

ASEXUALITY AND DISABILITY: STRUCTURING AND EXPLORING
EDUCATION-CENTRIC THEORIES AND RESEARCH THROUGH COMBINED
EXPERIENCE

by

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*For those who feel left out. As Dr. Nidiffer asked - for me. And for Umi. Of course.
Congratulations, girl. We're doctors now.*

PREFACE

A dissertation-by-publication feels, in hindsight, an extreme challenge. This is particularly so when considering the focus of this one. Critical asexuality, asexuality discourse, even crip theoretical constructions – these are all areas that are somewhat contested due to their “newness” on the playing field that is organizational and educational leadership publishing. I would argue that my experiences navigating the publishing worlds of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and the organizational (Human Resource Development, or HRD) side of things have been more positive and welcoming than the experiences within my student affairs scholarly community.

However, there are deep exceptions. I remember, after losing my initial advisor to the world beyond Higher Education (bless you and your success), a conversation with Dr. Kristen Renn, who many consider the head of the field in LGBTQ student affairs work. In a panicked email, I recounted the exit of my advisor from my institution, and the thoughts that I had no idea where to go or what to do now: an experience that, in my current work in graduate student success and academic affairs, I realize, is far too common. Dr. Renn *immediately* (how did you have time to do this) responded to my panicked emails, and (like the saint she is), recounted a somewhat congruent experience working for two different institutions and doing essentially queer work in a place and time where there was no real platform of conversation to be had for such topics – not in higher education and student affairs, at least (Renn, 2019). She stated that I should not worry: that “the field would pick me up” and support me, and that my institution was a great place to be (I concur).

Dr. Renn was correct. While student affairs has been, as mentioned, quite challenging, I have found congruent experiences where my current expertise is extremely valuable, including within HRD, organizational and educational leadership, queer studies in education, academic affairs, and more. I have made connections with other scholars doing asexuality-centric work due in no small part to the interactions of sociologists working within this field. I specifically need to applaud Dr. Megan Carroll, creator of the Ace and Aro Scholar's Support Network on Discord (California State University, n.d.), which has been an integral place to find human connection both across this seemingly disparate area of research, but also during an unprecedented global pandemic.

My path in this research has been a zig-zagging one: but one which I am proud of. Whereas I entered the program expecting only to perform dissertation research on asexualities in higher education, the expansion away from the theoretical and towards the practical (HRD, HCI, and equity work) and the expansion of my queer theory work to firmly include disability advocacy and crip theoretical work – these are welcome additions which have made me a better, more well-rounded and complete scholar. Indeed, I would argue (and do below) that a focus on critical asexualities and crip theory allows a more nuanced and timely way of interacting with our current thoughts about society, policy, and the work that we do: with critical theory as a greater mindset for change. In the following dissertation, I establish not only the value of critical asexualities/non-sexualities (as coined by Ela Przybylo, 2017) as an approach, but I make concrete connections between disability work and the interplay between those two worlds: the aforementioned combination that defines “crip theory.” I establish a historical, theoretical, and definitional foundation for asexuality as well as for disability theory. I

discuss theoretical lineages, epistemological underpinnings, and finally methodological approaches and challenges inherent within the work. In closing, I offer examples of how my established publications in queer theory in education, disability support in education, and critical examinations in organizational leadership are all representations of this work in practice.

A final thank you to Dr. Karen Cuthbert, Dr. Thandi Sulé, Dr. Julia Smith, Dr. Darlene Groomes, Dr. Shannon Flumerfelt, Dr. Jana Nidiffer, Dr. Chang-kyu Kwon, Dr. Douglas Zytke, and Dr. Rema Reynolds. My success would not be possible without any and all of you.

Standard Positionality Statement

The author identifies as a white, cis but agender, asexual spectrum/demisexual and sex-positive person attempting to find their place in a complicated and fraught postsecondary education world. The author also identifies as a psychologically disabled and trauma-informed individual navigating within the precepts of educational structure. Their work is informed by current and prior student instruction, by current and prior student affairs practice, and by current and prior academic affairs administration. They deeply identify with recent feelings surrounding education and equity, as asserted by Renn (2019), on being “in the tension of trying to work for justice from within a fundamentally unjust structure” (p. 287).

A Counter-Positionality Statement

To those who capitalize on discussions of “this is just me work,” I counter in the words of my Masters’ mentor, Dr. Rema Reynolds: “If not you, then whom?” I also colloquially invoke a statement once heard that “anything a white male scholar does is

‘me work.’ They do it anyway.” To those who ask, “are these people even marginalized,” who fight against “finding yourself in the data,” or who capitalize on aspects of difference rather than finding congruences of experience: there are only so many ways that we, as scholars, can ask those in power to consider different and more equitable actions. There are only so many ways to ask for kindness.

I did not find myself in the data. I was not there. Not yet.

I ask simply that when you look at data, that you see people.

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ABSTRACT

ASEXUALITY AND DISABILITY: STRUCTURING AND EXPLORING EDUCATION-CENTRIC THEORIES AND RESEARCH THROUGH COMBINED EXPERIENCE

by

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Adviser: Julia Smith, Ed.D.

This dissertation-by-publication introduces and examines historical and theoretical foundations of asexuality and its potential use as a critical theory set in higher education and Human Resource Development (HRD) contexts, including critical asexuality's applied use when combined with queer theory and disability theory (aka, "crip" theory).

The three articles contained within included (1) a conceptual piece discussing concepts of Homonormativity and applications within queer studies in education, (2) a qualitative study of 19 college-aged participants representing varied gender and sexual identities navigating online consent conversations as mediated through dating apps, and (3) a qualitative study of 9 Critical HRD scholars discussing critical research and teaching, including the lack of proliferation of critical applications outside of academia.

Collective findings of the three articles were filtered through the theoretical lenses of asexuality and crip theory, including (1) queer definitions and re-definitions, (2) concepts of expansiveness, (3) hypersexualization and de-sexualization, (4) disaffiliation, disaggregation, and disidentification, and four different definitional/conceptual understandings of asexuality: (1) oppositional understandings, (2) relational

understandings, (3) embodied understandings, and (4) social understandings. Collective implications were filtered through the lens of current sociopolitical climate, and include discussion of asexuality and crip theory's (1) broad applicability and interaction with existing frameworks, (2), interactions with powerful systems, and (3) requirements for a change in approach, including the need for Tolerance for Error (a Universal Design concept), the lack of reflexive self-critique of DEI applications, and the need for restorative practices both applied to and expanded beyond current research.

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CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The myriad ways identity is constructed - and the ways educational systems police or affirm identities – are both key components of research in student affairs and in higher education: particularly in the areas of student development or in administrative efforts at equity and inclusion. Gender and sexual norms have always had a place in these power structures, and queer-centric (or non-hetero-centric) research has gained ground as a legitimate place of study and as a theoretical route. LGBTQIA+ research, though increasingly becoming a point of policy examination and change movement, has only recently devoted concrete research attention to asexual (ace) or aromantic (aro) individuals and the concept of an asexuality spectrum, despite the inclusion of ‘A’ in the describing acronym.

When it comes to LGBTQ acronyms in education-oriented diversity scholarship, these last few letters of “LGBTQIA” – intersex and asexual, respectively – tend to be ignored, even in studies trying to be inclusive. Recent scholarship has called for a change to this trend (Mollet & Lackman, 2018), and though there are scholars within liberatory work for ace and aro people, such scholarship is still incredibly new and struggling to receive attention in light of pervasive societal and systemic aphobia – prejudicial attitudes towards ace and aro people. Questions such as “are these people even marginalized” abound, despite overwhelming evidence that individuals who identify as ace/aros tend to also identify as “queer in some other way,” and hold multiple queer identities (Cuthbert, 2017; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). Further, ace and aro individuals have a higher chance of

being involved in sexual violence such as unwanted forms of sexual contact, corrective rape and other violence, such as epistemic denials of agency and medicalizations of their sexual experiences (Lund, 2021; Mollet & Black, 2021). Population reporting in the UK has even found that cisgender asexual participants experienced conversion therapy at the highest rate out of their cisgender peers (10%) – though it should be noted that the conversion therapy instance for trans individuals is indeed higher (United Kingdom Government Equalities Office, 2018). If asexual-spectrum individuals do not experience marginalization – why do such statistics exist?

Medicalizing asexuality – or the medicalization of any difference in sexual identity - is not a new phenomenon. Anthony Bogaert (2004) is often credited with bringing asexuality into mainstream study, and did so through a medicalized lens, examining data originally intended to be used for sexually transmitted infection testing. Lori Brotto, Morag Yule, and Boris Gorzalka’s combined scholarship on asexuality (Brotto & Yule, 2011; Brotto et al 2010a, 2010b; Yule, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2014) followed on the heels of Bogaert and also began with a medicalized lens. These beginning studies are deeply problematic in their approaches, perhaps typified by *Biological markers of asexuality: Handedness, birth order, and finger length ratios in self-identified asexual men and women* (Yule, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2014). A self-explanatory title, this (and other works) sought a “cause” or a “biological grounding” for “asexual behavior,” as characterized in comparison to and as different than normative sexual behavior (allosexuals).

As damaging as these investigations are, scholar Ela Przybylo (2013) notes that they result in important change:

... there is a certain irony to the scientific study of sex. As Gayle Rubin (1984, p. 284) noted, ‘empirical sex research is the one field that does incorporate a positive concept of sexual variation.’ Even as it is potentially damaging in its, say, naturalization of sexual difference or its binding of sex to the body, such research is also transformative in that it allows marginalized sexual identities to become articulated, to appear in the world in a recognizable way. (Przybylo, 2013, p. 225-226).

While problematic, after several studies, Lori Brotto, Morag Yule, and Boris Gorzalka’s scholarship (particularly Brotto et al 2010a and 2010b) were also pivotal in the removal of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) – often a moniker for asexuality – being removed as a disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM (Przybylo, 2019), though the definitions of such disorders have been fragmented into male (Brotto, 2010a) and female (Brotto, 2010b) “definitions.” Of note is that in many cases, “new” definitions that have arisen after HSDD was retired from the DSM seek to draw lines between individuals who are “distressed” by their lack of sexual interaction, and those who are not. These new definitions also tend to frame “low sexual desire” as a feminine or female concern, with women being diagnosed under new standards at a much higher rate, and being compared to (and analyzed as objects for) male desire in these cases (Margolin, 2023). Many forget that until quite recently, homosexuality was considered deviant and a disorder by similar logic (Brotto, Yule, & Gorzalka, 2015; Przybylo, 2019).

Similarly, societal stigma and a supposed tie between asexuality and disability is a subject of frequent examination in nearly every field approaching asexuality (Bogaert,

2004; Brotto & Yule, 2017; Cuthbert, 2021b; Parent & Ferriter, 2018). Conversely, there are also proponents for examining asexuality and disability's co-occurrence in an affirming fashion. Scholars Kristina Gupta (2017) and Karen Cuthbert (2017; 2019) discuss how attempting disentanglement of asexuality from disability (as many studies do) may, in some spaces, serve as a form of ableism perpetrated by members of the LGBT community, and flattens or deletes true recounting of individual experiences. Following on research in the U.K. that examines asexual individuals with disabilities (Cuthbert, 2019), this dissertation-by-publication focuses specifically on the intersection of asexuality and disability, and seeks to examine congruently-identified student, faculty, and staff experiences throughout their college navigations: student identity realizations, abrasions with systemic (institutional) inequality, and most importantly, ideas for (and approaches to) systemic change. The word "intersection" is used intentionally to invoke intersectional scholarship, and done so in the spirit of Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) original meaning: not to examine identities which overlap; but to examine the ways that interlocking systems of oppression (such as homophobia, transphobia, aphobia, sexism, genderism, and ableism) may effect ace/aro college students, faculty, and staff with disabilities as they navigate collegiate experiences.

While examinations of asexuality's relation to disability exist, to the knowledge of the author, Cuthbert's (2017, 2019, 2021) publications on a single study are the only that exist in the realm of student affairs; and none exist that challenge institutional climate while discussing this particular experience – only practice briefs (Teut, 2019). In general, Gupta's (2017) and Cuthbert's (2017) studies are the among the very few that

exist that actively affirm the concurrent existence of both a disabled and an ace/aro identity in or adjacent to student affairs.

Area studies such as this one have the potential to change stigmas and stereotypes surrounding asexuality, disability, and their intersection(s) - and are foundational. The goal of such study is to open up the possibility of Critical Asexuality/Non-Sexualities (Gupta, 2017; Przybylo, 2011) and further the idea of Crip Theory's (the combination of Queer Theory and Disability Theory) application (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Sandahl, 2003) in higher education settings: hopefully providing both agency to students and others in terms of identity and lived experience as well as bringing the aforementioned absent power critiques into colleges and universities.

Foundations from Emerging Work

In attempting to speak to emerging asexuality and aromanticism research – we must first address the fact that “asexuality is almost entirely absent in queer, feminist, and critical sexuality studies.” (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014, p. 298). In the nearly ten years since Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper addressed this research gap, it has not closed. While there are promising studies that have occurred recently in sociological realms (Winer et al, 2022; Winer, 2023), and there are (few) discussions being had in Student Affairs (Cuthbert, 2017, 2019, 2021b; Mollet, 2023; Mollet & Black, 2021; Mollet & Lackman, 2018, 2019) – unfortunately, medicalized approaches to asexuality (and thus medical field studies) still seem to be a primary source of information for the topic, particularly in approaches that center students or identity development, or that look at LGBTQIA+ people in aggregate. Many research studies continue to debate the validity of asexuality as an identity or continue to discuss supposed ties to DSM diagnoses (HSDD)

and disparate ideas about what “counts” as asexual continue to complicate datasets and research thought (Ronis et al, 2021). In summary – attempts to legitimize discussion of asexuality have been complicated at best.

(Re)Definitions

In line with this complication of language and thought, something that must be addressed to proceed is the oft-referenced lack of a cohesive definition of asexuality (Mollet 2021; Mollet & Lackman, 2018; Ronis et al 2021). An overwhelming majority of researchers have attempted to define the term “asexual” based on AVEN (the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network)’s definition: “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (Asexuality, 2023; AVEN, 2023). While asexuality *includes* those who experience no sexual attraction – it also includes a wide variety of individuals who experience sexual attraction *differently* than normative society might expect. That is to say, their desires may be infrequent, they may only experience sexual attraction when coupled with a deep and safe relationship, they may experience sexual attraction rarely enough that it makes them a commodity – or any number of other factors. AVEN’s newest web-published material (titled “The Gray Area”) includes some additional definitions that speak to these differences, including “gray asexuality,” (greysexuality – or rarely feeling attraction, but it still occurring) and demisexuality (“only feeling sexual attraction under certain relationship circumstances, mainly emotional connection”). If only researchers were to read further on AVEN’s new material instead of adhering to outdated and medicalized definitions – they might discover the trend towards embracing asexuality as an umbrella term similar to “queer” - which holds underneath it a vast variety of ways of being. Despite different lived experiences, all

asexuality representations share in common a difference from the expectations of sexusociety (Przybylo, 2011), and form the basis for further social and scholarly discussion on asexuality spectrums. The definition of asexuality has thus been broadened and expanded, and should be understood as such in empirical work – yet there are still many places where conflicting, medicalized definitions cause problems.

In terms of definitions and redefining ace and aro research, researcher Lori Brotto’s writing work (Brotto et al 2015; Yule et al 2014) has been critical in advancing research in the field of asexuality, and as mentioned in the proposal for this exam:

Brotto, alongside asexual activists such as David Jay [founder of AVEN] and Andrew Hinderliter [scholar], played a key role in removing asexuality as a sexual disorder from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, such that the *DSM-V* now has exceptions for asexuality under low sexual desire diagnoses (Przybylo, 2019, p. 13).

Also as previously discussed, Brotto has tended to introduce, appear to support, and then present findings that refute medicalized definitions of asexuality (Brotto et al 2015; Yule et al 2013, 2014). In a recent study a research team (Ronis et al, 2021) including Brotto investigated congruences of asexuality and autism (important for this subject matter and discussed later), and found that some of their participants experienced asexuality on a diverse spectrum rather than explicitly as a lack of sexual attraction. Utilizing Morag Yule, Lori Brotto, and Boris Gorzalka’s “Asexuality Identification Scale” (AIS) as a measure (publicized and made popular in 2014), the team still chose to “adopt[ed] the original definition of asexuality and found that 4.5% of our sample... endorsed no sexual attraction” (Ronis et al, 2021, p. 3838). The research team discussed that when the

definition is expanded to include those identifying as asexual but experiencing some form of sexual attraction, the percentage climbs to “more than half (52.9%)” (Ronis et al, 2021, p. 3838). At first glance, the study appears to refute umbrella terms and expansive ways of thinking about asexuality – but concluded after examining the data that the use of the AIS, and thus other tools that *define asexuality in narrow terms* – may miss vast portions of people who experience these feelings: “there may be considerable diversity in the expressions of asexual attraction” (Ronis et al, 2021, p. 3840).

While expansions of asexual definitions are still rarer, there are other examples. Bush et al (2020) conducted a recent study, also on individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who identified as asexual, and noted that:

When defined narrowly, research suggests that about one percent of the population identifies as asexual; when the definition is broadened, more people appear to be on an asexual spectrum. Emerging research suggests great diversity within asexuality, and many people participating in asexual communities use language (e.g., ‘gray ace’) to reflect this variability (Bush et al, 2020, p. 725).

This research team’s study incorporated (and defined) the participant’s individualized language of their asexual identities, including asexuality, gray-asexual, demi-sexual, or other – and reported their findings as “asexual spectrum” – the language that I also adopt in my discussions. Similarly, Scherrer and Pfeffer, in their (2017) piece on asexuality, noted that definitions in research tend towards classifications - either as a “disorder” (medicalization), a “paraphilia” (an abnormal sexual desire), or a sexual orientation – about which the authors said that “Arguably, the purpose of the concept of sexual orientation is to categorize and describe people’s (a)sexual lives and proclivities” (p.

645). How then, does one label and categorize a spectrum of identity engagement, rather than a label of *behavior*? Scherrer and Pfeffer (2017) advocate for a push towards recognizing the term *asexuality* as a social and community identity first and foremost: an identity adopted to find congruence with others who have like experiences, and to find recognition – to feel seen. As researchers in medical and sociological fields advocate for and subsequently expand the language used to talk about asexual spectrum individuals, so too should we as educational researchers – as our students have been asking us to do for quite some time, and which some student affairs researchers are now doing (Cuthbert, 2019; Mollet, 2023). As Amanda Mollet and Brian Lackman (2019) said of asexuality in student affairs research: “Language and discourse serve important roles in society related to social identities. Quayle (2013) explained how ‘those who control language have the means to set standards for *what counts* as knowledge and discourse.’ (Quayle, 2013, p. 286)” (Mollet & Lackman, 2019).

Expanding What “Counts”

In this way of thinking (that of changing and growing definitions), the next theoretical and research-oriented trend worth noting, and which is not new, is clearly that of *expansiveness*: whether of gender (Human Rights Campaign, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2017), of disability (Baglieri et al, 2011; Kafer, 2013; Kwon & Archer, 2022), or of (a)sexuality. As Przybylo says, “queer and feminist approaches to asexuality tend to both broaden and pluralize what can ‘count’ as asexuality and how sexuality is defined.” (Przybylo, 2019, p. 14). Critical theorists have often described the ever present “monolith,” that seems so pervasive in present thought: the idea that there is a single way to “be” a particular identity. A way that is “more correct.” This has led to binary, either-or thought (gay or

straight, Black or white, man or woman) which in turn still leaves us with a “better” and “less good” side of these equations. Expansiveness as a concept challenges us to “expand” our ideas of thinking beyond these initial discussions. There is more than one way to be gay – more than one “correct” way to be queer. Indeed, one of the most often discussed aspects of sexuality is that it is fluid and changes over time (Diamond, 2016). Similarly, there is more than one way to “do” gender, which as Butler (1999) told, is a performance, after all. As such, societal or educational systemic norms are perhaps not the monolith we thought they were. In the realm of disability studies, advocates are calling for (no, begging for) educators and policymakers to *expand* their idea of what “counts” as disability – to broaden our conception of what we think falls into the arena of “disabled” (Baglieri et al, 2011; Kafer, 2013). Could we count communication style among them, even: something very prevalent in neurodiverse populations such as those living with autism, ADHD or trauma disorders? These disability advocates say that such expansiveness is important – and that people of all backgrounds and all lived experiences are valid, regardless of whether they fit a societal definition of correctness. When we limit our thinking and our expectations, we simply “miss” people in our attempts at service and at support.

Similarly, asexual theoretical thought asks us to expand our ideas of what we think “counts” as valid in regard to sexuality (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014) – to expand what we think counts as a relationship, as intimacy, as important. It questions the societal idea that romantic relationships (and thus marriages) are somehow more important or intrinsically valuable than friendships; the idea that family is to be lauded at all costs, even when truly harmful; the idea that one must be partnered to achieve a fulfilling life or

all of the financial benefits (such as taxes) that our society affords (Gahran, 2017).

Asexuality theory asks us to think more expansively about “what counts” in terms of the relationships we have. Are some of our friendships intimate? Does sex have the value that we place on it – and is having sex the deeply biological imperative that it has been made out to be? Asexuality particularly fights the normative notion that all sex must be driven by the same thing and be for the same reasons. While fighting continued medicalizations in literature, asexuality theory asks *what if asexuality is not something to be cured, and is not a disease* – what then? If we consider these thoughts in terms of the expansiveness of what counts as intimacy and what relationships and interactions are “important” - who (and what power), then, does asexuality *threaten*? These are the ideas put forth by the foundational sociology and gender studies scholars mentioned in my proposal, namely Cerankowski & Milks (2014) and Ela Przybylo (2011, 2018), and many writers and researchers are building on their work.

Hypersexualization and (De)sexualization

As we continue to discuss what counts, – it may be important to bring up the fact that there is much discourse, even outside the area of medicine, about what “does not.” To introduce the idea of such discourse, it may be best to refer to the concept of the *Gold-Star* or “*Unassailable*” *Asexual*. Said Angela Chen, in her book *Ace*:

There exists a vision of the perfect ace person, one who never needs to ask themselves [any] questions. The *Gold-Star asexual*, also called the *unassailable asexual*, has no doubt at all about their identity. (The term, coined by the blogger Sciatrix in 2010, is similar to the term *Gold-Star lesbian*, meaning a lesbian who has never had sex with a man.) The Gold-Star asexual will be the savior of us all,

the one who can prove that asexuality is legitimate simply because there is not a single other factor that could have caused their lack of sexual attraction. (Chen, 2020, p. 97).

Quite a binary construction, and far from the idea of expansiveness, Sciatrix (2010) states that

The unassailable asexual is completely neurotypical and has never had any health issues, physical or mental. They are cis, indifferent, between the ages of twenty and forty, and sex-positive [as compared to someone who is not repulsed by sexual conversation]. They do not masturbate but have no history of any kinds of sexual problems. They have never been abused in any way.” (Ace Admiral, 2021, quoting Sciatrix, 2010).

Far from recognizing the plurality of lived ace/aro lives, it is unfortunate that such discourse about perfection is perpetuated by members inside the asexual community: for years. Angela Chen (2020) discussed the idea of disability in the asexual community being an “automatic disqualification” (p. 97), citing interviews and study participants who discussed their identity being completely disassembled because of the thought that someone could medicalize their experience. In Chen’s examinations, non-disabled asexuals wanted nothing to do with disabled asexuals, as they feared others’ experiences would invalidate their own – a suspicious, surreptitious repetition of heterosexual discourse surrounding homosexuality when viewed through feminist lens – as a “political institution” that fears invalidation (Rich, 1980).

Gold-Star asexual discourse extends beyond the idea of disabled persons and into the realm of asexuals in relationships with people who aren’t asexual, asexuals who

desire romantic companionship, asexuals who form partnerships for other reasons, aromantic people who have (or even enjoy) sexual intercourse, and more. It extends into the realm of heterosexual cis men and cis women who identify as asexual and who are frightened by what that means – wondering if they have community among LGBTQIA+ folks. Amanda Mollet and Brian Lackman highlighted some of these issues in their (2018) article *Asexual Borderlands: Asexual collegians' reflections on inclusion under the LGTBQ umbrella*. Says one of their participants: “As a heteroromantic asexual, I don’t feel like I have a place [in LGBTQ communities]” (p. 626). Says another participant, “The [LGBTQ] community is supposed to be a way to show non-heteronormative people that they’re not alone” (p.626), and yet more students went on to discuss the fear of coming out as asexual in LGB spaces. Said yet another student, “I shouldn’t have to justify my membership by citing my romantic orientation to be accepted as part of the community” (p. 627). These findings caused Mollet and Lackman (2018) to call for a “both ... and” approach to LGBTQ services on college campuses, where professional practitioners must realize that asexual-specific services are needed, asexual students should be included in “queer” activities, and asexual students cannot be conflated with other acronym pieces for conveniences’ sake (see “(Dis)aggregation” below). Such findings (and discussions of what “doesn’t count”) echo anti-expansive rhetoric from within the asexual community, occurring mostly in online spaces, and is particularly troubling, as they are a direct representation of the existing power discourses surrounding concepts of *hypersexualization* and *desexualization*. In order to achieve a “Gold-Star,” one must be entirely desexualized.

Sexualization is defined as “the act of viewing somebody/something in a sexual way or making them/it seem sexual” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, 2023). By comparison – hypersexualization is the overemphasizing of these characteristics, and desexualization is the forced removal of them (Gupta, 2015, 2017; Kim, 2011). Przybylo defined hypersexualization as “the branding of some groups – most especially gay men and racialized groups – as excessively sexual and lascivious and thus in need of ‘population management,’ (2019, p. 16), evoking conversations of anti-AIDS and “God’s punishment for being gay” (p. 16) rhetoric in the 1980’s. Said Przybylo of desexualization: “[it] functions to render marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, lesbians and transgender people, children and older adults, people of size, and some racialized people as ‘asexual’ by default – misusing the term ‘asexuality’ in the process.” (2018, p. 15). Przybylo also pointed out that one cannot engage with such rhetoric without engaging the concepts of eugenics that they evoke, as “desexualization ranges from discourses around people with disabilities not being capable of having sex or not being desirable to eugenics-based initiatives for managing a population through controlling reproduction by methods of coerced sterilization” (2018, p. 15-16).

In her book *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, Sherronda J. Brown (2022) offered a scathing critique of cisheterosexual, sexualized narratives – both those which seek to frame queer acts and queer bodies as oversexualized, and those which seek to demonize or reduce certain presentations or ways of being (namely race). Her chapter “Frigidity” focuses intensely on discussing the roots of the DSM-V’s construction of “Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder” (HSDD) – the foremost clinical, medicalized construction often applied to

asexuals in literature, despite the discussed changes in definitions. Sexualized HSDD rhetoric is intrinsically tied to original definitions of “female hysteria” and their treatments trying to entice women into sexual practice – or calming “overstimulated” women, practiced from the 1880-s well into the 1950’s and beyond (Brown, 2022; Przybylo, 2013, 2019), and as previously mentioned, many of the “foundational” pieces of asexuality research focus on concepts of sexual arousal or sexual bodies, to the point of leaning into physical measures of sexual arousal in ways that evoke these physically invasive and harmful treatments (Brotto & Yule, 2011; Przybylo, 2013).

Hypersexualization exists in research as well as in practice.

Brown also invokes Ianna Hawkins Owen (2014), who provided a Black asexual lens to the theoretical foundations contained in Cerankowski & Milks (2014), saying: “Discussions of asexuality are inextricably linked to the concept of hypersexuality and the consolidation of its discursive attachment to Blackness” (Brown, 2022, p. 132, quoting Owen, 2014, p. 121). Brown is referring to the social construction of the “brute” and “buck” caricatures, beginning in the Jim Crow era and continuing in some ways into present day, that Black men are unfathomably promiscuous (and/or violent) and cannot keep their hands to themselves, particularly around white women (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Souza, 2020).

There is a simple but similarly intense reason behind narratives of sexualizing certain identities and desexualizing others: power. What Brown and Owen (and Chen and Przybylo) have stated is that sex and sexuality (and upholding gendered, racialized, binary ideals of it) have been wielded as a means of control; that asexuality is a useful ascription for power to utilize when it suits them; and that power has indeed used this

ascription - through hypersexualization and desexualization, particularly on racialized, anti-Black terms. Owen (2014) also originally discussed ideas of the “Black mammy”: a servile construction wherein Black women (and/or aged people, but particularly Black women) were characterized as sexless, and serving of the procreation of others, usually white families. Brown (2022) compared this to ideals of white female chastity, which by comparison is “desired,” and gives an in-depth view of the dehumanization that Black bodies face when oversexualized and medicalized. In *Ace*, Chen (2022) pointed out the avid hypersexualization of Asian women and the desexualization of Asian men in media. Brown (2022) similarly pointed out the oversexualization of and fear of Black men (ie, the brute and buck caricatures, sexual violence and crime rhetoric) to protect white chastity or white “property” (Harris, 1993) – as well as the hypersexualization of white male cis men (and the erasure of non-white queer identities) as further reinforcement of narratives of white cis dominance. The fetishization of differing behaviors, bodies, and identities is clear. Bluntly, Brown (2022) stated: “Hyperfocus on queer sex and sex roles is a direct result of the oversexualization of queerness as a means to construct it as nothing more than sexual deviance and also to reassert heteronormative gender roles within queer relations” (p. 31).

In comparison, Chen (2022), Brown (2022), Kafer (2013), and Przybylo (2018) all devote chapters of their foundational works to the discussion of desexualization – particularly of disabled lives and disabled bodies - as a means to uphold power. Kafer in particular, in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, completes the tie to eugenic sterilization, stating that:

Tens of thousands of people diagnosed with various ‘defects’ were targeted by eugenic professionals and policies for the first half of the twentieth century,

classified, and managed in order to contain the alleged risks they posed to public health. The category of ‘defectives’ included not only people with disabilities but also people from ‘suspect’ racial, ethnic, and religious groups as well as poor people, sexual ‘delinquents,’ and immigrants from the ‘wrong’ countries (Kafer, 2013, p. 30).

It may seem quite standard to combine concepts of hypersexuality with the idea of compulsory sexuality, and quite strange to also combine desexualization with these concepts. However, “the desexualization of disabled people may seem to disprove compulsory sexuality, but it actually reveals a nuance of the way it works” (Chen, 2022, p. 94). Whereas compulsory sexuality frames sexual behavior (or lust) as normal, the opposite of this is that “groups that are already perceived as less than ‘normal’ – like older people, people who are autistic, Asian men, the racist stereotype of the mammy, or disabled people – are desexualized, considered sexually unattractive to others, and assumed to have no lust of their own” (Chen, 2022, p. 94). The dangers of these assumptions have been articulated above. Marginalized groups are in essence further dehumanized when attention is not paid to this aspect of engagement with asexuality theory.

Of hypersexualization and desexualization, Brown (2022) said “In order for asexuality to be understood and recognized as the queer identity that it is, sex acts and sexualization would first have to be removed from the center of dominant conceptions of queer identity” (p. 132). Chen similarly said “Doing away with compulsory sexuality also means doing away with hypersexualization and desexualization” (p. 103). Of higher education, I ask: do these conversations make us uncomfortable – and why? What hypersexualized and desexualized *policy* exists within our institutions? Are they within

the way we program for LGBTQIA+ students? Are they within our conversations about sex education, or in our discussions of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)? Further - what assumptions do we make regarding who is deserving of our care?

(Dis)identifications, (Dis)affiliations, and (Dis)aggregation

In her conversations, Chen sadly stated: “What is the result of stereotypes or shame and what is not? How can we feel okay claiming asexuality when so many factors make it easy to doubt? And when are we allowed to stop questioning?” (2020, p. 100). Chen is asking – when can we stop asking who and what “counts?”

As we continue to present the question of “what counts,” it may be a pertinent moment to bring up the idea of identifying as “some shade of queer,” but engaging in adamant detraction from normalized (sexualized) aspects of LGBTQ community: something asexual and aromantic individuals seem very keen to do. However, much of our understanding of how students develop (discussed below) is predicated on student involvement in in-groups or a desire to belong to a cohesive community. What does one do when confronted with what is supposed to be “your” community, only to find that it does not welcome you at all? In my 2020 encyclopedia article in *The Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*, I discuss in-depth how society has intensely strong expectations for what normative behavior is, and that queer people of any kind are not immune from re-perpetuating these norms. I define pieces of this in-crowd idea, stating that:

When heteronormative and gender-binary-centric ideals and values are used to appraise LGBTQ+ existence – or absorbed as ‘normal’ and privileged by dominant LGBTQ+ groups or individuals – they are referred to as

homonormative. Homonormativity refers to an idealized performance of queerness that is congruent with as many privileged cisheterosexual norms as possible and which offers the least challenge to dominant [white, straight, male] narratives. (Archer, 2020, p. 284).

The refutation of these dominant ideals are performed by *many* of those who fall under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, while still maintaining queer identification. There are *many* ways to be queer, and not one correct, monolithic understanding of “queer” or “gay.”

In line with queer disruptive identity categories, while discussing Critical Theory and Queer Theory in higher education, J. Michael Denton (2019) highlighted the intentional resistance and tension brought by Queer Theorists performing contrary acts, and opens a discussion of *disidentification*. “To disidentify is neither to identify with available cultural identity discourses nor to oppose them. To resist dominant identity discourses legitimizes those identities; disidentification tries to transform shameful [as Chen, 2020, discusses above] aspects of the self into something [else].” (Denton, 2019, p. 60). Perhaps more clear, sociologist Canton Winer said disidentification “involves situating oneself both within and against the discourses through which we are compelled to identify” (2023, p. 19).

However, intrinsically *queer* disidentification (and subsequent disaggregation) requires an understanding of where the original theorist – José Esteban Muñoz (1999), himself performed acts of disidentification. Muñoz refuted an artist and theorist of the time, Franz Fanon, in his statements that queerness was an intrinsically white construction. Whereas it can be argued that homonormativity is an intrinsically white, upper-middle class construction (Archer, 2020), Muñoz’s identity as a gay Cuban man

doing and performing deeply gay, Cuban art led him to “disidentify with [established] theory [Fanon]” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 8) and attempt reclamations of the terminology. Muñoz (1999) also dubbed Fanon’s work as “this queer is a white thing fantasy” (p. 9). Speaking of Michel Pêcheux (1982), Muñoz discussed “good subjects” (those that adhere to norms) and “bad subjects” (those that rebel), and provides disidentification as a third option. Muñoz situated disidentification not just as resistance but a means of *survival* for non-normative queer people. He saw clearly then what is just becoming apparent to us in higher education now: that “antagonization exists between LGBTQ+ acronym members, as well as externally” (Archer, 2020, p. 287). Harkening back to Muñoz’s (1999) and Pêcheux’s (1982) discussions, I note Doug Meyer’s (2015) statement that “In LGBT communities, lines have increasingly been drawn between mainstream lesbians and gay men... this divide... ‘homonormativity’... has been viewed as one between the ‘good gay’ and the ‘bad queer’ (p. 163). As someone who identifies on the asexuality spectrum and appears generically “gay” and “male,” it pains me greatly to see this same “counts” versus “doesn’t count” discourse occurring within ace and aro discourse. As such, when we think of expansiveness, disaffiliation, and disidentification, the complexes of language and of definition within the asexual community should not surprise us. The claiming of queer identity by aces and aros while subsequently refuting the assertions of power by dominant groups does not surprise me.

We should also acknowledge that asks of language and thought expansion come alongside important asks for another key theme: *disaggregation* (Brown et al, 2004; Brown & Gortmaker, 2009; Renn, 2010; Feldman, 2023). As previously discussed (in the proposal), LGBTQIA+ acronyms encompass a large swath of identities with varying

political, social, educational, advocacy, and even capitalistic agendas (Archer, 2020; Chasin, 2003; Stryker, 2008). The queer community is not as united as it may first appear – though they come together in advocacy, in resistance, and in (some forms of) shared marginalization. Researchers should thus be expanding definitions of asexuality not just because they are “missing” people, but because such aggregation of different needs, agendas, and desires - especially when coupled with conflicting definitions of asexuality - muddles data results and complicates an already fraught sociopolitical landscape: one which has the potential to other our students.

At worst, some of these conflations cause direct harm. In *A-nother Perspective: An Analysis of Asexual College Students' Experiences with Sexual Violence*, Amanda Mollet and Wayne Black (2021) critiqued such conflations, noting studies that either omit asexually-identified students or aggregate them into other identities (such as queer, questioning, or “something else”). The authors asked “in the hypersexualized college context, do people assume that sexual violence against asexual students is unimaginable or simply not relevant?” (p. 527) and state that “these methodological decisions perpetuate asexual invisibility, erase asexual students’ experiences, and inhibit the development of new understandings about sexual violence in higher education” (p. 527).

Transitioning into Thoughts About Student Affairs

Amanda Mollet is quite clearly one of two foundational voices in student affairs literature regarding asexuality (the other being Karen Cuthbert), and has achieved increasing notice for her work in grounded theory, creating and examining the “Asexual Student Expatiation” (ASE) Model (2020) of asexual identity development, discussed below. The aforementioned othering of students is also typified in Mollet & Lackman’s

(2018) previously discussed essay, wherein the authors identify their study as “an opportunity to amplify the perspectives, identities, and needs of students representing a breadth of asexual identities,” (2018, p. 624) while also reflecting on the ideas of conflation with other letters of LGBTQ acronyms. Said one of Mollet and Lackman’s (2018) participants: “Asexuality is one of those borderlands orientations. Not fully accepted in LGBTQ+ circles, but not fitting into the heteronormative narrative. It can be extremely uncomfortable at times, feeling like you don’t quite belong anywhere” (p. 624). A direct strike at “Sense of Belonging” narratives in student affairs (Astin, 1984; Strayhorn, 2018; Tinto 1982, 1987), this quote highlights that the needs of asexual spectrum students are not being met. Fulfilling these needs begins with our language and our scholarship – which I intend to help change.

Language and data are quite firmly not the only areas of change development that exist, and “Sense of Belonging” and student identity development narratives belong to a larger school of thought that must be discussed: that of Student Development Theory (SDT). Since the 1970’s, student affairs has bought deeply into the ideas espoused by SDT scholars. Taught in most (if not all) student affairs programs, these patterns of theories form a useful lens through which to examine student development and student life – and played an important role in justifying the work that student affairs professionals do when compared with their academic counterparts in the professoriate. Driven by a diversifying student body in the wake of civil rights challenges (and war, which included veteran attendees), the creation of student development theory served to directly legitimize the field of student affairs; led to the rise of institutional assessment of student affairs programs; and served as a platform through which to understand diverse student

bodies, including LGB (and eventually T) populations. However, despite being useful psychoanalytic tools, these theory sets fail to capture the lived experience and nuance of students today for a number of reasons. Historian Ian McNeely wrote that the authors of such theories “... were largely white, largely male, and largely faculty administrators – that is, professors who straddled scholarship and hands-on management, not workaday practitioners” (2023, p. 5) and that:

“in [most] demographic respect[s], this cohort of reformers significantly lacked the diversification of the student body whose maturation they bid to oversee.

Although initially naïve about the particularities of a new generation of students, they founded [student development theory] on universalist claims about human psychology that proved well-suited to the expansion of administrative power.”

(McNeely, 2023, p. 5).

Critique of this set of theories also discusses the focus on developmental stages and age – and Patton et al (2016) also note that “early work by Erikson, Marcia, and Chickering [all foundational psychological and student development theorists] was based upon studies using primarily white, all male participants... collectively these theories have excluded participants who are women or who represent racially minoritized groups” (p. 312). In essence, one of the major critiques of what has been labeled as first-wave student development theory is the lack of connection with the actual lives of those it seeks to discuss, (Jones, 2019; Strayhorn, 2016).

Early student development theory works are perhaps so appealing because of the desire for validity and to create assessment data to support such validity – thus justifying jobs in student affairs administration – what was then a new and burgeoning field

(McNeely, 2023). When combined with professional organization competency ideals and institutional norms, a “checkbox” approach can appear rather enticing: the idea that one can quantify exactly the aspects of development, experience, or student interaction that will ‘work’ and thus replicate it. However, humans are anything but predictable.

Asexuality theory (and expansiveness) encourages us to open our mind to other possibilities. First-wave student development theory (and even the competency structures discussed by ACPA and NASPA) tends to forcefully structure developmental thought, student affairs performance, and institutional development curriculum as static ideals that are unchanging (Eaton & Smithers, 2020). Yet, current theorists and scholars, particularly those doing queer and trans work, are encouraging us to move beyond these ideals of static, “checkbox”, “best practice” ideals. As Z Nicolazzo stated in her (2017) book *Trans* In College*: “Moving beyond best practices wrestles [practitioners] out of the mythical notion that we can *ever* arrive at fully inclusive practices and demands that we see our work as being *about* practice, process, reflection, and self-evaluation [emphasis added]” (p. 142).

In the realm of student affairs theorizing and practice, moving out of what is known and into the unknown can be remarkably disconcerting: especially when considering contested thoughts on student sexual behavior, norms, and ideals. The structure and certainty provided by backed by published theory can be comforting. However, stage models – those constant, oft-taught models that tie student development to the aforementioned concrete “stages,” fail to take into account fluid and changing ideas of sexuality – the idea that ‘coming out’ (which is where most identity development models focus) is not a static process, but rather one which develops over time and can

occur again and again (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Diamond, 2016). Stage theories are temporally (and thus usually age) based, and require completion of a previous stage to move on to the next – perhaps best exemplified by Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” (1943), wherein an individual cannot move to higher levels of development unless their primary needs (such as food and shelter) are first being met.

By comparison, the three oldest and most famous models of sexual(ized) student development combine this first-wave idea of stage-based understandings with a new move into identity-focused work. Firstly, Cass’s (1979) definitively six-stage model of (arguably white, middle-class) gay male development, began with ‘identity confusion’ and progressed to ‘identity comparison,’ ‘tolerance,’ ‘acceptance,’ ‘pride,’ and then ‘synthesis.’ Second, there is McCarn and Fassinger’s (1996) model focused on lesbian development, which still contained four stages – but which attempted to examine development contextually. Third – D’Augelli’s (1994) “Homosexual Lifespan Development Model,” which includes social context and allows for the idea that that there are different variables along which people can develop – such as personal understanding of themselves, an LGB intimacy status, or development into political action. This bears a startling resemblance to Chickering: a foundational student development theorist, and his (1969) ideas of differing “vectors” along which students can develop (or not develop) simultaneously. It should be noted that all of these theories focus on how deeply group identity effects the view of oneself (Jones, 2019).

Vector (and variable) theories – those that move away from ideas of concrete stages, and also those that move towards acceptance of socially constructed identities – have helped to migrate theory towards a “second wave” wherein the impact of identity on

experience is understood. Whereas these theories do provide useful (and usable) lenses through which to view specific cross-sections of LGBTQIA+ experience – it is becoming clear that such ideas of application are no longer widely generalizable – and “in these second-wave theories, context appears more static than dynamic... the implication is that there is an end point to the development of a particular identity... rather than emphasize[ing] the influence of shifting contexts” (Jones, 2019, p. 10). Yet this is what we as practitioners do - “We like to [dis]aggregate students’ identities and campus experiences into discernible steps, stages, phases, categories, and time periods that, while useful for empirical research, carry little meaning for students’ real-life adaptations” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 44).

(Re)Locating Conversations About Asexuality Within Student Affairs

It is unsurprising then, that sociological and student affairs works remain focused fairly exclusively on how asexual people form their identities (Mollet, 2020, 2023; Winer et al, 2022), and on the interactions that asexuality has with other identity constructions such as gender (Cuthbert, 2019, 2022; Winer, 2023); disability (Cuthbert 2017, 2022); and sparingly, race (Brown, 2023; Owen, 2014). Such examinations are an entry point for published work in the field, and student (or generic) development theory is clearly the place for new and non-established areas of support rhetoric to find their “assessment” grounding and become viable through appeal to existing administrative power structures (McNeely, 2023). Such work is extremely valuable for this reason – and it is quite difficult to have critical conversations without some form of developmental basis. The lack of a cohesive scholarly definition does not help this matter, and requests for writers

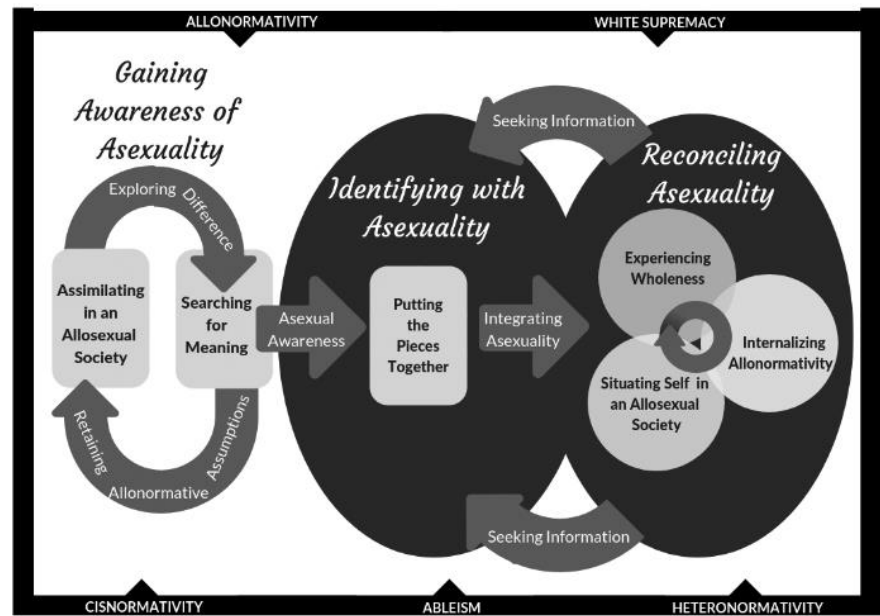
to define and articulate basic concepts of queer and asexual identity hampers discussion of more in-depth interactions.

