
THE AIMS OF SEX EDUCATION: DEMOTING AUTONOMY
AND PROMOTING MUTUALITY

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, Paula McAvoy critiques a commonly held view that teaching young people to be good choice makers should be a central aim of sex education. Specifically, she argues against David Archard's recommendation that sex educators ought to focus on the development of autonomy and teaching young people that "choice should be accorded the central role in the legitimation of sexual conduct." Instead, McAvoy argues that under conditions of gender inequality this view advantages boys and disadvantages girls. Juxtaposing a case of a culturally arranged marriage with a spring break scene from Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, McAvoy shows that focusing on sexual choice making obscures and reifies the unequal social conditions that young people navigate. She concludes by suggesting an alternative that is in line with Sharon Lamb's argument in "Just the Facts? The Separation of Sex Education from Moral Education" that intimate encounters are better governed by attending to our ethical obligations to others.

Liberal theorists often argue that the development of autonomy ought to be a central aim of education. Indeed, acquiring the skills and disposition to make well-informed choices about how to govern one's life is essential for living well within a liberal state, and it would seem that this is exactly the value that ought to guide a sex education curriculum. In *Sex Education*, political philosopher David Archard argues,

The liberal education must help to create individuals who can make free, autonomous choices as to how they want to lead their lives. It should maximize the opportunities and capacities of individuals to exercise their own free choices. And if sex education is indeed a part of that general education then it should be shaped and informed by the same ideal. This means at least three things for how sex is taught. First it means that young persons should be supplied with enough information to make informed, considered choices. Second it means that young persons should be taught to make their own choices. Third it means that *choice should be accorded the central role in the legitimation of sexual conduct*.¹

I take as true that an important feature of sex education must be providing young people with reliable information about their bodies, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and the dangers of high-risk behavior. I also recognize that being able to make choices, set limits, and communicate one's wants are important features of a positive sexual life. In short, I agree with Archard's first two elements of sex education, but I disagree with his third recommendation, that "choice should be accorded the central role in the legitimation of sexual conduct." I argue that in the intimate world of sexual relationships Archard's view of autonomy-as-choice making reifies gender inequalities and, further, crowds out other values that are more appropriate for guiding sexual conduct.

1. David Archard, *Sex Education* (London: Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 2000), 37 (emphasis added). This work will be cited in the text as *SE* for all subsequent references.

ARCHARD'S ARGUMENT

Archard positions his argument within the structure of a modern liberal pluralist state. More specifically, he considers sex education within the current policies and social context of the UK, but his argument fits well within liberal theory more generally. He starts from the reality that young people in the UK are having their first sexual experience at younger and younger ages and that the UK, at the time of his writing, has the highest rates of teen pregnancy in Western Europe. Factoring into this trend is the "sexualization" of mainstream culture into one that is saturated in sexual messages and imagery, and this appears to be speeding the "passage to maturity" (SE, 11). Though children are raised with a barrage of sexual imagery, what they see is a commodified view of sex that is used to sell products and that does little to inform young people about risks or to promote a view of sex that is intimate or healthy. Archard concedes that there is no turning back this trend and so takes it as a given that young people are sexually aware but often not well-informed about sex. Archard argues that given this and the fact that sex is an important part of life, it should be "obvious" that some form of sex education belongs in the school curriculum and is a necessary part of a good education (SE, 15).

Designing a sex education curriculum that attends to these realities and is supported by the public is a political challenge. The problem is that the "fact of pluralism" means that there are competing views about what constitutes an appropriate, moral, healthy sex life for young people (and for adults). Archard identifies four values that might be appropriate for guiding the creation of a sex education program in light of these different views: "neutrality, respect for cultures, the rights of parents, and the ends of education" (SE, 21). Archard discusses the merits of each of these views, but shows that no curricular program will be able to satisfy all. For example, teaching toward the "ends of education" requires educators to prepare young people to fulfill their personal potential and to become contributing members of society. Teaching students that contraception is an available option for sexually active people would be appropriate for this aim. However, some parents and cultural groups will oppose a curriculum that does not reinforce their view that sex outside of marriage is morally wrong. In this case, satisfying the ends of education is incompatible with recognizing the rights of (some) parents.

