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Pink and Blue Lenses: Duoethnographic Reflections on Biological Sex in Conservative Christian Education

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Abstract

In this duoethnography, we explored how experiences in conservative Christian high schools were viewed through the different lenses of our binary-constructed, biological sexes. Our perceptions varied along the axes of gendered roles, gendered responsibilities, and romance and sexuality. Through reflecting on our own experiences, we critiqued what we were taught and the lasting repercussions those teachings left on our lives. The approach of indoctrination proved counterproductive in our schools, as graduates left unprepared to enter meaningful romantic relationships or to encounter a world outside their previously sheltered environs.

Keywords

Sex, Gender, Christian Education, Duoethnography

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Pink and Blue Lenses: Duoethnographic Reflections on Biological Sex in Conservative Christian Education

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In this duoethnography, we explored how experiences in conservative Christian high schools were viewed through the different lenses of our binary-constructed, biological sexes. Our perceptions varied along the axes of gendered roles, gendered responsibilities, and romance and sexuality. Through reflecting on our own experiences, we critiqued what we were taught and the lasting repercussions those teachings left on our lives. The approach of indoctrination proved counterproductive in our schools, as graduates left unprepared to enter meaningful romantic relationships or to encounter a world outside their previously sheltered environs. Keywords: Sex, Gender, Christian Education, Duoethnography

Introduction

Confusion. Frustration. Resentment. Camaraderie. These four ideas represented perhaps best represent our progression of emotions with conservative Christian education. Indeed, these follow a somewhat similar to path to societal conceptions of how individuals process negative experiences, from Alcoholics Anonymous to coping with grief. Linly and Phillip first met in 2018, when she was a graduate student in his course. However, we came to realize that our backgrounds were very similar. We had both attended similar but different conservative Christian schools in the 1990s and early 2000s. As we talked about our experiences, we noted the years of confusion while we were at those schools, a building sense of frustration as we approached graduation, and subsequent years of bad feelings about our experiences. As one might commonly see among those who have shared negative experiences, we had an immediate camaraderie based on what we had gone through. However, this new-found commonality showed us how we had learned to distrust the other binary biological sex as ingrained in us by our previous schooling.

In his groundbreaking ethnography at Bethany Christian School, Alan Peshkin (1986) unveiled the world of fundamentalist Christian schooling at a time when he noted that it was rapidly expanding in popularity throughout the United States. Both authors of this study attended such schools for our secondary education. Peshkin rightly noted that such schools present reality as aligned with “one doctrine, one truth, one way” (p. 14). Nestled within that oneness, the concepts of sex and gender were key components of that doctrine and practice in conservative Christian schools, especially given that the secondary years are a time when sexuality comes to the forefront of the human experience. At the site of his study, Peshkin (1986) noted the importance of discreet gender roles, wherein “women are expected to become leaders in women’s organizations, but leadership, otherwise, is a male prerogative” (p. 127). As those roles play out, there were vastly different responsibilities, wherein male students were to provide for their future families as the curriculum teaches them “craft skills, work habits. . . economics, leadership” while female students were taught to serve their future families by “cooking, housekeeping, household management, manners, sewing, growing and arranging flowers, interior decoration, literary skills, and child care” (Peshkin, 1986, p. 127). While this curriculum was sometimes overt, it was often a hidden curriculum, wherein students learn

values and beliefs through normed behavior and subtle infusion (Giroux & Penna, 1983). With regard to romantic relationships, any sexuality beyond cisgendered heterosexuality was condemned; however, even within those constraints “hand holding and moonstruck gazes” (Peshkin, 1986, p. 128) were forbidden to protect sexual purity for marriage. While our Christian school experiences were not identical to the Bethany Christian School that Peshkin described, there is great consistency with the picture he painted and our experience.

Such teaching and practice embodied the stereotypes of Americana that idealize traditional conceptions of families and Christian morality (Baker et al., 2009; Gray, 2005; Peshkin, 1986). While society is always in flux, the culture of the United States underwent massive changes in the 2010s in rebellion from such traditional norming (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Lee et al., 2018). While society as a whole may have moved on from idealizing this way of life, the impacts of those who grew up with this ideal imprinted on them will be linger for many years to come.

Peshkin’s ethnography and other sources have described such educational settings, but here, we seek to provide insider perspectives on how sex and gender affected our educational experiences within the same generation. The terms “gender” and “sex” have taken on different connotations in Western society since our experiences in the late-1990s and early-2000s, but the two are not separated so in such religious schools. For the purposes of this paper, then, we use them interchangeably and as binaries, both in respect to the native usage in that setting as well as to emphasize the one “right” way that is taught there.

The purpose of this duoethnography is to illuminate the cisgendered experiences of those who attended conservative Christian schools and provide insight into the long-lasting effects of those experiences. The central research question we investigated was: how do female and male cisgendered former students in conservative Christian education evaluate the lasting effects of their gendered experiences? While conservative religious expression—and thus such education—may be in decline in the West, it continues to grow with the rapid spread of Islam around the globe and Christianity in parts of Asia and Africa (Kim, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2017). The lessons that may be gleaned from this study then may also be relevant in those regions as conservative religious education expands with belief there. Though this study provides a depth of insight from two perspectives, we encourage the reader to see commonalities with their own setting—regardless of where in the world they are—to find insight. This understanding then informs those who provide religious education and those who work with former students who went through that experience in order to better design educational experiences to reduce unintentional gendered harm.

