THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL CONTACT IN EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS
Writer's Note

I started talking to people online in the winter of my freshman year. I was fourteen and felt stuck in the Midwest, where there is not really anything for teenagers to do. I grew up (and still am growing up) in a culture that is anti-youth and feels oppressive to me. This culture is full of fear for teenagers and drives a huge wedge between adolescence and maturity, making it difficult to experience life openly and honestly. I was frustrated with my friendships and the lack of diversity in my surroundings, and turned to meeting new people online. I discovered an entirely new culture on the Internet that I had constant access to and could keep private from my family and peers. Knowing that what I communicated online would not be passed on to people I see everyday brought me peace and allowed for this to be a creative and personal outlet. I was able to meet people who felt exactly like I did and who helped me discover what I could not have with only offline resources. There is a stigma against those who seek friendship or romance or any kind of self discovery online rather than IRL (In Real Life), but that stigma feels conservative and dated. It is rooted in fear of predators and pity for those involved, but is rarely analyzed in a very serious or unbiased manner. I have personally wanted to explore some of the psychology of online relationships for a long time, and more specifically what makes them different than the ones we make organically (by this I mean offline, in person, etc.).

How are our emotional relationships shaped by physical interaction? What happens when the option for physical interaction is completely eradicated from a relationship? To explore these, I looked at my online conversations with people whom I have never met in person. I read pages and pages of what felt like interactive diary entries, or a catalog of anecdotes that ranged from mundane to deeply personal. Most of the things I share with these people I do not tell some of my closest friends, or at least I take much longer to. It is more difficult to tell deeply personal things to people I see everyday because they can potentially pass it on. Me and whoever I am talking to do not have mutual friends, or overlapping lives at all, so the conversations are often centered on ourselves. I have discovered much more about myself just by introducing myself over and over to strangers I have met online than I have through my organic friendships, because they fall into a cycle of updates about mutual friends and parts of our lives. I found that most of my conversations were rooted in loneliness or curiosity. Most conversations seemed to be asking or answering these five questions:

Do you ever ____?
Do you feel ____?
What do you do when ____?
What should I do?
Do you ____?

The basis of so many of my online friendships seemed to be a mutual struggle for self discovery and reassurance, and that is reflected in these questions. These are people who are instantly accessible and almost anonymous because they do not have the power to change how my peers perceive me, because they do not know them. By having friendships like this, I am able to be an unfiltered version of myself. In this sense, my online friends are synonymous with my out of school friends (or even my friends at Oxbow). It could be that the demographic of people I talk to are insecure, but I believe that having these types of friendships allows a person to seek validation more confidently than they would in normal friendships.

On one hand, I have a much deeper level of understanding of these friends' personalities and habits because I am exposed to a more intimate and personal part of their thinking process. On the other hand, I am aware of about 5% of their daily lives. I can not observe them around other people, I often can not experience their physical reaction to our conversations, I can not hug them, kiss them, touch them. How does this impact what relationship we have? What really is the role of physical interaction in platonic relationships? Through research and introspection, I came to the conclusion that physical touch is extremely important to shaping not only our emotional response to a person, but can shape our personality altogether. However, despite the vitality of physical interaction in any relationship, platonic or romantic, we are afraid to be completely honest about anything personal. The idea of being vulnerable, both physically *and* emotionally, is scary and threatening, and is what draws humans to online interaction.

This type of vulnerability is not only reflected in our online interactions, but also is present in the characteristics of pregnant women and new mothers. Postpartum Depression is a form of depression that sometimes affects a new mother following the birth of her child. During childbirth, the mother is simultaneously losing part of herself and receiving something long

anticipated, and the psychological effects can be massive. Although a woman's likelihood to be stricken with postpartum depression seems somewhat random, statistics show that in 60% of hospital deliveries, the mother will suffer from PPD, while it only affects 16% of home deliveries. It is theorized that because the home is typically considered a safe place for the mother, the chances of suffering PPD is decreased. Supporting this is the fact that spontaneous deliveries spike between 3-4am, a time where the mother is likely in a deep sleep and feels safe and sheltered. Other studies prove that even the first hours following birth is vital to the mother's bond with her child, for example, mothers who are separated immediately are more likely to stop breastfeeding (Macfarlane, 1977). Touch is an extremely important facet of how a child-parent relationship forms. We associate memories with feelings, and if the parent-child relationship does not involve touch, the relationship is often negative, giving touch negative connotation.