Archard considers several curricular approaches that may be appropriate in light of moral pluralism. He rejects two possibilities. The "retreat to basics" attempts to provide a factual account of sexual reproduction and basic information about STIs. This program fails because the basics are part of the contested territory of moral pluralism. It is not clear, for example, if information about abortion is basic information or a moral question that ought to be left out of the curriculum. Further, "the basics" ignores discussion of the "responsibilities and realities of

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making choices" that young people need to be truly informed about sex (SE, 28). "At the very least," Archard notes, "sex education needs to be a sex *and relationships* education" (SE, 28, emphasis in original). In the second option, a "neutral and comprehensive" curriculum, teachers neutrally present a menu of sexual options alongside the competing moral views. This approach fails because the very selection of options cannot be neutral. Excluding homosexuality, for example, would be applauded by some and be considered an injustice by others. Given these challenges, Archard argues that the most defensible curriculum is one that prioritizes the value of autonomous choice making.

Archard does not give a fully fleshed-out account of what counts as autonomous choice making and instead provides a general sketch that is "recognisably liberal" (SE, 42). He explains that autonomous choices require

not just facts or information but also capacities. To make choices I must be someone who not only understands what it is that I am choosing but someone who is confident in my choices, who will not simply choose to do what others do, or what I am told by someone else is the thing I ought to do. What is important is a high level of self-esteem and self-assurance, a belief that recognising what *you* want to do or believe you ought to do, whatever others might say, is what matters. (SE, 40, emphasis in original)

Consent giving is central to this view because in a liberal society "whatever is consented to by those capable of giving their consent and which harms no-one else is morally permissible" (SE, 41). Although the aim of autonomy is not neutral, Archard argues that it is justified as the guiding principle of sex education because it is in line with the ideals of liberalism that recognize individual liberty and equal respect for all persons (SE, 42).

I take the essence of Archard's view of autonomous sexual choices to be as follows. Autonomous choices are (1) based on accurate information, (2) made with knowledge of the range of options that are available to the agent, (3) made with an awareness of the consequences of one's choice, (4) not unduly influenced by what others think should be done, and (5) aligned with the values one endorses "from the inside."² Legitimate sexual conduct with another occurs when participating individuals choose to have sex and give consent. Rob Reich and Harry Brighouse have both developed accounts of autonomous lives that are similar to Archard's view, but that further explain the necessary conditions for autonomous choice making.³ Like Archard, both Brighouse and

2. Will Kymlicka discusses the difference between living by values one personally endorses "from the inside" and having values imposed "from the outside." See Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 80–84. Harry Brighouse further develops this idea in Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 69.

3. See Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*. Note, however, that both Reich and Brighouse endorse views of autonomy that are less choice-focused than Archard's. Where Archard thinks choices should be maximized, Reich advocates a "minimalist" conception of autonomy that opposes choice maximization. Brighouse, on the other hand, argues that autonomy should be "facilitated," by which he means children should be equipped with the skills necessary

Reich argue that our preferences cannot be autonomous if they are made under conditions of coercion or manipulation. Brighouse also adds that choices cannot be considered autonomous if “people *consciously and deliberately* accommodate their preferences to unjust background conditions: this process is captured by the stories of stoic slaves, or repressed housewives, who come to embrace their unchangeable lot as a way of making their lives more bearable.”⁴ Nor can choices be considered autonomous if people “subconsciously” adapt their preferences to “apparently unchangeable circumstances.”⁵ Like Archard, Reich and Brighouse believe that a good education should equip people to evaluate their inherited beliefs so that they may either accept them as their own or revise them.

