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ARTIFACTS

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Wrap It or Pack It

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Sex is everywhere. In today's society it seems like everyone is having sex, and is having it often. Whether it is homosexual, heterosexual, or asexual, it is truly the normative behavior. In twentieth century heterosexual relationships, there is a discriminative bias of sexuality as men in the dominant role and women in the submissive role. As such, there are social stigmas and pressures placed upon both the male and female genders to behave a certain way in a sexual situation. As a woman, I can relate to the multitude of pressures expected of myself and other women, many of which I will discuss. If I desire to be responsible when having sexual relations, it is frowned upon for me to buy condoms or have condoms in my possession.

The social stigma of purchasing or owning condoms is that women who do so are sexually promiscuous or dirty. Similarly, women are seen as undesirable if they suggest condom usage, or are considered uptight if they require condom usage. In addition, the power struggle between men and women often ends with women making amends that would not otherwise have been made.

Essentially, condom use is scarce and inadequate in our society because the majority of women lack the communication efficacy to change the cultural norms. I believe that women behave in this way as a result of three specific reasons. First I will discuss the negative social stigmas placed on women who purchase and possess condoms, next I will look at the unequal power balance between men and women, and last I will explain why a lack of sexual education is a main contributor to this phenomenon.

In a heteronormative society, men are viewed as responsible for the purchase and possession of condoms, while women are deemed responsible for securing other methods of contraception, such as various forms of birth control. Women are supposed to be in charge of their sexual lives, however there are negative social stigmas associated with women and condoms. First, society views women who buy and carry condoms as more promiscuous and ultimately less desirable for a sexual relationship. In an interview rapper and Black Eyed Peas member Will.i.am gave for ELLE Magazine, Will.i.am was asked what item would convince him that he and a woman were not compatible if he saw it in her house. His response is, "If she had condoms in her house, that would just [expletive] throw me off. That's just tacky" (ELLE, 2011, p. 30).

The interviewer then further asks Will.i.am's opinion if these condoms were in a private drawer and not out in the open. To this, he says that a woman should only buy condoms if she is in a committed relationship and the couple has previously had a conversation about purchasing them. This exemplifies the grossly misrepresented idea that women who purchase and possess this method of contraception are more promiscuous and possibly infected with a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Instead of praising women for ensuring healthy sexual relations, society constantly sends the message to women that this a negative decision, and the only women who would need this safety net are those that have exorbitant amounts of sexual relations. The next stigma I will discuss is that using a condom is 'killing the mood', women that bring it up are viewed as undesirable, and women that insist on it are perceived as uptight and overcautious. We have all heard the story: a woman and a man are about to have sex, the woman mentions using a condom, and the male either makes a comment about her killing the mood or her being uptight.

Understandably, no one wants to be seen as uptight, and condom use is forgotten. In 2006, the Center for Disease Control reported that an average of 71.03 percent of Americans admit to using condoms "none of the time", 6.9 percent use condoms "some of the time", and a feeble 22.1 percent of Americans report that they use condoms responsibly on a regular basis (Center for Disease Control, 2006). These numbers are not only the result of the price or availability of condoms, but they are also a reflection of the stigmas associated with this method of contraception. If a woman repeatedly insists on a condom, the male is likely to grow annoyed or try to coerce her to change

her mind.

The woman who will not have sex without a condom is regarded with the same animosity as if it were an obsessive-compulsive habit. By this, I mean she is looked upon as uptight and anal-retentive. The social stigmas that shadow women who buy and insist on using condoms have truly made it unattractive and difficult to maintain healthy sexual habits in a way that will not result in heavy criticism.

The next contribution to women's lack of communication efficacy when in a sexual situation is the presence of an unequal power balance between her and her male counterpart. As previously mentioned, men are historically seen as the dominant partners in the relationship, while women are the more submissive counterparts. For some time now, the two genders have fought against this, struggling to maintain or improve their role. If a woman does not feel like she has the power in the relationship, she will not have the social efficacy to talk about condom use. *Introducing Communication Theory* by R.L. West and L.H. Turner explains this phenomenon through two theories: Communication accommodation theory and muted group theory. The first theory, communication accommodation theory, explains that the individual in lesser power moves "toward another's communication style because of a conscious or unconscious desire for social integration, seeking or showing approval, identification, or communication effectiveness with another" (Street & Giles, 1982, p. 1).