Consistent with Norris and Sawyer (2012), we did “not begin with a survey of existing literature,” but rather we integrated literature into the Findings section “as the need emerge[d] from the conversation” (p. 34). Indeed, they describe the literature then “as another partner in the conversation and provides additional perspectives beyond those of the duoethnographers themselves” (p. 34). This duoethnography, using a dialogic methodology, provides a depth of insight and intimacy for the reader that is not otherwise available in the literature. Under each major theme in the findings, we have thus presented these three perspectives on the issues—cisgendered male, cisgendered female, and the literature providing sociocultural context as that additional conversant in the dialogue. It is through that lens of the literature that the reader should understand our dialogue fitting into broader cultural narratives in the United States as related to conservative religious belief, religious education, and changes in societal perspectives on gendered norms. The methods of duoethnography are uniquely suited to give the depth of perspective written directly by those with relevant lived experiences and incorporate those into the existing narrative portrayed in previous literature.

Researcher Stances

Linly. I attended a small, evangelical preparatory school in Nashville. My graduating class was approximately 125 students, who were predominantly White and middle- or upper-middle class. While I certainly feel some of the education I received there was far above average—English, Spanish, and Choir—much of it seemed to leave me ill-prepared for the “real world.”

There are a few events I recall as particularly impactful to me, which provide some insight and commentary on the school’s attitude towards sexuality. One student who became pregnant was expelled while there were no repercussions for the father of the child, who was also a student there. I remember during my junior year when rumors were flying that one couple in our class had sex, and it was all anyone could talk about. Both were shamed by their peers for doing something that would be considered normal and perhaps even boring at other schools. Finally, one summer at a church camp with one of the congregations that supplied many of the students to my school, some young men found one of their peer’s journals in which he wrote about his attraction to other men. They bullied and mocked him, sharing their findings with the rest of the campers, which led him to transfer to another school the following year.

Being deeply involved in religious institutions during my upbringing, every facet of my life and way of thinking was heavily influenced by the teachings of my church. I now view that aspect of my upbringing as a cautionary tale of how anything without moderation may become unhealthy or even harmful. The use of fear to manipulate people into compliance may appear to produce short term behavioral changes; however, as with many like me, this led me to no longer formally practice any religion or engage with a church in my personal life.

Phillip. I attended a conservative Christian high school in Michigan as a biological male in the late 1990s and early 2000s. An independent local church operated the school, but enrollment was not limited to church members. Across all grades of kindergarten through high school, enrollment hovered around 120 year to year, with far more on the elementary side. I graduated in a class of seven, which was the largest in the school’s history. More than anything, I think the school took a pragmatic, “ends justify the means” approach to how it attempted to regulate student behavior, which was in conflict with their clear teaching that such an approach in life was an affront to God. The school used deliberate inconsistency on rules and enforcement, surveillance both inside and outside of school, and manipulation to try to prevent what they believed to be immoral sexual activity.

As I think back on my experiences there, I am torn. On the one hand, I feel like my instruction in core subjects was outstanding, and it did really help me keep from messing up my life that early with what I would identify as bad decisions for me, such as a lack of focus on academics, experimentation with illegal drugs, or sexual experiences leading to unwanted consequences. However, I also recall feeling very wronged by the school as I graduated, cheated especially in the areas of critical thinking and generally being ready for life in an unsheltered world. While attending and then until the writing of this project, I did not really think much about the experiences of the girls at my school, other than assuming they were colluding with the administrators and teachers to make life unhappy for the boys. Such a conspiracy was, almost certainly, not going on. However, when molded into a boys-versus-girls mentality, such thoughts seemed to make sense. My experiences have led me to now be very suspicious of such an approach to education; however, I am not universally opposed to religious education.

Methodology

This duoethnography was born out of a course project on diversity in education, wherein the instructor, Phillip, and graduate student, Linly, explored how our differing biological sexes impacted our prior educational experiences in conservative Christian education. While we write about our own experiences, we use the term “conservative Christian education” for the context of this paper in the native sense to which it was used in our previous educational settings—to indicate private schools that identify as Christian and would only morally support the expression of human sexuality inside the bounds of a heterosexual, cisgendered marriage. This represents our lived experiences that we are able to bring to bear here, as well as that of the many who have, are, or will go through schools like those described in Peshkin’s (1986) Bethany Christian School.

Duoethnography

Duoethnography is a qualitative, “collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world” (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 9). To accomplish this, Norris and Sawyer (2012) identified eight tenets of duoethnography: currere (viewing one’s life as curriculum), polyvocal and dialogic, disrupts metanarratives, authorial difference, dialogic change and regenerative transformation, trustworthiness in self-reflexivity, audience accessibility, ethical stances, and trust. Further, they argued that “duoethnography embraces the belief that meanings can be and often are transformed through the research act” (p. 9), which we experienced and described how it changed us under the Discussion section. It is our intention that shining a light on our own process will help those who have had similar experiences, as well as those work those previously or currently in conservative Christian education, to better evaluate and overcome the associated challenges brought to light in this study.

Methods

Preliminary Considerations

In the first phase of our research process, we became better acquainted with each other and identified a topic of common interest. We had already done several classes together as professor and student, but we were not personal acquaintances familiar with our differing life stories. As partial fulfillment of the course requirements, we had to identify an area of significant difference that had affected our educational experiences. Initial conversations led us to biological sex as our axis of difference, which affected our experiences in similar conservative Christian schools.

As Linly was an online student located far from campus, we utilized Zoom, a cloud-based videoconferencing software, to facilitate synchronous dialogue and Google Docs to further discuss and co-construct the interwoven narrative. Such use of technology is an effective tool to facilitate duoethnography (Le Fevre & Sawyer, 2012).