The idea of developing students’ ability to be good choice makers through sex education is not limited to Archard. While Archard provides an explicit articulation and defense of this form of sex education, advocates of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) have long taken the stance that sex education must provide young people with the necessary information to make informed and responsible decisions in their sexual lives, and have condemned conservative abstinence-only programs on the basis that they withhold information important to students’ development and well-being.⁶ For example, Advocates for Youth, a nonprofit group that champions a research-based, value-neutral approach to sex education, endorses CSE for “introducing information on relationships, decision-making, assertiveness, and skill building to resist social/peer pressure, depending on grade-level.”⁷ Furthermore, the organization stresses the “*right to accurate and complete information,*” and asserts further that with this information, “young people have an obligation to act *responsibly*, to make safe and sound decisions about sexuality.”⁸ The emphasis placed here, and by other CSE advocates, on information, decision making, and responsibility positions autonomous choice making as the overarching aim of sex education.

to reflect rationally on their lives without necessarily being encouraged to make use of these skills. Josh Corngold’s discussion of autonomy in his contribution to this symposium is more sympathetic to Reich’s perspective than to Archard’s or Brighouse’s. See Josh Corngold, “Moral Pluralism and Sex Education,” in this issue.

4. Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 66 (emphasis in original).

5. *Ibid.*, 66.

6. Sharon Lamb, “Toward a Sexual Ethics Curriculum: Bringing Philosophy and Society to Bear on Individual Development,” *Harvard Educational Review* 80, no. 1 (2010): 6. Also see Sharon Lamb, “Just the Facts? The Separation of Sex Education from Moral Education,” in this issue; in this essay, Lamb provides an account of CSE programs along with the predecessor of these programs, family life and sex education (FLSE), and discusses how both have traditionally focused on choice making. Nancy Kendall also finds CSE curricula to be inattentive to gender inequality and focused on young people as “rational individual decision-makers.” See Nancy Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 350.

7. Advocates for Youth, “Sex Education,” <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/sex-education-home>.

8. James Wagoner, “Teens Need Information, Not Censorship,” <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/topics-issues/abstinenceonly/761?task=view> (emphasis in original).

Both Archard and advocates for CSE hold views of autonomy that are clearly focused on individuals reflecting on their own desires, cultural values, and morals to come to an independent understanding of their sexual preferences.⁹ Archard's justification begins with the principle that in a liberal society the state must recognize the autonomy of individuals and then argues that autonomy ought also to play a central role in the intimate sphere of sexual relationships. While it is true that the state must not interfere with the private sex lives of consenting adults, this does not necessarily mean that autonomy or fairness ought to play the central role in our intimate relationships. Indeed, other goods such as intimacy, love, trust, and generosity are often crowded out when friends, family members, and partners are overly attentive to their individual preferences.

SEXUAL CHOICE MAKING

In what follows, I critique the emphasis on choice making that Archard and other proponents of CSE advocate. To do this, I juxtapose two cases of sexual choice making by young adults to show that (1) given the existence of gender inequality, choice making cannot be the legitimating feature of sexual conduct; and (2) teaching young people to be more autonomous in their sexual behavior exacerbates rather than ameliorates gender inequality. In making this case I broaden the discussion of sexual conduct from Archard's narrow focus on deciding "whether or not to have sex, with whom we have sex, and what kind of sex we have with them."¹⁰ Instead, I think about sexual behavior more broadly to include all expressions of oneself as a sexual being. Young people make many sexual choices that range from how to dress and present themselves, to making out in the backseat, to "sexting" (sending sexually explicit text messages), to engaging in all kinds of other intimate, sexual activities that do not put them at risk of early pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Given Archard's belief that the achievement of autonomy requires developing a positive self-image, I trust that he would not disagree with this broader approach of including sexual expression and the development of sexual identity as part of one's sex life.