First in the field, Amanda Mollet's (2020) Asexual Student Expatiation (ASE) Model (Figure 1) attempted such an in-depth examination, and "celebrates the fluidity, complexity, and messiness of asexual identity development akin to a wandering journey" (p. 194). Visually intense, the model attempts to frame (quite literally) asexual identity development within societal contexts of oppression, and notes "awareness of asexuality," "identification with asexuality," and "reconciling asexuality" as cyclical processes that also interact in complicated ways between themselves. Of particular interest is the contrasting idea that there may never be a point of "arrival" – the process remains cyclical in the end. Of her work, Mollet says:

The ASE model begins with examining the influence of students' multiple identities and the societal influences of intersectional oppression for asexual students with multiple minoritized identities. My research also brings awareness to pervasive allonormativity [that sexual desires and sexual society are desirable and the norm] and the negative influences asexuality invisibility, invalidation, and erasure have in the lives of asexual students. (Mollet, 2020, p. 202).

Figure 1

Asexual Student Expatiation (ASE) Model



Note. From Mollet’s (2020) article, “*I Have a Lot of Feelings, Just None in the Genitalia Region: A Grounded Theory of Asexual College Students’ Identity Journeys*” (p. 195).

Of particular interest is how Mollet has framed asexual student understanding within the bounds of oppressive society and within understandings of marginality when facing such society – directly refuting a common rhetoric, perpetuated by medicalizations of asexuality, wherein asexual people must “prove their marginality” or “prove their oppression” in order to obtain validity (A. Mollet, personal communication, March 18, 2020). Such medicalized and othering rhetoric is rampant in student affairs spaces – as students have told us – and it shows up quite specifically in LGB spaces predicated on identity constructed around sex and sexual identity (Cuthbert, 2017, 2019, 2021b; Mollet

2021b). Mollet's model is working twofold here. First, it approaches asexual student identity formation through a lens the field understands – that of student development theory, and codifies the approach for future work. Secondly, it tries to move away from the roots that SDT has provided which seek to integrate with power, instead framing asexual understanding as occurring in context of these oppressive power understandings.

Mollet's (2020) reframing of asexual issues using the ASE model are promising. There are very few places, besides sociological theoretic literature that bring conversations of power into critical examination alongside policy and procedure. Mollet and Lackman's (2019) book chapter on *Asexual Student Invisibility and Erasure in Higher Education* attempted to do so, and serves as the foundation for pieces for the ASE model, including "invisibility," "erasure," and importantly, "denial of epistemic agency," a concept first discussed in asexual contexts by Kristina Gupta (2017). Defined by Mollet and Lackman (2019) as statements, policy, and actions that say, "your way of knowing and understanding yourself is wrong" (p. 89), this rhetoric drives at the primary issue in using existing SDT models to create understandings of newly emerging identities and intersectional lived experiences: these models tell students their discoveries of themselves – be they online, intersectional, ace or otherwise – that they are wrong. Mollet's (2020) model tells students that these messages of wrongness come from oppressive society.

My desire is to (eventually) take these examinations a step further and bring them into conversation with university power structures themselves. In terms of hypersexualized discourse, de-sexualized discourse, disaffiliation, expansiveness, and disaggregation – how can we as policy makers and teacher-practitioners change the actual *construction of our universities and pedagogy* to be more inclusive? Where are the

existing structures that interact with these situations? Do they perhaps exist within housing, healthcare, financial aid, or other places where family and relational structures predicate actual funding and survival? I admire Mollet's work (Mollet, 2021b; Mollet & Lackman, 2018, 2019) for laying these first steps – and the next platform is to critically engage and then change our own policies and procedures to meet student need. Such critical change is the direction that I hope to take my research – though the idea that a dissertation may reach such level is a very lofty goal.

Expansiveness Beyond Identity Development: Emerging Conversations

Social Publications and Online Communities

Earlier, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) was noted for being a foundational place for both education and for community for ace and aro people. I also discussed a few of the problems that can arise in such a community, highlighting that AVEN's beginning community interactions were overwhelmingly white (Owen, 2014) – and I also briefly discussed how drawing *only* from such online community sources (without respect to who comprises them) can be problematic for samples (Brotto et al, 2010). However, most importantly, emergent scholars have highlighted that higher education needs to take seriously the idea that students may develop a piece of their identity in virtual space – and that virtual space may mediate how they come to an understanding of themselves and others (Brown, 2016; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017). If we truly wish to understand aspects of student development, we as practitioners must change as the media through which students' development also change.

When discussing media, it is deeply important to highlight the impact that social publications are having on asexuality's visibility and its relevance. Representation in

television and streaming media has increased in recent years – and the most prominent print media authors are fond of reminding us of poor, medicalized representation being prolific. Episodes of medical and emergency room dramas wherein an asexual individual is found to have a medical basis for their “disease” and subsequently “cured” have often been cited (Brown, 2022; Chen, 2020; Przybylo, 2019). However, positive representation has increased as well. Angela Chen (2020) discussed the importance of *Bojack Horseman*’s (an dark, animated Netflix comedy that deals strongly with ideas of depression) positive portrayal of the character Todd Chavez:

Todd suspects he might be asexual and attends an ace meetup... watching the writers get it right was surprisingly moving. The specificity of ace imagery (the meetup featured a sign in ace colors) and attention to detail were a sign of respect. Todd is sometimes confused and a bit of a screwball, but he is well-meaning and beloved. His asexuality was not obscure. It was portrayed without mockery. And, in a testament to why representation is important, the mere existence of Todd has raised the number of aces there are in the world. (Chen, 2020, p. 75).

Perhaps to drive home the interactions of social publications and the effects they can have on the public, Angela Chen’s own work *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (2020) featured prominently in another well-regarded LGBTQIA+ piece of media: *Heartstopper*, named after the web comic series turned visual novel series (2019) turned Netflix television show. Created by writer and comic artist Alice Oseman (herself asexual spectrum), Chen’s *Ace* (2020) serves as a pivotal point of queer understanding and development in *Heartstopper* for a young person watching his friends engage in romantic relationships and trying to come to an

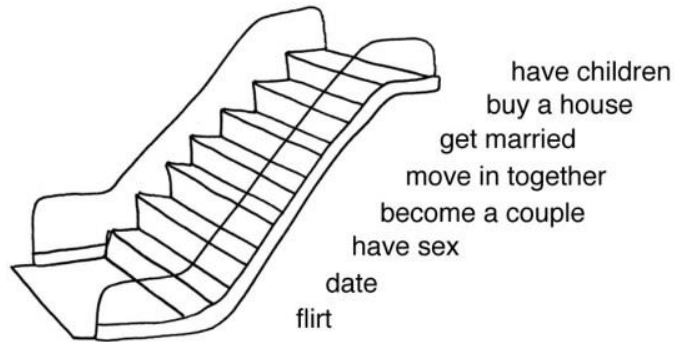
understanding of his lack of desire to do so. It should be noted that *Heartstopper* is well known for positive representation of queer youth development and healthy relationships – and the character Issac’s interactions with *Ace* are also representative of this trend (Iftikar, 2023).

It is not just Angela Chen (2022) who is raising awareness through book writing: Ela Przybylo’s (2018) book *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*, Sherronda Brown’s (2022) *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, Julie Sondra Decker’s (2014) *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*, and even Anthony Bogaert’s (2012) *Understanding Asexuality* are all publications that have crossed the “social publication” barrier. Whereas Przybylo and Bogaert have published previous notable material (Bogaert, 2004, 2006; Przybylo, 2011) – Brown, Chen, and Decker had not, before their major book publications. The usefulness of publications outside of what is traditionally accepted as “scholarly” cannot be overlooked: after all, asexual community and asexual identity developed into full discourse through examination of AVEN – and online communities are just now being realized as concrete places of identity development (Brown, 2016; Craig & McInroy, 2014). Theories, models, and important ways of understanding oneself are emerging from public sphere knowledge. In the area of asexuality representation and asexuality theory, I argue that this publicly-generated knowledge (filtered through scholarly lenses or not) is extremely valuable, and needs to be understood as such. In fact, many frameworks, concepts, and models that have emerged from public knowledge are now in use in our scholarly terminology, particularly in discussions of asexuality. The aforementioned idea of the “Gold-Star Asexual” sticks out, as do AVEN’s definitions of asexuality and

graysexuality. Also important is the relationship-identity model of “The Relationship Escalator,” (Figure 2) as popularized by author and blogger Amy Gahran, which provides a critique of “relationship hierarchy” and new ways of looking at interactions within relationships. Gahran’s ideas proved so popular that she took what originally began as blog community into print, calling it “the product of participation” and “a launching point for a variety of resources about unconventional intimate relationships” (Gahran, 2017, p.1). Perhaps most striking out of all socially-sourced scholarly information is the “Purple-Red Scale of Attraction” (Figure 3). Created by “Southern California man Langdon Parks” (Didomizio, 2015), the scale is a response to Kinsey et al’s (1948) references to a zero-to-six numeric scale of attraction, and attempts to account for interactions with ace and aro experience. The scale was originally posted on Reddit’s asexuality forum: and exploded into common discussion after proliferation on AVEN. It can now be commonly seen in educational discussions surrounding LGBTQIA+ identity – and has even been documented in LGBTQ studies textbooks (Alexander et al, 2018).

Figure 2

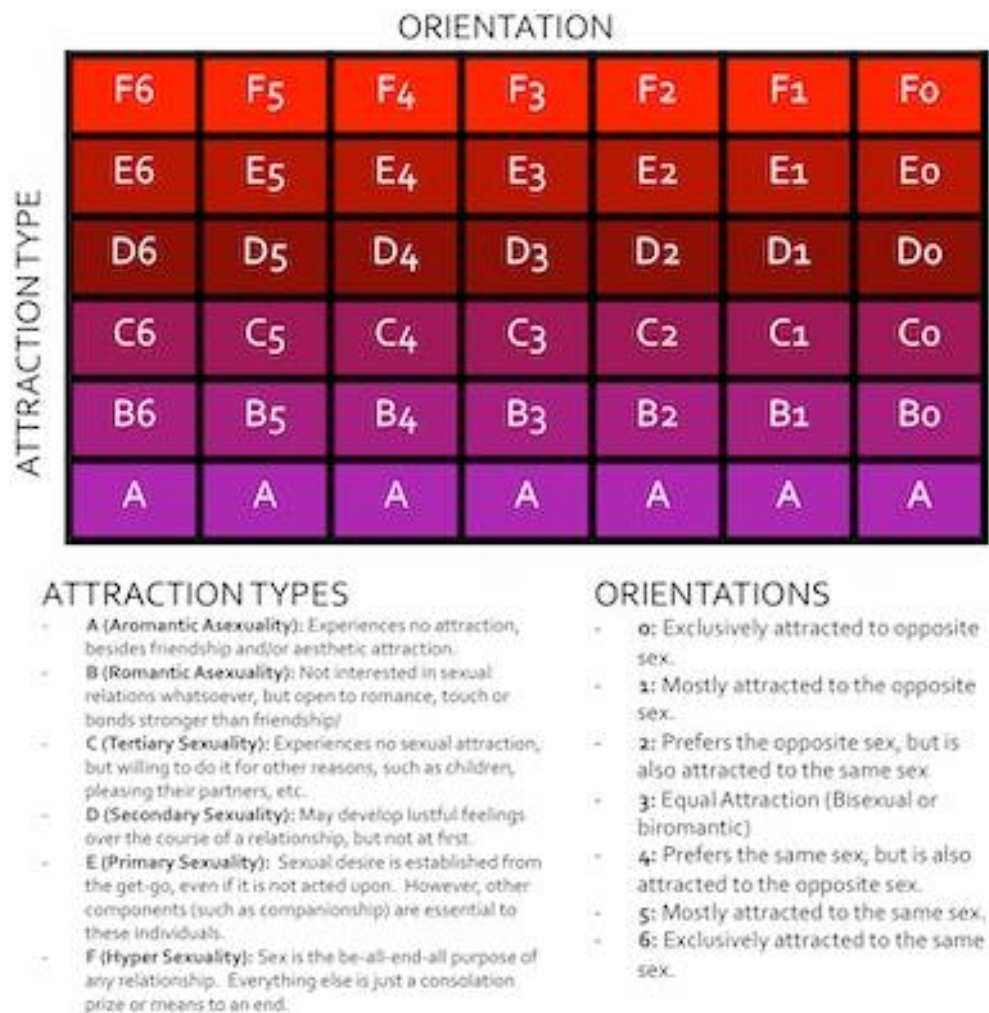
The Relationship Escalator



Note. A visual representation of Gahran’s (2017) “Relationship Escalator,” wherein if one does perform these “milestones” in order, Starting from the bottom and traveling upwards, one “falls off the escalator,” and cannot continue in their (allocishetero)normative relationship (Marie, 2019).

Figure 3

The Purple-Red Scale of Attraction



Note. Parks' original visual of the Purple-Red Scale of Attraction, as featured on [/r/Asexuality](#), AVEN (DiDomizio, 2015). More recently, the scale has become featured in queer studies textbooks (Alexander et al, 2018).

Public-arena discourse – and people speaking up for themselves – has been pivotal in changing the face of asexuality research. Remember, it was such public

discourse and responses to Brotto et al's (2010) work which caused her to perform additional studies: studies which, as mentioned, were pivotal in de-medicalizing diagnoses of and subsequent scholarly examinations of ace and aro people – even while participating in othering ideals. Ideas are powerful, and knowledge is not contained to scholarly publications or universities: it comes from a wide variety of sources. I argue we should engage in expansive practices, broadening our inclusion of social discussions surrounding identity development, even as we examine new scholarship, which I discuss below.

Ongoing Interactions between Asexuality and Disability

In the portion of *Ace* dedicated to disability intersections, Angela Chen opened the chapter by stating:

The disabled community has spent a long time fighting the idea that disabled people are, or should be, asexual. The ace community has struggled for as long as it has existed to prove that asexuality has nothing to do with disability. (Chen, p. 85)

It is difficult to more succinctly summarize the tension that exists between these two identities. Historically, asexuality has connections to HSDD, and has worked hard to distance itself from the idea that there is “something wrong” with anyone who identifies in the asexual spectrum. Conversely, disabled individuals have advocated strongly to be recognized as persons who have sexual desires, and have fought oppressive desexualization and eugenics rhetoric that has at times sought the sterility – or death – of disabled people (Kafer, 2013). As is clear from the number of studies that continue to be

published conflating asexuality with “wrongness” or seeking a “cure,” harmful discussions persist direct at asexual people and at disabled people.

So what is a person to do if they are both asexual-spectrum as well as disabled? There is the oft-discussed idea that asexuality is caused by “trauma” – and what if it is, in some cases? Does that somehow make the identity less “legitimate?” Does that mean it should be “cured?” We know that such discourse is connected to “impairment” focuses of disability discussion, as used in the social model of disability. The socio-political/relational model of disability views impairment focuses as a weak attempt to move away from the medical model of disability, which sees disability (or in this case, undesirable attraction, or the lack thereof) as a medical issue – instead of finding root causes of oppression in societal interactions with those who carry disabled identities (Kafer, 2013; Kwon & Archer, 2022). When discussing the idea of trauma-as-cause diagnoses for asexuality, Angela Chen said “It is difficult for me to see the purpose of a diagnosis that is not very likely to connect you to useful services but *is* likely to reinforce the idea that you are medically unwell.” (2022, p. 92). There are other researchers (and participants) that echo this thought: the idea that it can be very difficult to draw these two apart, or even separate causal activity – and as mentioned in the sections above, writers who feel that we miss people and populations when we are binary, monolithic, and do not expand our thought processes to account for “both... and” possibilities of asexual lived lives (Mollet & Lackman, 2018). There are asexual people whose asexuality is not caused by disability. There are disabled people who have sexual desires and lead sexual lives. There are also disabled people who interact with asexuality’s many facets, and identify on its spectrum.

The second of two researchers doing research into asexuality's interactions with student affairs, Karen Cuthbert focuses specifically on the lived experiences of individuals who identify as asexual and who have disabilities. As *the only published student affairs (or adjacent) literature in the area of asexuality and disability*, Cuthbert's (2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b) work is thus deeply congruent with the research and scholarship that I hope to perform. Most of Cuthbert's (2017, 2019) participants discussed:

... an understanding of their own embodied identities which they did not see reflected in either disability or asexuality narratives. Rather than distancing their asexuality from disability [as one might expect, given the political discourse between the two], most participants talked about how their asexuality was in some way connected to their disability and/or impairment (Cuthbert, 2019, p. 370).

Cuthbert's participants also discussed intense feelings of not belonging, including worries they might be "confirming the stereotype" (2019, p. 372) that disabled people are all asexual, or that asexuality is a medical problem. Participants discussed worry that they would need to (or circumstances in which they had been forced to) justify themselves as sufficiently disabled to members of the LGBT community and "truly" asexual to members of the disabled community.

Cuthbert also uses the construct of the "Gold-Star Asexual" to highlight the constant emotional and expectation management that participants felt, within her 2017 article *You have to be normal to be abnormal: An empirically grounded exploration of the intersection of asexuality and disability*. Therein, student participants described many of the same issues as Cuthbert's (2019) discussion, yet also highlighted how their disability

experience mediated the experience and understanding of asexuality: both were occurring – how could these identities possibly be considered as discrete from one another in this circumstance? Cuthbert discussed a need to “expand intersectionality” (2017, p. 252): which certainly counts as expansive thinking. I discuss in the proposal how I undertake this research in the spirit of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) original meaning: not to examine identities which overlap; but to examine the ways that interlocking systems of oppression (such as homophobia, transphobia, aphobia, sexism, genderism, and ableism) may effect ace and aro college students with disabilities as they navigate their college career. I intend to utilize these thoughts to confront *interlocking systems of oppression that exist within our universities*, which marginalize both asexual people and disabled people. However, this idea of an embodied experience which simply cannot be divided into different identities is not new. In direct comparison to Crenshaw (1989), queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2013) discusses the lived experience of identity *assemblages*, and in Black queer studies, E. Patrick Johnson (2001) invokes a queer Blackness that is neither “gay” nor “Black” but something completely embodied and lived in a way that is both part of and separate from both. The pain individuals feel while navigating multiple worlds while being “of” neither is something that I have tried to highlight throughout this paper as I discuss ideas of inter-acronym (LGBTQIA+) friction, discourse within the asexuality community, and now conversations of asexuality “versus” disability discourse. Asexual, disabled assemblages are a primary topic of conversation: as is their disidentification and their means of survival in collegiate worlds. While particularly relevant to my research, these discourses are not the only place where asexual (and disabled) individuals are encountering oppression.

Epistemic Denial of Agency and Coercive Violence

Unfortunately, there exists a strong undertone in scholarly community to “prove oppression” when it comes to asexual individuals and inclusion in research or under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella (A. Mollet, personal communication, March 18, 2020). This is in line with epistemic denials of agency/authority/justice, as discussed originally by Gupta (2017) and defined above, but which I will share again here – that “your way of knowing and understanding yourself is wrong” (Mollet & Lackman, 2018, p. 89). This same rhetoric is used institutionally to gatekeep not only access to scholarship, but is used inter-acronym to police access to queer spaces, resources, kinship, and belonging – and is also an experience that is commonly had by trans students, faculty, and staff (Catalano, 2014). Such rhetoric, invoked in trans or LGB spaces, often focuses on a person’s body – a similar congruence with disability conversations. What does it mean to be trans enough? Do you have to have surgery? Do you have to “look just right?” What about those who cannot take hormones due to medical issues – do disabilities make you fit into your other communities less? These questions highlight some of the frictions previously discussed, as the construct of the “Gold-Star asexual” persists, and there are many that police access to both queer-umbrella community spaces and asexual identity. While difficult to describe, I am reminded of Z Nicolazzo’s (2017) conversations in *Trans* in College*, wherein she and her participants discussed political and social pressure surrounding ideas of “what counts” as being trans: particularly when related to undergoing surgery (or not), taking hormones (or not), presenting as specific genders, dressing a certain way, or identifying with certain pronouns. In the conversation,

Nicolazzo and a participant discussed the nuances of both she and the student desiring more “representation” and “visibility,” and what that rhetoric meant:

... at stake for us was what such representation and visibility meant in relation to the wide diversity among trans* communities. Thus, it was not a matter of our wanting there to be more trans* people [at the university studied] but of the assumptions we made about *who counted as trans** [emphasis added]. In other words, when we admitted we desired increased trans* visibility, we were suggesting there was a lack of people we would identify as trans*. Thus, we all had a vision of what trans* people looked like, and by extension, did not look like. This complexity is particularly painful to discuss, as it underscores the ways the participants and I have been socialized to buy into the very concept that continues to harm us as trans* people... we were implicitly suggesting there was a particular [correct] way to embody transness (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 118).

The nuance is thus: when we seek others who are “like us” we may in fact deny those with whom we fit, but who do not meet the expectations that we are trying to visually (or socially) project upon them. I believe many marginalized folks have the experience of “popping their head above the crowd” in a packed space to “see if there are people like them” – I know that I do. As Nicolazzo (2017) says, realizing the exclusive nature of such necessary survival actions is indeed painful. What is also painful, and unfortunate, is the way that in-group members of identities who fit normative ideals perpetuate monolithic ideals of how to be onto others. In the case of transness (or even of cis maleness or “femme”-ness), this means adhering to heterogendered ideals. In the case

of asexuality: this means the Gold-Star Asexual standard, which is congruent with cisalloheterosexual norms (Archer, 2022)

The proliferation of such a standard, whether by asexual community members themselves as they police spaces or by others upholding social norms, unfortunately makes things not just uncomfortable for asexual individuals – but dangerous. When applied interpersonally, Gold-Star “standards” can have disastrous and violent consequences. Pathologization (medicalization), isolation, and erasure are subjects that have been frequently discussed in this overview, and which persist. Building on this research, scholars are now examining circumstances which surround unwanted sexual experiences of asexual individuals. There are many times where asexual individuals have been threatened (or worse) with “correction” when their epistemic agency is denied: that is to say, violence can occur when asexual individuals are viewed as simply needing to be “fixed.” Such violent and/or unwanted behavior has been termed *corrective rape* (Decker, 2014; Lund, 2017; Mosbergen, 2017). Whereas some individuals may engage in unwanted sexual activity willingly (such as for the pleasure of a partner), Amanda Mollet and Wayne Black (2021, 2023) have recently examined coercive rape tactics perpetuated against asexual college students. Related to corrective rape: *coercive rape* extends beyond physical violence (“alcohol or drug-based coercion” or “physical threats or force”) and into verbal coercion through lies, threatening to end relationships over a lack of sex, rumor spreading, repeated pressure to participate, and through coercive influence or authority (Mollet & Black, 2013, p. 98-99). A step towards “proving marginality” indeed, Mollet and Black’s research strongly pointed out the harms that asexual students face when their agentic identities are denied, and when such attitudes are pervasive

within our institutions. Cuthbert's research (2021a) also tells us that, similar to gendered applications of HSDD, agentic denial experiences are deeply gendered, with women experiencing denials on grounds of "romance-seeking," "frigidity," and more.

Autism, Decoupling, and Gender Detachment

Compared to conversations of corrective rape and coercive rape, other areas of emerging asexuality research are more theoretical in nature – at least at the present time. Ronis et al (2021; including Lori Brotto), while discussing changing definitions of asexuality, also discussed a "putative" relationship between autism and asexuality (p. 3832): that is to say, a relationship which is commonly and publicly discussed and assumed. This relationship is of course discussed from the direction of disability: autistic individuals are infantilized or assumed childlike, and must of course be asexual or avoid intercourse (Chen, 2020; Cuthbert, 2021b; Decker, 2014; Przybylo, 2019). However, this assumption is also approached from the opposite direction: *many* study participants discuss neurodiversity (Cuthbert, 2016, 2019, 2021b; Mollet & Lackman, 2018; Mollet 2021) and Brotto & Yule's (2016) participants, in one of the studies which formed the basis for DSM changes (Przybylo, 2011), advocated strongly for future research into the relations between asexuality and autism. Research this far has not shown the overlap between asexual identity and autistic identity that is purported to exist by individuals with this identity assemblage. This may be explained by Cuthbert's (2019) conversations of disability mediating asexual experience, or from her same discussions of identity assemblage being inseparable into intersecting, concrete identities. More research in this area of asexuality and autism overlaps is definitively needed.

Whereas examinations into asexual and autistic identities have thus far not provided the types of results that the asexual community has been asking for, examinations of other intersections with asexuality have been more revealing. In the proposal, in line with ideas of “proving marginality,” that asexual individuals are often “queer in some other way.” Kristina Gupta (2019) echoed this sentiment, and has stated that “asexuality studies scholars have suggested that a large percentage of asexually-identified individuals may identify as gender non-conforming because asexually-identified individuals feel less attached to those aspects of gender that are related to sexual scripts” (p. 1201). In *“When we talk about gender we talk about sex”: (A)sexuality and (A)gendered subjectivities*, Karen Cuthbert (2019) discussed asexual participants identifying a “disconnect” between their experiences and normative experiences of gender. Cuthbert discusses, at length, the idea of asexuality being “entangled” with agender identities and presentations: circumstances where students would feel that as they withdrew from sexual norms, that gender presentation desires and norms also naturally fell away. As Cuthbert said:

Many research participants understood gender to be fundamentally about sex. Because of their disconnection or disaffiliation with sex and sexual attraction, many asexual people experienced a simultaneous feeling of alienation from gender, with some going on the find recognition in identities such as agender. This was not a strategy, or an act of gender transgression, but rather something that just made sense. A disconnect from gender was inextricable from their asexual subjectivities, and this was also felt viscerally, at an embodied level (Cuthbert, 2019, p. 859).

Cuthbert drew a connection between this assembled, lived experience and the “Split Attraction Models” (SAMs) commonly emphasized in LGBTQIA+ community spaces, including those on campus. Figure 3 contains one such example, wherein “romantic attraction” and “sexual attraction” are easily extricable and separately defined (Diamond, 2003). Cuthbert’s findings tie not only into ideas of not seeing oneself represented, but into inter-acronym and intra-community friction: “some participants spoke about feeling like their experiences were not reflected in the things they saw and read, or that it was a risk to articulate these feelings due to what was at stake politically” (2019, p. 60).

Interestingly, Cuthbert’s conceptions of asexual students “disentangling” from gender has also come to light in recent sociological research. In *“My gender is like an empty lot”: Gender detachment and ungendering among asexual individuals*, researcher Canton Winer (2023) found similar evidence. Many of Winer’s participants “framed gender presentation and/or identity as irrelevant, unimportant, pointless, and/or overall not a topic of great personal concern,” (p. 9) leading Winer to define the found phenomenon as *gender detachment*. Winer stated that it “remains unclear if gender detachment either enables or is enabled by asexual identification or if similar attitudes would be prevalent among individuals of other sexualities” (p.21) and also states that “the likeliest explanation for the apparent connection between asexuality and gender detachment is that sexuality and gender are co-assembled” (p. 22), referencing Cuthbert’s (2019) assertions. Winer also heavily draws from Munoz’s (1999) concept of disaffiliation. Regardless of the source, it is clear due to Cuthbert’s (2019) and Winer’s (2023) research that gender detachment is a relatively common experience, particularly (but not exclusively) among asexual individuals assigned female at birth.

Closing

In approaching students, faculty, and staff on their experiences with sexuality and disability, I have already encountered many of the above-discussed situations. The papers discussed in Chapter 4 show us encounters with people whose experiences of asexuality are mediated by their disability; people who feel completely detached from gender and gendered experiences; people who have had encounters with sexual violence; people who fall in all sorts of ways into the Purple-Red scale of attraction and the ways they do/do not experience attraction; people who have been hypersexualized; people who have been desexualized – and more. I expect that we will continue to find students (and others) who are seeking disaggregated, targeted programs and intervention just as they are also seeking congruent belongingness experiences with others both like and unlike themselves. I also expect that we will continue to find those whose experiences of themselves do not align with standard conceptions of identity theory, and which require viewing through the nuanced frameworks that I introduced here.

I do firmly believe in Cerankowski and Milks' (2014) assertions about the “liberatory potential” of asexuality theory: that examining ace/aro identity and community has the ability to fracture existing policy and existing thought, allowing us to re-shape it in more equitable and accessible ways. I refute the idea that we must outline the extent of someone's traumas to establish their marginality (numbers fetishism) – as well as the idea that such traumas may render one's identity invalid. I seek to educate both widely in society and inter-acronym, reducing the frictions that I have discussed. Finally, I look forward to deconstructing monolithic ideals and normativity (especially cisalloheteronormativity and its gendered constructions), and to reshaping “what counts”

for in-group community consideration and for policy re-work. All members of our college and university communities are worthwhile, and deserve attention to their experiences and needs. I believe I have established and supported that ideal of worth here: and I will continue to do so.

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CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL LINEAGES, ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In *Rethinking College Student Development Theory Using Critical Frameworks*, J. Michael Denton begins a discussion of queer theory by stating: “Foucault revealed how, in the wake of seeming sexual repression, social institutions have produced an abundance of thought about sex and *(arbitrarily) positioned sexuality as an essential truth of the self*” (Denton, 2019, p. 55-56). If postsecondary education is viewed through this lens, how then would the institution react to critique that runs counter to essentialist sexualized ideals? As Denton suggests, higher education has long been troubled by questions against its’ power structures; particularly that of gender-based (and thus orientation-based) norms. It is the countering, questioning, and resistance against these norms that form the epistemological base of many critical theories, including asexuality theory and disability theory.

Asexuality and aromanticism are currently receiving increased focus: giving rise to a new combination of feminist and queer thought that may be best theoretically labeled as “Critical Asexualities and Non-Sexualities,” after scholar Ela Przybylo’s course syllabus of the same name (Przybylo, 2017). The word *critical* (as in critique and questioning) is intentional. The mere fact that asexuality exists in a sexualized society – within the institution, if you will - it’s seeming proliferation and varied forms, and the unique ways it can be used for critique all combine to form a new and exciting theoretical framework worthy of conversation and exploration. However, to understand where one is

going, it is helpful to know where one has been. Whereas Chapter 1 helped us form the basis for our discussions, this chapter now asks: from where do asexuality theory and disability theory build and draw an understanding of themselves and the world? What assumptions do each make about the nature of being (ontology) and about how people form knowledge (epistemology)? Where do these theory constructs (asexuality theory and disability theory) *come* from?

Historical Background of Asexuality Advocacy

Megan Milks and Karli June Cerwankowski state that “‘*Asexuality*’ as an articulated and named identity has a fairly short history that reaches back just over [two] decade[s]. The asexual movement emerged in the early 2000s with the political goal of establishing asexuality as a legitimate sexual identity” (Milks & Cerankowski, 2014, p. 1). This statement rings true: the vast majority of theoretical discussion on asexuality locates the political movement of asexuality – and thus asexual *identity* recognition - as the “beginning” point of its proliferation in society. This date, by no coincidence, coincides with the founding of AVEN in 2001 (Asexuality Visibility & Education Network, n.d.). While this point is important, it misses foundational pieces: such as one of the earliest discussions of asexuality in print, the *Psycopathia Sexualis*, written by German sexologist Richard von Kraft-Ebbing in 1886, which of course pathologized asexual experience, but which documented these experiences for the first time (von Kraft-Ebbing, 1886/1892). Citing the early 2000’s as asexuality’s starting point also misses such structural pieces as Alfred Kinsey’s (et al) development of the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale, or “the Kinsey Scale” (1948), which served as the basis for more developed and nuanced understandings of sexuality – such as the extended “grid”

for identifying sexuality proposed by Michael Storms (1980), whereas Storms' work has served as the basis of future models, such as the Purple-Red Scale of Attraction discussed in Chapter 1 (Alexander et al, 2018). While Kinsey is most well-known for bringing homosexual identities forth in research, Historian Emily Stremel (2022) told us that "Less well known is that Kinsey also included an 'X' category in his data, which he defined as 'men with no socio-sexual contacts or response'" (p. 71), and further stated:

Kinsey noted that women in this category were much more common than men.

Though he ultimately attributed this to the women's 'inexperience,' by positioning this category in relation to hetero-, homo- and bisexuality, he inadvertently implied that not feeling sexual attraction can be its own sexual orientation (Stremel, 2022, p. 71).

Ela Przybylo (2013), notes that after Kinsey (1948) and Storms (1980), psychologist Paula Nurius (1983) also "incidentally" labeled and conceptualized asexuality, while attempting to disprove the idea in research that heterosexuals are somehow more "sexually healthy" than homosexuals (Przybylo, 2013, p. 228). Unfortunately, this framing also created the "proximity to *pathology* for asexuality" (Przybylo, 2013, p. 228). Przybylo also notes that Nurius was not the only scholar to pathologize asexuality in this "pre-history" period before Bogaert's (2004) study: though in nearly all cases, this "new" research pathologized asexuality in an attempt to de-pathologize homosexuality or bisexuality (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Berkey et al 1990; Masters et al, 1986; Przybylo, 2013).

Pathologizing asexuality on the path to de-pathologizing homosexuality and bisexuality is unfortunate, even if unintentional, and highlights the focus on sexuality and

the physical act of sex as an imperative to be upheld. By comparison, the discussed erasure of women in asexuality research, as typified by Kinsey's research and concepts of the "inexperience" of women appears more intentional than accidental, and highlights cisheteronormative societal focuses, which were perhaps not uncommon in 1948, but which continue into present day. As mentioned, there is an irony to some of these pieces of research in their application for change: but the pre-occupation with asexuals "having sex" and the preoccupation with asexual bodies (usually aimed at women and usually in the context of "genital" sexual reactions) is still unsettling, especially in comparison with historical concepts of "hysteria" treatment and mistreatment of women in research (Brotto & Yule, 2011; Cuthbert, 2021a; Przybylo, 2013). This manipulation and erasure of women is a norm: and it is deeply important to note that the start of asexuality advocacy in the social consciousness beyond research is due firmly to the contributions of women's advocacy.

Fifty years ago, spurred in part by the radicalism of social activists, the time period during and after the Vietnam War saw a marked increase in advocacy for groups long-marginalized by society. Not least among these were the efforts of women to increase recognition of inequality and to and reduce oppression in law, resulting in advancements such as Title IX (which attempts to reduce discrimination on the basis of sex in education institutions), an increase in reproductive rights (including *Roe vs. Wade*, since overturned); and increases in equitable employment law which barred the firing of pregnant women, among others. A staunchly visible component of the women's movement was the push for lesbian rights, coinciding with the efforts of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), created after the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Written by a sub-

group of the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) dubbed the “Radicalesbians,” and identified as marking “the beginning of lesbian feminism” (Stremel, 2022, p. 72), the manifesto “The Woman-Identified Woman” was designed to increase recognition of sexism, homophobia, and adherence to ideals of male dominance within the feminist community. Similarly, the actual political beginnings of asexual advocacy in the United States can be traced here, and theoretical ties to this advocacy will be discussed shortly.

Of note to feminist and asexuality discourse as well as the upcoming conversation on disability is a process that historian Lisa Corrigan dubs ‘*rhetorical adjacency*,’ wherein social movements tend to occur in close proximity to each other by galvanizing each other’s bases through successful organizing actions, through the absorption of those successful tactics, and through methods of cross-support/collaborative resistance (Corrigan, 2019).

Historical Background of Disability Advocacy

Similar to asexuality conversations, the disability rights movement tends to locate the beginnings of advocacy efforts in the 1970s. Whereas this is in part due to the concept of rhetorical adjacency to other pieces of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, many pieces of disability advocacy have focused around concepts of rehabilitation and vocational access in the wake of World War I, World War II, and Vietnam, and the subsequent connection to law. Understandably, veterans receive increasing attention as they return home after war, and several Rehabilitation Acts have been passed after wartime, including the “first” Rehabilitation Act or the “Soldier’s Rehabilitation Act,” signed after World War I. References to this “act” sometimes confuse that this is actually a series of three, signed by President Woodrow Wilson – The Smith-Hughes (creating the

Federal Board of Vocational Education), the Smith-Sears Veterans Rehabilitation Act (aka the “Soldier’s Rehabilitation Act,” what is commonly being referenced) and the Smith-Fess, or the “National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act” (Library of Congress, n.d.). Similarly, after Vietnam, a new Rehabilitation Act (1973) was established both in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, and as a governmental means to address need, replacing previous iterations. The 1973 Act importantly establishes individuals with disabilities as “one of the most disadvantaged groups in society,” and also establishes disability:

[as] a natural part of the human experiences [which] in no way diminishes the right of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers, and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society. (Rehabilitation Act, 1973)

However, the most-referenced piece of the Rehabilitation Act is Section 504 (Department of Labor, n. d.), which prohibits discrimination from any program receiving federal financial assistance – which includes colleges and universities, and is a fundamental piece of protection for students to this day:

The impact of Section 504 cannot be overstated. Disability historians like to say that before it was passed, disabilities were seen as deficits and medical problems. Access was something you had to solve yourself. After it became law, the nation and indeed the world began to perceive access barriers as civil rights issues” (Mattlin, 2022, p. 37).

This is perhaps because of Section 504's ties to the provisions of federal funding. Author of *Disability Pride: Dispatches from a Post-ADA World* (2022) Ben Mattlin states that on the concept of disability rights, veterans of World War I who protested and demanded the cash bonus that they were promised by Congress before enlisting is truly what got the movement started: "a concerted push for disability rights didn't get moving until money became the central issue" (p. 27). Mattlin continues this thinking into conversation about Section 504, and also states that "without the civil rights movement, it's doubtful there would have been a disability rights movement," (p. 30), and directly ties movements of disability rights activists to the Black Panther Party – with some members of the Black Panthers literally funding disability activists to confront in-person senators in 1977 who were debating Section 504, which then became law (Mattlin, 2022).

Of strong relevance to the conversation of capitalism is Student Affairs. The 1944 Veterans Act (the original "GI Bill") established increased educational funding for education (Serviceman's Readjustment Act, 1949) which has been changed or increased since then several times – and there are several other acts that solidify preferential treatment for veterans in hiring practices and in education (Veteran's Preference Act, 1955; Vietnam Era Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act [VEVRAA], 2013). There is a strong argument that the proliferation of Student Affairs as a field owes its financial existence directly to post-war-time expansions of access and funding to accommodate the influx of veterans capitalizing upon service-connected tuition benefits (Altbach, 2011; Thelin & Gasman, 2011; Thelin, 2019). The advent of these series of laws had clear and direct effects on rehabilitation counseling, which in turn created both a "Golden Age" for rehabilitation as well as the jobs and professions that served them (healthcare) – as well

as the jobs that trained these professionals, in effect, universities and teachers (Dunn & Elliott, 2005; Wright, 1960, 1983). Disability rights have thus, in a way, become intertwined with rehabilitation training and inextricable from access to education.

Educational institutions, however, also share a less obvious relation to the eugenics-orientations discussed in Chapter 1. In *Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education* (2017), Jay Timothy Dolmage discusses how in the United States in the mid-1800's, land-grant institutions being given sites by the federal government (often taken from indigenous peoples) often shared space – and research resources, patients, and testing subjects – with asylum institutions designed to incarcerate, isolate, and/or sterilize people with disabilities. Dolmage discusses a “binary relationship between universities and hospitals and asylums like these” (p. 50), discussing a testing, treatment, and incarceration pipeline.

“Lunatic asylums,” as they were called, are often tied to Britain in the early 1800's, but have roots within the Catholic church in England as far back as the 16th century. It is important to note that such places were initially developed as hospitals, yet devolved into treating persons with disabilities as far less than human, forcing their incarceration and isolating them from others (Andrews et al, 1998). Many institutions have changed form, and psychiatric inpatient hospitals as well as nationwide systems of nursing homes run under poor conditions still exist. Even institutions with the best of intentions and the best of care have unfortunate side effects to the process of medical treatment:

Erving Goffman (1961), in his well-known work *Asylums*, describes what he calls the “mortification process” wherein institutional residents are deprived

not only of their privacy but of their power over themselves [agency], usually for the convenience and efficiency of those running the institution. Rules that would be considered intolerable if imposed on noninstitutionalized citizens are enforced and accepted. That they are behaviorally accepted does not indicate an absence of psychologically damaging consequences (Vash & Crewe, 2003, p. 42).

Thankfully, rehabilitation counselors and other advocates have been behind a social push to change institutionalization culture: that of *deinstitutionalization*, the recognitions of the harms institutionalization has and the subsequent attempts to return persons being treated to more community-focused mental health resources that are less isolating, less stigmatizing, and more constructive (Bird, 1998; Mattlin, 2022).

It is also important to note the ties between asylum-forced isolations and discussions of forced sterilizations, breeding control, and extermination: the legacies of eugenics (Dolmage, 2017; Kafer, 2013; Przybylo, 2018). The most famous and oft-referenced instance of eugenics application, “Aktion T-4” or the “Euthanasia Program,” comes from Nazi leadership during World War II, wherein roughly 200,000 people with disabilities were systematically murdered during the course of the war:

The T-4 program became the model for the mass murder of Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and others in camps equipped with gas chambers that the Nazis would open in 1941 and 1942. The program also served as a training ground for SS members who manned these camps.” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

Perhaps most startling, besides the connections to our educational institutions, is the idea that eugenics-thinking exists today. The National Women’s Law Center (2021) has released reporting within the last five years that outlines the existence of modern forced or coerced sterilization practices in 31 states and Washington, D.C, traceable to a 1920’s court case wherein the supreme court ruled that compulsory sterilization of “unfit” peoples was constitutional and needed, and which has never been formally overturned (Buck v. Bell, 1927). The Justice Department has quite recently ordered nearly 20 million dollars in settlements against a nationwide psychiatric hospital system that was found to be committing patients against their will and performing unnecessary procedures, and is finding and filing suit against individual states for similar abuse (Silver-Greenberg & Thomas, 2024; U.S. Department of Justice, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c). Whereas great strides in deinstitutionalization have been made since the latest push in the 1990’s to change what in-patient psychiatric, elder-care and in-home rehabilitation care looks like, healthcare changes in 2019 (alongside changes brought by the COVID-19 epidemic) have sought new forms of re-institutionalization by limiting what in-home workers and others are allowed to do. To quote one of Mattlin’s (2022) interviewees (disability rights activist Nancy Becker-Kennedy): “They’re trying to build an industry that’s just like the nursing homes... except using our homes for real estate” (p. 212).

These denials of justice - institutionalization culture, forced or coerced sterilizations, and manipulations of medicalized aspects of care and of law - still exist. There are marked improvements, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which for the first time prohibited discrimination in any employment – not just federally contracted (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). The subsequent expansion

of the ADA (colloquially, the ADAAA) in 2008 created a definitional expansion (as discussed in Chapter 1) on the definitions of what disability is and means, choosing to go with concepts of “impairment” of aspects of daily function (ADA Amendments Act, 2008). This expansion of definition opened access to protection for millions of Americans, is emblematic of what definitional expansion can do, and is deeply important. However, the history of disability advocacy in the United States is one of push-and-pull and continuing efforts to change the face of what legislation is supposed to do for civil rights, as can be seen when examining institutionalization/de-institutionalization conversations.

The ethos of bringing forth law to protect veterans (driven by capitalism) and those with disabilities, as well as a history of institutionalization culture *both* exist within the United States. Both conversations still carry over into present day, creating dual and conflicting information about disability, particularly when educational institutions are used as a backdrop.

Blending Historical and Theoretical Lineage/Background Concepts

As previously mentioned, social movements have a tendency to be galvanized by and occur in close proximity to one another (Corrigan, 2019). Furthering the idea of rhetorical adjacency and returning to conversations of asexuality advocacy: many members of the GLF were indeed women, and there were members of the NYRF who were indeed lesbians. As it turns out – a few of these lesbians were also asexual, and wrote a manifesto of their own. Lisa Orlando and Barbie Hunter Getz wrote the *Asexual Manifesto* in 1972, two years after *The Woman-Identified Woman*.

