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Un-Essay Project Statement

As a gender studies major, an aspiring physician, and a woman, women's health is very important to me. So, I decided to complete my project on the evolution of modern childbirth. Specifically, I wanted to focus on the evolution of birthing positions and cesarean sections. The more I learn about the history of gynecology, the more I find out about its misogynistic and sometimes oppressive past. Whether it be James Marion Sims and his fistula procedures on enslaved women or King Louis XIV's fetishization of birth, we haven't always done the best thing for a woman or her child.

For this project, I used the popular medium of TikTok to produce short informational videos about my topic. TikTok is one of the most widespread social media platforms in modern society with over 1 billion active users. I believe that videos are one of the most interesting ways to learn, hence my bio anthropology with Janelle series was born (no pun intended). I was inspired by some [recent TikToks](#) that have been exposing the process through which IUDs are inserted. The comments on these videos express utter [shock](#) that the cervix is stabilized by stabbing it with forceps, as gynecologists tell patients it's "just a small pinch." A lot of viewers had no idea that this was happening and were angry that they didn't give informed consent.

To create my TikToks, I first researched the topic and gathered all of my sources. I read through articles that were published in academic journals, such as *Evolution, Medicine, and Public Health*, before turning to opinionated media articles. I still wanted to read primary sources about women's experiences of giving birth, which revealed many women's frustrations about not being listened to by their doctors. I then created one 3 minute and two 1 minute long videos using pictures and my words, which was similar to short podcast bursts. The information in the TikToks is straightforward, so there's not much up to creative interpretation.

There's been a very interesting evolution of childbirth positions throughout history. In most historical artwork depicting childbirth, women are squatting or kneeling. It wasn't until King Louis XIV's era in 17th century France when the lying-down position for birth became popularized. While it's not a definitive cause for the birthing position, it is well known that the king enjoyed watching his mistresses give birth lying down, as his leisurely view was obstructed in squatting or kneeling positions. It makes sense that in contemporary America, lying down makes it easier for the gynecologist to view the birth, but much research suggests that it's not the most beneficial position for childbirth. Squatting increases the diameter of the pelvic and urges the fetus down the birthing canal with gravity. Even birthing in a side-lying position can decrease the risk of perineal tearing that often occurs with lying-down birth.

The other topic that I wanted to tackle in my project is cesarean sections. Even in 1940 when the "modern" c-section came about, c-sections comprised less than 5% of deliveries. However, between 1965 to 1985, this rate increased by 400%, and now c-sections make up a third of all births in the United States. The World Health Organization suggests that this statistic is almost twice the necessary amount of c-sections, which ranges from 10-15%. While there are obviously valid reasons for needing c-sections, such as fetal distress and placental abruption in the mother, there also appears to be an excess of c-sections being performed. There are many concerning correlations between rising c-section rates and medical practices; for example, a study found that c-sections spike around morning, lunchtime, and the end of the day, suggesting a scheduling aspect to the decision. It's also true that doctors are paid more for c-sections, which are quicker than vaginal births.

So, what I wanted to express with this project is that we have to ask whether the described evolution of birthing practices has truly arisen from technological advances, or whether some of our norms are partially rooted in misogyny and dishonorable healthcare practices. Childbirth has evolved in modern times for thousands of years, from the beginning of bipedalism to now, but gynecology and the medicalization of childbirth is a relatively new development in the grand scheme of our history.

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