CASE 1: PHOUA AND ZAJ. Phoua was born in a Thai refugee camp to a Hmong family that fled Laos following the Vietnam War.¹¹ She is the fourth youngest of sixteen children. When she was two years old, she and her family were relocated to the United States, where she now lives within a large Hmong community in

9. Also see Josh Corngold's defense of autonomy in "Moral Pluralism and Sex Education."

10. Archard, *Sex Education*, 38.

11. Phoua's situation is fictional, but based on two 1.5 hour interviews I conducted in April 2005 with "Mai," a twenty-five-year-old Hmong-American woman; conversations I had with Professor Stacey Lee at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; and the analysis provided in Lee's book, *Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005). Elsewhere, I have used a version of this scenario to discuss how arranged marriages for children should be considered within theories of liberalism. See Paula McAvoy, "Should Arranged Marriages for Teenage Girls Be Allowed? How Public Schools Should Respond to Illiberal Cultural Practice," *Theory and Research in Education* 6, no. 1 (2008): 5–20.

the Midwest. Her parents do not speak English and live on public assistance and the help of her older brothers. She attends a public high school and hopes to go to college to become a teacher. Phoua has known for several years that her parents have arranged for her to marry Zaj, a seventeen-year-old boy from a local Hmong family that is financially well-off. The families had agreed that the marriage would not take place until Phoua and Zaj finished high school. One day, Zaj gets jealous when he sees Phoua talking to another boy at school and tells his parents that he wants to get married as soon as possible. Phoua's parents explain to her that in order to keep this good match she needs to marry immediately and will be expected to move in with her in-laws and live as a daughter and wife within their family. Phoua does not want to get married now and would prefer a "love match" later in life, but in order to maintain her status as a "good Hmong daughter," she goes through with the marriage.¹²

CASE 2: GIRLS GONE WILD. In *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Ariel Levy recounts a scene that she witnessed while following a spring break camera crew shooting footage for *Girls Gone Wild* (GGW) videos:¹³

Later that night, GGW hit a second bar, part of a chain called Señor Frogs. . . . Señor Frogs was having a "sexy positions contest." Two chunky young women with the familiar spring break combination of hair bleached to a radioactive white and skin sunned an angry pink were pretending to hump each other on a raised platform. A group of mostly men circled around them and a rhythmic chant of "TAKE-IT-OFF! TAKE-IT-OFF!" rose from the crowd. It was followed by a chorus of boos when the women declined to do so, but as a consolation the taller woman poured beer all over the shorter woman's head and breasts.¹⁴

In both cases we have young people who are making sexual choices. In the first case, Zaj's jealousy results in the demand to move the marriage date. Zaj's choice results in Phoua's decision to respect her parents' (and Zaj's) wishes and enter into a lifelong sexual relationship with Zaj, despite her reservations. In the GGW case, there are two young women who choose to participate in the "sexy positions contest" and young men who choose to watch and encourage the women to strip. In the end, the young women do not "take it off" but do try to give the men a sexual show that will appease them.

Should we consider any of these choices genuinely autonomous? Looking first at the young women, Phoua's choice is paradoxically both "unduly influenced by others" and, at least in part, aligned with values she can accept from the inside.

12. Arranged marriages are one possibility within Hmong culture, but young people also have "love matches" in which a couple asks their parents for permission to marry. One consequence of living in the United States is that young people — especially girls — come to see this as a more desirable path to marriage, in part because they are saturated with representations of romantic love in popular media. See Lee, *Up Against Whiteness*.

13. Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2006). *Girls Gone Wild* is a series of "reality" soft-porn videos that Levy describes as "utterly plotless videos, composed entirely from footage of young women flashing their breasts, their buttocks, or occasionally their genitals at the camera, and usually shrieking 'Whoop!' while they do it" (7–8).

14. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

That is, Phoua likely does want to be a “good Hmong daughter” and respect her parents, but following this principle requires her to give up her desire to delay marriage and perhaps her goal of becoming a teacher. Further, she makes her choice knowing that disobeying would put herself and her family in the position of being disgraced within the community. In addition, it would leave her family, who will receive a bride price for the marriage, financially worse off. From a liberal perspective, this is a case of “accommodating preferences” to unjust social circumstances, specifically a system of classical patriarchy. Phoua is faced with a situation in which “good women” are subordinate to men and an economic system that has left her family unable to meet all of its needs.