Dialogic Data Collection and Analysis

The process we followed is well summarized by Huckaby and Weinburgh (2012)—“we recorded, transcribed, revisited, and restoried our writing” (p. 158). Thus, in the second phase of our research, we engaged in data collection. In duoethnography, data collection is done through dialogue between two individuals of significant, relevant difference (Norris & Sawyer,

2012). We did our first dialogue session live via Zoom, and we focused on describing our previous educational experiences. We asked each other probing questions, and then we compared and contrasted those experiences. We focused our second live dialogue session on our experiences through the lenses of our different biological sexes. As one would share, the other would, again, ask probing questions and make comparative remarks.

We followed Saldaña's (2016, p. 14) approach to qualitative data analysis, wherein we started with the raw transcripts and writing as data, coded for recurring elements, aggregated those elements into categories, and then finally we organized those categories into themes as coherent units of meaning. Norris and Sawyer (2012) described analysis of duoethnographic data as similar to layered-account autoethnography, which occurs concurrently with data collection (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, we engaged in informal data analysis—coding, categorization, thematization—each time we dialogued; however, our third dialogue was then focused on meaning making of the previous two conversations and to identify major themes.

At this point, we shifted our collaboration from being live through Zoom to asynchronous through Google Docs. While the live dialogue had afforded us the ability to respond intuitively and in-the-moment, asynchronous interaction promoted deep consideration and well-articulated responses. One author would add content under the themes we had identified, and similar to our live interactions, the other would add comparative content and ask probing questions.

We then conducted our fourth dialogue live via Zoom, wherein we holistically discussed what we had found through the three previous iterations. Because we observed that the prior asynchronous phase felt like pen pal letters, we decided to style the presentation of our findings in that fashion as a natural extension of our data collection and analysis. Having refined our preliminary themes in this fourth dialogue, we then went back to re-story our own findings from the transcribed live dialogue and written asynchronous dialogues. We wrote these letters chronologically as presented in the Findings, wherein the first letter listed under a theme was sent to the other author who then re-storied their own findings in response.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics can be murky within duoethnography. Norris and Sawyer (2012) noted that, for duoethnography, the “ethical issues are somewhat different. . . . Duoethnographers agree to write joint papers with themselves as the sites of their research. The people who wrote them will benefit from the publication and understood the risks of harm” (p. 21). These issues had the potential to be magnified by the professional relationship wherein Phillip was Linly's professor and the project was done in partial fulfillment of course requirements. Indeed, duoethnography has often been done between faculty members and students (Kidd & Finlayson, 2015; Latz & Murray, 2012; Snelson, Wertz, Onstott, & Bader, 2017; Tlale & Romm, 2019), and Phillip had experience doing so with a professor when he was a graduate student (Olt & Teman, 2018). His previous experience from the other side of the power dynamic shaped his approach in this project as the professor. We believe that we effectively mitigated such potential ethical issues. Phillip came to the project with a willingness to be open and discuss anything in the project. They shared common elements, such as writing the methodology and literature review, and no interpersonal complications arose that might have muddied grading. Linly was to be graded individually on her contributions to the project, without positive or negative influence from Phillip's work in it. When we discussed places or people other than ourselves, we only used generalized terms so as to protect confidentiality.

Ethical concerns within duoethnography are not, however, limited to the authors. Norris and Sawyer (2012) described what they saw as the most significant ethical issue in duoethnographic research—“the inclusion of others in stories of one's own” (p. 22). Unlike

most other human-subjects research, this issue does not arise from collecting data directly from others; rather, as the researchers are known and share their own stories (in lieu of other participants), this may create ethical issues for those mentioned in their stories. To combat this, they proposed two guidelines—“to (a) just tell the story without value judgments being placed on the other and (b) frame the individual as one constructed from your point of view, not as truth” (p. 23). Connecting our duoethnography to those guidelines, we worked diligently to protect others in our stories. We clearly explained that these were our own points of view, and that is further reinforced by the presentation as letters written by our past selves. We also generally avoided identifying others, especially so when the context might be seen as negative. So, while we may mention “mom” or “female teachers at school,” we avoid mentioning their names. As noted from Norris and Sawyer (2012), those who know us may be able to identify those, but that is inherent to the storytelling process.

Thus, due to the unique nature of duoethnographic research and the power dynamics involved, we gave great consideration to ethics in the preparation of this manuscript. As the authors were the only humans involved in this collection and analysis of data using our own memories and stories, we did not need review-board approval at our institution (consistent with Norris & Sawyer, 2012, pp. 22-23), and our joint participation is evidence of joint consent. We mitigated any potential harm to others mentioned in our memories by removing publicly identifiable information, such as names of people or organizations.

Findings

Writing for our former selves, we present our findings in a series of pen pal-styled letters, reflecting on each of the major themes in our exploration of how our different biological sexes affected our educational experiences at religious schools in the United States. We determined that this would be a powerful way to communicate our own thoughts and experiences, with the implied distance of a pen pal symbolizing the gendered gap created by our schools. In this section, we present our findings in the themes of gendered roles, gendered responsibilities, and romance and sexuality.

Gendered Roles

Linly’s letter. Hi Phillip,

I hope you are doing well. Senior year has been really stressful so far here. It seems like our Bible teacher is gone every week to coach a basketball game. I don’t really understand—if the Bible holds the most important lessons for us, why does it seem like all the Bible teachers are so absent? Except, of course, the one female Bible teacher we have is usually here, but she’s only allowed to teach one class, and none of the guys can take it. It just doesn’t seem right to me. I know a ton of women who possess all the leadership skills that any man does, and yet everything in our school and church seems to suppress those skills in us. Or at least limit us a *lot*.