Physical contact helps a child establish a connection with their primary caretaker. When the physical relationship is removed, children often experience higher levels of certain hormones linked with stress (Gunnar, 2001), and lower levels of hormones linked with familial recognition (Biello, 2005). Not only does the parent-child relationship alleviate stress for the child, it also is something that has to be taught. Aberrant parent-child relationships leave the child without a clear picture of normal relationships, leading to "perverse social and emotional difficulties," and causing them to often seek comfort in strangers (Biello, 2005). A study following Romanian orphans noted that those adopted at or sooner than four months in an orphanage had healthier hormonal levels, compared to those who spent more than eight months (Gunnar, 2001). A relationship between time spent in a familial setting and hormonal levels is proven here, and the implications of imbalanced hormones over a prolonged amount of time can have an effect on the child's personality and ability to establish close bonds with others.

As well as being important between the child and parent, an individual's relationship with their parent (or guardian) is a vital component to how they form relationships with others later in life. As Althea J. Horner states, "The unique quality of an individual's inner world of self and object derives from his or her early experience vis-á-vis the primary caretaker, usually the mother," (8). Her theory is that because our first relationship is with our primary caretaker, the quality of it will have an effect on how we develop relationships with others throughout our entire lives (Horner, 1995). These intrapsychic processes are inherited and never completely lost or suppressed. An infant's first relationship, typically with the mother, serves as precedent for every other relationship they will experience throughout their life.

Every person begins to be impacted and formed the second they are born. There is no delay between birth and when an individual begins forming their personality. In fact, this begins at conception, when certain genetic traits are inherited. Genetics do not establish an individual's entire future and personality, but they set a precedent. Nature versus nurture studies have found that genetics do have a definite impact on how an individual lives their life in certain areas, where nurture plays a role in others. To study this, identical twins' life patterns have been observed and compared. Identical twins are assumed to have more common traits not only due to their identical genes, but also due to the fact that identical twins are treated more similarly than fraternal twins by their parents (Guo, 2005). Parent-child relationships effect the traits of the child.

Environment is also key in the development of a child. Dr. Stanley Greenspan, of George Washington University Medical School, recognizes six levels in the development of human consciousness. The very first of these developmental levels involves the infant's first sensory experiences and their journey to creating patterns from them. After completing this first level, the

infant learns how to react to what happens around them. This second level relies on the knowledge gained in the first level, therefore the quality of the infant's sensory experiences then affects its interactions with others. An infant's prolonged exposure to even a certain smell can hypothetically have a domino effect on its entire development, even if only in microscopic ways. *A General Theory of Love* summarizes this translation of memory into personality, "As subtle changes accrue, experience rewires the microscopic structure of the brain- transforming us from who we *were* into who we *are*," (Lewis, 128). As children take in sensory experiences for the first time, their brains are putting together a puzzle that will allow them to function by talking, walking, communicating, etc. These initial experiences are all pieces of that puzzle and have an effect (which can be large or small) on what the picture shows at the end. The associations that are made with our senses play a lasting role in how the individual will interact with those senses later on in life, because the first experience informs the rest.

Sexuality is the most obvious example of how physical and emotional facets to a relationship work hand in hand. Laura Carpenter, of Johns Hopkins University, refers to the loss of virginity as "a central event in the process through which girls and boys become adult women and men," (Carpenter, 2002), meaning that the introduction of sexuality into an individual's life alters the way they view physical relationships. For some, sex and intimacy are intertwined, while others treat them as separate things that sometimes work together. Some use sex purely for pleasure, while others view it as an outlet to express their feelings for their partner. This is a hugely personal part of anyone's personality, but even more so for women. Conservative and traditional views on sexual independence tend to support a double standard for women. Modern Western history has done little to break free of its culture of shaming women's sexuality and accepting the sexual independence of men under the guise of men's and women's natural tendencies and obligations. Women are less likely than men to have a positive experience losing their virginity, according to a survey conducted across four university campuses. The survey also found that those who were in a committed relationship had more positive experiences than those who were not, and women felt less guilt was linked to a greater "psychological satisfaction," (Higgins, 2010). Sex is already a controversial and emotional topic, but becomes more so when applied to minors. The confusing messages from media, politics and peers is especially pertinent to teenage girls. Adolescence is a time of self discovery and being a teenager is largely about everything happening for the first time.

When sexuality is introduced either later in life, or earlier (than average), it has the great potential to negatively impact the individual's sexual behaviors. The same negative result was found with people who lost their virginity at a later age with those who lost it at a younger age. These results included difficulty becoming aroused for those who lost it later, and a higher chance of contracting an STI, have sex under the influence, and to have risky sexual partners (Childs, 2007). There is a vague window of time that is unique to every individual where losing one's virginity is least likely to result with negative effects. Oftentimes, those who wait longer to engage in intercourse are individuals who already have sexual issues or insecurities, which are not eradicated by this experience. On the same note, those who engage earlier are often seeking validation for their insecurities, which can stem from a number of issues.