The scene at the bar is a bit trickier to sort out. On the one hand, these young white women have enough money, status, and leisure time to go to Florida for a week of pleasure seeking. Further, although they are drunk (as Levy later confirms), they have enough control not to “take it off,” and they are setting limits about what they are willing to do. Levy also reports that many of the young women she encountered in her research felt that the GGW ethos was all in good fun and part of celebrating female beauty.¹⁵ At the same time, these young women are behaving in ways defined by the marketplace (more specifically, the porn industry) and a set of values that I will refer to as “commodified patriarchy.” In this version of patriarchy, adolescents are bombarded by all forms of media with the messages that sex ought to be used as a commodity, that young girls are objects of desire (and they should feel flattered), that “real men” only care about sexual conquest, and that casual sex is a sign of a more gender-egalitarian world. Popular culture sells this version of patriarchy by conferring on those who adopt these norms social status, peer approval, and the hope of material wealth. In this case, the bar profits from the sexy positions contest (in which women participate for free), the *Girls Gone Wild* company profits from the sale of videos (in which women participate for free), and the alcohol industry profits from binge drinking. Because this culture is so pervasive and begins with advertising and products targeted at young children, these preferences get shaped subconsciously over time and so cannot be considered autonomous.¹⁶

Some may nevertheless argue that the GGW are making autonomous choices — they can simply choose to go on a justice-promoting alternative spring break, or not drink so much that they are tempted to enter a sexual positions contest, or spend their evening in a less raunchy bar. One could also say that these young women are adults and simply enjoying their sexuality. In contrast, Phoua’s situation seems far more coercive because neither choice (marriage or disobeying her parents) is one she wants to make, and she has few other options before her. While Phoua certainly does have fewer options, the preferences of the GGW are nevertheless being “unduly shaped by the preferences of others,” namely the

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. For a sociological account of advertising to children, see Juliet Shor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

marketplace and the behavior of young men who benefit from and are complicit in reproducing patriarchal values. To think that these women are making free and authentic choices requires one to believe that they are choosing subordination.

One may want to respond to these cases by arguing that they illustrate why we should educate young people to make good choices by promoting autonomy. If, this view says, Phoua is taught about her rights and the GGW are taught to be “responsible” and “safe,” then they will be better equipped to resist social pressures and live autonomous lives. This response fails to recognize that under conditions of gender inequality, many of the “bad” behaviors of young women are responses to inequality. As a result, actions that look like a sexual choice making may actually be an attempt to gain social status. Both Phoua and the GGW want acceptance from their communities and fear social exclusion, but they are operating within social structures in which the path to acceptance comes through the approval of men. Phoua will be expected to have sex with Zaj, but her decision to marry is primarily motivated by fear of rejection from her family and community. She needs Zaj’s approval to maintain acceptance and respect. Levy makes a similar point after interviewing fifty high school girls about the trend among young women to gain attention by dressing provocatively and engaging in exhibitionist acts such as sending sexually explicit videos to boys, kissing girls at parties to turn on male onlookers, and performing (sometimes in public) oral sex on their male friends: “These are not stories about girls getting what they want sexually, they are stories about girls gaining acclaim socially, for which their sexuality is a tool.” She goes on to note that they are not so much “experimenting with sex as experimenting with celebrity.”¹⁷ Focusing on the sexual choices that these young women are making misses the larger point that they are trying to better position themselves within conditions of inequality.

Much of the philosophic literature on autonomy as an educational aim focuses on the tension between autonomy and cultural and religious pluralism.¹⁸ In these arguments, some religious beliefs and communitarian cultures are positioned as potential obstacles to the autonomous life because young people may not be able to overcome their early programming in order to reflect critically upon their inherited values — much like Phoua’s case. However, just as Phoua has been raised in a culture that defines modesty and obedience as markers of “good” daughters and wives, the Señor Frog contestants have been raised to believe that “good” women are sexy and that “fun” is synonymous with pleasing heterosexual men.

17. *Ibid.*, 145–146.

18. See, for example, Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); Susan M. Okin, “‘Mistresses of Their Own Destiny’: Group Rights, Gender, and Realistic Right of Exit,” in *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities*, ed. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 325–350; and Bryan Warnick, “Rethinking Education for Autonomy in Pluralistic Societies,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 4 (2012): 411–426.