I even told my parents last week that I was thinking about going into higher education student affairs, which I know will at least require a master’s degree. My mom thought it sounded really great, but my dad gave me a speech about how that career probably wouldn’t pay for the degrees it will require, like most careers that women go into. He told me that being a stay-at-home mom *was* a full-time job. It’s the same message I get *all* the time here. Shouldn’t I focus on my career before I think about getting married and having kids? What if I don’t even want kids? Does that make me a bad woman? I feel like there are

tons of men who never get married or have kids, and no one says anything about that. But when it's a woman, it's like she's incomplete if she's not a wife and mother. It's really frustrating. For example, there are two older female teachers at school who have never been married, so everyone spreads rumors that they are lesbians. But there's also an older male teacher who's never been married. Guess what people say about him...nothing! I don't get why people make assumptions about single women, but not about single men.

I try to speak up when I hear these conversations happening or when I have questions about this stuff they tell us in Bible class, but people just call me "opinionated," which really doesn't feel like a compliment. Women are supposed to be submissive and calm and gentle and soft spoken, but that's just not who I am. If that's how God wants women to be, why didn't he make us all that way? Why do men get the right to have opinions and make rules and share all of their thoughts? It feels like the reason we need a husband is so that he can be our voice, because at school and in the church, we don't get to have one.

Anyway, I hope you are doing well. Thanks for letting me share these thoughts and opinions with you. Talk to you soon!

Phillip's letter. Dear Linly,

I hope this letter finds you well! I know you've been struggling lately with how your school is teaching you to be a woman—wife and mother, no more. Honestly, I've had a lot of frustration with all this talk of gender roles too, lately. More and more, I feel like there's a hidden message or hidden curriculum behind what the staff say.

I think my high school and church are very heavy on traditional gender roles—that the 1950s version of family is God's version of the family. The husband works and has a good middle class job with a house. The wife has 2.5 children, stays home, cleans, has dinner waiting when her husband gets home, and then he walks in and says, "Hello, honey, how are you?" I think that is kind of their vision of the way life is supposed to play out. Even though it isn't always spoken, there is very much of an overwhelming presence of the traditional 1950s gender roles. Everyone is just kind of expected to be an actor playing out their role.

In my school, it's pretty clear that the principal could never be a woman even though that isn't necessarily a pastor's position (which our denomination does not allow a woman to be a pastor). They never overtly said it *isn't* a woman's position, but it is clearly the case, even though I can't understand why. I assume it's the leadership thing—the belief that women aren't meant to be leaders.

We also seem to have a different English teacher for the high school almost every year (we only have one such position). That spot is typically filled by a recent college graduate, who is a woman who had just gotten married, took this job, and then become pregnant within the school year. In fact, I think this is somewhat of a staffing strategy—they try to get wives in the church who aren't working outside the home to come teach. Like, "Oh hey, this guy is a member of our church and he has a wife, and she's not working...And, we need an English teacher..." There always seems to be this perception among the male students that this stream of English teachers are angry towards men, especially as the pregnancy would go on, and then it seems like they express that anger toward us guys. That's the kind of a perception we talk about.

All the other guys in my grade go take classes like auto maintenance at the tech center. Of course, the girls never take classes like that. I mean, they are *allowed* to, but I could never imagine they would choose that. It just wouldn't fit with the gender roles and expectations.

I think all this is a big reason why I am thinking about going into the U.S. Army rather than fulfill their expectations to go to a Christian college, get a good job, and have lots of kids. I don't want to be so sheltered and so controlled. It's an opportunity for me to go do something else and get away from it, frankly.

I'm so glad I have you to talk to. Can't wait to hear from you soon!

Reflection on gendered roles. In our pen-pal letters, we reflected on the gender roles that we were trained to fill at our conservative Christian high schools. The teachings, based in Christian beliefs, upheld that the traditional gender roles of 1950s America were supported by the Bible and were necessary components of a good Christian's life. However, we both felt some degree of injustice amidst the significant pressure to fulfill expectations. Linly, as a woman, was to become a wife and a mother, while Phillip, as a man, was to find a good job to provide for a family. The uncritical imposition of these norms by faculty and administrators ultimately drove each of us out of the mold as we grew older and reflected more deeply on what and how we had been taught. Though both did enter into their own heterosexual marriages, Linly stepped away from religious practice and entered her own career, while Phillip went into the U.S. Army and married a woman who has often made more money with her career.

As we analyzed the roles that we felt were portrayed as appropriate or necessary for our genders according to our schools, we landed on similar findings: men were to be leaders, while women were to be nurturers. As Peshkin (1986) described, "leadership...is a clear male prerogative" (p. 127), even outside the holding of religious offices like pastor. While in this study the authors were burdened with opposing roles, both carried significant pressure. Deviating from these traditional roles is a common reason cited by Evangelical Christians for their perceived deterioration of the institution of marriage (Baker et al., 2009). However, younger generations no longer view gender as static, but as flexible; they have now taken control over defining what is female-male, feminine-masculine (de Wet et al., 2011). However, most Evangelical churches disagree and continue to focus their teachings on traditional gender roles (Palmer, 1993). Rather than focusing so intently on superficial roles, the time and energy might be better spent fostering healthy perceptions in young people as they discover and explore their own identities without adding expectations or assumptions, which are often not even found in the Bible that is supposedly being taught.

