am I to judge someone for concealing information about themselves when I have never been in a position to know whether I might do the same, if I could? This book raised a number of issues I had never considered before.

One great thing the book does is lay out things I have struggled to understand in clear ways. What is gender identity? Gender identity is whether you feel like a man or a woman. It is not about anatomy. Bornstein (2012) was born physically male but felt female. From an early age, she grew up feeling as though she was a girl, wanting to be a girl. She then lived as a woman, had surgery to be a woman, came out as a lesbian, and now says she is not a man, not a woman, but something else. What is sexual preference? Sexual preference is, basically, who you are attracted to. Some people are attracted to men, some people to women, some people find both attractive, and some people do not find anyone attractive. Bornstein (2012) wanted to be a man, felt like a girl, found both women and men attractive, and in later life, realized that part of her attraction was identification. She wanted to be like the person as opposed to be with the person.

Except for the preface, when Bornstein (2012) identifies solely as female, 63, and a lesbian, the book tracks the life of a person who starts out being identified as a man and transitions into re-identifying as a woman. The reader tags along with Bornstein (2012) and understands what she went through on the road to becoming a woman.

In terms of style, this book is very matter of fact, down to earth, using everyday language. Every now and then Bornstein (2012) gets a bit dramatic, but it works because she is talking about dramatic events. For example, early in the book she talks about some fond memories of her daughter, Jessica, as a young girl. The memories continue as Bornstein (2012) then talks of putting Jessica on a plane to visit Bornstein’s wife, Molly, who’s living somewhere else for work, and then: “The Mexican divorce papers from Molly arrived on my desk two weeks later. I did not see Jessica again for another five years” (p. 124). Reading the quote, I felt
like someone punched me in the gut, like MY child had been stolen. It shocked me, came out of the blue, like it did for Bornstein (2012). That is good writing.

Working with a transgender person before and after surgery, having met several transgender people after that, having interviewed a trans person for a class project, and now, having read and reviewed this book, I am at a very different place with the transgender issue. Knowing actual people who have gone through this, understanding why they want to transition, and seeing it play out in real life has allowed me to look at my assumptions and unconscious beliefs and make what I think is a change for the better.

People are just people, they come in different flavors, and most people are just trying to get through the day, survive and be happy. To accomplish this, all through the book Bornstein (2012) urges readers to think for themselves, judge for themselves, verify other people’s claims, and to tell the truth to themselves and others about who they are, who they love, etc. I personally understood better why some people might “lie”—conceal, not disclose, or cover up—their gender identity or sexual preference. It is risky to disclose. There is often a price to pay, and, at times, that price is very high, and very unjust.

Near the end of the book, Bornstein (2012) urges her daughter and readers to “Do whatever it takes to make your life worth living” (p. 252). This quote summarizes not only Bornstein’s (2012) life, but also, her philosophy of living and her thesis. I think that her honest account of who she is, and how she came to figure out who she, is inspiring in a way that extends far beyond people who are wrestling with what it means to be transgender or what it is like to struggle with gender identity and transitioning. It is very relatable.

Following this paper is the cover of the book and a photograph of Bornstein herself.
References

BORNSTEIN, K. (2012). *A queer and pleasant danger: the true story of a nice Jewish boy who joins the Church of Scientology, and leaves twelve years later to become the lovely lady she is today.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.


The Other Side of Paradise by Staceyann Chin (2009)  
Relationship: Book Review

“I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.”
- Maya Angelou

The Other Side of Paradise is a memoir written by Staceyann Chin (2009) in which she portrays the true nature of being a woman of color. This coming of age memoir presents the attributes of black women who are at times devalued and negatively portrayed by Eurocentric critics. It is through her independent self-definition and her thoughts about racism and sexism that she is able to put an end to false Eurocentric assumptions. In Chin’s (2009) memoir, she explores the reality that women of color have strong personalities and powers through sisterhood and motherhood that are symbols of unity between black women. By using spirituality as an anodyne, she was able to achieve patience and inner strength, tested by a racist society.