The *Asexual Manifesto*, similar to the writings of the Radicalesbians, was written as a statement rebuking heterosexual power and male dominance. The manifesto identified asexuality as “sexually relating to no one,” (Stremel, 2022, p. 72) and called asexuality “a political response to objectification by men.” (Stremel, 2022, p. 72). Orlando and Getz defined sex as oppressive, even lesbian sex, because objectification, originally by men, “was copied by women toward each other due to social conditioning about sex and its function in intimacy,” (Stremel, 2022, p. 73) and further called the act of sex “a barrier and distraction from fighting sexism” (Stremel, 2022, p. 73). Stremel (2022) also noted, when discussing Orlando and Getz, that they formed their coalition in response to caucuses within the New York Radical Feminist group designed around sexual orientation: revealing that these self-identified asexual radicals did indeed approach asexuality from the perspective of an innate orientation *as well as* viewing asexuality as a strongly political maneuver. As we move into understanding a theoretical lineage that also historically undergirds these concepts, it will become clear that *many* theorists view sex and sexuality – or the lack thereof – as political endeavors.

Orlando and Getz are not the only lesser-known pieces of feminist discourse in the 1970’s and 1980’s that have impacted asexual advocacy and history: there are others who were against the louder voices of the sex-positive movement in feminism, which is the dominant rhetoric most often referenced. Scholar Breanne Fahs (2010) tells us:

In the shadow of the sexual revolution, women allegedly underwent a transformation from subdued, suburban, sexless housewives to revved-up, urban, highly-sexed, liberated women. Left out of this master narrative of the sexual revolution, however, are the many other interpretations activists espoused for

integrating sexuality and political freedom, particularly as radical feminists referenced the political goals of anarchism. Consequently, *more* sex became grossly insufficient for liberation (Fahs, 2010, p. 446).

Fahs outlines a group of women who, in challenge to the sex-as-liberation narratives, even more forcibly challenged sexuality on grounds similar to Orlando and Getz. Among them is Roxanne Dunbar, founder of “Cell 16,” a radical feminist group known for training its members in self-defense techniques in staunch opposition to violence against women, and which advocated for feminist separatism: the idea that women should break completely away from men and achieve sex-segregation. Celibacy and asexuality were both discussed as a means to this end, though Dunbar herself notes her own anarchist leanings, and that the group was sex-positive, which may have contributed to its later popularity and association with Lesbian feminism (Fahs, 2010; Golden, 1994).

Cell 16 were publishers of a distributed journal titled *No more fun and games: A journal of women's liberation*, to which Dunbar (1969), contributed a (short) article titled “Asexuality.” Dana Densmore (1969), a member of Cell 16, also contributed a work titled “On Celibacy,” to the journal. Publications to the journal are difficult to locate in their entirety (Siggy, 2018). Internet historian “Siggy” also notes Densmore’s (1971) article “Independence from the Sexual Revolution,” (also in *No more fun and games*) as containing what they consider to be clear foundations for asexual and aromantic conversations occurring today:

If you are told over and over that you are a being who has profound sexual needs the odds are very good that you will discover that you do. Particularly when other outlets are forbidden or discouraged. Particularly when it is emphasized that those

who do *not* feel these needs are frigid, neurotic, sexually maladjusted (which for a woman means *essentially* maladjusted), dried up, barren, to be pitied... We are programmed to think that not only is sex the only way to demonstrate or prove our love, it is the only (or best) way to express it (Siggy, 2018, quoting Densmore, 1971).

Each of these 1970's authors, as anarchist-feminists, firmly rejected patriarchical, sex-driven society. As mentioned, their work is also commonly side-stepped in favor of more sex-positive representations of the feminist movement; but perhaps most (in)famous in this group of feminist authors is Valerie Solanas – known for both the *SCUM* (“*Society for Cutting Up Men*”) *Manifesto* (1967), and for the shooting of Andy Warhol. The manifesto only explicitly mentions asexuality once, but maintains an air throughout of the maintenance of choice and agency, an air of reaction to mistreatment and societal malaise, and an air of sex-reactivity. Solanas states that you’ve got to go through a lot of sex to get to anti-sex” (Siggy, 2018, quoting Solanas, 1967).

It feels strange then, that as quoted, J. Michael Denton (2019) mentioned the common institutional positionality that sexuality is an “essential” truth of the self, and there exists a preponderance of thought about how best to approach issues of sexuality (or simply existing while different) within our higher education institutions. If asexuality and its associated theory sets are to be viewed as a way to confront systemic power (as indeed, radical feminists have asked us to do), we must first establish asexuality theory as “critical.” Similar to work that I have completed with Dr. Chang-kyu Kwon regarding ableism in (higher education and other) work environments, there exists a conflation

between research that is “critical” and research that is simply *about* marginalized individuals (Kwon & Archer, 2022).

Asexuality as Critical Theory

In an overview of published research on scholarly theoretical engagements with LGBTQ+ people, Duran, Jackson & Lange (2022) make 3 points in identification of critical research in higher education:

[1] Critical theories squarely place gender and sexuality into conversations about power, oppression, and privilege. [2] Critical theorists ask how laws and policies meant to control a population regulate race, gender, and sexuality. Of note, [3] critical theories are explicitly tied to as social justice project, meaning that scholars should identify and contest social inequalities (Duran et al, 2022, p. 382).

As a *post-positivist* theory set, critical constructions refute the idea that there are objective, undebatable truths about the universe (and especially about society), and ask us to examine the social context and experiences within which the applied theory is to be understood. Critical theories, then, naturally spring from concepts related to resistance and *critique* – hoping to change aspects of the status quo. Rather than merely being a theory set for discussion, critical theory:

... reflects on the context of its own origins and aims to be a transformative force within that context. It explicitly embraces an interdisciplinary methodology that aims to bridge the gap between empirical research and the kind of philosophical thinking needed to grasp the overall historical situation and mediate between specialized empirical disciplines. Critical theory aims not merely to describe social reality, but to generate insights into the forces of domination operating

within society in a way that can inform practical action and stimulate change (Celikates & Flynn, 2023)..

In short, critical theories exist to critique power, to discuss the different ways that power is applied, and to seek change to disparate social circumstances that are experienced because of these power differentials. If asexuality is approached and utilized critically (Przybylo, 2017; 2019), a number of lineage “branches” can be identified that inform its application and usage. The first is queer and feminist theory – of which asexuality theory incorporates many pieces – due in no small part to the discussed political roots, both in research and advocacy. Asexuality also shares a special relationship (an assemblage, if you will) with disability theory’s theoretical constructions and ideas of bodily autonomy or concepts of more “perfect” or less “perfect” bodies. Further, it is worth noting that applications of asexuality theory in the United States have relied heavily on the work of scholar Amanda Mollet (Mollet 2020, 2023; Mollet & Black, 2021; Mollet & Lackman 2018; 2021) and trend heavily towards Student Development Theory (SDT) constructs such as Mollet’s “Asexual Expatiation Model” (ASE). Also worth noting is how the ASE is literally framed by oppressive societal constructs – rooting the first grounded theory of asexual student development within critical theoretical approach (Mollet, 2020).

Queer and Feminist Theory Foundational Ties

In the barest of terms, one might think of feminist theory as critiquing male power, and providing alternatives; and queer theory as critiquing dominant sociosexual (heterosexual) power, and providing similar counterpoint. In line with fighting purely oppositional definitions, the nuances of both are, of course, a bit more complicated.

Disentangling feminist theory and queer theory from each other often proves difficult, with some scholars even advocating that such a separation should not be attempted. Gedro and Mizzi (2014) refer to them as “not just related; [but] ... spokes of the same epistemological wheel,” and state that “They both interrogate the role of gender at the individual level, at the sexual/relational affiliation level, at the organizational level, and at the societal level” (p. 447).

Crip Theory and Disability Theory Foundations

Similar to scholarly statements that queer theory is inextricable from feminist theory/(Black) feminist thought, so too has disability theory become nearly inextricable from ideas of queer theory – though there are some frictions socio-politically that I will discuss in Chapter 5. The deep ties between the two scholarly areas have resulted in a combined term: *crip theory*. These ties are perhaps best explained by Carrie Sandahl (2003), one of the foundational authors to introduce concepts of the subject:

Both [identity groups] have been pathologized by medicine; demonized by religion; discriminated against in housing, employment, and education, stereotyped in representation, victimized by hate groups; and isolated socially, often in their families of origin. Both constituencies are diverse in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliation, and other respects and therefore share many members (e.g., those who are disabled *and* gay), as well as allies. Both have self-consciously created their own enclaves and vibrant subcultural practices” (p. 62).

In the discussion above regarding societal norms, I established that queer theory “emphasizes the tendency of ‘noncompliance’ with norms enforced and the intrinsic

involvement of advocacy and resistance as a means of change” (Kwon & Archer, 2022, p. 521). As discussed in Chapter 1, such an idea is totally understandable in terms of eugenics-oriented thinking, which as mentioned, proliferated throughout the World War eras, yet which still exists today, particularly in medicalized frameworks (Kafer, 2013). Queer theory adopted notions on noncompliance for survival means – and directly shares this same outlook with disabled people. Sandahl states that “Perhaps the most significant similarity between these disciplines, however, is their radical stance towards concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)” (Sandahl, 2003, p. 26).

This push against “normalcy;” this pushback against ideals that are placed upon disabled people – it has a precedent, centered in society’s ways of understanding the lived experiences and needs of the disabled. At present, there are three primary frameworks through which disability theorizing is approached: the *medical model of disability*, the *social model of disability*, and the newer *socio-political/relational model of disability*. “The medical model of disability has been one of the compulsory ways that dominant society labels disability as less than ideal, grief-inducing, and a form of loss” (Kwon & Archer, 2022, p. 327). That is to say, the medical model views disability as a biological problem which needs to be cured or rehabilitated for “proper” functioning. The medical model views disabled bodies as flawed, in error, or in need of correction: something deeply familiar to asexual people who have been viewed through “trauma” lenses or through the “diagnosis” of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). I invoke here the section of *Ace* that I quoted in Chapter 1, where Angela Chen (2022) states that “It is difficult for me to see the purpose of a diagnosis that is not very likely to connect you to

useful services but *is* likely to reinforce the idea that you are medically unwell” (p. 92). In many ways, such a statement may sum up feelings of the medical model of disability. While the model should not be demonized, per se – indeed, people with disabilities may desire or need medical treatment – *its place is not in the understanding of disabilities* or in the framing of disabilities within greater society. The medical model of disabilities belongs solely to the realm of connecting people to services which may be of use to them: a way that it is not typically used. The connection to medical services based on diagnosis is valuable, but must be firmly understood in context of the historical hegemonic application of the medical model, as discussed previously.

As a direct response to notions of the medical model, the *social model of disability* arose, and is commonly taught. The social model focuses on the idea of structural and environmental determinants of a social “idea” of disability, in essence stating that an individual is not impaired by their disability, but by society’s reaction to it:

The social model is widely used in critique, but theorists also caution against its monolithic usage, as medical needs are quite real for many with disabilities, and the social model may fail to consider embodied experiences of impairment. In other words, because the social model focuses on structural and environmental determinants of disability, it leads to (1) the separation of impairment and disability, and (2) an overemphasis on collective (over individual) experience of disability. These limitations of the social model are particularly salient when understanding that disability intersects other identities and exists across gender, race, sexuality, age, and socioeconomic status. People with disabilities may hold multiple marginalized identities and may experience their identity assemblage in

unique and personal ways, thus complicating what either of these two models (medical or social) can adequately portray (Kwon & Archer, 2022, p. 328).

A third model – or really a reinterpretation of the social model – the *sociopolitical/relational model of disability* (Kafer, 2013) has also come to prominence.

Author Cathy Kologan (2016) has put this most succinctly, saying:

Thomas (1999, 2001) [one of the original proponents and critics of the social model in the UK] argues for the need to take account of the lived experience of disability, including the lived experience of impairment. Thus a social relational understanding of disability holds that: disability is defined by, and exists through, the lived experience of the body; that disability is created on the basis of unequal social relationships that undermine the psycho-emotional wellbeing of people labelled or designated as 'impaired' (and their families); and that disability is imposed on the individual through disabling restrictions carried out through social relationships and interaction (Kologan, 2016, p. 1).

Put differently, Dr. Chang-kyu Kwon and I (citing theorist Fiona-Kumari Campbell) stated that in work (or higher education) terms, disability is not determined by medical diagnoses, nor is it determined by societal indifference: it is created and reproduced at the *site (moment) of the interaction*. This conception of the sociopolitical-relational model allows for the analysis of interpersonal circumstances as well as the personal effects of (potentially) systemic interaction on a person with disabilities, in work or other context (Campbell, 2013; Kwon & Archer, 2022).

Kathy Cologan (2016), in discussing the sociopolitical/relational model has also helped us to locate the origins of the social model: theorizing in the UK in the 1980's.

Specifically, this model structure can be tied back to disability advocate and professor Mike Oliver, who originally published the idea of the social model of disability in 1983 (Oliver, 1983; 2013). The models themselves were aimed largely at the training of rehabilitation and counseling professionals and have undergone several iterations since their initial conception, though the spirit of them remains quite similar (Smart & Smart, 2006) Their focus on training counseling professionals is important, as is their varied usage: as mentioned, sole focus on social issues ignores the medical, and vice-versa, and sociopolitical, sociocultural, and interpersonal interactions cannot be excluded. Counseling consensus (again, a close relation to education) is that practitioners should be trained in as many models as available, in order to diversify and allow further complexity of understanding (Smart, 2009).

The tying factor: Epistemic Denial of Agency

Long have disabled people been denied agency, and long have they been infantilized, institutionalized, de (or re) sexualized, and de-intellectualized (Brown, 2022; Chen, 2020; Przybylo, 2019). The site-oriented (re)production of inequality highlighted by the socio-political/relational-cultural model of disability is also produced and perpetuated towards asexual and aromantic individuals in terms of their identity. In Chapter 1, I discussed Kristina Gupta's (2017) concepts of a "denial of epistemic agency", further defined by Mollet & Lackman (2019) as being told that "your way of knowing and understanding yourself is wrong" (p. 89). I also mentioned that Mollet's (2020) Asexual Student Expatiation model (ASE) tells students that these messages of wrongness come from society. What theorists on ableism and theorists on asexuality agree on is this common experience: being told that you cannot possibly know what is

good for you, what your identity is, what is best for you medically, that something may be wrong in the absence of diagnosis – and more. Indeed, *many* disabled individuals experience a denial of their sexual agency and a denial of the existence of sexuality for them (Brown, 2022; Chen, 2020; Cuthbert, 2017, 2021). Citing philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) in their article *Asexuality and Epistemic Injustice: A Gendered Perspective* (2022), Karen Cuthbert outlined the following in definition:

The epistemic – relating to knowledge and to knowing – is an important dimension of oppression and marginalization. Black feminists have long been writing on how knowledge is *profoundly social and relational* [emphasis added] – that is, how Knowledge comes to be formed, who is heard and afforded credibility, who is ignored and doubted, must be understood as part of the power relations of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism. (Cuthbert, 2022, p. 841).

Again highlighting the ties between (Black) feminist theory and queer theory, Cuthbert further defines epistemic injustice as “refer[ing] to harms perpetuated against marginalized groups specifically in relation to knowledge and their capacity as knowers” (2022, p. 841), and discusses Fricker’s (2007) two defined forms: *testimonial injustice* (not being listened to or being denied credibility because of who one is or is thought to be) and *hermeneutical injustice* (the lack of existing frameworks or discourses through which to discuss your experience – a commonly discussed experience among asexual/aromantic people (Cuthbert, 2022). Mollet’s participants in her (2020) study “*I have a lot of feelings, just none in the genitalia region*”: *A Grounded Theory of Asexual College Students’ Identity Pathways* are particularly representative of this issue, as

several students described not having language relating to spectrums or complications of identity before hearing about and understanding asexual pluralities. Angela Chen also stated “[modern day] Aces didn’t discover these [asexual] experiences. We merely paid attention and tried to better describe them.” (Chen, 2020, p. 28). Such a statement sounds remarkably like developing theory.

Asexual individuals and disabled individuals both experience testimonial and hermeneutical injustice applied to their identities and life experiences, and Cuthbert (2022) and Mollet (2020) are bringing much needed focus to these issues with their research. It should be noted, however, that educational institutions (and we as educators) are not exempt from perpetuating this inequality, and one of the ways student affairs professionals have done so is in their own epistemological approaches with Student Development Theory.

Student Development Theory

In Chapter 1, while articulating the foundations of Critical Asexualities/Non-Sexualities and discussing relevant definitions and theories, I also discussed the current approach to asexuality work within student affairs, which is from the direction of Student Development Theory (SDT) constructs (Mollet, 2022). Ian McNeely also ties SDT to ideas of epistemic injustice – wherein constructs created by mostly white male administrators to cement their place in the field are applied as monolithic approaches to pluralistic human experiences (McNeely, 2023). To proceed, it needs to be firmly said that these two theory sets (SDT and Critical Asexualities)– while intertwined, and certainly *both usable to examine the lives of students* – have typically come from two distinctly different backgrounds and have distinctly different (yet sometimes congruent)

goals. SDT constructs seek to examine student experience through a framework which condenses student experience into easily translatable chunks. As previously mentioned, this has the effect of “flattening” student experience, dumbing-down what may not easily be explained, and stepping over nuance.

At its simplest, “Student development theor(ies) provide frameworks that give educators different ways to look at and understand college students’ growth and development.” (LSU Online, 2020). Critical Asexualities and Non-Sexualities, as a critical theory set, serves a distinctly different purpose: as already mentioned, critical constructions ask us to examine the social context and experiences within which situations occur, and provide us the means to critique them. My intent here is not to disparage SDT as a valuable tool, nor to dispute its relevance in creating actual change for students. As the writers of *Student Development in College*, one of the most utilized SDT textbooks in print, have told us: “[SDT] enables student affairs professionals to identify and address student needs, design programs, develop policies, and create healthy college environments that encourage positive growth in students” (Evans et al, 2010, p. 7). When applied as Evans et al (2010) discuss – SDT can indeed help with the impacts of change – which is why recent practitioners and theorists have begun utilizing Critical Theories as paramount and current, instituting the construction of different “waves” of SDT, as articulated in Chapter 1. The third and most recent wave of SDT – Critical Theories – are touted as current (Jones, 2019).

The editor of *Rethinking College Student Development Using Critical Theories*, Susan Jones, told us that there are three goals to keep in mind when utilizing Critical Theory in higher education: “emancipation and societal transformation,” “explicit

attention to larger structures of inequality as the context in which development takes place,” and bridging the gap between theory and practice, which she discusses as “theorizing to what end?” (2018, p 13). In line with Jones’ statements, I assert that Critical Theory *can indeed be utilized* as SDT or as a separate, yet similar construct that is useful to analyze and change the circumstances that our students, faculty, staff, and community members encounter at our universities – institutions which often serve as social educators and social movement and mobility generators. In doing so, I also assert that the next steps for the application (“to what end?”) of theory are to utilize Critical Theory to enact actual change, rather than focus on early SDT “developmental” ideas, critiqued in Chapter 1. I fully understand that in order to discuss and utilize the concept, ‘the field’ has desired that we *define and establish what Asexuality is* – but I contend that work has already been done. I have utilized my research thus far to fully intend to utilize identify potential avenues of change and fully intend to continue to do so – which will involve the critique that critical theory portends, and which queer and feminist thought have paved the way for.

Queer and Feminist Theoretical Lineages

If we continue to look historically at the concepts that undergird feminist theory, queer theory, and thus asexuality theory; and if we try to approach from a critical lens; it becomes apparent that viewing sex and sexuality as a political maneuver is a common theme. Below, the basic paradigms essential to understanding are discussed. It should be noted that these tenets are presented in scaffolded order (Vygotsky, 1978), rather than on a timeline of theoretical emergence. The effect is similar, but not strictly chronological.

Foucault (as mentioned by Denton, 2019) is often credited with some of the first published scholarly work to address the concept of human sexuality as a societal and social construct, rather than as an imperative part of human nature. His multi-part work, *The History of Sexuality* (1978), blatantly stated: “[s]exuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given...[i]t is the name that can be given to a historical construct” (Przybylo, 2011, p. 445 quoting Foucault, 1978, p. 105). While the act of sex itself may be something that is naturally undertaken (by some), it is society that overlays the act with value judgments and status ascriptions. Foucault (during his moment in 1978) traced some of the ways in which society could be said to have done this historically, and provided special focus to the idea of social institutions such as religion, business, and in particular our educational system. Through Foucauldian analysis, social institutions such as these have been said to affirm, create, and define systems of normative behavior: what is “good,” “desired,” or “ideal.”

During this same era, scholars William Simon and John Gagnon examined sexual script theory, wherein human behaviors – particularly sexual behaviors are “scripted,” meaning that they follow norms of interaction defined by socialization in society(ies) (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In this vein, feminist theorists have also cautioned: “Note as well that the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are *constructs*, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or ‘fetishes,’ not *natural* categories, but *political* ones.” (Butler, 1990 [2007], p. 172). This creates a perpetuated system of power, in which sexuality (in good, desired, or ideal form) is firmly entrenched.

Transgressions are Punished – One Way or Another

Under this system of power surrounding sexuality, *transgressing*, or not adhering to norms, is punished (Foucault, 1975; 1978). This was done because certain acts are considered *more* good, desired, or ideal than others: heterosexual intercourse, pro-creative sex, and marriage, to name the most prominent. Thus, a hierarchy comes into view:

... there are always forms of language, deeds, desires, thoughts... that are suggested above others, that are coded as better, more exact, more ‘natural.’ The result is that ‘[s]mall differences in value or behavior are often experienced as *cosmic threats*’ ... those who do not act in accordance with the norm intimately know that there exist privileged deeds and that there are ‘real,’ material consequences for failing to repeat them (Przybylo, 2011, p. 477, quoting Rubin, 2006, p. 529).

These real, material consequences can manifest in a variety of different ways in today’s world, and are not constrained to corporate/legal punishment, or to macro-level conversations between heterosexuality and an idea of deviance. Even within queer communities, there are unspoken (or sometimes blatant) standards for what is expected; for what is “normal behavior.” Indeed: in some areas of queer and feminist thought, lesbian and gay male acts are examined in terms of their transgressiveness; sometimes as a form of rebellion against these societal structures. It should be noted, then, that *not having a sexuality* in a traditional (or binarily opposed – heterosexual or homosexual) sense creates a frightening and dissonant situation, outside this realm of thought, and of what is able to be easily policed. Such a topic raises questions such as: “Is it right to

punish this?” or “Is it deficient/fixable?” in order to try to fit the concept within existing systems.

Societal Messages About Sex are Deeply Ingrained and Often Indistinguishable

Complicating these matters of norm adherence is a normalized and accepted pattern of societal operating that scholar Ela Przybylo (2011) has coined *sexusociety*, defined as “[a] massive conglomerate of tangentially repeated sexual language, deeds, desires, and thoughts” (p. 447). Sexual images are pervasive in media. Our governmental tax system favors unions between (until 2015) heterosexual, opposite-sex partners. Society performs casual references to family structure, genitals, sex or bodies represented in art, inadvertent sex jokes and sexualized language. Masculinity studies as a field exists. There are even sexualized pronouns for inanimate objects in various languages, and sex or gender-related language bases (typically male): such as “seminal,” meaning “beginning,” which stems from the root word “semen.” Przybylo points to the fact that, yes, while certain acts of sexuality are privileged over others, it is by virtue of sheer *repetition* that this relatively invisible web of *sexusociety* exists. This repetition begets (a term used to describe fathering children) more repetition:

... *sexusociety*’s privilege lies in tangential, obsessive repetition by countless actors and the institutions they coordinate. To be exact, it is not *sexusociety* [itself] that privileges, but the obsessive repetition of sexual deeds, desires, thoughts which fuels further repetition and thus acts coercively and in favor of certain deeds at the expense of others (Przybylo, 2011, p. 448).

Without value judgment (for who could, as all participate), this system of repetition creates increased visibility and scrutiny for those who do not adhere. These normative

sexualized ideas are difficult to see and are ingrained in the very fabric of our society, language, desires, and interactions. By Przybylo's description, they are relatively mindlessly repeated: even by those who notice or are by their own definition non-normative.

Society Bears on us with Compulsory Messages

If the unseen messages of a sexualized society were not enough, remember that they are reinforced by social institutions and systems that suggest hierarchies of goodness and "natural"-ness. As such, the discussed message of "adhere or be punished" is so loud as to compel certain ways of being and acting. Compulsion is defined as "the action of urging irresistibly: constraint, obligation, coercion" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Attached to our discussion, queer and feminist theorists recognize various aspects of society that are *compulsory*, and that stem from an institutional perspective. Not only do individuals typically approach new people and situations with the idea that the new person/situation will fall into expected norms, they may go to great lengths to try to resolve their own dissonance around situations that do not fit normativity. The term compulsory, in this context, describes both society's pressure on an individual to adhere to norms, and society's *assumption* that someone "naturally" *will or does*.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

Commonly attributed to the 1980 essay, *Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Adrienne Rich explored how heterosexual intercourse, lifestyles, and the male gender are centered in discourse in terms of sociosexual and sociopolitical hegemonies. Rich's tone was one of exhaustion: with how heterosexuality is both "implicitly and explicitly" presented as superior and as a default choice (p. 633), and how even

societally, lesbians seem to exist only in terms of what they can do for heterosexual male gazes, likening such acts to grossness and “genital fetishism” (p. 634). Through this fetishism, penetration and maleness are privileged; so unlike other marginal identities, lesbians are afforded special interest and “tolerated” so long as they still relegate their existence to being inferior, though “women’s choice of women” is still labeled as problematic, since it deconstructs males as centric (p. 632). She points to this and more as one of the systems through which “male power is manifested and maintained” (p. 640). Her arguments raise the point that lesbianism’s existence is not respected on its’ own; it is given societal shape through its’ comparison to heterosexuality. Through these points, Rich’s also created the term *compulsory heterosexuality*, and has cemented in scholarly work the concept that heterosexuality and its common representations (two-party opposite sex-marriage, monogamy, chasteness, and child-rearing) are societally privileged, and commonly expected.

Compulsory Gender Binary Discourse and Compulsory Heterogenderism

Z Nicolazzo’s book *Trans* in College* devoted several chapters to discussing how dividing presentation and identification of gender into two stark binaries (and doing the same with sexuality) presented sincere problems for her study participants and is representative of similar discourse in society at large. In her own words,

compulsory heterogenderism... [is] a term I developed to explain the ways participants’ gender identities and sexualities were consistently understood *in and through* each other. Although the study participants’ sexualities (i.e., gay, lesbian, or bisexual) are distinct from their gender identities as trans*, the way other

nontrans* individuals could make sense of the participants' gender was *through their sexuality*. (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 76-77).

Nicolazzo's conversation served multiple purposes. Firstly, she articulated how passerby cannot comprehend a gender outside of a "normal" binary: at one point she said "my gender identity is often *flattened* by those assuming I am an effeminate gay man" (p. 14). But misgenderings do not end at such simplicity. In order to resolve community dissonance surrounding binary genders and hetero-centric sexualities, one participant stated "For a while it was easier for me to identify as a lesbian, you know?", despite not identifying in such a manner at all, and simply being perceived as masculine-presenting and female (p. 77). In order to resolve dissonance, confronters often ask uncomfortable and invasive questions in order to ascertain a semblance of gender grounded in an understanding of physical sex characteristics. If this attempt fails, the next question comes in terms of sexuality. "Who do you have sex with," functions as a way to maintain a gender binary that privileges heterosexuality and gender dichotomy. *Heterogenderism* focuses on the concept that "normative" heterosexual relationships are still *expected*, and the genders of participants are expected to fall in line with societal norms based on these heterosexual, privileged relationships. Moreover – gender is also expected to follow this heterosexual dichotomy, and if a questioner does not understand one of these concepts (gender or sexuality), they attempt to resolve it through cognitively engaging the other available concept. In Nicolazzo's terms, society understands gender in terms of sexuality, and sexuality in terms of gender – despite queer/LGBTQIA+ resistance to this idea. (Nicolazzo, 2017).

Compulsory Sexuality

Due to the articulation that society understands gender in terms of sexuality, and sexuality in terms of gender, it is a direct progression to discuss *compulsory sexuality*. Emens (2013), Chasin (2013) and Gupta (2015) have used this term specifically, and Gupta, in her article “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” related it to the work of Foucault (1978), Butler (1990), Rubin (1984), and Rich (1980), giving special significance to Rich’s statements on compulsory heterosexuality. Gupta defined compulsory sexuality in terms of “how norms about sexual interest function as a system of social control” (p. 132), and says:

I use the term compulsory sexuality to describe the assumption that all people are sexual and to describe the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity (Gupta, 2015, p. 134-135).

She further says that “the push to define sexuality as a system of social control” is being driven by asexual activists and writers who are building on the work of similar “pushes” from trans and gender non-conforming scholars and activists, citing Susan Stryker (2007):

... genderism [such as Nicolazzo’s discussion of heterogenderism] was named as a system of social control largely as a result of the growth of a politically active trans* community and the efforts of trans activists and scholars to point out that gender norms regulate and produce the behavior of both trans and cisgendered individuals” (Gupta, 2015, p. 133).

To Please Society, We Perform

By actively producing such regulated behavior, we as societal members are enacting Judith Butler's (1990) concept of *performativity*. J. Michael Denton (who grounded us in Foucault's work) paraphrases Butler's concept by saying that "Performativity means that individuals repeat actions, movements, gestures, and other stylistic choices in ways that society *genders* and *sexes*." (Denton, p. 59). He goes further by saying "Performativity does not mean that people's stylistic acts are inauthentic or even chosen but rather describes how those actions communicate gender, as *interpreted through societal norms*." To emphasize the performance aspect of the word, Butler (1990) likened her concept to "impersonation" (p. 186). Hers is a defining argument for the concept of gender as a social construct – and this concept of social construction can be applied to other identities in similar fashion.

If social institutions and societal structure decide what is more privileged and what is not, our identities aren't deeply essentialist or monolithic (in the words of Przybylo, 2011); they are instead templates of created behavior that we are expected to step into. Of this, Butler says "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false" (p. 186). The ever-popular statement "gender is a social construct" may be fun in retort, and though true: it and the other compulsions discussed here exist as systems that we participate in and re-perpetuate, no matter our identities; much like Przybylo's conceptions of sexusociety being insidious through repetition, and underlying many implicit, unthought actions (Przybylo, 2011).

Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings

The discussion of the lived experiences of asexuality continues today, and the ontological modalities of asexuality have expanded, as mentioned in Chapter 1: asexuality can appear as a definition of attraction; a(n) [spectrum of] orientation; be adopted as a political statement and strategy; or, as advocated for by Scherrer and Pfeffer (2017), asexuality can appear as a social and community identity first and foremost. What asexuality is *not*, is a pathology or a disability - though those experiences can be disabled experiences can co-occur, or lived assemblages can be embodied in such a way that they are inseparable. Rooting modern discussion of asexuality in the feminist women's movement of the 1970's brings discussions of asexuality as "deviant" into clearer focus. Whereas asexuality is valid in all of the perspectives mentioned above, one thing remains clear – asexuality as *theory* has emerged, as have many other critical theories, *as a response to/a reaction to/resistance against oppressive norms and potential mistreatment.*

Oppositional Understandings

Despite historical beginnings being rarely located (Przybylo, 2013), the concept of asexuality as a response and/or asexuality as a political statement is not one that is new to theoretical understandings. *Many* theorists attempt to locate and discuss asexuality in these terms. In a 2017 article on the negative impacts of sexual societal pressure, Kristina Gupta firmly framed asexuality as resistance to dominant culture, discussing how:

contemporary asexual communities challenge different aspects of Western sexual norms – identifying the ways in which 'pro-sex' aspects of contemporary Western society can negatively affect asexually identified individuals and [their]

potentially undermining any naturalization of sexual attraction as a universal motivating force or as an essential component of adult identity (Gupta, 2017, p. 992).

Gupta solidified her study's framing by further stating that "Western society Systematically privileges sexual identifications, desires, and activities while marginalizing different forms of non-sexuality" (p. 992). Foundational asexuality theorist Ela Przybylo (2011) also stated that she "question[ed] whether or not asexuality (as an identity category) may [or may not] be genuinely transgressive" (p. 445), and further said:

Asexuality asks us to speak of sexuality and it embeds sexuality into its very structure linguistically. It functions to stabilize sexuality because it incites new discourse of sexuality, coercing us into a defence of sexuality; we become sexuality's defendants against the potential threat of asexuality... Asexuality incites in us a reattachment to sexuality, thus strengthening sexusociety" (Przybylo, 2011, p. 452).

The above constructions make sense in light of the protest-formation background of asexuality theory's public presentation in the 1970's. Theorist Megan Milks (2014) further lamented the fact that "asexuality has been politically recognizable only via radical feminist constructions of anti-patriarchal abstinence" (p. 215), and highlighted how asexual politics are viewed as "not enough" or "not grown up" by mainstream feminist and queer sexual politics, which focus on ideologies of "proper" resistance to heterosexual norms. This deeply oppositional viewpoint of asexuality has permeated culture, and contributed to medicalized views of asexuality as well as the idea brought

forth by Milks (2014): that mainstream LGBT groups view asexual advocacy as “not enough” or “stunted” in advocacy for “failure” to speak directly to the politics of sexual liberation.

Relational Understandings

In her book chapter *Asexualities and Disabilities in Constructing Sexual Normalcy*, Scholar Eunjung Kim (2014) firmly located asexuality and disability’s priorities ontologically – and did an excellent job of articulating my own personal frustrations within the field, including the problem of operationalizing opposition. I discussed in Chapter 1 the preoccupation with definitions as well as with proving marginality, and also alluded to this preoccupation being a distraction from using these theoretical discussions to affect actual change. Kim discussed such “tensions” around definitions of asexuality by invoking in sequence several feminist scholars, beginning with Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) conversations about *definitional stress*:

Sedgwick... tries to avoid definitional stress as much as possible, arguing that her principal strategy is “to ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially *mean*.” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 27). ... Joan Scott explains that “making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don’t understand it as relationally constituted (Scott, 1991, p. 779)” (Kim, 2014, p. 487)

This tension arises from asexuality’s theoretical (and embodied experience) usage in differing ways. For some, as mentioned, asexuality (or homosexuality, or queerness, or in

many cases any identity) is an intrinsic rebuttal or “challenge” against societal norms. For others, it is a simple lived experience – whether experienced to the same definitions that others may experience it or not. What Kim (and Przybylo, 2011) have discussed by raising these definitional points is asexuality’s inability to be truly confrontational, transformational, or resistant by sheer matter of oppositional existence. If we rely on these definitions, we cement the idea that asexuality *only exists oppositionally*: and that same logic of opposition is commonly applied to refute or disprove ideas of agentic asexual identity. Instead of relying on such definitions, Kim (2014) and Przybylo (2011, 2018) approach them with the idea that using oppositional politics to solely define asexuality is outdated. We cannot simply take an oppositional stance for granted. What does opposition’s existence *mean*? What systems of power, relationships, and circumstances create these systems of difference and widen inequality?

While living as a marginalized person may in itself be an act of resistance, we cannot stop there. Kim and other theorists (including myself) are far more interested in asexuality’s *relationships* – the ones that do not exist solely in opposition to other concepts such as sexual interaction. Ianna Hawkins Owen (2018), in her work on Black asexual possibility, stated that asexuality cannot define itself by absence. “Since definitions of asexuality often center sexual intercourse and sexuality through [their] opposition or disavowal, asexuality cannot be ‘a relation of external opposition to power,’ so I must ask *how it operates inside of power*.” (Owen, 2018, p. 73, quoting Butler, 1993, p. 15). Similarly, asexuality theorist Theresa N. Kenney (2020) invoked Jasbir Puar’s (2007; 2013) assemblage theory (as discussed in Chapter 1) by asking to “bring Przybylo’s call to focus on ‘what [asexuality] *does* instead of what it *does not*’ (2011,

456) into conversation with Jasbir K. Puar’s suggestion to turn our attention from ‘what assemblages are’ to ‘what assemblages do’ (Puar, 2013, p. 57)” (Kenney, 2020, p. 10). This is reminiscent of Susan Jones’ conversations regarding critical theory and student development theory, asking “theorizing *to what end?*” (Jones, 2018, p.13).

I am personally of similar mind – I would like the field to turn towards what things “do” rather than what they “are” (Kenney, 2020; Puar, 2013). However, I find that asking “what does this identity/assemblage do” can be a slippery slope back to oppositional thinking and the inter-acronym, inter-identity frictions I discussed in Chapter 1, wherein access to asexual community, queer community, resources, or acts of advocacy are gatekept because an identity is “not grown” not “resistant” or “not oppositional” *enough*: a rather interesting way to “not count,” as it were.

I am most interested in what the assemblage of asexuality and disability does, rather than what it is: but I am interested in what it does *for people*. I am interested in the ways that, as Gupta (2017) and others have discussed, asexual identity allows people to be enough, to count, to find meaning in their resistance, rather than simply being defined oppositionally. I am interested in the ways that inequality is perpetrated within our systems; in asexuality’s unequal relations in context (Kim 2014; Scott 1991) and I am interested in the critique of these systems as a means to enact change.

Embodied Understandings

In her book chapter on *Disability and Asexuality* (2021), Karen Cuthbert describes the participants in their study as having “an understanding of their own *embodied identities* which they did not see reflected in either disability or asexuality narratives” (p. 370). Cuthbert’s participants recounted experiences of their disability and asexuality

being inseparable from one another – and their experience being unable to be separated apart. As previously mentioned, this is congruent with Jasbir Puar’s (2007; 2013) discussions of assemblages of identity, rather than conversations on intersectionality which address compounding systems of power (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, Black queer scholar E. Patrick Johnson (2001) articulated this idea by turning to etymology to discuss Black queer assemblages in a previously untold manner, describing his grandmother’s usage of the word “quare” to denote perhaps something a bit homosexual – but also meaning strange, or in excess – an inherently Black usage of a word that has a different *colloquial, in-group meaning*, especially when juxtaposed against what was concerned “normal” (gay white men). As Johnson stated: “Because much of queer theory critically interrogates notions of selfhood, agency, and experience, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from ‘raced’ communities” (p. 126-27). He further stated:

The theory that I advance is a ‘theory in the flesh.’ Theories in the flesh emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world (Johnson, 2001, p. 3).

The ‘theory in the flesh’ that E. Patrick Johnson references is a theoretical framework posed by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983), which states (rather famously):

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in

our experience... We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 23).

Such a conversation provides us two different lenses through which to view asexuality. Firstly, an embodied, assemblaged understanding of asexuality is a ‘theory of the flesh’ – *one which may also have a cultural underpinning* from an arena such as race (Brown, 2022; Owen, 2014) or gender (Cuthbert, 2022), or disability (Cuthbert, 2021b). A call for an understanding of embodied experience is a call for the broadening of “what counts,” (as mentioned in Chapter 1) surely, but is also a statement that lived experience *matters*, and that one need not succinctly divide their disabled experience from their asexual experience to be considered as “counting” in either arena.

Secondly, embodied understandings immediately challenge medicalizations, de-sexualizations, hyper-sexualizations, and a rhetoric of “causes” for asexuality. Eunjung Kim, discussed above, also wrote an article titled *Asexuality in Disability Narratives* (2011), wherein she stated that “Disabled and asexual identity and its narratives reveal that asexuality is an embodiment neither to be eliminated, nor to be cured, and is a way of living that may or may not change“ (p. 479). She further stated that “when understood as an embodiment and an epistemological ground, asexuality makes possible an examination of how sexuality is constructed and how the abnormality of its absence governs both nondisabled and disabled bodies.” (Kim, 2011, p. 486). *What if* asexuality simply *was*? What if asexuality is a normal variant of human identity, human behavior, or human sociology? Ontologically, does asexuality *need* to have a root cause? Other than comparison to others, many of the participants in the studies examined thus far have reported no feasible place to identify where their asexuality “began,” perhaps because no

such place is to be located, perhaps because such an assumption of root causes is not viable (or is rooted in oppositional thinking) – and certainly because such experiences are intrinsically embodied in such a way that such causative conversations do not reflect lived experience.

Social Understandings

As discussed in Cuestion 1, Kristin Scherrer and Carla Pfeffer (2017) advocate for a social understanding: one that identifies asexuality as a community and a *social identity*. In their paper *None of the Above: Toward Identity and Community-Based Understandings of (A)sexualities* they stated:

We find that the concepts of identity and community are particularly salient frameworks for understanding asexuality, as well as other forms of gender and sexuality, perhaps particularly those that fall outside normative or binary categories... Gender and sexual communities have important implications for sexuality research, as these communities often help individuals find instrumental support such as information and resources, as well as emotional support, for instance in finding support in coping with stigma and marginalization. The concepts of identity and community, we argue, facilitate more holistic understandings of how attraction and desire are manifest in everyday life (Scherrer & Pfeffer, 2017, p. 645)

Such a conversation warrants a conversation about *queer kinship networks*, and how queer “families” are often “found families,” created for safety, out of necessity, because of abandonment or absence from biological family, or because queer family structure does not *need* to look the same as heteronormative family structure in order to be relevant

and supportive. Such structure is usually built from friendship and those with like experiences. As Nicolazzo et al (2017) stated in *An Exploration of Trans* Kinship as a Strategy for Student Success*,

Queer(ed) conceptions of ‘family’ have always superseded normative assumptions centering on nuclear family structures. As Rubin wrote, ‘A kinship system is not a list of biological relatives, it is a system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships.’ (Nicolazzo et al, 2017, p. 305, quoting Rubin, 2011, p. 41).

Ideas of queer “community” extend beyond cisheteronormative conceptions of what “counts” as family and what support should look like, and are deeply integral to the survival of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Similarly, *disability culture* (and Disability Cultural Centers, such as at the University of Illinois at Chicago) has recently arisen as a place of community, with a focus on creating the same ideas of kinship, support, and social identity that may exist (on college campuses) targeted toward support of other, non-disabled yet still marginalized individuals. As stated on the University of Illinois at Chicago website:

Maybe ‘culture’ is not the proper term for a set of elements deriving from a mixture of: 1) inherent differences; 2) societal treatment; and 3) transmitted facts, interpretations, and preferences. But what better term is there for that collection of common views and expressions that increasingly characterize Disabled people everywhere? ... We refuse any longer to hide our differences. Rather, we will explore, develop, and celebrate our distinctness and offer its lessons to the world (University of Illinois at Chicago, n.d.)

One of the primary focuses of disability culture interaction is the establishment, maintenance of or participation in Community Action or Mutual Aid Networks – wherein individuals provide service, assistance, and kinship to one another outside of the boundaries imposed financially and systemically by health and food distribution systems. Defined as “a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions... by actually building new social relations that are more survivable” (Arani, 2020, p. 654, quoting *Big Door Brigade*, 2020), communities and relationships such as these more closely resemble the necessary level of support that kinship networks provide, but on a level designed more closely to equalize oppressive systematic treatment by navigating outside the system (such as knowledge sharing, healthcare, public assistance, or food access) and creating a different path where involved individuals pool and share their resources and their time.

In these ways – kinship relations, culture building and sharing, and mutual aid – social understandings for asexual (and indeed all LGBTQIA+) individuals mark the last of our discussed approaches, though certainly not the least.

Closing

Chapter 2 was designed to dive further into the theoretical background of asexuality as a theory, and its ties to disability constructs. Grounding the conversation historically in the politics of the 1960’s, 70’s, and 80’s women’s movement has allowed for a conversation to occur about the understandably political direction that asexuality theory has followed, as well as asexuality’s similarly understandable ties to feminist and queer theory and disability theory. Central to this understanding is the idea that queer and feminist theory have blended to such a point so as to become inextricable from one

another – made into an assemblage, if you will. Similarly, queer theory and disability theory share such deep ties to one another that they too have become inextricable from one another, when approached from most directions. In discussing relevant (to asexuality) tenets of each theory, in outlining a theoretical lineage (traced through feminist theory), in discussing these concepts’ relation to one another, and in examining the ontological/epistemological understandings that undergird current asexual theoretical thought, we were able to examine the four primary assumptive paths through which people conceive of and understand asexuality: oppositional understandings, relational understandings, embodied understandings, and social understandings.

While each are deeply important, perhaps most relevant to the furtherance of asexuality as applied theory is the idea of embodiment: specifically, the radical notion that one need not define sexuality or asexuality as binary. Oppositional understandings are deeply attached to Festinger’s (1957) *cognitive dissonance theory*; wherein we try to relate incoming concepts to currently schema-ed/learned-and-patterned concepts (Piaget, 1952). When we discuss oppositional understandings of asexuality, we are also discussing *definition by negation* (Lausberg, 1998), or the idea that in order to resolve cognitive dissonance against our pre-existing notions, we tend to define things *by what they are not*. Homosexuals are not heterosexuals. Binary thinking is easier than thinking in spectrums. Yet – embodied understandings of identity challenge us to approach thinking about *all* identities from a perspective of inherent validity, rather than “deciding what counts” or in comparing it to other existing norms. Similar to the socio-political/relational model of disability, embodied understandings respect lived experience and the assemblages (or lack thereof) that comprise such experience.

