

## Thesis Practice – The Roots of Current Gender Dynamics: Are We Missing Something?

It started with a google search. A girl newly enamored with the idea of education was stemming rolling through books on anthropology. Amazed by what she was reading, she knew she had found the language that she would describe the world through. She shared daily with people, anyone who would listen about what she was learning. She, all at the same time had the desire to share her knowledge and also observe her study in action. A bartender is a perfect job for observation.

Bartending requires a constant attention to detail while simultaneously providing a laid back, fun atmosphere. After weeks of updating the regulars at my bar on concepts of relativity, ethnocentrism, gender issues, and introspection (my bosses loved my ability to small talk), to my surprise I found people interested in what I was saying. People were picking up conversations with me that we had left from the prior shift I had worked. We were not arguing but in the words of one guest, “having a purposeful conversation and it was refreshing”.

This is not to say anything I was saying was groundbreaking. I more so highlight the statement above due to my own surprise of people’s engagement and desire to discuss topics of my study. As a bartender near a college I commonly received questions leading to the dance of “yeah, I’m a student at Michigan State” and at some point, stating what my major and minor are. That should have been an ethnographic study right there thinking about it now...typical. Anyways in even mentioning the study of anthropology followed by women and gendered studies is enough to turn a dinner party into... and that’s why we do not speak to cousin Sam anymore. So, I was delighted when the people who I now consider friends and owe a great deal

to, agreed to spend time donate time and speak on topics that are typically considered private matters to allow me to grow in my own area of curiosity.

At a certain point, I had begun to take note of the specific topics with individuals who I would speak regularly with and where their focus seemed to center. \*Dennis was the first person who was able to fire questions back at me during conversation and provoke hesitancy in my answers. I felt he was in a way testing me from day one. I appreciated the challenge and looked forward to our conversations. He was after a while building up to something. His questions became more focused. We spoke a lot about introspection and the importance of understanding what internally motivates and makes you as a person, verses giving the control of agency to societal influence. We agreed things can happen to someone but the real value is in observing your own reactions to an action.

Dennis and I were speaking one afternoon after I had finished my shift at the brewery. We were sitting at the bar with our mugs casually drinking our beers. Dennis's question which would ignite a connection to a curiosity within my own ponderings aligned perfectly. I was about to start a new semester at MSU where one of my classes required us to design as anthropologists a study of our own choosing and to record an ethnography as the final product. As a father, Dennis was looking for support. Him and his wife \*Rachael are parents to a 14-year-old daughter. Her name was \*Kayla and she was at a time in her life described by society as *adolescents*. This is tricky time during a human's developmental process. If considered in the legal sense, adolescents are in between child and adult status but not strictly confined to their own category. They reside in a grey area, often mixing child limitations with adult expectations.

While I thought about what my professors were teaching me on past histories of gender disparity and early to current anthropological theory, I began to wonder about the differences of

male and females. It is true we share many more similarities than I believe we are lead to understand but I could not look past the biological difference between the male and female sex. Dennis had asked me to my surprise during our conversation that day after my shift if I would be interested in spending time with Kayla.

D: “she is an amazing girl, and she grows the most when she I being challenged or guided by people she can respect... you have a gifted mind and really clear perspective and both my wife and I love the idea of her spending time with a college age woman who intentional seeks self-identity.”

Dennis and Rachael invited me over for a Friday night dinner. I pulled up to a white house the first thing I noticed was a black spiral staircase attached to the side of the house as I passed to pull into the driveway. The houses were greatly spaced out neighbor to neighbor, a farmhouse was not far off from their property however. I could see Rachael Kayla’s mother from inside; she was in the kitchen walking from counter to sink then stove. While I was approaching the door, I saw two younger children who were sitting at a small table off to the side with crayons and multiple coloring book. Rachael greeted me at the door saying said hi, hugged me and welcomed me in. Dennis shortly came into the kitchen minutes after I arrived and also hugged me and asked me how I had been. I handed Dennis the beer I brought him for his cellar and he asked me what beer I would like to drink which I responded unless it’s an anthropology question I had no ability to answer at the moment and told him he would have to pick. There were two younger girls playing in the family room who showed little interest in having a new person in the house and continued to go about their playful activities running around from one

spot to the next. Rachael, Dennis and I stayed in the kitchen and spoke about my schooling and new plans for my degree.

I looked around and realized I hadn't seen Kayla yet and wondered where she would be. I felt nervous and felt awkward about it. As I looked around I could tell their house was decorated with attention to detail, lots of wood, slate and metal accents. Rachael continued to prepare food, while we went back and forth over my new venture into a women study minor and some of the reactions I had already received. We spoke about what we thought the definition of intelligence really was. At this point the little girls who had been playing in the family room came running in and Tori who is Rachael and Dennis' 6-year-old was playing with a few sets of sunglasses.

Rachael began plating food at the table for the children and everyone (both the two children with I saw upon walking in, Tori and her friend, Rachael, Dennis and I) went to the table and that is when Kayla appeared. We all took our seats and I was sitting in between Dennis and Kayla. Dennis introduced us officially after we sat down. Kayla hesitantly said "hi" while we began to have dinner. Dennis and I were the dominant players in the conversation that night. Rachael would occasionally add her opinion when familiar but also made the point to mention to me that she was raised in a "very conservative Christian" household. Rachael is 1 of 11 children and the two children who were coloring had down syndrome children and actually her siblings. Tori's friend also happened to be her adopted cousin who is also a sibling of Rachael.

I began asking questions in a quieter tone so Kayla knew they were directed at her, Dennis was conversing with Tori at this point during dinner, who is a very active little girl. Tori exclaimed that she is going to be a bat for Halloween and Dennis is going to be a mosquito because bats eat mosquitos by using echolocation Tori proudly announced to the table. I asked

Kayla what she wanted to be and she said a bat just like Tori. I noticed Dennis then asking Tori why she was saying she didn't know an answer to a question

D: "you know the answer why aren't you saying it?"

Dennis felt that she knew and when he asked her why she wasn't saying it, she answered by looking at me and saying she wasn't answering because there was a new person in the room and she looked down with a slightly quieter tone of voice this time.