They too are acting in accordance with early gendered programming. Phoua is most likely aware that mainstream American culture values marrying for love and outwardly endorses equal rights for women. She knows that other girls at her high school will be allowed to go to college and pursue a career that interests them. But teaching Phoua to be a choice maker will not change the choices available to *her*. In contrast, the GGW already see themselves as choice makers, but their "choices" have been formed through gendered programming. A curriculum that promotes the consent of individuals as the most important feature of sexual behavior is generally in line with the values of the free market and would do little to change their behavior.

Another reaction to the cases might concede, "Yes, gender inequality is a reality, but the way that we combat this is to teach young people to treat each other equally by valuing and respecting each other's autonomy." In other words, teaching autonomy within intimate relationships is the corrective for gender inequality. To see why this view fails, consider the young men in the two cases. Imagine that Zaj, the men at Señor Frogs, and the GWW producers have all received an Archard-approved, autonomy-promoting sex education. It is not clear how any of them would behave differently in these cases. Zaj feels jealous so he requests an earlier marriage and Phoua consents. The young men enter Señor Frogs and see their peers volunteering to enter the competition and join the fun. The GGW crew simply shows up to a party scene with a camera and consent forms, and, with minimal prodding, trade young women a hat for a shot of their breasts. From the male perspective, they have all adhered to the values of their sex education program by using choice and consent as the marker of legitimate sexual conduct. Under conditions of inequality, prioritizing autonomy-as-choice making allows those more privileged to ignore the ways in which they benefit from and reify inequality.

Archard could respond to this critique by reminding us that he recommends a sex *and relationships* education that presumably entails some empathy for the other person. However, Archard's focus on individualism and consent giving does little to challenge male behavior or the values of the hypersexualized market. All of these men have stated what they want and, for the most part, have gotten what they asked for. These two cases are extreme (though realistic) depictions of a gendered continuum that has classical patriarchy at one end and commodified patriarchy at the other. Most men and women live somewhere in the middle of the continuum, but at all points heterosexual sexual negotiations will take place between social unequals. Ignoring this inequality and simply telling students to be individual choice makers will disadvantage girls and advantage boys.

SEX EDUCATION GIVEN THE BACKGROUND CONDITIONS OF INEQUALITY

Recall that Archard begins his appeal regarding the importance of sex education by accepting that there is "no turning back" the social shift toward a hypersexualized culture. His response to the highly coercive values of the free market is to try to arm young people with the skills and disposition to make good choices for themselves, despite being deluged with values to the contrary.

Of course, the better response would be to recognize that the values of liberalism would be more effectively realized within a highly regulated marketplace that does not sexualize children or use exploitation as a way of selling goods. Sigal Ben-Porath provides an argument for “structured paternalism” as a guiding principle for liberal societies.¹⁹ In this view, policies may limit some choices (like the choice to market to children) if the limitation actually helps people to live more free and fulfilling lives. If we are serious about wanting young people to live positive sexual lives, then as a society we should provide them with the social conditions that promote those values. Regulating the marketplace would also significantly help Phoua. Hmong girls and other girls in the United States who live within classical patriarchy lead more sheltered lives in their new country because their parents fear that they will become like the “Americanized” GGW.²⁰ A less materialistic, less sexualized culture would likely result in more choices for these young women.

Absent these structural changes, we are left to think about how to design sex education under conditions of inequality. I have shown that prioritizing autonomy through a focus on choice making will do little to correct injustices and will likely reify gender inequality. Rather than focusing on choice making, sex educators ought to teach young people, first, to recognize themselves as sexual beings within the larger social context, in which many of the heterosexual values that are promoted position men and women unequally. Second, they need to recognize that all sexual experiences, no matter how brief, are moments of interdependence and thus require those involved to understand their moral obligations to others, including above all concern for the other’s well-being. In line with this view, Sharon Lamb offers a well-developed account of a sexual ethics course based on the principle of mutuality. She notes, however, that there is a danger that mutuality will reinforce in girls the idea that they ought to please men.²¹ Lamb defines mutuality as care for the self as well as the other, and this could help clarify that mutuality is not the same as selflessness.