When the first experience of sexuality is a negative one (i.e. sexual abuse), the effects are often devastating, not only on the victim's sexual life, but their personal one as well. Child sexual abuse (CSA) has also been credited to the reason as to why depression is twice as common in women as in men, because a staggering 12 females have been estimated to experience CSA for every male that does (Weiss, 1999). Sexual trauma, especially early on in

life, leads to issues with "anxiety, anger, depression, revictimization, self-mutilation, sexual problems, substance abuse, suicidality, impairment of self-concept, interpersonal problems, obsessions and compulsions, dissociation, posttraumatic stress responses, and somatization," according to a review of 38 studies focused on adult women's psychological issues as a result of CSA (Neumann, 1996). A study that compared neuropsychological and cognitive function in college women who were CSA victims and who were not found that the CSA victims had "a constellation of neuropsychological deficiencies," despite their health (Navalta, 2006). Child sexual abuse is considered hugely traumatic by most, because it taints the victims' image of healthy sexuality before they have had the ability to experience it.

  Physical touch and interaction play central roles in psychological development from birth, to adolescence, to adulthood. The quality of our experiences with physical touch impacts the developments that we make and how we make our decisions, effectively playing a large role in our life stories. Even in subtle ways, every physical interaction shapes our personalities and behaviors. Novel and new experiences are often the most transformative because they bring new associations to old memories and expand your perspective by learning new information, however abstract it may present itself. Minor experiences can alter our entire understanding of something, while what we expect to be major experiences can have no noticeable effect at all. Consciousness of what we consume is vitally important when considering the kind of person we want to be. When you do not ingest valuable or inspiring materials, the chances of you inspiring someone else, or even yourself, are slim when compared to those who actively seek new information. Our emotional and physical selves are not one and the same, but they build off of each other a great amount. Sometimes separating them is transformative in analyzing yourself and your values. This is why having an online relationship with no physical interaction is different from a relationship in which physical and emotional selves are intertwined. It is not a negative difference, but without the physical facet, a strictly emotional relationship can not develop.

References

Aboujaoude, Elias. (2011). Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of an E-Personality. New York: Norton.

Biello, David. (2005). Orphaned Babies Show Hormone Disruption Years after Adoption. *Scientific American.*

Carpenter, Laura. (2002). Gender and the Meaning and Experience of Virginity Loss in the Contemporary United States. *Gender and Society,* 16(3): 345-365.

Childs, David. (2007). Losing Virginity Later Linked to Sexual Problems. ABC News.

The Digital Love Industry (Video file). Retrieved from https://youtu.be/FBRSR_LGlOE

Ehrenreich, B., Hess, E., Jacobs, G. (1986). Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex. New York: Doubleday.

Higgins, J.A., Trussell, J., Moore, N.B., Davidson, J.K. (2010). Virginity Lost, Satisfaction Gained?: Physiological and Psychological Sexual Satisfaction at Heterosexual Debut. *Journal of Sex Research*, 47(4): 384-394. doi: 10.1080/00224491003774792

Horner, Althea J. (1991). Psychoanalytic Object Relations Therapy. London: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Gunnar, M.R., Morison, S.J., Chisholm, K., Schuder, M. (2001). Salivary cortisol levels in children adopted from Romanian orphanages [Abstract]. *Dev Psychopathol,* 13(3): 611-28.

Guo, Guang. 2005. Twin Studies: How Much Can They Tell Us about Nature and Nurture? *Contexts,* 4(3): 43-47.

Lewis, T., Amini, F., Lannon, R. (2000). A General Theory of Love. New York: Vintage.

Macfarlane, Aidan. (1977). The Psychology of Childbirth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Navalta, C.P., Polcari, A., Webster, D.M., Boghossian, A., Teicher, M.H. (2006). Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Neuropsychological and Cognitive Function in College Women [Abstract]. *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry*, 18(1): 45-53.

Neumann, D.A., Houskamp, B.M., Pollock, V.E., Briere, J. (1996). The Long-Term Sequelae of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Women: A Meta-Analytic Review [Abstract]. *Child Maltreat,* 1(1): 6-16. doi: 10.1177/1077559596001001002

Orenstein, Peggy. (1994). Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap. New York: Doubleday.

Rifkin, Jeremy. (2009). The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis. New York: Penguin Group.

Roleff, Tamara L. (Ed.). (2001). Teenage Sexuality: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego: Greenhaven Press.

Weiss, E.L., Longhurst, J.G., Mazure, C.M. (1999). Childhood Sexual Abuse as a Risk Factor for Depression in Women: Psychosocial and Neurobiological Correlates. *The American Journal of Psychiatry,* 156(6): 816-828. http://dx.doi.org/10.1176/ajp.156.6.816