I continued to make conversation with Kayla. I asked her what in school she liked. She said math wasn't her favorite and I told her I used to cry over math homework, Dennis laughed and Kayla laughed as well, she said she felt the same way about it. She likes science class however. I asked her what kind of math or science she was doing and she responded with "I don't know" I later rephrased and asked "what topics are you going over" and she then stated that her science class was dealing with pressures and altitude at the moment. I asked Kayla about hot yoga and that Dennis said that she was interested in trying it out! She answered back "yeah" with a smile and slightly agreeing with the nod of her head. Tori at this point was in and out of her chair, playing with different sunglasses. Kayla got up to take her plate into the kitchen and Dennis whispered to me it was interesting seeing his daughter who is usually a chatterbox so quiet around me, he said it was interesting to see someone engaging her and how she was reacting. He explained she was normally a chatterbox!

We cleaned up the dinner table, the girl with down syndrome playfully lifted her plate to Dennis who playfully responded with, you're not a guest you bring your plate into this kitchen, she smiled with a small giggle. The two younger girls went outside to zip line in the backyard while Kayla Rachael Dennis and I went to the upstairs deck and sat by a fire. Dennis and Kayla

had already gone up stairs while Rachael finished cleaning the table off, I thanked Rachael for the good food and then proceeded to go upstairs. Dennis and Kayla were sitting on a couch and in the middle of a “boy” discussion which Dennis then stated that she had been going after all these “pasty white boys”, to which Kayla smirked. Something about a Sam was mentioned and Kayla responded and said Sam was no longer being thought about, I asked oh what happened with Sam? Kayla looked at her dad hesitated and they both responded that it was a long story.

This banter continued for a moment and then Rachael came upstairs and we all moved to the table, Kayla sat with us but didn’t contribute much to the conversation Rachael Dennis and I were having, she went to change into sweats and Dennis immediately turned to me in her absence and stated that it is very important for them that Kayla continues to have the confidence in saying “no” to boys. Kayla already receives unsolicited pictures, inappropriate sexual attention and messages from boys who when she asks why they would talk or send things to her like they respond and state “I thought you liked me”. Dennis maintained that currently they have an open dialog and she shows them “everything”. He wants her to continue to have the confidence in saying no and not to have that affect her own self-worth. We agreed that the want for acceptance is huge at this age. Kayla came back and Dennis asked me what music I liked and followed with, “just trying to help out Kayla”.

Throughout this encounter I realized just how out of touch I was with my ability to find conversation with Kayla. Throughout the evening, she continued to go back and forth between the zip line and watching TV goofing around with the younger girls, and sitting with her parents and me listening or scrolling on her phone only speaking when asked a question. I had already fumbled on asking what *type* of math or science she was studying then realized her classes are

not yet that specific. I was also out of touch with apps. Snapchat was something I had ignored but now according to my 18-year-old sister was “what everyone was using now.”

The statement that Dennis and Rachael had made replayed in my mind. They wanted to keep Kayla from engaging in sexual behavior while also continuing to build her self-worth as a female. The texts she had begun to receive had shocked Dennis and Rachael. Rachael had stated a few times she never felt her and Kayla had really ever clicked the way Dennis had been able to with their daughter. When I asked Dennis how he responded when Kayla approached him with the texts he said his first instinct was to be enraged but knew this would not be of benefit to Kayla. Kayla had approached Dennis which he felt was more than most girls would when regarding topics of this nature. He explained he tried to keep his own feelings at bay, he asked her how that made her feel instead of reacting negatively. This was a common theme throughout much of my experience interviewing with parents and educators. The juxtaposition is teaching young girls they are just as strong and capable as a male but also the responsibility that comes along with being a girl as parents put it, which centered on the ability to get pregnant.

While often hearing the popular message of teaching young boys to respect young women I wondered what are we teaching young women? In recent studies researchers found the use of force for adolescents varied between male or female. Young girls suffer more from relationship violence, emotionally and physically and are more likely than males to have serious injuries and report being terrified. Young boys seldom fear violence by their girlfriends, when they did comment about their girlfriends acting violently they cited it as comical and that it didn't hurt. (Hattery & Smith, 540) Dennis was trying to understand a way to protect Kayla from these pressures without making it so she felt her gender restricted her but was unsure of how to

do so as a father. He stated his intention is to ensure Kayla feels supported and safe at the same time.

I found that available time with their children was another worry of the parents I interviewed. A couple I spoke with, actually as my first experience with interviewing as an anthropologist expressed their struggle to feel balance between their careers and their family life. I later realized my focus was going to be parents to a slightly older age of children but I believe there is value in their precursor to the adolescent stage:

“How old are your children and what are their genders?”

B: “5 and 2 years old and both females.”

“If you could walk me through a typical weekday morning what would it look like?”

B: “I would say that one looks at the other one in bed and asks, are you going to get them? I don’t know, are you?”

J: “Right around 7 am Adaline comes walking in [to our bedroom] and hangs out with us and then I get up and get Regan and the day starts with giving them 15 minutes of us all hanging out and chilling before the day starts.”

B: “We just all hangout as a family. [before the day begins] and then the battle of brushing teeth, going to the bathroom, let’s eat breakfast begins.”

J: “The responsibilities of a human being kicks in and it’s the fight”

B: “There are plenty of tears”

“Do either of you have specific tasks you do for the kids?”

B: “Correct me [J] if I’m wrong but I think it’s really great that we play off one another has a team, we see what needs to get done and it’s a team effort every morning”

J: "And we both have mornings where we get the kids ready alone because we work different hours and there are very few mornings where we're together and can get the kids ready"

B: "We always try to end the day together"

"And how do you guys end the day?"

J: "Well it's just amazing because when I look at how many hours I'm with Regan over the course of Monday-Friday its 10 hours or less"

B: "It's so sad"

J: "So as much as from my work, her bedtime, so we don't have this great amount of time even though she lives with us, to make an impact on her in a day in and day out basis so it is nice to connect with dinner, the morning time and then at bedtime."

