

This paper will address how family structure and boundaries affect sexual intimacy. Meeting new people with childhoods different than mine and my sisters', I have noticed a difference in the way we communicate about sex, even casually. While we were all raised in the same societies, (the internet and the USA), I noticed that in our smaller communities and families, everything is different. I believe that the way society has shaped us affects more of our "outside" views on sexuality, how we feel about gender and sexual orientation, how we interact casually around sex, joking and commenting, and even an ability to talk about it. However, I notice more of a difference when it becomes more vulnerable and intimate, how individuals talk about their feelings around sex, how they can explain their childhoods, how they can describe anatomy, even how much they even want to talk about sex. So, I have become more and more interested in the ways our childhoods affect sexual relations, where personal, emotional, and spatial boundaries live in our familial relationships how they are established, and the ways in which we connect with ourselves and others in a world that shames sexual desire.

Human sexuality is and has always been an enormous subject in society, whether spoken or unspoken. As the taboo has been slowly peeled away generation after generation, the identities of Generation Z are being defined in many ways by gender and sexuality. Watching the development of my own sexuality and hearing about the development of my peers, I noticed a great divide, which raised the question in me, how does childhood affect sexuality? As a teenager raised in a sex-positive family, I find that my experience is rarely relatable and the way I conduct myself around sex is very telling of that. I find myself viewing sex as a healthy form of connection to myself, to my partner, and to a higher natural spirit or God, instead of something to be ashamed or afraid of. I focused on the effects of both sexual education and trauma, but also found early studies of this subject by Sigmund Freud and Jaques Lacan interesting.

Sigmund Freud writes about alienation in his essay *Infantile Sexuality* (1905) by saying, “The sexual researches of these early years of childhood are always carried out in solitude. They constitute a first step towards taking an independent attitude in the world and imply a high degree of alienation of the child from the people in his environment who formerly enjoyed his confidence.” (Freud) As Freud does not mention it, focusing only on the singular human subject, I wonder how he thinks that a pair (or more) of human subjects can form intimacy, specifically sexual intimacy, in the face of this alienation. Juliet Mitchell writes on Jaques Lacan’s views in the introduction of *Feminine Sexuality* (1975) saying, “Desire itself and with it, sexual desire, can only exist by virtue of its alienation.” (Lacan) She also explains that in Lacan's view, alienation and initial denial cause sexual drive to heighten. She gives the example of an infant not realizing that they need milk until the absence of their mother, in which instance, they feel a strong attachment and desire to and for the milk. In the specific instance of sex acts, edging seems to play on this emotion or instinct by giving something and taking it away, causing the recipient’s desire to grow stronger and stronger. In Freud and Lacan’s views, it is, in fact, the instance of separation and initial denial that causes such a strong desire in the human subject.

Mitchell speaks of sexual taboos on behalf of Lacan by saying, “The implication is that a truly permissive society would not forbid what is now sexually taboo and it would thus liberate men and women from the sense that they are alienated from their own sexuality.” But this is not said lightly, as Lacan believes alienation is a main sexual drive. I believe he is saying that without the form of alienation that sexual taboos cause, we will have little to no sex drive. Based on these claims, if a child is educated with a negative or taboo view of sex and their desires are repressed, their libido will be higher. Is that the case according to more modern studies?

Disproving both Lacan’s point and the points of many abstinence-only advocates, in 2007, a nine year, congressionally mandated study concluded that students were equally likely to choose to have sex as they grew as teenagers and entered adulthood. Lacan believed that the more taboo sex was, the more teenagers would desire it and therefore have it, which proved not to be the case. Many abstinence-only advocates believe the opposite, that teenagers will not have sex because they are taught not to. In reality, it appears teenagers will have similar amounts of sex, no matter what they were taught. This study had followed many students around the US, some who had been taught abstinence only until marriage, and some who had been taught comprehensive medically correct sex education. Along with its findings on sexual activity, the study also found that teenagers with comprehensive sexual education had less teen pregnancy and STD/STIs, even after race, socioeconomic status, etc. were accounted for. (Abstinence Education Programs) (John)

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (Abstinence Education Programs), only twenty-four (and Washington D.C.) out of fifty states require sexual education is taught in schools. Out of that twenty-four, only thirteen require that it be medically accurate. In thirty-seven states, if sex ed is taught, abstinence-only until marriage must be at least mentioned as an option. In twenty-six states it legally must be stressed.

I was never really taught sex-ed in school. My sexual education came from a book my parents gave me when I was ten called *Its Perfectly Normal*, a queer sex-ed YouTuber named Stevie Boebi, porn, my peers and my sisters. When sex-ed was taught in my public elementary school it was separated by gender and taught by somebody hired from outside the school. I arrived late, having just come from the doctors office, and when I knocked on the door, my prepubescent face and short hair wasn't seen as someone that could join the female classmates I was usually associated with. In fifth grade, I saw myself as a female; I could not fathom thinking of myself as enough of a boy to try and join their class. I had no idea what to do so I sat in the hallway until the class got out. In the sixth grade, I went to a Catholic school and wasn't taught anything. In seventh and eighth grade, I went to a Waldorf school. Our sex-ed consisted of sitting in a circle and putting our hand into the middle if we had done something like starting a period or having a first kiss. It was similar to the game, "Never Have I Ever" but it was initiated by a thirty year old hippie woman. My recorder teacher stood in the back of the room and quietly watched our nervous hands shrink in and out of the circle. We drank menstrual tea and ate raspberries. We had one more class after that but when we separated into gender and went into different classrooms, I sat in the hallway and watched Netflix on my laptop. After that, I was never taught sex ed in any classes. But, around the eighth grade, my YouTube algorithm recommended that I watch a video by Stevie Boebi who ended up teaching me the majority of my sexual education through a screen.