Gendered Responsibilities

Phillip's letter. Hi Linly!

So, I've been thinking some more after reading your last letter. Beyond just the roles we're supposed to play based on gender, there is also a lot communicated about gendered responsibilities.

From a guy's perspective, there is a big expectation that, it's your job to provide for your family. There's this really strong burden that you're supposed to have everything figured out when you graduate high school to make sure you can provide the American Dream for your family. You have to be successful at that, because no woman will marry you if you don't have a plan in place and a good enough job to provide for those 2.5 children, get the white picket fence,

etc. And so guys just have to have everything figured out, and that is very hard for me at 17 years old. More and more, I think about joining the Army. That will take me away from all this, and it seems like a pretty good step toward that American Dream with salary, health insurance, and the GI Bill. What I don't really understand about this, however, is that they can't show me where that is in the Bible? They say that the Bible is the sole source of faith and practice, but then the vast majority of what they tell us about gender roles and responsibilities seems to only come from nostalgia about how things were when the administrators were kids.

It's funny though, because I never really hear anything like this for the girls in my grade. All the administrators seem to talk about is "a man's responsibility!" They haven't ever said that women should *never* work outside the home, but it kinda seems like a backhanded implication of that. If men have all the responsibility for work outside the home, then what responsibility do the women have? Go to college? Have kids and support their husband? Cook and clean? Maybe the girls hear that stuff behind closed doors, but publicly, all the responsibility is about the guys.

The crazy thing is that they are doing some, like, social engineering experiment with us. They haven't hired a new custodian at our small school, so they started making us high school guys do the custodial work at the school before and during the school day. Meanwhile, the administrators and teachers sit around with the girls and watch us work. Sometimes, they would even buy doughnuts or something and tell the guys they were for us. Then, they sit with the girls and eat them while we work.

I think it's a little messed up that they do this stuff—well, maybe a bit more messed up than a little...Thinking ahead, I wonder how this is going to affect me in another 17 years? I can't imagine that I'm going to forget it all like some bad dream. What if my wife works—and makes more than me? Will that mean I'm a failure at my responsibilities?

Linly's letter. Hi Phillip,

Thanks for your last letter. I feel like we hear that a lot too—about men taking care of their families. My dad is a pilot, so when he's home, he doesn't have to do anything for work; so then, he drives us to school, picks us up, makes our lunches, and does other "womanly" tasks. I remember once in middle school, he came on a class field trip. He was the only dad among all the stay-at-home moms, and people kept commenting on it. I was actually embarrassed for him, as that was not considered "normal" in the 1990s. I saw what you're talking about. Men are supposed to be at work, but women should be at home taking care of their children and the house.

I feel like the main reason everyone wants us to go to college is to find a husband. Men go to pursue careers while women go to pursue husbands. It seems like they are constantly advocating for us to get married as soon as we can. People are always talking about planning their weddings, what they'll name their kids, etc. I just want to travel! I can't even think about kids right now. My mom got married at 23, and had my brother at 24. That is so young, but it seems like it's what everyone here does—and they are always talking to us about "remaining pure" until we do get married. They tell us that it's our responsibility in the relationship, because men can't control themselves.

I don't want to get too dark here, but there is one thing that's really been

bothering me recently. We had this one conversation in Bible class recently about abortion. It seemed like everyone was on the same page—it's always completely wrong 100% of the time, no question. But I *had* a question, and you know me—so opinionated; I asked it. I asked about cases of rape. I added that, if one of my sisters got raped, I would want her to be able to have an abortion. Everyone just stared at me in what felt like total disgust. The teacher wouldn't even respond. He just changed the subject, but I feel like it's a topic that merits a conversation! Why would that be a woman's responsibility to go through a pregnancy and birth that would constantly be an extremely painful reminder of an incredibly traumatic event? What if a woman has a health condition that could kill her if she had a baby? Is it still her responsibility to God and her husband to have the baby? It seems horrible to me, to be perfectly honest. I wouldn't marry a man who would put me in that situation. Yet, the message that women should have children is driven home so hard here, that it seems like women who can't have children might be failures. That must hurt them a lot.

Sorry I got so serious there! It was just weighing heavily on my mind since it happened. I still feel awkward and unwelcome going into that Bible class. Hopefully things will improve soon. Talk to you later!

Reflection on gendered responsibilities. In addressing the gender roles we learned about at our respective schools, we determined that gendered roles and responsibilities were really two different aspects of the experience. While the roles focused on what we were supposed to look like and how we were supposed to act, the responsibilities were the weight of failing to do so. Phillip was trained that, in order to be a good Christian, his duty as a man was to provide for a family at all costs, including great personal sacrifice. If he was then unable to do so, it would compromise his identity as a man and his standing among other Christians. The leadership Peshkin (1986) described as part of the male gendered role thus came with responsibilities to produce. On the other hand, Linly understood her role to be limited to that as wife and mother. Failing to meet this criteria meant she was not a good woman. Even pursuing a serious career could jeopardize her femininity. Christian education does tend to define womanhood revolves around a female's ability to find and maintain a husband, keep the home, and raise children (de Wet et al., 2012).