This lesson would be better realized if boys were also taught to recognize, and reject, their privileged social position and, further, to see themselves as having moral agency. This requires that young men learn how patriarchy harms them as well. One cause of harm is that men are taught that they must control women in order to control themselves. For example, in her study of fundamentalist Muslim

19. Sigal Ben-Porath, *Tough Choices: Structured Paternalism and the Landscape of Choice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

20. Lee, *Up Against Whiteness*; Nancy Lopez, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Loukia Sarroub, *All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); and Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998).

21. Lamb, “Toward a Sexual Ethics Curriculum,” 94. Lamb builds upon this argument in “Just the Facts?,” in which she makes an appeal for an “other-focused” curriculum.

girls in Dearborn, Michigan, Loukia Sarroub shows how classical patriarchy miseducates men. A fifteen-year-old married Yemeni boy explains, "If I didn't get married, I'd be lost. Marriage controls hormones. That's what my father says."²² Another boy, who was going to Yemen the next summer to get married, says, "If I didn't marry, I'd be lost and start drinking and smoking. Marriage fixes everything."²³ "Good" wives, in this view, prevent men from succumbing to their basest desires by satisfying their husbands' sexual urges. This understanding of gender relations says that men are not in fact responsible for their own behavior, and in order to control themselves, they must regulate the behavior of women.

This myth of the uncontrollable male, while empirically wrong, is certainly not absent from mainstream American culture. Kathleen Elliott, for example, observed the following exchange during a study of middle school sex education courses:

Mr. Armstrong: Girls, when you go to a party, what do guys want?

Girls: To get us drunk.

Mr. Armstrong: And why do they want to do that?

Girls: So they can rape us.

Mr. Armstrong: Right. Good.²⁴

As Elliott notes, the male behavior in this scenario is presented as "natural, thus giving boys a certain entitlement in their behaviors toward girls."²⁵ The "hidden curriculum" here is that the sexual behavior of boys is beyond their control. Consequently, girls learn that they have the choice of giving in or playing defense. There is apparently no room for young men to want emotional connection from a sex partner, nor should they listen to or attend to the interests of girls.

Furthermore, in *The Will to Change*, bell hooks argues that boys are harmed by patriarchy because they "are not seen as lovable."²⁶ Boys raised within patriarchy are taught to disconnect from their emotional selves and learn that "core feelings cannot be expressed if they do not conform to the acceptable behaviors sexism

22. Sarroub, *All American Yemeni Girls*.

23. *Ibid.*, 58.

24. Kathleen Elliott, "Danger, Control, and Responsibility: The Hidden Curriculum of Drug and Alcohol Education," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 5, no. 2 (2008): 12–22. In a study of abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) curricula, Nancy Kendall also found that girls were taught that they bear all of the emotional and physical costs of premarital sex because either they would get pregnant, they would acquire an STI, or boys would "discard" them. "Boys," an AOUM trainer explained, "don't have as much control" and so it was up to girls to "resist the boy." Kendall, *Sex Education Debates*, 241.

25. Elliott, "Danger, Control, and Responsibility," 17.

26. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 35.

defines as male."²⁷ As a case in point, the boys in Louise Archer's study of young Muslim men in the UK describe their fathers as "strict," "scary," and "powerful," and they are worried about how they will uphold this strictness when they become fathers.²⁸ hooks describes this construction of masculinity-through-strength as "violence" against the souls of men. The result is that boys learn that the only acceptable way to express emotion is through anger and heterosexual conquest.

A sex education that helps young men to deconstruct the gender norms they have inherited and to develop a willingness to be more interconnected and attentive to their moral obligations to others is an important step toward healthier sexual behaviors. Further, in Lamb's recommendation for a sexual ethics curriculum, she includes discussions of exploitation and avoiding harm to others.²⁹ It is important, however, that discussions of harm do not position boys as dangerous and girls as victims. Girls need to learn that treating young men as emotionless sexual pursuers harms them by denying their need for meaningful connection and recognition.