B: "And you know that feelings is only 4-5 days a week but it's amazing how even though you only work 40 hours somehow it feels like so much more away time away from the unit"

J: "We get them at their worst"

B: "Literally, super crabby in the morning and then putting them to bed when they are shot from the day and over it" [agreeing with J's assertion of getting them at their worst]

"What do you guys believe are some of the pressures kids face in today's society?"

B: "To me right now people say oh it's so hard right now your kids are so little to me this is the most precious time, because I have all the control for the most part. You know what I'm scared about? I'm scared for when they go and make their own friends and their own choices and this whole idea of comparing yourself to someone else and how you measure up and what kind of base we've given them. As a parent, I feel pressure to involve them in activities that they can compete with other kids and for what am I raising a pro athlete? No, I want to find their passion whatever it is, arts, sports, cooking."

J: “I see so many parents and their kids it’s like they have them involved in so much shit, it consumes their whole weekend. But if that’s what you grow up doing so the repeat behavior is probably because that’s how those parents grew up.”

Over the past three decades the rate of stay-at-home mothers has been in decline. (Pew Research, 2014) Jay and Brittney are experiencing the give and take that comes with being parents while both are commanding careers. Brittney also expresses a fear of “losing control” in a tone that echo’s Dennis’s commitment to protection of his own daughters. Similar to Dennis and Rachael’s expressed worries for Kayla, Jay and Brittney with girls at ages just five and two are observing the outside world and are uncertain of how to guide Adaline and Regan, fearing the influences of future friends and possible decisions their children will be faced with going forward.

Daniel and Gloria are another couple I had the opportunity to speak with. The couple had three daughters ages 24, 14 and 11. Their perspective was immensely eye opening in regards to how they described their experiences as parents to girls. Gloria and Daniel explained to me dynamics of what I referenced as “crush” behavior. Crushes, referencing what many also call “puppy love” being the early behaviors adolescents act out when they begin to focus more on the idea of having feelings towards someone. Their stories changed as they described the differences between their eldest and their middle child. As seen in the previous situation and true in Daniel and Gloria’s case technology is an ever-increasing challenge for parents to navigate.

“Walk me through your experiences with any of your children’s first crushes. How did you as a parent navigate the situation?”

G: “I think you [D] should go first [laughing]”

D: "It was very unique because my oldest daughter is 24 and she was socially different (G: awkward [Gloria adds]) than most kids her age. She definitely didn't go through a boy crazy phase she really liked Aaron Carter so we would go to his concerts and she would get excited but that was as close to a stereotypical boy crazy moment she ever had, she had her first boyfriend at 15 and it was nothing like I'd imagine it being or I guess starting to experience.

"How so? What were the things that surprised you?"

D: "She was very private about everything and she was very reserved about all of her emotions. She didn't really get that euphoric thing you know as I remember as a kid when you first start going with somebody and your skipping around the house. She was very subdued.

G: unemotional. [adds to D's explanation]

G: "well he was... [looks at D & asks 17 or 18? D confirms 17] 17 [boy that the daughter was dating] so he was a little older that was a little struggle um just from the standpoint of okay do we allows this or not ya know he was driving um that was a challenge, but we knew his family and I think that made it a lot easier.

D: "He was socially awkward [lot of laughter] too he couldn't navigate his way around anything [more laughing]"

G: "Well I think he did" [laughing playfully]

"Did you guys have any kind of discussions with her about this? Or how did you handle this situation?"

D: "Well I wasn't overly thrilled and the situations a little different because G raised her and she was [G] definitely the sounding board more than me.

G: "Yeah I had to talk him off the ledge a couple times. [laughing]"

D: "Yeah exactly she wasn't going to talk to me about it so it was definitely more G.

G: “And we had conversations but I think Andrew made it pretty easy, he was a good kid, he’d come over um and they’d go to his house and his parents were there and we always made sure like she had to call us from their house so we knew she was there. But she was very unemotional and wouldn’t share much with us.”

Corey, as we will call her is described as somewhat of a mystery to her parents. I was surprised to hear Daniel compare himself from how he understood his first crushes to how he was witnessing his daughters experience. Where he recalls being excited and open, he and Gloria describe Corey being “very private” and they could not understand why. They note she did not go through the boy crazy stage that seemed to be a normal occurrence for girls Corey’s age according to her parents. Another mother I spoke with, Monica cited similar confusion to the dynamic of adolescent/teen dating after having a conversation with her daughter Dani who is 14. Monica described the conversation she had with her daughter about a new boyfriend that Dani had casually announced she had. After Monica attempted to engage her daughter about how they met, what her boyfriend was interested in or what the two of them had in common Monica was left wondering what exactly the point of the “relationship” that her daughter was describing.

M: “I asked if they had ever had a date which she replied to by explaining it doesn’t work like that and that no one goes on dates. So, I was wondering what they talked about or what he was like and she just kept saying I don’t know and I kept sitting there wondering what the point of it all was? She said they don’t even really talk at school!”

Weeks later Monica told me that Dani had been upset after one of her lacrosse practices because her boyfriend had instructed his friend to tell Dani that he wanted to break up. Monica explained that Dani was more bothered by the fact that the boys then proceeded to exclaim to others that she wasn’t good at lacrosse. It was a short-lived *relationship* but seemed to have

caused embarrassment and turmoil for Dani. I wondered about the action from the boy of indirectly breaking up with Dani. It was a decision to include another boy to do the confrontation and dirty work.

In the following weeks, I decided I needed to speak with teachers. I noticed the participants I had interviewed up until that point were all working parents. Parents with young children were working. As a child, I remembered having before and after at school for the kids whose parents both worked and needed essentially a buffer zone of time in the morning and afternoon. Teachers I began to wonder may have a more routine schedule with children than the parent's schedules may allow at times.

Mrs. Williams has been teaching since 1989. In her 28 years of teaching she has experience with 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> grade. She describes how the "crush" like emotions were acted out by her students.