We found that our institutions' teaching offered little flexibility, even when such prescriptiveness was not apparent in the Bible. Isherwood (2004) further explored the importance the church placed on the genders, especially women, fulfilling their expected responsibilities:

Many fundamentalist Christians seem to believe that many of the ills of the world would be cured if sex was saved for marriage, and duty not pleasure was the order of the day. The seriousness and sincerity of this argument is best illustrated by examples taken from the Religious Right in America who argue that even national security and economic growth relies on "traditional family values." Of course that means that women know their rightful place and have white Christian children for Christ. (p. 274)

Mpofu, Mutepfa, and Hallfors (2012) found that continued, uncritical communication of that messaging from Christian education may lead to resentment, constraints, and unhealthy practices or attitudes for students after they graduate. The teachings persist in this setting that girls are naturally better suited for tasks such as housekeeping and cooking, and unfit to carry any responsibilities outside of the home—that God created them specifically for these

responsibilities, despite modern young people's growing desire to be "active agents constructing their identities...constrained by the cultural resources available to them" (Pattman & Bhana, 2009, p. 22).

Romance and Sexuality

Linly's letter. Hey, Phillip!

I hope everything is going well. I was thinking more on what we were writing about recently with how our responsibilities differ based on our genders. It's crazy how much pressure they put on us already as teenagers! This week, we hit a topic related to it that really bothered me.

We had girls' chapel this week, and it was another lecture on finding the right husband. It seems like we get that lesson so often, as if our whole purpose on this planet is to find the perfect Godly man, snag him, and then have his babies—and of course, to make sure he doesn't get too physical with us until we're married. It gets so uncomfortable for us, especially the girls who have boyfriends. I think it makes them afraid that their boyfriends are probably constantly and exclusively thinking about having sex with them, and then it's the girl's total responsibility to keep them from doing it. Then, the next week, they tell us that we are supposed to let these men lead us and be in charge. It's really confusing. They make you guys sound like animals! I have a lot more respect for most of the guys I know, but these messages I'm getting in school keep making me question it.

In another chapel, they talked about how girls who have sex before they're married are like chewing gum that's already been chewed, or Skittles that someone already chewed...No one will want you, because you're already dirty and gross. Where's the grace and forgiveness in that? Apparently in the guys' chapel they were just told not to masturbate. They're told it's natural for them to think about sex all the time; in fact, it's kind of a running joke that "guys think about sex every 32 seconds" or whatever. They can think about it all the time; it's just their biology. However, *our* biology is to have control of guys when it comes to maintaining sexual purity, but to allow them to control pretty much every other aspect of our lives. Seems like the guys have it so easy. It just doesn't add up for me.

I actually remember my 8th grade Bible teacher once wrote on the white board about "where sexual sin starts." According to him, it started with hand-holding, went on to kissing, and then other activities until the end of the line was sex. He drew a circle around "heavy kissing" before "heavy petting" and told us that was where sin started. Okay, fine, whatever. But *then*, he told us that it was up to the girl to say "stop" at that point. He said that once a guy reached that point, there was no going back for him. It's like no women ever have any sex drive. They just "submit to their husbands." Guys want sex, but we're not allowed to. We don't get to have any pleasure or desire for them. Or even worse, we have to suppress, suppress, suppress for all the years before marriage, but then *literally* overnight, we're supposed to be ready to jump right into it and submit to our husband whenever he wants it. That sounds impossible to me. We're told that we should try to view our "Christian brothers" as just that—brothers. But then, how could I ever find a husband if I keep trying to picture these guys as my brother? Ew! I constantly feel guilty just for finding guys attractive, like, I've already taken it a step too far! I don't think that's what God

wants for us. I don't think that's what he meant. It seems very unfair for us.

Sorry, I know this is kind of an uncomfortable subject, especially since you're in an environment just like me that seems to intentionally make it awkward. I feel like I shouldn't ever talk about it, but it seems like you don't judge like most of my peers here do. In another Bible class this year, I tried asking about how we are supposed to keep ourselves from even thinking about sex, because supposedly, just thinking about it is already a sin. Again, I was just stared at and felt gross for asking. The teacher didn't really answer me. He just reiterated that thinking about any of my male peers or friends in that way was wrong. It seems like we're set up to fail by our biology.

I hope you've received some more positive messages at school lately. There must be some balance somewhere in the middle! Hopefully we'll find it soon. Thanks for letting me vent when I need to!

Phillip's letter. Hello again; I'm so thankful we can share these letters!

We don't talk about relationships or sex education at my school—especially not in the positive sense of what good or healthy is supposed to look like. In a conversation with an administrator, I learned that we had a female student a few years ago who got pregnant as a senior out of wedlock. Rather than moving on with life or giving positive instruction to the students, the administrators and teachers seemed to concoct this scheme to make the boys and girls hate each other so no one would get each other pregnant. It's like they think, "Maybe if we get these people to dislike each other, they won't interact, and nothing will happen that we don't want."

Their plan has really seemed to backfire. It's not like any of their schemes change our biological inclinations. They just change the "who" we're attracted to, so in a lot of ways, I feel that's counterproductive to their goal. Rather than the "good Christian kids" dating each other, so to speak, the guys just found girlfriends who went to public school. It didn't make them not want to have girlfriends at 16 years old; it just made them hate those girls who were at our school.

Have you read Joshua Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997)? I haven't, but the administrators and teachers seem obsessed with it right now. I think the author has a really convoluted idea of love and romance, even compared to other Christian perspectives. All this talk of "courting" makes me think we're back in the 1800s or something. In a way, I think it's almost like arranged marriages between families. With how much the people in charge here love it, I assume this isn't going away soon, unfortunately. It might be from that book—I'm not sure, but there is this big saying in our school, "Date to mate." They apply it like this: if you're in high school, you're not old enough to get married; therefore, you shouldn't be dating.