Introduction

The Other Side of Paradise is a memoir written by Staceyann Chin (2009) in which she portrays the true nature of being a woman of color. This coming of age memoir presents the attributes of black women, who are at times devalued and negatively portrayed by Eurocentric critics. It is through her independent self-definition and her
thoughts about racism and sexism that she is able to put an end to false Eurocentric assumptions. In Chin’s (2009) memoir, she explores the reality that women of color have strong personalities and powers through sisterhood and motherhood that are symbols of unity between black women. By using spirituality as an anodyne, she was able to achieve patience and inner strength, tested in a racist society.

I decided to review *The Other Side of Paradise* by Staceyann Chin (2009) because it vividly illustrates the intersections that we as women face within a racist, misogynist, and patriarchal society. As someone who grew up in the patriarchal, homophobic country of Jamaica, and later on migrated to America, a country that has many of the same issues, I see how diverse populations suffer from these societal plagues. I selected this memoir for my review because of my own personal insights into the conditions that the memoir addresses. My objective is to bring awareness and understanding to others by letting them know it is all right to be different, even when it means acting in opposition to the values of the society in which one lives.

It was effective for me to review Chin’s (2009) memoir because I am Jamaican and grew up in a Christian household too. I understand clearly how socialization is the reason why we play roles that are assigned to us and make certain choices in our lives. By immigrating to the United States of America, I was able to make my dreams of furthering my education become a reality, though it proved more daunting than I imagined. Like Chin (2009), my mother left me in the care of my grandmother at an early age. I have always said that the person I have become today is through my grandmother’s influence and the way in which she raised me. Therefore, much credit is given to my grandmother for all the hard work, dedication, and knowledge she shared with me.

Chin (2009) was born in Jamaica, and her writing draws from lived experiences both from her past and present. In her memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise* (2009), she speaks about the experiences she had being from a mixed-race, Jamaican household. She uses words like “sexual deviant” and “unwanted child” that depict the treatment of marginalized bodies in Jamaica (Chin, 2009). The memoir describes her coming of age in Jamaica during the 1970s and 1980s where she lived as an abandoned child who was physically and sexually abused. In her memoir, she describes her struggle as a young woman to get an education. Her self-identification as a lesbian provoked much violence and
hostility (Chin, 2009). It became very difficult for Chin (2009) to separate her neglect and the trauma she experienced as a child when she reflected on the treatment she endured during her childhood years. The fact that she was an outspoken individual, a lesbian, and a biracial woman definitely compounded her challenges. Often times, Chin (2009) was chastised and beaten by her aunts and other family members, branded in Jamaica an unruly child. This reputation spilled over into adulthood when she dared to make the connection between corporal punishment and slavery (Chin, 2009). She went further in connecting these concepts to child abuse and rampant homophobic violence on the Jamaican island (Chin, 2009).

The Journey

Chin’s (2009) journey began at a very tender age when she and her half-brother were left in the care of their grandmother because their parents abandoned them. Immediately after Chin (2009) was born, her mother migrated to a different country. Her father, a Chinese businessman, denied the fact that he had any relationship with her mother. Chin’s (2009) grandmother was poor and could not support her, so she was sent to live with different family members who thought of her as a burden because there was not enough food to feed an extra mouth. Her living conditions were terrible because some of the homes she stayed in had no electricity or running water. Others living in Blood Lane, Montego Bay, Jamaica, had television, helpers, and the finer things that life had to offer (Chin, 2009). Chin (2009) often got into trouble because of her mouth, and when this happened, the adults would use the Bible for reinforcement. Chin’s (2009) aunt would say, “Stacy, the good book tells us in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (p. 7). I too was a culprit for voicing my opinion, giving my thoughts, and especially asking questions even when the family was not talking to me. I got into trouble many times with my grandmother, who would always say “speak when you are spoken to,” “shut your mouth,” and even ask the same question like Chin’s (2009) grandmother. For example, Chin’s (2009) grandmother would ask, “if her mouth set on a spring” (p. 37), meaning that her mouth is always going off (p. 37). According to American author, feminist, and social activist bell hooks (1989), “children were meant to be seen and not heard,” and this is a typical example of the issue hooks (1989) speaks about in her book Talking Back (p. 5).