W: "I remember a couple of girls that would come into my classroom when they were in 6<sup>th</sup> grade after school, and they would um you know how kids are when they are really into... they have that feeling... when they are really into... they have that rush they just like this person so much they can't stand it and I know its infatuation when their eleven, but they would come into my room and I remember they would sit against the wall and I sometimes they were really up sometimes they were really down and they were just, they didn't know what to do with themselves um but it was an on-going thing where they came in almost every day and just vented about you know whoever their you know their one special crush they had and it consumed them, it was a very very big part of them at that point and you could tell they were trying to figure out where they belong in the world and how this all works and it was goofy but it was real. It's a very important process I think of getting to the point when you're older that you're ready for it

but you kinda have to go through all these silly stages to get there, I went through them too

[laughing a bit] I can remember when I was young and their age thinking oh my gosh why did I say that that was so stupid” and I would run over that for days sometimes about oh my gosh I said the wrong thing or did the wrong thing, how should I act? Should I act like I care? Should I ignore them? You know and some of my students have had some of those same experiences where they don’t know if they should talk to them or just ignore them and then they do the stupid things where they are poking and shoving and taking things from each other and that kind of thing but they don’t mean it in that kind of way, but that you know can also board on abuse.”

“Do you think they are just trying to figure out how to express these emotions and how to work through them?

W: “I think they’re trying to get attention and they don’t know how to get attention from the person appropriately. Now I recently, I’m going to put this in here because this is something that smacked me in the face recently, I used to joke around a lot with the students in my class perhaps even in your [my] class when I saw boys and girl’s kind of doing that little taking each other’s stuff and poking at each other, and use to say to them ohhh looks like somebody has a crush I would kind of joke with them cause then they’d be like oh my gosh no we don’t [makes embarrassed childlike sounds of rebuttal] and that would kind of stop the behavior, but then I read something saying that actually you have to be very careful as a teacher that you are not promoting abuse as this is the way that relationships are. In other words, that if you’re touching and poking and shoving each other not in a violent way but it could be a pre-cursor to abuse. So, if you say that [addressing certain behavior with having a crush] maybe that’s what makes them think that that’s how you act in a relationship. So, I started thinking oh my gosh I have to be

careful not to do that, even though to me it was innocent maybe it's the beginning to something that isn't or it gives them the idea that that normal and it's not.

“That's really interesting I would want to ask then how do you think the teacher's role is significant, just as the parent's role is significant in influencing children as they take on more sexual roles as humans as they grow up?”

W: “I think that honestly being a teacher is an unbelievably awesome responsibility and an honor. Because I think even more so than a parents, kids see their parents and their failures you know what I mean they see them in all their glory but as they see them as humans, and they know that they're not always perfect, but as teachers I think they look up to us in a different way because they don't see us all the time 24/7 so I'm kind of in this role with them where I've got to think about everything I say and do and maybe they don't understand that yeah I do have the same kind of failures as their parents or the same kind of human.. ya know they might think I just crawl into the wall at night and come out for them in the morning. They might not realize that we have a life outside of school completely and we do, and I mean if they don't understand that then they might perceive what we do as normal or the way that you're supposed to behave so I always try to take a higher road than what I would even hold myself to in my own personal life with my students. And I feel very bound to that because they might be looking up to me or maybe they don't even have any role models at home that would be good role models so maybe I'm just one of those that they have during that day that I can guide them in a way that they're not getting in their own home environment.” [stated with a firm commitment in the tone of her voice]

Mrs. Williams observation of the girls in emotional turmoil expressed after school is a different tone from the parents I spoke with who seemed to have trouble gathering information like that of what Mrs. Williams is describing as witnessing daily. She also acknowledges that she

feels a certain responsibility to uphold herself to a standard due to her potential ability to influence children when said children may not have a smooth home life and view her as someone to trust.

Mrs. Gilford who has taught for 15 years also shares in Mrs. Williams sentiments. She as well recognizes the issues of adolescents while teaching. She explains even if as a teacher, you don't want to deal with it you are forced anyways. She also explains the difficult situation between children, parents and teachers,

G: "Yes. I think that it definitely becomes a thing where it's kind of even distracting from what's going on just in general things socially are shifting in a massive way at that age in 5<sup>th</sup> grade 6<sup>th</sup> grade. You can't really teach effectively because it becomes something that takes away from the learning process and so you are forced to deal with it, I mean I can't tell you how many kids come eat lunch with me and talk to me about things or just we have to like step out in the hallway and navigate some kind of a situation because you know for them this is as big as like let's say I can't make my house payment, it's as significant thing for them you know there is drama when this boy said he did this with me and he didn't or um we broke up. Its conversing and its listening and its making a lot of choices to not overstep boundaries. I think a lot as a teacher you are aware of a lot more than I think even parents are sometimes aware of and that's hard too. Now being a parent I think what would I want this teacher to do with my child so, it takes on a whole new aspect at that point.

"Do you think parents expect teachers to navigate situations for their kids?"

G: "I don't know... [signs in contemplation for a minute] No I don't. I think that parents would rather navigate themselves to be honest with you I don't think parents a lot of the times feel very connected with teacher's um and so it's like you don't really want somebody that you don't

know and trust talking intimate things with your children I think you would rather it come back to you as a parent and so that is where it becomes hard and I don't want to break a child's trust and run to their parents all the time but at the same time there are just things their parents need to be made aware of, and it's also hard conversations to a parents saying hey this is going on with your kid and they are very unaware on the fact that their child is even engaging in this you know what I mean?"

Mrs. Gilford makes an important point to explain children that do form close relationships with her she develops a relationship with the parents as to allow for ease of communication and trust to form. Mrs. Williams during our talk explains how children are more informed on sexual topics today than she has ever experienced before. She sites media exposure as a large issue in her opinion. Mrs. Williams exclaims her concerns over lack of monitoring by parents over social media platforms. "They are exposed to far more than ever before" she states and voices concern over the age decrease matched with knowledge increase. She differs from Mrs. Gilford in her opinion that parents would rather have the schools teach matters of sensitive issues such as sex and sexuality.

There was a general consensus among educators that girls express a more emotional response, internalizing their feelings, often more aware of feeling different overall than their male classmates who express a physical reaction towards sexuality and less of a tendency to become consumed. Mrs. Gilford as well as Mrs. Williams describe the girls as more concerned about what they are experiencing than what they see expressed from the boys. In one of her closing comments she describes that girls has she has witnessed are usually pitted with the responsibilities of sex where guys get a free pass. She also explains that social media is eliminating communication amongst family in her view.