Asexuality, and other identities, do not *have* to exist in opposition – even if opposition is observed. Our understandings of identity may indeed change if we drain the oppositional thinking from them, and embodied (and relational and social) understandings of asexuality help us do just that. I believe that in my research, just as in the findings of others, that strong representation of all four of these ontological and epistemological approaches is present.

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CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ASEXUALITY WORK

From the beginning, methodological questions surrounding asexualities have typically been fraught with complications. It is both fascinating and methodologically problematic that Bogaert (2004), in his oft-cited foundational work, chose a survey designed to locate and identify those participating in at-risk sexual behavior and drug use as the place to pull data that inferred “asexual behavior” (Bogaert, 2004, p. 241): and Bogaert (admittedly) did so before examining asexuality conceptually or even attempting in-depth definitions (2006). Whereas the emergence of asexuality as a critical theory set has its roots in the political; Bogaert’s (2004) choices mean that asexuality *research* as we know it is a direct result of survey efforts created to shed light on and eradicate HIV in Great Britain in 1987 (Wadsworth et al, 1997).

That such statements are accurate should prepare us to examine asexuality and asexuality studies with great methodological care, and to carefully examine our choices as researcher, including method of approach. Where does our data come from? Why did we choose that method? What is the historical context? What answers are we attempting to find, and whom are our answers serving? In research, *methodology* is ‘the description, explanation, and justification underlying methods and *not* the methods themselves” (Guido et al, 2010, p. 3, quoting Kaplan, 1964, p. 18). Andrew Kaplan, author of *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (1998), beyond this general definition, also stated that there are four main uses of the term in academic writing. These usages include: field and context-specific *techniques* or procedural undertakings;

honorifics ascribed to procedures thought to be of appropriate ‘status’ (such as the ‘scientific method’); *epistemology*, including philosophical understandings of the nature and import of knowledge; and lastly *methods*, particularly the description and analysis of these methods, “throwing light on their limitations and resources, clarifying their presuppositions and consequences, [and] relating their potentialities” (Kaplan, 1998, p. 23).

As will be discussed, not every researcher articulates their methodology or critically reflects on the assumptions that their work invokes - and as mentioned, not every researcher means the same thing by invoking the term ‘methodology.’ In the following paragraphs, I attempt to relate these somewhat paradoxical navigations of research to the subject matter of my own work in asexuality and disability research, and discuss three different methodological approaches: Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, and Narrative Inquiry. For each, I provide historical and field context, and then focus on a single (what I consider to be) representative work that strongly demonstrates the methodology’s application within the field of asexuality research. I then discuss the framework(s) and foundational writings that undergird each methodology, and articulate how the associated study authors’ approaches are or are not congruent with the paradigms of research and understanding. I end each section with a short discussion of the usefulness of the approach for my individual research plans, and for each methodology, highlight what I feel is the most useful paradigmatic approach for implementation in asexuality work. Due to historical and social context, these are paradigms which aim to highlight the experiences of underserved populations and which are more suited towards equity work.

Phenomenological Approaches

As Cuthbert (2017) stated, “Much of the existing empirical asexuality research is ... problematic. For the most part, empirical research on asexuality has been conducted from within the paradigms of psychology and sexology... As Przybylo (2012) suggests, these preoccupations are reflective of a positivist impulse to somehow ‘know’ the ‘truth’ of asexuality” (p. 244). This is congruent with the discussions of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2: a great deal of research publications in the realm of asexuality approach from medicalized perspectives, even those studies which are foundational in the field. In particular, Brotto et al’s (2008) studies on asexuality, which Przybylo (2019) notes are partially responsible for the removal of asexuality as a diagnosis from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), begins with a single intended study with participants sourced from the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), statistically approaching the measuring of “sexual frequency,” orientation, relationships and relationship duration, sexual interest/drive, masturbation frequency, erectile dysfunction, fantasies, and “sexual response and distress (Brotto et al, 2008, p. 604).” Participants were also tested for psychiatric symptoms on several disorder scales. Subsequent outcry from participants characterized that they did not feel the questions appropriate to their experience. As a result:

“Unsolicited feedback from some of the participants to the AVEN discussion board was forwarded by the founder of AVEN to the researchers. Some of these reports indicated that participants felt compelled to underrate their psychiatric symptoms in hopes of minimizing any relationship between asexuality and psychopathology that the researchs may have hypothesized. Moreover, other

unsolicited feedback suggested that participants felt that many of the questionnaires were more appropriate for individuals *with* sexual attractions, and were, therefore, irrelevant for an asexual person. This feedback, along with the number of new research questions generated from Study 1, prompted the design of Study 2” (Brotto et al, 2008, p. 608).

This feedback resulted in Brotto et al’s creation of a second study within the same publication - arguably one of the most famous instances of Phenomenology applied to asexuality studies and being explicitly outlined and used, due to its subsequent importance (Przybylo, 2019). Brotto et al described Phenomenology as “undertaken to explore the experience of asexuality [insinuating their particular quantitative study did not] as shared by participants. This approach focuses on describing the essence of phenomena, as described in the everyday or ‘lived experiences’ of the participant (Brotto et al, 2008, p. 609, quoting Burch, 1990).

Brotto et al’s study, in getting at the ‘essence’ and *objective* ‘lived experience’ of asexuality, asked particular probing questions of their participants, including: “Is there a link between religion and your asexuality? Describe your fears associated with sexuality? [and] What are your feelings about yours and others’ genitals?” (Brotto et al, 2008, p. 609). While relevant to a sexological approach – such a lens is not conducive to critical approaches to sexualized or medicalized power structures, which is the direction that my research takes. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I am more interested in what things “do” rather than what they “are” (Kenney, 2020; Puar, 2007, 2013), and more interested in how asexual identity allows people to “be enough.” In locating such circumstances within our educational institutions or organizational systems, my lens is still one of critique of

these systems as a means to enact change. Because of this, I approach Phenomenology with great hesitation.

Brotto invokes Robert Burch's (1990) chapter *Phenomenology, Lived Experience: Taking a Measure of the Topic* in situating her approach to 'Study 2.' Burch describes Phenomenology as "seek[ing] to discover an underlying truth ordinarily concealed or distorted" (1990, p. 131). Burch goes to great length to discuss the need for critical reflexivity in Phenomenological work by discussing the political and ideagological backgrounds that form the situations within which research is conducted. Burch (1990) also goes to great length to discuss the importance of 'lived experience,' how lived experience is "self-constituted" (p. 134) and ultimately describes it as rooted in "the living present." (p. 134). Burch further explains that this means that a person's experience of a phenomenon, as they describe it to a researcher, is contextualized by place, time, culture, interpretation, and a variety of other factors.

Whereas Burch's (1990) comments are deeply encouraging for community-centric work, the preoccupation with present-tense experiences may also limit future application and change efforts. On the surface, focusing on the essence or lived experience of asexuality might not directly address policy critique, and Phenomenology's emphasis on 'explanation' may overlook structural and systemic issues. This emphasis is worth mentioning in context because, as mentioned, explaining the 'phenomenon' of asexuality, whether through quantitative or qualitative means, has been a primary focus of researchers who medicalize, and this research has formed foundational understanding within the field. As such, Phenomenology has served as a building block of sorts as asexual research has become established – and as such, I intended to posit that there are

more useful approaches that serve the field and social change in more future-forward ways. To do so, however, would ignore that Brotto et al's (2008) study and its subsequent inclusion in articles directly refuting DSM diagnoses (Brotto 2010a; 2010b) are primary examples of how phenomenological work can be used to inform or create change. The process Brotto et al undertook in this work (research and then subsequent publications) does mean that Phenomenological work in this context *is* a building block.

I desire a more direct methodological approach to student experiences in terms of what experiences “do,” (for people) versus what they “are.” I nevertheless recognize that phenomenological work has been deeply important to the field. There remains work to do highlighting the lived experiences of students with particular identity assemblages – particularly those who remain on the margins even in recent work, as in the case of disability and asexuality. Counter to standard conceptions of phenomenological work, if I were to employ phenomenology, my desired approach would be from the direction of Sara Ahmed's foundational work, *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). True to semantic terminology, Ahmed ‘queers’ (makes different) traditional approaches by recognizing Phenomenology as a methodology that is overly concerned with ‘orientation’ – including sexual orientation, and the medical explanations aimed at it. Ahmed describes ‘being oriented’ as objects being physically pointed ‘towards’ or ‘away’ spatially: their proximity to the observer, the direction they may or may not be moving, and their relation to other objects. In recognizing this metaphor of different objects – or indeed, different people viewing an object from different angles – the queer approach that Ahmed begs of us is to view phenomena from non-cisheteronormative perspective. Quite simply: to consider queer points of view. Through concepts of orientation and ‘dis’-orientation,

Ahmed seeks to de-center traditional points of view and the idea that explanations of phenomena can be objectively observed from any one angle. At one moment she states: “If we think with and through orientation we might allow the moments of *disorientation* to gather, almost as if they are bodies around a different table. We might, in the gathering, face a different way.” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 24).

More to the point, I find Ahmed’s discussions of ‘contingent lesbians’ in *Queer Phenomenology* to be more effective when applied to asexuality research than her more popular discussions of ‘space’ and ‘orientation.’ In a discussion of heteronormative discourse regarding lesbians who ‘choose’ to be lesbians because they are ‘not pretty enough’ or ‘do not have other options,’ she draws a difference from heteronormative phenomenological inquiry that makes assumptions about orientation. As previously discussed: individuals have sexual autonomy, and can make choices about their bodies and their actions (Carrigan, 2011). There are many reasons why asexual individuals may choose to be sexually active – or not. If contingent lesbians do in fact exist – how would this change generally-accepted, normatively-observed-and-oriented phenomena? This encouragement of critical reflection on phenomenological findings is important, and in these discussions of space and orientation, Ahmed operationalizes phenomenology towards both questions of what people ‘do’ in space and how that might conflict with existing knowledge. Such an approach is in line with my desire to follow up (in research) on what asexuality ‘does’ rather than what it ‘is’ (Ahmed, 2006).

Grounded Theory Approaches

On the trend of what things ‘do’ versus what they ‘are:’ as mentioned previously, within the field of Student Affairs there exists an overwhelming desire to operationalize

policy interaction and to track and justify one's worth and legitimacy – what scholar Matias Garza (2023) calls a “culture of proof,” (p. 8), spurred by the rise of program assessment ideals (Schuh et al, 2016) and by a de-valuation of qualitative research and a documented bias towards quantitative research (Johnson et al, 2016). Recent trends toward professional competency certification from both NASPA and ACPA point towards such operationalizations (McCloud & Messmore, 2023), as does the historical context of Student Development Theory (SDT), which seeks a flattening of experience, identity, and development into easily digestible (and as such, *hopefully* easily program-reproducible) chunks (McNeely, 2023; Strayhorn, 2016).

Historian Ian McNeely (2023) explains that in the early 1970's, Student Affairs emerged as a profession due to a segregational separation of Student Affairs practitioners from the lofty realms of faculty and Academic Affairs, and pushback from Student Affairs practitioners, who: “assert[ed] that their own professional practice likewise [in comparison to academic research and teaching] amounted to a form of applied disciplinary knowledge meriting institutional influence and respect” (p. 67). In context of expanding research, even scholar Diana Ali, responsible for the NASPA competency cornerstone piece *Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals* (2017), states bluntly (and ironically) that “The evolution of the field of student affairs largely surrounds inclusivity efforts regarding marginalized students” (p. 6), highlighting a primary arena where ‘new’ and ‘novel’ work is desired. McNeely also notes that Student Affairs as a field was lauded for fiscally navigating the “‘academic depression’ that forced higher education into retrenchment after decades of postwar expansion [that is, the ebbing of the historical

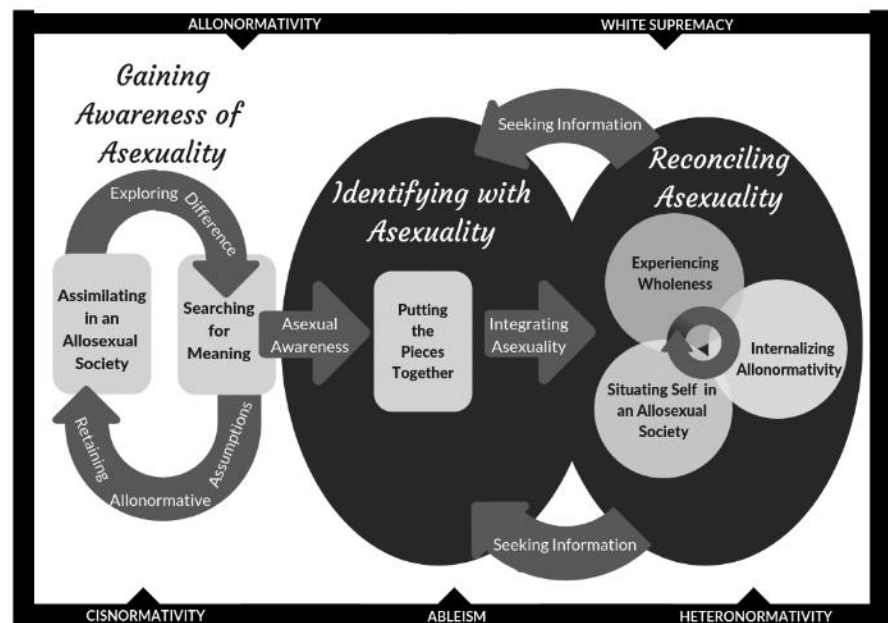
money flow brought by GI bill expansions in higher education] by aligning SDT with fashionable new management doctrines to meet senior administrators' austerity demands" (2023, p. 67-68). In research, following on the trends of research that is 'new' or 'novel,' and still involving 'how students come to or develop their identity,' this can look like a push to find or establish new concrete theories (which then have the possibility of being applied to policy or practioner work). Of Student Affairs research, Brown et al (2002) wrote that "The purpose of grounded theory studies is to explore and understand how complex phenomena occur" (p. 2). I argue instead that within this context of operationalization that the purpose of grounded theory is to explore and *systematize the explanation* of how complex phenomena occur. Systematizing/bureaucratically operationalizing 'development' of students has long been, as mentioned, an important way to entrench one's work by proving fiscal worth and to flatten experience into reproducible 'best practices.' I do not wish to use Grounded Theory methodologies to attempt to argue the legitimacy of certain identities over others, or to try to 'justify' that people deserve care due to their marginality. 'What counts,' indeed.

In my research, I do not intend to seek a 'development theory,' but I also do not seek to disparage Grounded Theory usage entirely. Dr. Amanda Mollet's recent (2020) usage of Grounded Theory in her article *I Have a Lot of Feelings, Just None in the Genitalia Region: A Grounded Theory of Asexual Students' Identity Journeys* is deeply encouraging in this arena for several reasons. Firstly, an existing SDT framework for asexuality means that a portion of the argument for 'establishing legitimacy' in the Student Affairs field has already been completed. The Asexual Student Expatiation

(ASE) Model that her research discovered now serves as a building block upon which other researchers such as myself can build.

Figure 1 (From Chapter 1)

Asexual Student Expatiation (ASE) Model



Note. From Mollet’s (2020) article, “*I Have a Lot of Feelings, Just None in the Genitalia Region: A Grounded Theory of Asexual College Students’ Identity Journeys*” (p. 195).

Secondly, Mollet’s (2020) work, of course, focused on the identity development of asexual students, again an area that I feel is necessary to examine, but which I would rather build upon than iterate personally. However, in the creation of the model, Mollet has *literally* framed student’s development of asexual identity within oppressive societal structures: specifically cishnormativity, ableism (pointedly relevant), heteronormativity,

allonormativity, and white supremacy. Framing the theory in this way paves a path for others to approach from critical perspective. Finally, Mollet perhaps approached from this perspective because of her specific use of Constructivist Grounded Theory as presented by Kathy Charmaz (2014, 2017). Mollet specifically says:

Although the study did not begin with a critical perspective, ‘constructivist grounded theory facilitates defining and developing emergent critical questions systematically.’ During the process of analysis, I integrated critical perspectives for emergent questions examining oppression, power, and structural inequalities within the findings (Mollet, 2020, p. 191-192, quoting Charmaz, 2017, p. 35).

Mollet’s application of this methodology in the area of asexuality studies in higher education is particularly notable for the work that I wish to complete. Constructivist Grounded Theory has been beneficial to research I have conducted previously because of its usefulness in critically interrogating concepts of power and oppression, and could be beneficial to future work for the same reason.

Traditional methods of grounded theory encourage the objectivity of researchers – and as previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the application of asexuality as a critical theory is a relatively post-positivist endeavor. The idea that research could *ever* be objective is one that Charmaz critically interrogates. For Charmaz, the researcher is an integral part of the process which cannot be removed: they are constantly co-sharing, co-constructing knowledge, and constructing theory – both during data collection and during data analysis (Charmaz, 2017).

Table 1

Approaches to Grounded Theory

Objectivist	Constructivist
Avows no preconceptions (from the literature review and extant theories)	Grapples with preconceptions
Treats data as unproblematic and self-correcting: “All is data” (Glaser, 1998)	Advocates “theoretical agnosticism” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003) [“critical skepticism” of existing research and theory (Charmaz, 2017, p. 5)]
Reflexivity is optional	Reflexivity is crucial
Discover generalities abstract of time, place, or individuals – erases difference	Data analyses – and methods – are constructed in specific times, locations, and situations
Methods [are considered] neutral	Methods [are considered to] reflect values

Note. From Charmaz’s (2017) special invited paper, “*Continuities, Contradictions, and Critical Inquiry in Grounded Theory*” (p. 5).

I find the difference between objectivist and constructivist paradigms in *any* methodological choice particularly compelling – as the simple act of recognizing asexuality as an identity requires stepping away from pathologizing, objectivist ideals. Asexuality itself, as mentioned, can be seen as a counter-response to allonormative sex society. There is nothing objective about such a stance. If I am going to systemize an explanation of ‘phenomena’ and call it Grounded Theory – I am going to do so from the

critical directions that Charmaz (2014, 2017) recommends and that Mollet (2020) has achieved.

Narrative Approaches

On process of research and review, much of the applicable research to the research assemblage of asexuality and disability falls into the realm of Narrative Inquiry – or at the very least, an umbrella of qualitative research that combines methods and methodological approaches which highlight not just the experiences of individuals, but deep and meaningful stories which shed light on systemic and societal issues. *Many* scholars studying asexuality outline their methods (such as sampling, coding approaches, etc), but do not explicitly discuss their approaches. I also find that these scholars are the same individuals publishing data prolific with quotes that attempt to characterize important aspects of these narratives – and indeed, these paradigms could easily be classified as Narrative Inquiry. I would like to highlight one formative scholar: Karen Cuthbert (2017, 2021, 2022), who focuses on asexual and disabled student experiences, and whose research is deeply congruent with my own.

Cuthbert defines one of her articles, *You have to be normal to be abnormal: An empirically grounded exploration of the intersection of asexuality and disability* as an intersectional attempt to engage with the lived experiences of asexual people who traditionally have been ignored within research efforts. When discussing Phenomenology, I highlighted Cuthbert’s statements that asexuality research has traditionally been problematic. She also stated that other researchers “have attempted to engage more meaningfully with the lived experiences of asexual persons. Scherrer (2008, 2010) and Carrigan (2011, 2012) have both conducted qualitative sociological research

on asexuality, engaging with *subjective* insights and with what asexuality *means* in people's lives" (Cuthbert, 2017, p. 244). In this, Cuthbert draws distinct difference from Phenomenology, and while not explicitly stated, both the approach and format of her study are reflective of Narrative Inquiry. Following a Narrative Inquiry format but omitting the explicit details naming the approach is a common occurrence, and reflective of field and cultural differences. In the United States in student affairs (and other qualitative educational research), the expectation for a 'methodology section' to be valid is the publishing requirement that one defines and discusses methodological approach – which may be a particular result of current research publication climate that attempts to 'quantify' qualitative research in order to increase 'legitimacy' (again, a nice hallmark to 'what counts'), and the 'culture of proof' mentioned above in Grounded Theory (Garza, 2023; Johnson et al, 2016). For example, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), for their journals, requires that:

...empirical studies... [also known as] 'reports of original research'... stress the link between research and practice. Several ways authors can achieve this is by addressing the underlying issues or problem related to practice that inspired the research; *reveal the methodology* (i.e, name and describe the specific methodology used) and discuss its relevance to the student affairs and higher education field; and/or offer a full discussion of results, implications, and conclusions that relates to practice in student affairs and higher education" (NASPA, n.d.).

In other fields adjacent to the work – such as gender studies, wherein Cuthbert publishes a great deal of work (2017, 2022)– the journalistic requirement to articulate a

methodology *by name* is simply not the same. In fact, the articles she mentions above by Scherrer (2008, 2010) and Carrigan (2011, 2012) are also excellent examples of studies that could be classified as Narrative Inquiry that do not explicitly name and discuss ‘a methodology in use,’ though Carrigan’s texts are deeply informative for asexual methodology work.

If Narrative Inquiry is to be explicitly named, it is likely to be attributed to D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, specifically their book *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) frame Narrative Inquiry as a process between researcher and participant, where allowing the participants to tell their individual stories is equally as important as the researcher’s interpretation and understanding: the resulting analyses are co-constructed. Narrative Inquiry, according to Clandinin and Connelly, also holds with it an experience of discovery, as opposed to an experience of concrete hypothesis exploration. As stated:

Narrative inquiries are always composed around a particular wonder [phenomena], a research puzzle. This is usually called the research problem or research question. However, this language and wording tend to misrepresent what we believe is at work with narrative inquirers. Problems carry with them qualities of clear definability and the expectation of solutions, but narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of a search, a ‘re-search,’ a searching again.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124).

What Clandinin and Connelly (2000) are doing here is drawing a primary distinction between phenomenology and narrative inquiry: in phenomenology, the researcher *knows and identifies* the phenomenon being studied. In Narrative Inquiry, the researcher may

not – they are more interested in analyzing the experience being had. Further, it is stated that “being able to say what phenomenon a narrative inquiry is about is not an easily answered question,” (p. 125) because it is important to “Recogniz[e] that the phenomena in narrative inquiry are a kind of shifting ground. We make spaces for beginning narrative inquirers to name [and thus search, re-search, and search again] their inquiry phenomena at many points in their inquiry journeys.” (p. 126)

This relation of different methodologies to phenomenology and the subsequent discussion of Narrative Inquiry’s relationship to a phenomena forms a particularly useful frame through which to summarize aspects of this chapter’s discussion, and as discussed above, the other frameworks examined within this chapter are approached from the perspective of their angle or viewpoint approach to working with a particular phenomenon:

Table 2

Breakdown of Three Qualitative Approaches

	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Narrative Inquiry
Study examined:	Brotto et al (2008)	Mollet (2010)	Cuthbert (2017)
Cited foundation:	Burch (1990)	Charmaz (2014)	Holstein & Gubrium (1997)
Relation to phenomena (Seeks to):	Explain a specific phenomena	Systematize and standardize the explanation of a phenomena	Describe someone’s experience with a phenomena

Table 2 – Continued

	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Narrative Inquiry
Concerned with:	What the phenomena is or what the phenomena does	Codifying a theoretical explanation which can be re-used	Exploring personal, practical knowledge (stories)
Beneficial for:	Foundational explanations which can then be expanded upon	Providing ‘official’ frameworks through which to view change and effort	Narration of experience, co-construction of knowledge
Lineage:	Gadamer (1982 [1960])	Glaser & Strauss (1999 [1967])	Clandinin & Connolly (2000)
Useful direction/paradigm:	Queer Phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006)	Critical Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2017)	Critical Counter-narrative (Miller et al, 2020)

Note. Created by author.

Whereas I am deeply fond of Clandinin & Connolly’s (2000) approach, I also want to briefly highlight a newer presentation of Narrative Inquiry as outlined by Miller et al (2020): *Critical Counter-Narrative as Transformative Methodology for Educational Equity*. Counter-narratives are, of course, those stories collected in narrative work which differ from normative experience and which highlight the voices of those suffering from inequity and who may not be normally heard. Such Counter-narratives run ‘counter’ to dominant discourse. The concepts of Critical Counter-Narrative are deeply rooted in Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) ideas of ‘counter-storytelling’ and in Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), including the work of legal scholars

(Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado, 1989). The power of storytelling has long been a central tenant of Critical Race approaches to change. Of this, Miller et al (2020) note: “It is important to remember that collecting counter-narratives and *presenting them in a new context* is not just a scholarly pursuit for these scholars: doing so in court is advocacy and action, and as such itself bears transformational potential” (p. 272). Such transformation is what I would aspire to locate within asexuality work: it would be interesting to locate not just narrative stories, but stories which challenge dominant systems dominant understanding.

Methodological Critiques and Warnings

Methodological critiques and warnings regarding asexuality studies have been common, especially since Andrew Hinderliter’s (2009) article *Methodological issues for studying asexuality*, Lori Brotto and Morag Yule’s response and Letter to the Editor (2009) regarding Hinderliter’s (2009) publication, and DJ Chasin’s subsequent (2011) article *Theoretical issues in the study of asexuality*. As mentioned above, Mark Carrigan’s (2011, 2012) work is also deeply informative for asexual methodologies. Whereas the discussion requires nuance, and researchers have expanded upon Hinderliter’s ideas (such as Winer, 2024), methodological issues that require care when attempting studies still roughly fall into two categories originally posed by Hinderliter: definitional issues and sampling issues (Hinderliter, 2009).

Definitional (Measuring) Issues

Bogaert himself, in one of his subsequent conceptual studies (2006), notes that his foundational (2004) publication was “largely an empirical examination of the issue” (p. 241), while attempting to provide a “conceptual and definitional” (p. 241) viewpoint in

his (2006) article several years later – an atypical order of operations, and a strange insinuation that conceptual, definitional work rooted in the population being studied is not of value. Bogaert’s (2006) ‘definition’ draws on Storms (1980) conversations regarding separations of sexual and romantic attraction – but ties them to concepts of sexual behavior, abstinence, and a lack of sexual stimulation.

Carrigan (2011) stated: “both articles [Bogaert 2004, 2006] rest on a problematic definition which, though brought into explicit focus, remains uncorrected in the later work” (p. 463). Carrigan explained that medicalized views of asexuality (‘aetiological’), particularly in Bogaert’s work, stem from methodological desires to remain ‘objective,’ and stated that:

Bogaert’s concern with aetiology [medicalization] manifests itself in a desire to establish objective categories but his subject matter (sexual orientation) means these [categories] must extend beyond the narrowly physical [and into the subjective], for example the measurement of arousal. An objective investigation of a phenomenon such as sexual orientation necessitates that we consider all its subjective aspects. (Carrigan, 2011, p. 463)

Clearly, questioning groups of participants who may identify on a spectrum appropriately yields a spectrum of responses, and our understandings of what ‘asexuality’ may mean to both our participants and to the field of study has grown considerably. An asexual identity does not necessarily mean a lack of attraction and certainly does not mean a lack of sexual interaction –there are many different reasons why someone may choose to have or abstain from sex. As such, “scholars should adjust how they measure sexuality to reflect what we have already learned about asexuality” (Winer, 2024, p. 7).

I advocated in previous chapters for expansiveness of the definitions of asexuality. Definitions, while relevant, are not the full picture of what the field of asexuality studies understands Hinderliter's (2009) 'definitional issues' to mean. Carrigan's (2011) full quote from above is actually: "An objective investigation of a phenomenon such as sexual orientation necessitates that we consider all its subjective aspects. In this particular context [research], doing so entails the investigation of *self-identified asexuals*" (Carrigan, 2011, p. 463). As such, the methodological conversations regarding definitional issues of asexuality include the methodological framings discussed above while examining Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, and Narrative Inquiry: conversations of *research objectivity versus research subjectivity*. This conversation has been represented in whether 'self-identified' individuals are 'valid' in research, as opposed to 'objective measures' of their sexual attraction or lack thereof.

Both sets of concerns (definition and objectivity) create unique problems. Carrigan (2011) stated firmly that investigation of self-identified asexuals in research is the correct way forward, away from aetiological/medicalized definitions. However, reporting issues remain when definitions are not articulated. Chasin (2011) explained that:

Understanding asexuality in terms of mutually exclusive sexual orientation-related categories entails expecting self-identified asexuals to consistently report their sexual orientation as asexual. In contrast, as Hinderliter (2009) noted [see below] in discussing the results of Prause and Graham (2007) [another popularly cited early article], this is simply not the case. (p. 714)

Hinderliter also further stated that:

Asexual self-identification has been operationalized in threeways: requiring people to say that they are asexual to participate in the study (Brotto et al, 2008), a free response sexual orientation question (Prause & Graham, 2007), and a forced choice sexual orientation question (Prause & Graham, 2007). Some studies have used multiple forms of these, yielding different responses” (Hinderliter, 2009, p. 619).

As such, how one measures and defines asexuality *to participants* is crucial in ensuring accurate response. Chasin (2011) calls the above-referenced differences in “forced choice” (p. 714) a “pattern of inconsistency” (p. 714) in research, and highlights the need for change.

Sociological scholar Canton Winer (2024) points out that conventional studies on asexuality rely on cisheteronormative sexuality measures that focus on ideas of attraction, behavior, or identity, and that each of these three areas presents unique challenges that problematize their use. Calling this a ‘*measuring issue*’ rather than a definitional one, he advocated succinctly for five different practices:

1. Include asexuality as an option if a study asks respondents to select a sexual identity,
2. Include an ‘I use a different term’ write-in option when soliciting sexual identity,
3. Allow respondents to select *multiple* sexual identities [gay, bi, asexual, etc],
4. Avoid assuming that asexual people are automatically aromantic, and
5. Do not use asexuality as a proxy for abstinence or any other sexual [or non-sexual] behavior (Winer, 2024, p. 8).

Most recent studies navigate around this ‘definitional stress’ (Kim, 2014; Sedgewick, 1990) by providing differing definitions, explaining their studies’ measures, and exploring the tensions that exist in these definitions.

Sampling Issues

Sampling in asexuality studies is subject to differences of definition, but also subject to issues such as Bogaert (2004) created sourcing old data from sexually-focused material: over-saturated sources or skewed context (such as low scoring measures on items not meant to be indicative of asexuality). The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), mentioned previously as an important developmental place where asexuality research participants are recruited, is one such over-used source for participants. With so many (foundational and other) papers in the field using participants from AVEN (Brotto et al, 2008; Carrigan, 2010, 2011; Gupta, 2017; Scherrer 2008, 2010; Yule et al 2013, 2014) other contexts may be ignored. In my discussions of expansiveness in Chapter 1, I reference how Owen (2014) discusses the overwhelming whiteness of AVEN and the invisibility of Black asexual people both online and in research. Winer (2024) references AVEN’s own policy of ‘race neutrality,’ when discussing Yule et al’s (2013) decision to exclude Black individuals and individuals of color from their analysis, as 88% of respondents (all sourced from AVEN) were white.

Researchers from many different fields are calling for more diverse sampling – and have been for quite some time (Carrigan, 2011; Chasin, 2011; Hinderliter, 2009; Owen, 2014). Quite frankly – participants need to be sourced from areas other than AVEN, and *most* online spaces have been noted to be overwhelmingly white (Winer, 2024). Whereas online sources are important areas for student development, we as

researchers should be cautious about their methodological overuse. Further, many studies tend to focus on the use of college-aged individuals (Rothblum et al, 2020). While extremely relevant to my own research agenda – there are in fact non-traditionally-aged and/or graduate students at most colleges and universities, and their experiences also deserve to be discussed. Winer (2024) also discusses how, although there have been intersectional approaches to differing aspects of identity, class is remarkably absent from examination, and may be an area of further exploration for individuals: after all, recruiting from an online community denotes that one has technological access to the online community.

Conclusion – Restorative Approaches

It is notable that asexual individuals consistently recount themes of invisibility, erasure, and not being heard, and that these themes extend into the research arena – which can often miss the very individuals it is studying, such as in Bogaert (2004). In examining these studies, I am particularly struck by Brotto et al, 2008: where, when provided feedback by AVEN community members, the research team *listened* and created a second study to speak specifically to the desired approach to identity conversations. I am reminded strongly of Participatory Action Research (PAR). While not a methodology in and of itself, but rather a framework that can be layered on other frameworks,

Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach to research that prioritizes the value of experiential knowledge for tackling problems caused by unequal and harmful social systems, and for envisioning and implementing alternatives. PAR involves the participation and leadership of those people experiencing issues, who

take action to produce emancipatory social change, through conducting systematic research to generate new knowledge. (Cornish et al, 2023, p. 1)

Further described as “a collaborative, iterative, often open-ended and unpredictable endeavour” (Cornish et al, 2023, p. 2), PAR focuses on four key principles: the authority of direct experience and the expertise created by it; knowledge in action and learning by doing; the idea of research as a transformative process that is just as important as its outcomes; and collaboration through dialogue – wherein relationships are central and hold special power. (Cornish et al, 2023; Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017).

Of queer Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) research, deeply relevant, T.J. Jourian and Z Nicolazzo (2017) noted:

No methodological framework is free from critique; however, the ongoing preference for certain methodologies in educational research comes at the cost of other methodological orientations. For example, the continued presence of methodological conservatism in higher education research [the aforementioned assessment culture/‘culture of proof’] presupposes that critical and emergent methodologies be relegated to the margins of educational research. (p. 598).

Jourian and Nicolazzo’s (2017) article is titled *Bringing our communities to the research table: the liberatory potential of collaborative methodological practices alongside LGBTQ participants*, and is particularly relevant when considering asexuality research, given all that has happened to the community in their own journeys as participants.

Jourian and Nicolazzo discuss an umbrella of methodological approaches that they label as “collaborative and participatory frameworks” (p. 598), and highlight their potential for liberatory implementation – as a way to approach or critically change unjust structures (in

higher education no less). The researchers also posit that “thus far, [queer higher education research] has done little to dismantle the imposed binary of researcher(s) and subject(s), relegating queer research and practice to something that is done ‘*on*,’ ‘*to*,’ or ‘*for*’ queer people, rather than ‘*with*’ them (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 594).

Each of the three discussed methods in this paper are worthwhile to examine. I view Narrative Inquiry and Phenomenology as opposite ends of a spectrum, with Grounded Theory in the middle, and relate them to one another with how they view abject phenomena (see Figure 3). I believe that I hold much of this positionality (and a desire to be more narrative) due to my own experiences – and due to my desire to build a more just structure wherein we speak *with* students (and faculty and staff) rather than *for* them in our research.

A challenge that is personal for me also hides within Jourian and Nicolazzo’s (2016) article: the statement that “‘Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary.’ Put another way, liberation needs to be explicitly written into research projects if it is a desired outcome” (p. 603, quoting hooks, 1994, p. 61). I have thus far in my career identified as a theorist first. It is time to change that. Whereas teaching is an emphasis of where theory can meet practice – writing liberation into research is an area I desire to strongly approach within my own research. I desire to do so alongside and with my participants.

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CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLICATIONS TOWARDS CRITICAL QUEER, CRITICAL DISABILITY, AND
CRITICAL ASEXUALITY RESEARCH

Article 1

The idea that “theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary” (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 603, quoting hooks, 1994, p. 61) ties deeply in with ideas mentioned in previous chapters: with definitional stress and concepts of being more concerned with what a thing “does” rather than what it “is” (Kim, 2014; Sedgwick, 1990); with Student Development Theory (SDT) lacking critical approach and being more “about” students rather than “for” students (from a cisheterosexual, white male standpoint, as in McNeely, 2023); and with the potential (or lack thereof) of Critical Theory sets to effect change if not applied to powerful structures. Whereas I enjoy explorations of identity development, the application of critical theory to powerful structures is, as previously mentioned, my definitive goal in research work.

I do recognize (and have previously stated) that the field of asexuality studies (specifically in Higher Education) must develop a vocabulary that it can, as a field, actually *use*, with “softer” and more “definitional” methodologies and studies before it can move on to higher concepts. I also argue, as in Chapter 1, that this foundational work has been done – by Amanda Mollet (2020, 2021, 2023), by Karen Cuthbert (2017, 2021, 2022), and by scholars who are adjacent to the field of Higher Education. Further, their foundational work is doing its job by leading towards critical applications: thoughts about how we fundamentally approach critical work, academic work, research, and teaching.

Below, I present three (3) different publications that further conversation about criticality in organizational leadership, educational leadership, student affairs, disability studies, and queer studies. These three studies are a cross section of the seven (7) publications that I have thus far been involved with. All of the publications come together to form a scholarly background that demonstrates my capacity to perform these inquiries and publish research in our field. However, I chose these three studies specifically because together they make an argument that yes, theory by itself is not inherently liberatory – but if we as critical scholars are *critical of ourselves and our approaches* in this work, and we continue working to apply these concepts to an institutional structure *which includes ourselves*, we can impact other scholars and practice. We can affect change.

The first paper presented here is an entry I authored that was featured in *The Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*: a collaborative volume of 152 entries written by authors and scholars across all education subdisciplines and aspects of queer and trans studies in higher education (as paraphrased from informal advertisements by the editors). The Encyclopedia is described by the publisher as “tak[ing] an intentionally intersectional approach, with particular attention to the intersections of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy.” (Brill Publications, 2022), and it is from this lens that I approached the entry on Homonormativity (Archer, 2022).

I originally discovered this opportunity while working with Dr. Amanda Mollet on a joint paper presentation on asexuality at NASPA (Archer & Mollet, 2021) – a defining opportunity for me that allowed me to hone my skills working on previously created qualitative data sets. Dr. Mollet was familiar with pieces of my writing from my

Outstanding Graduate Paper award on asexual topics at the LGBTQ Research Symposium at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Archer, 2020). While our work did not result in an empirical publication, it did lead to involvement in the Encyclopedia, greater exposure to the queer and trans scholarly community, as well as to other collaborative opportunities to talk about asexuality research, including (Mollet et al, 2021) and involvement in the Ace and Aro Scholar's Network (California State University, n.d.). I present the paper in its original submission form below, as a writing sample that is definitively focused on conceptual conversations of queer studies in education.

I argue that the concept of Homonormativity is directly relevant to this dissertation's area of study, including the limiting of behavior and presentation as "appropriate" for *all* groups in the path of enforcement, dominant or on the margins. I point to the areas within where I discuss Homonormativity's application across identity boundaries: including in discussing "a procreative and recreational-sex" based way of interacting (asexuality discourse), and in the policing of body appearance and ability status (disability discourse). This conceptual work directly formed the theoretical foundation for pieces of my later work, including this dissertation.

Copyright Acknowledgement

Archer, M. W. (2022). Homonormativity. In K. K. Strunk & S. A. Shelton (Eds.),
Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education. (pp. 284-289). Brill Publication.
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“Homonormativity” from *The Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education* reprinted with
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Introduction

Society’s expectations for heteronormative behavior are powerful, and when
heteronormative and gender-binary-centric ideals and values are used to appraise
LGBTQ+ existence -or absorbed as ‘normal’ and privileged by dominant LGBTQ+
groups or individuals- they are referred to as *homonormative* (Duggan, 2003; Stryker,
2008).

Homonormativity refers to an idealized performance of queerness that is
congruent with as many privileged cisheterosexual norms as possible, and which offers
the least challenge to dominant narratives. The term is often leveled as critique at
members of the LGBTQ+ community who may benefit from this dominant privilege and
are complacent or complicit in the othering of LGBTQ+ people who do not fit such an
“ideal” (Stryker, 2008); though it is also used as a critique of cisheterosexual imaginings
of queer lives, such as when perpetuated through capitalist means (like advertising), or
through policies aimed only at (often white) cisgender gay and lesbian people –the
closest heteronormative imagined ideals (Chasin, 2003; Duggan, 2003; Stryker, 2008).

Homonormativity, and thus this imaginary LGBTQ+ ideal, often centers whiteness, masculinity (Nast, 2003), upper or middle-class status (Chasin, 2003; Duggan, 2003), cisgender and binary-adherent gender identity and presentations (Stryker, 2008), and able-bodiedness (Kafer, 2013). Homonormativity also polices what is appropriate relationally, preferring monogamous partnering, (Gahran, 2017), a binary and genital-related understanding of attraction (bi and pan-erasure) (Halberstam, 1998; Yoshino, 2000), pro-creative sex and hypersexuality (Przybylo, 2011), the seeking of marriage, and the creation of financially inter-dependent relationships (Duggan, 2003) –all items that are congruent with and reaffirming of the dominance of cisheterosexual norms.

Origins

Popular usage of the term “homonormativity” is typically attributed to scholar Lisa Duggan, through her book *The Twilight of Equality* and the contained discourse on LGBTQ+ intercommunity politics (2003). However, Susan Stryker noted that grassroots trans advocates in San Francisco were using the term during the 1990s to describe both frictions and “common cause” seeking with “nontransgender gays, lesbians and bisexuals who [also] contested heterosexist privilege.” (Stryker, 2008, p. 146). Of this she wrote:

We [trans people] needed to name the ways that homosexuality, as a sexual orientation category based on constructions of gender it shared with the dominant culture, sometimes had more in common with the straight world than it did with us.” (Stryker, 2008, p. 146).

Stryker names the term “suitable for use where homosexual community norms marginalize[d] other kinds of sex/gender/sexuality difference” (2008, p. 147). Linguistically rooted with heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), homonormativity’s

conceptual underpinning draws deeply from Gayle Rubin's (2011) discussions of a privileged, value-attributed, and hierarchical ranking of sexual activity; wherein the appearance of non-procreative or gender-transgressive acts are labeled abnormal, and such abnormality, particularly sexually, is punished by society (Foucault, 1990, 1995; Puar 2007). Even for those who transgress societal expectation through queerness, the appearance of heteronormativity is rewarded -or at least punished less. Because fear regarding one's perceived sexuality or gender identity is very real, and "coming out" or simply presenting differently can result in homelessness, job loss, a loss of familial or friendship support, violence, or even death (Meyer, 2015). The presentation of "normal" is not an innate and unconscious performance for many, but something done as a matter of survival. This second foundation of homonormativity (that of presentation and palatability to the dominant) is heavily informed by Judith Butler's (2011) notion of performativity, which states that gender ideals are something that we 'do' or 'perform' for society as an audience. Either consciously or unconsciously, for safety or for material benefit, individuals and groups may perform to meet the structural pressures imposed by dominant societal ideals. In present society, that means that there is benefit attached to appearing and acting heterosexual (Rich, 1980), appearing and acting in line with binary gender expectations of masculinity and femininity (Nicolazzo, 2017), and actively engaging with ideas of procreative or recreational sex culture (Emens, 2014). Other ideas for what are "acceptable" performances also exist, such as age-appropriateness, ability-status, and timeframes for achievement milestones (such as marriage or graduation) (Gahran, 2017; Kafer, 2013).

Connections to Capitalism

Participation in capitalist systems has been noted as a technique for social control of minoritized groups, and this concept has deep connections to homonormativity. When defining “the new homonormativity,” Lisa Duggan called the term “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). Author Alexandra Chasin (2003) similarly stated that:

Advertising to gay men and lesbians has often promised that full inclusion in the national community of Americans is available through personal consumption. In other words, consumption has been held out as a route to political and social enfranchisement (Chasin, 2003, p. 101).

Chasin and Duggan’s use of the word ‘consumption’ refers to the literal buying of a specifically American ideal: the ideal images of queerness which are “sold” to the LGBTQ+ community in advertising, through Pride festivals and nationalist pride, through body and appearance policing, and through the idea of “equality” – an equality defined specifically through the terms of desiring a nuclear family and a marriage structure, and the financial expenditures and ideal class statuses involved. While not evil or unworthy of aspiration, non-involvement in the U.S. two-party (i.e., married) tax system has very real ramifications for livelihood (Chasin, 2003; Duggan, 2003). Tax documents and marriage status are tied to several benefits needed by many for survival and societal navigation: employment and healthcare including spousal benefits and spousal job placement (Charlton et al., 2018), affordable housing, financial assistance

such as school financial aid predicated on family structure and tax reporting (Garvey, 2020); and credit scores are intricately tied to ideas of two-party marriage.

This buy-in process of queer capitalism includes adoption of other dominance-serving values to reach Chasin's (2003) conversations of "social" enfranchisement – meaning a sense of belonging to a cohesive group of similar people. This sentiment includes strong nationalist and identity-oriented pride (as an advertising scheme and unifying factor) and the "tendency to collapse American [the 'American dream' or nuclear family] with white" (p. 126). Jasbir Puar (2006; 2007) pointed to these realizations, marking United States homonormativity as a construction rooted in exploitation of race narratives and the transferring of otherness to different (less white, ostensibly poorer, and as such, less "American") groups. Manipulating these multiple narratives of "pride," (called "homonationalism") is another place of homonormative (and thus heteronormative) reinforcement, and lends to sentiments of race and other exclusion in queer space (Puar, 2006; 2007).