For as much as the people in charge here don't want to talk about it, there seems to be an obsession with sexuality, though always as a bad thing. They talk like every guy is a budding sexual predator and every girl a seductress. Even if it's only for marriage, why isn't there every any talk about romance and sex being good things? Seems like God created that for people, after all. With how much negative talk there is, I feel like I'm under constant surveillance, and everyone is suspect about my motives. Even though I really like girls, I feel guilty even talking to them, because they might feel uncomfortable or scared that I was going to attack them or something.

I really just wish we could get past all this guilting and shaming that assumes we're going to do things we're not supposed to. Like, what is a healthy relationship supposed to look like?

Reflection on romance and sexuality. We found our educational experiences about sex and relationships to be seriously lacking, even to the point of being counterproductive. In the administrators' and teachers' efforts to keep the students from premarital sex, they instead cultivated unhealthy attitudes and practices about the students of other gender and sexuality, resulting in underprepared and undereducated youth. The stereotypes that our schools prescribed for us—men as untamable sex maniacs and women as either chaste or seductresses—were clearly meant to instill fear of the opposite sex. However, American attitudes on sexuality have changed greatly from the 1990s now going into the 2020s, but vestiges of these portrayals remain. In the #MeToo movement of the late-2010s, a small number of powerful men were identified as serial perpetrators, feeding the male stereotype but certainly not being representative of all men in society. Hiding beneath caricatures, in fact, appeared to make it easier for these actual predators to hide their activities. In our letters, we found that the messages we received from our high schools left us confused about our own identities and about what a healthy relationship should look like, whether within or outside of the confines of religion.

Peshkin (1986) noted that one of the greatest areas of emphasis in schools like this is that of romantic relationships, with any non-heterosexual inclinations being eschewed while heterosexual relationships were to be tightly controlled. He described how, "Romance is very much a part of student life, but it is romance in [the school's] style" (Peshkin, 1986, p. 153).

While our schools gave much effort to keep students from entering into premarital relationships, they failed to prepare them for what a successful relationships could look like. This failure to prepare young people can often be a dangerous oversight with ramifications throughout students' lives. It remains a common message from Evangelical Christians that premarital sexual relations make a person used and undesirable (Dent & Maloney, 2017).

As we demonstrated, these assigned responsibilities can result in unhealthy views of oneself. Men learn that they cannot control their bodies, making some feel unnecessarily guilty and giving others an excuse for demonstrating animalistic behavior. On the other hand, women are tasked with maintaining purity in the relationship before marriage. Women may be made to feel guilty if they do experience sexual desire and are expected to repress it for the spiritual wellbeing of themselves and their partners. Isherwood (2004) noted the importance that:

[Christians] need to endorse this view and not make the body the enemy or at best the worst kept secret in the world...They should not just celebrate the procreative nature of women but rather they should revel in the capacity for pleasure that a woman has and the vast potential that pleasure has to change the world. (p. 281)

Most Evangelicals still fail to recognize this need for an equal share of the responsibility to practice healthy habits in sex and love, however. The message remains that a good Christian marriage depends on these gender roles being also applied to romance and sexuality (Baker et al., 2009).

Discussion

Through our discourse, we explored how our different biological sexes affected our educational experiences in conservative Christian high schools. There were specific roles and

responsibilities that were clearly prescribed for each of us according to our biological sex. In turn then, the expression of sexuality was supposed to be limited inside a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, though even there it was to be a taboo and dirty concept. Though our experiences varied significantly based on our biological sexes, the educational approach used at our schools created impediments to our social and psychological development both then and now.

Changes to the Authors' Perspectives

Norris and Sawyer (2012) described a central tenant of duoethnography as *currere*, or viewing one's "life as a curriculum" wherein "duoethnographers recall and reexamine that emergent, organic, and predominantly unplanned curriculum in conversation with one another" (p. 12). To that end here, we each share how our ways of thinking have changed about the ways in which our biological sexes affected our experiences in religious education.

Phillip. This process of duoethnography has forced me to revisit many of the experiences of my youth to consider deeper meaning. My youthful reflections of annoyance and frustration have now turned to a more balanced way of thinking. As a teenager, it was easy to only consider my lens and my side of the experiences.

I had previously misplaced blame for my own negative experiences on my fellow students who were female. I genuinely believe the school leadership wanted that to be the case to try to minimize the development of romantic relationships. I am sad that I allowed myself to play that role so well. Hearing Linly describe her experiences, I was able to better interrogate my own, now through my clearer lenses of 20/20 hindsight. The reality of my situation was that none of the students were in a healthy setting to consider their own sex or sexuality. I say that now believing that a much healthier and more successful environment could have been provided—even if operating under the assumptions of very traditional sex roles and responsibilities or that sexuality should only exist in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Though it is very easy to focus on such traditional norming from our dialogue, I believe the central problem in both of our settings was a focus on externalism rather than internal understanding of and commitment to what was being taught. They were somewhat effective at controlling students while in high school, but without ever asking students to think about why or consider themselves as autonomous people with regard to the subject matter, they produced a climate of fearful protectionism that generated little but resentment in the long-term.

Linly. Over a decade after graduating from a conservative Christian high school, these reflections on my experience have evoked mixed feelings. During that period, I do not think I spent much time closely analyzing and challenging what I learned, especially what I learned surrounding sexual education. I am inclined to agree with Isherwood's (2004) assertion that, "Young women need to understand that they are women and that this looks as they wish it to; they are not made into women by the gaze of others" (p. 282). Had I considered those lessons with more scrutiny, I think I would have benefited from having a much more balanced perspective as I grew and matured in the years that followed.