Harriet was my guidance counselor when I was in middle school. I reached out to her and she was more than willing to help me. She mentioned after I thanked her that her only request is that I someday return the favor to someone else. Spoken like a true guidance counselor I thought. I learned from Harriet that teachers are not bound by confidentiality like counselors are. Harriet is still a mandatory reporter and it is her job to interject when she believes a situation is unhealthy or posing threat to a child's well-being, but she could choose to keep an adolescents conversation private from a parent.

Harriet explained the difficult job teachers face in a middle school setting,  
H: "Social media plays a large role in children's lives today. I have kids whose parents are texting them during the day! I understand a text stating issues of getting stuck at work but there is a time and a place and the phones shouldn't be out its very distracting."

Harriet highlights another focused point of contention. Social media and the technology it brings with it. She goes on to explain that teachers are frustrated and could benefit from more training on backgrounds of behavior. The middle school she works for had seen a few girls in 8<sup>th</sup> grade pregnant and that as educators they consistently are having to step in and stop inappropriate sexual remarks and actions committed by boys. When I asked Harriet who she counsels more between girls and boys she stated with ease,

H: "Girls, boys are less likely to seek console."

Daniel and Gloria also expressed an unnerving feeling about the new dynamic of technology that as adults they explain was not present during their childhood or even some of their experiences with their older children. Like Monica, they are left guessing about the ways today's adolescents are deciding to emulate relationships.

"Do you have any experiences now with your younger children yet?"

G: "Yeah so Emily's first crush, was that the texting? [looks at D] Remember you figured that out before I did"

D: "Yes she was texting someone"

G: "But was that the boy she went to the dance with?"

D: "Yes"

G: "Yeah so I think it's a little weird for us because there's no one calling the home phone, like when I had crushes and D had crushes that person had to call and talk to one of the parents before the phone was handed to me and now we don't really see that unless we really pay attention to her phone and we kinda give her that privacy for the most part so I think you [D] saw a text pop up on her phone with a heart and was like alright well who is that? And you kind of just have to [sighs] in the teenage years they're so, you know you have to be really gentle because they are embarrassed super easy and trying to talk about that stuff is interesting, it's like following a road map right when you think you're going down the right turn and you realize it's the completely wrong turn and you have to head back and maybe later try to approach it again but um she's still in just that crush phase, I think they considered one another boyfriend and girlfriend but it was a short lived kinda thing.

I never thought about how the use of mobile phones puts parents in a rough spot. Like Gloria mentions her and Daniel want to respect their daughter Emily's privacy but by either effort or accident, a parent can upset the child in a way that appears as possibly snooping or not being trusting of their child. This concept of crushes and emotions being private for adolescents seems problematic to me, if they can easily google a question instead of communicating with either a parent or adult what exactly are they learning and causing in their development.

Anna, the second guidance counselor I had the opportunity to meet has her Bachelors of science teaching degree and a Masters in counseling. She originally was the high school counselor working there for eleven years and for the past three years she has filled the counselor's role for the middle school. She is a large advocate for cell phones being required to turn off upon entering the building. She starts out of explaining to me that high school and middle school are two very different arenas. In high school the discussions are more career topics and future planning. Middle school brings emotional topics, developments issues concerning maturity levels, and she stated she sees more issues with phones in the middle school than the high school.

Throughout her experience over the last 14 years Anna tells me she has dealt with a range of issues concerning sexual behavior. Girls receiving sexual inquiries over texts has led her to speak out more about having what she stated as sexual respect but more mentoring is needed. In her district difficulties with situations where home life abuse and sexual abuse make it hard to help children who do not have the support at home. 65% of her students receive free lunch currently, a reflection of the economy. Anna's school district resides in a rural area where as Harriet's district is located in an urban area. Anna takes a deep breath when beginning to detail her irritations with social media, "Sixth graders know things I don't!" she exclaims this echo's Mrs. Williams expressed shock.

Anna explains the same trends I have been hearing about girl and boy behavior as adolescents in school. Girls fight with their words and remember, where boys fight with their fists and the next thing you know they are fine. Anna believes talking more with girls can help by encouraging self-esteem in healthy ways not focused on appearance. I discovered at the end

of our interview that Anna's district currently do not have a sex ed. Program due to resent budget cuts. She explained to me how worrisome this is. By high school she explains "it is just too late".

Throughout the interviews and days spent speaking with parents and educators I was overwhelmed by the information they had to give, I felt a deep connection to their stories and concerns. Three of my interviews were not focused enough to be of use. This experience has been challenging in a humbling way. Upon experiencing my first women's and gendered studies courses my views on how to interpret gender dynamics has been vastly complicated. In asking how female sexuality is approached I found there is a large focus on the responsibilities and dangers that seem to inherently come with possessing a childbearing body. Interviews and literature also revealed children much younger than I expected to be repeating and emulating gender roles. The younger children are the less willing parents are willing to discuss topics of sexuality, I was refused many times upon attempt.

I was intrigued and will continue to look into the statements Peggy Orenstein discussed in her NPR interview on the studies of Dutch mothers and their commitment to not only teaching the responsibilities of sex but also explaining to their daughters the equal agency and pleasure they deserve. While Orenstein as I will discuss below explains how girls in the U.S. tend to rate their sexual pleasure based off of the man's satisfaction with makes sex appear as a service in the U.S. opposed to an act of enjoyment as the Dutch report. One of the stark differences in the Dutch education verses the American model is that the Dutch do not teach their children in such either/or fashion. What I mean by this is that they do not separate female and male hormones to specify who is a male and who is a female, they teach that each individual has a mix of both just in varying levels from person to person. (Wade,14) I would be curious to explore U.S. opinions on this idea of gender education.