Adverse Effects on LGBTQ+ Peoples and Society

As noted by Puar (2006), US homonormativity and homonationalism are informed by a nationalist sense of "us" versus "them". By creating an ideal (heteronormativity), and an ideal way to be LGBTQ+ (homonormativity), diverse lives cannot be realized by either queer or cisheteronormative society. A platform of oppression has been created: not just of exclusion, but of active antagonization. Such antagonization exists between LGBTQ+ acronym members, as well as externally. As author Doug Meyer (2015) puts it: "In LGBT communities, lines have increasingly been

drawn between mainstream lesbians and gay men... this divide... ‘homonormativity’... has been viewed as one between the ‘good gay’ and the ‘bad queer’” (p. 163).

Homonormativity seeks assimilation, and anything outside the boundaries of what can be integrated to reinforce the normal-ness of heteronormativity faces homogenization or shunning (Nast, 2003). Bisexual people are essentially reduced to their presentations: if in a same-gender relationship, they are read as gay, and if in an opposite-gender relationship, they are assumed heterosexual, thus suffering from bi-erasure (Yoshino, 2000). Asexual people and aromantic people are similarly reduced to their presentations; their identity and belongingness refuted if in a partnership, and their realities questioned because a lack of sexual or relational activity does not reinforce normativity (Przybylo, 2011). Homonormativity also seeks to police physical appearance, privileging some LGBTQ+ presentations over others using anti-fat, anti-trans, anti-femme, or racist discourse. (Han, 2008). LGBTQ+ individuals that refuse to be homogenized or resist integration into dominant ideals may question their belonging in queer communities (or receive pushback) when trying to assert agentic identities. In terms of people who hold asexual identities, this agency is gendered: epistemic injustice is not experienced equi-

Trans lives (and/or the experiences of those who do not identify on a gender binary) are also overwritten – or capitalized upon. Transgender transitions and presentations which fit heteronormative ideals of gendered beauty are lauded (or fetishized), and experiences outside what can be easily assimilated are excluded (Stryker, 2008). Those who do not conform to binary notions of gender may find themselves actively excluded from binary spaces (such as gay and lesbian clubs or groups). In gendered gay and lesbian spaces, homonormativity (and thus heteronormativity) is

reasserted, as heteronormative ideas of gender “rel[y] upon a belief in the two territories of male and female, divided by a flesh border and crossed by surgery and endocrinology.” (Halberstam, 1998).

Conclusion

The result of homonormative narratives is the policing of access to queer spaces and queer identity, and a societal ascription to the idea that there is one true, correct way to be LGBTQ+: a way that re-affirms heterosexuality’s dominance. Unfortunately, homonormativity adopts the discussed pieces of what heteronormativity finds acceptable, and reaffirms these pieces through perpetuation from within the LGBTQ+ groups. Monolithic ideals of what “gay” and “queer” need to look like to achieve acceptance is harmful to all LGBTQ+ people, including those who may benefit from homonormativity. Constraining belonging and community acceptance to specific identity acts, presentations, or ideas of congruence with cisheteronormative value overwrites the breadth and plurality of lived queer lives –and serves to reinforce the hegemonic aspects of heteronormative dominance.

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Article 2

I began my doctoral journey in 2019 – shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the time between my Master's and my PhD program, I had a short stint working with the Research Office at my doctoral institution, where I became a part of an initiative to develop a social matching system to connect new, tenure-track researchers at the institution with community members who desired research or assessment projects. It was there that I met Dr. Douglas Zytke, and became involved in needed research work to complete the project: interviewing both professors (to find out their desires on how they are presented in the app) and community members (to find out their desires on how they are presented and what they would like to see). This process introduced me to the skills necessary to navigate sensitive matters in participant questioning, as many of the participants were from local non-profit organizations that serve deeply underserved communities, such as those with disabilities or women who have experienced human trafficking. (Archer & Zytke, 2019). It also introduced me to Dr. Douglas Zytke and the Human-Computer Interaction lab at Oakland, where I became involved in research and grant initiatives for the next few years.

One such research initiative culminated in the following paper, and Dr. Zytke has gone on to publish a plethora of affiliated work on consent in online spaces and app development. I was initially interested to participate based on the research-matching paper experience, but also because the populations studied (Greek Life and LGBTQIA+ individuals) are both demographics that I belong to and am deeply interested in assisting. The lab was also extremely interested in the ideas and perspectives that I provided from the lens of a student affairs professional when examining the work, and my unique

identities and group membership - as well as my prior experience running required freshman consent courses at my Master's institution – all proved valuable in discussion and in writing.

I also had a deep interest in the subject area due to consent conversations surrounding asexuality. When asked by the lab to explain, I cited much of the information I shared here, via Chapter 1: that asexual and aromantic people (and anyone, truly) can choose to engage in sex for a variety of reasons and motivations that may not have any reason at all to do with sexual attraction, and that consent conversations are intrinsic to navigating such interpersonal relationships. Of particular interest to the lab was the idea that individuals with disabilities have a complicated relationship with ideas of consent, as many people have caregivers who are responsible for assisting them with daily tasks, and the lines of touching – or even consent to help with tasks that may/may not be required – are blurred or otherwise de-sensitized (Kafer, 2013). I also outlined (at this moment in time with less verbiage and less intensity) the beginnings of a conversation surrounding people with disabilities and asexual people's experiences with consent and epistemic denials of agency.

Through these conversations, and through providing my perspective and scholarly expertise in the coding and writing processes, I was able to contribute to the following paper, which won both “Best Paper” and an “Impact Recognition” award from the Computer-Supported Co-operative Work and Social Computing (CSCW) conference of the Association for Computing Machinery in 2021. I firmly recognize my part as only a piece of Dr. Zytka's lab, and am grateful to have been a part.

Copyright Acknowledgment

Zytka, D, Furlo, N., Carlin, B., & Archer, M.W. (2021). Computer-mediated consent to sex: The context of Tinder. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3449288>

“Computer-Mediated Consent to Sex: The Context of Tinder” from the *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW) 2021* reprinted with permission from the Association of Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3449288>

Abstract

This paper reports an interview study about how consent to sexual activity is computer-mediated. The study’s context of online dating is chosen due to the prevalence of sexual violence, or nonconsensual sexual activity, that is associated with dating app-use. Participants (n=19) represent a range of gender identities and sexual orientations, and predominantly used the dating app Tinder. Findings reveal two computer-mediated consent processes: consent signaling and affirmative consent. With consent signaling, users employed Tinder’s interface to infer and imply agreement to sex without any explicit confirmation before making sexual advances in-person. With affirmative consent, users employed the interface to establish patterns of overt discourse around sex and consent across online and offline modalities. The paper elucidates shortcomings of both computer-mediated consent processes that leave users susceptible to sexual violence and

envisions dating apps as potential sexual violence prevention solutions if deliberately designed to mediate consent exchange.

CCS Concepts

Human-centered computing - Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing;
Social and professional topics - User Characters - Gender; Sexual orientation

Keywords

Online dating; dating apps; Tinder; consent; sex; sexual violence; impression management; signaling

Introduction

Once a taboo topic, sex has gained in popularity as an explicit research focus in human computer interaction over the last two decades (Blythe & Jones, 2004, Brewer et al, 2006, Kannabiran et al, 2011, Troiano et al, 2020). Much of this research has been into sexual wellness, or how technologies can positively augment our sexual lives (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011; Eaglin & Bardzell, 2011; Kannabiran et al, 2018; Su et al, 2019; Wood et al, 2017). Other research has focused on sexual violence—meaning activity of a sexual nature without consent (Basile et al, 2014)—including how the use of technology enables sexual violence, particularly online sexual harassment (Blackwell et al, 2019; Camille, 2006; Nova et al, 2019; Rubin et al, 2020; Vitak et al, 2017), and how technologies could be designed to address this behavior online and offline (Ahmed et al, 2014; Ali et al, 2015; Blom et al, 2010; Mohan et al, 2017; Rajan et al, 2018; Sarosh et al, 2016).

A central characteristic of sexual violence (SV) is the absence of consent, by which we refer to unambiguous agreement to a sexual experience (Basile et al, 2016). Despite ample HCI research into SV, we lack understanding of how consent itself is computer-mediated. How does computer-mediated communication shape the ways we give and (perceive to) receive consent to activities of a sexual nature? This is a pressing question given the increasing use of computer-mediated tools for finding and interacting with sexual partners, and mounting calls for empirical investigation into how technology facilitates SV (Camille, 2006; Gillet, 2018).

An ideal focal point for studying computer-mediated consent would be dating apps, not only because they are popular tools for discovering sexual partners (Anderson et al, 2020), but because the literature portrays dating apps as unique facilitators of SV across virtual and physical modalities (Choi et al, 2016; Gilbert et al, 2019; Gillet, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2016; Rowse et al, 2020; Shapiro et al, 2017; UK National Crime Agency, 2016). Dating apps are a class of mobile social matching systems, or systems that recommend people to people (Terveen & McDonald, 2005). Popular examples include Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and OkCupid. Quantitative research has linked dating app-use with physical-contact SV including rape and bodily injury (Choi et al, 2016; Gilbert et al, 2019; Rowse et al, 2020; UK National Crime Agency, 2016), as well as online SV (Gillet, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2016). Yet, as noted by Gillett (2018), understanding of how or why dating apps facilitate SV “primarily stems from anecdotal accounts in popular and social media” (p. 217). For example, popular media has brought attention to user struggles with reporting SV to dating app companies (Cousins & Edwards, 2020; Jacques, 2018; Picciani, 2020).

It is paramount that the role of online dating interfaces in mediating consent exchange be empirically investigated so as to inform interface designs that can curb nonconsensual experience. Given that dating apps have been used by almost half of adults under 30 years of age (Anderson et al, 2020), insight into how interfaces scaffold consent could be the basis for future dating app designs that serve as scalable preventive solutions to sexual violence, which is currently a serious public health issue (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; DeGue et al, 2012; Smith et al, 2017, 2018).

In this paper we report a semi-structured interview study (n=19) with dating app users representing a range of gender identities and sexual orientations about their computer-mediated consent processes, primarily through use of the app Tinder. Empirical contributions include:

Identification of two computer-mediated consent processes: 1) consent signaling, in which the dating app interface is used to infer and imply consent to sex without any explicit validation of consent prior to sexual activity, and 2) affirmative consent, in which the dating app interface is used to establish a pattern of overt dialogue about sex across online and offline modalities.

Elucidation of challenges to both of these computer-mediated consent processes that leave users susceptible to sexual violence, such as misinterpretation of inferred consent, and changing one's mind about sex that was previously agreed to over computer-mediated communication.

Background

In this section we first review HCI research into sex and sexual harm, which we use to argue for more research into computer mediation of consent to sex. The concept of

consent to sex, including modern day consent exchange practice, is discussed. We then identify and explore online dating as a context for studying and designing for computer-mediated consent.

HCI and Sex

Human computer interaction research foregrounding sex has stretched back over 15 years to when Blythe and Jones recognized pornography as an oft unspoken, yet dominant, driver of Internet use (Blythe & Jones, 2004). This has been followed by research agendas for explicitly examining sex and sexuality in HCI (Brewer et al, 2006; Kannabiran et al, 2011, 2018), with some literature mapping the subject area to human rights and social justice (Bardzell, 2010; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011). Research in this area has commonly explored how current and future technologies may augment sexual gratification and wellness, particularly with sex toys (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011; Eaglin & Bardzell, 2011) and sex robots (Sparrow, 2017; Su et al, 2019; Sullins, 2012; Troiano et al, 2020).

Another focus has been on the role of technology in sexual violence (SV)—a term used by the CDC to comprise any activity of a sexual nature without the consent of all parties involved, ranging from sexual harassment to rape (Basile et al, 2014). Online sexual harassment through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and even social VR has been shown to be commonplace (Blackwell et al, 2019; Jhaver et al, 2018; Pater et al, 2016; Rubin et al, 2020; Vitak et al, 2017). This includes behavior such as unsolicited sexual comments and the sending of sexually explicit pictures without consent of the recipient (Nova et al, 2019).

Research has also studied and proposed technology to stop, or support victims of, SV in the physical world. Much of this research has focused on sexual harassment and assault of women in urban areas (Blom et al, 2010; Satchell & Foth, 2010, 2011) such as Bangladesh (Ahmed et al, 2014; Ali et al, 2015; Mirza et al, 2016). That research has led to prototypical tools to support women in mitigating risk of SV as they navigate their urban environment, such as with panic buttons to alert trusted contacts (Ahmed et al, 2014; Sarosh et al, 2016; Satchell & Foth, 2010), user-generated reports (Ahmed et al, 2014; Dimond et al, 2013), and safe routes (Ali et al, 2015; Sarosh et al, 2016). Other research has focused more specifically on rape with systems that match victims to lawyers (Rajan et al, 2018), and stick-on clothing sensors that use auditory alarms and odor-emitting capsules to ward off attackers (Mohan et al, 2017). The use of social media to solicit support after sexual abuse and other sexual experiences has also been investigated (Andalibi et al, 2016; Razzi et al, 2020).

Computer-Mediated Consent to Sex

While nonconsensual sexual experience has been a recurrent focus in the HCI literature, there has been little investigation of how computer-mediated communication shapes understanding of consent itself—how it is given and how it is (perceived to be) received prior to a sexual act such as penetrative intercourse. By consent we refer to the CDC’s definition: “words or overt actions ... indicating a freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact” (Basile et al, 2014).

Study of computer-mediated consent is needed because SV is a serious public health issue (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; DeGue et al, 2012; Smith et al, 2017, 2018), and technology that mediates consent could be a scalable preventative solution. SV is also a

gendered issue, hence technologies that effectively mediate consent would then also be impactful to reducing gender inequality. While all genders are impacted by SV, women are disproportionately victimized compared to men (Smith et al, 2018), as are LGBTQIA+ individuals compared to cisgender heterosexual individuals (Breiding et al, 2013). For example, over one third of US women, and 35% of women worldwide (Garcia-Moreno et al, 2013), have experienced SV involving physical contact, compared to a quarter of US men (Smith et al, 2018). Over half of transgender men (51%) and more than one third of transgender women (37%) in the United States have experienced sexual assault in their lifetime (James et al, 2016). Approximately half of non-binary individuals have experienced sexual assault (James et al, 2016).

To lend necessary context to computer-mediated consent, we must first consider how consent is exchanged during face-to-communication; in other words: the preexisting consent practices that computers may now augment. The specific behaviors qualifying as consent to sex during face-to- face communication have been points of contention socio-politically over several decades (Muehlenhard et al, 2016, Ortiz & Shafer, 2018). Best practices for consent exchange as advocated in literature, law, and by sexual health organizations require mutual, overt agreement from all partners (Jozkowski, 2015; Planned Parenthood, n. d.; RAINN, n. d.; Student Safety: Sexual Assault Bill, 2014; Schulhofer, 2016). This is sometimes called affirmative consent. The onus is on the initiator to receive agreement before engaging in a sexual act, rather than on the recipient to overtly refuse. The absence of overt resistance to sex or escalation in sexual activities (i.e., silence) is not considered consent.

Affirmative consent, despite its potential to mitigate inadvertent SV, is not universally adopted in physical world contexts. In reality, consent practices vary greatly and are often susceptible to SV. For example, non-verbal cues are commonly interpreted as consent to sex (Jozkowski, 2015; Muehlenhard et al, 2016; Ortiz & Shafer, 2018). This is problematic because such cues can be misinterpreted, and individuals sometimes do not overtly stop a sexual act that they otherwise do not want due to fears of retaliation including physical violence and repercussions to their career and social standing (Handel & Shlovski, 2012; Khan et al, 2018).

In-person consent practices are informed by sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), or messages learned through cultural or social transmission about how to recognize, and behave during, sexual encounters (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Many sexual scripts are instigative of SV. Some are based on spatial and temporal factors (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Hirsch et al, 2019), for example: inviting someone to a college dorm room late at night may imply that sex is going to happen, which makes college students uncertain of their sexual agency (their right to deny a sexual advance, as in Richardson, 2000) in this situation (Hirsch et al, 2019, p. 8). SV victims sometimes blame themselves for unwanted sexual acts because of perceived failure to recognize contextual factors implying that sex is supposed to occur (Khan et al, 2018, p. 445). Sexual scripts concerning consent are also gendered. For example, the gendered assumption that “men always want sex” can lead to the perception that asking for consent from men is “dumb” and unnecessary (Hirsch et al, 2019, p. 7).

Some HCI research has begun to consider the role that technology can play in shaping sexual consent practices. Wood and colleagues’ mobile phone game “Talk About

Sex” (Wood et al, 2015, 2017) intends to facilitate discussion about consent and other sexual wellness topics. Nguyen and Ruberg studied the “consent mechanics” in sex-themed video games to unpack “commendable” values around consent that are conveyed to players and which could be designed into other technologies (Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020).

Despite these positive examples, the literature indicates that technologies currently designed to augment progression to sex are perpetuating nonconsensual experiences. One example is mobile apps for recording consent between sexual partners, such as Good2Go and LegalFling. While intended to facilitate overt consent exchange, these apps have been harshly criticized in HCI literature (Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020) as well as popular media (Petter, 2018) for failing to design for the possibility that a person may change their mind about sex and want to stop the experience. LegalFling, for instance, turns consent into a legally binding contract (LegalFling, n. d.), stripping users of any subsequent agency during the sexual act.

Online dating is another example of SV being inadvertently perpetuated through technology that is intended to augment sexual encounters. Several quantitative studies have linked dating app-use with SV (Choi et al, 2016; Gilbert et al, 2019; Gillet, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2016; Rowse et al, 2020; Shapiro et al, 2017; UK National Crime Agency, 2016). Choi and colleagues found that dating app users are 2.13 times more likely to be sexually abused than non-users (Choi et al, 2016). In two different studies of SV in Australia, dating apps were attributed to more than 10% of overall cases (Powell & Henry, 2016; Rowse et al, 2020). In a study of Tinder, users were more likely to report nonconsensual sex than non-users (Shapiro et al, 2017). Other research indicates that

dating app-facilitated SV is getting worse: reports of rape by perpetrators met through a dating app increased six-fold over a five-year period in the UK (UK National Crime Agency, 2016).

Our study explores computer-mediated consent in the context of online dating, partly because of the aforementioned research portraying it as an SV risk factor, and partly because of the widespread use of dating apps for pursuing sex (prompting some research to call them “sex apps” (Birnholtz et al, 2015)). With 49% of US adults under the age of 30 having used a dating app (Anderson et al, 2020) they are an opportune context for designing future interventions to mediate consent and therefore prevent sexual violence at scale.

Dating Apps: Sexual Opportunity and Risk at Scale

Dating apps are a subset of social matching systems (Terveen & McDonald, 2005), meaning that at a basic level their purpose is to introduce, or recommend, people to people. Examples include Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, OkCupid, and Hinge. Sex is a pervasive desire behind dating app-use (Blackhart et al, 2014; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Wu & Ward, 2019; Zytke et al, 2015), leading some users to think it is the predominant purpose of dating apps (Communello et al, 2020). Some dating apps are more synonymous with sex than others, such as Grindr (an app for men seeking men) (Blackwell et al, 2015; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2017) and Tinder (Fansher & Eckinger, 2020; Stamper, 2014). However, research indicates that motivations for using Tinder (Sumter et al, 2017; Timmermans & Caluwé, 2017), Grindr (Rice et al, 2012; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014), and dating apps in general (Petrichyn et al, 2020; Zytke et al,

2014) are more diverse than sex, including friendship, community building, validating self-worth, and long-term romance.

Dating App Design

Mechanisms for user discovery are rather uniform across dating apps today, with an emphasis on relative geographic location of users' mobile devices (e.g., "this user is 1 mile away"). Two features available to users for informing face-to-face meeting decisions are profile pages and private messaging interfaces (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Profiles are static representations of users that predominantly showcase pictures of their physical appearance. Non-picture content in profiles has witnessed a steady reduction since the transition from dating sites accessed on personal computers to dating apps on mobile devices. However it is still typical to find fields for demographic traits like age, open-ended text, and (in the case of apps for men seeking men) HIV status (Warner et al, 2019). Messaging interfaces today commonly require two users to "like" each other's profile before messages can be exchanged, which is signified with an explicit notification of a "match." Dating apps also include various safety-minded features, including the abilities to block and report troublesome users. More recently Tinder has added a panic button that will alert trusted contacts if harm occurs during a face-to-face meeting (Tinder, n. d.), as well as a feature that maintains a record of users that one has met face-to-face.

Use of Dating Apps

Use of dating apps has usually been studied through the lens of impression management (self-presentation) (Goffman, 1978) and signaling theory (Donath, 2007a, 2007b). Impression management, originally from Goffman (Goffman, 1978), has been

used to study how online daters craft their profiles and message content to achieve an intended impression in the eyes of potential partners (Gibbs et al, 2006; Whitty, 2008; Zytke et al, 2014). This is typically motivated by the desire to maximize attractiveness, which has driven users to engage in deception (Fiore & Donath, 2004; Gibbs et al, 2006; Hall et al, 2010, Hancock et al, 2007, Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma & Hancock, 2010a, 2010b) and use profile and message content sold by dating coaches and recommended by strangers on the Internet (Masden & Edwards, 2015; Zytke et al, 2016b). The flip side of impression management is impression formation, or evaluation of other users to determine their value for future interaction. Aside from the challenge posed by deception, users have struggled with evaluating “experiential traits” such as personality (Zytke et al, 2014, 2016a), and have reported going on dates earlier than they wanted to in order to better collect this information (Zytke et al, 2014).

Signaling theory describes the extent to which a piece of information indicates an otherwise unobservable trait (Donath, 2007b). A simple example would be a list of favorite books in a dating profile signaling intelligence (Zytke et al, 2016a). Signaling theory has been used to study Grindr users’ interpretations of profile content, such as interpreting use of PrEP (an HIV preventative medication) to signal desire for unprotected sex (Warner et al, 2019). However users warn that signals of unobserved traits from profile and message content are susceptible to misinterpretation (Zytke et al, 2016a).

Ultimately, users have expressed frustration over their capacity to make informed face-to-face meeting decisions (Frost et al, 2008; Zytke et al, 2014), which could lead to unnecessary exposure to physical risk. This has motivated prototypical interfaces such as

the prompted discussion interface (Zytka et al, 2020) and virtual dates (Frost et al, 2008) to better support impression formation.

Risk in Dating Apps

Risk has pervaded much of the online dating literature beyond the themes of deception and ill-informed face-to-face meeting decisions. Online dating poses amplified risk of HIV and STI transmission, particularly amongst users of Grindr (Albury et al, 2020; Corriero & Tong, 2015; Handel & Shlovski, 2012; Landovitz et al, 2013; Rendina et al, 2014; Rice et al, 2012; Warner et al, 2018, 2019; Winetrobe et al, 2014). Research has reported on users' hesitance with reporting HIV status in profiles: some users feel that disclosure may limit conversations around safe sex (Warner et al, 2018), while others purposely keep their profile scarce to maintain control over information that may be inadvertently disclosed (Warner et al, 2019). Relatedly, there is evidence that users disguise, or blatantly lie about, their interest in casual sex due to fears of "slut shaming" and stigma (Blackwell et al, 2015; Zytka et al, 2015), which can lead to misinterpretations of the reasons for meeting face-to-face.

Risks with self-disclosing other types of personal information have also been explored. Several studies have acknowledged the risk of being outed when using a dating app for men seeking men, which can have significant social and safety implications (Birnholtz et al, 2020; Blackwell et al, 2015; Corriero & Tong, 2015). Transgender users also put themselves at risk when deciding to disclose their transgender status, although some users purposely disclose this information online so as to avoid potential harm in-person (Fernandez & Birnholtz, 2019). Users with disabilities have similarly self-

disclosed online in order to weed out users with biases against those with disabilities (Porter et al, 2017).

Online harassment is another common theme in the online dating literature, which indicates women and LGBTQIA+ individuals being disproportionately victimized (Albury et al, 2019; Anderson et al, 2020; Communello et al, 2020; Shaw, 2016) by behaviors such as unsolicited pictures of genitalia, threatening messages, and sexually aggressive messages.

Safety in online dating has been a research focal point since at least 2001 (Brym & Lenton, 2001). That work has uncovered additional generalized safety strategies like avoiding users with no profile pictures (Blackwell et al, 2015) and increasing uncertainty reduction strategies (Gibbs et al, 2010), such as using search engines to investigate potential meeting partners. However the research indicates that dating apps are generally failing to protect users: Duguay points to suboptimal platform moderation (Duguay et al, 2018) while Pruchniewska critiques Bumble for enforcing “gendered labor” by requiring women to carry the responsibility of vetting men (2020).

Despite a history of studying risk and safety in online dating, sexual violence and consent practices have not been studied directly beyond quantitative associations (Gillet, 2018). There is some indication that this is a concern of users; Corriero reports on fears of rape and physical harm by users of Grindr (Corriero & Tong, 2015) while Asbury and colleagues found that women are 3.6 times more likely than men to want to see consent-related information in dating apps (Albury et al, 2019).

Research Questions

We question how dating app design and user experience play a role in shaping and influencing users' processes of giving and (perceiving to) receive consent to sex, which may predispose them to engaging in or experiencing unwanted sexual activity. Our research questions are:

- *RQ1*: How do online daters exchange consent to activities of a sexual nature?
 - *RQ1A*: How do online daters give consent to sexual activity?
 - *RQ1B*: How do online daters identify consent to sexual activity from their partner?
- *RQ2*: How do dating app interfaces and user experience inform users' consent processes?
- *RQ3*: What challenges do users face with dating app-mediated consent to sexual activity?
- *RQ4*: In what ways do users' dating app-mediated consent processes fail to protect against sexual violence (unwanted sexual activity)?

Method

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 users of the dating app Tinder who represented a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. The interview protocol involved participants giving detailed descriptions of sexual experiences facilitated through dating app-use from the point of initially discovering a user on the application to the point of penetrative sex occurring, or otherwise the final interaction with the user if penetrative sex did not occur.

Student researchers from demographics at elevated risk of sexual violence comprised most of the research team. They were motivated to address the prevalence of sexual violence and saw this research project as a vehicle for making a difference. These demographics included women, students identifying as LGBTQIA+, and members of Greek Life organizations. Greek Life—and its composites “fraternities” and “sororities”—refers to systems of social organizations at United States colleges and universities usually named with Greek letters (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998). They provide community service and postgraduation networking opportunities, but have a troubled history of conflict with college administrations and are associated with a culture of sexual objectification (Keenan, 2015; Ross, 2016).

The student researchers co-constructed the interview protocol and recruitment methods. They also served as interviewers and co-led data analysis. Their research training, including IRB certification, and all other duties mentioned above were supervised by the paper’s first author.

Table 1

Demographic Details of Interview Participants

Referred to as	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Age
Kate	Cisgender woman	Bisexual/Pansexual	White	22
Jose	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	Hispanic	22
Chrissy	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	White	22
Willie	Non-binary trans-feminine	Pansexual	White	27

Table 1 – Continued

Referred to as	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Age
James	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	Asian	25
Billy	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	White	20
Alex	Non-binary trans-masculine	Bisexual/Pansexual	White	23
Ethan	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	White	24
Grace	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	White	22
Joe	Non-binary	Bisexual	White	23
Jess	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	White	20
Chloe	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	White	24
David	Cisgender man	Heterosexual	Asian	22
Brick	Agender	Pansexual	White	23
Dan	Cisgender man	Pansexual	White	23
Tiglet	Cisgender man	Queer	White	23
Magmar	Trans woman	Bisexual	White	24
Bob	Cisgender man	Gay	White	28
Kyle	Cisgender man	Pansexual	Mixed Race	24

Recruitment

Recruitment methods involved student researchers promoting the study through social media posts, a word-of-mouth campaign that involved a text message invitation being shared amongst and between student social circles, paper flyers at social spaces (particularly LGBTQIA+-friendly spaces in which our student researchers had rapport),

and snowball sampling. Recruitment targeted individuals in the 18-29 age range to map with statistics on dating app-use (Anderson et al, 2020) as well as statistics on prevalence of sexual violence (Smith et al, 2017, 2018). All recruitment materials emphasized that participants would be asked to describe their dating app-facilitated sexual experiences in detail. The recruitment approaches collectively yielded 19 interviews. See Table 1 on the previous page for demographic information (participants provided fake names for the purpose of anonymity). While recruitment materials invited users of all dating apps, Tinder was the common dating app used by all participants, and the primary app discussed during interviews.

A Note on Participant Care and Mandatory Reporting

Due to the nature of the study's topic, several precautions were taken to protect participants from re-traumatization and stress. At least one student researcher was present at every interview to establish comfort with the participant based on shared demographics around age and gender/sexual identity. All participants were asked before the interview began if they were comfortable with the interviewers in attendance and were reminded that they could end the interview or ask any interviewer to leave at any time. The research team also consulted with a practicing nurse with experience engaging with SV victims, as well as researchers with experience studying SV and related gendered risks, to understand best practices for participant inquiry. In order to understand how our responsibilities as mandatory reporters of Title IX violations extended to our study we consulted appropriate reporting structures as well as several faculty and staff at our university with experience conducting SV research and who were involved in implementing our university's mandatory reporting policy. It was determined that

instances of SV reported through data collection were exempt from mandatory reporting; the decision was confirmed by our university's research office.

Data Collection and Analysis

All but two interviews occurred in-person at a location chosen by the participant, such as the authors' research lab, restaurants, and participants' homes. The other two occurred online. Interview lengths ranged from 27 to 62 minutes, with an average of 53 minutes.

After an IRB-approved consent form was signed, interviews began by assessing the participant's general online dating experience: which dating apps they used, how many online daters they had met face-to-face, their expectations for meeting those online daters, the typical outcomes of their face-to-face meetings, and their experiences with sex throughout the online dating process. Answering these broad questions naturally led participants to mention particular sex-related experiences they had through online dating. We encouraged participants to narrow their focus to these experiences and recollect them in detail, from the moment of initially discovering the respective user online up to the moment of penetrative sex or otherwise wherever their interaction with the user concluded. Questioning from interviewers served to clarify understanding of sexual interest and consent, particularly in the moments directly preceding vaginal or anal penetration, and other ambiguities. Once participants completed the retelling of their experience, interviewers probed additional experiences based on notes taken about particular moments in the online dating process (e.g., how a user's consent-seeking behavior compared to other sexual experiences they had through online dating).

All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. Dedoose was used to facilitate iterative line-by-line coding of the transcripts according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) and then recurrent review of the codes to refine emerging categories and themes. A team of three researchers (a pansexual non-binary person who was assigned male at birth, a heterosexual woman, and a heterosexual man) individually coded interviews and then collectively reviewed coded transcripts in recurrent meetings to refine the evolving codebook and motivate recoding of the interviews. Over multiple iterations all interviews were recoded to reflect the finalized codebook. The team then collectively engaged in axial coding of the transcripts to identify relationships between codes and organize them into a hierarchy. This hierarchy was used to identify selective/overarching code categories pertaining to computer-mediated consent processes.

Findings

Selective codes during data analysis pertained to two distinct computer-mediated consent processes, which we call *consent signaling* and *affirmative consent*. These terms refer to the process adopted by a participant in a specific experience with a particular user for understanding, presenting, and receiving consent to sexual activity through Tinder's interface. These processes began at initial discovery of a user's profile page and ended at the point of physical sexual activity occurring (although in some instances interaction with the respective user ended without a physical sexual activity occurring). We unpack these two consent processes below, including the role that Tinder's interface plays in facilitating or influencing their adoption, and limitations of both consent processes that can leave users susceptible to sexual violence.

Computer-Mediated Consent Signaling

In experiences coded with *consent signaling* Tinder's interface was used to infer and imply consent to sexual activity without any verbal or overt confirmation before the activity was engaged in. These users (at the time that the respective experience occurred) understood Tinder to be an app intended to support discovery of sexual partners and rapid progression to sexual encounters. Profiles were thus perceived as tools for identifying nearby people interested in sex, rather than tools for evaluating *if* someone was on the dating app for sex. A "match" in Tinder's interface (when two users "swipe right" on each other's profile, enabling them to exchange messages) was considered a signal of mutual sexual interest and consent to sexually explicit messaging. Agreement to meet face-to-face through the messaging interface was then interpreted as agreement to have sex. Experiences coded with consent signaling were predominantly from users identifying as heterosexual men and women, and some LGBTQIA+ users when reporting on their early sexual experiences through Tinder with heterosexual partners.

Profile Discovery Signals Interest in Sex

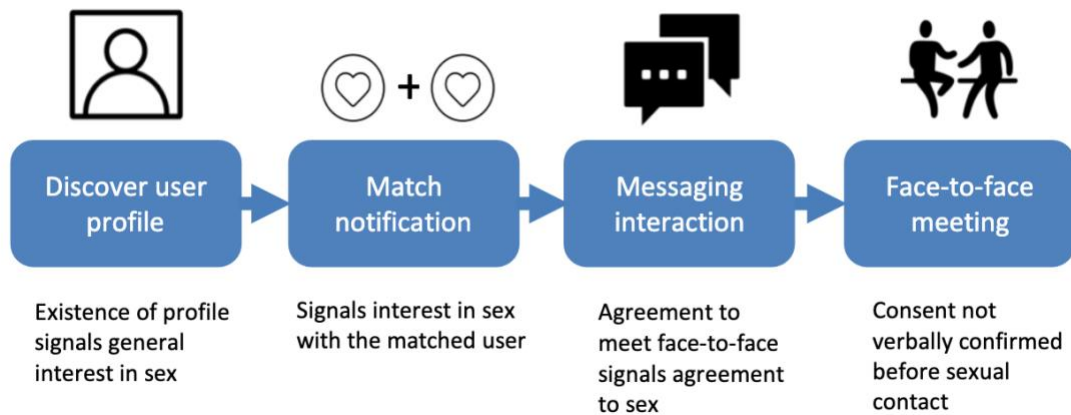
Almost all participants coded with consent signaling assumed that the primary purpose of Tinder was for finding casual sex partners. An implication of this perception was that the mere presence of a profile page was interpreted as a signal of the profile owner's interest in casual sex. Tinder's profile discovery interface, in this light, was seen as a tool for effectively bypassing the need for overt discourse about sexual desire because it was perceived to identify who in the geographic vicinity wanted sex.

When participants reported how they evaluated the profiles of eventual or potential sexual partners, impression formation usually began and ended with determination of whether the evaluator was willing to have sex with the user presented in

the profile. Profile pictures of physical appearance were the sole determinant of decisions to “swipe right” in most cases. As Jose described: “There's like very few things that like, will get me to cause to swipe left. If you have, like, a really bad first photo, use too many, like, filters.”

Figure 1

Computer-Mediated Consent Signaling



Note. Users practicing consent signaling interpreted the components of Tinder’s interface as tools to effectively bypass the need for overt discourse around sexual interest and consent.

While Tinder profiles do have open-ended text bios, which can potentially hold information about one’s interest in casual sex, participants usually ignored this content. In the few instances that bio content was mentioned participants dismissed its validity, especially if the bio content indicated that the profile owner was not interested in sex. Participants usually referred back to their preconception that Tinder is for sex when

explaining why they found such content to be dubious for impression formation.

Ultimately, the possibility that a profile owner may not be interested in sex was either rejected or not seriously considered:

Ethan: “Some (profiles) are like, ‘Oh, well, I’m here to look for a boyfriend’ and I’m like, really? You’re here on Tinder to look for a boyfriend? I can smell that bullshit a mile away...

Interviewer: “So those people that say things like ‘I’m looking for a boyfriend’ or things like that (in their profile). Do you still attempt to, like, match with them? In pursuit of sex?”

Ethan: “Yeah, yeah. I mean, I always get, always try to give it the college try.”

Some participants explained that Tinder’s interface design encourages sexual objectification of profiles. In Joe’s words:

“Yeah, I would say that the swiping isn’t, I don’t think that’s very good. The like/dislike feature based off of images alone. I feel like that just turns every user into a commodity or an object, you know, regardless of how they want to treat it or use it. It is a tool of objectification. So if you look at Tinder, you know, that is a tool of objectification for every user. Every user is objectified and objectifying others at the same time.”

Joe’s quote represents a pattern of participants rationalizing the commodification of profiles as unavoidable by design. It does not simply turn them into commodities but forces them to commodify others (“every user is objectified and objectifying”) and therefore excuses them from any personal responsibility when they practice this objectification. Other participants pointed to the amount of screen real estate devoted to

pictures and the necessity of an extra button click to read open-end bios as explanations for how interface design encourages them to evaluate profiles in this way.

A “Match” in Tinder’s Interface Signals Consent to Sexually Explicit Interaction

Under consent signaling, “matches” in Tinder’s interfaces (notifications of mutual “liking” between two users’ profiles, which enables one-on-one messaging) were interpreted as signals of desire to have sex with the matched user and consent to immediately engage in sexually explicit interactions. Initial messages, which were always sent by men in our interviews, often immediately sexually objectified the recipient. These included overt statements of desire for sex, overt requests for sexual favors, or thinly veiled sexual innuendos. As James described: “I would essentially be like, ‘Hey, send me nudes,’ or ‘Hey, DTF.’ Or hey, like, just really, really simple. Straight to the point. Like, ‘Hey, you want to fuck?’ Boom.”

These messages were the first attempt in the consent signaling process to overtly state interest in sex with another user. However, the intent of these messages was not to clarify mutual sexual desire, but to expedite the progression to a face-to-face encounter so that sexual urges originally developed during profile evaluation could be acted on. Men exhibited some frustration when partners were not receptive to these messages. For example, David was annoyed with “one-word responses” to his messages soliciting sex: “Yeah, yeah, like one word responses. It's the most annoying thing. Like I come up with like a witty three liner and you come with ‘KK All right.’ I'm out. I'm done. Like you, you just wasted my time. Yeah, like, I don't want to meet you then.” This frustration with “wasted time” was reflective of the perceived purpose of the messaging interface being to escalate online interaction to a physical sexual encounter. Refusal by a messaging partner

to abide with sexual objectification was therefore considered an incorrect use of the application.

Recipients of sexually objectifying messages concurred that these types of messages were normal and that use of Tinder for non-sexual reasons falls outside of its intended use. Importantly, they maintained this perception even when they themselves used Tinder for reasons other than, or in addition to, sex (their choice of Tinder in those cases was driven by its sheer popularity or because the participant's social circle used the app). This occasionally impacted their understanding of sexual agency, or their capacity to reject sexual requests over messaging. In one instance Grace described how she was hesitant to firmly deny a man's request for "full body" pictures because the request aligned with her understanding of how Tinder's messaging interface is supposed to be used. As she described the interaction:

Grace: "So I remember he said can you send me a picture because your ones on (your profile), they were old or whatever. So I sent him like a face shot. I'm in the library. So I can't really do much, right? I just take a selfie. (He was) like, no, I want a full body shot. So I was like, okay, whatever. It's fine. I'll just go into the bathroom. Took a full body selfie in the mirror. He's like, well, I was hoping for more than that... I told him no, indirectly. So it was kind of like, I'm not. I don't know. I was like, teasing and flirting back but like saying no. You know what I mean?"

Grace went on to rationalize the man's behavior as understandable because of his sexual drive and therefore undeserving of a stern rejection. She described this kind of messaging exchange as typical of her Tinder experience. In her words: "They're horny. And some of

them are rude. I've had negative experiences with most of the guys on there. They, I mean, I guess not negative in their sense. Like he was there to hook up." Chrissy similarly considered sexual solicitations over messaging to be a normal and acceptable experience, despite such messages driving her to stop using Tinder. Rather than voice her disapproval she would apologize to men for her lack of interest in casual sex because she considered her reasons for using Tinder to deviate from the supposed sexual purpose of the app:

Interviewer: "Why'd you stop using Tinder?"

Chrissy: "I didn't, I didn't like the conversations. I didn't find anyone that was like, good enough to talk to or else the conversations did get weird... in a sexual way where they're just like, well, 'I'm just here to fuck.' I'm like, well, 'I'm not. Sorry.' ...I mean, it is Tinder. So like you're expecting it at some point... When it happens you're not surprised. Like, oh, well this is Tinder."

In only one experience of consent signaling did a recipient of a sexually objectifying message (Chloe) describe firmly rebuffing the advance. She explained how men would often react with confusion because they understood the purpose of messaging interaction to be for arranging a sexual encounter: "a lot of times they'll be like, 'why else are we here?' Like on this app, like a lot of people just think Tinder is a hookup app."

Agreement to Meet Face-to-Face Signals Consent to Physical Sexual Contact

In experiences coded with consent signaling, participants often talked about the prospect of face-to-face meeting and sex interchangeably, as if sex was the assumed purpose and expectation of face-to-face meetings. While men's intent to meet for sex was usually clear through their sexually explicit messaging, mutual intent from users who

were not cisgender men was typically not as clear. When describing how they “knew” a messaging partner wanted to meet and have sex with them, men pointed to the content of messages received from their partners, however examples never involved the messaging partner confirming or clearly stating that they wanted to have sex. Rather, desire to meet face-to-face for sex was interpreted from message content such as jokes of a sexual nature, physically revealing pictures sent through Snapchat or text messaging, or even just the absence of an attempt to change the messaging topic to something less sexual. James described such responses as “reciprocating the energy.” And in Ethan’s words: “She was receptive (to sex). I’m assuming (that from) what kinds of things she was saying.”

Men sometimes described particular moments in messaging interaction that solidified their interpretation that a user was interested in meeting for the purpose of sex. Billy exemplified such a moment with an exchange of sexually explicit pictures, which led him to invite a woman to his house at the next opportunity that his parents were not home.

Interviewer: “How did that change your perception of things, once you exchange those (sexually explicit) pictures?”

Billy: “I got a little more hopeful that she was going to come over and we’re going to end up hooking up.”

A consequence of assuming sex to be the purpose for face-to-face meetings was that participants sometimes conflated agreement to meet face-to-face with agreement to sexual activity. In one example, Ethan described how his messaging interaction with a woman solidified his interpretation that she wanted to have sex with him. This was based

on her confirmation that she was one time a “Catholic school girl” which he interpreted as a signal of interest in anal intercourse. Sex became not just the assumed purpose of their face-to-face meeting, but something Ethan felt entitled to as a condition of spending time to drive to the woman’s town:

Ethan: “(During messaging) she was like, ‘Yeah, I was a Catholic school girl.’ She gave me a winky face (emoji). It’s like, alright. Yeah. I know. I know what she’s trying to do here. (...) I was really hoping for sex. Which was a lot, which is, which, which like, okay, here: a guy doesn’t drive over an hour and leave empty handed.”

Ethan later described, with laughter, the anal sex that occurred during his face-to-face meeting with this woman as fulfillment of the Catholic school girl fantasy originally developed in their messaging interaction: “I’m laughing because I’m remembering how funny (the anal sex) was because the stereotype of Catholic school girls being very, very, very, very, very kinky.”

Like Billy’s excerpt above, Ethan mentions “hoping for sex,” which suggests that men’s interpretations of message content were biased by their own desires for sex (a confirmation bias). However, in experiences coded with consent signaling men seemed oblivious to the subjective nature of their interpretations of agreements to meet face-to-face. None of them made attempts to confirm their interpretations—either online or in-person—that the purpose of meeting face-to-face was for sex.

This can create dangerous situations when such interpretations are wrong. Chrissy demonstrated this with a story about a man following her to a bar. He knew she was spending time at a particular bar because she had mentioned it in a message, which he

interpreted as an invitation. He never confirmed this interpretation with Chrissy before showing up to the bar, at which point she used her friends to hide from the man:

Chrissy: “(I told him) ‘I’m going to karaoke night to the bar by my house.’ I didn’t really expect it to be an invitation, but he took it as one and showed up and I was there with my friend it was really awkward... I was, I literally, I was sitting at the bar and watched (him) walk up with his friend I was like someone hide me, like please I swear to God, I swear to God, and then he walked in and I was with my roommate at the time, and her friend and then my neighbor, and we were all kind of sitting at the bar. And the dude comes in and I stole my... neighbor’s seat. I was trying to like hide from him.”

Risk of Sexual Violence with Computer-Mediated Consent Signaling

In no experience of consent signaling was consent verbally confirmed prior to a physical sexual activity occurring. This poses a risk of nonconsensual sexual activity because of the possibility that signals of consent could be misinterpreted. The initiators of physical sexual contact through consent signaling—all cisgender men—also conveyed problematic conceptualizations around consent. For one, they believed that their partners did not want to overtly discuss consent. In Billy’s words: “I know most girls don’t want to, like, talk about that kind of stuff. Unless they’re the ones bringing it up.” Due to the assumption that sex was already agreed to upon meeting face-to-face, other participants understood consent to be confirmation of “when” sex would occur, not if it was desired. Similar to Billy, James considered consent discussions to be disrespectful to women: “I don’t think being super open about it is like, the best approach. Like I don’t really, I’m

not really going to be like, hey, when are we gonna fuck? Like, you know, I don't feel like being, that's like, I don't feel like that's very respectful."