One way of thinking about sex education is to imagine the stand-alone course on health and sexuality that is fairly typical in American middle and high schools. While Archard and CSE advocates imagine a course that emphasizes choice making, my curricular strategies are more in line with Lamb's call for a sexual ethics course that is part biology, part gender and cultural studies, and part philosophy with an emphasis on the value of mutual care and our moral obligations to others. While important, such a course is likely to be minimally effective at combating the effects of growing up in a hypersexualized culture. Better still is for school administrators and teachers to adopt the aims of sexual well-being and equality as general aims for the school. In other words, the overall climate within the school is likely to be more influential in developing the long-term well-being of students than a single course. In schools, children are (hopefully) mentored by caring adults, and they form friendships, acquaintanceships, working relationships, and, at times, romantic relationships. But students are also judging and sorting each other into groups that hold varying degrees of status within the school. Most students understand clearly where they fit in a school's social strata and this affects how they view their own worth. More effective for the well-being of children than a single sex education course would be for school officials to consciously create a school culture that recognizes students and resists allowing the hypersexualized norms of the market to gain traction in the school. This means that all teachers should resist promoting or reinforcing sexism in the ways they teach, the curriculum they choose, the discussions they have in their courses, and the images they put in their classrooms. And of

27. *Ibid.*, 153.

28. Louise Archer, *Race, Masculinity and Schooling* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2003), 101–102.

29. Lamb, "Toward a Sexual Ethics Curriculum," 91.

course, they should interrupt sexist and homophobic behaviors when they see them.

CONCLUSION

In the fields of democratic education and philosophy of education it is common to talk about the educational aim of autonomy, or self-government. This view flows out of liberal theory that begins with the idea that adult citizens ought to be given the authority to direct their own lives. It follows from this that the government ought to be accountable to the people who should democratically decide the policies and laws that will be enforced by the state. However, to live well under this system requires a certain type of upbringing — one that teaches young people to reflect on values and principles so that they may live the life they feel is best. This view of autonomy is both political and personal. It is political because there needs to be a social order that allows for some degree of individual choice making and because the principle of autonomy puts limits on state authority. It is personal because seeing oneself as a choice maker is a social construction that has implications for how people treat each other.

I have shown that in the nonideal world of a hypersexualized free market and gender inequality, sex education that prioritizes the value of autonomy reifies inequality. I argue that a better approach for sex educators is to teach young people to understand their moral obligations to others under conditions of inequality. Such an education would be an improvement over autonomy-promoting curricula, but I have little faith that it would be very effective in helping young people — already socialized to accept some version of patriarchy — to overcome their early upbringing. The students most likely to take these lessons to heart are those who have been shielded from the marketplace and have a home life that models gender equality and mutual care. Nevertheless, I think schools can play an important role in helping young people examine the social forces behind inequality and gender norms.

The argument I have made may throw into question autonomy as an educational aim more generally. Given that modern, nonideal, liberal societies confront many types of inequalities — including those based on income, race, and ethnicity — one might draw from my argument that teaching toward autonomy is either impossible, because we are all coerced in significant ways, or it is undesirable, because prioritizing choice making will reify inequalities by allowing the more privileged to ignore the less well-off. It is true that we are all socialized and to some extent may feel that our choices are coerced — especially by market forces, but also by our families and institutions such as established religions. This does not, however, mean that educators should not aim toward teaching students to evaluate the norms and values shaping their preferences. In this way, autonomy is *an* important aim for education, but as I have shown here, it is not the only aim. To the second concern, that prioritizing autonomy reifies other social inequalities, I agree. Insofar as educators prioritize autonomy-as-choice making, it allows those

better positioned to choose paths that disadvantage others. Just as men within patriarchy can ignore how their choices reinforce their higher social status, so can white people choose to ignore racial injustices and the wealthy choose to maintain their own status at the expense of the least well off. These realities show that educating toward the development of a sense of justice, which requires people to recognize their interdependence, is at least as important as recognizing oneself as self-governing.

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