Although Chin (2009) lived a difficult life, she was an intelligent child. This opened the path to her gaining entry into a prestigious high school, despite her
race and identity. The school’s population was diverse, so she was able to mingle with the rich kids regardless of the fact that she was poor (Chin, 2009).

Chin was viewed as a half-breed, which is what Jamaicans called someone who is mixed with the Chinese race. Her family members verbally abused her constantly, due to her lighter skin color. At times she was called worthless, which resulted in her being beaten as a form of punishment. Chin’s (2009) brother Delano was aware of the privileges he had over her, using his masculinity against her, which their grandmother allowed. Traditionally, in Jamaica, it is the norm for boys to have an education and girls to be raised to be housewives. Consequently, this made Chin (2009) more vulnerable to several attempts of sexual abuse, which she endured while living in Jamaica.

When I lived in Jamaica as a youth, I was in a similar situation as Chin (2009). I was subjected to more restrictions and control than my brothers. Boys could go outside and play and perform jobs that were considered a “man’s job.” My brother had more social experiences than I did; he was privileged just like Chin’s (2009) brother, Delano. Unlike my brother, I was expected to remain indoors performing work typical of a housemaid, which is what society deemed women’s work. My lack of outside adventurous experiences when growing up resulted in the majority of my time spent in the classroom and the home instead of playing outside with my friends. Despite the social restrictions I had, I excelled in elementary school and was also able to attend high school and college back in Jamaica.

The Coming Out

Throughout history, people have been stigmatized not only for their race and class, but also for their sexual identity. Our lives are not shaped by one lens, but through all elements of our identity. Inequalities force us to acknowledge this reality and thus bring to the forefront the importance of studying the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. As feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1989) and Kimberly Crenshaw (1997) make clear through their research, intersectionality incorporates both elements of personal identity and sources of social identity. The way in which an individual presents his or herself to other people is shaped by external forces and also life experiences. What we are raised to believe, and how we are raised, affects the way in which the self is presented, perceived, and how people perceive us. It is important to know that our backgrounds and beliefs cloud our perceptions; bear in mind that what is real is dependent on what is socially acceptable.
In Chin’s (2009) memoir, sexism, racism, religiosity, and classism played roles in the homophobic life she lived in Jamaica. It was a must for Chin (2009) to attend church and Bible study during the week because her grandmother was a religious woman. In centuries gone by, women of color found jubilee in the Bible. Religious knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. Chin (2009) was not the only person who was forced to attend church; I was in that similar situation until I reached my twenties and then said, “No more!”

It was later in Chin’s (2009) life that she discovered and came to terms with her sexual orientation. This did not sit well with her family members and friends. Chin (2009) endured beatings, humiliation, and verses from the Bible quoted to her in an attempt to not only control her sexual identity, but her way of life. Her family wanted her to live her life as a straight woman. Regardless of how her grandmother and brother tried to control her sexual identity by showing her love, they both began to gradually fade from her life due to economic conditions such as poverty.

Not only did her father abandon her, but her brother did as well. The men she encountered throughout her life were not better. These men either suffered from drunkenness or were sick or mentally ill, which resulted in estranged relationships. At some point in her life, her biological father paid for her school fees and assisted her with college admissions. Regardless, he treated her like a nobody and never did conceptualize her as his blood. He was constantly absent from her life, and this affected her in a negative way. At one point, she thought that her brother’s father was a blessing in disguise, but she was wrong. He also helped her financially, but it became clear that her brother’s father had a motive. His assistance came with a price. She was forced to have sexual relations with him (Chin, 2009). To Chin (2009), all the men in her life failed her. Even the preacher, who was supposed to help people in need, took advantage of her sexually.

Midway into Chin’s (2009) memoir, she opens up about her sexuality, which did not fit into the heteronormativity of her society. This was not the only way in which she deviated from the cultural norm; she was light-skinned and had a looser hair texture, which made her the subject of envy and lust. Chin (2009) faced many challenges in the course of navigating society with her nonconforming sexual identity and physical appearance; violence was one of those challenges.