In lieu of verbal discussion of consent, cisgender men believed that they could "sense" when their partner was ready to have sex. This was typically signaled through a lack of physical resistance to a sexual advance. For example, Jose assumed a woman from Tinder wanted to have sex because she did not overtly refuse his attempt to pull her shirt off: "It's like a sense thing. I can't really describe it... I grabbed her shirt and I was like, pulling it off. And I guess she was just okay with it... It just happened. Like, there was no like verbal like, 'hey, do you want to do this?'"

Other participants described letting a sexual experience happen that they otherwise did not want for reasons including a perceived obligation to have sex and fear of physical retaliation. For example, Tiglet described feeling a "need to, like, perform" while in a woman's bedroom that he met from Tinder. He did not want to have sex and was unable to have an erection, but he did not physically resist when the woman placed his hand on her breast and attempted to stimulate herself:

Tiglet: "It's important to get, you know, consent from people in this day and age, but I also don't think we're at a point where that always happens explicitly, verbally, at least not for the first time. I mean, it's good if that happens. But you know, we're in (the) bedroom, doors closed... The first time I touched her boob she put it there when I think about it... I was unable to get hard and she did whatever. Maybe it was still a feeling and need to, like, perform."

Chloe described a different experience where she let a man from Tinder kiss her while she was sitting in his truck, despite not wanting the experience, because she feared

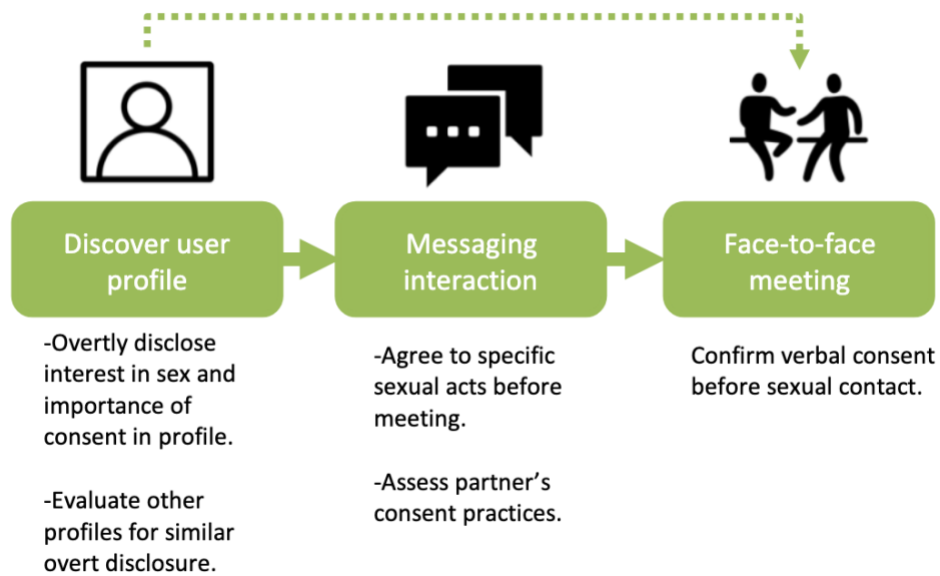
retaliation if she resisted. As Chloe described: “I was afraid. Because I was in his car, like it’s his environment. He could’ve just driven off. Like lots of times we’re afraid if we don’t give him what he wants something bad will happen. I’d rather kiss someone than, you know, die.”

Computer-Mediated Affirmative Consent

In experiences coded with affirmative consent Tinder’s interface was used to prompt overt discourse around consent before face-to-face meetings. The term affirmative consent comes from public health literature (Jozkowski, 2015) and legislation (Student Safety: Sexual Assault Bill, 2014) that rejects the lack of resistance to sex as a form of consent and necessitates that partners give unambiguous agreement to sex (“yes means yes”). Tinder’s interface was conceptualized by some participants as affirmative consent software, enabling them to foster patterns of affirmative consent and identify resistance to affirmative consent practices in a reduced-risk computer-mediated environment. Consent to specific sexual acts would be overtly exchanged before ever meeting a sexual partner face-to-face, and then verbally reconfirmed during the face-to-face meeting. Experiences coded with affirmative consent were entirely from users identifying as LGBTQIA+ and were typically adopted in response to sexual violence or general harm that such users experienced in their prior dating app-use.

Figure 2

Computer-Mediated Affirmative Consent



Note: Users practicing affirmative consent used the components of Tinder's interface as tools to foster overt discourse around consent and identify resistance to affirmative consent practices.

Profiles are Tools for Overt Disclosure of Interest in Sex and the Importance of Consent

Adoption of computer-mediated affirmative consent was commonly driven by prior experiences of “sexual trauma” (Alex) that involved the participant personally being sexually assaulted or a previous sexual partner disclosing trauma. Willie described a sexual experience that motivated their adoption of affirmative consent in this way: “One time I was hooking up with someone and they started like crying halfway through and that really just, for lack of a better word, fucked me up. I was like 22. And apparently

they had been assaulted.” Adoption of Tinder as affirmative consent software was intended to mitigate future experiences like this for participants and their sexual partners.

One way that participants did this was by crafting the open-ended text bios in their profiles to clearly state openness to sex, amongst other social goals, so as to mitigate any misinterpretation for why they were using the app. This profile content was often the result of an iterative, trial- and-error process. As Kate described: “I think I re-worded my bio so that I, I was open to hooking up... I've gotten it to be pretty clear about, like, what the expectations were.”

Several participants described how these iterative profile revisions led them to include open- ended content about consent itself, particularly the importance of exchanging consent during sexual encounters. This reflected their own personal valuing of consent as well as the role of overt consent disclosure in their preferred process of escalating to a sexual encounter.

Dan: “For a very long time on my profile, I did have, you know, that near the very top of my profile, especially when I was looking for casual sex there, I did put consent is extremely important to me. Like, if you're not willing to have conversations even about consent, like please do not expect anything like that. (...) I definitely put it there just because I value those things.”

Willie: “I think it just literally is like, I'm very straightforward. ‘Looking for hookups or friends with benefits, if consent is discussed at length.’ I think that is my bio verbatim right now.”

When evaluating the profiles of other users discovered in the app, participants similarly looked for open-ended bio content that overtly disclosed interest in sex and valuing of

consent. This became particularly important for participants looking for relatively uncommon sexual arrangements beyond one-time sexual encounters such as non-monogamous or polyamorous relationships. Dan recounted a positive experience with a Tinder user who included similar profile content about non-monogamy: “I said that I'm looking for friends, yeah, I'm looking for casual hookups, I'm looking for relationships. And I mean, within my profile, I put ‘I practice non- monogamy’ and she had a pretty similar setup in the bottom of her profile too.”

Participants found that other LGBTQIA+ users, as well as users that self-identified with the “kink” community, were most likely to include profile content about sexual desire and consent. They indicated that cisgender straight men were the least likely to include this content, and a few participants indicated that they completely avoid cisgender straight men for this reason.

Messaging Interaction is a Tool for Confirming Compatibility of Expectations

In a few instances participants only used profiles for mediating their affirmative consent processes and would not overtly discuss sex and consent again until the face-to-face meeting. As Kyle described: “I try and save a lot of the conversation for the in - person thing, because otherwise, if you get all your messaging done right away, it's going to be a very awkward first date.” However, in a majority of experiences coded with affirmative consent, messaging interaction through Tinder’s messaging interface as well as external messaging tools such as Snapchat and SMS played a significant role in mediating consent.

A common topic of messaging interaction after two users “matched” was to reiterate or further explore each other’s goals for using Tinder. Rather than take the form

of sexually explicit and objectifying interaction as was previously mentioned in the consent signaling findings, sex was broached in these messaging conversations in order to confirm that one's messaging partner was comfortable with sex and understood that they had the option to end the interaction if they were not. As Joe described: "Well, for casual sex, it was mostly I was like, pretty forward that I want everybody to be comfortable with what's going on. And so if that's not what you're looking for, I don't want to push that." Several participants practicing affirmative consent were using Tinder for a variety of goals ranging from friendship to casual sex and long-term relationships, and so it was also important to them to clarify which of their many goals a messaging partner aligned with. This became most important when the participant was not interested in sex with their messaging partner and wanted to clarify that misalignment before exposing themselves to sexual risk face-to-face.

Dan (recounting a situation where he did not want sex, but his messaging partner did): "I pretty quickly was just like, hey, you know, I'm not here for anything like that. I'm in a happy relationship, but I'm not really looking to expand or do anything else right now. I appreciate it. I'm flattered. And I'm down to talk about these sorts of things with you, but I just want to, you know, make my intentions clear. I'd like to sit down, have coffee and talk about what it means to be an undergrad in PoliSci, as opposed to do that and then we bang my car."

Once participants confirmed compatibility of interest in sex, messaging interaction evolved into overtly discussing sexual boundaries or the specific sexual activities that both partners wanted to engage in. As Willie described a recent experience: "I think the

first thing we talked about, we, we wanted to give each other oral first, and they volunteered to go first.”

These conversations were also an opportunity for participants to clarify sexual acts that they were not comfortable with and would want to avoid during face-to-face meetings. In Tiglet’s words: “my interactions there were more like, you know, I’d be honest and forthright like, hey, I’ve never done anything with a guy but I’m interested in it. I might be down to do like, do the blow each other stuff, but like I’m probably not going to want to do anal right now or anything like that.” Relatedly, conversations tended to also explore sexual history, particularly concerning HIV, STIs, and users’ history of getting tested.

A few participants indicated how their profile content worked in conjunction with messaging to facilitate conversations about sexual boundaries. Matched users would utilize participants’ profile content about consent to voluntarily broach discussion of sexual boundaries, which alleviated the need for our participants to have to navigate towards these topics. Two participants indicated this was more likely to happen with messaging partners from the “kink” community (users who disclosed specific and relatively niche sexual desires in their profile).

Dan: “I would definitely say that a noticeable amount of the time, roughly half of the time that I’m talking about things regarding sex for consent people, it comes about through things that were previously talked about in my profile.”

Trust and comfort were recurrent motivations in participants’ descriptions of their messaging conversations concerning sex. The intent of sexual boundary discussions was not to build anticipation of sex or to increase the odds of sex occurring. Beyond the

surface level conversation topic of planning the sexual activity, participants intended the conversations to build trust and make their partners feel comfortable with maintaining overt dialogue about willingness and hesitance to engage in sex. The messaging interface was a tool for reaffirming, rather than abandoning, sexual agency. While this posed ample opportunity for one's messaging partner to back out of a sexual encounter, participants believed it made subsequent sexual encounters "better" because of the trust and comfort underlying them.

Joe: "There's a lot that can go into it that makes it way more fun, interesting, engaging. That sort of thing. So, I would want to have a fairly, fairly thorough discussion about likes and dislikes, fears and desires in sex so that way, you know, if at any point you or the other person wants to withdraw their consent, they can feel comfortable in doing so because I made it readily apparent that I want to respect their boundaries. So hopefully that person feels more trust in me. I'm making the sex better."

Messaging Interaction is an Opportunity to Test Consent Practices

Like profile evaluation, participants utilized messaging interaction through Tinder and other messaging apps such as Snapchat to detect signals of resistance to affirmative consent and thus risk of sexual violence during potential face-to-face meetings. One signal was a general unwillingness to discuss sex in detail over messaging conversation. In Kyle's words: "That's a pretty big red flag if someone's not willing to openly discuss what the expectations are, because then you're probably going to be taken advantage of, or there's just something, something's up."

Another strategy was using Snapchat to intentionally make oneself susceptible to online sexual harassment. Snapchat is a separate social media application that affords users the capability of exchanging ephemeral picture content (including sexually explicit photos), which some participants saw as an opportunity to evaluate other users' practices around consent. For example, Kate described how she would intentionally use Snapchat to give messaging partners the opportunity to send sexually explicit photos without permission. If a messaging partner did send such pictures without asking her first she would interpret that as a signal that affirmative consent practices may not be respected and followed during a face-to-face encounter.

Kate: "I usually don't meet people (right away). If I'm just messaging them on Tinder, usually give them like social media first, and then if they don't send me like, pics there, genitals, like, then it's like, a good sign... With Snapchat, it's pretty easy to like, snap a picture of your genitals and send it to somebody. So I mean, if they're not doing that, without my expressed permission, then I think that speaks to them being a decent human being."

Consent is Overtly Exchanged Online and Reconfirmed In-Person

Discussion of sexual boundaries over messaging naturally led to overt agreement to specific sexual activities before face-to-face meeting. Upon meeting face-to-face participants described reconfirming consent verbally before engaging in physical sexual activity. Kate described this as consent "along the way." Participants gave two reasons for reconfirming consent in-person. One, it gives each partner an opportunity to change their mind. This possibility is particularly high when using dating apps because of the potential time lapse between messaging interaction and face-to-face meeting, and new

information that users can gather during face-to-face meetings that corrects or supersedes impressions formed online. Some participants exemplified this with profile pictures being deemed physically inaccurate during face-to-face meetings, which reduced sexual desire. Others spoke of unanticipated anxiety upon meeting face-to-face.

Another reason pertains to perceived pressure to engage in sex. Several participants spoke of feeling an expectation to perform sexually, especially when intent to have sex was already explicitly stated over messaging. Dan elaborated by describing how he was less willing to decline any sexual advance when he was younger, regardless if he really wanted the experience, because he was “desperate” and used sex to affirm his sense of self-attractiveness. Reconfirming verbal consent in-person was thus an opportunity for his sexual partners, who may similarly view sex as a vehicle for self-worth, to reflect on whether they really wanted the experience to happen.

Dan: “I believe in consistent, enthusiastic consent. So you need to enthusiastically and consistently over a period of time affirm with me that sex is something that you want to have for me to genuinely believe because I remember what it was like being a desperate person on dating apps. I had OkCupid when I was that weird and dirty ugly duckling. I know that people will be like, yeah, yeah, whatever.

Yeah, let's do it. Let's do it. I just really want to (confirm that).”

Risk of Sexual Violence with Computer-Mediated Affirmative Consent

Despite computer-mediated affirmative consent being adopted by users specifically to mitigate nonconsensual sex, participants exhibited reasons why this process can still expose users to sexual violence. For one, use of the dating app for scaffolding affirmative consent stops once users transition to face-to-face encounters.

Once-overt dialogue about sexual boundaries and consent over asynchronous messaging can make way to ambiguous face-to-face situations where the need to (re-)exchange consent becomes “blurry” (Willie), leaving victims to hesitate in moments of nonconsensual contact. Willie recounted such an experience of being raped by a Tinder date. After they had a consensual sexual experience their partner attempted to initiate penetrative intercourse for a second and third time but without renewing consent. Willie doubted their sexual agency in that scenario and hesitated to stop the nonconsensual experience.

Willie: “(I was thinking) I hope they don't want to do this again. And they sort of grabbed me and like, started having sex with me. So looking back on it, I could definitely say they assaulted me. It's just like, consent gets really blurry. And I should, just I don't know, that's just what happened. I didn't really like fully realize a lot of this until like a couple years later, thinking about bad experiences.”

Willie connected this to another complicating factor that may obfuscate consent face-to-face: alcohol consumption. The literature indicates that people under the influence of alcohol are unable to freely give consent (Basile et al, 2014), which may negate the validity of consent exchanged online before meeting, and obfuscate whether consent is—or even can be—exchanged face-to-face. Other participants remarked about general awkwardness with broaching conversations about verbal consent during face-to-face meetings without the use of an intermediary tool such as Tinder's interface. For example, Kate discussed struggling to get a sexual partner to verbalize unambiguous consent during a face-to-face meeting because it clashed with the partner's preference to feign reluctance to sex that they really wanted.

Kate: “One time that I was like, really confused, because this was like, the first time I hooked up with like, a woman. And I was trying to, like, get her consent for things. And she like, said some, she said stuff that she didn't mean, like, she'd be like, ‘no, no, no, no,’ like that... And I was like, ‘are you, like, are you good? Do not want me to do this?’ And she'd be like, ‘no, no, yes!’”

Participants reported additional struggles with trying to implement computer-mediated affirmative consent through the dating app. The strategy of overt discourse around sexual boundaries and consent was reported as uncommon amongst the broader userbase by all participants practicing affirmative consent, which had implications on how the strategy was perceived by others. While disclosing sexual desire in their profiles sometimes helped trigger conversations about sexual boundaries, other times it was misinterpreted as an invitation for sexual objectification. Several participants remarked that they endured frequent sexually objectifying messages as a result of being open about their interest in sex. Likewise, participants acknowledged that their messaging partners often misunderstood their attempts to discuss sex as objectification. As Joe described:

Interviewer: “So did you find that other users seem to express that same desire and wanting to talk about consent (over messaging)?

Joe: “I'd say if anything more feminine people were willing to do that then masculine people, but most people thought it was weird. Most people thought that it ... felt more objectifying... You're still assuming that that person is going to be okay with even getting that type of message.”

Similarly, other participants reported how messaging partners sometimes misunderstood attempts to discuss consent as “sexting” (Kate) or invitations to have erotic conversations

with the intent of building sexual desire rather than navigating sexual boundaries. In Kate's words: "I think some people think that if I'm talking about sexual stuff. If I'm talking about those subjects (like consent), it's automatically like, dirty, or like, a sexual scenario."

Limitations

The study's focus on Tinder may hamper generalizability of the findings to other dating apps. This is likely for dating apps with different design structures, such as Grindr which does not include a swiping/"match" mechanism, and Bumble's mandate that women send the first message after a "match" occurs. While the age range of our participants aligns with statistics on SV victimization (Smith et al, 2017, 2018) our sample leaves questions regarding dating app-mediated consent in other age ranges. Our sample is also predominantly white and located in the Midwest United States; the findings may not reflect the experience of users from other ethnicities or locations. Due to the cross-sectional nature of our study design, it is also impossible to know how the process of using Tinder over time may have gradually shaped our participants' understanding of consent or their modes of consent exchange. As was particularly the case with the users adopting affirmative consent, computer-mediated consent processes can be iteratively refined, and our interviews likely disproportionately reflected participants' most recent consent processes.

Discussion

We conducted a semi-structured interview study with 19 users of the dating app Tinder to explore how processes of exchanging consent to sex are computer-mediated. Two computer-mediated processes of consent exchange were discovered: 1) consent

signaling, in which Tinder's interface was used to collect and convey escalating signals of sexual interest and consent, but without any explicit confirmation of consent prior to initiating physical sexual contact; and 2) affirmative consent, in which Tinder's interface was used to establish patterns of overt discourse around sex and consent to specific sexual activities, which was verbally re-confirmed upon meeting face-to-face. Limitations of both computer-mediated consent processes were discovered that can result in nonconsensual sexual activity occurring.

In this section we first use our findings to pose explanations for the frequency of online dating-facilitated sexual violence (SV), and reflect on how the discovered computer-mediated consent practices compare to offline consent practices. We then discuss how Tinder is adopted by users not merely as a dating app but as a consent exchange app, and why dating apps need to more deliberately design for consent scaffolding in order to accommodate this latent motivation behind app-use. We conclude with suggestions for intentionally designing consent mediation, and the potential of dating apps to become scalable solutions for SV prevention.

Explanations for Why Online Dating is a Sexual Violence Risk Factor

There is mounting quantitative evidence that online dating is contributing to sexual violence (SV), meaning sexual contact without mutual consent (Choi et al, 2016; Gilbert et al, 2019; Powell & Henry, 2016; Rowse et al, 2020; Shapiro et al, 2017; UK National Crime Agency, 2016). However there has been a lack of empirical insight into why online dating perpetuates SV (Gillet, 2018). Our study poses two explanations. One is that the process of using Tinder leads users to assume that consent to sex has already been given by virtue of online interaction through the app and agreement to meet face-to-

face. Two, the process of using Tinder can obfuscate one's sense of sexual agency—the perceived ability to decline a sexual advance (Richardson, 2000).

The media psychology and trauma literature (Bandura, 2001; Camille, 2006) has warned that the Internet is a powerful vehicle for mass modeling of behavioral patterns including sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), or socially learned perceptions of appropriate sexual behavior. Sexual scripts are at the root of many problematic consent practices and explanations for SV in offline contexts (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Hirsch et al, 2019; Khan et al, 2018). Unspoken meanings behind contextual factors like place and time (e.g., being in a college dorm room late at night) and gender (e.g., “men always want sex”, as in Khan et al, 2018) lead individuals to assume consent has already been given, or cannot be revoked. Our findings show that Tinder not only enables “mass modeling” of conventionally harmful sexual scripts, but that new sexual scripts unique to Tinder-use have emerged. Tinder's sexual scripts carry expectations of sexual interaction much in the same way that physical spaces and contexts do (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Hirsch et al, 2019). They also carry similar behavioral outcomes: assuming consent and doubting one's ability to say no.

The obfuscation of sexual agency through Tinder's sexual scripts makes apparent why existing safety features in Tinder, and dating apps more broadly, are ineffective at stopping online dating-facilitated SV. Features such as user blocking, reporting, and the more recent panic button (Tinder, n. d.) all necessitate that victims recognize when a “wrong” behavior is occurring. That recognition may never come if SV-qualifying behavior is interpreted as normal, acceptable, and aligning with the sexual scripts of

Tinder-use. Regarding SV statistics, this suggests that dating app-facilitated SV is likely underreported.

Tinder...The Consent App?

HCI researchers have exhibited a growing interest in mediating consent to sex through technology (Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020; Wood et al, 2015, 2017), but have been critical of existing solutions (Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020). Our study shows that Tinder is used not simply for discovering sexual partners, but also for scaffolding the consent process, suggesting that researchers should be considering dating apps as additional consent exchange technologies.

Users practicing consent signaling interpreted Tinder as a tool that expedites consent exchange through bypassing the need for it. One's presence on Tinder, and subsequent interaction through the interface, provided signals of sexual interest—in other words, users thought it performed consent exchange on their behalf. Users practicing affirmative consent, on the other hand, used Tinder because it afforded them control over the consent process; it enabled them to impose their preferred process of overt consent discussion in a reduced-risk computer-mediated environment.

Under neither interpretation is Tinder a particularly good consent exchange app. Under consent signaling, consent is implied through information that is not directly about consent, and not directly about sex at all in most cases, such as a “match” in Tinder's interface or an agreement to meet face-to-face. As reported on in prior HCI literature regarding signaling theory, signals can vary in their reliability (Donath, 2007b, Donath, 2007a, Zytko et al, 2016a). It would seem to the impartial observer that signals of consent and sexual interest through Tinder are extremely unreliable.

Computer-mediated affirmative consent, while less susceptible to misinterpretation, also has limitations. For one, the role Tinder plays as a consent exchange app ends prematurely. It does not facilitate consent exchange during face-to-face meetings where risk of SV is at its highest, and users in our study recounted struggles with reconfirming consent or refusing sexual advances in-person even after establishing open dialogue through the app. In addition, unlike consent signaling, participants acknowledged that affirmative consent is an unusual use of Tinder's interface, and it was a struggle to stay committed to the process while enduring sexual objectification and negative reactions.

Computer-Mediated Consent by Design

The ways in which Tinder mediates consent are currently unintentional through design. Dating apps should attempt to deliberately scaffold consent because, otherwise, misalignments in consent processes and misassumptions around receiving consent stand to continue the perpetuation of SV through online dating. Yet it is shortsighted to think that mediating consent through dating app design would only mitigate SV facilitated by online dating. It would reframe dating apps as scalable, generalized tools for SV prevention given the significant proportion of adults that use dating apps (Anderson et al, 2020).

Before intentional design for consent mediation can happen, designers must decide which consent exchange process they want to support. Affirmative consent is the practice currently advocated in the literature, law, and by sexual health organizations (Jozkowski, 2015; Planned Parenthood, n. d.; RAINN, n. d.; Schulhofer, 2016; Student Safety: Sexual Assault Bill, 2014). Affirmative consent requires mutual, overt agreement

from all partners to the initiation and escalation of sexual activities (“yes means yes”). Because partners must actively give and seek unambiguous agreement recurrently as sexual activity escalates, it minimizes opportunity for unwanted sexual activity due to misinterpretation of desire or misunderstanding of one’s own right to stop a sexual act. However, affirmative consent is not without its challenges (Jozkowski, 2015). The practice is not commonly followed and can seem awkward or mood-killing during real world situations. Our own study showed that affirmative consent can be too sex-forward for the masses. As some participants pointed out, there are users who simply do not want to discuss sex. This is poignant given that dating apps are now used for goals beyond dating and sex, such as friendship and employment (Bumble, n. d.; Kuczwara, 2018; Timmermans & Caluwé, 2017; Zytka et al, 2014) It would be presumptuous of users’ goals to mediate consent with features that scaffold overt discussions about sex in particular.

One possibility, per Nguyen and Ruberg (Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020), is to broaden the concept of consent beyond sex. Dating app interfaces could be designed to make overt discourse around consent for all kinds of social interactions more natural and normative. The swiping feature now typical in mobile dating apps for exchanging consent to messaging interaction is one example, and could be replicated for other escalations in interaction. Users could “swipe” to explicitly indicate a willingness to meet face-to-face, and for what reasons (e.g., dating, friendship, employment).

Another opportunity for design would be to consider features to be used during face-to-face meetings. Some participants in our study exhibited frustration with maintaining overt discourse around consent upon meeting face-to-face. Without the

dating app to assist them users had trouble broaching conversations about consent, vocalizing disapproval to a sexual advance, and recurrently receiving verbal consent to escalating sexual activities. When considering ways to mediate in-person consent exchange, critique of consent exchange apps like LegalFling and Good2Go (Nguyen & Ruberg, 2020) highlight the risk of inadvertently stifling sexual agency if users cannot revoke computer-mediated consent. Potential approaches for encouraging overt and recurrent consent exchange that provides opportunity for users to revoke consent could be app-recorded consent that “times out” after a certain period (therefore requiring re-exchange) or a conversational UI that requests verbal consent from partners when the application has not sensed any recent verbal exchange.

Above all, we think the best course of action for future work is to follow the principles of feminist HCI (Bardzell, 2010), specifically participation. Artifacts designed by researchers who may not personally use them hold the potential to inadvertently obstruct sexual agency in ways similar to existing consent exchange apps. Involving end-users in the design of consent-mediation tools would ensure that consent exchange is scaffolded in ways that protect their sexual agency and accommodate factors that researchers and designers may not have anticipated.

Conclusion

This paper reports an interview study about computer-mediated consent to sex in the context of the dating app Tinder. The study found that users conceptualize Tinder as a consent exchange app, albeit in different ways. Users practicing consent signaling considered Tinder to effectively bypass the need to overtly exchange consent to sex because one’s presence on the app, and any subsequent interactions through the app, were

assumed as signals of sexual interest. This poses risk of sexual violence (nonconsensual sexual activity) because such signals could be misinterpreted. Users practicing affirmative consent used Tinder's interface to scaffold overt discourse around sex and consent before meeting face-to-face so as to minimize threat of sexual violence. However, such users were still at risk of sexual violence because they found it difficult to maintain overt consent exchange in-person where the app could no longer be used to scaffold sexual dialogue. Ultimately, the paper argues that dating apps could become valuable tools for computer-mediated sexual wellness if designed to intentionally mediate consent exchange.

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Article 3

As the second empirical contribution to this dissertation, Kwon & Archer (2025) discusses an interview study with nine (9) top Critical HRD scholars: leaders currently at the head of the scholarly field who are well-regarded as experts, and who are in process of defining paths forward for the discipline. For this study, I was asked by Dr. Kwon to examine previously gathered data which I had intentionally never been exposed to, so as to provide methodological quality and a fresh perspective. For my approach, I chose to utilize learned aspects of previous work. My knowledge conducting and coding qualitative interviews with students (Zytke et al, 2021) and community members (Archer & Zytke, 2019) from my time in the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) lab lent itself well to this work, as did conversations of methodological approaches researched during my time working with Dr. Amanda Mollet – specifically those conversations surrounding Kathy Charmaz’s (2014, 2017) Constructivist Grounded Theory and how Charmaz’s approach lends itself to critical examination of both data and researcher assumptions. This piece builds on previously demonstrated (Archer & Zytke, 2019; Zytke et al, 2021) ability to perform work, as well as aspects of coding and finding new thematic elements within existing data (Mollet, 2021; Zytke et al, 2021). I have saved this paper for last in discussion, as I believe its findings to be particularly startling, and yet simultaneously, unsurprising. As such, there are extremely important implications not just for how we perform inclusion work within Human Resources, but how we do so within our educational institutions – and how we teach others to do this work. I am grateful for the opportunity provided to contribute a unique perspective and a personal approach to this work.

Copyright Acknowledgment

Kwon, C. & Archer, M. W. (2025). Does Critical HRD really exist outside academia?:

An interview study with nine Critical HRD scholars. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 49 (1/2), 26-42. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-05-2023-0070>

“Does Critical HRD really exist outside academia? An interview study with nine Critical HRD scholars” from the *European Journal of Training & Development* reprinted with permission from Emerald Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-05-2023-0070>

Abstract

Purpose: The complex world in which we reside is calling for more critical approaches to address the precarity experienced by the most marginalized in social systems.

However, HRD lacks empirical data to describe, define, and project the objectives and future directions of Critical HRD in today’s turbulent and volatile times. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the historical and contemporary progression of Critical HRD, as described by nine of its most well-known scholars.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and a constructivist grounded theory coding approach was applied during analysis to identify themes and patterns.

Findings: The findings of this study highlight the persistent scholarship versus practice divide among Critical HRD scholars, suggesting that Critical HRD may merely be an

academic undertaking and something not practiced within the public domain. We call for an evolution of Critical HRD toward more practice and action-oriented approaches to scholarship and teaching so that meaningful changes can take place in actual organizations and workplaces.

Originality: This study was the first to empirically show that there is a real research-practice gap, particularly among Critical HRD scholars. Critical HRD scholars need to take these findings seriously as an opportunity to reflect on how they can take Critical HRD to the next level beyond academic discourse.

Keywords: critical HRD, identity, power, diversity, social justice, research-practice gap

Introduction

The aim of Critical Human Resource Development (Critical HRD) is to challenge dominant approaches to Human Resource Development (HRD), including definitions, policies, practices, structures, and ways of knowing (Gedro, Collins and Rocco, 2014). By challenging dominant approaches, Critical HRD seeks to heighten awareness of and sensitivity to the ways in which individuals, organizations, communities, and societies produce and reproduce power and privilege in the various learning and performance contexts in which adults engage (Shuck et al., 2016). However, because of HRD's position as an applied discipline in a capitalistic globalized economy (Fenwick, 2005; Sambrook, 2014), Critical HRD faces obstacles of challenging dominant approaches in contexts where more humanistic paradigms and perspectives may be overshadowed by

larger imperatives centered on productivity and profitability (Bierema and Callahan, 2014).

This paradox complicates the work of those who wish to fulfill HRD objectives from a critical vantage point, particularly in organizational settings where HRD is typically positioned as an intermediary between an organization – which is represented by management and leadership – and workers or employees. HRD often serves the interests of the organization more so than the individuals who occupy it (Wang et al., 2017), because of the power imbalance inherent between the two in an employment relationship (Collins and Chlup, 2014). Organizational needs, desires, and objectives are therefore prioritized over individual development. Organizations may be willing to invest in individual development, but usually only to the point when that development will pay larger dividends for the organization's bottom line.

In this regard, Critical HRD's impact on practice is still little known and questionable. Although debates on research-practice gap in HRD are not new (Gray, Iles and Watson, 2011; Hamlin, Reidy and Stewart, 1998), Critical HRD scholars have greater responsibilities to generate knowledge that is useful in enacting change. Over the last 10-15 years, there has been a significant surge of critical scholarship in the field of HRD as the world responds to big dilemmas such as climate change, disability advocacy, or racial injustice. Additionally, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has made visible various social inequalities even more visible at local, domestic, and international levels, calling for critical action among national leaders, policy makers, organizations, and HRD professionals to address the precarity experienced by the most marginalized in social systems (Bierema, 2020; Zanoni, 2021).

However, much of current Critical HRD research is still discursive in nature and takes a normative stance rather than an evidence-based approach. Trehan and Rigg (2011) stated, “It is notable that much of the work in this area operates on a theoretical plane, and is often light on practical guidance” (p. 276). These authors further stated, “The foregoing discussion has highlighted the emerging contours of critical HRD and the increasing attraction of the approach to a growing number of scholars. But what does this mean in practice? How is critical HRD actually implemented?” (Trehan and Rigg, 2011, p. 283). A similar point was raised by Cotter (2014) where the author argued that Critical HRD “seem[s] to focus too heavily on making managers critical rather than acting with them in critically reflexive ways” (p. 467). Most recently, Kwon and Nicolaides (2022) asserted that “the claims of critical HRD scholars have remained largely theoretical” due to “its tendency to view the world and organizations dichotomously” (p. 151). To summarize, this research implies that the HRD academic community is far behind in producing critical knowledge that will aid in actually addressing those unprecedented global challenges described above.

In response to this, we, as the authors of this article, feel it timely and necessary that HRD has empirical data to describe, define, and project the objectives and future directions of Critical HRD, to crystalize its evolving role in today’s turbulent and volatile times. One significant study was published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly* examining the subjective perceptions of Critical HRD scholars regarding this issue (Baek and Kim, 2017). While Baek and Kim’s (2017) study represented the first to engage with Critical HRD scholars to more clearly articulate Critical HRD’s objectives and future directions, the nature of the study’s methodology did not allow for the rich description

which is often associated with qualitative interview methods. Furthermore, this study failed to capture the added complexity of the global pandemic, as well as the arguable impact of the past presidency of Donald Trump. As these events happened after the study was published and informed the social context in which Critical HRD is presently being studied and practiced, many questions still remain unanswered. For example, how is the world's shifted social context influencing our emerging understanding of Critical HRD? What is hindering Critical HRD from making its best impact in practice where equity and social justice are sought-after values? What strategies are needed to break down the persisting research-practice gap in Critical HRD? To fill this knowledge gap, the voices and perspectives of Critical HRD scholars are essential. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the historical and contemporary progression of Critical HRD, as described by nine of its most well-known scholars.

Literature Review: A Brief History of Critical HRD

The lineage of Critical HRD can be traced back to HRD's historical relationship to the modern field of Adult Education. Adult Education as a discipline has had a longer history engaging with critical theory and problematizing the harm which may be done in the process of developing humans merely for productive ends rather than for the greater social good. One prominent voice in this regard is Paulo Freire (1970), whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* continues to capture the imaginations of contemporary scholars. Freire (1970) presented ideas which situated an understanding of power and privilege as essential building blocks of human development and learning which can lead to emancipation. Emancipation continues to be a major focus of many Critical HRD

scholars, who have also been informed by the works of leading feminist scholars of color such as hooks (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1998).

Since the formal scholarly beginnings of Critical HRD in 2004 with Fenwick's *Adult Education Quarterly* publication, many Critical HRD scholars have attempted to reimagine the very frameworks on which most HRD scholarship, academic programs, and practices have been established. That same year, Cunningham (2004) published an article in *Advances in Developing Human Resources* calling for more accountability within HRD, asking for a shift in focus to improving quality of life rather than capital gains. Cunningham (2004) was an infamous critic of HRD and believed its dominant approaches to be extractive and exploitative. These perspectives have been influential in shaping the contemporary landscape of Critical HRD.

Most notably, Bierema and Callahan (2014) proposed a shift away from the “three-legged stool” (McLean, 1998) paradigm focused on training and development (TD), organization development (OD), and career development (CD). Instead, Bierema and Callahan (2014) stated that the work of HRD – through the lens of Critical HRD – may be more accurately described across four domains: relating, organizing, learning, and changing. In response, Collins et al. (2015) proposed a fifth domain: advocating. By arranging the work of HRD around relating, organizing, learning, changing, and advocating, Critical HRD distinguishes its perspective as one that does not simply prioritize productivity and profitability, but is instead concerned with a “whole person” approach (Kwon and Nicolaides, 2017, 2019). The vast majority of the Critical HRD literature has explored the experiences of minority and underrepresented groups while utilizing the aforementioned theoretical perspectives. Some of the most recent examples

include: Kwon (2021) who explored a new mode of inclusion related to combatting ableism in organizations, Wicker (2021) who explored Black male leadership in corporate America, and Manongsong and Ghosh (2021) who explored how diverse development opportunities can help minoritized women overcome imposter syndrome.

Yet, as Callahan (2007) pointed out and Kwon and Archer (2022) stated, “Simply studying marginalized people for equity and inclusion should not be thought of as inherently critical,” (p. 326) unless the explicit focus is made on uncovering power imbalances and disrupting the blind pursuit of organizational enhancement. Accordingly, many Critical HRD scholars concentrate on the “reform of both workplace organizations and development of practices directed towards individuals and groups” (Fenwick, 2005, p. 228) beyond making a business case for inclusion (Byrd and Sparkman, 2022). This focus has, at times, led to allegations of “academic elitism” (Githens, 2015, p. 2) among Critical HRD scholars and has produced questions about the applicability of theories to practices which intentionally and explicitly reject the norms which permeate most organizations (Fenwick, 2005).

Methods

Our study sought to explore how leading Critical HRD scholars perceive their work, including ideas of what makes Critical HRD “critical,” as well as its historical and contemporary progression. We also wanted to explore Critical HRD’s impact within the greater whole of the field of HRD and to discuss congruences and tensions within the field. Two research questions were developed: (RQ1) how is Critical HRD conceptualized within our contemporary sociopolitical landscape? and (RQ2) how is the theory and practice of Critical HRD engaged?

Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author. A list of potential participants was identified by the first author in consultation with Laura Bierema, who is considered the leading authority in Critical HRD. Through a process of specific and targeted purposeful sampling (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019), nine Critical HRD scholars with varying backgrounds, focus areas, and at varying stages of their career were recruited and agreeable to participation in the study. By the time of the interviews, all interviewees shared a background of being employed as tenured or tenure-track university faculty. Interview questions were developed with a focus on how the participants viewed the evolution of Critical HRD as a research stream including any milestones, current trends and future projections, as well as its teaching and practice. Each interview took place for 45-60 minutes (one at the annual Academy of Human Resource Development conference and the rest virtually via Zoom), and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analytic purposes. Table 1 summarizes the participants' detailed information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

No.	Gender	Race	Country
1	Female	White	USA
2	Male	White	UK
3	Female	White	UK
4	Female	White	UK

Table 1 - Continued

No.	Gender	Race	Country
5	Female	Black	USA
6	Male	White	UK
7	Male	White	USA
8	Male	White	USA
9	Female	White	USA

Data Analysis

From the conducted interviews, we used our research questions as the basis for an open coding, used in a modified grounded theory approach (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It should be noted that grounded theory coding schemes were chosen specifically because of the way they lend themselves to critical inquiry – not for their ability to provide a concrete theory. As Charmaz (2017) stated: “An open-ended, emergent method fosters developing a critical stance” (p. 35). However, as Charmaz (2017) further stated: more than simply taking a critical stance, grounded theory coding schemes begin with the researcher’s “explicit value position” – usually rooted in knowledge of critical theory – and seek to “address[es] power, inequality, and injustice” from a social constructivist standpoint (p. 35). An epistemology like the one described above lent itself well to the backgrounds of our participants as well as the viewpoints of the researchers, while allowing codes to emerge organically from participants’ specific discussions (Egan, 2002).

As the first author was the original recorder of the interviews, the second author served as the primary researcher for the open coding process. Codes emerged initially through referencing actual words and phrases used by participants (such as “identity,” “age,” “gender,” or “disability”) and comparing them to one another. This open coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) revealed cohesive themes across our series of interviews, creating strong groups of codes that allowed us to employ axial coding, to relate these themes and combine them together. Defined simply by Corbin and Strauss (2008) as “the act of relating concepts/categories to each other,” (p. 199) axial coding “serves to indicate to readers that though we break data apart, and identify concepts to stand for the data, we also have to put it back together again by relating[, comparing, and categorizing] those concepts,” (p. 199) thus making sub-categories of codes. The separation of the first author from initial coding schemes and their subsequent involvement in the later collaborative process addressed any issues that may have arisen from ideas of data fit or from problems of data interpretation by the second author that may have come from a “problem of not having been there” (Heaton, 2008, p. 40). Specific patterns of conversation (that is to say, sub-themes or axial codes) emerged, including discussions of “difference” (n=111), ideas of a “scholarship versus practice divide” (n=105), and ideas of power relations or “dominance” (n=67). Saturation was achieved during second pass application, when like codes were combined and no new codes could be identified. Finally, codes were easily and simply re-classified into two parent codes – a final stage which Corbin and Strauss (2008) referred to as *selective coding*, where main themes are identified. These parent codes matched our research

questions: the “conceptualization of Critical HRD” (n=254), and “tensions between theory and practice” (n=149).

Findings

(RQ1) How is Critical HRD conceptualized within our contemporary sociopolitical landscape?

Identity and Difference

Our participants placed an intense importance on the idea of Critical HRD’s service to people of marginalized social identity. Conversations of identity occurred more commonly than any other conversations within the study, and when discussed explicitly, gender (particularly in terms of cisgender female equality) was the most discussed identity category (n=42). Race followed extremely closely behind, being discussed almost nearly as much (n=39). After that, sexual orientation (n=21) and disability (n=14) were common subjects. The scholars interviewed discussed identity not only from the perspective of employee lived experience, but also in terms of their own identity and how scholarship is performed in HRD. As one participant said of employees and of themselves: “So many professionals identify their person with their work, and that makes it really easy for employers to exploit their [our] services.” Most of our interviewed scholars discussed identity as a “lens,” stating that a crucial component of Critical HRD was examining the field from differing perspectives; most importantly, every scholar discussed how Critical HRD can be used to address dignity and equity and every scholar did so by using language that centered concepts of difference. The word “difference” was often used explicitly (n=111), but many scholars preferred to also discuss “norms,” “assumptions,” “care,” “attention,” and “visibility.” For example, one participant said: “I

think of Critical HRD as an approach to helping people and organizations realize their full potential, using a lens that questions norms and assumptions that are dominant within organizational cultures.” Another participant was quite blunt with how the introduction of critical ideas and the inclusion of those of differing identity in the field of HRD has changed scholarly focus, saying:

“I see a lot more attention and visibility surrounding people of color, people of different abilities, and people of different gender identities doing research, whereas before [Critical HRD], at least around racial diversity, it was mostly white women getting attention for those words.”

In addition to ideas of identity, the interviewed scholars emphasized the idea that to be critical, HRD research and practice “must support those who are marginalized.” Many of our participants expanded concepts of marginalization beyond ideas of identity and employment, with one saying: “We push back. We push back on the margins of what is considered good research and valuable ideas.” Critical HRD scholarship with a strict identity focus and utilization marginalized perspective was also critiqued within the interview itself, with some scholars disagreeing with the approach of identity critique without further action. One person said:

“You know, that’s the thing. I’m at this point in my career where I’m not interested in critique for the sake of critique: I am only interested in the critique if it has the power to lead to a change.”

While this particular quote is quite pointed, this idea of purposeful change was echoed among all participants. For the scholars we interviewed, Critical HRD does not just involve a critique of a workplace (or of HRD) utilizing identity lenses; in order to be

considered critical, HRD must approach issues of power, control, agency, domination, pondering is provided (or allowed) the ability to thrive in the workplace. As such, simply identifying oneself (or perhaps one's research participants) as having an identity of difference did not automatically qualify a conversation to be critical. Our participants saw this as the current direction and flow of Critical HRD as a field. To quote one of our scholars:

"I think the way people are starting to frame their work is using system[ic] power structures to get into very specific issues that individual minoritized and marginalized groups face, and I think that's what we're going to continue to see."

Power and Dominance (and Resistance)

Confrontations with power, and the critique of who (or what) is in power in organizations were the overwhelming focus for each one of our participants. Each participant's discussions of identity led directly to explicit discussions of "power," with many also discussing "dominance" in the workplace (n=67). One participant stated this succinctly when asked directly to define Critical HRD, saying "I think Critical HRD is a platform for scholars to engage in conversations about power, and how power can be oppressive for some." Or, as another scholar said:

"For me, Critical HRD is about looking at our relationships and making ourselves and others aware of who holds power; and whether that power is being practiced in a positive or negative way. Who is affected by who holds power? If power in an organization is predominantly held by people who all have the same background, then for me, that sends a warning signal about how welcoming that organization will be to people who are different."

Another participant said: “Critical HRD is concerned with disrupting systems of power, and finding ways to build organizations that are more inclusive of difference.” In terms of identity difference, this disruption -typically phrased as “resistance” (n=81) by our participants- was the second most discussed topic in our findings with some participants noting this resistance as the central point of what Critical HRD is. Our participants conceived of this resistance from both oppressed or marginalized populations towards unfair or unjust conditions but also as backlash from those in power against people attempting to voice problems, particularly scholars who do critical work. One scholar cautioned that resisting power structures was isolating and lonely for scholars, despite such resistance being an important aspect of service and care. Again, another scholar agreed, stating:

“I think the purpose is to help practitioners and scholars have a space to be able to work towards making organizations more just and more humane. ... I think that really, by being able to provide that space, and the scholarship and research surrounding that, we do a service to the field.”