Participant Observation & Semi-Structured Interviews:

- Participants:
  - Family BDA = Kayla's (age 14) Family
  - Couple JB = Parents of 5 & 2-year-old females
  - Couple DG = Parents of 24, 14, & 11 year old females
  - Teacher G = Female - 5<sup>th</sup> but mostly 6<sup>th</sup> grade – 15 years' experience (parent to 9 & 6-year-old sons, 2-year-old daughter)
  - Teacher W = Female – 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> grade – 28 year's experience (parent to adult son)
  - Mother M = 36 years old – Single mother to 14-year-old female
  - Mother B = 27 years old – Mother to 5 & 2-year-old females
  - Mother I = 41 years old – Single mother to 23 & 9-year-old females
  - Mother J = age unknown – Mother to 2-year-old female
  - Guidance Counselor H = Female – Elementary 2 years // Middle school 15 years
  - Guidance Counselor A = Female – High school // Currently Middle school – 14 years
- Methodology:
  - Semi-structured interviews and some initial participate observation allowed me to comfortably converse with parents, teachers, and guidance counselors. Due to limitations of schedules and school demands many of these interviews were made possible by facetime and Skype. I did however manage to perform half of the interviews in person. These actors were the perspectives I aimed to understand. I began by speaking with parents. I first began wondering about the adolescent's perspective but soon realized this would be a difficult task with their status as minors. Speaking with teachers next I was able to compare the outlooks and was advised by

one teacher to contact the guidance counselor of her school. I managed to speak with two individuals from differing districts.

### Literature Review:

National Center for Victims of Crime published national statistics stating “1 in 5 high school girls in the United States report being abused physically and/or sexually by a boyfriend, and 50 to 80 percent of teenager’s report knowing others in violent relationships.” (Shaw & Lee, 538) Half of all females raped are under the age of 18 years, and about one-fifth are younger than 12 years old. (Shaw & Lee, 550)

Looking through a postmodern lens the difference in childbearing abilities between the sexes would largely equate to a different experience, a different reality. (Erickson & Murphy, 2016) This has been reflected throughout history. The first, second and now third wave of feminism has and continues to fight for equality of women and other feminized bodies that experience discrimination and oppression. (Shaw & Lee, 2015) According to reports from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics from 1900 to 2013 there has been an increase from 18% to just under 50% of women actively participating in the labor force. About 58% of women in the U.S. are working in the labor force. 71% of U.S. working mothers have children younger than age 18 and of that 55% of those children are infants. Women are likely to be the primary caregivers and as trends from the Pew Research center indicate they are increasingly the primary breadwinner as well. (Shaw & Lee, 483)

With women appearing to gain more opportunity in the work force alongside men I was surprised to find that forms of sexualized and gendered violence are also increasing in number. Approximately 90% of all interpersonal violence victims are women with men being the perpetrators. Women’s experiences with IPV are also more violent with higher rates of required

medical attention or fatally from an attack than male victims. Gender is clearly a factor when assessing the likelihood of victimization. (Hattery & Smith, 2012) Practice theory, a more revised form of interest theory, looks at all forms of human action from a political angle. The theory aims to through a political lens analyzes decision making from less of an ad hoc dynamic to more of a series of small actions that align to a long-range plan for the human agent. (Erickson & Murphy, 466-471) Doing gender is described as the actions of performing behaviors in a masculine or feminine fashion and having those actions reinforced by the society the individual is a part of. (Wade, 2015)

#### Discussion:

Stemming from the *self*-crowned *selfie* queen *herself*, Kim Kardashian West (KKW) ... (hold your applause please), I sought to understand if self-empowerment for females could go hand in hand regarding the ways KKW and her sisters the Kardashian/Jenner clan have promoted over the last decade with momager Kris Jenner boosting at the helm. In 2016 on International Women's Day, the "book" *Selfish* was released. KKW was shown in many sexually explicit photographs with an entire section devoted to complete nudity & and a campaign to "Break the Internet" with her nude images for Paper Mag. She stated that she was proud of her body and was expressing her sexuality. (Orenstein, NRP) I have a slightly different interpretation when analyzing the actions taken by the reality star and many like her. I believe her book *Selfish* perfectly entitled, contributes to a dangerous dynamic of what I reference as victim cycles; female victimization as well as male perpetration. Not only are these effects psychological but for women the objectifying perspective towards one's body and self is believed to be connected to diminished mental and sexual health levels. (Ward et al.) This connection is well studied and yet KKW just yesterday (5/4/17) announced a newly released copy of her book.

Within the framework of Objectification theory, the U.S. media in its current dynamic manipulates female empowerment through the lens of sexual objectification. Sexual Objectification (*S.O*) through a bivariate relationship between body evaluation and body surveillance affect the individual's sexual assertiveness. This lack of assertiveness can lead to increased tolerance towards sexual harassment and increased chances of sexual victimization. Self-sexualization is yet another aspect intertwined with *S.O*. Self-sexualization looks into the effects of when women apply the assumptions of sexualization to themselves, also increasing but adding a layer of complexity to sexual victimization. (Franz et al)

Body evaluations in the forms of cat-calling, and verbal references made towards women's bodies and sexual appearance, leads to higher rates of body surveillance amongst women. The U.S. media's sexual portrayal of women can be seen in 71% of music videos, 45.5% of young adult female characters on prime-time TV, and in 22% of TV commercials that involve women. This sexualization of sexuality through media portrayals narrowly defines what it is to be "sexy" and with those aged 18-25 in the U.S. spending upon twelve hours a day using media, these portrayals are impossible to escape. (Ward et al.)

*S.O*, fueled by body surveillance according to Objectification theory is caused through media pervasiveness of *S.O* in society shown through TV content, media, and magazine exposure. When women are shown continuously that their image is what is most important it becomes internalized as such, and image takes priority over other facets of her person. KKW's celebrity subjects her to high levels of sexual objectification by the media but also positions her in a place of influence. Although KKW is not responsible for the injustices received upon being born a female, she is responsible for the messages she promotes and under what guise.