In other words, if a person [female, in this situation] feels uncomfortable or out of place, she will revert to the communication accommodation theory, which deals with the idea that people will accommodate others. The underlying meaning of this theory is that women are historically pegged as the more accommodating gender, and when we feel out of our element, we will do anything to accommodate our partner and close the communication gap. For the purpose of this paper, when women feel the unequal power balance, they will try to make adjustments to their actions, speech, and beliefs to match their partner. This is especially dangerous because it is not a conscious decision, but instead a subconscious instinct.

When a woman cannot make adjustments to her value structure to hypothetically close the power distance, she may become silent as explained in muted group theory. Muted group theory explains that women trying to use "man made language to describe their experiences is somewhat like native English speakers learning to converse in Spanish" (Fitzpatrick, 2007 p. 484). The theory goes on to explain that "to do so they have to go through an internal translation process, scanning the foreign vocabulary for the best words to express their thoughts"; in turn, they are "hesitant and often inarticulate in that they are unable to use language fluently for their purpose" (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 484).

Through this theory, it is explained that [in this situation] women literally lose their words when they feel they do not know how to communicate. Whether the reason for this is social stigmas or lack of education, it is a serious issue. Without their voice, women have little hope of demanding safe sex practices, and avoiding being coerced in a sexual situation. If we think about the unequal power struggle between men and women, we can begin to understand how this theory can take effect. If a woman feels she does not have the power in the relationship/exchange, she will feel inadequate to speak up about what she wants. This potential for an exchange however, can only take place if a woman knows her options.

The last reason for women's inadequate communication skills in regards to condom usage is simply a lack of education. I believe we are moving in the right direction to improve sex education, but even today not enough women are educated about the truly disastrous outcomes that can befall them if they forgo condom usage. The issue of insufficient sexual education and knowledge consists of two parts: many women are uneducated about sexual safety, and many women are uneducated about how to talk to their partner about sexual safety.

In an article from The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, John Brown reports "adolescents consider parents, peers and the media to be important sources of sexual health information" (Brown, 2008, p. 64). What this means, is that our young adults are not receiving the majority of their information from individuals who have been trained in sexual health; they are instead getting information from their friends and the media.

It only takes a look around to see that the media and groups of people do not make the best resources for sexual information. The facts, concerns, and issues are misrepresented, and this can lead to misinformation about what is normal, natural, and expected in a sexual relationship. Laferriere (2011) called for women to demand better sexual equality and education (Laferriere, 2011). So much misinformation has become prevalent that it is difficult for our young people to decipher what is right, wrong, safe, hazardous, and so on. Laferriere sums it up nicely when she states, "these women may not feel empowered to reject sexual advances or activity that does not completely appeal to them due to social pressure or simply not knowing of alternatives" (Laferriere, 2011, p. 1).

What I personally find equally as disturbing is that many young people have not been educated on how to talk about sexual safety. Once they have beaten the hurdle of misinformation, they realize that they do not have the tools necessary to eloquently talk about condom use or voice their concerns. This means that when the time comes for them to take a stand and demand condom usage, they do not feel comfortable. I feel that women themselves feel like they do not have the tools to even begin a conversation. Maybe these women are embarrassed, uncomfortable, or just intimidated, but the silence needs to end. Our society is moving towards a more open and upfront approach when it comes to dialogue, which I believe will especially help with this issue of communication. A mere boost in sexual

education and education about approaching the topic of safer sex could aid so much in the fight to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancies.

Condom usage is very important for preventing unwanted pregnancies and fighting against sexually transmitted infections, but they are unfortunately brushed aside in a sexual situation. I believe that the inadequate usage of condoms is the result of insufficient communication skills on behalf of women. This gap in communication stems from three factors: negative social stigmas about women and condoms, an unequal power balance, and a simple lack of education. Over time, one can hope that this happenstance will become less frequent. Women will ideally take charge of their sexual lives, and build the communication efficacy to speak up when faced with the question of condoms.

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