While such discussions of resistance abounded, at least half of our sample was emphatic that resistance was not radical enough (n=14), and that the field should pivot to be more forceful in voice. Echoing our participant who stated that they are “only interested in the critique if it has the power to lead to a change,” one scholar stated that “incremental change is not enough,” and yet another scholar offered their view of where they think Critical HRD is going in terms of resistance:

“I think some of the early voices in Critical HRD are maintaining their perspective that we should negotiate with existing power structures. ... I think

that's fine – important and needed. But I think what's emerging now is more of a push [resistance] against that. ... around radical transformation and a desire for just *more*. This sense that there's more we can do and that we won't get there if we continue to just kind of compromise. That we have to push for what we want.”

In this fashion, our participants cited resisting dominant systems of power as a central tenet of what makes Critical HRD indeed critical. To supplement this, our interviewees also made comparisons between power negotiations and radical action. However, the majority of our participants were also very quick to tell us that these actions do not occur in a vacuum, and that climate – both institutional and societal, play a very important role.

Societal and Global Context

This need to recognize the societal context within which identity categorization and resistance of power occur was another central tenet that emerged in our research. One participant said simply: “Part of being a critical scholar is knowing that whatever we do, whatever we say, however we think, is informed by our social and cultural context.”

In these conversations, our participants revealed an interesting cycle: practice does affect our society, but that society also affects what we practice, research, and study. While identity and the acceptance (or dominance) of particular groups of people may make this concept more transparent, for a large portion of our sample, “dominance” also included concepts of United States dominance: in research, in political action, over people, over media, and over the field. One of our participants, located in the UK, pointed out that “[our] particular political climate will influence the kind of discourse we see in the press and how we think about things,” and several other of our participants were

quick to point out that the political climate of the United States is one that is in tension.

One participant said:

“[Critical HRD is about] questioning some of the ways that people are asked into or not included into conversations, or advancement opportunities, or promotions, development, and then also on a deeper level – I think especially right now in the US – with very polarized perspectives on lots of things and attitudes, it is challenging to be in conversation with people that have very, very different views about equality and inclusiveness.”

Yet another participant spoke even more bluntly, citing “the age of Trump and nationalism in general, and then right-wing ideology” as being a context that informed current media, and thus our thought and discourse. Another scholar stated that Trump was a reason for major polarization and arguments about power discourse in the academy. Political ideological differences was a significant topic of conversation among our interviewees (n=24).

Yet, for all the polarization in the United States, our scholars interviewed from other countries echoed these same sentiments, while also expressing that Western-centric views of the world are another area of critique for the field, and that not every viewpoint expressed in the United States (or elsewhere) is helpful or fitting for HRD in other countries:

“I think there is a move beyond the Western dominant mindset. That’s a trend: a growing trend to look more widely beyond the kind of scholarship that has mostly been focused on in America, the UK, and Europe. On the critical front, that’s important.”

In these ways, our participants heavily discussed how context -political and otherwise- is crucial to Critical HRD while also highlighting how easy it is to forget the greater context of global society.

(RQ2) How is the theory and practice of Critical HRD engaged?

Scholarship

The largest area of theory and practice discussed by our participants was that of scholarship (n=35): all of the interviewed participants were scholars in the field of Critical HRD, and the lens through which they approach the field was through their own work. In fact, many of our interviewees saw scholarship as the purpose of their work. One person said “For the last eight years, I have primarily brought things to practice through my scholarship,” and another said simply: “What specific actions do we, as critical HRD scholars, take in the academy to bring awareness? I think we do that through publications,” and this sentiment echoed the majority of our participants’ feelings.

Another participant stated:

“When we’re talking about practical recommendations, it’s actually kind of forthright to do your research on the practitioner or on what a practitioner might be looking for. Because then that way, automatically or not, you are trickling down to the mainstream through papers and publications... that would then help strengthen and legitimize the critical nature of the field.”

In this way, our interviewed scholars felt that the publication of their scholarship was a way to affect change: first of mindset, then of practice, and eventually of powerful systems. Every scholar discussed their own scholarship at length, with an intense focus on publications in the field.

Publications in HRD journals were not the only aspects of scholarship that were discussed. Several participants cited academic conferences as important places of networking and development, and as places where Critical HRD can be actualized. Conferences were described as an important route where those who work within Critical HRD can meet other likeminded individuals and have an impact. One participant discussed this at length and said that “they have been significant in evolving the field”; but that academic gatekeeping is also a problematic way that powerful systems restrain access to critical knowledge. Roughly half of our participants discussed the need to publish outside of Critical HRD – either due to trouble with subjects being accepted, or to attempt to share knowledge with other fields. One participant noted that “there are other ways to be seen besides publishing in journals,” and cited the importance of social media interactions in their work. The core of these scholarship discussions was putting Critical HRD information in public hands so that it could then be practiced.

Limitations of Scholarship

Ironically, the limitations of scholarship production were discussed just as much as scholarship’s importance. A “scholarship versus practice divide” was discussed by participants, with tension surrounding the idea of bridging this gap (n=105). Most participants did not provide solutions to the gap, though one mentioned interaction with workshopping in local communities, and the importance of supporting non-profits and other local businesses. Typically, the scholarship versus practice divide was discussed in terms of whether one’s research was actually being seen so that it could be acted upon, and it was here that many scholars highlighted practices of academic gatekeeping and

how publications were commonly used as a way to keep critical ideas from reaching the field.

“It’s hard to even put your research out there. Because when you submit, it’s going to be hard to be published. It’s going to be hard because there are gatekeepers. People that keep your research out of the mainstream literature. So when you talk about change, conversations, and discourse? Well first of all, your research has to be accepted into the discussions and publications.”

Said another scholar:

“The only way that people are going to know what critical issues you’re trying to make an impact on: the gatekeepers are keeping those conversations out of journals, out of publications. How in the world... can you make an impact?”

Besides this, several scholars also discussed their published work being denied, or colleagues telling them to study something less “edgy” or “controversial.” One scholar said:

“Women of color and men of color are pushing back on not so much who is doing the research, but why isn’t their research gaining attention? Even now I have a few women scholars who will say, over their career, they’ve been told ‘now don’t research those topics around diversity and inclusion, because they’re really controversial.’ I’ve never been told that as a white woman. So I find it interesting to hear that Black women have been given that advice.”

Not only does this gatekeeping (n=12) make publication difficult for our participants – but it also highlights how academia and academia-centric activities become the only way to proliferate critical ideas. Participants also seek to do this though the

aforementioned option of social media, and concepts of teaching. However, one participant, in their frustration over gatekeeping, went so far as to suggest that “critical HRD does not exist outside academia,” meaning that the idea of actualizing critical concepts in HRD settings – Critical HRD as a recognized field – was an academic undertaking, and something not recognized (or perhaps practiced) within the public domain. Another scholar stated:

“I believe that we need to find more ways to collaborate with practitioners. I think that we need to recognize the importance of how we reach out them and help them to see our research. Because when you’re researching stuff just to say we got a publication... what does that really mean? If we’re not really trying to make changes in how [things occur] in people’s experiences, I think it is just a self-service process.”

Teaching

Teaching (n=34) came through in interviews as another place to perform Critical HRD. As one interviewee said: “Academic programs at universities are for me, [primary] sites of critical HRD practice.” Another scholar said: “I think that [critical HRD] should at least be a section in a course on diversity or critical theory... it at least merits its own section. But programs should [and do not] teach it as a standalone course.” Conceptions of teaching were not constrained to the classroom, with one participant saying: “[I see teaching] as mentoring and developing early career researchers: less experienced researchers and academic colleagues.” This sentiment was shared, as this participant and others discussed their teaching less in terms of classroom instruction, and more in terms of “socializing graduate students,” and the importance of conferences and publications to

this end. Just as conferences became increasingly discussed and important for publication, they were cited as places of importance for introducing new graduate students (and thus new ideas) into the field. The importance of graduate students was highlighted by one participant who said:

“We need to listen [to graduate students] and to what future aspects of critical HRD we are not currently meeting, and those of us who are more established have to work to continue to carve pathways for those who are not.”

Raising these students up to perform as Critical HRD scholars and helping them avoid academic gatekeeping and “fit in” with the field was a central discussion.

Limitations of Teaching

On topics of fitting in, however, the limitations of teaching (and mentoring, more aptly) became apparent. For a mentored graduate student focused on publishing, practicing critical ideas in HRD is seen as contentious and unacceptable, whether in the classroom or eventually in the workforce - that workforce setting usually being a university. One participant said that “[there is still] a sort of controversy over developing people for organizational purpose versus for individual purposes or social purposes,” stating that acceptance of critical ideas (such as identity difference) are seen as a threat to performance. Of such threat, one scholar summed up their thoughts bluntly: “How do I teach students to go out and do this [critical HRD] without losing their jobs?”

Discussion

Our participants made clear that the contemporary landscape of Critical HRD is one that is defined by identity difference, and more specifically, by power differentials. Within this landscape, gender inequality and race inequality still sit at the forefront

(Sparkman, 2019). Critical HRD scholars and practitioners fight for equity, for recognition, and for fairness, attempting to humanize workplace practices and make safe the routes by which people financially support themselves and seek their livelihoods. The interviewees fight against dominance, against oppression and view themselves as defiant; they also view their scholarship and teaching as acts of resistance against oppressive practices, even against those inequalities that are actualized within the field itself, in the form of academic gatekeeping.

Despite these highlights, Critical HRD is often viewed as a response to current United States sociopolitical context. Previous literature has similarly pointed out the limits of Eurocentric conceptualizations of Critical HRD specifically (Gold and Bratton, 2014; Osafo and Yawson, 2021; Sambrook and Poell, 2014; Syed and Metcalfe, 2017) and HRD broadly (Wang et al., 2017). This indicates that the examination and critique of power structures, at the heart of Critical HRD, is made more complicated not just by interlocking and intersecting systems of power which affect those with multiple identities, but by the interlocking and intersecting needs of a global community that sometimes feels disregarded by the power differentials present *within* the Critical HRD world. For example, as Kwon (2023b) indicated, perspectives on disability and systems available for supporting the development of people with disabilities would vary according to national cultures, thus requiring more contextual approaches. “Calling out” these systems of power through research, publication, and action was highlighted as vital. The question remains, however: once these power discrepancies have attention called to them by publication, what then?

The lack of ability to expand critical work outside of the realm of academia highlights the most glaring piece to emerge from our findings. Whereas publication and socialization at conferences are important pieces, they should perhaps not be thought of as “doing the work.” The overwhelming majority of those interviewed discussed the actualization of their work not as the practice of HRD within institutions, but as teaching and written scholarship. Even when teaching and written scholarship were discussed as *a way of practice*, the subject matter discussed was how to acclimatize to existing intolerant communities within publication routes and at colleges and universities – not how to actualize critical work within workplaces or organizations that are not the academy. One participant discussed “workshopping” (in the context of educating workplaces, as a hired outsider) or community-centric care (volunteer or board work), as outlets for their work, but the majority of participants (105 codes) still lamented (by name) this scholarship versus practice divide. Our findings suggest that a piece of why this separation occurs is because we as Critical HRD scholars teach it to our students that way.

We are teaching HRD students to be scholars, writers, and theorists – not to go out and enact their work within organizations. In the context discussed by one of our participants that “critical HRD does not exist outside academia”, we are *teaching* the subject that way, in a publish-or-perish, tenure-within-universities, assimilation-to-the-academy light. Such actions do nothing to fix the problems stated as most critical by participants – the examination and confrontation of power structures – it re-perpetuates them instead. A recent study conducted by Ross et al. (2022) confirms this reality by showing that the introduction of new performance measure and associated methods in the UK higher education works against alternative aims such as social justice or human

flourishing that Critical HRD seeks. It is, then, our responsibilities as Critical HRD scholars to recognize in what context we are operating and to think about, if teaching (or publication) are the only ways to enact Critical HRD, how, if at all, we might be able to expand our teaching beyond the academy into actual workplaces and places where criticality does not exist.

Implications for HRD Research

The main contribution of this study to HRD literature is that it was the first to empirically show that there is a real research-practice gap, particularly among Critical HRD scholars. Although we do not see this as a problem owned by Critical HRD but as a problem of the HRD field as a whole, research also tells us that there are extra challenges in applying critical approaches to HRD interventions in work organizations where established economic and political interests prevail (Trehan and Rigg, 2011). However, at the same time we take our findings seriously as we are very well aware of the fact that we, as Critical HRD scholars, are the ones who need to be more proactive and purposeful in bringing about change despite such difficulties.

From this perspective, this study is a call for Critical HRD to challenge itself to become more directly responsive to the pressing needs of the organizations, communities, and societies in which we are part of. In today's polarized and unstable domestic and international sociopolitical milieu, knowledge of and action toward diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice are demanded more than ever before. People's desires to be seen and accepted as their whole selves, as well as their expectations around sustainable lives and what supports are available at work have shifted dramatically through the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, HRD scholars and practitioners working in

critical paradigms must keep these changing contexts in mind as they reassess the efficacy of their work in practice and restructure their approaches. This need for more direct response is also affirmed by our study findings about the role that societal and global context plays in conducting Critical HRD research, as well as a lack of strategies and structures in place that allow for effective dissemination and enactment of critical ideas in practice.

In a recent editorial, Thomas Garavan (2023) stated: “HRD is now firmly established as both a field of research and practice globally. This is in marked contrast to the pronouncement of Kuchinke (2014) who argued that HRD is decidedly not a discipline in the academic sense” (p. 1). Our findings tell us that while HRD may be more established, that Critical HRD is not: Critical HRD has not yet found a true foothold as an area of research and practice that is implemented outside of academic discipline. Our theoretical contribution is such that we provide a decidedly critical view of Critical HRD itself, as stated by its own esteemed scholars. Expansive ways forward are possible. It is time for Critical HRD to reimagine its role more boldly in practice, in order to enhance its relevance and applicability to the complex world in which we reside (Bierema, 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can benefit from studying whether or to what extent the idea of criticality (e.g., explicit consideration of power) exists among Critical HRD (diversity, equity, and inclusion) practitioners in organizations. For example, in many for-profit organizations, it may well be the case that criticality rarely exists due to the prevailing business case approach to inclusion (Byrd and Sparkman, 2022). Studies can further examine if the level of criticality that exists in organizations varies depending on

organizational type (e.g., for-profit versus non-for-profit) and industry, as well as what strategies are actually being used by Critical HRD practitioners to promote criticality in their workplaces and which of these implementations are effective. In order to engage in critical work beyond academic discourse or intellectual activities, staying closer to the voices of practitioners and their challenges is a much-needed way to increase the relevance of the work of academics up front.

Another fruitful direction for future research is to conduct more critical research in higher education, a setting where many HRD scholars are located. There are a growing number of examples that bring a Critical HRD lens to achieve greater diversity and inclusion in higher education: for example, Hutchins and Kovach's (2019) paper advancing women academic faculty in STEM, and Kwon's (2023a) writing addressing academic ableism, just to name a few. Our work, as academics, are inevitably rooted in higher education, and without first changing higher education, it is structurally much harder to enact critical ideas outside academia. Specifically, future research can aim to investigate institutional barriers that hinder Critical HRD scholars from engaging with practitioners. Conducting case studies of successful applications of Critical HRD principles in practice (whether they be in higher education institutions or other external partner organizations) would also provide useful knowledge for Critical HRD scholars seeking ways to expand their boundaries of impact to learn new ideas for effective collaboration. Answering these questions would contribute to the ongoing inquiry around how to bring critical ideas outside academia and make the best use of such ideas in the real world with pressing challenges to make meaningful and lasting changes.

Last but not least, we suggest conducting more critical research in international contexts to advance the educational and work lives of the marginalized around the world. For example, HRD can revitalize its humanistic mission while contributing to addressing global challenges such as poverty, conflict, and human rights by pursuing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Cho and Hyatt, 2023). We argue that expanding HRD's critical inquiry into a changing global context is not only an untapped opportunity for the field to broaden its impact but also the field's ethical responsibility. We thus call for the Academy of Human Resource Development and the University Forum for Human Resource Development to strategically partner with international organizations such as the United Nations, International Labor Organization, and World Health Organization to systematically promote and engage in various community and social development projects. In doing so, researchers can take what Hill (2014) described as a transdisciplinary approach that "allow[s] the logic inherent in both HRD and critical theory, on equal footing, to be brought to the table in dialogue with each other" (p. 414) to create cross-paradigm synergy. This is also in alignment with Yawson's (2021) view on transformivism as a path for "rigorous and robust empirical social justice [HRD] research" (p. 9). Providing specific future research questions in this domain would be beyond the scope of this paper as they would depend on the context and the problem; yet, we hope that the general research direction we offered here invigorates many HRD scholars to raise awareness on this agenda and identify strategies for moving forward as a field in this regard.

Implications for HRD Practice

In terms of practical implications, first, we recommend HRD faculty work more closely with current students who are often working professionals and have their own organizational agendas to address, to help them connect their personal experiences at work with wider social structures and take necessary action (Gold and Bratton, 2014). When doing so, genuine power sharing is important to truly co-design and co-engage in an inquiry of mutual interest, the outcomes of which may not only enhance practice but can also be published in the form of co-authored research (Cotter, 2014; Gray, Iles and Watson, 2011). Furthermore, by taking advantage of the interdisciplinary nature of HRD here, such collaborations can be done with other applied disciplines such as medical education or engineering education in ways that generate more context-specific critical knowledge (Ross et al., 2020). A second recommendation would be to incorporate elements of publicly engaged scholarship (Eatman et al., 2018), critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008), or social justice-oriented evaluation (Keeley, 1978) into the existing HRD curriculum. Most colleges and universities exist in tandem with their external communities, and professional partnerships can be made with local organizations in ways that address the pressing needs of those communities that they are part of (Hamlin, Reidy and Stewart, 1998).

Finally, we call for higher education institutions to reexamine how promotion and tenure criteria might look differently in today's rapidly shifting world. A great example is the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a premier research university in the United States, where new guidelines for evaluating publicly engaged research are recently incorporated in the new promotion and tenure policy. This new policy also

requires diversity statements from all faculty going up for tenure (Flaherty, 2022). We believe these kinds of progressive changes within higher education institutions can potentially have powerful influences on the way we think about the role of research, what counts as valued knowledge, and how to transform teaching and learning for such knowledge production. At the same time, academics, journal editors and reviewers must also be open to non-traditional forms of research and knowledge, as well as the voices of underrepresented scholars, that have had difficulty finding places for publication due to academic gatekeeping. In the mentor-mentee relationships that current professoriates undertake, power and gatekeeping in the scholarly community should also be openly discussed, confronted, and rallied against. Together, these changes will create a more equitable and inclusive academic culture that welcomes and embraces diverse orientations and worldviews.

Today's world is asking for knowledge that can address actual organizational and societal problems. It is very likely that the research-practice gap will never be closed if higher education institutions continue to reward and reinforce one form of knowledge over another (in the name of scientific rigor) that often resides in academic journals and does little to bring relevance to practitioners and make actual changes outside academia (Gold and Bratton, 2014). Therefore, in order to fix Critical HRD's own scholarship versus practice divide, we suggest the intentional, structured inclusion of non-academy, community-based scholarship and collaborators both inside and outside of the curriculum – utilizing approaches such as local health or business partnerships, student consulting services, and community-based (collaborative) action research (Githens, 2015). Such

work can help us collectively reimagine the definition of academic excellence and the role of higher education and academics in future society.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study was that it was limited to the viewpoints of nine scholars based in US and UK higher education institutions, and therefore does not fully represent the perspective of the entire Critical HRD academic community located across different geographic regions and sociopolitical contexts. In line with our discussion and implications for change, it should also be noted that these scholars represent a specific cross-section of the community, and hold worldviews associated with tenure-track publication and high levels of fighting for esteem in the academic publishing climate of their career time. Nevertheless, their depth and breadth of experience within and understanding of the field was a valuable step toward identifying Critical HRD's current challenges and opportunities to evolve into a more practice-relevant stream within HRD.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the persistent scholarship versus practice divide in Critical HRD and call for our attention to close this gap. Why do we conduct critical research, for whom do we do so, and are the intended beneficiaries of the critical knowledge we generate through our research really benefiting from it? Are we really changing the world out there and preparing our students to do so? These are the kinds of questions that we as Critical HRD scholars should constantly ask ourselves to stay aligned to the true mission of Critical HRD. Critical HRD is now at a juncture where societal demands for action and change are higher than ever before. In these turbulent and

volatile times, we boldly argue that whether or not Critical HRD will be successful in realizing its mission depends on our ability to expand Critical HRD outside academia.

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As previously discussed, my approach to research work is to use asexuality and disability as frameworks of critique in higher education and in organizational leadership. Whereas not specifically titled on ideas of asexuality or disability, each publication I have thus far obtained only echoes this approach of framework and critique. The three articles I have selected to highlight are particularly representative of that.

Article 1 Methods

First, my article on Homonormativity (Article 1) presented the theoretical and historical lineage pieces discussed in Chapter 1 in a truncated format for a specifically “queer studies in education” audience. Methodologically, the piece is an encyclopedia article, and as such it is *conceptual*, but also designed to present *factual historical information*, focused on *review of relevant literature* and formatted to define terms and provide a foundation upon which others can build. As mentioned in the introduction to Article 1 above, the piece clearly articulated some of the places where asexuality and disability theory collide with greater societal interaction, particularly: in terms of inter-acronym and inter-community friction within LGBTQIA+ groups (and for example, within asexual/aromantic social groups, as regarding the “Gold-Star Asexual”); in terms of policing appropriate bodies and body presentations (queer/crip/disability theory), ages, and “a binary and genital-related understanding of attraction (bi and pan-erasure), pro-creative sex and hypersexuality, the seeking of marriage, and the creation of financially inter-dependent relationships – all items that are congruent with and reaffirming of the dominance of cis[allo]heterosexual norms” (Archer, 2022, p. 284). I highlighted that capitalist society does indeed push people towards and capitalize upon ideas of two-party, pro-creative marriage rather than accepting other ways of being. I also discussed the

reduction of asexual people who may be “attractive” or “in a relationship” and thus do not appear as heteronormative society expects them to.

Article 1 Discussion (Concepts)

It should be noted that Article 1 shares a deep relationship with two other articles within the encyclopedia: namely that of “Allonormativity and Compulsory Sexuality” (Mollet & Lackman, 2022) and that of “Homonationalism” (Muncaster, 2022). I frequently discuss “cisheterosexual” ways of being – that is, cisgender and heteronormative ideas. Certain allowances within the encyclopedia had to be made by the editors and 200+ authors in order to keep language consistent and the encyclopedia succinct across all entries. One such expectation was the limiting of conversation within one’s writing on the topics of other articles. Other such expectations were the use of “cisheterosexual” and the use of “LGBTQ+” throughout the encyclopedia, despite entries on “Intersex” (Melchior, 2022) and “Asexuality & Asexuality Studies” (Mollet, 2022). A more accurate discussion of “cisheterosexual” in my entry would be *cisalloheterosexual* – in line with Mollet & Lackman’s (2022) discussions in their article which define compulsory sexuality (see Chapter 1). Indeed, Mollet & Lackman define *allonormativity* as “a worldview that assumes all people experience sexual and romantic attraction” (2022, p. 26), and they go on to include *amatormativity* in their discussions – the privileging of romantic relationships as a pinnacle hierarchically and as somehow “above” all other relationships (Mollet & Lackman, 2022, p. 26).

My discussions of how homonormativity is harmful borrow from concepts of allonormativity and amatormativity, particularly when arguing the homonormative’s obsession with capitalism, where I frequently discuss “two-party” financial systems

(Chasin, 2003; Duggan, 2003). Such conversations also discuss how asexual, trans, and gender non-conforming individuals are affected, and I believe Article 1 clearly articulates this connection. However, in further discussing my article's potential impact within the field, I additively bring up the concept and article of homonationalism so strongly because Puar's discussions have deeply affected my own work. I referenced Puar's conversations on identity assemblage within the article itself (limited as requested), and I also extensively referenced them within this dissertation in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3.

In Article 1, I refer to homonationalism as “manipulating references of pride” and generating a sentiment of “us versus them” in regard to how more “perfect” cisalloheteronormative public appearances are valued (Archer, 2022, p. 287). Without the constraints of an edited volume: there is a firm suggestion within these normative-concept discussions of examining non-white, non-cis, and non-allo identities. Puar, in her coining of the term homonationalism, sheds light on the usage of visible “acceptability” and/or legal gains within western society as a misleading, often incorrect, exploitative – and often outright racist - barometer for achievement (Muncaster, 2022; Puar, 2006; 2007; 2017). The most blatant application of the term is in using a nation's queer acceptance as a benchmark of “progressiveness,” and in further using such idea to de-humanize others, a concept called *pinkwashing*:

“Pinkwashing, a term that describes the use of queer rights to distract from oppression and violence, is a tenet of homonationalism that relies on the construction of racialized and non-Christian people, in particular Muslim and Sikh people, as always and only homophobic and always and only heterosexual” (Muncaster, 2022, p. 280).

While sometimes contentious (Blackmer, 2019), I mention Puar's concepts at length here because homonormativity and homonationalism share more than just their similar exploitations, their similar flattenings of human experience, and their similar linguistic roots. Homonationalism is not a pejorative, and it is not a political movement or a political stance. Much like other isms, homonationalism is an *applied form of power*, regardless of if those wielding it realize its origins. Puar herself states that "Homonationalism is... not simply a synonym for gay racism or another way to critique the "conservatization" of gay and lesbian identities, but [is] instead *an analytic for apprehending the consequences of the successes of the LGBT movement* [emphasis added]." (Sircar, 2020, p. 332 quoting Puar, 2017). She goes on to say how homonationalism as a term is usefully defined in that it offers a way to discuss and track these shifts, both historically and politically. This echoes Chapter 1's conversations of (dis)identifications, (dis)affiliations, and (dis)aggregations: who are we "missing" as we celebrate our "acceptance" and "progressiveness?"

I think of being careful in this applied power and again of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and statements in Chapter 1 when I say that I desire to carefully use the term as Puar intended while expanding its use. Asexuality theorizing (in oppositionally understood terms, as in Chapter 2) also encompasses this analytic idea: we can use homonationalism, homonormativity, allonormativity, and amatonormativity as *analytics for apprehending the consequences* of previously placed policy. In this way (and in the others articulated within Article 1), such an analytic can examine LGBTQIA+ definitions, sexualized or de-sexualized initiatives and understandings, and acronym-focused data aggregations as we approach change within our institutions.

Article 2 Methods

Participants in the study behind “Computer-Mediated Consent to Sex: The Context of Tinder” were LGBTQIA+ students, female students, student members of Greek Life organizations – or all three. These demographics, as well as the focus on consent-processes and safety when using apps, intersected deeply with the ongoing desires that I have to focus on queer and disabled research and critical applications for policy change. In this case, the focus of the research work was on understanding consent practices of college students in at-risk groups as they navigate dating apps. The method of change is not only how we think about consent processes among college students and underserved groups, but about how we can *design better systems* to help. As mentioned in Chapter 2 regarding “Re(locating) Conversations About Asexuality Within Student Affairs:” one of the locations in which we must learn to locate conversations about identity development (and in this case, student consent and safety) is in fact, online. Interview candidates were sourced through a campaign that involved social media, word-of-mouth, text messaging and snowball sampling (wherein participants are asked to identify other participants).

My work on Article 2 was, as mentioned in Chapter 4, informed by my work in Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, my knowledge of systemic processes (and my working relationship with our Institutional Review Board), my prior work as a consent educator and workshopper on college campuses, and my PhD study in LGBTQIA+ and disabled experiences. It was also informed by my own experience as a member of several of the cited student groups at higher risk of sexual assault. In this definition and context, the lab group discussed not only Greek Life membership (Barnes et al, 2021) or dating

app usage (Gewirtz-Mayden et al, 2024; Valentine et al, 2022) placing people at higher risk of assault; but also a female identity (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, n.d.), an LGBT or queer identity (The Trevor Project, 2024), having a disability (Basile et al, 2016; Valentine et al, 2022) - and identifying as asexual (Mollet & Black, 2021). There were also several at-length discussions within our lab regarding the relationship inherent between asexuality and consent: the two theoretical lenses discussed in Chapter 1 regarding 1) epistemic denial of agency/authority, and 2) consent to sexual activity for reasons other than sexual attraction based on sexual orientation or identity. As stated within the article, “Student researchers from demographics at elevated risk of sexual violence comprised most of the research team. They were motivated to address the prevalence of sexual violence and saw this research project as a vehicle for making a difference” (Zytke et al, 2021, p. 189).

Whereas methods are discussed, methodological approach to the research is not mentioned within the article. As stated in Chapter 3, this is often due to differences in field. We did work to analyze the narratives of participants, and a construct that is usable as a theory (discussed below), did emerge. However, Zytke has described the article as a “Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Zytke, personal communication, Feb 22, 2025). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is defined as “an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set” (Byrne, 2021, p. 1392). While RTA differs from Narrative Analysis in that it looks less at overarching story and more at emergent themes, they share extremely similar structures in the coding and telling of stories. RTA approaches appear to be on a continuum, wherein depending on the

approach and interpretation used, different paradigms may be applied – and this appears to be a point of contention when using the methodology. At one end of the continuum, themes are understood in a positivist sense as “residing within the data” (Byrne, 2021, p. 1393). On the opposite, themes can be understood in a constructivist sense as impacted by the positionality of the narrators. One requirement of RTA is the recognition of its reflexive nature: in RTA, researchers consider their *own* positionalities and their own constructions of knowledge during the process: “[R]TA highlights the researcher’s active role in knowledge production. Codes are understood to represent the *researcher’s interpretations* of patterns across the dataset” (Byrne, 2021, p. 1393). Because of such (relatively recent) discussions on the methodology of RTA and inherent researcher involvement, many publications understandably acknowledge a constructivist mindset. The uncertainty (or “flexibility,” as the case may be) that this continuum provides is justified through different combinations of coding reliability/validity approaches: one of the most popular of which involves seeking group consensus among a team of different coders, as was the case here (Byrne, 2021).

Article 2 Discussion (Findings)

Our investigations into the app-mediated (that is, with a computer in the way) consent habits of Tinder users revealed two very different ways of navigating consent electronically: consent signaling, and affirmative consent.

Practitioners of *consent signaling* viewed the existence of an online dating profile (at all) as an overt declaration of a desire for sexual activity, regardless of the content contained within. Further – consent signalers viewed a match as a direct “signal” which stated overt interest in sexual activity with the person being matched with, with very little

future discussion needed. Simply matching with another user was considered as actual consent to sexually-explicit interaction, with an agreement to meet face-to-face considered to be consent for physical sexual contact. These hypersexualizations and denials of epistemic agency have led to dangerous situations for those using these social matching systems.

Conversely, practitioners of *affirmative consent* – perhaps aware of the bias of consent signaling - utilized electronic communications including slang, signals, or overt information within their dating profile as a way to seek safety, and to signal to other users that consensual practice was required. These users viewed their profiles as a means to communicate their intentions to others, and viewed messaging and the features of the app itself as a way to verify others' intent. Examples included discussions of specific desires (“hook-ups” or specific activity) and explicit discussions of consent. Of note is the fact that utilizations of affirmative consent “were entirely from users identifying as LGBTQIA+ and were typically adopted in response to sexual violence or general harm that such users experienced in their prior dating app-use” (Zytke et al, 2021, p. 14). Further, these users found LGBTQIA+ users and members of the “kink” community to be the most receptive and respectful in terms of the desires articulated in their profiles.

As previously mentioned, these two findings – consent signaling and affirmative consent - emerge from a climate wherein underserved populations have a higher risk of sexual violence, including members of the asexual community (Chapter 1). We also know from research that online dating itself is a risk factor for sexual violence: but there has been a lack of explanation as to *why*. Our study found two reasons: Tinder users *assume* that consent has already been given by the act of using the app, and the process of

using the app itself can “obfuscate one’s sense of sexual agency – the perceived ability to decline a sexual advance” (Zytke et al, 2021, p. 19). It should be noted that some participants in our study even described letting a sexual experience happen that they did not want because of a perceived obligation to have sex, or fear of violent retaliation.

As discussed in Chapter 1, sexual violence shares an intrinsic relationship with denials of agency. When we speak of epistemic agency, we speak of the ability of a person to self-determine, and one’s right to choose. Examining such agency (and its removal) is an important part of both asexuality critique and disability critique, particularly in terms of allowing someone the choice of when to engage – or not engage – in sex. The tropes launched at asexual individuals of “you don’t know yourself” or “you can’t possibly know your identity” and “how do you know if you have never tried it” sound an awful lot like critiques leveled at women and Tinder users suggesting that Tinder is “for” sex, and that people should “know” better. These findings also call to mind previous discussions (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2) of policing access to spaces and community – and the community is an app for finding connections (of various sorts), and online. As stated within the article:

“... frustration with ‘wasted time’ was reflective of the perceived purpose of the messaging interface being to escalate online interaction to a physical sexual encounter. Refusal by a messaging partner to abide with sexual objectification was therefore considered an incorrect use of the application” (Zytke et al, 2021, p. 11).

Also in Chapter 1, I advocated for the inclusion of online spaces as important places for identity and social development, citing trends in which students (and others)

discover and explore an asexual (or trans) identity in online spaces. Sexual experience (*or the lack thereof*) is one such exploration. I also discussed how Student Affairs as a field is missing both a large group of people and a large opportunity if they deny online spaces.

Development within social matching spaces is *certainly* occurring, and behavior within these spaces, problematic or not, becomes more normalized as exposure occurs. Our research also shows that these spaces develop their own climates of practice, much like online forums such as AVEN: “Our findings show that Tinder not only enables ‘mass modeling’ of conventionally harmful sexual scripts, but that new sexual scripts unique to Tinder-use have emerged” (Zytke et al, p. 20). Also in Chapter 1, I discussed how group membership often involves policing who “counts,” and who gets to be involved in said group, citing online arguments surrounding the concept of the “Gold-Star Asexual” and other “inter-acronym” frictions between LGBT community members. The similarity between this policing and the policing of certain sexual presentations (ie, hypersexualized and already consenting) is not lost on me, though this method of presentation is particularly uncomfortable. Users (particularly cisgender heterosexual males, as noted within the article), likely fail to comprehend a critical analysis of such behavior. As in Article 1, the policing of these normative constructions harm the dominant group as much as others. In arenas of sexual violence and lack of consent practice, harm is glaringly apparent.

In addition to seeking an explanation for why dating apps increase the risk of sexual violence, Article 2 sought to discuss the concept of computer-mediation in consent practices. As stated:

“The ways in which Tinder mediates consent are currently *unintentional* [emphasis added] through design. Dating apps should attempt to deliberately scaffold consent... it is shortsighted to think that mediating consent through dating app design would only mitigate sexual violence facilitated by online dating. It would reframe dating apps as scalable, generalized tools for sexual violence prevention given the significant proportion of adults that use [them].” (Zytke et al, 2021, p. 20)

After this statement, we go on to discuss features and approaches for such scaffolding within the application.

This approach is fascinating, deeply applicable to student experience, and helped our lab win an award for real-life, demonstrable impact. While certainly focused in critique, Article 2 provides practical paths forward and articulates how individuals keep themselves safe even when systems are working against such safety. Article 2 is deeply related to similar implications behind critical (asexuality and disability) work, and provided me with an outlet through which to examine potential change. What if institutional policies could be approached as just as scalable and scaffolded as app design? What if we could adjust policy to support agentic identity realizations of faculty, staff, and students in more proactive, rather than reactive manners? What if we bolstered the efforts of individuals protecting themselves within these spaces, rather than limiting them by our designs? At present, practical applications of asexuality and crip theories are slim. Though I hope to change that soon, this article is one of my publications that is deeply informed by asexuality and disability work, and which demonstrates that concepts

of asexuality and crip theory have broad application within many domains and across many subjects.

Article 3 Methods

Further building a case for broad applicability and potentials for change, the last article for examination, “Does Critical HRD really exist outside academia? An interview study with nine Critical HRD scholars” is a step into the realm of Human Resource Development (HRD), particularly in terms of Higher Education and Student Affairs. This article built firmly upon my existing base of disability (crip) theory established through previous publication collaboration, particularly in Kwon et al (2023), “Understanding career development pathways of college students with disabilities using Crip Theory and the Theory of Whole Self”; and Kwon & Archer’s (2022) “Conceptualizing the marginalization of people with disabilities in organizations using an ableism lens.” As discussed in Chapter 4, both of these articles combined with my knowledge of different coding methods and research methodologies allowed me to develop a new approach to existing data.

In the original, semi-structured interviews, Dr. Kwon and Dr. Laura Bierema (Bierema & Cseh, 2003; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Bierema & Callahan, 2014), Our research questions were targeted at how Critical HRD is conceptualized by our participants, and on how our participants engage in Critical HRD as a practice. These questions served as the basis for an open-coding scheme: one specifically utilizing Kathy Charmaz’s (2017) Critical Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology. I personally chose this perspective due to Charmaz’s own discussions regarding the methodology explicitly addressing a researcher’s positionality and value position, as well as their

knowledge of critical theories being implicit. This was not only important due to Dr. Kwon and I's positionality as researchers, but *also* to the identities of our participants: themselves Critical HRD scholars and researchers. I discuss in-depth within the article the coding schema used, wherein we begin with simpler coding based on actual identity-focused words that our participants used (such as "age," "race," etc.) and then re-define and group those codes through axial coding and then selective coding processes. Grounded Theory is targeted at creating a cohesive, applicable theory that one can reproduce. In this case, that did not occur: but the coding scheme and Charmaz's approach were still deeply valuable and still deeply applicable to both the subject matter being studied as well as the participants (and researchers) involved. This approach may also still eventually yield a Grounded Theory from this data.

Article 3 Discussion (Findings)

Building on these ideas of Constructivist Grounded Theory and positionality, during the literature review portion of Article 3, I quoted Dr. Kwon and I's article, "Conceptualizing the Marginalization Experiences of People with Disabilities in Organizations Using an Ableism Lens," (2022) and said:

‘Simply studying marginalized people for equity and inclusion should not be thought of as inherently critical,’ (Kwon & Archer, 2022, p. 326) unless the explicit focus is made on uncovering power imbalances and disrupting the blind pursuit of organizational enhancement (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 3).

In that article and within Article 3, we also stated that:

... much of current Critical HRD research is still discursive in nature and takes a normative stance rather than an evidence-based approach. Trehan and Rigg (2011,

p. 276) stated, ‘It is notable that much of the work in this area operates on a theoretical plane, and is often light on practical guidance.’ (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 2).

The deep focus on disability and ableism that both Dr. Kwon and I brought to this work cannot be denied, and in our 2022 article, we firmly decried normativity and discursive (i.e., oppositional) approaches, stating:

1. That disability receives extremely sparse attention compared to issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation regarding workplace identities (Procknow & Rocco, 2016).
2. People conflate research *about* individual identities with research that is “critical” – as also discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 (Callahan, 2007). This is deeply related to Student Development Theory (SDT) constructs being *about* students, and to the concepts discussed in Chapter 4 wherein people perform research that is *about* marginalized people rather than *for* or *with* them.
3. “Scarcely have academics that have self-disclosed a disability contributed to HRD scholarship” (Procknow & Rocco, 2016, p. 395): meaning that in our writing we led with our positionalities as academics with disabilities, and that our perspective informed our approach, and is also valuable.

Frankly, “normative stances” when approaching work in organizational (and educational) leadership are entirely too common, as discussed in Chapter 1 regarding both the medicalizations of identity (disabled or asexual), in Chapter 2 regarding oppressive uses of SDT, and quite plainly in Article 1 (on Homonormativity). Similarly,

these comments from Article 3 are in line with Jourian & Nicolazzo's (2017) statements regarding the idea that theory without practice is not inherently liberatory. Article 3 thus begins with the contribution that within Critical HRD, the idea that commodifying people and flattening them into their presentations (i.e., studying them at oppositional or definitional level) has often been considered as "critical" work and is not. It also begins to hint at a greater undercurrent: the idea that people are dissatisfied with the state of current academic work in the DEI arena.

In fact, *every* person interviewed lamented the same things: gatekeeping within the academy, a lack of progress, a lack of understanding of Critical issues, the commodification and objectification of marginalized individuals - and a lack of the existence of Critical HRD in organizations outside of universities. The best, most well-respected authors in the field of Critical HRD (at that moment in time), all agreed on these points. The most startling finding from "Does Critical HRD Exist Outside Academia" then, is not the existence of this problem: it is the idea that we as critical professionals may be causing it.

Our interviewees overwhelmingly pointed to the two arenas of scholarship and teaching being the places where Critical HRD is actualized. This raised several important questions. Firstly, if Critical HRD is actualized (only) in scholarship and teaching - where else does it exist, if at all? Scholars lamented this lack of adoption outside of the academy, pointed to a greater need to engage with practitioners and in workplaces, and also expressed fear due to the contentions surrounding critical work: our scholars defined critical work as inherently contentious and going against the status quo. In this climate of contention and non-adoption, one professional simply asked, "How do I teach students to

go out and do this [Critical HRD] without losing their jobs?” (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 10). Put another way:

We are teaching HRD students to be scholars, writers and theorists – not to go out and enact their work within organizations. In the context discussed by one of our participants that ‘critical HRD does not exist outside academia,’ we are *teaching* the subject that way, in a publish-or-perish, tenure-within-universities, assimilation-to-the-academy light. Such actions do nothing to fix the problems of inequality stated by the participants but rather perpetuate them (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 11).

This finding, as drawn from interviews with the fields’ top professionals, is unsurprising, yet still extremely startling – I myself am actively communicating these points through scholarly writing. If not in this medium – how? If critical thought does not exist outside the academy and those outside the academy will not adopt it, how are we to proceed? One participant had a direct answer: grassroots work. Other implications for practice involve leaning into Critical HRD’s interdisciplinary nature - such as through broad applications and work in other fields, as I have tried to demonstrate through the presentation of interdisciplinary work here. We advocated for “staying closer to the voices of practitioners and their challenges” (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 12), calling for HRD scholars to become “more directly responsive to the pressing needs of the organizations, communities, and societies in which we are a part of,” (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 11), and also called for critically examining Higher Education itself using Critical HRD practices - again, an act I am currently attempting to perform. Perhaps most

importantly, we advocate for the voices of our participants who expressed fear and anger at the current sociopolitical climate.

One scholar pointed to growing senses of nationalism and fascism within the United States, and how such polarizing rhetoric was spreading not just domestically but also abroad. Other scholars asked (as in Puar, 2007) for a move beyond Western-centric thinking, pointing out that Critical HRD is a *global* movement, and not one constrained to the United States. Similarly to the concepts discussed above for Article 1 and in earlier chapters: the contexts in which we apply these discourse navigations in the USA is not the same as the context in which we discuss them in other areas of the world, and the same rhetoric may not apply and may not even be helpful. Regardless of one's thoughts on the current state of politics in the United States, all scholars agreed that critical work cannot proceed without addressing *current* sociopolitical context. Scholarly norms are a similarly constricting social norm that we should be attempting to move beyond.

Chang-kyu Kwon and Aliko Nicolaides have also discussed how critical HRD has “remained largely theoretical” due to “its tendency to view the world and organizations dichotomously” (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 2, quoting Kwon & Nicolaides, 2022, p. 151). This is not a dichotomy. We are in fact far behind, when it comes to practical applications of critical work. Our (2025) article also advocates for the idea that critical work seems to focus too much on “making people critical” rather than “acting with them in critically reflexive ways” (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 2, quoting Cotter, 2014, p. 467). I argue that this problem and way of acting for critical researchers and practitioners is one of the things currently stopping us from achieving active integration in broader community and organization work.

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CHAPTER FIVE

COLLECTIVE IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

When taken together, these three publications, their findings, and their discussions form a cohesive picture as to the usefulness of asexual and crip frameworks when applied to critique aspects of higher education, including HRD practice. The areas addressed are numerous, including theory (Article 1), student affairs support, areas of identity development, and discussions of safety (Article 2), and direct critique of publishing, acculturation practices, employment, pedagogy, and reflexive examinations of “critical” work (Article 3).