The societal attitudes that made her sexual identity and physical appearance significant could be said to be the product of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy, which normalize ways
of being that are quite different from Chin’s (2009) life. Her sexuality is inseparable from the social context in which she exists. Sexuality is in a backdrop of socializing and social cultural factors. For example, how men and women of today are either categorized as masculine or feminine is based on society. Historically, we have witnessed the regulations of sexual orientation through formal societal controls enforced through law and judicial mechanisms, such as the illegality of homosexual marriage in many countries.

It is very difficult for Chin (2009) to own her true identity as a lesbian living in the heteropatriarchal, homophobic country of Jamaica where there is no tolerance for the LGBTQ community. As a Jamaican, I know first-hand the treatment Chin (2009) endured as an individual who stepped outside the norm of the binary gender system. According to an article in The New York Times, “On Being Queer in the Caribbean,” written by Gabrielle Bellot (2015), this hatred is rooted in the legacy of the colonial laws of the British Caribbean, which criminalized sodomy and reinforced the powerful influence of anti-gay evangelists. The culture in Jamaica is very different from that of the United States, which is more open and accepting to people who choose a different identity from what they were assigned at birth. Yet, as someone who has lived in both countries, I am aware that intolerance is also rampant in America, even though it may be in a different form. In Jamaica, people are scared to openly live their sexual truth because of the violence they will face from their countrymen. However, I will admit that cultural norms and practices have always shaped the way in which the LGBTQ community is perceived.

I use the word “homophobic” to describe Jamaica because the word covers a wide range of different viewpoints and attitudes which are conveyed through violence and discrimination. In the article, “Sexuality in the Caribbean,” Barry Chevannes (2003) states that “homophobia is particularly intense in the Anglophone Caribbean, with Jamaica perhaps heading the ranking” (p. 75). Although racism is something that Jamaica and the United States both share, this modern-day racism faced by Chin (2009), myself, and others bears similar consequences to that of the hate crimes experienced in the past. Regardless of how bad Chin’s (2009) life was, she found the strength to use her talent in a progressive way and was able to prove the naysayers wrong. Her struggles were real, yet she rose above it all and found peace, peace within herself and her identity.

Conclusion
My own experiences observing the discrimination and intolerance in Jamaica do not stem from my own identity; however, my experience affirms the truth of the story that Chin (2009) tells in her memoir about the challenges of navigating an intolerant society. Chin's (2009) memoir effectively portrays the range of issues that Jamaicans have faced both past and present, and she tells a remarkable tale of maintaining a radical and nonconformist identity in the face of oppression. Readers who themselves wish to stand up against injustice in society will do well to read this memoir and will perhaps draw informative lessons from Chin's (2009) struggle to adapt and ultimately assert her own choice. Her memoir might have benefited from taking more of an approach to informing Jamaicans and other oppressed communities about the changes in perception of sexuality and gender that have occurred throughout the rest of the world. My reason for saying this is that society's views, research, and perception from centuries ago are based on rich older white men who did not include intersectionality and the transition from binary to non-binary identities. Not to forget that the Combahee River Collective (1977) is a statement written by women of color who identify as lesbian and use their platform to critique issues about the intersection of sexual oppression, racism, and heterosexism. However, Chin's (2009) memoir is still a powerful expression of herself and her defiance of societal norms. Having gone on a similar journey of self-discovery and migration as she has, I feel confident in recommending this memoir as a substantial feminist, anti-patriarchal text.

References


In 2006, activist Tarana Burke, pictured here, founded the Me Too. Movement to help survivors of sexual abuse, assault, exploitation, and harassment, particularly young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing. Using the idea of “empowerment through empathy,” Burke created the Me Too. Movement to ensure survivors from all walks of life know that they are not alone in their journey. Regarding the 2017 #MeToo hashtag, Burke has said, “It creates hope. It creates inspiration.” But Burke also said, “It will take more than a hashtag, however meaningful it has become, to do the real work that is needed now.” https://metoomvmt.org/