I often try to remind myself, with the aid of close friends and family, that I should be grateful for all of the education I have received. I recognize that such education is a luxury that many people, especially women, do not have access to. When given the opportunity to assess the education I received, however, I do find shortcomings, especially regarding sex education. I left high school unprepared in many ways for what followed. I was extremely naive about my own and others' sexuality, feeling limited in what my role and options as a woman were. I left high school believing that it was my responsibility to hold men accountable for remaining sexually pure and, at the same time, to allow them to be my leader. The burden was placed on us, as women, to dress and act in such a way that *we* would not tempt *them*. I now find the

contradiction that exists in these lessons to be astounding.

As I have grown since high school, learning about Phillip's experience has helped bring more balance to my reflections. While I do still view Christianity as a highly patriarchal ideology, hearing his stories brought me to realize that the men, too, were given what I would consider unnecessarily heavy burdens at that particular stage of development. While their burdens still gave them a distinct advantage as the leaders and heads over women, they were still inappropriate for young people to receive. If Christian institutions found a more balanced center, perhaps both sexes could experience relief from these burdens.

Understanding the Perspective on Biological Sex in Conservative Christian Schools

Conservative Christian schools in America teach students about religious beliefs as woven through the instruction in all subjects (Peshkin, 1986). Deriving those religious beliefs from the Bible as the sacred text, two sections perhaps best summarize the way of thinking that shaped our experiences. "So God created man in his own image. . . male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27, English Standard Version). Extending from this binary creation, God assigned different roles and responsibilities to Adam and Eve after they sinned. "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:1-2, English Standard Version). As Phillip reflected upon previously, there was little to no discussion of sexuality in the positive as stated in this passage; however, it is framed as exclusively within the monogamous relationship of a married man and woman.

These two passages laid the foundation for our educational experiences, though certainly there are many others that interplay. Because God had created humans as biological males and females with different roles and responsibilities, it was the leaders' responsibility at the Christian schools to indoctrinate that into their students. Similarly, it was their responsibility to control students the expression of their sexuality in any venue outside of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, which was not really even possible in that high school context.

Whether we or anyone else agreed with their theology on these issues, there was a logic to what they were doing; however, the actions taken from that way of thinking were both generally unproductive and harmful. Because we and our peers were not intentionally exposed to other perspectives until adulthood and outside of the supervision of school leaders and parents, there was commonly a shock to the system when we encountered views other than our own. There was an inability to explain or defend what the school had taught us to believe, and so many of our peers completely reversed their way of thinking shortly after graduation. Because romance and sexuality were so consistently portrayed in a negative light, we still experience lasting struggles. While the author of 1 Corinthians 7 portrayed sexuality within marriage as a positive thing, we both struggled in our separate heterosexual marriages with the guilt and shame we had been trained to associate with sexuality. Even having the dialogue for this duoethnography, we were reminded of how taboo the topic still is for us after a decade or more removed from our Christian school training.

Limitations

As this study was framed by our own experiences, our findings were limited to those contexts. Linly presented the cisgendered female perspective, while Phillip supplied a cisgender male perspective. Both of our schools were Evangelical, though from different denominations, and as such, they could not represent the breadth of settings in which conservative Christian education has been offered. Despite the narrowness of the contexts in

this duoethnography, we ask the readers to look for aspects that can be transferred to their own setting.

Implications for Research and Practice

Harris (n.d.) came back to the topic of his book on courtship many years later, offering an apology for how his book may have “restricted you, hurt you, or gave you a less-than-biblical view of yourself, your sexuality, your relationships, and God” (para. 7). We hope that those who perpetuated an unhealthy and ineffective environment can similarly come to terms with their impact.

This dialogue provides a depth of insight beyond the existing body of literature. As such conservative Christian education has experienced significant contraction over the last decades, critical research has also dried up. However, as demonstrated in this duoethnography, the effects can last a lifetime. Further, those providing curriculum in any venue would do well to consider the high-level messaging and how students critically interact with it. We make the following recommendations to practice:

1. For those delivering any curriculum, it is important to consider the hidden curriculum. Consider what is implied beyond just what is explicitly stated, and look at the meanings inferred by the students rather than just what was implied by those giving it.
2. In order to most effectively deliver that curriculum, focus attention on critical engagement with it. If you believe in the message of that curriculum, believe that it will stand up to student inspection and critique. By omitting thorough explanations of “why” and a focus on critical thinking, students may accept and comply in the short-term, but they may well turn from it once they are beyond your control.

As research interest in those in conservative religious education has experienced a significant decrease parallel to or outpacing the sector’s market share, we propose the importance of further research on the topic, specifically along the following lines:

1. Given the rapid changes in Western society’s conceptions of sex and gender, further investigation is warranted of the lasting perceptions on these topics by those who went through the Christian school movement of the 1960s through early 2000s. As we noted lasting impacts, it is likely that others with similar experiences would also experience some long-term impacts.
2. Such instruction on issues around gender in conservative Christian education provides incredible research opportunities to investigate the general phenomena of the effectiveness of (a) moral education and (b) instructional approaches based on students’ acceptance of assertion rather than critical evaluation. In both cases, there are now many adults in the 30-55 year old age range to evaluate the persistence of belief and practice based on their years under such tutelage. Principles derived from that might then be applied more broadly affect social and moral education, as well as general pedagogy.

While this duoethnography does not provide a result that is generalizable across all those who experienced similar educational circumstances, we do believe it illuminates such experiences and suggests a path forward to both research and practice.

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