So, when females exclaim they feel sexy what exactly are they saying? This image for women is narrow in defining the idea of what “sexy” looks like. (*Miss Representation*, 2011) KKW throughout her show has been shown obsessing over losing baby weight, refusing to be seen until she decides upon a careful planned *reveal* to show that she “got her sexy back”. She just recently decided telling her fans the flu was the best and quickest way she had lost the last six pounds, officially under baby weight and ready to rock her styles again. In a study conducted in 2016 the aim was to investigate the contributions of diverse media to self-sexualization among undergraduate women and men. They expanded off of past testing and used definitions from the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007). The APA Task Force defines sexualization in four occurrences’ “1. a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics 2. A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy 3. A person is sexually objectified – that is made into a thing for others’ sexual use and 4. Or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.” (Ward et al.) The team’s question was how this everyday exposure to sexual objectification was affecting women. They determined reality TV and RTST movies significantly and positively contributed to self-sexualization among women. The team also observed that men are not shielded from sexual objectification. Due to U.S. scripts of gender however the portrayal provides different appearances and expectations. (Ward et al)

Walking through a popular department store with its sections split up into various categories of clothing, one side for men the other for women it is easy to make a curious observation. While one side displays the typical pants, shorts, tee’s, maybe jackets depending on the season, hats, the other side is a bit more complicated. I would like to ask, what is the intent of a long sleeve crop top? The various “peak-a-boo” cut out “micro mini” skirts? The sheer pants,

slit on both legs leading up to the very top of the thigh where a thong bodysuit sits importantly, ...or not in place? Last week I thought I had put a shirt on backwards only to find out that the upside-down triangle cut out over my chest was “trending” as the sales lady explained. I’m 25-years-old so feeling prudish over not wanting my clothes to come from baby gap or Edward Scissor hands shouldn’t be this hard. This female trend of S & M like day wear? “*Faaaashionn*” ... I envision the response coming from a twelve-year-old while she scrolls through her Instagram not bothering to look up while I observe the headband she is wearing as a skirt.

I want to be very careful here. I will never once justify or support actions of sexual violence or abuse taken against a woman due to her clothing or any other form of victim blaming of that matter. My issues come when I am in a women’s and gender studies course and I hear “there is nothing women can do about being sexualized” or that “men need to just shut up and know that it is not about them right now”. Gender is a two-part system, one side cannot change without affecting the other, men must be a part of this conversational as well.

Another aspect of Objectification theory is that less severe forms of *S.O* contribute to more lenient feelings concerning more severe forms of *S.O* of women. Growing studies are showing that “media use among adolescents, exposure to sexualized media leads young men and women to endorse a view of “women as sex objects,” as well as stereotypical views regarding gender roles.” (Bernard et al) *S.O* is linked with heightened appearance anxiety, negative mood, and body dissatisfaction.

Miss Representation is a documentary published by a concerned mother. The author of documentary was molested by a trusted team coach which later lead to two years of an eating disorder, “Is it any wonder why teen girl feel more powerless than ever?” she asks in her open scenes. Men are cited as feeling powerless too. What is going on where both sexes are citing

feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness? 53% of 13-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies, by age 17 this percentage increases to 78%. 65% of women and girls have an eating disorder. 17% of teens engage in cutting and self-injurious behavior and rates of depression among girls and women have doubled between 2000 and 2010. Ariella a high-school student is concerned over the media's negativity of women and the pressure to be the perfect women looking the certain way to fulfill men's expectations. Urenna as a 5<sup>th</sup> grader worried about her weight and she explains she is still worrying about her weight in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Angelina a petite girl goes on to say "me being a small person" as she states she was consistently teased. She was told to go throw up or go eat a hamburger because she is naturally skinny. She was taunted as if she were anorexic. Her response was to eat a lot of food so people would not think she was anorexic. Alexis, straightens her curly hair to fit in, meanwhile another girl named Alexis has close friends who she says in between break periods would "go put on like ten pounds of makeup and brushing their hair, "pampering". Maria heartbreakingly cries during her interview "when is it going to be enough?" Her sister she emotionally explains as she begins to cry cuts herself due to teasing of not having the "perfect" body in school by other peers. The "perfect body" is stated but never truly defined. She asks "what can I do so that my little sister won't be hurt by the media" She's so young and feels responsible for what she sees going on. She's begging for guidance She views the media as a tool for controlling the idea of how we are supposed to be. "They want you to be something that you're not".

Jean Kilbourne explains photo shopping puts into print the idealistic unattainable beauty standards young girls are trying to live up to. Young men are shown these media images and judge women much more harshly Women are being taught they are inadequate and men are

expecting perfection. Fashion industry photo-shopping effects are very often subconsciously internalized by the reader.

Advertising is based off of making people feel anxious and insecure. Men are targets for status and power while Women receive the message “you’re never beautiful enough, never thin enough.” Those body types that are continuously shown in media are the body types that are hard to obtain and that spawn a desire to become what you currently believe or see yourself as lacking.

In *Girls & Sex* by Peggy Orenstein she explains that girls are not having intercourse at any higher rate or sooner than before but what is happening is they are engaging in other sexual acts. In an example that struck me as quite obvious but something I have never once pondered on was when Orenstein brought about the question of oral sex. She asked the girls, if your partner always asked you for a glass of water and you have that glass of water for them every time but the one time you asked for a glass your partner said no how would that make you feel? She explained the girls had never thought about the fact that they are receivers just as much as they are givers in a relationship. She explains there is a complete silence on the matter of female pleasure when it comes to sex and if we cannot teach our girls that they are not just their bodies how do we expect them to develop a sense of confidence in their own agency in the bedroom? Orenstein reports that women base their sexual ability off of the indicators of pleasure from their partner. Girls are serving instead of enjoying and it is leaching out into all aspects of life. It starts young in sex education where boys are given names for their anatomy and girls are not.

Caroline Heldman, PhD, Associate Professor of Political Science, explains that self-objectification has become a national epidemic leading to negative consequences such as shame, anxiety, and self-disgust, depression, eating disorders, lower confidence, lower ambition, lower

cognitive ability, lower GPAs. A whole generation of young people are being raised to see the objectification of women as normal. KKW's commodification of her body through emoji's and printing swimsuits with 'TURBO THOT' the acronym stands for "that hoe over there" and pictures of her body parts is selling an idea that if you emulate her persona then you will be confident and happy. Heldman makes the important observation that women who are high self objectifies have lower political efficacy, the idea that your voice matters in politics and you can bring about change. We have a whole generation of women who are less likely to run for office and less likely to vote. Women make up 51% of the U.S. population, 17% comprise congress. The 2010 mid-term election is the first-time women have not made gains in Congress since 1979. At this rate women may not achieve parity for 500 years. 34 women have been appointed to government seats compared to a staggering 2319 men. 67 countries in the world have had female presidents or prime ministers. The U.S. is not one of them. U.S. 90<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of women in national legislatures. (Miss Representation, 2011)

The chain reaction sexual objectification has is a dangerous one. It not only continues to victim women but also places men in a predisposition for perpetration which I find to be a type of victim as well in the larger span of gender dynamics. Media sells unobtainable goals to keep society in a balance vying for power and control with women currently bearing the brunt of its consequences. Celebrities like KKW, her sisters, Nikki Manji and Jennifer Lopez who preach public nudity as empowerment I believe are preaching the commodification of sexuality for profit in the U.S.'s capitalistic market. This continues to teach young girls that your body is a way to gain attention and success.