Collectively, the findings and assertions identified within these publications fall into the following areas:

- Broad applicability and interaction with existing frameworks
 - Concepts of shared marginality
 - Concepts of friction and distance
 - Careful examinations of care for vulnerable populations
- Interactions with powerful systems, including:
 - Current sociopolitical relevance
 - Unintentional consequences of program and policy design
 - Requirements for a change in approach

Broad applicability and interaction with existing frameworks

Asexuality theory offers benefits beyond just being “new” and novel. The varied critical lenses of queer/asexual/crip theory within these publications speaks to the utility

of the theory set(s): they offer a range of useful, flexible approaches, particularly when combined together. The entwinement of asexual and crip theory with inextricable, embodied experiences; their expansion beyond identity development; and their historical and epistemological ties with other critical theory sets serves as a useful platform from which to step into adjacent critical areas as well as a new way to approach existing work, as demonstrated in each Article publication.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mollet and Lackman (2018) presented one of their approaches as “an opportunity to amplify the perspectives, identities, and needs of students representing a breadth of asexual identities” (p. 624). This spectrum approach to asexuality work and the expansiveness of definition and of what is “applicable” or what “counts” applies to *many if not all* aspects of identity and demographic work. Ideas of definitional stress included (Kim, 2014; Sedgwick 1990), one must define a topic to begin to discuss it. Current aspects of identity education work require some of these boxes, as such that we “wall or box in” identity categories with strict definitions. It is also important to methodologically clarify what one is discussing when performing research. But *practically* speaking, as we further our understanding about what an identity category is or means, we lessen these boundaries. Straight asexuals are members of the queer community. Asexual people can have sex and sexual desires. Trans people are not defined by their medical use of hormones or gender affirming surgery – nor are they (or anyone of any gender presentation) defined by what clothes they wear, how they appear in public, or what restroom they use. Some persons with disabilities have accommodations such as mobility assistance; yet not every person with these needs requires them *every day*. Different aspects of neurodivergence are being included under

that definitional umbrella, and we are continually learning more about how differences in thought pattern, memory storage, and brain chemistry can impair or improve our lives.

These (and other) concepts of expansiveness of definition are what supply such broad options for asexual and crip frameworks, and the three referenced publications are emblematic of the theory set's deep plurality of application.

Concepts of Shared Marginality

These ideas of broad applicability and advocations for expansion often reach across boundary lines and help cement concepts of shared marginality: amongst different letters within the LGBTQIA+ acronym, between asexual folks and disabled folks, and between queer/asexual/disabled individuals and other identity configurations. Asexuality theory shares interactions not only with disability theory (of course), but also with aspects of homonormative and homonationalist critique (Article 1). It shares not only space with epistemic denial of agency and sexual violence prevention, but also with sex-positive interaction and discussions of affirmative consent – whether these circumstances involve disability or not (Article 2). Asexuality theory asks us to question our critical engagements and to bridge the gap from the theoretical to the real by smashing normative aspects of medicalized, un-medicalized, sexualized, or de-sexualized approach and seeking broader, more expansive ways of accepting others and criticizing policy (Article 3).

As Sandahl (2003) and Kafer (2013) have suggested: these theory sets do not differ greatly in their approach, focusing on concepts of “allowable” body presentations, ways of being, and interaction with others. Further, the suggestions of Gedro and Mizzi (2014) in regard to feminist theory and queer theory being “not just related; [but] ...

spokes of the same epistemological wheel,” (p. 447) are also of relevance. Asexuality theory is crip theory. Disability theory is queer theory. Queer theory is feminist theory. And further: much of our modern interpretation of feminist theory is *Black* feminist theory – particularly in education and pedagogy (hooks, 1994, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and particularly in law (Crenshaw, 1989). Many of the interpretations I provided in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 are built on Black queer authorship (Brown, 2022; hooks, 1994, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Owen, 2014). We arguably owe the foundations of much of our theory work to our peers.

Concepts of Friction and Distance

Similarly: disidentifications, disaffiliations, and disaggregations also serve to highlight areas of friction and distance both *within* communities and *between* communities, regardless of whether the examined community is a member of the LGBTQIA+ acronym or not. Asexual and crip theory asks us to look closer at these differences. Examples discussed within the literature include (of course) asexual individuals (“Gold Stars” and “what counts”), but also the frictions between the different political and capitalist agendas that different acronym members may hold. Further: cisgender and/or heterosexual asexual (queer) people exist. Individuals are *allowed* to make the choice to pick up or leave behind an identity as they see fit, complicating both data collection and social relations. This can also complicate ideas of “what space is for,” “who belongs in what space,” or “what resource is for whom.” Painfully, we all just want to belong (Nicolazzo, 2017) – and we all also guard our resources or police what “normal” is supposed to look like.

Even as theorists, practitioners, and HRD professionals look at ways to be further inclusive, there is not always agreement on the best methods to do so (Article 1 and Article 3). There is not a “one size fits all” approach to inclusion or to policy critique or creation. Identity categories are not monoliths: and indeed, identities serve different purposes (opposition, relation, embodiment, or social) for many people and come in different assemblages (Puar, 2007, 2013; Johnson, 2001) with different intersections (Crenshaw, 1989).

Careful Examinations of Care for Vulnerable Populations

Again: examining people based on their identity categories is not an action that is inherently critical (Kwon & Archer, 2022). This can be said in dozens of ways, but I again want to highlight the idea that “theory” alone is not liberatory (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017), that depending solely on medicalizations or explanations of “why” can harm people, and moving critically in a direction necessitate critical examinations of who may be left behind or not invited to the table (Chapter 1 and discussions on the beginnings of asexuality research).

Ideas of agency and consent can be complicated, especially if examined in terms of identity; where and how such consent takes place; and how consent conversations change based on how they are filtered through different mediums and understood (Zytka et al, 2021). I am also reminded of how consent conversations for individuals can be further complicated by medicalizations or requirements. At what moment is someone considered non-consenting for *any* action, such as a required medical transport, or assistance by a caregiver or physician? For (sometimes necessary) physical contact such as helping one with mobility, daily tasks, or other needs (Kafer, 2013)?

Disparate ideas (medicalizations vs. non-medicalizations, or sexualizations vs. de-sexualizations) can – and absolutely do - exist within the same space. A shift in “one” direction again necessitates critical examination of the individuals or groups left behind. This holding of “space” for seemingly conflicting ideas within the same argument is also the core of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT): typically used in cases of trauma or neurodiversity, and in an adjunct way, brings trauma-informed (whether trauma is a cause or *not*) into asexuality and crip theory work and is yet another useful frame for approach (Robins & Rosenthal, 2011). Focuses on concepts of agency and on its epistemic denial – as well as the dangerous consequences of doing so – bring further focus and clarity.

Expansiveness is crucial to providing care for the vulnerable, and is a tactic that should be utilized, as mentioned, to avoid otherwise un-cared for individuals from falling through the cracks in our policy and advocacy. For current examples, one need only look at the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (2008), or “ADAAA.” The Amendments Act was a *literal* expansion of the definitions of disability in the original Americans with Disabilities Act, or “ADA” (1990). These changes to the law included *perceived* disabilities, impairments which impact major life activities (not just “daily life”), and more: not just strict (medicalized) diagnoses. This change in scope was significant for many Americans.

While it is important to sometimes constrain scope in our writing and our research, we should *acknowledge* that sometimes doing so means that we miss potential people who need care, community, and connection. I argue that by presenting these three different articles in different subject areas, that this dissertation in and of itself is an advocacy for expanding the application of critical asexual theoretical constructs and

crip theory to new dimensions. Article 2 and Article 3 in particular represent careful examinations of care for vulnerable populations, including students.

Interactions with Powerful Systems

On the topic of higher education research and students: normality narratives are controlled by those who write the definitions (Quaye, 2013). They are further controlled by those who decide “what counts” in census-taking, and who is “allowed” to perform critique. Methodologically speaking, these publications ask for examination of these systems, as well as a refutation of existing research rhetoric including the medicalization of experience or the quantification of qualitative work. In administration, narratives are controlled by those who write the policy. Nebulousness allows for interpretation of policies as one sees fit. Policy that is too restrictive does not allow for flexibility. Current theorists, scholars, and practitioners ask us to see policy as a living, breathing document which shifts to meet the needs of constituents. Put differently, each publication herein – and asexuality and crip theory in general - eschews staunch binary approaches as overly *oppositional*. Instead, these research works ask for dialogic approaches: those which are *relational, embodied, or social* in their construction.

Additionally, a common discussion in disability work is the statement that disability cuts across all lines of identity, and is the (sole) aspect of “diversity” conversation which effects every demographic, regardless of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and more. In addition to the relevance of this thought in context of shared marginality or differing frictions: this also means that the broad applicability of asexual and crip frameworks has the ability to impact a *greater margin* of existing policy and procedure if used as a tool for critique.

Current Sociopolitical Relevance

There will always be challenges – and if theory in and of itself does not have liberatory potential, its applications certainly have an impact that is felt – otherwise the current legal and political battles occurring within the United States would not be happening. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and other critical theories have recently been demonized in government work, and the attack on critical theory implementations and the scholars who work with them is ongoing (Henry et al, 2023). Anti-Black and anti-LGBTQ (particularly ant-trans) legislation and rhetoric is prolific (Luhby, 2025; Russell-Brown, 2023). We are in the process of seeing widespread defunding of diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) structures within the United States (Cerullo, 2025), as well as current attacks on educational structure and attainment, including the outright defunding of the Department of Education (Lobosco, 2024).

In such a climate, I realize it is no small act of resistance to say “here is yet another lens and way through which we need to approach our care of others.” Yet, this is an important message to maintain, and the lens of critical asexualities and critical disability discourse remains valid and extremely relevant.

Current politics are also smart enough to weaponize justice language to advantage. As the current presidential administration works to further delegitimize public education and critical thought through stripping grant funding to research universities who support DEI initiatives, they have unfortunately employed a variation on the pinkwashing aspect of homonationalism called *faithwashing*. Faithwashing had been defined as “a state organization appeal[ing] to interfaith dialogue in order to deflect attention from its harmful practices” (DecolonizePalestine, 2025), and recently

conceptualized in research as “entailing an engagement with select faith-particular discourses and practices that simultaneously serve a corporate purpose while marginalizing or completely ignoring other religious, spiritual and moral values. Faith-washing implies a lack of transparency and an element of deception” (Driscoll, 2025, p. 2). Current administration has made claims that allowing student protests against the Israeli occupation of Palestine on college campuses is “antisemitic,” effectively flattening complex thoughts behind (legal) student protests into ideas of (likely false) anti-Jewish religious sentiment, “conflating ‘Zionism’ [Israeli occupation] with ‘Jewishness’ and anti-Zionism with ‘antisemitism’” (Degraff, 2024). Unfortunately, this claim has been used to rock the foundations of research universities by stripping hundreds of millions of dollars in funding from Columbia University and threatening to do so at 59 other institutions. There are surely more to follow. (Kline, 2025)

There is more strife in the realm of disability studies and how they intersect with LGBTQIA+, particularly trans, issues. In 2018 and 2019, editors from the UK-based disability studies journal *Disability & Society* resigned in protest, due to the espoused beliefs (in publication) of its executive editor, Michele Moore. Moore has been documented in public rebuttals of LGBTQIA+ involvement in inclusivity education; has been accused of removing articles accepted for publication because they go against her views; and has written in and edited a recent book, titled *Transgender children and young people: Born in your own body*, which triggered the protests (Slater & Liddiard, 2018; Yeomans, 2019). Moore is recorded as stating “That the journal is in any way associated with ideologies of discrimination and oppression is unacceptable and goes against the very heart of the disabled people’s movement” (Yeomans, 2019), yet in her own book, in

a chapter titled “The fabrication of ‘The Transgender Child,’” co-editor Heather Brunskell-Evans and Moore (2018) discussed “the practice of transgendering children” (p. 1), discussed gender dysphoria as an “alleged” diagnosis (p. 1), and misconstrued differences between sex assigned at birth, gender, and transgender identity and experience. Of most concern is Moore’s (2018) twelfth chapter, “Standing up for girls and boys,” wherein she states bluntly that she “argue[s] that alliances should not be made between the disabled people’s movement and the transgender movement,” (p. 218), in direct opposition of the epistemological connections I have discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. Moore was one of thirty (30) academics involved in a rebuttal of the mentioned LGBTQIA+ inclusivity education program (the Stonewall Diversity Champions, Stonewall UK, n. d.), and in the same year as Moore’s book publication, the UK government proposed review of their 2004 Gender Recognition Act, which allows trans people to change their sex on public documents (Humphrey et al, 2023). In April of 2025, it was ruled that even though such document changes are allowed, that trans people are not afforded protections based “sex” because of changed gender (Brocklehurst, 2025).

In Article 3, several of our participants discussed at length the effects that sociopolitical discourse in the United States and the UK have on each other and the rest of the world. It would appear that while our scholarly work can often lack multinational context, that oppression does still indeed cross these boundaries. Here in early 2025, current political movement seeks to layer epistemic denial of justice on top of denial of access to life-saving medical care for queer and trans people, on the tail end of terrible (and ongoing) murder and harm for innocent Black Americans (University of San Diego, 2024). Current political movement seeks to constrain and binarize, rather than expand,

concepts and aspects of identity. Current political movement seeks to leverage both hypersexualization and desexualization to sensationalize situations such as bathroom usage, gender-affirming care, and simple acts of gender presentation. Our current politics seek to de-legitimize aspects of our educational systems by approaching only from the perspectives of dominant discourse, and these politics are about punishing individuals for their gender (or other) “performances,” or about commodifying and leveraging the identities of students to push agendas which defund and deconstruct universities. Current politics sees only oppositional relations to these complex topics, rather than understanding relational interactions or respecting the lived, embodied, and social experiences of affected constituents.

Unintentional Consequences of Program and Policy Design

When discussing policy and procedure, a strong theme throughout these publications is the after-effects of what “progress” can do. The political “pendulum” theory, or “ebb and flow” of progress and regression is well documented (Polanyi, 1944; Stewart, 2010). In Article 1, the “progress” of marriage equality and “acceptable” (cisgender, male, married) homosexual presentations has lead to homonormativity and homonationalism increasingly applied as a means to dominate others. Conversely, evidence exists to suggest that the nationwide adoption of Marriage Equality as outlined in *Obergefell vs Hodges* (2016) has resulted in a rather fast reversal of majority thought in terms of the legality and “appropriateness” of such equality: very quickly smashing traditional thoughts of *incrementalism*, or the acceptance of small, compounding, incremental wins over a long period of time in political spaces or in law (Donovan & Milby, 2018; Ho, 2016). *Neither* of these outcomes – immediate changes in viewpoint

nor marginalization of others using queer identity - was something (immediately) foreseen when policy changes and theoretical conversation increased visibility and care/progress for LGBTQIA+ individuals: at least not in Western critique (Puar, 2007).

Article 2 showed us that while social matching systems provide a means for greater human connectivity, the usage of dating apps actually increases one's risk of sexual violence (Gewirtz-Mayden, 2024; Valentine et al, 2022), and there is growing literature that suggests that our online personas leave us feeling more disconnected than ever before, rather than creating the connection that we so crave. Finally, Article 3 discussed that even the most well-intended among us - professors and leaders in critical thought and application – can approach problem solving from directions that are not achieving the desired results, and which can leave us in self-perpetuating cycles if not corrected. Similarly, while pushback against social progress objectives is to be somewhat expected, educational institutions and DEI educators are currently in shock at the political responses to their work.

Requirements for a Change in Approach

I argue that the frameworks surrounding the presented theories can be used to critically examine what our ideas of improvement actually are. They can be used as an “analogue to critique our progress” (Sircar, 2020, quoting Puar, 2017). There is potential here to change views, approaches, and policy.

Below, I have collected referenced areas of practice from within the three discussed articles, and contextualized them through a series of potential “questions” which target asexual and crip concepts introduced in previous chapters. From Chapter, 1 I include: definitions and re-definitions; expansiveness; hypersexualizations and de-

sexualizations; disaffiliations, disaggregations, and disidentifications. From Chapter 2, I include the four realms of understanding I have presented regarding asexual and crip identity: oppositional, relational, embodied, and social. The “potential areas” portion of the table is drawn from the areas of Higher Education/Student Affairs research, policy, and practice that were either directly studied or directly referenced within the three articles, and which could deeply benefit from the applications of these theories. The questions themselves are designed to elicit useful conversation and thought from leaders about the construction of policy, pedagogy, and procedure in these areas.

Table 1

Potential Areas of Practice and Research

Concept	Important Questions	Potential Areas
Definitions and Re-definitions (Ch. 1)	“Are we spending too much time caught up in what this <i>is</i> or <i>means</i> rather than what we should <i>be doing</i>?” “How are we defining the <i>goal</i> of the <i>work</i> that we do?”	Pedagogy and understanding (Article 1, Article 3) Swiftness of policy adoption and interaction within institutions (Article 3) Effectiveness and scope of new implementations (Article 2, Article 3)

Table 1 - Continued

Concept	Important Questions	Potential Areas
Expansiveness ("What Counts") (Ch. 1)	"If we limit our definition, what (and who) does that exclude?" "If we expand our definition, can we provide more support to more people?"	Support of/education of people based on identity categories* (Article 1, Article 2, Article 3) Different approaches to legitimacy (Article 1, Article 2, Article 3)
Hypersexualization and De-sexualization (Ch. 1)	"Is this policy (place, tool, application) unnecessarily sexualized, or based on sexual assumptions?" "Did we de-sexualize a person or situation when that was not the appropriate thing to do?" "Who are we <i>missing</i> by having/not-having/specifically targeting this conversation?"	Title IX (Article 1, Article 2) Residence Life/Safe and affordable housing (Article 1) Age-category (old <i>or</i> young) or disability-based support (Article 1, Article 3) Healthcare (Article 1, Article 3) Spousal benefit support (Article 1) Familial benefit support (Article 1)

Table 1 - Continued

Concept	Important Questions	Potential Areas
Dis(Affiliation[s]), Dis(Aggregation[s]), and Dis(Identification[s]) (Ch. 1)	“What assumptions did we make regarding who ‘belongs’ in which group for this data? Did we provide open-ended options?” “Did we allow this person to tell us their own story, or did we do it for them?” “Does this look the same in other countries as in the studied country?” “When we ‘target’ support, who <i>exactly</i> are we targeting?”	Research conduct, data accuracy, and methodological problems (Article 1) Epistemologies and consent (Article 2) International student, scholar, and policy investigation support (Article 1, Article 3)
Oppositional Understandings (Ch. 2)	“In what ways have we viewed this situation as immature, as ‘stunted,’ or as an otherwise ‘unreasonable’ response?” “Are we responding to the situation, or are we responding to our emotions about the situation?”	Student or employee misconduct (Article 2, Article 3) Mistreatment allegations (Article 2, Article 3)

Table 1 - Continued

Concept	Important Questions	Potential Areas
Relational Understandings (Ch. 2)	“How does our particular power structure impact this decision?” “What impact will this decision have on how people or groups interact with one another or to the decision makers?”	Administrative, academic, or referral structuring (Article 3)
Embodied Understandings (Ch. 2)	“Who has the opportunity to move towards/away from parts of this decision if they do/do not approve – and who cannot?”	Choice and agency (Article 1, Article 2) Student & employee retention (Article 3)
Social Understandings (Ch. 2)	“How will this impact a constituent’s ability to find community?” “How will this impact understandings about the culture of our institution?” “Will this impact our retention of quality students/ employees?” “Where is learning happening/where is belonging happening?”	Inclusivity/sense of belonging (Article 1, Article 2, Article 3) Psychological support/safety (Article 3) Institutional reputation (Article 3) Online identity forming/support (Article 1, Article 2)

NOTE: Created by author.

In addition to these concrete areas of application and discussion, collective implications from the published articles suggest important future approaches to maintaining the relevance of critical work as a field. I firmly believe the findings of

Article 3 - that Critical HRD (and critical work) does not exist outside of academia – are of the utmost importance. It is clear from the current sociopolitical context that something about the way we perform inclusive work is not being received as we intended. The findings of Article 3 in particular show that crip theory, queer theory, disability theory, and critical applications of thought to existing power structures have become gatekept commodities. Unfortunately, such commodities increasingly see purchase only within academic discipline, rather than in widespread application in community and HRD work and beyond the academy. When such language *is* adopted beyond the academy, it can, as discussed, appear in weaponized political format.

What is most shocking about Article 3 is that the scholars interviewed in one breath lamented that such buy-in did not occur – while in the next stating that the ways in which we publish, socialize students, and teach this work contribute to its containment within academic discipline rather than its widespread application. In a way, we as scholars are the ones responsible for the lack of proliferation of equity work, and we are responsible for making such work more widespread and applicable.

I do not believe that this dissertation work, or any work really, contains the entire answer to this problem. However, I do firmly believe that asexual and crip theoretical constructs contain new lenses that deeply assist with new or more widespread approaches. I also believe that these three articles present a cohesive picture of societal problem and potential directions forward, when viewed together.

The Inaccessibility of the Academy

A formative text during my Masters' studies was *University Ethics*, by James F. Keenan (2015). A theologian and bioethicist, Keenan deftly calls out and critiques the

fact that while universities are the current teaching authority on the idea of ethical behavior – they do not practice it. Keenan cites many ongoing situations that universities refuse to adequately resolve: sexual violence against undergraduates and its perpetuation particularly within Greek Life, substance abuse and drinking on college campuses, colleges continued poor record when it comes to racial and gender equity and inclusivity, the plight of adjunct faculty and poor pay – and much more. Utilizing this framework, it is easy to see why someone outside the academy would view it as an immovable object that refutes change, and may even be harmful. Indeed, universities are notoriously resistant to change.

The current sociopolitical problem in America (and thus the non-proliferation of critical thought lamented in Article 3) could easily be framed as a *moral panic*, or “overreaction to a social problem framed by political actors... led by... policy entrepreneurs who identify and amplify perceived DEI threats... caus[ing] fear, leading to an overblown societal reaction to counteract the DEI movement” (Conyers & Fields, 2025, p. 9). Also, in Article 3, we discuss that Critical HRD (and thus other critical fields it borrows from) is “often viewed as a response to current United States sociopolitical context” (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 10). This seems like a rather self-perpetuating cycle.

I posit that some of these items, as well as the reasoning behind the findings of Article 3 - the non-proliferation of critical thought outside of academia - are due to the inaccessibility of the academy. As mentioned, there is a somewhat moral, ethical imperative attached to academic thought and DEI work, even if such ethics are not implemented in practice. Author and DEI practitioner Lily Zheng states that:

“the mainstream DEI strategy adopted by many organizations – marked by jargon-heavy communication, siloed programming reliant on burned-out volunteers, one-off workshops utilizing outdated tactics like blame and shame, and little measurement or accountability – often created the appearance of progress at best and substantial *backlash* at worst [emphasis added]” (Zheng, 2025).

Zheng has for several years predicted that current DEI efforts will not be enough to sustain actual equitable solutions, particularly because of their lack of “measurable results like pay equity [and] physical and psychological safety” (Zheng, 2025). She states that “Rather than gauge an employer by whether they have *committed* to progress, an outcomes-based approach requires us to gauge an employer by whether they have measurably *achieved* progress” (Zheng, 2025). Zheng also advocates for a systems-approach; meaning changing workplace norms, policies, and systems rather than focusing on belief-alignment or “standards of inclusion.” Interesting, she also advocates for an *expansion* of engagement protocols: instead of limiting involvement or education to constituent groups, she proposes engaging a “wide range of people who stand to benefit from a healthier workplace, rather than limiting participation... even if not everyone shares the same beliefs about the work.” (Zheng, 2025).

Lily Zheng writes these items specifically in context of DEI backlash: the aforementioned moral panic impulse, manipulated politically, which she states as a problem of the “personal” versus the systemic:

“Why is backlash such a large risk when DEI initiatives are put into practice?...

Because people are strongly motivated to protect their own sense of self-esteem,

competence, and ‘inherent goodness.’ When any of these things are challenged, their gut reaction is to *resist* and *reject*.” (Zheng, 2022).

The moralization (and deep personalization) of these initiatives – telling people that *they* are wrong, rather than their behavior being wrong, may have contributed to the current backlash, and the lack of adoption of such initiatives outside of the places where they are created. Put simply: Zheng’s ideas of systemic change rather than personal change is one that may work.

Zheng’s idea also seems to have a grounding in the densely theoretical. In Chapter 1 and 2 and in some of my published work, (Kwon & Archer, 2022; Kwon et al, 2023) I mention the three (3) Models of Disability theorizing as current approaches to ableism in organizations and in higher education. As previously discussed, those three models are the Medical model, the Social model, and the Sociopolitical/Relational model, articulated by several theorists, but named such by Allison Kafer (2013). In recent classroom discussions, I have asked students in my Disability Social Justice courses to perhaps think of these different models in terms of where they ask someone to “locate” the “problem”: to think of them in terms of “location”: an application of Sarah Ahmed’s (2006) phenomenological approach. If we use this frame: the Medical model locates the problem inside the *affected person*. The Social model locates the problem in *greater society’s approach* and with *systems*. The Sociopolitical/Relational model locates the problem *at the site of an interaction and interpersonally*: thus making potential transgression deeply personal, the exact thing that Zheng (2022, 2025) has suggested that we avoid to achieve progress.

In Article 3, while discussing claims of “academic elitism,” we also explicitly call for more trans-disciplinary, expansive approaches to this work, as well as ask for a more systems-focused, action-oriented (rather than explicitly research and teaching) approach. I do not refute the Sociopolitical model. It serves an important, concrete purpose. However, like any framework: these ideas are lenses, and the Sociopolitical/Relational lens of conflict (rather than resolution) is one that has been adopted beyond the realm of Disability theory. Like any framework, I suggest we pick up and put down usages of different lenses as they succeed – or fail – at what we are trying to achieve.

Our Work is Not Multinational

In viewing this work as more personal rather than systemic, we also fail to embrace expansiveness across other boundaries. I discuss above the recent frictions between disability studies and trans-inclusive scholarship in the UK: in Article 1 and Article 3, there is major discussion about the lack of applicability of Western critical thought to ideas in the rest of the world. Article 3 specifically discusses sociopolitical context and DEI backlash, while also discussing how the “Western-centric” (United States and UK) approach of current critical thought is a major area of critique for the field of Critical HRD.

On the failures of critical thought – in this case, critical queer thought – to address appropriate multinational work and draw a lens away from “the West,” the concept of pinkwashing again needs to be discussed, as conversations regarding the words’ usage vary depending on the context in which it is addressed, and where in the world the word is being deployed. Popular usage of the term is usually attributed to Sarah Schulman in a

(2011) New York Times opinion piece, wherein she says the term originated in the United States. Israeli scholarship states the term in fact came from Israel and Israeli activists in 2001 (Blackmer, 2019). Considered a play on the word *greenwashing*, wherein corporations pretend environmental friendliness for deceptive profit reasons, the term pinkwashing is usually applied to similarly deceptive advertising practices by American companies – when used the way Schulman employs it. Her New York Times article (2011), and Jasbir Puar’s own concepts of Homonationalism (2007) have faced much critique abroad. Schulman (in the original article, at least), employed the term to critique Israel’s perceived co-opting of queer rights progress when the presumption was that it was not really occurring. In her article “Pinkwashing” in *Israel Studies*, Corinne Blackmer stated: “‘the term Pinkwashing is not very successful. It causes people to misunderstand the situation,’ because unlike the use of the word Greenwashing to describe false environmental claims, Israel has had *real* LGBT rights advances” (Blackmer, 2019, p. 172, quoting an interview contained on Columbia’s Law pages which has since been removed, per current sociopolitical context).

Whereas scholarly circumstances of disagreement commonly occur, it is important to recognize and adjust one’s statements for international context. Schulman’s context as a Jewish-American playwright differs greatly from that of Puar’s, as an American doing critical race and gender studies – which differs greatly from Corinne Blackmer’s perspective, as an American director of a Judaic Studies department. There may be international context here: but it is not context that is *multinational* and which acknowledges these different divides and perspectives – not until Blackmer’s (2019)

writing. This example opens up two very important conversations regarding problems with the current direction of critical work.

There is no Tolerance for Error in DEI Work

Critique is important, but language must be more than oppositional.

Conversations of pinkwashing and the word's purpose and direction are perfect examples of the need to move beyond a definition and to its application: the worry of what something *does* rather than what it *is*. However, in moments where our language falters, or where we have not been critically self-reflective, we are faced with the judgmental, person-oriented critiques of our peers. Mistakes in this realm are not allowed.

I am a firm proponent of the idea that Universal Design is not universal: Nicolazzo's (2017) statements on our jobs being *about* change and *about* work and *about* progress come to mind. However, that does not mean that Universal Design – “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people” (National Disability Authority [Ireland], 2025) is not a great place to start. I posit that DEI work would *greatly* benefit from one of the tenets of Universal Design called *Tolerance for Error*. Simply defined, Tolerance for Error asks that “the design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions” (Burgstahler, 2021).

Folks may be tired of being told they are “virtue signaling,” or “savior-complexing.” People who want to get involved and want to help may be tired of being told they are not helping the “right way.” Whereas we should invoke reflexive self critique in these moments – we should also employ thoughts of expansiveness to make space for different forms of knowledge, different life directions, and different

contributions that people can bring to the table that is critical work. I bring up pinkwashing's language for another reason here: the "right" and "wrong" way to use language is another point of contention. Crenshaw (1989) and the usage of "intersectionality" is another arena of misused language.

Certainly, organizations (and universities) are occasionally guilty of co-opting the stories of "underdogs" and "the marginalized" in order to turn a profit. *Rainbow-washing* language exists for this critique. I am not providing that incorrect language use should not be corrected. I am saying that as communities, our collective Tolerance for Error is so low that people - especially educators, volunteers, or potential allies from dominant groups - are not allowed to make mistakes as they do this work. That practice needs to end if progress is to be seen.

A lack of reflexive self-critique

The employment of critical thought does not make you exempt from critique. I would counter that being a critical theorist or practitioner actually requires a higher standard of self-awareness. However, as Zheng (2022, 2025) notes, these examinations of how critical work is enacted and the impacts seem to be fewer in number than they perhaps should be. Where they do exist, there is, as stated, a propensity to measure "commitment" or "intent" and a failure to measure sustained outcomes.

I still find myself rather shocked at the findings of Article 3, wherein the leaders of a field discussed the containment of Critical HRD within academia, but did not seem to realize their own place in that cycle, save for the one professor who asked "How do I teach students to go out and do this [critical HRD] without losing their jobs," (Kwon & Archer, 2025, p. 10) and cited increased efforts within community involvement and

volunteerism as key to improvement in the field. As these scholars sadly discussed gatekeeping, publication, teaching in college – and how to socialize their students into these practices – no one discussed alternative ways to proliferate work, or examined the ways their own actions may continue to contribute to the cycle. Admittedly, several did discuss breaking such a cycle: by stepping into board leadership (gatekeeping) roles themselves. One, and only one, interviewee - the same who questioned how to teach students to do Critical HRD work without losing their jobs - stated that the most important realization of their work was when they brought it out of the academy and into the community.

All authors must accept that they are not exempt from reflexive-self-critique, and make attempts at multinational contexts – myself included. Chapter 2 discusses the backgrounds of *United States* advocacy and history, and only scantily references United Kingdom (UK) contexts – as is important when discussing the social model of disability (Thomas 1999, 2001). Further, as mentioned above, much like discussions of pinkwashing and its usage and application, clearly the tensions between disability theory and feminist/queer theory in UK contexts are more explicitly on display than Gedro & Mizzi (2014) and Kafer (2013) led us to believe. The tensions are at least, worth mentioning; though scholars appear unified in calling out these situations and labeling them ideological difference, rather than theoretical (Humphrey et al, 2023; Slater & Liddiard, 2018).

Restorative Practices Must Expand Beyond Research

Plainly, and as mentioned several times: researching and writing about individuals on the margin, in and of itself, is not Restorative Practice (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017;

Kwon & Archer, 2022). Our participants in Article 3 had a perfectly fine idea, thinking about the actualization of Critical HRD through research and teaching: but I posit that the *teaching of teachers* (those who go on to teach others), as well as teaching educators *to go outside of the classroom* is of terrible, integral importance. The involvement of the greater community is paramount. Two possibilities of restorative practice, related in particular to queer/disabled community work, are of note.

Mutual Aid

Mutual Aid is one such place where action can be performed, rather than simply written about. The concept has gained extreme traction post COVID-19, particularly in disability-culture communities and particularly when supporting prison abolition and assistance for inmates and the newly-released: but the applications are many, and have roots in both the 1970's Civil Rights Movement and indigenous anti-colonialism and self-sustaining practices. Mutual Aid also has a strong relation to Transformative Justice principles, which seek non-violent and non-police-based reactions to violence (Spade, 2015; 2020a; 2020b).

Dean Spade, founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), defines Mutual Aid by saying that

Mutual Aid projects are a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another *and* for changing political conditions. Not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on representatives, but by actually building new social relations that are *more survivable* (Spade, 2020b).

Spade also states that “Mutual Aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we can address this injustice together” (2020a, p. 13).

Spade's tone difference in his two different 2020 pieces is amusing, and quite informative. In his book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And the Next)*, he says of Mutual Aid:

1. Mutual Aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.
2. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.
3. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors. (Spade, 2020, pp 13-18).

In his online video, "Shit's Totally Fucked! What Can We Do?: A Mutual Aid Explainer," he says:

1. The government is fucked, we can't rely on it.
2. You are not alone.
3. The system is the problem, not the person being targeted by it.
4. We're going to take matters into our own hands and help each other survive *right now*, rather than expecting help from the same systems that have a clear history of causing harm (Spade, 2020b).

To expand upon Spade's point of waiting for "saviors": Mutual Aid recognizes that the systems in place are often the systems causing the problem/need/the crisis that needs solving. Mutual Aid is about not waiting, and it is about the community solving problems and taking responsibility for one another. It is about navigating around or without the support of systems, rather than waiting on the system to assist you. Mutual Aid is strongly bolstered by ideas of queer/trans kinship networks; and also by disability

community support concepts, wherein persons with disabilities help each other rather than waiting on systemic resolution (Peipzina-Samarasinha, 2021). It is well represented in the prison-abolition and support-for-prisoners space, as well as for other folks who may be “forgotten” or be completely outside the possibility of systemic care due to administrative (re: law-oriented) violence (Spade, 2020a; 2020b).

I recognize the oxymoronic nature of this conversation when attached to Higher Education rhetoric and concepts of change, and on the idea that research may “help” in some way. I think of the conversation I frequently reference in my positionality statements (such as the one in the preface of this document), of Kristen Renn (2019) discussing the “tension of trying to work for justice from within a fundamentally unjust structure” (p. 287): and I am also reminded of the moment I broke my back while in school. Where I was told by the on-campus Housing department that anyone who worked for them could not help me take out my trash or take my laundry across the street to the machines for me, and how I was told I should “hire an aide instead,” with money I did not have. In desperation, I turned to local community organizations for help, and they directed me to a local “skill bank,” wherein volunteers put forward hours of their time to help others, and get helped in return. I offered up my technical expertise from my previous career in Information Technology. In return, a *professor* (bless you) came to help me with the daily tasks I needed. A member of the community that I was told would not be assisting instead came to help, and did not wait on the system.

The point of the expansiveness advocacy built into asexuality and crip theory is to ask that we keep people from falling through the cracks. Philanthropic work is already baked into some service organization precepts: what would it look like to have concepts

of Mutual Aid built into critical work in Higher Education, instead of excluding it outright? There are some promising examples, including performing Mutual Aid as a means of pedagogy (Latz, 2024), and creating community-centric “Mutual Aid” funds at Universities that can assist with student basic needs (Benson, 2023). Perhaps most interesting, though, is the National Intercollegiate Mutual Aid Agreement (NIMAA), created by a professional organization, the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM), and voluntarily signed by over 130 member universities and colleges, the NIMAA allows member institutions to activate and call for help across the organization, and has resulted in intense support, including hurricane evacuation and response, Remdesivir re-allocations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and emergency operations assistance during major political fallout (International Association of Emergency Managers, 2025). I wonder deeply at the system’s (the university’s) willingness to step into spaces of Mutual Aid for institutional benefit – could we not systemize such opportunities for those *within* our institutions? Why *not* have a “skills bank” at the institutional level, supported by community desire or community research?

What would it look like if our students stepped into local communities to assist with their needs? What is an appropriate way to bridge the gap between organizations that may need critical assistance and care? Perhaps quite on the fringe of the concept of “Mutual Aid” and more along the lines of “mutual benefit,” I think even of the Gies College of Business at the University of Illinois, and their implementation of a Student Organization known as Illinois Business Consulting (IBC). A literal student group, but run and managed by staff and professorship: local organizations hire the student group to work on consulting projects where they need assistance in areas of technology, finance,

strategy, and growth. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, n. d.) What would it look like to expand these concepts into HRD realms? Are there ways that we can prepare students through interaction *beyond* such things as internships? Is there a way we can help others, as we teach our students, beyond practicum assistance?

Participatory Practices

On the idea of students, faculty, staff (and research participants) “doing it themselves,” Participatory Action Research and Participatory Design concepts deserve discussion.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), as outlined in Chapter 3 (Cornish et al, 2023; Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017), shares much in common with ideas of Mutual Aid. PAR prioritizes experiential (practitioner, embodied, and lived experience) knowledge of situations over typical researcher-constructed or systemically-constructed narratives. Liberatory practices in PAR also asks for a return of research data to participants for say, or at least useful products that are not capitalized upon solely by university researchers, and are returned in their usefulness to the groups who helped provide data while not leaning in to participant bias. In the asexual research space, I find Brotto et al’s (2010) mixed-methods study to be representative of this ideal, even if not declared outright. Instead of mixed methods, “dual-study, after community feedback,” may be the more appropriate statement: not sanitizing or changing aspects of the data (Brotto et al 2010’s Study 1), but taking participant feedback into account and creating further student to characterize findings in more personal manner (Study 2).

Participatory Design (PD), on the other hand, has some scripted methods, including “participation of stakeholders with different areas of expertise, iterative prototyping of [a product, and idea, a project], and co-determination of technologies and work practices” (Foth & Axup, 2006, p. 94). In essence, participants – not strictly research participants, but participants in the design process – work together to design their own outcome. While not exactly the same as PAR, PD and PAR are a “synergetic pair” almost the same in idea, and can be thought of as two different stages in the research process. Frankly, if a PAR participants face a design problem, PD is an appropriate method through which to approach the design of a solution (Foth & Axup, 2006).

The implications of using PD in education are fascinating. As a current Program Coordinator for a doctoral program in Information Sciences, I am often (continually) faced with the plight of PhD students seeking to improve their educational experience: socially, pedagogically, employment-wise, and more. The number of queer or disabled students that I see, perhaps by virtue of positionality, seems quite high. In an ideal world, where time and policy permitted, I would have the option to sit down with these students and run a Case Study based on program design they came up with, and we could test it ourselves. Such an act, however, requires the relinquishing of some aspects of programmatic control at the level of administration, and a willingness to engage in discomfort and try something new. There are promising opportunities that have arisen, however, particularly in disability-centric space. In Kwon et al (2023), I mention the outright success of these conceptions as applied to student, faculty, and staff-led review committees for Emotional Support Animals (ESA) in university housing situations.

Students in the pilot program at Michigan State University had their applications for ESA's reviewed by a committee of campus stakeholders, mainly comprised of students with disabilities or those with animals (Dedmon-Woods, 2020). Appeals were allowed, but the structure has the possibility to provide triple benefit: community members can feel engaged and involved, happy to provide Mutual Aid and perform service; students who go through the process may feel better about peer-led outcomes than case-adjudicated outcomes; and workload may be removed from already over-strained case loads in disability support service offices (Levinovitz, 2024). Participatory Research and Participatory Design can become "Participatory Action." There appears to be further evidence this can even reduce our workload.

While administratively discomfiting – both Mutual Aid and Participatory Practices could have the ability to "bridge the gaps" between theory publishing and practice, and between pedagogy and reality, in ways that are deeply constructive. My research into queer student support, my explorations of disability care in higher education (and the ways students seek mutual support), my explorations into Human-Computer Interaction (and design), my examinations of the strength (and faults) of critical work in HRD, and the theoretical basis of asexual and crip work all point to such practices being sorely needed. I believe this realization to be one of several that ties the work together.

Planned Research Directions

Currently, I have several personally-planned research initiatives for furthering work in the realm of asexual crip applications. Firstly, a pilot and study (Study 1) has been planned to examine asexual and aromantic student interactions with powerful structures within University systems. In this planning, I have side-stepped the normative

ideas of “identity formation” and chosen to utilize questions targeted at understanding experiences in terms of epistemological approaches, asking students about their interactions and then asking them to locate within their experience how they “came to know” the conclusions that they have reached. In these lines of questioning, I hope to highlight the many varied aspects of experience that make up asexuality and disability spectrums, inclusive of oppositional, relational, embodied, and social understandings of these identities, feelings, and structural interactions.

The *purpose* behind such research is application within organizations. As such, after Study 1, I intend to begin Study 2. The second study will be a multiple-case investigation into applied thought and theory work, examining (1) how educators in queer and disability spaces on campus react to the offered frameworks and how they are (or are not) implementing such ideas within their campus spaces and pedagogy, and (2) how practitioners of administrative compliance - i.e., not student affairs but policy decision makers such as campus Title IX and ADA offices – react to the discussed frameworks and how they are (or are not) implementing such ideas within campus policy. Plans for research beyond the initial two studies would expand into a third study (Study 3) questioning how research and Institutional Review Board offices are (or are not) aware of these policy practices in terms of medicalizations and sexualizations of participants and data: for example, requiring trans or otherwise queer individuals to discuss or undergo psychiatric paperwork or evaluation in order to participate in studies, simply due to identity. Being trans or queer does not mean one inherently requires mental health contact due to some sort of “instability.”

Finally, further out on the timeline, I intend to research the application of concepts of both Participatory Design and Mutual Aid within Higher Education settings. I have a deep, concrete interest in Participatory Design utilized in tandem with Institutional Review Boards or campus decision committees. Rather than decisions coming from case-workers or policy, the decisions being in the hands of effected stakeholders is remarkable – and effective. Participatory design also provides for concepts of allowing greater *agency and choice* to individuals or organizations who may have been denied those choices previously. I am curious as to how the idea can be expanded, and I do believe it falls into ideas of Mutual Aid. I’m particularly interested in places where “students help students” and “the university community helps itself.” On both this topic and regarding increased agency and interaction with queer/disabled identities, the ESA case study I mentioned comes to mind. As the proud owner of an ESA-turned-Service Animal, I am personally interested in seeing what future research into that area could reveal. If such a structure was beneficial in this arena, what other arenas could it be beneficial for? They often seem tied into “experiential learning components,” such as the IBC at Illinois mentioned above. I am reminded of the Carolina Judicial Council (CJC) at the University of South Carolina, wherein students who believe their judicial (student code violation) process was unfair can appeal to a panel of their peers (University of South Carolina, n. d.) I intend to see how we can involve queer and disabled students actively not just in their educational outcomes, but in the systems that design them.

Closing

I want to close by saying that in my conversations of changing or expanding DEI work (and what that means) that I am certainly not advocating for personal experience to

be detached from the work that we do. Embodied experiences – things that we cannot remove from ourselves, or our work – are in fact one of the frames that I advocate strongly for within this writing. I do, however, believe that by making this work so deeply personal, we may have built our scholarly field to appear as if it is (only) an attack, rather than a reparative way forward. I am not advocating for “meeting people in the middle.” I do not desire to excuse poor behavior, whether by systems or individuals. I do however, firmly believe in the application of these theories I have been advocating for: an application of critical ideas to *systems*. To the application of theory to change: rather than a focus on “identity development.” I find myself more interested in what the idea *does*, rather than what it *is*: because I desire change. Not because I refute it.

Whereas I question the direction and application of force involved in some critical approaches, and it is clear now due to sociopolitical context that the feat universities have felt regarding DEI efforts was well founded, I still do not question the value and usage of critical approaches themselves. I am in fact advocating for the adoption of *more*. Always more, but I find the adage of being “ruthless with systems, and kind to individuals” (Konst, 2020, quoting Michael Brooks) to be even more applicable as I critique the way that we go about this work, and attempt to apply the “new” angle or asexual and crip theory to these critiques.

Disability constructions are not new, and they do indeed cut across all sociodemographic nuances: of age, of race, of gender, and of nationality. Similarly, asexuality constructions ask us to fundamentally critique how we think and act about sexuality in society, rather than critiquing sexuality itself. Asexual and crip constructions have a definitive place in how we go about critical work, and my future research will

focus on their explicit applications within educational and organizational space. Within this dissertation, I have provided both the background of the work as well as information about current applications, as well as shown through my publication record how these concepts can be broadly applied. I have also discussed the very real need for these broader applications, deployed both in defense of our educational institutions and as a means to improve them and reach across political boundaries.

Again, such an act of resistance seems much harder now than before. I find myself weary and more than a little frightened in the closing sentences of a dissertation focused on diversity and inclusivity work in such a climate: but I remain committed now, just as before, to improving outcomes for students and for those of us who require voice. While difficult, such an endeavor is worthwhile, and deeply necessary. In closing:

“To practice criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy... [but as] soon as people begin to no longer be able to think things the way they have been thinking them, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult and entirely possible” (Foucault, 1981, pp 456-457).

Thank you.

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