As the internet becomes ingrained in the way children take in information, their ability to get proper, and very improper, sex education is expanding. I got most of my own sexual education from the internet, from YouTube to porn to simply googling my questions and reading whatever I could find for answers. Because of this, my sexual education was very broad and I was never sure what I should trust as fact.

YouTube has become a University of its own as anyone anywhere can upload videos about what they know. Many queer Millennials are uploading videos to educate teenagers and sometimes even children about things they would've liked to know as younger people. In my opinion, some of it goes too far, for example, *Queer Kid Stuff*, a YouTube channel marketed towards very young children, often as young as four or five years old, explaining queer and transgender identities along with consent, pride, and privilege. There are other YouTube Influencers like Ash Hardell, Stevie Beobi, and more who talk about their queer identities and how they relate to sex. Obviously, in this, there is a lot of drama and controversy in this community but sometimes this has to be the best option as other forms of "sexual education" on the internet (i.e. porn) are riddled with false expectations and information.

I don't think that it is appropriate to learn about sex through porn, it isn't a real representation of sex or even humans, and gives very false expectations to teenagers who have no idea what sex is. The impacts of porn have changed since it has become widely accessible, an entire world of kinks, preferences, and extremes are at the fingertips of anyone with working internet and a smartphone or computer. Hearing older generations talk about their first times as

awkward, bumbling encounters and then hearing my own generation explain their first times, I realize that with videographic pornography, we know much better what to do with ourselves. Not only where to put what but also how to look, arch our backs and moan, how to grunt and use force, how to knit our eyebrows together and widen our eyes. For many, the first time is no longer an awkward exchange, it is now a separate performance, until they feel comfortable enough to let down the facade. In HBO's *Euphoria*, Maddy Perez, played by Alexa Demie, watches and analyzes porn for tips and tricks on how to act, how to be the perfect sexual partner. (Levinson) According to Emily F. Rothman, ScD, in her TedMed talk, "*How porn changes the way we think about sex*", by age 18, 93% of male college freshmen and 62% of female college freshmen have seen porn at least once in their life. (Rothman) Rothman is a public health researcher at Boston University looking into dating violence. She has found a way to teach respect and consent to teenagers through the lens of pornography. Rothman discusses the pros and cons of pornographic culture, the overt sexuality in our day to day media consumption and the way that pornography perpetuates violence, racism, and misogyny while it also empowers and normalizes desire. Porn is by no means a good form of sexual education but in many ways, it is the only place to get answers.

Sexual intimacy can be greatly affected by trauma, both sexual and non sexual. It is more heavily researched around sexual traumas, especially around postcoital dysphoria, a form of PTSD that affects how childhood sexual abuse survivors feel after sex or sexual acts. The symptoms of this can include depression, anxiety, crying, melancholy, or feelings of emptiness. According to a 2015 study by the journal, *Sexual Medicine*, 46% of women have reported to feel this at least once in their life. According to Stefani Threadgil, a sex therapist based in Texas, "Postcoital dysphoria is more common among sexual assault survivors, because memories of trauma are stored in the parts of the brain associated with survival — the amygdala and the hypothalamus — that can be triggered during a sexual experience." Postcoital dysphoria is often brought on or triggered by PTSD flashbacks that happen during sex. (Rodriguez)

One of the main and most common symptoms of postcoital dysphoria is dissociation, a condition described by Mayo Clinic as "Disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions, and identity." (Dissociative) Its symptoms include feeling detached from yourself or reality, memory loss, a distorted perception of surroundings, a blurred sense of self, and an inability to cope with personal and professional issues. In relation to postcoital dysphoria it is often that feeling of a curtain being up between a person and themselves, their partner, or their surroundings. (Ringler)

Sex is also an antidepressant and can be used on the other side of the spectrum to cope with depression, anxiety, and dissociation. Beyoncé Knowles-Carter describes using sex as a coping mechanism in her film, *Lemonade*, "Grief, sedated by orgasm. Orgasm, heightened by grief." (Knowles) As a natural stimulant with the ability to prove intimacy as a possibility and cause momentary euphoria, sex often helps people with mental illnesses to find a very real sense of hope and life, even if just for a second. Also, as a form of exercise, sex releases dopamine and many endorphins which cause the brain to experience a high similar to those experienced through the use of substances like opiates, alcohol, nicotine, cocaine and more. (Gardner) (Vann)

In summary, sexuality can be pushed and pulled and changed throughout our childhoods and teenage years, mainly by the effects of trauma and the ways that we are educated. Sexuality is part of the human subjects' worldview and as one person passes their sexuality on through education, experience, or emotion, it influences the next in an intergenerational, never-ending

pattern. Sexuality has the power to lift us up and in that same way, pull us down. We are connected when we can reach past alienation into intimacy.

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