Taking a look at the other side the current gender dynamic, to list the number of restrictions inhibiting a man from obtaining "true male status" as defined by the United States'

social expectation would require a thesis' length list. An easier endeavor is to state what does qualify as acceptable components for acquiring the coveted status of almighty manhood. To be unmanly is to be anything but, a white, middle class, heterosexual male, void of an emotional range outside of a competitive drive displayed through sexual accomplishments, anger, rage, and violence. To say the confines of this standard are narrow would be putting it lightly.

Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist specializing in gender studies explains, "this idea that manhood is socially constructed and historically shifting should not be understood as a loss, that something is being taken away from men." (Kimmel, p.23) This shift for arguably the first time allows men agency, the capacity to act. Kimmel uses David Leverenz as support in his claim that masculinity is a direct opposition of femininity. Men act seeking the approval of other men. The male guise does not just police the "other" but also sets strict standards for the male gender to adhere to. In masculinity's message, encouraging the rejection of the feminine while simultaneously encouraging heterosexual conquest, women become tools used at will for displaying/proving masculinity among other men. Psychologist Sam Osherson explained how easy it is by the time a male has reached adult status "to think you're always in competition with men, for the attention of women, in sports, at work." (Kimmel, p.24)

Men's need to repeatedly reinforce their masculinity to one another unveils a potential underlining fear within this set standard. Fear, for a male seeking to fulfill this stereotypical macho man identity is allowing for a perceived lack of power and control over a situation or dynamic. The threats by other men exclaiming words such as "faggot" or "gay" reflect the deep-rooted dedication to upholding the ideals that define what it is to be a sissy, untough, or uncool. In this way, the "other" is grouped in with the feminine. The term faggot is not a representation of believing one is gay or the hatred of that sexual orientation rather the term used with the

intention of emasculating the individual. It is the reaction of rejecting those qualities in oneself as well.

During the second wave of feminism (1970s -1980s) women cried out for equal treatment. Women exclaimed they were no less competent than their male counterparts that dominated the professional working sphere. Immigration also brought new complications in the sense of defining acceptable masculinity with new variations of behavior to combat as cultural diversity expanded. During the Regan era while the feminist movement was demanding attention, females were encouraged back into the home and to avoid birth contraception for the benefit of the family dynamic. Many women did not see this as a part of their goal in the fight for equality. Feminism works to explain through the perspective of the “other” that traits are not biologically linked to the sexes. Kimmel makes a critical point that “thus with the same symmetry, feminism has tended to assume that individually men must feel powerful.” (Kimmel, p.29) This assumption disallows a true understanding that it is far more likely men feel powerless. Male stereotypes that view traits seen as “soft” as not being a part of their biological makeup. When faced with the claims that gendered behavior is much more overlapping than previously decided disallows men to hold power in the way they were taught was inherently theirs from birth. An identity crisis of what makes a male a male begins to surface.

The recent outcome of the presidential election many would argue is a direct reaction from men who expressed their feelings of a perceived powerless position. Donald Trump’s persona is an example and representation of traditional American hegemonic masculinity holding power by owning immense capital, and adhering to the traditional gender binary. While the feminist movement aims to redefine what it is to be female, the same expectations of the stereotypical macho male continues to be reinforced to young males. These two perceptions of

the sexes will never cohesively exist together. Masculinity must also shift in its expectations of what a male's behavior can encompass. Second wave feminism failed to understand the issues with the message lacking comprehension for the male sex. The third wave of feminism although making strives needs to engage more straight men to step out of their silence caused by fear of reprisal from other straight men. Feminism must be able to communicate how the gender binary confines both genders to untrue either/or behavior limitation. Until social thought shifts androcentric mindsets will continue to reinforce the current gender binary.

Sources:

Bernard, P., Legrand, S., & Klein, O. (2016). From bodies to blame: Exposure to sexually objectifying media increases tolerance toward sexual harassment. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/10.1037/ppm0000114>

Bourne, L. (2015, April 17). Kim Kardashian's Book of Selfies Has Arrived: Our Complete Review. Retrieved April 27, 2017, from <http://stylecaster.com/selfish-kim-kardashian-book-review/>

Cohn, D'Vera, Gretchen Livingston, and Wendy Wang. "After Decades of Decline, A Rise in Stay-at-Home Mothers." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. N.p., 08 Apr. 2014. Web. 02 May 2017.

Franz, M. R., DiLillo, D., & Gervais, S. J. (2016). Sexual objectification and sexual assault: Do self-objectification and sexual assertiveness account for the link? *Psychology of Violence*, 6(2), 262-270. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/10.1037/vio0000015>

Hasinoff, A. A. (2014). Blaming sexualization for sexting. *Girlhood Studies*, 7(1), 102-120. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/1699538959?accountid=12598>

Kimmel, Michael S. "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity." *Theorizing Masculinities* (n.d.): 119-41. Web.

Orenstein, P. (2017). *Girls & sex: navigating the complicated new landscape*. New York, NY: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins.

Miss Representation. (n.d.). Retrieved April 27, 2017, from <http://documentaryheaven.com/miss-representation/>

Shaw, Susan M., and Janet Lee. *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015. Print.

Ward, L. M., Seabrook, R. C., Manago, A., & Reed, L. (2016). Contributions of diverse media to self-sexualization among undergraduate women and men. *Sex Roles*, 74(1-2), 12-23. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/10.1007/s11199-015-0548-z>